

Blindsight:

A Story of the Mirus

By Kait Nolan

Blindsight
Written and published by Kait Nolan

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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 noontday 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 backpedaled 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.

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