

Blindsight

The book cover features a woman's profile in the foreground, looking upwards with her eyes closed. The background is a textured, golden-brown surface with dark, swirling patterns. The title 'Blindsight' is at the top in a large, stylized font, and the author's name 'Kait Nolan' is at the bottom in a similar font.

Kait
Nolan

Blindsight:
A Story of the Mirus

By Kait Nolan

Blindsight

Written and published by Kait Nolan

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Blindsight

The city was burning. Ash drifted down like snow, blanketing the cracked pavement, mixing with the blood that leaked from broken bodies strewn in the street, on the sidewalks. In the distance the thunder of mortar shells competed with choruses of screams cut short before their crescendo.

Across the street a pack of vampires dragged a pair of women--mother and daughter by the look of them—down the steps of a smoldering brownstone, fighting and arguing with every step over who had rights to the kill. No one stopped to help. They were too busy running for the overturned cars that barricaded either end of the block, clamoring, climbing to escape this nightmare.

All around her creatures that should have lived in the dark, in the night, or on the fringes of the human world were running amok. In the broad light of day. The dregs of Mirus society had erupted, and the ignorant, foolish humans were paying the price.

A shadow blotted out the sun, and she looked up to see a dragon, glittering black wings extended in a magnificent show of strength as it hovered a dozen feet above the street. It inhaled, armored chest expanding before it opened its enormous mouth and rained fire over every living thing, Mirus and human.

Isla did not feel the burn, but that didn't stop the bite of fear as she watched more people swarm in. Fae soldiers with flashing blades took formation against a small army of goblins and trolls. A pride of Felis and a pack of Wylk

flanked the other side, tearing through the disorganized ranks of underworld creatures with vicious claws and fangs.

Blood, so much blood.

The sound of mortar shells drew nearer until she could see the tanks of the human military beyond the barricade of vehicles, surrounded by soldiers kitted out for urban warfare. They were being picked off along either side by creatures Isla didn't even recognize. As she watched, a broad-shouldered, white-faced soldier went down under a mass of razor-studded tentacles, the spray of blood soaking his nearby companions.

A voice rose upon the air, overpowering the sounds of violence with a language of the ancients. Isla looked up to the rooftops and spotted a robed figure, arms raised to the heavens. In a sharp, divisive motion, he brought his hands down and apart. The ground trembled and split. Trolls and goblins screeched as they fell into the pit, and other fighters scrambled back to the relative safety of the edge to continue fighting. Backs turned, they didn't see the beasts that emerged behind them, clawing, crawling, decimating everything in their path.

The staccato pop of automatic weapons announced the arrival of the military on the scene. Some of the citizens they were allegedly protecting went down in the spray of bullets. A young boy fell, motionless, across the body of a wraith. The dragon bellowed, rising up above the chaos to lay waste to the barricade and unleashing the paranormal hell on the last hope of the human race.

~*~

Isla stared up at the Hunter with after-images of blood and death still flickering in her eyes as she clasped his big, rough palm between both of hers. He returned the gaze, eyes cool and dispassionate. They were the color of his blade, she thought foolishly. The glinting gold of tempered bronze. Being Fae, he wouldn't use steel.

She fought down the nausea and struggled not to fling his hand away like a rat. Squeamish little girl was not her role here. He was an assassin. Not the first she'd encountered, nor would he be the last. Her father's was a bloody business, and he depended upon her skills as a Seer to make careful estimation of the success of his campaigns before they were even launched. That meant regular contact with some of the deadliest, most feared denizens of the Mirus world.

“Well?”

Isla blinked at the barked demand, brain scrambling to concoct a lie—a suitable vision that would mislead, yet carry enough truth to be believed so that she was not blamed for the failure. She came up with nothing, still too rattled by the true vision to think, to play the deadly game of deception.

“I . . .” She tore her gaze from the Hunter's, searching blindly for inspiration somewhere in the echoing marble space of the throne room. It wasn't *really* a throne room, but the man she called father ruled from here like the despot he was, so the name seemed fitting.

Bael stood by the empty fireplace, a vast Gothic monstrosity that had no purpose in south Florida. Though his bearded face betrayed nothing, a quiver of anticipation trembled down the length of his stocky body. It centered her, that unholy excitement. Renewed her purpose.

“A single man team will not get the job done,” she pronounced, releasing the assassin’s hand. Isla sensed, rather than saw, his curiosity at her statement. Curiosity instead of insult. The lack of overt response was disturbing. But then everything about Ransom was disturbing. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him again.

Instead she focused on bolstering the lie. How many can I get away with? she wondered. “I see three. Members of your personal guard will have more success here. Cronan and Levi,” she improvised. *Might as well see if I can get rid of some of the worst of the lot.* “The mission requires the strength of a Felis and the cunning of a skinwalker.”

“And the third?”

“It is uncertain. Perhaps Ransom—”

“I work alone,” interrupted the Fae.

“—or perhaps another.” It wasn’t like Isla cared. She just wanted the Hunter away from her. As soon as possible.

Bael looked displeased, his mouth a narrow slash amid the dark of his beard. For a moment, Isla thought she’d gone too far, that she’d failed. Then he turned to Ransom, “It appears we no longer require your services.”

The Hunter inclined his head in acquiescence and turned to leave. “For the record, I have never failed.”

“Then you can thank my daughter for keeping your record intact.”

Ransom’s gaze flicked toward her, and Isla felt her blood run cold. *Okay, pissing off an assassin by denying him the job. . . probably not the smartest thing you’ve ever done.* She watched as a pair of her father’s guards peeled away from their posts on either side of the entryway to escort the Fae off the estate.

Bael crossed the room, pulling Isla into an avuncular embrace that made her skin crawl. “What would I do without you?”

She didn’t know. He’d gone to great lengths to acquire her twenty years before when his former Seer was dying. His men had killed her entire village and even attacked a Wylk stronghold to get to her. Twenty years of captivity. Twenty years of being forced to serve him, along with the indignity of being called his daughter. Certainly the physical abuse had ceased then, but there were worse things than attacks on the body.

Isla forced her lips into a fond smile. “You would be much less efficient.” She loosened her knees and swayed a little.

“Are you all right?” he asked, instantly concerned. About his investment of course, not her personal well-being.

“A little tired. The Fae are always a hard read. I believe I will head up to my room and go to bed early, if it pleases you to allow it.”

“Of course, of course. You must rest. Shall I have a tray sent up?”

“It is unnecessary,” she assured him. “I can always send for something later.”

Bael snapped his fingers and another pair of guards materialized to escort her back to her room. “Get some rest, my dear. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Thank you, Father.” Isla nearly choked on the words. It was becoming harder and harder to maintain the lie, to keep up appearances as the dutiful daughter.

From the outside looking in, his precautions appeared to be those of an over-protective father with enemies who would not hesitate to use her as leverage. And though there

was a component of truth to that, the reality was that the sprawling grounds of the estate, the lavish house, the numerous bodyguards were all a part of a gilded cage.

I am going to pick the lock, she thought, turning away from him.

Isla climbed the stairs, one guard ahead, one behind. She felt the eyes of the latter on her, an almost physical touch that seemed to reach beyond the light summer clothes she wore and made her wish the compound was in Alaska instead of outside Miami. Cronan wouldn't lay a hand on her and risk Bael's retaliation—her father's dubious protection was worth something—but he absolutely delighted in creeping her out. With luck he'd be slaughtered on this mission and she wouldn't have to worry about him anymore.

Not until she was safely locked in her room did Isla breathe easy again. *That was close. Too close. You nearly flubbed it trying to lie on the fly.*

But this vision wasn't like the others. Usually she touched someone and pulled what she wanted to know, navigated to that particular set of futures. But when she'd touched Ransom the vision had taken over, wiping out any vestiges of control, of direction, until she'd been left at its mercy, so shocked when it ended that she'd all but fallen over, if not for her grip on the Hunter's hand.

What did it mean?

She wandered into the bathroom, thinking a bath might help relax her enough to chase the vision again. Maybe a second viewing would help clarify. She turned on the water, tested the temperature, and reached for the jar of bath salts. The scoop clattered out of numb fingers as she saw Ransom framed in the doorway.

~*~

Ransom saw the wash of fear sweep over Isla's face, that quick draining of color from her cheeks.

"The guards are just outside the door."

The rock steady voice almost made him want to smile. He had to admire a woman who refused to show fear beyond what her body betrayed.

"And you and I both know that if I wanted you dead, your throat would be slit before you drew breath to call for them."

He watched her absorb that truth, accept it.

"What do you want?"

And wasn't that the million dollar question?

Ransom had done jobs off and on for Bael through the years. Few and far between and only those that fit within the bounds of his own personal code. As head of the Dodona—a paranormal mafia if ever there was one—Bael was a cretin. Which meant that many of his enemies were likewise criminals—by human or Mirus moral standards. Motives for the kill never mattered to Ransom, so long as the end result was one less malefactor in the world.

He'd watched Isla grow up in bursts. Quiet child of ten. Fiery girl of sixteen. It was the grave woman of twenty-one who'd told the first lie. Or at least the first one Ransom recognized. It intrigued him that Bael's pet, whom he consulted on all matters of import, was feeding him lies. Subtle ones. Small rebellions, he'd realized. Ever after, he paid more attention to her, observing, assessing. At twenty-four, he finally recognized her for what she was—a captive. A slave.

She would be better off with the Underground—the resistance fighters would protect her from more exploitation by the likes of Bael. And she would, Ransom thought, be the perfect buy-in for him. The group didn't trust him, and that, he supposed, was deserved. His exploits were many and bloody and showed no apparent allegiance to anyone, save himself. But rescuing the Seer would not only hobble Bael's activities, it would—hopefully—prove to the leaders of the Underground that he wanted to fight on their side.

So he'd formed a plan for extraction. Not his usual specialty. Getting in and out alone was easy. Getting in alone and out in a pair was considerably more of a challenge. It took yet another year before circumstances forced Bael to request his services and provided the opportunity Ransom needed to set the plan in motion.

Of course that plan had hinged on staying the night in the compound, and Miss Isla had neatly derailed that option. But he was nothing if not adaptable. So here he stood in the doorway to the Seer's tiny bathroom, watching her watch him with eyes that always saw too much.

"You saw something when you touched me, but not what he wanted you to see. What was it?"

Not what he'd meant to say, and clearly not what she'd expected to hear. Those wheels were so obviously churning, turning in her mind.

"Will you lie to me like you lie to Bael?" he asked.

That stopped her. Shock again.

Not used to being caught, are you? he thought. *You usually see everything coming.*

"It had nothing to do with you," she said finally.

She believed it. Isla's hands were her tell, and they remained completely still as she spoke. Whatever she'd seen

had disturbed her profoundly, but she didn't actually think it was to do with him. So be it. He'd pry the vision out of her later. They had more important things to address.

"What do you want?" she asked. "If the job means that much to you, I'll—"

"I'm not here for the job," he interrupted. "I'm here for you."

What little color had returned to her cheeks washed out again. She automatically stepped back to escape him, into the ledge of the tub.

Ransom reached out and grabbed her before she could fall, yanking her toward him. Her body collided with his, her hands pressing against his chest. For one snapping moment, he forgot his purpose.

No one touched him. Ever. Not without malintent. Yet Isla's hands, those tiny hands, pressed just over his heart, trembling. Something shivered and cracked, leaving shards of memory long repressed stabbing through him

Ransom set her away from him, carefully, not trusting his own movements, his own instincts. When he found words again, his voice was quiet. "I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to rescue you."

~*~

Isla just stared at him, still too stunned that he'd touched her to be sure of what he'd said. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me."

Now she just sank down on the edge of the tub, the carefully controlled mask lost to utter bewilderment.

He reached past her to shut off the water, which was near to overflowing, and she didn't move away. As he'd

said, if he was here to kill her he could and would have done so by now and been on his merry way.

“Why?” Out of the maelstrom of her thoughts, it was the easiest and most salient thing to ask.

He shrugged. That in itself was more emotion than she’d ever seen him display. He was a man of few words and fewer wasted movements. “Would you rather remain Bael’s prisoner? You’re not his daughter, and you clearly tire of playing that game.”

He saw. And that made her feel exposed, vulnerable. Isla wrapped both arms around her middle—a useless self-protective gesture, yet one she couldn’t seem to stop.

“How long have you been here with him?” Ransom asked.

“Twenty years.”

Something kindled in his eyes, a flare, a spark of . . . something. But it was gone before she could identify it.

“You’ve been trying to undermine him from the inside. Your way is subtle, and perhaps has taken out some of his men. But more have always come to replace them. More *will* always come. I can take you away from here.”

“To where?” she asked sharply. “To what? You’re a Hunter. How can I know that I won’t be leaving one cage just to run into another? One that may be worse.”

“You don’t,” he said simply. “You have no reason to trust me, and my word, my oath, is worth nothing to you. You have only the fact that I know the truth about you and you’re still breathing. Can you say the same of Bael if he finds out?”

Panicked fury threatened to beat a hole in her chest as she glared at him. “Is that a threat?”

“I don’t deal in threats.” Ransom crossed his arms, another of those actions that violated his habit of economical motion. His eyes glinted like blades as he looked down at her. “War is coming. I see no reason for you to be caught in the crossfire.”

Isla stared at him and felt again the echoes of the vision. Blood. Death. Yes, war.

“And if I go with you,” she asked, “where will you take me?”

“Somewhere you’ll be safe.”

She couldn’t imagine such a place. The one time she’d felt safe since her village was slaughtered was in the Wylk stronghold. Yet even surrounded by a pack of fierce wolf-shifters, Bael and his men had come, had taken her. How could this be any different? And how could she knowingly endanger someone else? Because Bael would come after her. She looked at Ransom. Bael would come after him. That was a guarantee.

“You would risk Bael’s wrath for this? For me? Why? What’s in it for you?”

He seemed to consider the question—weighing answers or concocting a lie, she didn’t know. “Proof that I’m one of the good guys. You should change. You’re not going to be able to run in that dress.”

In the span of a blink, he’d disappeared from the bathroom doorway. Isla didn’t delude herself into thinking he’d gone far or that he was giving her time to think about it.

One of the good guys? she thought. *He’s a Hunter. A contract killer for the likes of miscreants like Bael. How the hell can I believe he’s one of the good guys?*

There had to be something else in it for him. Maybe he planned to use her visions the same way Bael did. A

Hunter would be even more effective with a clairvoyant on his side. Perhaps Ransom had some high-risk target he wanted help with and thought that rescue was a good way to create a debt she could pay no other way. That had to be it.

Unless. . . what if someone had hired him to steal her from Bael?

Isla stood and paced restlessly in the small space of the bathroom. What was she supposed to do? Call the guards and risk the probability that Ransom would kill her before they could get through the door? Go with him and risk that he'd be handing her over to someone as bad—or worse—than Bael? Or go with him and be party to who knew what kind of heinous atrocity he planned to commit?

The devil I know or the devil I don't?

~*~

Ransom didn't pace—it was a waste of energy—but he wanted to. Each moment that passed made him more twitchy. They had a little while longer until the sun sank below the horizon and the lights came on, but the Seer was still in the bathroom. What the hell was she *doing*? Where was the decision to make here? Like staying with Bael was an option?

He was on the verge of marching in there to drag her out when she walked into the bedroom. Outwardly she was more composed now, wrapping herself in that emotional armor that had served her so well in Bael's world. But Ransom could see the pulse beating rapidly in her throat as she crossed to him.

“Give me your hand.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask why, but this was what she did, how she operated. Maybe she needed to see their chances for success. He placed his hand in hers for the second time that evening, marveling at how small and delicate hers was. Soft hands. Not the hands of a warrior. She laid her other hand over his and her eyes faded to white as the vision took her. The hands around his heated almost to burning, but he did not pull away.

She was frowning when her eyes turned blue again.

“What did you see?” he demanded.

“Enough,” she said simply. “Let me change.”

She was quick about it, emerging in minutes from the walk-in closet, clad in some kind of stretchy black pants and a form fitting t-shirt, also dark. Ransom approved. She would be able to move in the outfit. After donning her shoes, she grabbed a hoodie, then hesitated. “Will I need this where we’re going?”

“Might.”

“Anything else?”

“Do you really want to take anything from your life here?”

Isla crossed to a jewelry box, lifted out the interior tray, and grabbed something from the bottom. Whatever it was, she shoved into her pocket before returning the tray and shutting the box. “Okay, I’m ready. How is this going to work?”

“I’m prevented from teleporting within the bounds of the compound, so we’re out the window, through the grounds, and over the wall. Once we’re outside the blocking spell, I’ll teleport us both out of here.”

“You make it sound like a walk in the park. Do you have any idea how many guards are on patrol out there?”

Ransom just lifted one brow.

“Okay fine, of course you know. But how do we get past them without raising the alarm?”

“You leave that to me. Come on.” He moved toward the window and raised the sash. The sun was awfully low, the sky the same mottled shades of a bruise. They’d be cutting it awfully close. He turned to Isla, “I’ll brace myself and lower you down. The bushes below should cushion your fall.”

Isla nodded.

Ransom slipped one leg out the window and reached for her hand. Outside there was an explosion of light, accompanied by a metallic buzzing as the dozens of security lights snapped on, bathing the grounds in illumination that rivaled the noonday sun. He yanked his leg back in and swore, low and vicious. Too late. They were too late. She’d taken too fucking long in the bathroom and now they’d lost their window of opportunity.

Isla flicked the curtains closed. “There is another way.”

“Where?”

“Bael is always expecting a siege. He would be foolish not to prepare a hidden way out in the event the compound is taken. There is a tunnel beneath the grounds that lets out down by the canal.”

“And where is the access to this tunnel?”

“Bael’s bedroom.”

“And that is. . .?”

Isla grabbed a notepad and pen and drew a quick sketch of the floor plan. “This is my room. Bael’s room is here, across the mezzanine. These are upper corridors that open to the foyer below. There are guards here—” She

marked either side of her doorway. “—here—” And the base of the stairs. “And here—” She marked either side of Bael’s bedroom door. “—*if* he’s retired already, which he probably hasn’t because it’s early yet. He’ll most likely be in his study, which is directly beneath on the first floor. You’ve seen it before.”

Ransom pulled up the image of the room in his mind. Nodded.

“There’s access to the tunnel from his study as well. There is a spiral staircase that winds in the wall going down below the house to cellar level. We can get in from his bedroom, but it means we have to sneak past the study and risk him hearing. Obviously you could manage it alone with your skills, but I . . . It’s a risk.”

“Is it one you’re willing to take?” he asked.

She caught her lip in her teeth and gnawed on it. Ransom found himself distracted by the motion, fascinated by her mouth. At last Isla nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “Here’s what you’re going to do.”

~*~

Isla stuck her head in the hall, casually noting that Bael’s guards weren’t stationed at the door to his bedroom. “Ricardo can I borrow you for a minute? The entertainment system is messed up again, and I can’t get my movie to show.”

Both guards rolled their eyes, but the wraith came into her room, crossing to the armoire that housed her entertainment center. He reached for the remote she’d left

lying on the chaise. “You probably just have the wrong input—”

Ransom rose out of the dark and snapped the other man’s neck. Isla gasped and backedpedalled as he cushioned the fall of the body, true shock lending credence to her performance. Cronin, drawn by the noise, stepped inside.

He took in Ricardo’s limp form. “What did you—” And then Ransom was on him too. A clean twist and her tormentor lay still on the floor.

Isla felt nauseous. This was real. It was actually happening. And Ransom was across the room, motioning her to hurry. Because there was no other choice, she moved, stepping past the bodies of her former bodyguards and onto the mezzanine. She peered below. They wouldn’t have long before the guards flanking the stairs noticed that Cronin and Ricardo weren’t at their post. Barefoot, shoes in hand, she followed Ransom to Bael’s room on the other side. He, of course, moved like a ghost. But even the tiny touch of her foot to the marble seemed to echo in Isla’s head. She hardly dared to breathe until they were safe on the other side of the paneled door.

Bael’s bedroom was a testament to the man’s love of luxury. The space was dominated by heavy, Baroque-style furniture and rich, heavy velvet in a shade that Isla had always thought said bordello more than baron. She paused to slip on her shoes, then crossed to the enormous floor-length mirror—tall as a man, wide as a horse. Bael was nothing if not vain.

She motioned to the mirror and whispered, “It’s behind here.”

Ransom curled those strong, deadly hands around the thick gold frame and tugged.

Nothing happened.

“There must be a latch somewhere,” she whispered.

They both began to run their fingers over the swirls and carvings of ornate frame, seeking a button or a switch. Ransom found it along the top edge of the mirror, well above Isla’s head. The huge mirror swung open on hidden hinges to reveal a dark opening.

“After you,” she said.

Ransom stepped onto the tread and began the spiraling descent. Isla took a breath. *Down the rabbit hole*, she thought, and followed him. She could barely contain her gasp as the mirror swung shut behind them, thrusting them both into darkness.

Her panicked breathing sounded like explosions to her ears. They would get caught. Bael was just below, only feet away. She could hear him speaking in muffled tones through the wall! He would—

“Isla!” Ransom hissed.

She swallowed down a breath.

“Can I touch you without you going in to a vision?”

She nodded, then realized he couldn’t see her. “Yes,” she whispered.

His hand closed around hers, an anchor in the dark. Her panic leveled off, and he began to lead her down. With each trembling step, she thought she’d hear a creak or groan of the stairs. When Bael’s voice rose to a shout, they froze.

“The lords of Primastu are breathing down my neck! What do you expect me to do?”

Who was he talking to? Who was he talking *about*? She’d never heard mention of any group called Primastu. And she’d certainly never known Bael to bow to anyone.

Ransom tugged her hand and they started moving again. They'd reached the cellar by the time they heard the alarms.

"We don't have much time," he said. "Where's this tunnel?"

"Behind that wine rack."

Ransom muscled it over, revealing the steel door. He reached for the handle, but Isla was staring with sick dismay at the numeric keypad illuminated on the wall.

"Oh no," she whispered.

Ransom swore. Tested the door handle, then swore again. "Do you know the combination?"

"I . . . I don't. . ."

"Well try something!" he demanded. "It won't take them long to find us!"

Frantic, she began stabbing in sequences of numbers. The address.

"Code invalid."

Phone number.

"Code invalid."

Bael's birthday.

"Code invalid."

"Fuck!" she snarled.

The sounds of running footsteps echoed from above.

"Keep trying!" ordered Ransom.

Okay, okay. What else? His number of kills.

"Code invalid."

No, no. It has to be something static. Something that doesn't change.

Credit card. Off-shore bank account. She bet he didn't know she knew that one.

"Code invalid."

Footsteps on the stairs.

“We’ve got company.” Ransom met them as they reached the bottom, blade flashing in the light that filtered down from the first floor.

Isla felt her stomach twist at the thud of bodies. She turned back to the keypad. *Focus, she ordered herself. What are other important things to Bael? The compound? The number of members of Dodona?* She stopped, hand hovering over the keypad. *Me.*

She stabbed in her birthday.

“Code invalid.”

More thundering footsteps. The thud *What other numbers relate to me?*
of more bodies.

Hand shaking, she punched in the date of her capture.

“Accepted.”

The door released with a hiss of air.

“Ransom!”

“Go! I’m right behind you.”

Isla didn’t hesitate this time before she plunged into the dark.

~*~

Ransom’s blade flashed, an extension of his hand, his will, and another body fell. He backed into the dark, as more feet came into view at the top of the stairs. Trusting that the pile of fallen comrades would be enough to delay them a few seconds, he headed for the open door of the passageway. He tugged the door shut with a clang. It wouldn’t buy much time, but maybe it would be enough.

Isla had stopped fifteen yards up the tunnel, looking back at him with horror. Taking in the blood spattering his clothes and skin, no doubt. It was one thing to see such things in visions, quite another to see them in reality. She could process later.

“Go! Run!” he shouted.

The door was already opening behind him as he sprinted after her, muscles burning as he ran up the sloping, narrow corridor. He rounded a corner and the opening came into view, fifty yards ahead. Boots pounded behind him, but he didn’t slow, didn’t try to take more of them out. He was an assassin, not a melee fighter. They just had to make it beyond the spell boundary.

When Isla broke free ahead of him, the thugs started shooting. Bullets ricocheted off the walls. Ransom hunched, already reaching for his throwing knives. One. Two. Three. He was throwing blind, but a couple of screams told him he’d hit something. Thirty yards. Another bullet whizzed by his ear, pinging off a support beam. Twenty yards. Out of throwing knives, he yanked his dagger from the sheath at his waist and turned, flinging it with deadly accuracy into the lead goon’s throat. The other man fell, tripping up one of the others.

Gonna make it.

Another shot rang out, and Ransom felt the burn as he emerged from the tunnel. Iron. He’d been shot with iron. A wave of dizziness rolled over him. He fought to stay upright, stumbling forward in a sprint until he laid hands on Isla and teleported them both to safety.

He winked from location to location, around the world, in and out of cities, of forests, of deserts, until even he was dizzy and somewhat lost from the trip and from the iron

poisoning his blood. By the time he stopped in a New Orleans alley, his head was spinning. But he thought that the trail was probably muddled enough that even the best of Tracers wouldn't be able to follow it.

As soon as he let Isla go, she stumbled over by a dumpster and wretched. Her face was pale and waxy from the trip. Humans, even those with witch blood, were not meant for that much teleportation.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She braced both hands on her legs and tried to straighten, glaring at him. "Do I look all right to you?"

Ransom could see blood on her hands, her clothes and felt his head spin again as he leapt the distance between them. "Are you hurt?" he demanded. "Were you shot?"

She scooted back, away from him, her eyes on his bloody hands. "It's not my blood. But you spilled plenty of theirs, didn't you?"

It was his blood, he realized. Mostly. It had dripped down from his shoulder to bloody his hands, and by proxy, hers. His relief at her lack of injury was short-lived as he absorbed her tone, her words, and the condemnation in her face. Why should it bother him so much? "I got you out, as promised."

"You had to protect your investment," she said bitterly.

Investment? And then he realized. She believed him to be just like Bael, intending to use her and her abilities for his own ends. *And aren't I? Wanting to use her to buy my way into the Underground?*

No. He knew what it was to be used. To be a slave to those more powerful. He did not wish that for her. He'd find another way.

“That’s not why I brought you here.”

“Where is here?”

“New Orleans. We’re just around the corner from a bar, *Le Loup Garou*. It’s one of the home bases for the Underground. They are a group of resistance fighters.”

“Resistance against whom?”

“People like Bael. The Council of Races. Those who would exploit you for what you can do. They will protect you.”

“Why should they?” she asked. “Why should anyone?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.” Ransom dropped his gaze to his blood-stained hands and wished abruptly that he could shower. The consequences of his trade felt filthier than usual in her presence. He looked back up at her and nearly fell from the wave of dizziness that rolled through him. Stubborn, he locked his knees. “Look, I’m not going to make you go in there. It’s your decision. Your life.”

“What will you do?” she asked.

“I’ll keep teleporting to muddy the trail. They won’t be able to trace you here. I’ll see to it.”

She stared at him for a long while. “I don’t understand you.”

Ransom felt his lips curve a little, an unfamiliar expression. “You are something of a mystery as well. Before I go, can I ask you something?”

“You can ask,” she said, wary.

“What made you decide to come with me? What did you see in that second vision?”

This time she smiled, but there was no humor in it. “Bael’s head, no longer attached to his body.”

Ransom's hands fisted at his sides, itching for his blades. Yes. He could see that vision through to the end. "He won't hurt you again."

She was staring at him again, eyes narrowed. "Are you all right?"

He'd lingered too long. Time to go. The healers would have much to do on his shoulder. There was work to be done and a trap to plan. With a courtly bow he said, "Be well, Seer. Goddess be with you."

~*~

In the span of one blink and the next, Ransom was gone.

Her decision? *Her* decision?

But had he left her any choices? He disappeared. Just winked out and *left her*. In an alley outside a bar, in a city she didn't know, with no money, no map, no nothing. The only thing she had on her was the silly alligator keychain shoved into her pocket. The sole piece of her first life. A gift from the Wylk who had saved her, when her village was slaughtered the first time Bael came for her.

She'd wanted away from the Hunter, from the blood on his hands. Blood spilled in her name. But like this? Was she any safer out here? She'd been kept since she was five years old. Her knowledge of the world was made up entirely from books and movies. But even that was enough that she knew what allegedly went on in big cities at night.

There was nothing for it. She would have to go into the bar, to meet these people running the Underground and pray that they could and would help her get on her feet.

Isla looked down at herself, at the blood on her hands, her clothes. The blood of Bael's men. Even as sheltered as she was, she knew that was going to attract unwanted attention. Despite the chill in the air—it was so much cooler here than Miami—she stripped off her hoodie and used it to scrub her hands and face clean. Or as clean as she could manage. There was still some blood on her yoga pants, but they were, at least, black. She tossed the hoodie in the dumpster.

Good as it's gonna get, she thought, curling her fingers around the keychain for courage.

At the mouth of the alley she peered out, seeing the neon sign lit bright to her right. She was nervous. *Stupid to be nervous*, she told herself. *They'll either help or they won't. Either way you're away from Bael. You can find a way to make this work.*

With a bracing breath, she stepped out of the alley and walked toward the entrance to the bar. *You can do this. Head high. Face relaxed. Like you've done this a thousand times. It's just another act. You're good at acts.*

Isla pulled open the door, shuddering as a gust of wind all but shoved her inside. It was noisy. Raucous laughter mixed with music from a jukebox on one weathered wall, all of it underscored by a babble of voices. No one was looking at her, and she was grateful because she was sure her mouth was hanging open. She felt every inch the ignorant, country bumpkin.

There were signs of the bayou here. A pirogue hanging from the ceiling. A series of framed photographs in rough, cypress wood frames depicting images of the Atchafalaya. Of a home that was a long ago and distant memory from another life. And the smells. The food. Rich,

spicy jambalaya. Crawfish Etouffee. Gumbo. Dear goddess, she hadn't smelled gumbo since she was five. It was the smell of favorite dishes that finally unknotted her stomach, relaxed her into the role she needed to play.

At least until the man vaulted over the bar.

Isla jolted, a bolt of fear ricocheting through her as he headed straight for her like some kind of freight train. She backed up, bumping into the wall as she took in the massive shoulders and messy, dark hair. His nose was twitching, she saw. He was smelling her? Some kind of shifter then. He bore down on her, stopping just a foot away, staring at her with golden eyes. Wolf eyes.

Her hand fisted around the alligator. "Mick?" It barely came out above a whisper.

Something twisted in his face, a painful mix of hope and disbelief. "Isla?"

Because her throat had twisted shut on a knot of tears, she nodded. The bar had gone quiet, watching them, but Mick didn't seem to notice.

"You're alive."

Another nod.

Then she was crushed against him in a bruising embrace, listening dazed to a spate of rapid-fire Cajun French she only half remembered from her childhood.

Everything moved really fast after that. She got hustled back to an office, provided a change of clothes from who knew where, and settled with an enormous bowl of gumbo and a hunk of crusty French bread. There was so much she wanted to ask, to say, but she couldn't get her jumbled thoughts to settle. How had Ransom known to bring her here? To Mick? Or had it been just some giant, cosmic

fluke that the one person she would feel safe with happened to be tied up with the Underground?

“Where you been all these years *'tite fille?*”

Isla focused on Mick where he'd slouched in a chair across the desk, a deceptively relaxed posture when she could see the restlessness in his eyes. “Imprisoned. By the same man who slaughtered my village and attacked your Pack to take me.”

She watched him shift in the chair, leash his fury.

“Who?”

“His name is Bael.” The words wanted to spill out in a flood, all the horrors and the secrets she'd witnessed. But Isla stuck to the abbreviated version. She'd spent too many years without allies to tell all, even to Mick.

When she finished, he said, “Where is the Hunter now?”

“I don't know. He told me staying here was my decision. Then he left.” Isla sat forward. “He said they wouldn't be able to track me here, but Bael will be coming for me. He'll do anything in his power to get me back. I already brought death to your doorstep once. I won't do it again.”

“You're not goin' anywhere. I'll keep you safe this time like I didn't manage before. Let the bastard come. This time we'll be ready for him.”

Before Isla could say anything further to dissuade him, the door opened and a small, dark-haired woman slipped inside. Mick's gaze shifted to her and softened. Isla watched, intrigued as he reached out and tangled a hand in hers to tug her closer.

“Isla, this is my Sophie.” Something about the fond possession in his voice made Isla bristle.

Bright blue eyes shifted to her with a perfunctory nod. “Hi.” Sophie looked back at Mick. “We have a problem. Eli just showed up with a body in tow. He stumbled across a Fae on the other side of the city with really bad iron poisoning from a gunshot wound.”

Ransom. It had to be Ransom. She knew he hadn’t looked right just before he disappeared.

Isla felt all the blood drain from her face. “Is he dead?” she whispered.

“Not yet, but it’s not good,” said Sophie. “They’re taking him in around back to see if Jeannette can do anything for him.”

“It’s all my fault,” Isla groaned. “He risked everything to help me escape and I was horrible to him. I didn’t even know he was hurt. He didn’t say anything, and I thought all the blood was from Bael’s men.”

“It will be all right,” Mick said. “I owe him for getting you out. We’ll bring in whoever we have to to make sure he survives.”

As Mick reached for the phone, Isla buried her face in her hands and wondered how many more lives would be lost because of her.

~*~

Ransom’s face was gray, the lines of it gaunt and tense as his body fought the iron. Would this proud warrior, who’d survived centuries of bloodshed, be felled by something as small as a bullet? The wound would almost certainly be deadly for any of the humanoid races. Just to the right of his spine, even if it hadn’t hit his heart, it tore through something vital. If it had gone through and through, the wound might have begun to heal. But the bullet had

lodged somewhere in his chest, and there it poisoned his body. Wicked black lines spread out from the wound, across his back, down his arms, and lower, beyond what the sheet covered, a ragged map of the poison's path. The wound itself was packed with herbs from the Fae home world of Alinar. Isla didn't have a clue where Mick's healer had gotten ahold of them. It was enough to slow the spread of iron, to keep his heart beating.

Isla didn't know if it would be enough to keep him alive until the Fae healer could arrive.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. You didn't deserve this."

She sat by the bedside and watched his face. Not even unconsciousness was keeping him from pain. Seeking to offer comfort, she reached out and curled her hand around his.

The vision slammed into her.

Chaos. Blood. Noise. She was back in the burning city. But this was different somehow. The acrid scent of smoke clawed her throat, burned her eyes. Isla coughed. She started to lift one hand to her mouth and found it weighed down by a blade. Before she could puzzle that out, a goblin began to move toward her, its red eyes fixed in her direction. She turned her head, looked behind her. But there was no one else. The goblin was charging when she looked back. It could *see her*.

No, no this wasn't right. She was an observer only.

The goblin kept charging, a mace held high above his head, poised to crash into her skull. Unthinking, Isla lifted the blade and parried the goblin's swing. She felt the shock of impact all the way down to her toes. Before her mind could recover, her assailant swung again, and again she parried, her body knowing what to do, though her brain hadn't caught up.

Isla gave up arguing with herself that the vision could not be happening, her disbelief swallowed by the adrenaline of a true fight. Not until she drove her blade into the goblin's

chest, feeling the initial resistance in her arm before it slid home, did she have another moment to think, *This can't be real.*

From her left, she heard another battle cry. A vampire bore down on her, sailing through the air, fangs bared, to land only a dozen feet away. Isla tried to pull her sword from the goblin, but the blade was stuck. She braced one foot on the goblin's body, trying to yank the sword free, but it wouldn't come.

Desperation ripped through her as she saw the vampire stalk closer, mouth curved in a delighted leer.

She could run. Abandon her blade. But then she would only be cut down by something else. With grim resolution, she picked up the goblin's mace and readied herself.

Before she could swing, something else flashed between her and the vampire. She saw a spark of gold, then a spray of red, as the top half of the vampire's body slid off the bottom.

Ransom turned, his bronze sword stained red and black, his eyes almost feral.

"Are you all right?" he demanded.

Mute, she could only nod.

He knelt over the goblin, wrenching her sword free and offered it. When her hand curved around the hilt, he slipped his hand around the back of her neck, lifting her to her toes. She had time for only one hissed breath before his mouth claimed hers.

Isla woke on the floor of Ransom's room, breathless, her heart pounding, her hand still fisted around his instead of the sword from her vision. She disentangled it and brought her fingers to her lips, which still burned from his phantom kiss.

In all her life, Isla had never had a vision of her own future. She had not believed it possible. Yet she had just undeniably seen it. *Felt it*, though that too should have been impossible.

Who the hell was this man that brought her visions of her own future? Visions where she fought. Visions where they were clearly far more involved than they were in the present.

Shaking, she got to her feet. This assassin was part of her future. She did not know what it meant. Did not know what to think, and her voice, too, trembled when she spoke. “You will live to fight another day, warrior. I have seen it.”

With one final look at his face, Isla fled.

~*~

Please turn the page for more information about Isla and Ransom.

A Note From The Author

Kait Nolan is stuck in an office all day, sometimes juggling all three of her jobs at once with the skill of a trained bear—sometimes with a similar temperament. After hours, she uses her powers for good, creating escapist fiction. The work of this Mississippi native is packed with action, romance, and the kinds of imaginative paranormal creatures you'd want to sweep you off your feet...or eat your boss.

If you're interested in more of the Mirus, please be sure to check out the first two novellas in the series: *Forsaken By Shadow* and *Devil's Eye*. You can find more information on Kait's books and where they can be purchased on her website <http://kaitnolan.com> or follow her into the kitchen on her cooking blog Pots and Plots <http://potsandplots.wordpress.com>. If you want to see more of Isla and Ransom, please keep your eyes peeled for *Revelation* the next full length Mirus novel. Sign up for Kait's newsletter for notification when it is available.



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