

Katrina

The Beginning

A Royal Blood Chronicle
Book One

By
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We are named in every ancient culture.

*You speak of us in every written
language.*

*We have walked beside your ancestors,
just as we walk beside you. What you
don't know protects you.*

Those you fear will save you.

CHAPTER ONE

I sat very still, staring straight ahead just as I was told. Being asked to sit for a portrait to be displayed in the Sanctuary's grand library was a great honor. My name is Katrina Von Dracek, and I can't believe how long it's been—almost one hundred thirty years. Now I've been asked to chronicle my journey from the beginning.

From this vantage point atop the castle's west wall I could see the entire valley. The breeze was cool, but no longer held any threat of winter.

What would the rest of my life be like, I wondered? All young girls, I supposed, want love, but I also

wanted adventure, to travel the world, to make a difference in some way. It would be a long life, I knew, for vampires live a very long time.

I appraised my surroundings. The night was breathtaking. With my vampire gift of acute hearing, I heard a stag in the woods nearby. There was no moon tonight but my enhanced vision made the darkness as clear as the day.

I remembered from my history lessons that back in time, the earliest known vampires could not tolerate the sun or control their lust for blood, but just as all creatures have evolved through the centuries to survive, so have we, although some of the clans prefer, as they call it, to stay true to their heritage. Vampires are mostly born now, not made. Blood lust has been tamed by the hunting of animals and the use of crimson, blood from our human watchers mixed with an ancient elixir which vastly multiplies a small amount of blood and enables it to stay fresh indefinitely.

Just as I turned to leave I saw a shadow, too fast to be human, streaking across the field toward the front gate. I had been up on the wall for hours, and although vampires can easily move very quietly, I had neither seen or heard anyone leave the castle.

“I have to find Quinn,” I said to myself.

Quinn is my Watcher and my friend, one of the seven Voss brothers who watch over us. The Watchers are the personal human guard of the vampires, men who have dedicated their lives to the well being of their vampire families, none more loyal than the Voss.

I turned and rushed toward the stairway leading to the entrance courtyard just as Quinn was coming toward me.

“Oh, there you are Quinn. What has happened?”

“A courier has just arrived. The whole council is to meet in Salzburg, and to bring along young royal representatives from each family. You will be joining your father. Come with me now, for we must prepare to leave. The journey is long and the Council is to meet in just fourteen days.”

Quinn, always wanting what is best for the family. He and I had become so close that my father sought to warn me. “Katrina,” he said, “Quinn is your Watcher and must stay just that.”

I told my father in no uncertain terms that Quinn was also my friend, just my friend, but I found myself wondering if that was still the truth. Had I started to feel something more? No, he was my friend, and of course I cared for him, yes even loved him, but as a friend, only a friend. Right? I guessed that I would need to sort this out, but that would have to wait, for tomorrow we must travel north and east, a journey full of danger. The unknown is always both the most frightening, and the most exciting part.

With the clans being represented by their royal families’ most worthy young members, the royals going to Council would number in the hundreds, all traveling with their Watchers, servants, and numerous wagons for provisions and gifts for the leaders, especially the High Regent.

“Katrina, you look weak. When was the last time you fed? Did you drink anything today at all?”

Quinn was right; with everything that was going on I hadn't had crimson or been out to hunt for days. I realized I could have gone dormant in my sleep, a kind of hibernation if you will, which saves us when we have to hide, heal, or survive when food either is not available or is tainted. This dormant state can last hours, days, weeks, or even years. I had no time for that, but now that Quinn brought it up, I felt too weak to hunt. Why hadn't I paid more attention? Suddenly my vision started to fade, and the last thing I remembered was leaning against the wall to steady myself from the feeling of dizziness. When I awoke, Quinn was wrapping a cloth around his wrist.

"You must be more responsible." he chided me. "I can't be in charge of your feedings too!"

He was angry, so angry his face was turning red, and though I had never bitten a human, the vein bulging on his neck was making me feel something I had never felt before, blood lust. It didn't help that he was so handsome, and as he kept ranting about how I was ignoring my training, my studies, and everything else, I couldn't help admiring the ruggedness of his jaw and the way his dark brown hair flopped onto his face, his beautiful face.

"Katrina, *Katrina!* Are you even listening to me at all?"

Snapping out of my trance was almost painful; I would have liked to remain in that reverie just a little longer.

"Katrina," he said as he walked toward me.

It took all the strength I had to stop myself from throwing my arms around his neck, his very inviting neck, and kissing him passionately.

“What is *wrong* with you Katrina? We have no time for this!”

I had to turn away just so I could gather myself, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, tears filled my eyes. What *was* wrong with me? Quinn placed his hands on my shoulders and turned me towards him. When he saw the tears in my eyes, he froze for a moment; then his face softened and I thought I saw something new there, but then he hardened again and said, “You must be more careful.”

He turned and strode away, leaving me feeling empty and alone.

I walked to my room in a daze, suddenly tired again.

Pulling the door open even seemed difficult. Once inside, I was so pleased to see the bed turned down and sweet bread, butter, and a glass of wine on the table. Thank goodness for Sarah, my handmaiden and confidant.

I ate the bread quickly and savored the wine. Then, too exhausted to put on the dressing gown left out for me, I lay down on the bed and the last thing I remember was picturing the look in Quinn’s eyes and wondering what it meant. Though it had been fleeting, it had been there, hadn’t it? And with that thought I slept.

Quinn:

My mind was racing and my heart was pounding so loud I was sure everyone in my compound could hear it.

What had just happened? I had seen something different in the way she looked at me. I was sure it wasn't just because I had yelled at her. I had never had to hand-feed her before; was that it? Was it the fact that I had cut myself and let her feed directly from my wrist? But she hadn't woken up until afterwards, so she didn't know I had given her blood from my arm or that she had actively engaged in direct feeding.

I knew of course that it was strictly forbidden for a Watcher to give blood directly, but when she fainted it was clear that she was about to go into a dormant state. So I acted, thinking only of getting fresh blood into her to revive her quickly. As my knife opened the vein on my wrist, the scent made her nostrils flare and the same instincts that had kept vampires alive for centuries kicked in. She grabbed my arm and began to feed like a newborn baby at her mother's breast. The movement was so swift and powerful I wasn't sure I could have stopped her even if I'd wanted to.

The feeling I'd had while she was feeding was pure euphoria and only the sound of my brother coming up the stairs made me break the bond. Then I carried her to a side room to recover. "*Break the bond.*" Why had I thought of it that way? Was that it? Had that short feeding changed everything?

Entering the courtyard of the Watcher compound, I found three of my brothers, Thomas, Simon, and

Avery, seated around the roaring fire. The smell of venison and red cedar firewood made my mouth water. Only then did I realize I hadn't eaten since yesterday. I needed to take my own advice, especially when I and my brothers were also giving and storing blood for our charges. Baron Von Dracek would surely also hunt along the way, but there might not be game in the high country, and added strength would definitely be needed. Extra blood to mix must be stored; nothing gives strength to vampires like human blood.

As I sat by the fire to eat, I heard my oldest brother, Gunter, approaching.

"We missed you at training today," Gunter told me. "Don't let it become a habit. None of us can be the weak link."

I was the youngest of seven brothers, something the other six never let me forget. It was exciting to think I would now have a chance to prove myself on this journey. I was bound to protect Katrina no matter what might happen, even if that meant giving my life for hers, as many of my family had done for generations.

"Quinn," said Gunter, "we have decided that four of us must accompany the Baron and Katrina on this trip, and we feel you may be too young and untried in battle to be one of the four."

I jumped to my feet, pulled my sword, and with anger I didn't know I possessed, looked Gunter straight in the eye and said through clenched teeth, "I dare any of you to try to keep me from my duty. Nothing is going to stop me, including you, Gunter. If you have any doubts, let us settle them here and now."

Gunter gave a surprised look to Thomas and slowly rose from the seat he had just taken by the fire. Looking around at the others seated, he shrugged and said, "All right, little brother, let's see what you've learned."

As I backed into the open part of the courtyard, Gunter drew his sword. The fire reflecting off the blades made them seem alive. We circled first right and then left. Gunter lunged, his sword held high. Though moments before I had felt tired and weak, I was now invigorated by anger and the thought that my brothers would try to leave me behind.

I countered Gunter's move, our swords clanking in the night. Out of the corner of my eye I could see servants and the other brothers gathering. Guards were yelling encouragement from above.

"That's it, lad, don't let Gunter push you about!"

Gunter was strong, but my speed easily made up for his extra years of training. I had always been a fast learner. Although Gunter had trained all of us brothers, I could see surprise in his eyes, for there was something in me he hadn't seen before: pure rage. With the rage, I felt stronger, quicker, and more alert. When Gunter made a mistake, I seized my chance. As he lunged, I easily jumped aside. As my brother went by me, I whacked him on the back of his head with the hilt of my sword.

Gunter turned and swung for my head, but I ducked and hit him in the gut with my fist, using all the power I could muster. He bent over in pain and shock, and as I backed away the crowded courtyard erupted in cheers and laughter.

“I guess your little brother showed you a thing or two, Gunter,” a guard said from above.

Gunter raised his head, his hands still on his knees, and yelled, “Don’t you all have work to do? Be gone, for tomorrow comes quickly!”

Still breathing hard, I remained in an attacking stance, ready to continue if I must and capable of taking on all of my brothers, if need be. I would not be denied. This was my destiny, now more than ever.

Gunter slowly stood and put his sword back in his scabbard.

“Well, little brother, you’ve learned well and I have obviously misjudged your skill. You have just earned the right to join us. So it will be the two of us plus Thomas and Simon. Be ready, we leave before dawn.”

Katrina:

I rose with a start, not even sure what day it was. My head throbbed, and just as I was about to ring for Sarah, into the room she rushed, a full breakfast tray in her hands.

She dragged me out of bed, peeled me out of my rumpled dress, and helped me wash, all the while bemoaning the state of my beautiful hair. While I ate, Sarah told me about a fight the night before between Quinn and Gunter. What started it she didn’t know, only that Quinn had seemed to win and that everyone had survived intact.

By the time I had finished my huge breakfast, surprisingly eating every last crumb, plus a large

goblet of very fresh crimson, Sarah had finished braiding my hair back away from my face.

I rose and dressed myself in a simple but tasteful traveling outfit of the softest lambskin leggings, riding boots, and a beautifully embroidered emerald green over tunic. Sarah then pushed me in front the mirror, a gift from my father on my seventeenth birthday. Had it been so long since I looked at myself? I hardly recognized the girl in the mirror. The tall young woman looking back at me looked surprised too!

I had to admit, as Sarah often told me, I *was* pretty. My golden brown hair shone in the candlelight, and my green eyes full of wonder complemented my outfit perfectly. I felt strong and ready for whatever I would face.

Because of the changes in our lifestyle over the past centuries, starting in our seventeenth year we begin to age very slowly. For the next hundred or so years only subtle changes would take place, leaving me looking more mature but essentially the same, unless of course I kept forgetting to feed properly. I would have to apologize to Quinn. I also wanted to ask him about the fight. Maybe I should let him bring it up, I decided.

It was May in Germany, and the mornings were still cool, but the wind was sweet with hints of jasmine in the soft mountain breeze. The birds were already awake, singing and going about their business. The beginnings of sunrise made the eastern sky glow with soft bands of pink and orange.

I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath. In my mind I could still hear my father's voice asking, "What do you 'see' daughter?" When I was small I didn't

understand what he meant, but soon it became so clear. With my sense of smell I found I could “see” almost everything—humans, vampires, and animals alike—and was able to discern their numbers.

Later I could identify individuals, as each being has a unique scent (not always pleasant). I could tell if there were horses, dogs, sheep, goats, and the like. When outside the grounds, I could add my acute hearing to my sensing, to tell not only the kinds of animals or people, human or vampire, but also how far away and in what direction. If I was patient and practiced, Father said, “it would become a very useful gift.” I quickly learned that once I “find” and identify a scent I will never forget it.

“Katrina,” I now heard my father call as he walked towards me. Tall and regal, he looked handsome in his all-black attire, which included a hat and a cape. His slightly greying hair fell to his shoulders.

“Yes Father?” I replied as I hastened to meet him.

“Are you ready? Did you have gifts packed for everyone?”

It was customary to give gifts of friendship to his Lordship the High Regent and his wife the Lady Margarite. But I had also ordered Sarah to pack extra trinkets and sundries in case we needed them along the way.

“Yes Father, everything is in order.”

It must have taken all night to complete all the preparations, I thought.

“Then let us be on our way. The journey is long and we know not what awaits us. Why his Lordship chooses such secrecy I don’t know, and I’m anxious to

arrive early and have some time to seek council with others before everyone else arrives.”

“Yes, Father.” I felt as if I were rushing behind him like a young puppy, but I couldn’t keep up with his long stride.

Then I spotted Quinn and my heart started to pound. He was standing by the horses, my beautiful bay mare and his dark grey gelding, their manes fluttering in the early morning breeze. He was talking to Thomas and hadn’t noticed me yet. Why was I reacting to him this way? He’d been my Watcher for a year now, and after all, we had grown up together. It was just Quinn, my Quinn. *My* Quinn? Where had that come from? He’d always been *just* Quinn. I was drawing closer now and just as I stepped within a few feet of him, Thomas stopped talking and looked over. Quinn then turned and our eyes met for a moment before he looked away.

“My Lady,” they both said at the same time, and made a slight bow of their heads. My Lady? Not, “Good morning, Katrina,” or “Why are you late?” This was all too strange and I was determined to get to the bottom of it soon, but just as I was about to remark on their new attitude the castle guard yelled out.

“Caravan approaching!”

Count Philepe Bistodeau, his son Gerhardt, and their entourage cantered through the west gate.

“Oh, good, Fredrik. I was afraid you would already be gone,” said the Count.

“We were just about to depart, Philepe,” Father said.

“Excellent, we can travel together. There’s safety in numbers, and we can talk along the way.”

Then Philepe turned his eyes to me.

“Ah, is this Katrina? How beautiful you have become. You remember my son Gerhardt don’t you?”

I did. A pompous, spoiled, self-absorbed peacock, as I remembered; but I said, “Yes, of course. How are you, Gerhardt?”

“I’m getting better all the time. I look forward to a long journey together.”

Oh how marvelous. The thought of listening to him for days on end talk about how great he was made me nauseous.

Quinn brought over my horse, Nulla, and helped me mount. After I was safely in place he gazed up at me and said in a low voice so only I could hear, “Don’t worry Kat; I’ll always be here to save you.”

Then he winked at me and went over to his horse.

I smiled and turned Nulla toward the east gate, Quinn on one side and Simon on the other, so Gerhardt had to ride with someone else.

I turned to Quinn to say thanks, but he was looking straight ahead, a wry smile on his face, I wished I could hear his thoughts.

I was relieved when finally Gerhardt rode by us and joined our fathers. I had endured hours of his trying to engage me in conversation. It was a small victory but a very satisfying one.

For the next three days there was no privacy and no chance to speak with Quinn alone. We would arrive in Salzburg the day after tomorrow, about which I felt both excited and fearful. To have all the young royal

vampires together had never happened before. We had met only briefly with the other European clans to discuss rogue vampire killings or other clan business. Most of the other clans I'd never seen. Of course Father had visited all of them, helping whenever help was needed, and knew well those members who had been sent to Council. Along the way I had heard my father speaking to Philepe about how on edge all the clans have been. The council is keeping the peace for now, but rivals are arguing amongst themselves over a new territory across the sea in the New World. Such things I cared nothing about usually, but the thought of younger vampires from several of our clans starting a new coven in this New World, was exciting. I knew I wanted to go. Now all I had to do was convince my father.

Where will all this lead, I wondered. Was it true they intended to send us off to that New World they talked about? The Viking vampires had been going there for hundreds of years and had sent an expedition two years ago. I hoped they would be telling us all about what they saw.

Finally, we were in sight of Salzburg, which was stunning. I had no idea a place could be so grand, so beautiful. We were headed through the city to the Regent's palace, not too far outside the city gates. We had no time to linger now, but passing the shops, seeing the lovely outfits adorning the women and the couples having lunch, made me wish I had time to stroll the streets and explore all the wonders that abounded there.

“Daydreaming again?”

Quinn's voice jerked me back to reality.

"Yes, and I wish..." Then I realized these were the first words he had said to me for days, and I wondered where Thomas and Simon were.

He said, as if reading my mind, "Thomas and Simon are consulting with Gunter about how best to guard you and his Lordship while in the Palace. What were you about to say?"

I paused. "Nothing."

My heart sank. I hadn't been alone with him all this time, and now that I did have a chance, I couldn't think of anything to say. What a fool I was!

Quinn turned to me, and the look on his face showed me that he couldn't think of anything either.

"You'd be coming with me? That is, if they really are sending us to start a New World coven, I mean."

"Nothing is sure, Katrina. What we've all been hearing is just speculation. The High Regent may have called the Council together to tell us something completely different. He may even forbid anyone to go to this 'New World' as you put it. But I will say this: wherever you are, that's where I'll be until I am no longer."

Then he looked ahead, as did I, to see that Thomas was returning.

He did love me. I was sure of it now.



CHAPTER TWO

The roadway turned, and as we entered a dark forest I suddenly felt impending doom surrounding us. Listen,” I told myself. “Use all your senses.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could feel Quinn and Thomas tense as they realized what I was doing. They slowly drew their swords, and as they did, so did Gunter, Simon, and Father. I could “see” many horses and many humans.

Then Father’s voice boomed. “Ride!”

As we forced our horses into a gallop, my senses told me the men in the woods on the right outnumbered us by ten. “How far? *How far?*” I asked myself. A mile maybe less, I detected.

“How far is the Palace?” I yelled.

“Two miles!” Father shouted back.

“We’ll never make it they’re only a mile away,” I yelled.

Thank goodness we had left the wagons in the city, with the servants, who would follow us later.

Then I realized that someone must have alerted our assailants to our presence. We must have spies amongst us, for only one kind of human would be chasing us—the Volator—those out to hunt and kill vampires. What a perfect time to attack, I thought.

I could see the Palace now, less than a mile away. We might just make it.

Then I heard the distinct whistle of an arrow in flight, coming toward us out of the darkness of the woods.

“Duck!” I yelled.

We instinctively bent down low and urged our horses ahead. Another arrow from the right, and a horse squealed and fell, the guard flying off his mount into the ditch.

Suddenly Father, Philepe, and Gerhardt pulled their horses up, jumped off, and ran into the forest.

“Get Katrina into the palace, *now!*” yelled Gunter. As he dismounted, we galloped by.

Suddenly Nulla tripped and I was nearly thrown to the road. I clung perilously halfway down her left side.

“Open the gate!” Quinn yelled. Then he tried to help me back into the saddle.

I had trained my whole life to be able to save myself, and the time had come to do it. I pulled myself up just as the gate opened and we galloped through. Guards with swords drawn pushed past us, ready to aid Father. My heart was pounding as people rushed towards us.

“Are you all right, my Lady?” someone asked.

“Yes. Quinn, Thomas are you all right?”

“Yes, we’re fine. We’re going back to help,” said Quinn.

“No!” Thomas said. “Katrina is your charge right now. You stay here; she must be safe.”

I dismounted and noticed blood dripping down Nulla’s leg, an arrow jutting from her shoulder.

“Oh, no!” I cried, “Nulla!”

Quinn ran over to see what was wrong.

“She’ll be fine, Katrina. The wound is not a fatal one. Stable boy! Here! Now! Take my Lady’s beloved mare to the stable and see to her. Take great care and report back to me.”

The stable boy nodded, and poor Nulla walked away with him.

As if he had read my mind Quinn said, “She’ll be fine. Your father will be fine. It’s whoever was after us you should worry about. Your father and Philepe will show them no mercy. The only problem we’ll have is to endure the stories of bravery Gerhardt will tell.”

I rolled my eyes and we both had a laugh. It was short lived however, because just then we heard the gate swing open and horses gallop through, the dust from all the hoofs making it impossible for me to see for a moment. Then I heard.

“Katrina! Where is my daughter?”

“I’m here Father.”

He was alive. And just as we had predicted, out of the dust Gerhardt appeared and said, “Did you miss me?”

Philepe, Gunter, and Simon were also unhurt but we’d lost four guards, two from our garrison and two from the palace guard.

“What of the Volator, Father?”

Father had a shocked look on his face.

“You knew?”

“Who else would it be?”

“Five got away, but twenty-five or so were not so lucky. Unfortunately I don’t think their leader was

amongst them. But I assure you he's not far, and we'll find him. Now you get cleaned up and rest, because we must report to the High Regent. No one is safe until we root out the traitor who has revealed us."

The thought of a traitor living amongst us sent shivers up my spine.

A lovely girl named Gretchen showed me to my quarters. Several young ladies would be sharing a large common area surrounded by bedrooms. Large leaded glass windows on each side of the fireplace filled the room with light and gave the gold overstuffed chairs and sofa a soft glow. A round table with six chairs sat in the corner. The high dark-beamed ceiling was adorned with two iron candle chandeliers. My bedroom was the second door to the left, and in it was a large bed with wooden posts, lush green velvet bedding, and an eiderdown so thick that they may not find me in the morning.

I heard the door to the common room open and my curiosity revived me enough to go and meet the new arrival. She was stunning. Glossy ebony hair drifted over her shoulders nearly to her waist. She had big brown eyes and skin the color of warm sand.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Katrina Von Dracek."

"How nice for you," she said in a bored voice without looking in my direction.

I can see this is going to a long week, I thought to myself.

"I'm Rosalinda DiPalicio."

"How nice for you too," I said and turned to walk away.

“All right, that was rude, forgive me. It’s just that it was quite an adventure to get here. I’m exhausted, I’m starving, and I smell like a horse.”

The tension broken, we laughed. I knew just how she felt.

“Let’s start again. I’m Rosalinda DiPalicio, but you may call me Rosa.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Rosa. I’m Katrina Von Dracek, and you may call me Kat.”

“There were some delicious morsels standing guard outside. I don’t suppose we’re allowed to feed on anything or anyone we want to?” Rosa grinned and licked her full lips.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Again the door opened and Gretchen came in carrying a large case. She was followed by a girl of medium height, her blonde hair pulled back away from a lovely heart-shaped face, which featured a smile that seemed to light her from within.

“Hello. I’m Eleanor Flanery. We just arrived from England.”

“I’m Rosalinda DiPalicio, and this is Katrina Von Dracek. You may call us Rosa and Kat.”

“I’m glad to meet you, Rosa, Kat. Please call me El.”

“And call me Letta, short for Arletta,” said the girl stepping out from behind Eleanor.

Arletta Valdesio had traveled from Spain. She had olive skin and dark brown hair pulled back and up in ringlets, which were clipped at the top with a beautiful jeweled comb. Instead of the brown eyes I was

expecting, cornflower blue eyes met my gaze upon our introduction.

Gretchen showed them to their rooms.

“Thank you, Gretchen,” said Letta. “Has a bath been prepared?”

“Yes, we could all use a bath,” said Rosa.

“I’ll see to it at once,” Gretchen answered, “and then I’ll bring you some luncheon.”

“Oh, glorious,” El said. “I’m starving,”

“I am, too,” I said.

Eleanor flopped down on one of the chairs.

“At least I survived the crossing. I really hate the water. How were your journies?”

“We were attacked in the forest, about two miles from the front gate,” I said.

“Really? How frightening!” said Eleanor. “Was anyone in your party hurt?”

“We lost two guards, as did the palace, and, Nulla, my beautiful mare took an arrow in the shoulder, but she’s going to be fine. Father said only four or five of our attackers escaped.”

“Who, was it? Why would anyone do such a thing?” asked El.

“There are many who dislike our kind and despise our way of life,” said Rosa, “They seek to end our existence and take our lands, but they’re fools.”

“It is true that man often seeks to kill that which he does not understand, and it seems they are always fighting someone,” I added.

“That makes my trip seem pretty boring,” said Letta. “I did get to stop in Paris to buy some new

dresses. I'll show them to you as soon as my things arrive."

I wished I could be more excited about getting some new clothing. But most of the beautiful dresses Father had ordered made for me were still unworn, and since we rarely had guests there was no reason for formal dressing. I preferred simple, comfortable sheaths and leggings more suited to my training.

"Ah, Gretchen, thank goodness," said Rosa.

We all followed after Gretchen and the tray of treats she had brought us for lunch. She had also brought a pitcher full of crimson for strength and the news that the baths would be ready by the time we had finished eating. We practically inhaled the food and the crimson. Then, dressing gowns in tow, we ambled off to our baths and looked forward to resting for a while before dinner. I had hoped to see Quinn waiting outside the door, but he was nowhere to be seen. I'd have to seek him out later.

"If you're looking for your Watchers, they are gathered down the hall, deciding watches and duties amongst them," said Gretchen.

"Thank you Gretchen. I wasn't worried," I said.

After the layers of grime were removed—which took a lot of scrubbing I might add—I put on my dressing gown and a robe Gretchen brought in, ran a comb through my hair, and slowly walked back toward my room. There, leaning against the wall, was the silhouette of someone I knew well.

"Quinn!" I called, so happy to see him.

He looked up and smiled. Without even thinking I ran over and threw my arms around him and drew him into a close embrace.

“Oh, Quinn, I missed you.”

At first he was stiff, because I’m sure my hug was quite a shock. He had never seen me react to his short absence quite like this before. He grasped my shoulders and pushed me away slightly.

“I should stay away more often,” he laughed. “I do have duties, you know.” He feigned a serious look, and then he smiled.

“Is not my wellbeing one of those duties?” I asked as I folded my arms and turned my back to him.

“Of course it is.”

He pulled me back towards him, his arms now crossing around my waist.

“My most important duty,” he whispered in my ear.

His warm breath on my neck made my knees feel weak. My pulse was racing; more than anything else in the world I wanted him to kiss me.

“Well, well. What have we here?” we heard from behind us.

Quinn pushed me away so quickly I almost fell. When I turned around I saw a man I’d never seen before.

“Lady Katrina Von Dracek, this is Joseph. He is the Watcher for Lady Rosalinda DiPalicio and will be taking the first watch this evening. I will, however be accompanying you to dinner, and if you wish beforehand, to the stables to see Nulla.”

“Thank you Quinn. I would like that. I am pleased to meet you, Joseph.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said.

I hurried past as fast as I could. Without looking at Joseph, who opened the door, I went in and straight to my room. As I rushed through that door I was happily surprised to see Sarah laying out my clothes.

“Sarah, oh thank goodness.”

She looked up. “Well at least you’re clean. But we’ll have to do something with this hair,” she said walking over and lifting strands of wet hair and shaking her head in disgust. “I brought those oils your father gave you last summer. You remember he brought them back from the Far East?”

“I do remember,” I replied. “He had to join up with Philepe and Demitrie to go to the aid of Gomon, whose clan was in a bitter fight with an unknown wild enemy.”

Vampires that are made rather than born can be unstable, even more so if they were unstable in their human form or had been left to fend for themselves without guidance and training. This is why the making of new vampires is mostly forbidden, except in rare circumstances. As it happened, when our group arrived to help the Gomon, they were able to seek out and kill the wild creatures by beheading, the only way to ensure that the creatures stayed dead, and then the remains were burned just for good measure. *Well, I thought, that’s an unsettling thought to take a nap with.*

“Sarah, finish my hair and get out a simple sheath for me. I can’t rest now. I want to go to see Nulla. Quinn said he would take me.”

“What else did he say he’d do for you?”

“Sarah, please. You know it’s forbidden.”

“Yes, I remember, Katrina. But do you? I know your feelings for him; we talked for hours on the way, if you recall. And I can see the look on your face and the flush of your cheeks, so don’t act so innocent with me.”

“Very well, but it’s our secret—it has to be. All right let’s get me dressed, and then go ask that Joseph fellow to get Quinn to escort me to the stables.”

When Quinn arrived, I guessed the other girls were resting, because there was no sound in the common room.

“Thanks for coming a little sooner than we planned.”

“Not at all, my Lady. It’s my duty to be at your beck and call,” he said without a smile.

I rolled my eyes. He was obviously making an effort to be more professional in front of Joseph, who gave us a look and a smile but said nothing.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” Quinn asked. “We’ve had quite a trip.”

“I wasn’t tired,” I said as we walked down the stairway and then across a small garden courtyard. “Sarah brought up the situation in the Far East last summer, and I knew I wasn’t about to sleep after that. And I really do want to check on Nulla. Are you sure she’s going to be all right?”

“They carefully extracted the arrow, then cleaned and bandaged the wound, and she seems comfortable. I even brought her carrots from the kitchen. She’ll be fine.”

“How about Father and the others?”

“They’ve been in Council since we arrived. Everyone is a little shaken because of the attack this morning. I don’t really understand the attackers’ motives either; there have been no killings other than the ones they bring on themselves. Maybe that’s what they are trying to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how can they get rid of you—that is to say, us, all the clans—if they can’t blame unrest and murder on vampires? Without the violence and killings, no one would believe you’re a threat, and then they’d have no right to hunt you.”

“Well they don’t have any right. We *are* peaceful. We take care of our own problems as they arise amongst ourselves, as we have for a hundred years. Why do you think these Volator hate us so much—especially the leader, whoever he is?”

“I don’t know, but I wager your father does. Have you ever asked him?”

“When subjects like that come up he always says it’s Council business and tells me not to worry about it. He let me know that this was one of the subjects not suitable for discussion. It’s just like when I bring up my mother.”

“Here we are the palace stables. After you, my Lady.”

“Oh, for heavens sake, I’ve been Kat for all the years you’ve been training to be my Watcher, and now all of a sudden it’s ‘my Lady’?”

“It’s the proper way to address you, especially around here.”

I turned to face him then.

“What if I were to punch you right in the gut?” I said. As I started to make a fist, he threw his hands up in surrender and backed away a couple of steps.

“Very well, Kat, but only when we’re alone, all right?”

“All right, but that doesn’t seem to be very often anymore,” I said as we continued on. “Nulla, oh Nulla, there you are.”

She nuzzled my hand as I reached out and I put my head against her cheek.

“Oh, Nulla, you scared me half to death.”

I patted her neck, and she bobbed her head up and down and shifted her weight, trying to get closer to me. She was such a good friend and I loved her dearly.

“See, she’s fine.”

“It’s just that we had quite a scare today, and if anything ever happened to her, or you...or any of your brothers, I’d be heartbroken.”

“Listen, Kat, this is what we train for, and we’re very, very good at it, all right?”

“I know it’s just that...”

I paused and looked up into his eyes.

“That I care very much about...all of you.”

He moved closer to me and took my chin in his hand, which was warm against my cool vampire skin. As I lifted my hand to brush away the hair that always seemed to be in his eyes, he leaned forward, his lips parting. I could smell the sweetness of his breath and...

“Excuse me, my Lady.”

Damn it! Why does someone always have to appear when I'm about to have the thing I want most, a kiss from Quinn? Damn, damn, damn.

"Yes?" I responded, with the most annoyed voice I could muster.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, my Lady, but they have asked all of you to come to the great hall for introductions, and Sarah said I'd find you here. I'm to tell you that you must come quickly to change into something appropriate."

"Tell her I'm coming right along. Well, go ahead. I'll be right there."

Quinn turned to go towards the main palace.

"No you don't," I said as I pulled him to me.

I was certainly not leaving that stable without my kiss. I put my hands around his neck, rose up on my tiptoes, and kissed him with all the pent-up passion that was in me. Surprised at first, he relaxed into the kiss, and with matching passion, wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off the ground. The world disappeared in that moment, and nothing mattered but Quinn and me. When we finally parted, reluctantly, I felt a sigh leave my lips. I slowly opened my eyes, half expecting it to have been a dream, but he was gazing back at me. It *had* happened. He and I both knew what we felt without having to say the words, *I love you*.

We hurried back across the courtyards and gardens hand in hand. He left me at the entrance of the hallway, as he too had to change and receive his orders.

"Katrina Von Dracek, where have you been?" Sarah demanded in a very annoyed voice.

“You know perfectly well where I’ve been or you wouldn’t have known where to send someone to find me.”

“You know what I mean. What took you so long to get back here? The other girls have already been escorted down to the great hall.”

“Sarah, calm down. Next to the other girls I will simply disappear anyway. They make me look like plain white bread next to pastry.”

“That’s not true, Katrina,” she said as we hurried to get my sheath off and the new dress on. It was my favorite red silk, with puffy sleeves to the elbow, tighter from elbow to wrist, and with beautiful silk-covered buttons adorning the sleeves and corset front. It pushed my breasts up and out for which I was thankful, and it made my waist look even smaller.

“Good thing we did your hair earlier.”

She pinched my cheeks and whisked me to the door. Quinn was waiting for me, looking so handsome.

“No time to gawk at each other now. Go, go,” Sarah said as she pushed me out the door.

“You look stunning Kat.”

“Thank you. You clean up nicely yourself,” I said, looking up at him.

We laughed. Here we were, just two people in love, walking into the unknown; all we knew was that we were going there together.

Father was waiting for me at the door to the reception room.

“Finally,” he said. “Almost all the others have already arrived and have taken their places.”

When we got almost to the top of the stairs I looked back for Quinn. He smiled and at once I felt better.

“Baron Fredrik Von Dracek and Lady Katrina,” the court announcer intoned.

We made a slight bow and started down the stairs. *Don't trip, don't trip, smile, don't trip*, I thought.

I surveyed the room, hoping to find a friendly face. There were Eleanor, Rosa, and Letta with their fathers. All three looked stunningly beautiful.

Eleanor in blue the color of a night sky; Rosalinda in teal, her black hair braided around her head and down her back; and Letta in red, with black lace around the collar and down the front as well as the edges of her sleeves, her hair still the way I saw it earlier. Of course they could have worn sacks and made them the new fashion. But having them all smile at me helped me feel at ease.

Philepe and Gerhardt gave a head bow of acknowledgement as we passed. I noticed Gerhardt's gaze didn't leave my chest. It is my best asset, but it would be polite of him remember I had a face. As we took our place, I thought that Father had been right, we should have been here sooner. Being one of the last to be announced was a big disadvantage, because now I didn't know who anyone was. Except for the three I'd already met and Philepe and Gerhardt, everyone else was a complete stranger. I'd have to meet up with the girls later in the evening so they could fill me in.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let me now introduce the High Regent, Count Petrovich Daminov, his wife, the Countess Margarite, and his son, Damien, and daughter, Luena.”

The Count was quite old, and his pure white hair made his skin look even paler, but he was regal and handsome and in no way frail looking. He's from one of the oldest known clans and has been ruler of the vampires for over one hundred years, since the clan wars ended and the Council began. Both feared and respected, he's ruled with an iron fist and swift justice. Some say it's time for a change, but fear if his son Damien comes into power that the alliance between clans would break and the ground would again turn red with the blood of both vampires and humans. Margarite is his second wife. His first wife had disappeared, I had been told, but this was before my time and I knew none of the details.

She looked lovely in a silk gown which looked as if it had been spun from pure gold; it was cinched in at the waist, with a full skirt billowing to the staircase. The largest ruby I'd ever seen adorned her neck, and on her ears were earrings to match—rubies circled with diamonds. Her hair was piled beautifully atop her head and sparkled with a diamond and ruby tiara.

When they were halfway down the stairs now, I looked past them and saw Damien and Luena taking their turn on the stairway, looking side to side and acknowledging the crowd lining the hall. I had also learned the Luena adored her brother and would like nothing more than to see him rule next, at what ever the cost. Some even say that their father should watch his back, as betrayal could come from within his own family.

As they got closer there was something about Damien, aside from the fact he was flawless, with his

shoulder-length brown hair, long sideburns, square jaw line, and piercing dark eyes. He was so handsome that I could hear women all over the hall swooning. Those dark eyes seemed to penetrate my very being. But there was something else, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Just then the Count and Countess reached the bottom of the stairs and greeted my father, who then presented me to them.

"May I present my daughter, Katrina," he said as I curtsied.

"She's lovely, Fredrik. So much like her mother." Was I? I had no memory of her so I couldn't know, but still it made me feel...proud. I wished Father would talk about her. Introductions complete, the Count and Countess moved on to meet the many others waiting to greet them. Damien and Luena were now at the bottom of the stairway. I hadn't even looked at Luena until now. Like everyone else in her family, she was breathtaking. Dark brown eyes were set in porcelain skin; her low-cut emerald green silk gown shimmered in the candlelight of the hall. Large emeralds, their color perfectly matched to her gown, adorned her neck and ears. They made a stunning pair, the brother and sister royal.

As I looked from Luena back to Damien, I was shocked to see he was looking back at me. Those eyes...could he read my mind? I gasped, for just as I formed the thought, he smiled at me, as if to confirm it!

"Baron Von Dracek! So nice to see you again," said Damien, offering his hand.

"Damien, Luena this is my daughter, Katrina."

I curtsied and extended my hand to Damien in greeting. He took hold of it and while still looking me straight in the eye bent and gave the back of my hand a kiss. I felt what I can only describe as pure energy coming from his lips onto my hand up my arm and into my heart! I could feel my face heating as he stood and smiled at me.

“Delighted to meet you, Katrina.”

“Come, Damien, we have others to meet,” said Luena taking his arm.

“Yes of course, sister,” he said with a hint of sarcasm. “Please save a dance for me, Katrina.”

Then once more he acknowledged my father.

“Your Lordship.” He turned and gave a slight bow, which my father returned, and then brother and sister were gone.

At least he looked at my face. I was sure he’d seen his fair share of breasts. Once again I had a strange feeling about him, but what? As for Luena, there was nothing good about the feeling she gave me.

I had never met them before, yet there was something I recognized about Damien, but I couldn’t place it. Not yet.

Next we went around the room casually greeting everyone, and I hoped I would somehow be able to remember who was who. Some families would be easier than others of course. The Tantees from Africa, who were tall and elegant, regal with caramel colored skin, high cheek bones, beautiful bodies draped with the most colorful fabrics. Chander, who was my age, was a prince. His father MoMar was king of his clan, and he and my father knew each other well. The

delegates from the Far East, the Goman, had beautiful Asian eyes, black short hair, and clothing of hand-embroidered silks of red and gold, depicting scenes from their homeland. Hun Lee, Lord Goman's son, spoke seven languages and by all accounts was the most brilliant mind in attendance.

The tall, handsome Vikings also were easy to pick out, with their broad shoulders, long blonde hair, chiseled rugged features. Sven Arenkiel and his son, Axel, both had beards and although their hair was blonde their beards appeared to be shaded with red. They had piercing blue eyes and always seemed to be on guard, ready to fight at a moment's notice. I imagined some smoldering quiet passion awaiting some lucky girl.

Of course the girls' fathers we would see often: Duke Ricardo Valdesio, Arletta's father; Edward Flanery, Eleanor's father; and Michael DiPalicio, Rosalinda's father. Everyone seemed exceedingly pleasant, but still an element of caution and apprehension filled the room. I imagined that outside there was also a lot of tension. Since news of the attack had spread, everyone's Watchers were on edge.

*Tonight we eat and enjoy each other's company.
Who knows what tomorrow will bring.*

Rosa, El, and I sat together discussing fashion. Other than the Council members, it was indeed hard to keep the other royal family members matched.

"I think we should all wear name tags with family crests and a coordinating list to follow," said Rosa.

She was particularly attracted to Axel, as were many of the young ladies in attendance. He didn't

dance, much to the disappointment of the half-dozen or so girls that surrounded him.

“How are you ladies this fine evening?” asked Gerhardt. “I can’t stay long, as that would deny too many others of my company.”

“You’re forgiven, Gerhardt,” I said. “We understand, don’t we girls?”

As he left to continue sharing himself with those unfortunate women who hadn’t yet been graced by his presence, we all giggled.

Rosa was asked to dance several times, as was Eleanor. I danced with Demitrie Devorak and an adorable Russian named Nicoli, but was content to watch people and chat with the girls. Finally I stood, ready to look for Father to make our exit. I hoped for a moment alone with Quinn before I rested for tomorrow.

“If you’re looking for me, look no further.”

“Damien, you startled me.”

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t had a chance to speak with you yet. Would you care to dance?”

“No, I’ve danced all I can dance, I’m afraid. I was hoping to find Father and say goodnight.”

“But the night is young, and so are we! Won’t you stay and talk, at least for a little longer. Please?”

He was even more mesmerizing than he was earlier, but something was still bothering me about him. Maybe I could figure it out if I stayed and spoke with him for a while.

“All right, you win. But just for a little while. I have training in the morning and as you know, the Council

meeting later. What can you tell me, Damien? What's going on?"

"I am sworn to secrecy, my Lady, and I don't know very much myself. I would rather talk about you."

He brushed my cheek with the back of his hand, which sent tingles from my face down my spine. His dark brown eyes had a sparkle in them, which told me he knew and expected that very reaction. I stepped away.

"Damien, I really am tired – Oh, Father, there you are."

Damien looked deflated. I didn't think many girls refused his charms.

"Father, I'm very tired. May we go?"

"Of, course Katrina. Damien, goodnight."

"Lord Von Dracek," said Damien giving a slight bow.

With those acknowledgements we started to make our way from the hall.

"Quinn is waiting to escort you back," my father said. "There is still something I must do. I will see you in the morning."

He gave me a kiss on the forehead and turned to walk away.

"Father?"

"Yes, Katrina?"

"Do I really look like Mother?"

"Yes, yes you do, just as beautiful."

Then he turned back and walked away. It made me happy and sad at the same time. As I exited the hall the cool night air gave me a shiver. Quinn stepped out of the shadows and placed a cape around my shoulders.

“Sarah said you’d get chilled.”

“She was right, as usual. She always knows what I need before I do.”

I looked up at him, then and we both smiled. I was sure he couldn’t tell I was blushing in the dim light of a half moon. I was thinking back to the last time we were together. That kiss was amazing, and although I had nothing to compare it with, because it was my first kiss, I could not believe anything could match it. However, I was willing to try.

We walked slowly back. I really wanted some more time alone with him. Did he feel the same way, I wondered?

“Maybe we should check on Nulla again,” he said.

“Yes, I think you’re right. I want to make sure they changed the dressing and used a fresh poultice.”

He *did* feel the same way, I was sure of it now. We quickened our step, we didn’t dare take too much time; Gunter would figure it out, and that was the last thing we needed.

“You look so beautiful.”

I had to look down. My face was feeling flushed again. My pulse was racing.

“Thank you, again.”

Why couldn’t I think of something to say?

When we arrived at the stable, Nulla’s head was drooping, her eyes closed. Then her nostrils flared as she picked up our scent with her sensitive nose. A low whinny escaped from her throat and she tossed her head as though scolding us for taking so long to get close.

Quinn laughed. “She’s never seen you in a ball gown before.”

“Her dressing looks good, and I can smell the fresh poultice. Are you all right, girl?”

She placed her muzzle into my hands, the soft velvet caressing my palms. Quinn produced a carrot, which she eagerly took from his outstretched palm, and I scratched her neck, then gave her a pat.

“We should probably get back.” A shiver went through me just then, so I pulled my cape closer around me. Quinn came behind me and rubbed my arms up and down to gently warm me. This gave me a shiver of a different kind, one that went from my stomach to my toes, a tingle I’d felt before, when we kissed.

He wrapped his arms around me, then from behind, the same way he had outside my room earlier that day. He kissed my neck just below my ear. I heard a moan and then I realized—it was me! He gently turned me around to face him. We looked at each other for what seemed like forever but could have been only seconds.

He began to lean down as I rose up to meet him; he pulled me closer, his arms now around my back. I slid my arms under his and up his back towards his shoulders. At that moment I knew this was right, and no one was going to be able to tell me this was wrong. No one, not even Father. When we broke from the kiss and the one that followed, we turned to walk back. I knew I would never forget this night. As we left the stable we were startled by someone coming out of the shadows. Damien.

“Well, well. Aren’t you two cozy?”

Quinn placed himself between Damien and me.

“No need to be defensive, I mean you no harm.”

We had let our guard down, allowed Damien to approach us unaware, which is exactly why relationships between Watchers and their charges were forbidden.

“What brings you to the stables, Damien?” I said.

“Oh, I was just out for a stroll, trying to relax after such an exciting evening.” He looked past Quinn to address me. “I guess you found your second wind. Before you left the hall you were feigning exhaustion.”

“My horse Nulla was hurt in the attack earlier, and I wanted to check on her, not that it’s any of your business. Now if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be going.”

“Of course, don’t let me keep you. I’ll see you tomorrow. But please be careful on your way back. You never know what lurks in the shadows.”

As I passed Damien, again I was overcome by the same sense of knowing. Something about him was escaping me, but what?

Quinn and I were silent all the way back, because now we both knew what needed to be done. I would not give him up. I also knew I would not let him give me up. He walked me up the stairs and as we turned to enter the main hall we knew the time had come. The Watcher who had this shift would be in front of my door, so this would be our last chance to be alone.

“I love you, Katrina.”

“I love you, too.”

He held me and I wished I could hold him forever, but I released him. Then he said what I knew he had to say.

“I’ll speak with Gunter in the morning. Either Simon or Thomas will take my place as your Watcher.”

I nodded. Knowing it was right didn’t make it any easier. We continued around the corner until we knew the other Watcher had seen us. Then Quinn just turned and walked away.

This couldn’t be the end. It was only the beginning. “Goodnight, Joseph,” I said as I got closer.

“My Lady,” he said as he opened the door for me.



CHAPTER THREE

Once inside, I noticed the table had been prepared with fruit and pastries and a pitcher, I assumed of crimson. I knew I should be hungry; I was the only one who hadn't eaten before we went into the Hall to be introduced.

Maybe in a minute I would try something, but at the moment I just wanted to warm myself by the fire. The part of me that needed the warmth wished that I would hurry to get a little older, for I knew the older we get the less we feel heat or cold. The aging process also takes away our need to sleep except when necessary for healing, and we no longer need to eat regular meals to sustain us. Filling my head with these thoughts was keeping me from breaking into tears. We would find a way to see each other, I promised myself.

I dragged myself up and into my room, loosened the corseting at my waist, and once the dress was off my shoulders, the sheer weight of it made it fall to the floor. I stepped out of the ruffled gown now filling the space in front of the bed and removed the equally

constrictive undergarment. I slipped on the simple nightgown laid out for me and crawled in between the two layers of down. In that cradle of softness I drifted off to sleep.

The dream began with my taking in a breath just before our party was attacked. I could “see” men on both sides of us, but there was something else, much farther away. I could almost place it...almost. Then it hit me. I sat straight up in bed, now wide awake.

Damien! It was Damien in the woods that afternoon! Damien was the traitor! It was *his* scent! That was what I couldn't place! I had to tell Quinn; after tomorrow he would no longer be my Watcher, but for tonight he was, and I needed him. We had to get to Father, now! By the look of the light it was nearly four in the morning. I asked myself, *Why would Damien want to have us killed?*

I dressed in my training outfit, leggings, boots, white long-sleeved shirt, and a leather vest. I tied my hair back with a strip of leather and strapped on my weapons.

The fire was low but still crackled; the candles had melted almost completely when I rushed to the door, expecting to see Joseph. But the hallway was empty, the flickering lamp casting shadows on the walls and floor.

Something was terribly wrong, I thought. With four girls inside, at least one Watcher would always be at the door, and now the hall was empty.

“Joseph?” I called. No answer. Should I go back inside, close the door, and wake the others? *That's ridiculous. I'm a vampire, I'm fast and strong, and I*

can take care of myself, I told myself. I had Joseph's scent; he was around the corner. Why didn't he answer me? Rosalinda was going to hear about this if he was sleeping.

When I rounded the corner I could see him slumped on the ground. Then in an instant someone approached me from behind, too quickly to be a human, but I was quicker. As he grabbed for my neck, I ducked and ran for the stairs.

"Quinn!" I yelled as I ran. "Gunter, *help!*"

As I got to the stairs, another vampire I didn't recognize was blocking my way. He hissed and rushed toward me. I rammed my sword into his side, his legs crumpled, and he fell to the floor. I heard the other approach from behind. I kicked the fallen body off my sword with my right boot and turned to deal a fatal blow across the neck of the approaching assailant and his head fell to the floor. I turned to see the first would-be assassin starting to rise from the landing, his sword wound healing quickly. I swung and dispatched his head as well. Now I heard Gunter rushing up the stairs toward me, Quinn was right behind.

"Katrina, are you all right?" asked Gunter, wildly looking around.

"Yes, I'm fine."

I was panting and still in a defensive crouch, but I was fine, better than fine! I had done exactly what I'd been trained to do, defend myself and those around me. And I'd done it very well.

"Joseph is dead, around the corner from our rooms. Gunter you'd better see if the other girls are safe. Quinn, I must see Father, right now."

We headed toward the other side of the palace, where the Council had their accommodations. I was relieved to see Thomas and Simon in the hallway.

“Have you had any trouble here tonight?” I asked.

“No. What’s going on? All the Watchers and guards are checking every room.” said Thomas.

“The Watcher guarding Katrina’s room was killed and she was attacked,” said Quinn.

“By whom?” asked Simon.

“No time to go into it now. I must see Father.”

Thomas opened the door; Father was staring out the window.

“Father, I must speak with you.”

“Katrina, what’s happened?”

He embraced me, and at once I felt safe.

“I was attacked Father, outside my room.”

“Where was the Watcher?” he asked as he looked angrily at Quinn.

“Dead. Father, I was attacked by fledglings.”

“Fledglings? But why? Who would be creating fledglings? Quinn did you get a look at them?”

“Yes but only after Katrina had already killed them.”

Father looked shocked.

“It *is* why you have the Watchers train me, isn’t it Father? I don’t think they wanted to kill me. I think they were trying to kidnap me. And something else, Father. The reason that I was already dressed and preparing to come and see you. Joseph, the Watcher on duty, was not outside my door so I went looking for him and found that he was slumped in the side hallway. That’s when I was attacked by two vampire

fledglings. But Father, the reason I had to see you is that I remembered something from the first attack outside the gates. The scent of someone in the woods with the Volator. A vampire. I couldn't place it then because I had never 'seen' this scent before, not until we arrived here."

I looked into my father's eyes.

"Who is it Katrina? Who's the traitor?"

"Damien. Its Damien Daminov Father!"

He stepped back away from me and gave me a stern look.

"You're absolutely sure, Katrina?"

"Yes! You've trained me well, Father. Everything and every being has its own unique scent, and once I match that scent, I never forget it, right? And how would Damien know what my gift is? He mistakenly thought he was too far away from us for me to pick him up. Once the frenzy started, he thought he would be safe, but I had sensed something was wrong very early on that afternoon and took a very deep breath."

"That's right," added Quinn. "She started to use her gift about two miles outside the palace. I remember thinking that could only mean trouble and drew my sword."

"What should we do Father? The son of the High Regent has betrayed us. But why would he try to have us killed and then try to have me kidnapped?"

"Without more proof we will only expose the fact that we know what he is and what he's done. We'll need more, and what of the fledglings? If we can prove he is making new vampires against all the laws of the

Council, we'll have more than enough evidence to convict him."

"But why would he take such a chance, knowing that if he is convicted of this, it would mean his death? He'll be very cunning; we must find a way to get close to him," said Quinn.

"What of his Watcher? Gunter must know him?" said Father. "Anything going on concerning Damien the Watcher must know."

I turned to Father and said, "The Council meets today. This must be connected."

"Thomas and Simon will come with me to the High Regent. We must not delay the Council. I'll see to it that the meeting happens as soon as possible. Quinn, you and Katrina ask Gunter about Damien's Watcher and set up a schedule to follow both of them. They must not find out what we know of their involvement, so be very careful whom you speak to, and beware of palace spies. Remember, Damien is very dangerous and has nothing to lose."

Once we were alone Quinn took my hand and led me to a private room.

"I think I might know the reason Damien wants your father dead. I've heard rumors that today the High Regent will be stepping down. Your father is the most likely to be elected to take his place. That's why all the families have been assembled—to vote. I think Damien can get enough votes only if your father is no longer a candidate. Don't you see, Kat? First he tried to kill us, and when that failed, he tried to kidnap you. He thinks your father could be made to step aside by using you as hostage: your life for the Regency."

“Oh, my God! Damien knows about us, too.”

“The important thing now is to talk to Gunter as soon as possible. And we have to make Damien believe we aren’t romantically involved, so he won’t be able to use our love against us.”

“You’re right. Quinn, I have an idea. I can get close to Damien. He seems very interested in me, if only to get to my father.”

“No, Katrina it’s too dangerous.”

“Quinn, listen to me, as soon as the Council meets it will be too late for his plan to work. We have to find out what his backup plan is. If he made those two fledglings I killed, there may be more of them somewhere. If he can’t gain power through the vote. Maybe he plans to take power with an army of fledglings. What if I can convince him that I am vulnerable to his charms because of our recent break-up? He may think he could court his way into power.”

“Who knew you could be so devious? We will of course explain all this to Thomas or Simon whoever is to be your new Watcher, and I will insist that an extra Watcher be assigned—me—to secretly watch every move.”

“Yes, of course. We can say you’ve been reassigned because of our ‘closeness.’ Send for your brothers Avery, Gregor, and Cedrik. We’re going to need those we can trust.”

“Let’s go find Gunter. He was checking on the other girls,” said Quinn.

We hurried back to my quarters, where we found Gunter speaking to a large group of Watchers.

Sarah ran towards me crying.

“Thank goodness you’re all right. Something terrible has happened!”

“I know. Joseph is dead,” I said.

“Not just that, Katrina. It’s the girls, Rosalinda, Eleanor, and Arletta, they’re gone.”

“Gone? Gunter, what’s happening?”

“We found a side gate unlocked, and we think that once the fledglings had the girls they took them out that way. With their speed, and obviously some inside help, no one saw a thing at first. Then a couple of them ran into you. The two that tried to take you didn’t fare as well.”

“Sarah, I’m all right, and we’ll get the girls back. Find me something to wear to the Council meeting. Gunter and Quinn, send a vampire courier to alert your brothers. We have need of them. Come Sarah, I need to change, and I’m feeling a little weak, so I’ll need to eat. Make sure the food and drink come only from our stores; trust no one but our people.”

My mind was spinning. What did Damien want with the other girls? Was this just a ploy to cover the fact that his real target was me? When I didn’t come right back to my room I must have messed up his plan so he came looking for me. When he saw Quinn and me it was just a bonus to be used later, since he didn’t dare expose himself and try to take me there. Our only advantage at this point was that he didn’t know we knew. Sarah brought the food in. The poor thing was still shaking.

“I didn’t hear anything and I was just at the end of the hall. I woke when I heard you yell for Quinn. I

looked out, and all I could see was a blur of swords. Then it was over.”

“I told you I could take care of myself. The other girls were surprised in their sleep, but they are also trained and will not be easy captives to hold. We will find them, and whoever is responsible will pay a heavy price, I assure you.”

I wolfed down the fruit, cheese, and meats Sarah had brought me and swallowed all the crimson in the small pewter pitcher. I longed to hunt, as the adrenalin had heightened my senses, but there was no time.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, Katrina. I don’t know if you realize it but you’re splattered with fledgling blood. I filled the bath and we’ll have to wash your hair.”

“Quickly, then,” I said. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the way by; I looked like a warrior. It made me stand up tall and proud. “I think you’ve met your match, Damien,” I thought.

After I was clean and had put on the simple dress Sarah laid out for me, I headed over to the Council room.

The room was packed, and I could feel tension in the air. Council members were speaking to one another of the events of the day before. Guards were posted all around the perimeter, while the Watchers were posted inside, along the back of the Council room.

The Council members arrived, wearing their robes of dark grey, followed by the High Regent, dressed in his royal purple. Once all were settled in their places the High Regent announced without preamble, “We shall come to order at once, as we have pressing

business to discuss. It has come to my attention that three of my Council members' daughters have been abducted this morning, and the daughter of Baron Von Dracek was attacked. A Watcher was also killed, as were two fledgling vampires. We know no reason for these acts and are pursuing every avenue to ensure the safety of our citizens and bring to swift justice whoever is responsible. As you know, the making of new vampires, except under very special circumstances and by express permission of this Council, is prohibited and punishable by death. If whoever did these egregious crimes thinks he can intimidate this council, he is mistaken.

"Now for the reason you have been summoned here." He paused, then continued. "I, as High Regent of all the clans, have served you now these one hundred years; and I hope you think I served you well. It is now time for new leadership, and as soon as we vote here today I will step down as High Regent and we will install your newly elected leader. I nominate Baron Von Dracek as my replacement."

"I second that nomination," shouted Philepe.

Then Count Marcus Devorak of Romania shouted, "I nominate Damien Daminov."

"I second that nomination," cried out his son, Demitrie.

"So, if we have no other nominations we will now vote," said the High Regent.

One by one the crowd filed up and cast their votes silently, even somberly, until everyone had voted.

"The council will now tally the votes. We will recess and meet back here in two hours," said the High

Regent. He then rose and made his way from the chamber,

Most people went to the dining hall or back to their rooms. I, however, needed to seek out Gunter. I knew he would be watching my father's back so I asked Thomas to go with me to take his place. I had to have an update on everything. Quinn had told Thomas and Simon the details of everything that had happened up until the Council meeting and had a courier sent home so Avery, Gregor, and Cedrik would be arriving in the next day or two.

"Any news on the whereabouts of the girls?" I asked Gunter.

"Vampire trackers have been sent out but have not returned yet. If you are up to it, Katrina I would like you to use your gift to try to find them."

"Of course. I'll do so as soon as the results of this election are in. We should also be watching Luena; she has as much at stake as Damien."

"That shouldn't be too hard since they are almost inseparable anyway. Katrina, Quinn informed me about his involvement with you. These things happen when you're young and together as much as you two have been; but as you found out, he can't protect you and you won't be able to protect yourself if you are distracted. This is for the best."

"I know, and that's why we told you. When we realized that Damien was able to sneak up on us, it startled both of us. But Gunter, that doesn't mean we'll be apart forever. As for the present, what do you think of my plan to get close to Damien?"

“It’s very dangerous, but you’re right, I’ve seen from the beginning how he looks at you. His lust for you may be our only way to find out what he’s up to and find the girls. If he lets his guard down we just might be able to stop him before he starts a war.”

“Luena might be a problem. If looks could kill I would have been dead at the ball. Her possessiveness of Damien is a little —no, a lot—creepy.”

“So Thomas is now your Watcher, he along with Simon will be guarding you day and night. We will make it known that Quinn has been reassigned and his other brothers will be arriving soon. He’ll the get a regular Von Dracek guard uniform and be keeping an eye on Damien, Luena, and their Watchers. The girls’ fathers have provided extra Watchers to help him.”

“If we’re lucky, Damien will try to comfort me, and I’ll be so sympathetic about his losing the election.”

As I headed back around the front of the Council room, Damien stormed out through the side door. He seemed full of anger.

“Damien, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Congratulations are in order, my Lady. Your father will be the new High Regent.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Damien. I know you would have been a wonderful leader.”

His face softened upon hearing these words.

“I had no idea you regarded me so highly, my Lady.”

“Katrina. Please call me Katrina.”

“What of your feelings for your Watcher? Those feelings are not safe for you, you know.”

“He’s been reassigned; alas our closeness was not to be. He remains my friend, for we grew up together, but we cannot be more than friends. It’s for the best; such closeness is forbidden for a reason.”

Insincere, yes, but necessary, I thought.

I tilted my head, smiled, and gave Damien a sweet look. “If it were not so dangerous I would love to take a ride with you, to cheer you up.”

This prospect made him stand up tall and give me a puzzled look.

“Maybe I can arrange something later. I’m sure now you’ll want to see your father’s appointment as our new leader.”

“Damien, I wish you would be my escort. It would be comforting to me and a nice show of support for my father’s appointment. And the gesture would demonstrate that you bear no hard feelings.”

“Of course, Katrina. Shall we?” He offered his arm and off we went into the Council room, our entrance inciting a loud murmur amongst the crowd now reassembled.

I was so proud of my father; he would be a great leader. As he was receiving his new adornment and seal, I whispered to Damien.

“This will give us more time to get to know each other, because my father and I will have to stay longer to complete all our duties.”

I didn’t look at him but he squeezed my hand.

“Indeed,” he replied.

The ceremony installing my father as High Regent, was followed by a dinner in the great hall. Of course everyone was quite subdued because three of the

Council members' daughters were still missing. The trackers returned, but they had lost the trail along the river to the west.

Father thanked Damien for being so gracious and excused himself to attend the matters at hand. "All this violence makes everyone so uneasy, no one will relax, least of all me, until the girls are found safely," he said, and then he left us.

"Let us take a walk in the gardens," Damien said. "It will do us good to rest our minds from the troubles of the day."

"I'd love to," I answered. "Thank you Damien for coming with me to the installment ceremony, even though you were disappointed about the election."

"It was my pleasure, Katrina. Your company helped to lighten my mood. Indeed your friendship fills me with thoughts of a new future, one that I hope will include a lot more of you."

"There you are, Damien," said Luena.

"Hello, Luena. How nice to see you again," I said.

"May I speak with you please, Damien?" she said without even acknowledging me.

"Will you please excuse me, Katrina?"

"Of course."

The brother and sister walked away, either unaware or not remembering my highly developed sense of hearing.

"Younger brother," Luena said, "have you lost your mind? Whatever are you doing with her? We are wasting time. If we are to take power we need to act soon, before the Council disbands until fall. The

families will be heading home soon and they will be vulnerable.”

“An alliance with Lady Von Dracek could be very advantageous, Luena. There may be more than one way into power.”

He turned and gave me a smile, while Luena gave me a scowl.

I smiled back at them both and then looked away like a shy schoolgirl. *Let them think I have succumbed to his charms at last*, I thought. *He’s so pompous, but also very handsome.*

His shoulder-length brown hair was combed back and tied behind his neck, and those dark eyes—yes very handsome. Then I asked myself, *How far are you willing to go to trap him?*

And, Luena, she was not going to be so easy to win over.

“I’m back,” said Damien as he rejoined me.

“Wonderful. Shall we continue our walk, or must you leave with your sister?”

“I wouldn’t think of leaving you.”

I could see a guard in the background, and I was sure it must be Quinn, with Thomas was nearby. Damien’s Watcher was somewhere I suppose; it wasn’t as if we were really alone. We sat in the garden for over an hour speaking of our childhoods, training, and why he and sister were so close.

“I was so young when my mother disappeared that Luena became like a mother to me. No one ever talks about my mother, or Luena’s for that matter, but Fathers’ current wife is agreeable and she makes him

very happy. Now that he won't be burdened with ruling they can be together more and travel."

"Why did you want to rule, Damien?"

"I've had enough politics for one day," he responded. "I'd rather talk more about you."

He seemed at ease with me and I with him. I had my guard up, but he seemed quite different from the dark and angry man I'd seen earlier.

"Well, I'd better be getting back," I said at last. "I promised Father I'd stay with him until we find the girls, so I must be going, Will you walk me there?"

"It would be my pleasure."

So we rose and he took my hands in his. I turned to look up into his eyes.

"We could just run off together, we're faster than our keepers," he said with a wink.

We laughed, but I couldn't help thinking he was at least partly serious. Then he surprised me. He bent down and whispered in my ear, "You could save me, Katrina."

When he straightened back up I heard myself say, "If I can, I will."

Did I just say that out loud? I thought to myself? It was my voice, but did I mean it?

He put my arm into his and we walked on.

"Goodnight, Damien, and thank you again," I said as we arrived.

He bowed and kissed my hand.

"Goodnight, Katrina."

I watched him walk away for a moment. *How strange*, I thought. *He's either really good or not who I thought he was at all.*

Thomas was at my side in an instant.

“I’ll change,” I told him. “Check the perimeter, and I’ll meet you at the back terrace.”

I rushed to get my dress off and don my hunting attire. If someone should see us we could say I was feeding. In fact, we were looking for the girls. Simon had joined Thomas, the other guard, and Quinn.

“The trackers lost the trail at the river, so we’ll start there,” I said.

We started out on foot, since horses would draw too much attention. When we reached the river, I stopped to search with all my senses, starting with scent. I closed my eyes. Women have strong scents, especially young women, as their hormones emit distinctive perfumes. I took in a deep breath; the breeze was freshening from the south. I could detect deer, fox, many small animals, and something else.

“A fledgling,” I said pointing in the direction of that scent. “At least one, and he’s traveling fast. Let’s go.”

I could travel much faster on my own, but I needed the boys; so until I thought the fledgling might escape, I decided we would stay together. When we got close enough we spread out, making sure we didn’t alert the young vampire. Checking the sounds and smells again, I could tell we were close to more of them.

“We should keep going, but slowly. There are more of them up ahead,” I said as Thomas came up behind me.

About fifty yards ahead we saw an old fortress wall, crumbling yes, but quite large. Our subject was heading around the left side of the wall, and on the top of it I spotted two sentries.

“It looks like we found the fledgling hideout, but can you sense the girls?” asked Thomas

I tried again to pick up their scent but found nothing.

“I see fledglings and... humans, four or five men, but not the girls.”

“Let’s go around the wall where our friend just went,” said Simon.

As we started that way, making sure we stayed out of sight, we could see that no buildings were left standing behind the wall; there was just a large opening into the hillside. Since the fledgling we were following was nowhere to be seen, it was obvious the cave was their home or at least a meeting place.

We observed for an hour or so, but no one entered or came out.

“We must get inside,” I insisted.

“No, it’s too dangerous. We were told to scout, nothing more,” said Thomas.

“But we have to know what we’re up against. It could be vast inside. Don’t worry. I’m fast, and they won’t see me. Remember, fledglings don’t have gifts. I can sense them and I can see in the dark.”

My pleading was getting me nowhere.

“But Kat, if they are alerted we won’t get a second chance. We must report back to your father.”

“All right, Thomas, let’s go back.”

We arrived back just as Father was finally returning from his meetings with the Council.

“Katrina, did you see any sign of the girls?”

“No Father, but we found where the fledglings are holed up. Across the river, then south about three miles

there's an old fortress wall hiding an opening to some sort of cave. I sensed at least fifteen fledglings and about five human men."

"Thomas, get Gunter. He should hear this, too."

After updating Gunter, we had to devise a plan.

"These are new vampires; so they are still vulnerable to the sun. Since they were made, not born, their senses aren't as good as ours, but they will nevertheless be very strong. Since Watchers aren't meant to fight vampires, we should use the elite vampire guard," said Father.

"We have trained vampires and are used to their speed. I refuse to let any of you go without us," said Gunter.

"We should strike at first light," said Father.

"I'll give orders for another tracking party to go out at dawn," Gunter said. "We can't take a chance of alerting Damien or any of his partners in this. The Romanians have shown their allegiance to him, so we must also beware of them and any of their party."

"Thomas, go and alert Philepe and Gerhardt. Simon, you go and speak with the Vikings. Katrina, I want you to stay here."

"But Father—"

"You'll need to distract Damien. Quinn will watch Luena. Damien must not get suspicious."

"I'll send word that I wish to spend the morning with him. Sarah, take this note over to Damien's apartment and please wait for a reply."

"It's not fair," I wanted to scream. I was trained to fight too, and hadn't I just proven myself?

While Gunter and Father continued talking strategy, I decided that I needed some time to myself. I opened the doors and stepped out onto the balcony. The moon was almost full which made the night almost as light as day. This was not the adventure I had envisioned before we arrived. How did everything get so complicated?

“Katrina.” I heard Quinn’s voice softly coming from below. I peeked over the railing to see him in his guard’s uniform. We both looked all around to make sure no one was watching.

“Meet me downstairs. I want to talk to you.”

“I’ll be right down,” I whispered back. To the others I said, “I’m going to get something to eat. May I get either of you anything?”

“No, thank you,” they said.

I walked quickly down the stairs. I hadn’t realized how much I missed him until I saw him.

“Please come in, and I’ll fetch you something to eat.”

“Thank you, my Lady. You’re very kind.”

Once he was inside, I gave him a big hug and a kiss.

“I missed you.”

“And I missed you. Thomas filled me in on what you found in the woods. Damien stayed put all evening and he just received what I assume was a note from you, since Sarah brought it. She’s on her way back, but she wanted to get supplies from our stores, so I brought the answer back with me.” Quinn handed me the note. “You should have seen the look on his face. He seemed pleased with himself I must say, and he did not hesitate to write this reply. What does it say?”

I opened the note and read out loud, "I'll meet you at our spot in the garden at sunrise. I'll bring breakfast, and you bring your beautiful smile."

I sighed, "Should I swoon now or wait until tomorrow?" We both laughed.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Luena went out just after she talked to Damien in the garden. When did you leave the compound?"

"Not long after that."

"She went to a spot at the rear wall of the palace, far away from everything else, and entered what appeared to be a small storage building. She didn't come back out for over two hours, and then she went straight to her room and must have gone to bed, as the candles were put out right after she returned."

"That's strange, don't you think? We got back about a half an hour before that and we didn't see anyone else outside the palace walls."

"I went around the entire perimeter of the palace and didn't see anyone, nor was there any sign of an outside exit from that storage area or the wall."

"Hmmm. What is that witch up to? So everyone is in bed now, you're sure?"

"Yes, Damien, Luena, and the Romanians. Their Watchers are at their doors, except Luena's; no one seems to know where he's been for a while now."

"Shall we go and see what we can find in that shed?"

"Shouldn't we tell the others?"

"You know they won't let us go if we do. Besides it might be nothing, right? Did Luena have to unlock it?"

"Yes."

“Very well, these keys were given to Father this afternoon. There are only three different sizes, one for main living areas, one for weapon storage, and one for supplies. One of these will work, I’m sure of it. Let’s go.”

Staying in the shadows of the buildings we worked our way around the back wall.

“This really is out of the way,” I said. “It must be used for weapons for the guards up on the wall.”

Just then we heard one of those very guards coming along the wall above us.

“Everything all right up there?” called out Quinn, as I hid in the shadows.

“All’s well, no sign of trouble,” answered the guard.

“Good, I’ll inform the High Regent,” replied Quinn. He then whispered to me, “He’s gone. Let’s try the middle key.”

I slid the key in the lock; it fit, so I turned it to the right. *Click*. I smiled and looked at Quinn. We were in.

“Ouch.” I heard Quinn mutter as he hit his head. There were no windows, but I could see that there were matches in a cup next to a small candle. I lit the candle and filled the space with a soft yellow glow.

“Sorry, I forgot you can’t see in the dark. What would Luena be doing in this small room for over two hours? You’re sure no one else went in or out?”

“Well, I followed her here and after she left I waited to make sure no one came out later, and no one did.”

“And no Watcher was with her?”

“As I said before, no one seems to know the whereabouts of her usual Watcher, and I saw no other Watcher with her tonight. Usually Damien’s loathsome

Watcher, Ivan, is with them. What do your senses tell you, Kat?"

I closed my eyes.

"I can pick up Luena's scent going towards that corner, not much else."

We walked to the corner. Arrows in bundles were stacked on a pallet.

"There's nothing here," said Quinn as he surveyed the area.

"There has to be. Help me move this. Oh, my God!"

The pallet was on some kind of a rail and moved aside easily, revealing a descending stairway wide enough for only one person at a time.

"Katrina, no! We don't know what's down there, at least use your gift to 'see' first."

I took a breath in.

"The girls, I see the girls! I can't detect anything or anyone else except the lingering scent of Luena. Come on!"

I went first because I could see and hear better and because I was faster. We got to the bottom of the stairway and into a small room with three archways, all dark.

"This way," I said, pointing to the closest archway. The scent was so strong now I knew they weren't far.

"Eleanor? Rosalinda? Arletta? Can you hear me?"

All I could hear was muffled noises down the corridor. When we got a little further the corridor opened into a small room, and there on the floor, bound and gagged, heads covered with black hoods, were the three missing girls. With all the vampire

speed I had, I untied each one, and then made sure they were all unhurt.

“We’re angry more than anything else,” said Rosa.

“I expect you are, but there’s no time for speeches now,” I said. “We need to get you out of here and back to my father’s apartment without being seen.”

“But why, Katrina? I want *my* father.”

“Just trust me Eleanor; this is how it must be. Let’s carefully get you up and out of here. Remember your training, and be aware.”

The girls were filthy and still in their nightgowns, but they were strong enough. We left the small room and went quickly back along the corridor.

Then a scent I knew all too well hit me straight in the face. Fledglings! Where had they come from? I looked behind us but saw nothing. No one!

Where was Quinn?

Had they taken him? Were they holding him upstairs?

I saw feet coming down the hall in front of us. I backed the girls into the shadows and put my finger to my lips, signaling for them to be silent. We waited.

To my great relief, it was Quinn.

“Hurry,” he whispered, “It’s clear.”

I pulled Eleanor forward.

“Run,” I told her, then Rosalinda, and finally Arletta.

Quinn pulled each of them up. I could now hear the fledglings getting close, coming through the central archway. It took all my vampire speed to make it the final few steps up and out the narrow opening in the floor of the shed. Quinn pulled me up and out of the

way and together we shoved the pallet back over the opening.

“Here, use this, Quinn,” I said as I tossed him a spear so he could block the rail and keep them from getting to us.

“I had better use one more,” he said. “Good, that’s it. Now let’s get out of here. I know everyone is shaken, but we must not be noticed. Kat will take you. Use your speed to not be seen. I’ll lock up and meet you at the apartment. Don’t worry, I’ll bring your fathers with me. Now go!”

The girls and I raced along the palace wall. No human would see us, but vampires might. I kept looking side to side, checking for danger. So far, so good.

“We’re almost there. Stay close.”

We made it to the verandah and I looked in to make sure it was clear. It was.

“Thomas?” I called up the stairs.

“Katrina is that you?” I heard Gunter say as he rushed down the stairs. “Your father is frantic. Thomas and Simon are out looking for you.”

Then I stepped aside. His jaw dropped and he gasped, “What the—”

“Let’s get the girls some blankets. I’ll explain later.”

Then I took the girls past Gunter and towards the stairway.

“Any word?” I heard Thomas say.

When he and Simon came into view, Gunter nodded in my direction. The girls huddled together behind me.

“Where were they?” said Simon.

“Get some blankets from storage,” said Gunter.

Thomas returned a few moments later and handed me three woolen blankets. I wrapped them around the girls and gave them each a hug.

“You’re safe now. Let’s go upstairs.”

I could hear Father pacing as Gunter opened the door.

“We found her,” Gunter announced, and when I gave him a scolding look, he added, “Well, she actually...she came back on her own and she brought a few friends with her.”

As we entered the room Father’s anger turned to shock.

“The girls, where...who...?”

“All in good time, Father, for now we must get someone over to make sure Luena doesn’t go anywhere.”

He gave me a questioning look, but sent guards immediately. Moments later, Quinn arrived with all three fathers in tow. The girls, who had been sitting quietly until then, ran into their father’s arms and burst into tears. I then explained what Quinn had seen and all that had transpired in the corridors below the shed.

“I’m not sure we can wait until morning,” I added. “The fledglings know the girls have been found. I didn’t detect them when we first opened the passageway, so that means there must be a way in from some distance away.”

“Now we know why the trail was lost by the river. That must have been a decoy group. They were here all along,” said Gunter.

The girls were more settled now, and their fathers couldn't stop thanking us.

"We only saw fledglings, but we did hear a woman's voice once in a while," said Rosa.

"They kept us hooded and bound. We were fed very little, but had some fresh blood, human blood," said Arletta.

"I scented humans in their compound earlier."

"What should we do, Fredrik?" asked Michael, Rosalinda's father.

"Well, now that your daughters have been returned safely to you, I expect you to join us in exterminating this fledgling scourge."

"Of course," all three replied.

"If they know that their leader has been exposed they may disperse into smaller groups and be a greater problem throughout the continent and beyond. Katrina's right, we can't wait until morning. We have to act now. Wake everyone, Thomas, and have them come to the Council room. Simon, make sure you don't see any of the Watchers for the Daminovs before you alert any of our Watchers not on duty now. Quinn, tell the sergeant of arms to prepare our weapons as quickly as possible. Now go, everyone, and be ready within the hour."

I could tell by the look on Rosalinda's face she wanted to fight too.

"I know just how you feel," I told her. "We all want to go. Let's get you cleaned up, or otherwise they'll smell you coming. Sarah, oh good, we'll need..."

"No need, Katrina, the baths have been prepared, food and drink are on the way, and I've sent for clean

outfits. Their Watchers have been notified, except Rosalinda's new watcher."

"What do you mean?" Rosalinda asked. "New Watcher? Where's Joseph?"

I had forgotten she didn't know.

"I'm so sorry, Rosa. The night the fledglings.... They overwhelmed him...I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry too, miss, but at least it will be a comfort to you to know that Katrina took care of two of those that did this," said Sarah.

"You did?" Rosa said through her sobs.

"Yes, my training served me well, as it will all of you if need be. Now take your baths and eat. You'll need your strength. Thank you Sarah."

"Of course, Katrina."

Then she guided them into the dressing rooms.



CHAPTER FOUR

Thomas returned a moment later. I had almost forgotten he was my Watcher now. How strange it felt to be attended by someone other than Quinn.

“All the Watchers are here—two inside, three of us outside.”

“Thank you, Thomas. They can watch the girls, but I want to be at the Council rooms.”

“Your father left orders for me to keep you here!”

I gave him a look that stopped him in his tracks. “Shall I go alone or will my Watcher be going with me?”

On our way to the Council chambers, I noticed several guards around Luena’s quarters, including specially trained palace guard—vampire guards—whom I recognized as ones we had brought with us. Father was already talking strategy with Philepe. Gunter and Quinn were huddled with them, pointing at maps and discussing final details.

“I need to speak with you, Father.”

“Thomas, what did I tell you?”

“She’s your daughter, sir. She was determined to come with or without me.”

I saw Quinn hide a smile as if acknowledging that he knew just what Thomas was going through.

“All right, you’re here now, what is it?”

“What of Damien, Father? He hasn’t been implicated in this, and we have no proof he’s involved. All we know is that he was out there in the forest when we were attacked, nothing more.”

“Why are you defending him now? You’re the one who called him a traitor in the first place. He’s being guarded; we have no time to deal with him or his sister now. Either make yourself useful or go back to your room.”

Why *was* I defending him? Was I really that gullible? If Luena was knee-deep in this, why wouldn’t he be? They were so close...or were they? I had to admit I was confused by him, the way he was the other night. Father was right, of course; there was no time to worry about him now. This might be all over before breakfast if we could still surprise them.

As parties arrived at the Council room, they were told of the recent developments and given their assignments, then sent to be armed if need be and were told to gather at the gate. Everyone was organized and on task as the gravity of the situation was lost on no one. We were split up into two different assignments. Most were going to the encampment in the forest, with a smaller group, including Thomas, Quinn, and myself, going through the shed entrance, clearing out the rooms and corridors as we went. Vampires first in of

course, we'd check with all our senses, divide up as need be, and with luck meet Father's party at the river.

Father's forces raced out the west gate. Ours ran together to the back wall and to the weapons shed. Quinn unlocked the door and we charged in. The spears had held. Quinn and Thomas dislodged them and pushed the pallet aside with a thud. I fully expected fledglings to rush out, but there was nothing. We neither saw nor sensed a thing.

"This is a bad sign," I said under my breath.

Philepe and Gerhardt headed down the stairs, and I went next.

"The girls were in a room off the corridor on the right, but the fledglings came from the center archway," I said, pointing straight ahead.

With our swords at the ready, we started forward. Quinn and Thomas were behind me with torches.

"Ricardo, you and Momar go into the last corridor," said Philepe.

We moved cautiously but quickly forward, checking the many side rooms. Suddenly the corridor opened up into a huge room with exits all the way around it. We heard something coming on our left and braced for a fight. We were relieved when Ricardo came through the opening.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Not yet," replied Philepe

"Now what?" asked Gerhardt.

Before we could answer, I cried out, "They're coming!" They poured out of each of the corridors across from us, yelling and hissing, with weapons

drawn. Ricardo and Momar stayed left, we stayed right.

“Don’t let them get behind us!” yelled Philepe.

We started mowing them down right and left. They were not well trained, but they were strong, and there were so many of them that they seemed to just keep coming. They were as fast as we were, but our training was making quick work of them. Someone was yelling orders to them out of the darkness, but even with my vampire vision I couldn’t quite make him out. The Watchers had torches with them, which had been tossed about on the floor, making the room glow. We pushed ahead and finally they stopped coming through the archways. Two charged me from the front, and one came at me from my left. I leapt in the air, kicking one square in the chest, and used him to push off and turn in midair, slicing the second across the throat. I had seconds to land and duck before piercing a third through the heart. The one I kicked in the chest was just getting back up when Quinn lopped off his head.

“I was coming to save you. And once again I see you could save yourself,” he said, panting and drenched with sweat.

“Sorry to spoil your fun,” I said. “Let’s get the rest, and maybe I’ll even save one for you.”

“You’re on.”

Our swords clanged, and two more went down.

“Go back, go back,” the leader yelled as he ran in through the archway directly across from the one we had come through. The last of the fledglings ran into whatever corridor was closest to them.

“We can’t let them get away!” yelled Philepe.

Two Watchers were directed to stay and make sure the dead stayed dead. The rest of us charged on. From what we could tell, only six remained alive, including the one who seemed to be the leader.

“We’ll have to split up,” I said.

Ricardo and Momar went left, Philepe and Gerhardt went straight, and I went right.

“We have to catch them before they get to the river!” I yelled to Quinn and Thomas.

I took a deep breath and sensed that the two on our side were still ahead.

“They’re close.”

I had just enough time to duck as one jumped out of an opening on my right. Quinn quickly swung his sword and split the fledgling’s head open. As he fell, Thomas divided his crushed skull from his shoulders.

“One more!” I yelled.

I could smell water now. The river wasn’t far, and as expected, the corridor opened onto the bank of the river. I could see brush moving on the other side of the rushing water.

Without thinking I leapt across the water in one stride and ran after the fledgling through the brush. I slowed, trying to see where he had gone. It was then I realized I was alone, having forgotten that Quinn and Thomas would be forced to find their own way across the river. My enemy was close, I knew; I could smell him. Then from above, he dropped right on me. He knocked me down and my sword flew out of my hand. We wrestled on the ground; the wild look in his eyes was that of a rabid dog who wanted to tear out my throat. Just as I was about to lose hope, I saw two

hands grab the fledgling's head and twist. The crack of his neck made my stomach turn. Expecting to see Philepe or Gerhardt, I was shocked at the face I saw as the fledgling dropped.

"Damien... What are you doing here?"

"Saving you, what else? You didn't think you could have all this fun without me, did you?"

"Well, thank you," I said as he kicked the body off of me and helped me up.

"I have to speak to you. I can't stay here. Everyone will think I'm part of this plot, but I swear to you I wanted no part of it. It's my sister's doing. Luena is evil. We don't have much time. That day when your party was attacked, I tried to get there to stop it, but I was too late. I did, however, kill the Volator that got away from your father and Philepe, including their leader; you're safe from them. They're coming, I must go. Katrina, I'll find you in the New World. Please believe I'd never harm you or your father."

Then he put his hands on my shoulders.

"You believe me don't you?"

I looked into his eyes and I knew I did.

"Yes," I said, "Yes I do."

He pulled me close and kissed me, and then he was gone. For a moment I thought I had dreamed it all, but the body at my feet was real enough. I dispatched his head just as Quinn and Thomas trotted up.

"You're late again," I gloated.

"I guess so," Quinn said. "I'm getting used to it."

We laughed and headed back to the river to meet up with the others. In the cool water we all washed off the sweat and blood from the cuts and gashes that would

heal in a day, because we were vampires. The Watchers were not, so lucky, of course. The ten of us had killed forty, and Philepe told us the leader looked familiar because he turned out to be Luena's Watcher, Edgar. That explained why no one ever saw him anymore.

Just then horses thundered into view.

Philepe yelled, "Fredrik what took you so long?"

We all laughed. My father explained that the cave they'd checked out was huge, but they'd killed only twenty-five. Three captive men were saved; they were questioned and it was found that they were villagers from far in the north. They and other villagers from that area had been disappearing with no trace for about a year. These captives recognized some of their kidnappers now as vampires. They were then told not to fear us, because all the vampires had been killed and they would be escorted back to their village.

I knew I must tell Father what Damien had told me about the Volator. But I was suddenly too exhausted for that effort.

"Let's head back," said Father. "Our work is done here."

We all agreed. Then Father reached out his arm and pulled me up on his horse behind him.

"Well done, daughter. Well done."

I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed him to me as tightly as I could, a huge smile on my face and tears filling my eyes. He was proud of me, and that meant everything.



CHAPTER FIVE

The rhythm of the horse's hooves clopping along the rocky shoreline and the sound of the river made me sleepy. It seemed as if months had passed since I felt this relaxed. I wondered about Damien; where would he go? What had he meant by "I'll find you"? That's what he had said; "I'll find you in the New World." *The New World*. In all the commotion, no one else had even mentioned the subject since we arrived. Maybe now I could ask Father if the Council would discuss it before they disbanded. Up ahead, I could hear the gate hinges squealing. Our triumphant return was soon interrupted by the palace guard rushing to meet us.

"I hope you were successful, my Lord," said the Captain of the guards.

"We were indeed," said Father as we dismounted and he handed his reigns to the stable boy.

"There's news my Lord. The Lady Luena has escaped. And her brother Damien is also missing. Even his Watcher knows not of his whereabouts. Luena killed two guards. We made a search but found no sign of either of them."

It was disturbing news about Luena; of course I already knew Damien was gone. I hope he was truly free of her, but I couldn't be sure they weren't traveling together. Regardless, what he had said about her was surely true: she was evil.

"Well, inform all the delegates so they can watch out for her and Damien."

"Yes, my Lord."

"We'll have to question Damien's Watcher about the fledglings, so make sure he doesn't disappear."

The guard bowed and took his leave.

"I'm going to get cleaned up and check on the girls," I said.

"That's a good idea. I'll join you in a little while. I need to inform the others of all the news of the day."

"Of course, Father."

Then we parted ways. Thomas and Simon weren't far behind me of course, and we walked back together to Father's quarters.

"Katrina!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Rosalinda, Arletta—Katrina's back. Oh, Katrina, you *smell*."

"Thanks, Eleanor."

Then Rosalinda and Arletta came rushing out of their room.

"Did you kill them all?" said Arletta, her Spanish accent sharpened by anger.

"That's ladylike," I laughed. "And yes, we killed them all."

"Tell us everything Katrina," said Rosa.

"Yes everything," the other two chimed in.

"Can I at least get cleaned up first?"

“Good idea. You *do* stink,” said Rosa, holding her nose.

“Thanks.”

Sarah, of course, had everything ready for me. She was the perfect handmaiden, always a step ahead. The girls told me she was downstairs preparing lunch, and as soon as they said the word lunch I realized I was starving. Rosa helped me off with my boots. Eleanor put my sword away, and Arletta tried to unbraid my hair, all the while informing me of all the news. I sank deep into the warm water, held my nose and slid completely under. When I came back up Sarah was there with a full glass of crimson.

“Here, drink this; it’ll give you some energy.”

“Thank you, Sarah. What would I do without you?”

“I don’t know, and I’m not going to let you find out. There’s no getting rid of me now!”

I finished off the crimson and Sarah replaced the glass in my hand with soap. She washed my hair while I gave a detailed accounting of the battle. I left out the part about Damien; that memory was mine alone.

The girls were hanging on every word and when I was finished Rosa said, “I swear this is the last time you’re going into battle without me. I wish I could have been there with you.”

“Or us,” said Letta and El with equal determination.

I hadn’t spent much time with my roommates, but I had a feeling we were going to be great friends.

“We’ve decided something, Katrina,” said Rosa matter-of-factly. The other two looked at me and nodded in agreement.

“We have neglected to train as hard as you have. Oh, we learned our languages, our history, rules, manners, and so on. But our battle skills—swordplay, strategy, and the development of each of our special gifts—are sorely lacking.”

“And...?” I said.

“We want to train with you, if it’s allowed and if you consent. The three of us want to stay with you after our fathers go home,” said Letta.

“Well, say something, Kat,” said El, “What do you think?”

“I think it would be fantastic!”

They jumped up and hugged each other, then trotted over to the tub. I gave them a splash of water, they squealed, and we all laughed.

“All right, all right,” scolded Sarah. “Stop making a big mess for me. Shoo, you three. Let me get her out and dressed.”

The girls left reluctantly. I hoped they could convince their fathers, and I knew my father would have no objection to the plan. He always said I spent too much time alone. I guess he didn’t count Sarah or Quinn. *Quinn! What was I going to do about him?* I sighed, and Sarah helped me into a simple sky-blue dress, combed my hair out with scented oils, and then deemed me fit to join the others for lunch. Father had returned and was in his room washing off the same sort of blood and grime that I’d just soaked off of me. He was soon changed and joined us for lunch. The girls each gave me a look, urging me to ask Father about their plan to accompany us home, and to stay and train with me.

“Father?”

“Yes, Katrina?”

The girls and I wanted your permission to ask their fathers if they may stay with me, so we can all train together, when we go home.”

“Is that right? Well I think that’s a fine idea. If you want, I’ll speak with all your fathers myself.”

“Oh yes, yes, would you?” they all exclaimed, while clapping their hands.

“Thank you, Father.” I went to him and gave him a big hug. He patted my arm and when I sat back down he gave me a wink.

“I have news. I’ve decided that a celebration is in order. We have much to be thankful for. You girls are safe, and we have averted a great threat to all our people—indeed to everyone on the continent. We shall plan a dinner and a ball.”

We clapped with glee and Father responded with a belly laugh.

“Is this what I have to look forward to?” he said and then laughed again.

As we finished our lunch we asked Father if we could move back to our original accommodations, which he said was fine. We wanted to see each other’s gowns and stay up all night and gossip. None of us had sisters, and we were so looking forward to having each other’s company.

Back in our quarters, we shook off all bad memories surrounding the place with a fashion show. Rosa and Letta, being blessed with beautiful olive skin, looked wonderful in any color. Rosa settled on a copper-colored silk and for Letta a gorgeous tangerine, both

concluding that gold slippers would be just the thing. As for El and me, we were blessed with the palest of skin, but we both had long legs and comely figures. Everyone agreed gold silk was right for me; and teal looked lovely with El's blue eyes and light hair. El had matching teal slippers; I decided to go with matching gold ones.

We oohed and aahed over each other's jewelry and decided to all wear our hair up. After all these important decisions had been made Sarah said we should rest before dinner. Feeling uneasy about being alone in our rooms, we paired up, El and I in my room, Rosa and Letta in Rosa's.

As El and I snuggled down in bed and I was just closing my eyes, El said, "Did you hear that Luena had turned her Watcher?"

"Yes, and I saw him up close this morning," I said, my eyes still closed.

"I wonder if she was sleeping with him. Do you think so, Kat?"

"I don't know, but I wouldn't put it past her."

"What about you, Kat?"

I wasn't going to get any rest, was I?

"What do you mean, El?"

"Well, would you ever sleep with one of your Watchers? All of yours are so handsome."

This got my eyes open. I turned towards her and propped my head up on my elbow and studied her for a moment. Could I trust her? Yes, I was sure I could.

"Yes," I said with conviction.

"Really? Which one?"

"Quinn," I said, and then I told her our whole story.

“Kat, that’s so romantic! I wish I had a secret someone,” she said, then sighed again.

“This is all between us for now, agreed?”

“Of course, Kat. I’m so glad you trusted me with your secret. We’re going to be the best of friends, all of us.”

“Now can we get some rest?” I said, as I lay back down and closed my eyes. She was so nice. I had always wished that I had a sister, and now I had three. Just weeks ago I was wondering about my future, and now I realized just how quickly everything could change. Why I kept the part about Damien to myself, I wasn’t sure. Maybe it was because I wanted that memory to just be mine alone. I probably would never see him again, except in my dreams. With that I drifted into a peaceful sleep.

Sarah woke us about two hours later. We were to meet our fathers for dinner, and we hoped they had agreed to let us stay together and train. The ball was to be tomorrow, so we dressed simply and headed over to the main dining room

Our Watchers of course escorted us, and I noticed Eleanor looking around to see if she could get a good look at Quinn when we arrived at the hall. I was looking as well, but he was nowhere in sight. Then all at once he appeared, three of his brothers in tow.

“Thomas, Simon, look who just showed up,” said Quinn.

Thomas laughed. “You missed all the fun.”

“Thought you’d save some for us,” said Avery, jutting his lip out in a pout.

“Maybe next time,” said Quinn.

“Katrina, I heard you did us proud. After all the whining during your training, I bet now you’re glad we all worked you so hard,” said Gregor.

“You’re absolutely right, Gregor. Just remind me of that the next time I complain.”

Just then Father arrived with Gunter, and the men all shook hands. It was good to have them all together again.

“Since you are all here now I want to introduce you to your new students. May I present Lady Rosalinda DiPalicio, Eleanor Flanery and Arletta Valdesio. Their fathers have agreed that they will be traveling back with us to continue their training with you and Katrina.”

The men bowed, but had startled looks on their faces.

“We look forward to the challenge,” Thomas said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“Now,” Father said as he clapped and rubbed his hands together. “We must meet the others for dinner. Ladies,” he said as he gestured for us to enter the hall.

My friends’ fathers were already inside, and the girls ran to them, giving them big hugs and kisses and thanking them for agreeing to let them train. I went to thank each of the fathers as well. We were all so excited we could hardly eat.

“Fredrik?”

“Yes, Philepe?”

“Any news of Luena or Damien?”

“Nothing. The Count and Countess are devastated and have gone into seclusion,” said Father.

“We are fortunate Damien wasn’t voted High Regent, for they would have continued creating their fledgling army,” said Philepe.

We all nodded in agreement. I so wanted to defend Damien but this wasn’t the time. Maybe that time would never come. For that matter I wasn’t completely sure he had told me the truth.

“We have had word, however, of the Volator. After we were attacked, we sent out scouts to find those that had escaped. What they found was quite a surprise. Bodies of not only the four we knew had escaped but also one who we suspect was their leader. The bodies were found in the forest, about two miles from the palace.”

“Well, that is fine news Fredrik,” said Philepe.

Everyone agreed. My heart was pounding; Damien had told me the truth. I knew I must tell Father that Damien had saved me and all he had told me. What else did this mean to me? That was yet to unfold.

So after dinner I went to Father and told him all about Damien.

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier, Katrina?”

“I wasn’t sure he was telling me the truth, especially when I learned that Luena had escaped too. But after you confirmed what Damien had told me, I knew you had to be told the truth. Do you think he’s in danger? He could come back now that he’s been cleared?”

“We still don’t know if he created any of the fledglings and how involved he was in the planning.”

“Well I know if he was, it was only because Luena coerced him. He said she was evil, and that’s what I sensed too.”

“All right, this is what I can do. Stop the hunt for Damien and send word to his father that he has been cleared. Katrina you hardly know him. Are you sure you can trust him?”

“I didn’t think I was sure until today, but yes, now I do trust him. There’s something else I want to ask you. Now that the crisis has been averted, are we going to be discussing, at the Council meeting tomorrow, the forming of a new coven to colonize the New World?”

“We may. Don’t tell me you want to be among those wishing to be chosen?”

“I think I’ve earned a place this week, don’t you agree Father?” I said with confidence.

Father chuckled, “That is surely true, daughter; you’ve more than earned it. But it will take some time to debate this subject further. And you have committed an extended amount of time to train your new friends.”

“All I ask is to be seriously considered when the time comes to go.”

“If that is still what you wish, Katrina, of course.”

“Thank you, Father. Now I’m going back to my room. I’m still rather tired. Oh, Father is it all right with you if I go hunt later? I promise to stay close.”

“All right, but don’t go alone. Maybe Quinn would go along.”

My head snapped around, my mouth gaping open.

“Well, he’s not your Watcher anymore,” Father said with a wry smile.

I rushed out the door. Was he saying what I thought he was saying? Down the steps I flew. Thomas was waiting.

“Katrina?”

“Yes, Thomas?”

“My brothers and I were wondering if you and the girls would come over to the training compound tonight for games and camaraderie, so we can all get to know each other.”

“And Thomas, which of the girls would you like to get to know better?”

He was blushing now.

“Well, Lady Eleanor seems very interesting,” he said shyly.

“Interesting?”

He nodded without looking up.

“All right, that sounds fun, if the girls agree, when would you like us to join you?”

“About ten o’clock. Of course, I’ll be outside your door; Luena is still on the loose. I’ll escort you.”

I gave him a concerned look.

“You don’t think she’s still around here do you?”

“I wouldn’t put anything past that one, and I’ll not take any chances by letting our guard down.”

“Thank you, Thomas. My family is so lucky to have your family watching out for us.”

The girls’ Watchers were all placed at their positions, so I knew they were in and I couldn’t wait to tell them about our invitation.

“Katrina!” They all chimed at once. “Where have you been?”

“I had to speak to Father.”

Then I told them of our discussion about Damien. Still leaving out the part about the kiss and what he said about finding me in the New World.

“Oh, and something else. We’ve been invited by Thomas and all his brothers to the training compound for games and fun, as Thomas put it, so they can get to know you better, since they’ll be training you. Do you want to go?” I said, of course knowing the answer.

“Well, I suppose so,” said Letta.

Then we looked at each other and laughed.

“Thomas said he’d escort us over around ten. We should wear our training outfits since, there will be games, and we’ll be sitting by the fire so we’ll want to be comfortable.”

They agreed and went to get ready.

“Eleanor,” I whispered and she came into my room, “Father said I could go hunt tonight—with Quinn.”

Her eyes got big.

“He knows?”

I nodded. “I guess so, because he added that Quinn isn’t my Watcher anymore.”

“He as much said it’s all right,” she exclaimed.

“I think so.”

We clasped hands joyfully. Then I told her what Thomas had said about her and she was thrilled. She left to change, so I lay on my bed thinking of what the evening might bring. After a few minutes of staring at the ceiling, I decided I wanted to go hunting first, so I jumped up to change into hunting clothes. As I finished buttoning up my vest, I took a look in the mirror to make sure my hair was still intact. It was. Sarah had twisted it back at the sides then pulled it back in a ribbon. I thought I saw a face reflected in the mirror. I turned, pulling my sword at the same time,

but the room was empty. I went to the window, but didn't see anyone.

"I'm so foolish," I said out loud. Re-sheathing my sword, I walked out of my room and out the front door. Thomas was, as he said he would be, outside guarding the hall.

"Father said I could go hunting tonight, Thomas. He said I could take Quinn."

Thomas look shocked.

"He said since he's not my Watcher anymore it's allowed."

"Your father is really something, you know that?"

"You're right about that. He's the best.

Thomas walked me down to the Watchers quarters, and I realized, after he left me outside while he informed Quinn of my arrival, that I was nervous. Why? When Quinn appeared before me, I decided I was more excited than nervous.

"Father said I could go hunting tonight as long as I don't go alone. He suggested that you go with me," I said, peeking up at him to see his reaction.

"He did?"

"He said since you weren't my Watcher any more..."

Quinn pulled me close and gave me a big hug.

"This is wonderful Kat. No more hiding," he said with relief. "Let's go! I'll get some meat for us, and you'll get your strength back."

We walked together, hand in hand, with a spring in our step. Once outside the gate I used all my senses to discover where the game was.

“There are deer about two hundred yards on the right. Let’s start with them, shall we?” I said as I reopened my eyes and turned towards Quinn. He was adjusting the quill of arrows he had strapped to his back on the way out.

“That sounds good to me, Kat. You take the lead once we get close. You can use your speed and I’ll use my arrows.”

We agreed and headed toward the forest to the right. As we got to within fifty yards, I nodded to Quinn and took off running to the right, curling around the herd and driving them towards Quinn. I picked out a nice stag, and with my speed I overtook him easily, grabbing him around the throat and pulling him down in one maneuver. I sank my teeth into the large vein on his neck and fed until I was completely full. The hot flush of his blood was warming my whole body, transferring all his energy to me. When I finished, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and then licked my hand clean with my tongue. Satisfied, I looked for Quinn. He was about twenty yards away, taking his arrow out of a doe. We cleaned our game and dragged them back toward the palace.

“Let’s rest,” said Quinn as he dropped the doe to the forest floor.

“All right, if you’re tired.”

He laughed as he sat down on a fallen moss-covered tree.

“I’m not tired; I just want to have some time alone with you. Last time we were together there was a lot of killing involved.”

“That’s true, there wasn’t much time for conversation, was there?”

“Did Thomas tell you about the get-together later tonight? All my brothers are very excited about their new training partners. Except Gunter of course; he’s married and thinks the girls will be nothing but trouble.”

“Well that leaves five of you because you’re already taken too.”

Then I sat down on his lap, put my arms around his neck, and kissed him.

“We should go back, Quinn; it’s almost time for the get-together.”

“You’re right and I want to change.”

We rose, then resumed our journey back. We left our prizes with the butcher and Quinn walked me back to my room. He pulled me to him between the hall and stairs so we could have one last moment to ourselves.

“For as long as I live, I will love you,” he said, and then he kissed me. I melted into his arms, I was so happy. I would take each moment and worry about the future in the future. I couldn’t think about losing him now.

I sighed as I closed the door. All three girls rushed out of their rooms.

“Did you go hunting with Quinn?” said El.

“Yes, and it was wonderful.”

“I told Letta and Rosa all about you and Quinn and what your father said. I didn’t think you’d mind anymore.”

I gave her a stern look but then softened when I realized she was right. “It’s true,” I said, “we’ve

nothing to hide anymore and I can't tell you how glad I am. I must change; did Sarah put out my things?"

"Yes, and soap and water to wash up. She didn't think you'd have time for a bath," said Letta.

"I'll go clean up and change, then."

They all looked like scolded puppies.

"All right, come and help me get ready and I'll tell you all about my hunting trip."

That made everyone giddy. The girls followed me into my room asking questions about Quinn, and if we kissed again, and then about Quinn's brothers. I answered while they got my boots off and then while I combed out my hair and put up the sides with fresh flowers. They helped me on with my training leggings and matching vest over a white shirt and high leather boots. We were all wearing similar outfits and agreed that the four of us were going to dazzle the Voss brothers.

Thomas and Quinn were waiting for us. The girls' Watchers still on duty would be our guard, but with so many Watchers at the gathering we weren't worried about our safety. Although Thomas greeted us all, he kept his eyes squarely on El as she smiled shyly back at him.

"Shall we?" said Quinn, gesturing for us to take the lead.

We walked to the training compound, making small talk and laughing amongst ourselves. When we arrived we could see that a large fire had been built on one side of the compound. The fire was surrounded by low wooden stools, with a table close by heavily laden with refreshments. There were many people milling around

and others standing in small groups making conversation. I could see Gerhardt surrounded by a group of adoring young ladies. It was hard to miss Sven, so tall, his long blond hair flowing in the breeze. He was animatedly speaking to a gathering of Watchers and other young men, no doubt relating heroic battles and great conquests. Most of the families seemed to be represented, and all seemed to be having a fine time.

“There you are,” called Simon. “Come, get something to eat and drink.”

At hearing their brother call out, the other Voss brothers came to greet us—except Gunter who was on duty watching Father.

“Nice to see you ladies again,” said Avery.

“You four put all the other girls to shame,” added Gregor.

The girls blushed and thanked them, accepted the offer of wine and food, and carried our full plates over to the fire for some story-telling. One of the elder Watchers, a Norseman named Thorn, began an oral history about the origins of the Watchers.

“It all began when the first vampires came into existence, when the race was unable to tolerate the direct rays of the sun, and needed someone they could trust to keep them safe during those dangerous daylight hours. In those early days the vampires used their powers and intimidation to keep the Watchers loyal, but as the centuries past they developed mutual respect and the bonds of friendship, so now the Watchers are deemed family and consider it an honor to serve.”

We all clapped and toasted, cheering, "Hear, hear!"

We challenged the boys to play some games - horse shoes, darts, and archery. I'm proud to say we held our own. I noticed Arletta taking an interest in Avery. Rosa was so stunning that she was equally sharing time with the other three Voss brothers as well as several young vampires, including Demitrie Devorak. Eleanor and Thomas were off by themselves in cozy conversation. We all had a wonderful time late into the night, singing folk songs and listening to some who played instruments or were willing to entertain us with a native dance. Then people started to slowly head back to their quarters, as did we. Quinn and I were hand in hand, as were El and Thomas. Letta and Rosa had Avery, Simon, Gregor and Cedrik surrounding them. Quinn and I stopped and let the others pass us so we could say goodnight alone.

"It's been such a wonderful day, hasn't it Quinn?"

"Yes, but anytime we can be together is wonderful," he said as he brushed my cheek with his hand. We leaned into each other then, and his breath was so warm and sweet. The kiss started softly, then turned urgent and filled with passion. I felt as if I couldn't get close enough to him, as his arms squeezed me and lifted me off the ground. I heard myself moan softly and felt him quiver slightly. We broke the kiss and he set me back down. As we stood looking into each other's eyes, our unspoken desire was clear to both of us.

"I love you," he whispered.

I hugged him and said, "I love you too."

We walked up the stairs, the boys were coming back toward us, down the hall we could see Thomas kissing Eleanor.

“We’ll wait outside,” said Gregor as he passed Quinn. Quinn nodded and he and Thomas said goodnight to Eleanor and me, and into the common room we went.

“It’s always the shy ones, isn’t it Letta?” laughed Rosa. “Well, tell us El, is he a good kisser?”

“I wouldn’t have anyone to compare him to, but I thought the kiss was heavenly,” she said, closing her eyes as if to remember each second.

“How about you two? Any interest in anyone?” I said.

“Well Avery is handsome,” Letta said, “but I haven’t made up my mind yet. How about you, Rosa?”

“I’m having so much fun with all of them, to choose just one seems, well, selfish.” She pretended to be completely serious, then looked at all our shocked faces and started to laugh.

We talked about the party for another hour, then we all started to yawn and decided it was time for bed.

We said goodnight and went to our rooms. I put on my nightgown, slipped under the down comforter, and sank into the feather bed.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to make love to Quinn.



CHAPTER SIX

I woke up early and dressed in riding gear, my sword as always strapped to my waist. Sarah was just putting out some fruit, porridge, nuts, hearty bread, pastry, and jams.

“I didn’t think you’d be up quite yet, but I fixed breakfast just in case,” she said.

“I’m glad you did. I’m starving, even though I hunted yesterday, you’d think I’d be full of energy,” I said as I stuffed my face with pastry. “I’m going to take Nulla out for a ride this morning. I saw her last night and she’s all healed and now needs the exercise.”

I finished my pastry by licking my fingers clean.

“Mmm, I really enjoyed that. Thank you, Sarah. I’ll be back later.”

With that I was off. As I opened the door to the hallway I found Simon, who was guarding the door this morning and who cheerfully greeted me.

“How are the girls? Did they have a good time last night?”

“If you’re trying to find out if any of them fancy you, I have no news; but yes, we all had a fine time last night, I hope we can do it again soon.”

“I do too. Gunter said training with the girls will start tomorrow. He also said the girls’ fathers want to make sure their daughters are serious about this training.”

“I assure you they are. Father also pledged to help each of us find, hone, and perfect our special gifts.”

As we approached the stable, Quinn led out the horses. Nulla immediately let out a whinny when she spotted me. I broke into a run so I could reach her sooner.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you,” I told Nulla as I rubbed her forehead and patted her neck. She nuzzled me with her nose; and I lifted it up and gave her a kiss, the soft velvet tickling my lips.

“Look what I brought you,” I pulled an apple out of my pocket, which she hastily gobbled down.

Simon was to accompany us as my Watcher, but Quinn assured me that Simon had agreed to give us some privacy. Then he helped me into the saddle, even though I didn’t need it. They both mounted their horses and we trotted off towards the training grounds to warm up and try some spear and arrow skills from different speeds.

“I bet you’re rusty,” said Quinn, obviously baiting me.

“Would you like to make a small wager then?”

“Fine with me. How about a kiss for every time I win and a kiss for every time you win?”

“You drive a hard bargain, but I accept,” I said. We both laughed as we cantered onto the grounds.

The targets and arms were set up every morning at dawn for those who wanted to practice, and already there were several men taking the line for shooting, including Demitrie, Hun Lee, and Chan.

“May we join you?” I asked of Demitrie.

“Of course, Katrina...Quinn. We welcome the competition. We’ve set up both stationary and moving targets. The far line is for spears, and this closer one is for arrows.”

“Let’s try spears first. It’s been a while so don’t expect too much.” I looked at Quinn and gave him a wink. We continued over to the far line and waited behind Chan.

“Hun Lee, that was great work!” I applauded. He bowed his head in thanks as we watched Chan take his turn. First up was a stationary target, the spear to be released no closer than ten yards away. Point zones and bull’s eyes were painted on each target. He hit the bull’s eye easily from fifteen yards at a canter. The next was a swinging target shaped like a man, with more points for a head shot than a body shot, and one had to be careful not to be knocked from one’s horse by the rotating arms. Chan grabbed a spear from the ground in between the targets and raced forward. He got within twenty feet and with a shorter but much harder shoulder turn hit the dummy square in the chest. The third and last target was a simulation of an enemy on horseback coming straight on. Two men pushed the target from the rear, with one man guiding the wheels, using a long handle from the side. This time Chan

waited until the last minute and rammed the spear into the midsection of the target.

These men are going to be tough to beat, I thought, but I was determined to prove myself. I was next, and adrenaline was pumping through my veins.

“Great job Chan,” I said, as he trotted his horse back.

“Thank you,” he said while patting his horse’s neck.

I walked Nulla up to the spears imbedded in the ground, pulled one out, and held it straight out so I could judge its length and balance. Then I closed my eyes and turned my senses to the wind. Slightly into my face coming left to right, I determined.

“Very well, Nulla, let’s show these boys what we’re made of.”

She reared slightly as if to let me know she understood and then steadied down in preparation for the task. After one more bounce of the spear in my hand, I nudged Nulla with my heel, and we bolted off at a dead run.

“She’s going too fast,” I heard.

Then I heard Quinn laugh, “Just watch, Demitrie.”

I crouched down over Nulla’s shoulders, then leaned to the right and from twenty-five yards, hurled the spear with all my might. Into the middle of the target it went with a thud. I raced past and grabbed the last spear in the ground on the way to the next target. My heart was pounding, but then my senses seemed to slow the action, making it feel like a graceful ballet. Every fiber of my being was in tune with the spear in my hand. At ten yards I let it fly and hit the dummy right in the throat. Just after I thundered by, I picked

the first spear this time and let it fly. A second later the spear hit the moving target in the chest, surprising the men who had just started pushing it toward me. I then pulled my sword and slashed the grain-filled enemy across the throat, spilling its contents out onto the ground. I pulled Nulla to sliding stop and gave her a pat on the neck.

“Good girl Nulla. I think they got the general idea, we’re good,” I said and patted her again. We were both breathing hard as I walked her back to the start.

Hun Lee clapped and shouted, “Unbelievable, Katrina.”

“To bad you’re so rusty,” quipped Demitrie.

“True. True. Think what you could do if you practiced,” laughed Chan.

“Well, I give up,” Quinn said, managing to keep a straight face. “I’m not going after that. You win, Katrina, and I’ll pay up on my bet with you later.”

I gave a mock bow of my head “I accept your surrender. Well, I think Nulla and I are warmed up. Shall we go for a ride in the woods or by the river?” I turned Nulla towards the gate.

I waved goodbye. “I’ll see you later, gentlemen,” I said as, Quinn trotted up to my side.

“You were fantastic back there. I really thought you’d be rusty; you haven’t done targets in at least two months,” he said his voice full of surprise.

“I don’t know, but since that first battle with those two fledglings, my senses seem so attuned, my instincts honed, my body and mind working as one.”

I turned to look at Quinn and found him staring at me as if he’d never seen me before.

“What?”

“You’ve never seemed more alive than just then.”

“Funny, that’s what the girls say when I talk about you.”

I smiled at him and he smiled back. We stopped to wait for the gate to open. Thomas walked his horse right behind us, and then to our surprise Eleanor, her Watcher, and Simon came trotting around the corner.

“Wait for us,” she called as she waved.

We did, and she joined us at the gate.

“I’ll stay on duty, Thomas it’s all right,” said Simon.

So he and Eleanor’s Watcher pulled their horses around so they could follow the four of us. Thomas was all smiles as we headed out the gate.

“Sarah packed us a lunch, but we have to be back before one o’clock so she can get us ready for the meeting at two.”

“I swear I don’t know what your servants do. Sarah seems to take care of everything for us,” I said, shaking my head.

“I know, but every time our servants come to help she shoos them away. They do kitchen work, laundry, and fetch water and supplies from the stores, but she says they just get in the way upstairs.”

“Sounds like her. Let’s go up the river this time. The path downriver has too many memories.”

Thomas and Quinn agreed. There was a well-worn animal path that we followed along the river and as the water bubbled along I felt myself letting go of my excited state from the target practice and becoming more and more relaxed. In a little while we noticed a

grassy knoll to the north. We dismounted and handed our horses to the Watchers, who would see that they had water to drink and allow them to graze a little. As we walked up the knoll to have our lunch, Thomas carried the leather pouches full of food and drink and held hands with El. Quinn and I followed behind, our arms around each other's waists. It was beautiful out here and quiet, except for the birds' singing. Wild flowers, daisies and blue bells, made a lovely mosaic, one that was ever changing with the wind. Lilies of the valley dotted the edge of the forest, filling the air with their sweet perfume. We picked a spot at the very top; it gave us a beautiful view of the river valley below. We ate heartily and guzzled down water and a little wine. My workout earlier had made me hungry and thirsty.

"You should have seen Katrina this morning," Quinn said proudly. "She put three young men in their place on the spear target line."

"You'll be doing the same thing soon, El," I promised.

"I almost forgot, our fathers said they wanted to make sure we're serious about this, so our training begins tomorrow. Plus we have to travel once every three months or so to one of our homes to show what we have learned," said El as she put another grape into Thomas's mouth. I couldn't believe how sweet they were together.

Quinn said, "Simon told me this morning about what your fathers had said, and I assured him you were serious, all of you."

Simon and Leo, El's Watcher, came up the knoll with the horses.

"Time to head back," I sighed, as I brushed off my hands and Quinn helped me up.

We mounted and headed back down to the river. In the distance I could see the palace and noticed that a caravan was headed through the gate.

"That's strange," I said as I pointed toward what I had seen, which made everyone look and we all agreed it *was* strange.

We rode back more quickly than we had come. Upon returning we discovered a coach being unloaded, with servants rushing around carrying trunks and baskets full of goods. We dismounted and handed the horses over to the grooms who were waiting for us.

"Who's arrived?" I asked the one who was to take Nulla.

"The Baroness and her daughter," he said.

"Which Baroness?" I asked.

"Why, your mother, Baroness Von Dracek," he said looking at me as if I were a fool, which is exactly how I felt.

"Katrina, wait," I heard Quinn say as I rushed to the Council chambers. I had to speak to Father, this was crazy. *My mother?* How could this be? I had always assumed she must be dead, even though no one had ever told me that it was so. But why had I never seen her before? Then it hit me. And her *daughter?* Not only had I never seen my own mother, but I had a sister too! Somebody had some explaining to do and right now! I was becoming more and more angry the

closer I got to the rooms where I knew my father would be.

“Father, I need to talk to you,” I said as I burst through the door.

He was standing in front of his desk and turned to me as I entered.

“Ah, Katrina, what timing. I’d like you to meet someone.” Father gestured toward the front of the room directly in his line of sight but outside of mine.

I turned, and there smiling back at me was my own face! Older yes, but we looked remarkably alike. I let out a gasp and thought I was going to faint. *Compose yourself*, my mind told me.

“Come meet your mother, Katrina,” Father said, holding out his right arm to me. I put my left hand onto my chest hoping it could keep my heart from bursting out.

“Katrina this is the Baroness Elizabeth Von Dracek, your mother.”

I gazed into eyes the same hazel as my own. Her light brown hair was done up gracefully atop her head, and she wore a lovely green velvet dress, her cape and hat edged in what looked like fox. She smiled and started walking toward me. I suddenly felt sheer panic. I wanted to turn around and run. I was shaking, my palms were clammy, and my throat was suddenly dry. When she stood right in front of me she threw her arms around me and started to cry.

“My little girl, my Katrina, I can’t tell you how long I’ve waited for this moment. Let me take a look at you. She’s lovely, Fredrik!”

“She looks like you, my dear.”

“There’s someone else for you to meet, Katrina. This is your sister, Katherine.”

I took one look at my newfound sister and gasped. My knees buckled, and the room turned black. . . .

. . . As I started to come to, I was still groggy and not sure if I was dreaming or not, but I could hear Father’s voice. He sounded stern and anxious at the same time.

“I told you it was going to be too much of a shock for her, Elizabeth. You should have sent word that you were coming, so I could have prepared her.”

“And take the chance our enemies would find out before you did? And how was I to know you chose not to tell her what happened to me and that she had a twin sister?”

Twin sister! I tried to sit straight up. *Oh, my head.* I slapped the side of it with my left hand and let out a moan.

“She’s coming to,” said Father. “Go now; let me talk to her alone, please Elizabeth.”

I could hear footsteps across the wood floor and the door open and close. When I opened my eyes Father was sitting beside me, a worried look on his face.

“Katrina, are you all right?” he said patting my hand. “Katrina, I’m so sorry.”

He was looking down now shaking his head.

“Father, why didn’t you ever tell me? All these years I thought she was dead.”

“I never told you that,” he said sternly looking back at me.

“You never told me anything! What else was I supposed to think?” I said, closing my eyes again and rubbing my forehead.

“I thought I was protecting you and your mother. I told myself I would deal with my decision when the time came, and now the time has come.” He sighed, “You know I love you, don’t you?”

“Of course, Father, and I love you. Nothing is ever going to change that.”

“When you live as long as we do, it’s sometimes a long time to stay with one person, although of course some couples do. Your interests change. Elizabeth wanted to travel the world, and I wanted to save it. When clan wars broke out I had to decide, over and over, to either help or stay with her. Peace always won, and your mother tired of watching me ride away. I chose to stay and make sure we could live in peace and not be driven into hiding like so many other races. Your mother chose to go. I couldn’t bear to give you all up, so you stayed with me and Katherine went with her mother. They were joined by many others who wanted no part of the life I and many others had chosen. So, they gathered together and formed their own clan and went secretly to an unknown location to seek sanctuary. Very few of us knew and we have kept their secret all these years. After a while people just assumed, like you, that they had died, and we just never told anyone anything different. Most of them wanted to start a completely new life with their own laws, and unless we found that anyone was putting our existence in danger, they were left in peace. But if, however, they were to ever violate our territories and our peace, they would have been dealt with swiftly. Remember last summer when I had to give help to the Gomon clan? That turned out to be some of the rebels

coming out of hiding and trying to overthrow a peaceful territory.

As Father's story was unfolding, it dawned on me—Damien's mother had disappeared too.

"I didn't know if your mother would ever come back again, and as no one was to go looking for them, it would be up to them to decide whether to come back or not. Does any of this make any sense to you, Katrina?"

"It's just a lot to absorb, Father. What are their plans, do you know? Are they going to stay? And a twin sister is quite a shock you know. What does she think of all this?"

"Well you'll have to ask her. She's known about you all along, and from what Elizabeth has told me in the short time we've had. Katherine was the reason that they came back. She wanted to get to know us, she wanted to be a part of our life. Your mother wants that too, whether she decides to stay in Germany or not."

"But Father, this is an awkward time for all this, isn't it? With all the families here there are bound to be a lot of questions. So why now, after all this time?"

"Katherine just felt she needed to come now, that's all I know. There will be questions, but we'll just have to take each situation as it presents itself. I hope you can forgive me for not telling you all this sooner."

"You did what you thought was best for me, I know that."

He gave me a hug and sighed with relief, patted my back and released me. Then he kissed my forehead.

"We still have a Council meeting this afternoon. Are you up to it?" he asked as he stood.

“I think so, if you could ask Sarah to bring a change of clothes here. I’m still a little shaky.”

“Of course. I’ll send for her right now.”

Then he turned and walked out of the room, nodding to Quinn as he came in.

“Kat, are you all right?” Quinn said as he rushed to my side.

“I guess so, considering I was blindsided with a Mother I thought was dead and with a sister I didn’t know I had. A *twin* sister at that,” I said as I tried to stand.

Quinn helped me, but my knees were still wobbly and I had to sit right back down.

“I feel so weak,” I said rubbing my head again.

Quinn walked over and locked the door. Then walked back to me, his knife in his hand. As he got close he took the point of his knife and made a slice into the vein on his wrist. He could see the shock on my face.

“No time, Kat. Just drink.”

He lifted his wrist to my mouth; the smell of his warm blood combined with his human scent was intoxicating. As I drained blood from Quinn’s arm I felt not only a surge of energy but a feeling I’d had before but never this strongly, and I was completely aroused. I realized now what it would be like to make love to him. It took all my will power to force myself to stop. When I pulled back I realized we were both breathing hard. He looked away from me busily wrapping his wrist. This brought back a memory from home.

“You’ve done this for me before, haven’t you?” I said with shock.

“Yes,” he said sheepishly. “The other time there was not a moment to waste. I know it’s forbidden, but both times it was necessary.”

I stood, full strength filling my body. I was amazed how quickly it had happened, and I could also see why it was forbidden. It was like a drug, and a vampire could get thoroughly addicted. I went over to him, put my arms around his neck and kissed him, exactly what I had wanted to do the last time. As we kissed I could tell he was as aroused as I was.

“I want to ask you something,” I said, feeling embarrassed. “How does feeding me like that make you feel?”

Now it was his turn to be embarrassed.

“Heavenly,” he replied looking down, his face turning red. “And very erotic. You?” he inquired still not looking up.

“The same.”

He kissed me again, and then we both jumped when we heard someone try to open the door. Then knock.

“Katrina?” I heard Sarah’s voice ask.

I walked over and opened the door.

“Are you all right?”

“That’s the question of the hour. I’m better, thank you. Did you bring a change of clothes?”

“Of course, and combs and some fruit,” she said, sounding put out, as if resenting the implication that she’d forget anything.

“Out with you, Mr. Quinn, I have a job to do. She’ll see you later,” Sarah said as she pushed him out the

door. She had brought me a lovely but simple dress of yellow cotton. As she combed my hair she informed me of all the talk of the new arrivals. As I left the room, which turned out to be right behind the Council chamber, I was still feeling overwhelmed by all I had seen and been told. Entering the hallway, I could hear the buzzing of dozens of voices all blending together coming from the Council room.

Well, here we go, I said to myself. I entered the Council chamber just as Father was calling the meeting to order.

“We are here today to finish the business of this special session, answer any questions you may have and hopefully solve any problems brought to this Council,” he stated with authority. “Let us finish any old business first.”

Then he went over new laws to be enacted, elections to be held in each territory, four council positions, and a list of minor and mundane subjects. Everyone was getting restless as the hours passed. Finally the agenda came to the subject that everyone had thought the special session had been called for in the first place.

“Now let us discuss new business. We have consulted the Vikings on news of the New World; the Americas to be exact. They’re experts on the subject and they advise me that we should soon send an envoy of senior council members to make a tour of cities already established to help us decide where we will have an advantage to establish covens and infiltrate the ruling governments and upper classes just as we have in all the territories in which we reside today. It has, as

you know, always been in our best interest to be well established before moving full force into any situation. This way we always know local and regional information ahead of time in order to influence and take advantage of trends. It is imperative that we choose the correct locations, as well as the best positions in business, government, and society. We will send our envoy this very summer. We have been informed that the Americas have recently ended a four-year war, and we believe that this is a fine opportunity for us to begin to establish our presence there. The envoy's survey of the situation should be complete by early next spring and will allow us to make final plans at that time. Are there any questions on this subject?"

"Yes," said someone in front, whom I could hear but not see. "Who is to go on this first expedition?"

"Not everyone wants to be away for almost a year," said Father, "so I will need to have volunteers."

After much discussion it was decided. Philepe agreed to go, since Gerhardt could manage his estate; and since their daughters would be staying with us anyway, Ricardo, Edward, and Michael also agreed to go. Others in banking, law, and accounting would also be going. Assignments were given and accepted, final business was discussed further, questions were answered and disputes were settled, after which the meeting was adjourned and all were invited to the dinner and ball. Departures would begin the following morning for the long journeys home.

I was relieved that no one had brought up the new arrivals, even though the surprise really was no one

else's business. My mother—the thought still shocked me—and sister—that thought shocked me more—had wisely stayed out of sight so far that afternoon.

“Katrina,” called out three voices together. They rushed toward me, pushing through the crowd that was leaving the opposite way.

“We were so worried. Sarah said you fainted! Have you recovered? You look a little pale,” said El.

“Physically I'm fine. I'm just still in shock from learning that I have a twin sister and a Mother I thought all these years was dead, both of whom showed up this morning. It's a bit overwhelming that's all.”

They gave me a hug and I told them I would tell them all about it as we got ready for the festivities to be held that night, but I had to go over to Father's and spend some time with my newly enlarged family.

Thomas was waiting outside, looking concerned.

“I'm all right,” I said before he could ask.

“I knew you would be. You're strong, Katrina, and if you can handle yourself in battle you can handle this,” he said with conviction.

“You're right, Thomas, thank you.”

He was right. I could and would be fine; I had no choice, I decided. I nodded to Thomas, shrugged my shoulders, and we continued on. My apprehension was gone by the time we reached Father's quarters. As Thomas opened the door for me I took a deep breath and walked in. Father wasn't there yet; I knew that because Gunter wasn't outside. Mother and Katherine were out on the balcony and I saw them turn as they heard the door.

“Katrina, I’m so glad you’re here at last. Katherine, come, let’s sit and get acquainted. How was the talk with your father? Do you have any questions for us?” she asked, a look of concern on her face.

It was so odd to look into the faces of two people that looked so much like me. Of course, as I looked at Katherine I realized that she looked *exactly* like me, except that our hair naturally parted on opposite sides. She was my mirror image, which would mean that she was left-handed while I was right-handed.

“He explained why you left and why he didn’t tell me. I know that he kept the secret because he thought he was protecting me. And while I understand his reasons, I have a question for you. Didn’t you ever wonder how I was doing?”

“Of course I did, but I had my spies,” she said with a smile and patted my hand. “They told me you were doing well. Besides, I knew your father loved you so much that he would make sure you thrived.”

“He also said that you, Katherine, were the main reason you came back. Is that true?”

“Yes, I wanted a chance to know both you and Father, as I’m sure you would like to know Mother.”

“Certainly I can say that, now that I know you exist. How long are you going to stay?”

“We haven’t decided yet,” my mother said. “We’ll just have to see how it goes. Seeing your father again brings back wonderful memories for me and I realize the two of you deserve a chance to have the closeness most other twins have. What seemed like the right decision all those years ago just makes me sad now. But what’s done is done; I can’t take it back, so I’ll

concentrate on what we have now. We have time, time is on our side. We live for centuries, after all.”

Father came through the door then. “Oh, good, you’re all here,” he said. “My family as it should be.”

He seemed as happy as I’d ever seen him. Could it be? Would they reconcile? Too much to ask for, I supposed. Still, Mother was right, time *was* on our side. When I looked at her, she was beaming. Katherine and I looked at each other in wonder, realizing it really could be true. We grinned at each other and I motioned for us to go and leave them alone.

“Father, I’m going to take Katherine to meet the girls. May we take her things so we can all get ready together, Mother?”

“Mother, that sounds delightful. May we, please?”

“Of course you may, but come back here when you’re dressed, and we’ll all go together. The others will want to enter with their fathers too.”

“Very well,” we said in unison, then laughed and walked out.

“Is it as strange to you as it is to me to have another person that looks just like you?” I asked my sister.

“Not really, because I lived with Mother and she looks so much like me—like *us*. I suppose I’m used to it.”

“Hmmm, I never thought of that. Where are your trunks?”

“Downstairs, I think.”

As we headed down the stairs we could see Thomas and Gunter talking near the bottom. They stopped and looked over as we approached.

“Well, fancy that. And we thought one was a handful,” said Gunter, and we all laughed.

“Katherine this is my Watcher, Thomas, and his brother, Gunter.”

“Do you have Watchers with you my Lady?” said Thomas.

“No, we don’t. We only have vampire guards.”

“Well, you will have to have a personal Watcher while you’re here. I’ll see to it myself,” said Gunter.

“As you wish.”

They fetched her things for us, which were beautiful—just purchased in Paris, she told me as we headed out. She couldn’t tell us where they had traveled from, only that it had been a long trip and she was tired. When we got to our complex, I saw Quinn standing by the door and I felt my spirits soar.

“Nice to see you feeling better, Kat,” he said lovingly.

Then he looked at my companion.

“Katherine, this is Quinn, my friend and Thomas and Gunter’s brother.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Quinn, and you may call me Kate.”

“I’m stunned. I had no idea you were identical twins.”

“Mirror twins,” we said again in unison and again we giggled.

“What does that mean?” he said, still looking shocked.

“It means she’s left-handed and...”

“She’s right-handed, and our hair naturally parts on the opposite side, that’s all.”

“I see. Well, at least we can tell you apart that way. I wanted to let you know that your father has arranged for Vampire guards to be on guard tonight, so my brothers and I can attend the ball, except for Gunter, of course. He even kindly arranged for formal attire for all of us. You’re going to love him, Katherine.”

“I already do.”

“That’s great news, Quinn. Wait until you meet the rest of the brothers Kate, one of whom will become your Watcher, and another one will be Mother’s.”

“If they’re anything like these two, I can’t wait,” she said parting her lips in a smile.

Thomas laughed, “Double trouble.”

“Indeed,” added Quinn.

“Let’s go meet the other girls and tell them the news. We’ll see you both later.”

Then I clasped Kate’s hand and we rushed up the stairs together.

“Watch the dress,” I ordered, and in we went.

“Greetings, everyone! I want you to meet my sister, Katherine. Katherine, may I present Rosalinda, Arletta, and Eleanor.”

“She’s...*you*,” gasped Eleanor.

“I know. Isn’t it eerie?”

“Gracious, this is going to take some getting used to,” said Arletta.

Rosa added, “That’s an understatement.”

Sarah had, of course, everything well in hand.

Snacks and crimson were laid out so we could keep our strength up. Kate needed that, but of course thanks to Quinn, I was fine. I’d have to think more about the matter of his feeding me again later. While she ate and

drank greedily, we told the girls that Mother might be staying and that she and Father seemed very happy to see each other. I informed Kate that there had been no other women in Father's life since they left, as far as I knew. She told us that although there had been many suitors, Mother had also remained single. The girls insisted on telling Kate what a hero I was and how we would all be training together from now on, at least until the envoy returned from the Americas. We had forgotten she didn't know anything about that either, so we were quick to explain the situation, and added that we all hoped to be included in the colonization. She seemed very excited about that, adding that she intended to go wherever I went.

"Now to the important things," said El, a devilish smile appearing on her lips. "Did Quinn or Thomas tell you the news about the ball tonight?"

"Yes, isn't it enchanting? I'll have to thank Father," I said.

"You are in for a treat Katherine. All the brothers are gorgeous. Letta and I haven't decided on which ones we like best, but those two are smitten with Thomas and Quinn," said Rosa, pointing to El and me.

"Please, call me Kate, and I saw for myself just before we came up here how much Kat and Quinn meant each other."

"She told them if the others were anything like them, she couldn't wait to meet the rest."

Letta laughed. "She fits right in already."

"They're calling us double trouble," said Kate.

"If you ask me, they have no idea yet how true that's going to be," said Rosa.

“Do you want to move in with us?” asked El, excited she had thought of it.

“There’s an empty room. Oh, please say yes! It’ll give your parents some time to be alone, and we’ll make sure you both get time with them,” said Letta.

“How about it?” I asked, turning to Kate.

“I think it would be delightful. Thank you so much for making me feel so welcome. You don’t know how afraid I was that no one would accept me— including Kat and Father.” As she spoke her eyes filled with tears.

“Stop, you’ll make us all cry,” said Letta and gave her a hug.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Kate's gown was a sexy, off-the-shoulder, blood-red silk taffeta, complemented by matching slippers. It showed a generous amount of cleavage, as did all of our gowns, our motto being: "Don't hide your blessings." We had Sarah put Kate's hair up in a style similar to ours. Rubies and diamonds at her neck and ears completed her outfit. We all had on the outfits we had agreed on days before, and with Kate's hair finished we had to admit if there were any five girls more fetching than us, well, we'd just have to take them out.

"Stunning," said Sarah. "Jaws will be dropping, that's for sure, and I bet the brothers are going to have to fight off a lot of competitors tonight. You'd better go, girls; it's time for you to meet your fathers so they can escort you to dinner. Does everyone have a handkerchief?"

"Yes," we all chimed, pulling them out and waving them in the air.

“Just checking. Put them back up your sleeves and be off. Go, go on,” she said shooing us out the door. The girls went to find their fathers, and Katherine and I went to find ours.

Cedrik had joined Thomas to be our Watchers until we were delivered to dinner. Then they would be off duty.

“Cedrik,” I said, “this is my sister Katherine.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Katherine.”

“Likewise, but please call me Kate.”

Father was pacing when we arrived. Gunter was joined by Avery, who was to be Mother’s new Watcher. We introduced him to Katherine and entered the apartment.

“How many more brothers are there?” said Kate.

“Two, not a bad one in the bunch.”

Father smiled. “You two look stunning, absolutely stunning. Will the two of you please see if you can rush your mother along? It’s getting late.”

“No need Fredrik, I’m ready,” we heard her say as she came from her room.

Now it was our turn to gasp. Her hair was up and in ringlets, her dress was the color of a blush pearl, and hand-sewn iridescent crystals edged the sweetheart neckline. Sleeves, puffed at the shoulders, ended slightly past her wrist, also edged in the same crystal detail. The dress was corseted in the back with a full pleated skirt that flowed to the floor.

“I don’t have words, Elizabeth; there aren’t any that could do you justice.”

“You’re so beautiful, Mother, really,” I said.

“As always,” added Kate.

“You girls are ravishing. The young men don’t stand a chance, nor do any girls who try to compete with you,” said Mother proudly.

“I’m just the luckiest man on earth,” sighed Father.

Smiling, he offered his arm to Mother and we left for dinner. As we crossed the courtyard, we could see all the others making their way to the dining room as well, the beautifully gowned women and dapper gentlemen talking and laughing as they entered the hall.

Dinner was wonderful. Candlelight danced across the walls like fairies fluttering in mid-air. Everyone looked splendid, and with all the business complete, the mood was light and happy. Much to my surprise Mother was welcomed graciously, and several times I noticed that adoring looks were being exchanged between Father and her. I was so excited I could hardly sit still.

Finally Father rose and invited everyone to the ballroom, which was across the hall and down the stairs. We led the way, with Father and Mother gliding down the stairway arm in arm; we followed, wishing they would hurry. As we continued down, my eye caught sight of a very handsome group of gentlemen standing around the foot of the stairs, three on one side and three on the other. Having never seen them dressed in tie and tails before, I was stunned at how handsome they all were. There was not a man alive, here or anywhere else, that was a match for any one of these escorts. And of course I had my eye on one of them in particular.

Kate squeezed my hand and whispered, “Easy Kat, you can’t kiss him right here.”

Finally we were on the final step. When Quinn smiled at me and offered his arm I thought I would melt.

“You’re gorgeous Kat.”

“You’re pretty gorgeous yourself.”

Cedrik was escorting Kate over to sit down and we followed. Thomas would be spending the evening with El, of course; the other girls were working at keeping Avery, Simon, and Gregor guessing, but they could have had any number of girls attending. We danced the night away. I wasn’t surprised that our Watchers knew how to dance, since while I was growing up they had taken turns teaching me. I could have spent the rest of my days in Quinn’s arms, looking into his beautiful blue eyes.

“Would you like to go out to the veranda?” he said.

“I’d love to.”

I would follow him anywhere, I thought. It was a perfect spring night, with crisp air and a clear sky filled with thousands of twinkling stars. We walked to the edge of the building, our arms around each other’s waists. I leaned my head on his shoulder and sighed; the night had been perfect and I didn’t want it to end.

“So how are you coping with all the sudden changes in your life?” he asked as he ran his finger down my neck and across my bare shoulder, sending chills down my spine.

“Well it’s been only a day, but I think it’s going to be fine. I’m sure we’ll have times where we won’t be happy with one another—all families have such

days—but after the initial shock wore off and Father explained what had happened, I couldn't be upset. I vowed to find a way to make this work, and Father seems so happy. Looking back, it seems that all these years he must have been terribly lonesome; he must have missed her desperately. I know if you went away—”

“Shhh,” he said, touching my lips with his finger. Then slowly, he bent down and kissed me. I didn't want that kiss ever to end, but when it did he whispered, “I'm not going anywhere.”

Kate called out, “Hey, you two,”

She was arm in arm with Gregor this time, and they were followed by El and Thomas, Rosa and Simon, and Letta and Avery. Cedrik was still inside, surrounded by several young ladies, we were told.

“Look at all of us! I went from having no sisters to having four; and I will have to say that my brothers have never looked so good.”

Just then Cedrik came around the corner with a waiter carrying a tray full of Champagne glasses filled almost to the top. We each took one.

“To what shall we toast?” said Cedrik.

“To us,” I said, raising my glass. “The family I always wanted.”

“Hear, hear!” they all joined in as we clicked our glasses together.

Later we informed our parents that Katherine would be moving in with us and then proceeded back to our quarters. Quinn and I entered the courtyard first, and when we turned we laughed to see that the procession of brothers and sisters seemed to go on for blocks.

“What’s so funny?” asked El.

“It’s just that we look a little like a parade,” I said.

When she turned she could see what I meant, and she laughed too. We lingered for a moment while the rest paraded on. I wanted to sneak Quinn into my room, but knew that was a bad idea...wasn’t it? Yes, it was, I decided.

“I had a wonderful time, even though these suits are really uncomfortable.”

“Oh? And these dresses aren’t?”

“At least you’re somewhat used to it.”

“Well you wouldn’t know it, but all of you had every lady in attendance tonight drooling.”

“And you, my dear, are so funny. You can’t be totally unaware that men can’t take their eyes off you, not just tonight, but wherever you go? You never seem to notice?”

“Well I don’t know about that. All I care about is how you look. And where you look.”

“Just look?” he laughed.

“You’re right. I want far more from you than just looking at me.”

We kissed again. I wanted so much more, but there would be plenty of time, I thought.

“Break it up, you two,” said Thomas, “We all have to be up early to train, and everyone has to work especially hard to impress your fathers.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, giving him a mock salute.

“I’m serious, and you’d better be, too,” he said, his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

“Oh, Thomas, you know how serious I am with my training, and you can expect the same from everyone

else. I think we've found out this past week how important training is. We have to be able to act on instinct at any moment. They all assured me they want to do just that, and I wouldn't have asked Father to let them stay if I didn't believe them."

"True. How about your sister? Do you have any idea what she's been learning?"

"No, but I'll ask her when I get back. She is my twin after all, and if nothing else you can bet she's a fast learner. Did you send someone for her trunks, Thomas?"

"Sarah was way ahead of you, as usual. Katherine's all settled in, including additional supplies."

"I don't know why I even open my mouth. Sarah always seems to read my mind."

"Well let's get you back so you can get some rest," said Quinn. "You must be ready right after sunrise."

"Very well," I said with a pout.

Quinn walked me to my door, gave me a quick kiss, opened the door, and wished me goodnight.

From inside we heard a chorus of four voices, crooning, "Goodnight, Quinn."

I leaned against the door for a moment and sighed, "That was great."

Everyone agreed.

"You were right Kat, there's not a bad one in the bunch. Those brothers are amazing," said Kate.

"Absolutely delicious," said El, licking her lips and looking straight at me. "You know what I mean, right Kat?"

"What do you two know that we don't?" said Letta.

“You two have been getting personal attention at snack time haven’t you?” said Rosa. “It’s always the quiet ones isn’t it?”

“Is that true Katrina?” said Katherine.

“It’s true,” confirmed Eleanor, “Thomas told me he suspected because he saw cuts on Quinn’s wrist and Quinn told him it was necessary.”

“Oh, please,” said Rosa.

“It was, Rosa. The first time I nearly went dormant from lack of blood, and again after I fainted yesterday.”

“Very well, I’ll allow you that one, but that’s not why you’ll do it next time,” said Rosa.

“What do you mean?” asked Letta.

“Because it’s as good as having sex, that’s why.”

“Katherine!” we all exclaimed.

“It’s true, and I’ll bet you’ve compared the two. Am I right Rosa?”

Rosa nodded. “She’s right.”

“So I’m the only one here who’s never fed directly from a human?” said Letta.

Kate laughed, “I guess so, but the way you were looking at Avery and the way he was looking at you, I doubt it will be long.”

“Well I don’t have anything to compare it to, not that I wouldn’t like to,” I said, “but it was amazing and that’s exactly what I was thinking when I was drinking Quinn’s blood, that this must be what it would be like to make love to him. What’s more, I could tell he was having the same experience I was.”

“Really? So Thomas wasn’t just doing it for my benefit, huh?”

“Yes, out of the goodness of his heart,” laughed Rosa.

“Well he probably only had Quinn’s word. It’s rather hard to explain to someone until you’ve experienced it yourself,” said Kate.

“I can see why it’s forbidden though, can’t you? I’m not sure I’d be strong enough to stop myself. It’s like a drug; one could become addicted,” I said.

Rosa and Kate agreed.

El looked around at all of us and said, “Well I think I have to try a couple more times to make sure.”

We all laughed again.

We all were getting tired, so Sarah helped us with our ball gowns and we combed out each other’s hair and put on our nightgowns.

“Remember, we have to be at the training grounds tomorrow just after dawn, so we’ll need to be up an hour earlier.” Everyone groaned.

“By the way, Kate have you been in training with weapons before you came here?”

“We did some fencing and archery.”

“Well, you will find that this training will be a little more intense, but as you heard, it’s time to take it seriously, and you never know when you’ll need to defend yourself or those you love, right?”

I heard several voices chime in “right” along with Kate’s. I was glad that that we were all in agreement on this and suggested we climb into bed. I snuggled down into my soft comforter and promptly fell into an exhausted sleep.

I had the strangest dream. I was at the ball dancing with Quinn, and I was so happy I gave him a hug and

snuggled my head into his shoulder. When I straightened to resume my dancing form, I looked up expecting to gaze into the beautiful blue pools of Quinn's eyes, but instead the smoldering dark eyes of Damien stared back at me. Strangely, I didn't seem shocked but just laughed and kept right on dancing as if nothing had happened, and then I woke up.

What was that all about? I asked myself. I sat up trying to figure out what time it was. It was still dark. I flopped back down on my pillow. I loved Quinn; there was no doubt in my mind; so why had I dreamt about Damien? He was so different from Quinn in nearly every way. Of course there was the obvious difference: he was a vampire, from an elite royal blood line at that. Damien was my equal; I wouldn't outlive him, which was a problem I would have to deal with eventually, because Quinn was human.

The girls and I had discussed the difficulties that came along with serious relationships and the quandary that falling in love with a human would bring. We talked of this often and had decided, like many of our kind, that the intensity of the relationship was the important thing. Such bondings were so uncommon, that to deny one just because the other was a human was to deny ourselves the love we desperately needed to make life bearable. We also understood that just because you have a relationship with someone who lives as long as you doesn't mean you will always stay together— or that something else will not happen. Vampires can be killed or die too, for that matter. I didn't want to dwell on the negative. Damien and Quinn were utterly different. Their personalities were

different, and although they were both, handsome, they were handsome in very different ways.

This is ridiculous, I thought. If Damien were here—which he's not—I would still choose Quinn, wouldn't I?

“*Oh for crying out loud,*” I told myself sternly. “*Just get up!*” I threw off the down comforter and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

Why did everything in my life have to be so complicated?

I was glad to be training this morning. The intense concentration and focus necessary to stay ahead of my trainers always cleared my mind. I felt complete and totally in my element, as if this was what I was meant to do.

I dressed and headed to the common room. The coals glowed in the darkness, giving the room a warm orange hue. I knew I had at least an hour and a half before I had to be at the training ground, so I headed down to the prep area to find something to eat; no sense waking Sarah when I was perfectly capable of fixing something myself. Two Watchers were in the hall, and one positioned at the bottom of the stairs. Entering the prep room, I could see fruit and yesterday's bread covered with a towel. Good, I thought, something simple. A jug of water was all there was to drink; it was too early for fresh crimson. I chose some grapes, a piece of bread and jam, and a slice of dried meat to round out the meal.

Satisfied, I drank some water and decided to go see Nulla, grabbing an apple for her on the way out. I double-checked my sword and dagger, which now

seemed like part of my body and were never very far from my reach. Even at the ball I had strapped a dagger to my thigh. Better safe than defenseless was my new motto. Maybe having to fight for my life every other day was affecting me more than I thought.

I strode confidently down the hall. I didn't see anything of Thomas, which was fine, since I really wanted to be alone. The other Watchers had let me get this far alone only because I had convinced them that I was meeting Thomas at the stables. As I headed across the courtyard, the sun was just about to make its appearance. The air was crisp but still. I took a deep breath and sighed; *mmmmm*, I felt good—strong, fit, and ready to take on the world.

I had almost reached the stable when I recognized his scent, Damien was close!

I swiveled and surveyed my surroundings, then closed my eyes and tried to “see” where he was. “Finding” him, I looked up and there on top of the wall beside me was Damien looking right back down at me. I couldn't believe it; he *was* here. He dropped off the wall to land gracefully at my feet. He rose not inches from my face. My heart was racing, his spicy scent filling my head.

“I missed you,” he whispered.

And then I realized that I had missed him too.

“What...how...when...?” I stuttered.

“My father sent Ivan to find me and relay that, thanks to your intercession, I had been cleared. My father was so thankful that at least one of his children wasn't to be hunted down and killed, that he has arranged for me to go with the others to the Americas.”

He took my hands in his, raised them to his lips and kissed my fingers. Reminding me of the first time, it felt like energy moved from his lips through my skin and tingled up my arms. All the while he never took his eyes, those dark sexy eyes, from mine.

“Thank you for telling your father I was innocent.”

“Believe me, Damien, you have many traits but innocence isn’t one of them. We can say ‘not guilty,’ maybe.”

He laughed, breaking the sexual tension between us.

“I’m going to see Nulla. Walk with me.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and walked beside me.

“I hear you had a surprise arrival this week. How are you?”

This stopped me in my tracks. I turned my head to see a concerned look on his face, and studying him for a brief instant I thought, *I really did misjudge him.*

I managed to reply, “Well, now that the shock has worn off, seeing not only my mother but my twin sister, I think actually I’m fine. And Father has never seemed so content. So we’ll see what transpires, but for now we’re making our best efforts to get to know each other and make it work.”

We started walking again.

“There have been so many times I wondered about my mother, and if she would ever come back,” Damien said. “Your mother being here gives me hope.”

He sounded so sad that I turned and gave him a hug. He seemed surprised but adapted quickly, reaching his arms around me and pulling me close.

“If that’s what you want, I’m sure someday you’ll be together again.” I told him.

“There are many things I want that I’m willing to wait for,” he added, holding me away and looking into my eyes passionately. Then he pulled me close again, and his breath on my ear and neck made my stomach quiver. How could I feel this way about two such different men?

He released me and we began walking again. We reached the stables moments later.

“Well, we’re here. I’ve brought an apple just for Nulla.”

He gestured for me to lead the way. It was getting quite light now and the grooms were busy cleaning stalls and feeding horses. Nulla had had her bath, her stall was clean, and she was happily munching on fresh hay. How I loved the smell of that fresh straw bedding and hay.

“Nulla?” I called, and she raised her head and whinnied in recognition. “Look what I brought you,” I teased.

She reached her head out to me impatiently.

“Very well, here you go.” I laughed and offered her the plump green apple.

She snatched it from my outstretched palm as if she hadn’t eaten in a week. I patted her neck, scratched behind her ear, and stroked her beautiful face.

“I’ll see you later, girl.”

“Maybe we could take her out later, unless you’re not staying. I know most people are getting ready to be on their way back home,” said Damien. “I came back

to ready myself for the journey ahead, and then I'll head to the port with the others."

"I'd like to go on a ride, maybe this afternoon. Has there been any word of Luena?" I asked, changing the subject.

"No," he said angrily, "and if I never see her again it will be too soon for me; but I have a feeling I'll never be free of her. She told me she would kill Father if I said anything about her army. I've grown to see her deep level of evil, and believed her capable of actually doing harm to Father. After she revealed her full intentions to me, I was able to convince Father to resign, so she would have to change her plans and expose herself and her army before it was too late. Of course you know the rest." He sighed.

"Well all we can do is to be vigilant. I, for one, am going to make sure the girls and I can always take care of ourselves. Speaking of preparation, I have to get to the training grounds. I'll see you later, then?"

"Of course, I'll meet you at the stables for that ride." he called after me.

I waved as I walked away. I was getting more and more excited, the closer I got to the training grounds.

"There she is," Rosa called out to the others.

"Where were you?"

"I woke up early, so I made a trip to the stables to see Nulla, and you won't believe whom I came across on my way."

"Who?" asked Letta.

"Damien!"

"Really? Damien? When did *he* get back?" said a shocked Eleanor

“Who’s Damien?” asked Kate.

“You remember, Luena’s half-brother,” said Rosa.

“Oh.” Kate shrugged her shoulders to show didn’t really know who we were talking about.

“We’ll have to talk about it later. Here come our fathers,” I said.

“All right, let’s get started, girls,” said Gunter, clapping his hands. “First, I just want to explain to those that haven’t had much training with Watchers why we train as we do. Our methods develop your skills deliberately, slowly, so that the moves become routine and with time are easily mastered. When you then add your vampire speed, you will become almost unbeatable.”

“Why the swords and daggers?” asked Kate. “Why not pistols and bullets?”

“Good question, Katherine. Bullets are of no use against vampires. Because of your speed, by the time the bullet leaves the barrel of the gun pointed toward the target, the target is no longer there. Against humans your speed and superior strength is your best weapon. The swords, especially the short swords you all carry, are light and lend themselves well to speed. They are also silent and lethal, killing your opponent before he even detects your presence. Each of you also possess special gifts, and we as Watchers are especially adept at recognizing those gifts and will be helping you develop them as well. So let’s get started. First I’d like Katrina to come forward to show you what I’m talking about. Katrina?” He gestured to me.

I walked up next to Gunter smiling, and he gave me a wink. “Show them what you’ve got,” he said.

“I replied, “Yes, sir,” and took up my weapon for the exercise.

Exchanging my real sword for a wooden one like those the brothers were all sporting—we wouldn’t want any fatalities, just injured pride—I got into my defensive crouch, closing my eyes so I could concentrate on my hearing. I could detect the brothers arriving at their positions surrounding me. *Ah my favorite* I smiled. It was up to them to begin. I could feel their apprehension. Then in an instant it was on. Six brothers, all taking their task very seriously, came at me from all sides. I ducked and countered each of their blows, rolled underneath Thomas’s and Simon’s jabs, and was out of the circle. Now they charged. I dispatched each one easily in turn. Gunter was right, it felt as if I were fighting in a slow ballet compared to their human full speed. I was one step ahead of them at every turn. In minutes it was all over. The girls all erupted in cheers and clapped with glee.

“Impressive daughter, now show us your skill against our vampire guard.”

Once again six men approached carrying wooden swords. These were the elite palace guard, but the rules were the same: if a weapon was dislodged or a blow was deemed to be debilitating, the opponent was out of the exercise. As before, I began in the middle, surrounded by the enemy. I centered myself again, breathing in deeply so I could “see” them. Then three charged in, one from the front and one from each side. This exercise was at full vampire speed; humans could perceive us only as a blur. I jumped over the front guard and whacked him on the head; he was out. Then

as he took himself out of the fight, the other three guards now entered the game. I engaged two more, one from each side, ducking and slicing. I threw my wooden dagger, and even though this crude weapon lacked the balance and heft of my real weapon, it hit one right in the chest. That left four remaining, with one on each side, surrounding me. The larger of the two lunged in for a chest wound, but I kicked his sword out of his hand and flipped backwards over the second, making a mock slice across his neck on the way over him. I swirled around, hitting each of the other two across the throat as well. Done! I was breathing hard but the adrenaline rush made me sorry it was over.

Again clapping and cheering filled my ears. I smiled, looking over at my thrilled roommates. Then someone rushed at me from the rear, I dropped to one knee and thrust my sword backwards towards the would-be assassin, aiming right for the gut.

Gunter applauded. “Good job, Katrina. Never drop your guard.”

I looked up and saw Damien in the audience, smiling and clapping with everyone else. I rose, still breathing hard, and brushed some hair out of my eyes, never breaking my gaze with him. Everyone started coming over, praising my work and patting my back.

“It’s only because I have worked so hard all this time with great trainers,” I said as I noticed Damien being joined by his repulsive Watcher, Ivan. The man was big and tall, with beady brown eyes and a scar across his left cheek and nose and black slicked-back hair. More than his appearance, it was his manner that

unsettled me. He truly set me on edge, and I had to look away then and speak to my friends and our fathers.

“She’s very accomplished my Lord, and very beautiful,” whispered Ivan to Damien, “but still very much interested in her Watcher boyfriend.”

“For now, but I have time on my side and I am willing to wait for her, she’ll be mine I assure you,” said Damien.

“Do you really think we can ever be as good at fighting as you are, Katrina?” asked Arletta, eyes still wide with amazement.

“Absolutely, if you work hard and take it seriously, I have no doubt.”

“Are you willing to do that, girls?” asked Ricardo.

“Yes,” they all answered together emphatically.

“We’re so determined, aren’t we?” said Rosa, the others all nodding.

“Very well,” said Gunter. “Then the work begins now. We’re going to test your skill levels and agility so we’ll know how to approach your training.”

Gunter and all the brothers put the girls through beginning phases of swordplay, balance, and movement, and found they had been well taught in the basics and all were quick, agile, and stronger than he expected.

“Good work, everyone, we’ll start early tomorrow,” said Gunter.

The girls all looked at one another.

“If you don’t mind, Gunter, we’d like to start after lunch,” said Kate.

It was clear that Gunter was taken aback by this unexpected statement.

“Very well, after lunch it is. I’ll discuss the details with my brothers and meet you back here in an hour and a half.”

“We’re very proud of all of you, aren’t we?” said Father looking around at the fathers for support.

“We agree to let you stay and train together as long as you stay focused,” admonished Edward.

“Thank you, Father,” the girls said together, and they gave their fathers each a hug.

“Let’s have some lunch,” said Kate. “I’m starving.”

They all headed over to the main dining area with their fathers.

“I’ll be right there,” I called to Kate and father.

“Gunter, since I’ve worked out all ready, I’m going hunting this afternoon. I’ll take a vampire with me so all of you can stay and train the girls.”

“All right, but I’ll need you when we start developing their special gifts. Maybe you can all get together in your rooms tonight and get a feel for what those gifts might be.”

“That’s a good idea. And it’ll be easier if we’re not all distracted by the presence of so many brothers.”

We both laughed and went our separate ways. Of course what Gunter did not know was that the vampire I meant to take with me hunting this afternoon was Damien. I headed off to join the others.

“You were splendid this morning, as usual, but I’ve seen you in a real battle, so I wasn’t surprised,” said a grinning Quinn.

“Quinn, you startled me. I thought you’d be discussing training with Gunter. I was just heading over to have lunch with everyone. Can you join us?”

“No, I’m on duty with Simon.” He grabbed my hand. “I just wanted to tell you again what a fine time we all had last night, especially me.”

“I did too. The girls and I would have stayed up all night talking about it, if it hadn’t been for our appointment this morning. I thought they did well this morning, don’t you?”

“The five of you will become quite a force once the girls are fully trained the way you are. For what it’s worth, you were right about your sister; she’s just like you, fast and furious.”

We smiled at each other. Quinn was so handsome, I felt guilty about Damien, not that I had done anything wrong, mind you.

“Did you see that Damien was back?” I asked.

“I saw him at practice. He couldn’t take his eyes off you, not that I blame him.”

“I spoke to him at the stables. I was shocked to see him, but he thanked me for helping him to be cleared in Luena’s scheme.”

“Do you really believe he had nothing to do with any of it? At the very least he knew of the fledglings and didn’t mention them.”

“Quinn, Damien told me Luena threatened to *kill* their father, and I believe him. He also mentioned he’s going to the Americas with the others.”

“Really? Well I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt if you think he’s being truthful. I trust your instincts.”

Then he gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

What was I thinking? I’d have to go hunting by myself. I needed it in more ways than one. Not just to feed, but also to clear my head and try to figure out what I was feeling.

“There you are! Seems as if we’re always wondering where you are lately,” laughed El.

“Come sit by Father and me, Kat,” said Kate, gesturing for me to join them.

They were so excited about getting to stay with me it was infectious. I even asked Father if we could make over a wing of our estate so we could have our rooms together, as we did here. He laughed and said, “Anything you want, my dear.”

That was my favorite reply. Father had always spoiled me terribly, all the while being supportive and stern. I’d always been sure of his love, and now Mother was back!

“You know what else?” said Rosa.

“What?” I asked.

“We’re going to turn eighteen within a few days of each other. Isn’t that something?”

“All five of us?” I said. “Well of course Kate and I are twins, that was silly, but the three of you too?”

“Yes,” she beamed. “You two were born on June seventeenth, my birthday is the eighteenth, El’s on the twentieth, and Letta’s on the twenty-first.”

We all looked at each other in amazement.

“That’s going to be one gala birthday party we’ll have to plan,” said Father as he pounded his fist on the table. “We can combine it with a farewell party for those headed to the Americas, including all your fathers, then we can have a Council meeting as well and show your new skills, right girls? Remember, unless you’ve made real progress in your training, progress that can be seen by your fathers before they go, you’ll all have to go home.”

“That’s right,” said the other fathers.

“We made a promise to all of you, and we intend to keep it,” I insisted. “Now it’s almost time to get back to work, ladies.”

All five of us rose and headed to the door. When we arrived at the courtyard I told them to work hard and have fun.

And I told them I would see them later.



CHAPTER EIGHT

I arrived at the stables without seeing anyone, fully intending to go hunting alone. Nulla was saddled and ready to go, although I didn't remember telling a stable boy I was taking her out.

Then Damien came out of the stall next to Nulla's, leading the most beautiful black stallion I'd ever seen.

"His name is Theo. My father gave him to me on my birthday this year," he said as he scratched Theo's neck underneath his long black mane.

"He's gorgeous," I said adoringly. Theo snorted and pawed the ground impatiently.

"All right, all right, boy, we'll go," laughed Damien.

He led Theo out and I followed with Nulla. It was another beautiful afternoon and I couldn't wait to gallop through the countryside. I knew that wherever Damien was Ivan wouldn't be far away, but I didn't see him, and that was just fine with me. We mounted and decided that leaving through the back gate was a good option. Even before the gate was fully open I

urged Nulla into a canter and yelled, “See you in the meadow!”

Then we turned the canter into a full gallop down along the river and into the open. I could hear Theo closing the gap behind me. I knew there was a well traveled wagon trail through the forest nearby on the left, so I steered Nulla that way and burst across the river to the far shore and onto the trail.

Suddenly I didn’t want Nulla to run anymore. I wanted to be the one running; I wanted to race through the woods on foot. With that thought in mind, I started pulling Nulla back to a canter, then reducing her pace to a trot. Damien had caught up to me by then and he stopped Theo next to Nulla.

“What are you up to now?” he laughed.

“I’ll race you,” I shouted so he could hear me over the hard breathing of the horses.

We led the horses to a tree to tie them.

“I assume Ivan will take care of them.”

“Of course.”

Once I tied Nulla, I turned to say I’d give him a head start if he wanted, but he was already gone.

“When are you going to start?” I heard from the forest.

I took off racing into the forest towards his voice and used my gift to easily find him. He smelled so good. I used my full speed to get around in front of him and stop. He was so shocked when he saw me ahead of him that he didn’t see a low branch, which ended up hitting him right in the head. Whack! And down he went. First I started to laugh but then Damien didn’t move.

“Damien, stop kidding. Well then, I win. I’m heading back.” And I started to walk right by him. He grabbed for my ankle and instinct took over. I twisted easily away from him, laughed, and continued running.

I stopped as quickly as I had started. I smelled blood, fresh human blood.

Damien came up behind me. “What’s wrong?” he whispered.

I placed my hand on his chest to silence him. I had to find out where the scent was coming from. What else could I “see”? Normally vampires can smell things hundreds of yards away, but my gift was so strong I could smell certain scents miles away.

“What is it?” he pleaded.

“I smell fresh human blood.”

“How far? Which way?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. Give me a minute.”

I took another breath in. *Concentrate*, I told myself.

“Got it, about a mile and a quarter due northwest! Let’s go!”

We both took off at top speed, knowing we would reach the spot in mere seconds, even through the thick forest. We cut our speed as we approached. We could hear voices now, and we see the source. Bandits robbing a coach! The driver lay dead on his seat, slashed at the throat and chest. There were four bandits, one holding the coach horses, one on watch at the rear of the carriage, and two demanding jewelry and money from three frightened aristocrats.

“Which do you want?” said Damien.

“I’ll take the right.”

“Sounds fun. I’ll meet you in the middle,” he said.

With humans we would use no more than half speed. They wouldn’t realize we weren’t human that way, thus protecting our secrecy. With a blow to his head, I knocked over the one terrorizing the poor passengers; then I took one leap and kicked the one on horseback squarely in the chest, dropping him to the ground. Damien easily dispatched his two as well. With my sword I raised the chin of my bandit friend, the only one we left alive.

“This will be the last time you and your friends terrorize these people. Do have any last words?”

“Kill me,” he yelled.

“That’s up to the authorities, but my guess is you’ll get your wish,” I said as I tied him up with rope from the coach.

“How can we ever thank you?” said a very large fellow from inside.

“No thanks are necessary. It is enough to know these lands are safer than they were a few minutes ago,” said Damien.

“Do you feel safe enough to continue on your way, or would you like one of us to escort you to your destination?” I asked.

“We are not far from our village; we’re just back from a diplomatic visit to the capital. How is it you were here in this remote woodland?”

“We are guests of the Count and Countess Daminov, and their estate is not far. Our hunting party heard your distress and we immediately came to your aid.”

They looked skeptical but then, as if on cue, Ivan came through the woods with the horses.

“Can I be of any assistance, my Lord?”

“Oh Ivan, good. Would you please escort our new friends to the village and deposit this bandit with the constable there?”

“Of course, my Lord.”

One of the three gentlemen traveling with the coach climbed into the driver’s seat, moving the dead man aside.

“Poor fellow, we’ll see that his family is compensated and he is buried. We’ll send back a cart for this rabble.”

“Very good,” said Damien, taking the reins of our horses from Ivan. “We’ll be on our way then.”

“Thank you again.”

The bandit was tied behind the coach and they were off. Ivan on his horse made sure no one else could cause these travelers any further trouble.

I walked over to Damien to retrieve Nulla. We took one look at each other and started to laugh. I said, “Next time let me explain ourselves; you’re really bad at it,”

“You think we’ll get more practice doing this, then?”

“You never know. We made a pretty good team didn’t we?”

“I think you and I are a fantastic team,” he said as he took a step towards me.

I knew I should turn and go, but I couldn’t make myself. It happened so fast I wasn’t sure if he or I had initiated the kiss. It was so different from kissing

Quinn. With a different passion—harder, more lustful—his arms pulled me closer and roamed over my back. My arms were around his neck and into his hair, our tongues exploring each other’s mouths. Then, as he felt me start to pull away, breaking the kiss, he looked deep into my eyes.

“You want me as much as I want you, and there’s nothing wrong with that, Katrina.”

He was right, I did want him. Maybe it was the fresh blood smell in the air, or the adrenalin rush from the swordplay, but I was definitely attracted to him.

“I can’t do this Damien. This is pure lust, nothing more.”

“You can.”

“You’re right, I can. But I won’t.”

“This isn’t about that Watcher? He’s just a first crush. He’s not worthy of you, Katrina; it won’t last, you know that.”

“Maybe not, but I’m not betraying him. I’m sorry, Damien—not for the kiss, but for not being able to take it any further.”

“I’m sorry too. I want more from you, but I’m willing to wait until you can give yourself to me without hesitation.”

“Well, thank you for being so understanding.”

“Oh, I’m a saint, haven’t you heard?”

We laughed then, breaking the tension.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,” I said.

I took a breath and located two stags between us and the river. With our quarry in mind, we mounted and cantered off. We tied the horses when we got close enough, looked at each other, and nodded. It took only

seconds to down our prey and drink our fill. As we walked back to the horses, I so wanted him closer to me. I really had a lot of thinking to do.

Then it occurred to me, I had my mother now. This was something she could help me with, I was sure of it.

We arrived back just as the training session was ending. Everyone looked tired but satisfied. I had no doubt the girls would be successful, and now maybe they knew it too. A lot of the delegates and council members had left on their journeys home, so most of the palace was empty; we would be leaving as well the day after tomorrow. *Who knew our lives would change so radically in such a short amount of time?* I thought as we handed off our horses to a groom.

“I’ll say goodbye here Damien. I want to speak with my mother before dinner.”

“Let me know if you need help saving the world again, Katrina. I wouldn’t miss it.”

Father and Mother were sitting on the balcony when I arrived. “Katrina, how nice; we were just talking about you,” said Mother.

“Good things, I hope.”

“Of course; we just haven’t seen much of you.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here actually. I’d like to spend some time with Mother, if you don’t mind, Father?”

“No, not at all. I think that would be wonderful for the both of you. I’ll just be over at the library, and we can meet later for dinner.”

He kissed the top of my head as he passed on his way out.

“Mother, I need to talk to you about something.”

“All right, Katrina. You sound serious.”

She came in, sat on the sofa, and patted the cushion indicating that I should sit beside her. I walked over and sat down, but found that I didn’t know how to begin.

“Men?”

“How’d you know?”

“I’ve lived a long time, my daughter, it’s obvious. Now tell me all about it.”

“I thought I loved Quinn...well I *do* love Quinn. He’s wonderful, and he loves me too, or I think so.”

Then I told her everything—and that included Quinn’s feeding me and all about Damien. I thought I would be too embarrassed, but as I talked, I could tell she was listening to me with her full attention, without judgment. That put me at ease so that I felt I could tell her anything.

“Katrina, perhaps neither Quinn nor Damien will be your one true love. One will make you face mortality; the other may only be a passing fantasy. You’re so young; take your time, it’s on your side. But know that your heart will tell you one thing, and your head something else, but it’ll work itself out. I would caution you, don’t dally with others’ emotions, but consider their feelings too.” She was silent for a few moments. “As for Quinn, you did say that it was necessary that you fed from him. Have you considered that there may have been a bonding because of that? Especially since the blood bond will grow with successive feedings. I can see from your eyes that you haven’t thought of that. And it may be that I’m wrong

and that your feelings for him may not be a bonding, but a true love. I know that it's a difficult thing, these very adult feelings, but I have faith in you and know from my long experience that these things do have a way of working themselves out. I hope I haven't confused you more."

"I don't think that's possible. Thank you, Mother."

We hugged, I was comforted, and it felt so good. "I'm so glad you're here," I told her, "and I've never seen Father happier."

"Well, I feel the same way. It's like it was when your father and I first met. Katherine was right, it *was* time to come home. Now do you feel better?"

I nodded.

"Then go get cleaned up for dinner. I'm sure the girls are dying to tell you about their day."

I gave her one more hug before I left. As I was going out the door, I turned.

"Mother?"

"Yes, Katrina?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, darling."

Avery was coming up the stairs as I was coming down.

"Back on duty, huh?"

"Yes, and you missed a good training session this afternoon."

"I went hunting," I said as we passed each other on the stairs.

Thomas was outside. He was acting like a proud parent and couldn't stop talking about how great the girls were. I was glad to get back to our rooms—*whew*,

I reeked! Sarah confirmed that fact when she helped me out of my clothes and into a bath. I was sure that she had kept a score of servants busy heating water all afternoon, first for the other girls' baths and then for mine. I was the last and with great contentment, I stayed in that tub until my fingers were all wrinkled.

"Sarah, you're going to have to stop scolding me every time my hair is a mess. I can't help it, so unless you expect me to cut it all off you're just going to have to deal with it."

I dressed quickly so the girls and I could spend some time together before dinner. We gathered around the fireplace and I listened as each told me about her training experience.

Then it was my turn. "Well compared to your afternoon, I guess mine was quite boring. I went hunting... with Damien."

"What? Tell us everything," said Kate.

So I told them everything, swearing each of them to secrecy before beginning.

"Wow, Kat, that tops our training any day," said Letta.

"Maybe, but it does show exactly why you have to take training seriously. Soon the five of us will be out 'saving the world' as Damien said, together, right?"

"Right!" they all said excitedly.

"We'll be ready sooner than you think Kat. We're working really hard, and all the brothers were happy with our progress.

"I know Thomas and Avery couldn't stop praising you, and your training went well too, they said."

We all laughed.

“They are great teachers, it’s true, but there are things we have to do on our own. After dinner we are going to talk about your gifts. Each is unique to you and we can develop them to be great assets in battle and life in general. But now we need to go. Your fathers are leaving tomorrow, so this is our last dinner together for awhile.”

“Is Damien going to be there?” Rosa inquired, a mischievous smile on her face.

“I suppose so, since he is Lord of this palace, now that his father is away.”

Dinner was uneventful, with many toasts raised to one another. Of course the girls were very interested in Damien, and he was only too pleased to entertain them. As we were just finishing the last course, a guard entered the dining hall.

“A message was just been delivered, my Lord.”

As High Regent, Father took the message.

“What is it, Fredrik?” asked Mother.

“Well, it seems there was an attempted robbery on the road to the village today. Let me read this aloud. The Lord and Lady Ravonavich wish to thank the young lady and gentlemen who rescued our son and his escorts earlier this very day as they returned from a diplomatic mission. We invite you and your friends and families to join us tomorrow evening for a dinner to be given in their honor. We hope to meet you then and bestow our deepest gratitude in person.”

He then dropped the hand holding the message to the table.

“Well, Katrina, Damien, would you like to explain?”

“It was really nothing, Father; right Damien?”

“Right. We were hunting when Katrina scented trouble and of course took off right towards it, leaving me following. We dispatched three bandits and captured a fourth. The driver of the coach had been killed, but the occupants of the coach were untouched. We had Ivan take charge of the prisoner and escort the travelers home.”

“Is *that* all?” said Father.

“Yes, Father. I just couldn’t stand by and watch these bandits kill and rob innocent people. I had to help them.”

Father sighed and said, “Of course you had to help them Katrina, it’s just that I fear that you are too impulsive.”

“I assure you sir, she was in no danger and in fact could have handled all four herself, even at the half speed she used.”

Father looked down at the note and sighed again. “I see. Well, then it appears we owe these good people a reply. Send word we would be happy to attend and thank them.”

“I’d like to propose one more toast,” Rosa said, raising her glass. “We’re proud of both of you and here’s to saving the world.”

We all raised our glasses.

“To saving the world,” we laughed.

We giggled all the way back to our rooms. Quinn was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“See you upstairs,” said El, as the four of them left to give us some privacy.

“I heard you had quite the hunting trip.”

“Really, it was not that special.”

“I was a little surprised by your choice of a hunting partner.”

“He was going, I was going...you wouldn't have me go alone would you? Listen, all this concern makes me think you're jealous,” I said as I traced his jaw with my finger. He softened then.

“Of course I'm jealous. He's everything I'm not—royal, wealthy, not to mention he's a vampire.”

“You've got something he doesn't have Quinn, *me*.”

Then I kissed him.

“I wish I didn't have to go, but I do. I'm on duty.”

“I have to go, too. I'll see you tomorrow.”

We kissed again and he left. Of course everyone was eagerly waiting for me when I arrived.

“Everything's fine. I told him he had nothing to fear from Damien, and I meant it.”

“Whatever you say, Sis, but if you don't want Damien, I'd sure be interested.”

That shocked me a little. I wasn't sure how I felt about anyone else being paired with Damien.

“You'll need to concentrate on your training first.”

“Wasn't that amazing at dinner tonight? What were you thinking as your father read that message?” asked Letta.

“My heart was pounding, but I knew we'd done the right thing. Now, enough of that subject, let's get to work. Go and get changed so we'll be comfortable for the next assignment.”

We all changed and moved the sofa so we could sit in a circle on the floor in front of the fire.

“Tonight our task is to try to find out what each of your special gifts might be. Some gifts show up early, some later. As for me, my gift is my sight, as I call it, which became obvious when I was six. My dog was lost and I told Father I knew he was in the woods. We found him trapped in the mud about a mile away. When Father asked me how I had known he was there, I told him I’d smelled him. So let’s start with you, Kate. Do you have any idea what yours might be?”

“I might, yes. Sometimes flashes of people or objects enter my mind. It happened when we were coming here. I tried to picture the palace, and when I closed my eyes I could see it for a moment. When we reached the edge of the forest, it was exactly like the picture in my mind.”

“That’s fantastic. It makes perfect sense, when you think about it. That’s what I do, I close my eyes and it helps me ‘see.’ We’re twins, so it must work the same way. Father also said we should see if we can contact each other using only our minds, but we’ll try that when we get home. That’s a great start. Letta, how about you?”

She looked into the fire and the fire instantly roared, doubling in size. We all gasped in wonder. When she looked away the fire went right back the way it was. Then she looked into the fire once more, closed her eyes, and the fire went completely out.

We all clapped.

“Amazing, Letta. Even if we’ll all be cold now,” I laughed.

“Don’t be silly, Kat.”

Then she looked over and started the fire once again.

“I just discovered I could do this since we arrived here and heard you talk about us each having some kind of gift. I like my gift, though I’m not sure how I’ll use it.”

“Are you kidding, Letta? I can think of a hundred ways. Fire is an element, and if you can control one, you probably can control all the others—wind, water, and earth.”

“Something just occurred to me,” said Rosa.

“Remember when I said our birthdays were within days of each other?” We all nodded. “It means we were born under the same sign, Gemini. I think when we’re together our powers are strengthened and I would bet if we were to close our eyes and concentrate we could magnify whichever of our gifts we’re trying to use. Do you think that could be true Kat?”

“I think that has to be true. Let’s try. We’ll use Letta’s gift, but how about trying a different element.”

“Wind, how about wind?” said El trembling with excitement.

“Okay, wind. First, Letta, concentrate on creating a breeze right here in this room.”

Letta didn’t close her eyes but just stared, concentrating with every fiber of her being. And sure enough we started feeling a breeze. It was cool, blowing our hair and giving our skin goose bumps. It felt as if a spirit was floating by us. Then Letta closed her eyes and it went away.

“I knew it! Now let’s see if we can enhance her gift by concentrating with her. What did you think about, Letta?”

“Just wind, I just thought of wind.”

She was as amazed as the rest of us.

“Okay, all of us think of just wind.”

The breeze came up again exactly as before, no different.

“Well, that didn’t really work. Everyone but Letta, close your eyes, and maybe if we hold hands it’ll help. Let’s try again.”

We all held hands and began to concentrate once more. I could feel the breeze come again, but this time it wasn’t just blowing by us, it was swirling around us. My hands were getting warm, like being close to a flame. The warmth seemed to move up my arm, across my shoulders, down my other arm, and continued—as if we had completed the circle of self-perpetuating power. The wind became stronger and stronger until it started to lift us off the ground. I opened my eyes and looked up; it was like being inside a wall of wind. We were all looking up now; our bodies were about twelve inches off the floor.

“Let go,” I yelled.

When we broke the circle, we dropped back to the floor with a thud, and the wind changed back to the same cool breeze Letta had produced before. It continued until she closed her eyes.

We looked at each other in complete shock.

“Did you feel the energy flow through you?” I said.

“It made me a little weak,” said El.

“Yes, but I think if we practice, it’ll be like anything else; we’ll build up stamina and get stronger,” said Kate.

“This is unbelievable. I think we can all agree we couldn’t have imagined anything like this would happen when we first sat down.”

“That’s for sure, and Rosa and El haven’t even revealed their gifts yet,” said Kate.

“You’re right. Rosa, you’re next.”

“It’ll be hard to top that, but I’m really excited to show you what I can do. It seemed so silly before but now...”

“Just show us, come on,” urged El.

“Okay, okay.”

Rosa stood, looked around the room, walked over to the table, and picked up an apple. She held it in the palm of her hand and stared at it. In a few seconds the apple lifted from her palm and slowly started to spin. As she looked up the apple followed, and when she looked right, it went right. We all sat watching, eyes wide, mouths open like children at a magic show. Rosa grabbed the apple out of mid-air, smiled, and took a bow. We all clapped.

“Wonderful, Rosa! We’re going to do great things with your gift. El, last but not least, what surprise do you have in store for us?”

“I don’t know if I can take any more,” said Kate. “I wonder what the Watchers think we’re doing in here with all the noise.”

“Are you ready to impress us, El?”

“My gift is different from yours and I discovered it when I was young. I had a servant whom I loved

dearly. She was my best friend. One day she fell down the stairs and hit her head. I frantically ran down to her. I instinctively put both my hands over her gaping wound, closed my eyes, and strongly willed her to live. That's when I felt the energy, much like the energy we've all felt tonight. She started to moan after a minute. When I opened my eyes and lifted my blood-covered hands, the wound was gone; not even a scar remained. If it hadn't been for the blood you wouldn't have known anything had happened. She woke up as if from a nap, and I explained that she had fallen and asked if she was all right. She said she thought so. I helped her up. She was still dazed when we reached my rooms, so I washed both of us up and sent her to her quarters to rest. The next day she didn't remember anything about it. I've used this healing gift on animals too, but all these years I've felt like I should keep it to myself. Now you all know, and I feel proud to share it with you."

"I think we all feel the same way, don't we girls?" I said.

We all agreed. "Your gift is a wonderful addition, El. When I said impress, us I had no idea you'd take me that seriously."

"I don't know about you girls, but all of this has worn me out," said Rosa, yawning, "I'd go to bed now, except I'm starving."

"Dessert sounds really good," said El.

"You mean Thomas?" teased Kate.

We all had a good laugh.



CHAPTER NINE

We made a pact to keep the gifts we had shared last night to ourselves and to practice whenever we could. Exploring with our gifts made us even more confident in our training. Gunter had Kate and me working as a team, one right-handed, one left-handed, and we made a dynamic pair. We also worked on targets, using archery, swords, and daggers. Horseback skills filled our afternoon. We even hauled a small straw target back to our quarters so we could practice throwing daggers before bed. What we really wanted to do, of course, was to see if Rosa could throw a dagger using her mind. That would have to wait, because we were going to dinner at the Ravonavich estate tonight. The girls' fathers had even delayed leaving so they could accompany us. We cleaned up and dressed in our finest gowns. We all agreed that it felt good to have a fancy dress on again.

"Well, I have to say, we make a formidable force in training and on the dance floor," I said proudly.

"I'd like to see anyone try to match us," beamed Kate.

“Ready, ladies?” inquired Thomas.

Damien had the most beautiful coaches awaiting our arrival, with four white horses for each of the black coaches. Damien rode with my family in the first coach, and we headed out. Mother looked beautiful, of course, and all our fathers were very handsome, but they were no match for Damien. He had his hair tied back tonight, showing off his gorgeous face. We made small talk along the way, Father and Damien discussing plans for the trip to the Americas this summer, and in no time we arrived at our destination. Our Watchers had escorted our traveling party and of course and were right there when we exited the coaches.

The Ravonavich family was waiting to greet us.

“You look quite different from how you looked yesterday,” said a young man.

“Let us make formal introductions,” said Father. “I am Fredrik Van Dracek, and this is my wife, Elizabeth, my daughter Katherine, and my daughter Katrina, whom some of you have already met. We are visiting the Daminovs. This is Damien Daminov, whom your party also already met.”

“It’s so nice to meet you all. I am Janich Ravonavich; this is my wife, Cynthia, and our son, Richard.”

Richard bowed and kissed my hand. He had worn a hat and cape yesterday so I hadn’t noticed much about him. He was fair, with shoulder-length light blond hair and eyes the color of a morning sky; very nice indeed.

“I rather like these circumstances for our meeting, Katrina, but I’m very thankful you and Damien chose yesterday’s.”

“Glad we could help, Richard,” I said.

Richard’s parents were very gracious, and they also introduced his son’s thankful escorts and their families, who also couldn’t stop thanking us. Damien was his usual charming self, and the dinner was lovely. I couldn’t help thinking how much all of us are more alike than we are different. We may look different, or believe in different ways, but in the end we just want the same things: to live free, have families and be safe, healthy, and happy. We must not be afraid to fight for these values.

The evening wound down and soon we were headed back to our coaches.

“We have a token of appreciation for each of you,” said Lord Ravonavich to Damien and me.

Then he took two boxes from a page and presented one to me and the other to Damien. We looked at each other and opened the boxes. Inside were beautiful daggers, the handles encrusted with jewels. Everyone gasped at the beauty of these gifts.

“It’s a very beautiful gift my Lord, but it is not necessary. One should never expect payment for doing the right thing,” I said.

“That, my dear, is a noble thought, but my son is priceless to his mother and me, so please accept this gift as just that—a token of gratitude from very grateful parents.”

“In that case, I thank you, not only for this wonderful gift, but for your gracious hospitality.”

With that we said goodnight and were on our way back to the palace.

“What an eloquent young lady you have raised, Fredrik,” said Mother, patting Father’s arm and smiling at me.

“Indeed, Elizabeth, she surprises me every day, it seems,” he said, his voice full of pride.

“Now that we’re all together Father, I think you’re in for double the surprises, right Kate?”

Kate laughed, “That’s true, Father, and I hope you’re up to it.”

Damien was very quiet all the way home. I noticed him often watching Mother with such sadness that I vowed to find out what had happened to his own mother. We were going home tomorrow afternoon, and I hoped to have time to talk to Mother tonight. I had no idea what the true story might be. He must have felt my eyes studying him, because he turned his head so our eyes could meet.

“*Katrina.*” I clearly heard his voice, but his lips hadn’t moved. My eyes widened in surprise, but I didn’t say anything. Maybe I had imagined it.

“*Katrina,*” I heard as clearly as before. “*Don’t be alarmed, it’s only my gift. Please meet me for a final ride before you go.*” Could I use my mind to answer him or would he just be able to read my mind? “*Yes,*” I thought, but I received no reply. So I closed my eyes. “*YES,*” I thought. When I opened my eyes it was my turn to see surprised eyes looking back at me. Just then the coach stopped and it was time to gather ourselves and head to our rooms.

“Well, it’s been a lovely evening,” said Mother. “Will we see you ladies at breakfast, or are you training again?”

“We’re going to train in high speed for the first time tomorrow, Mother,” said Kate, her voice filled with excitement.

“Well, lunch then. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” we all said at the exact same time, and then laughed.

“I’ll see you in a minute,” I told Kate. “I need to say goodnight to Damien and then speak to Mother.”

She shot me a questioning look.

“It’ll be okay, I’ll explain later.”

“Very well,” she said, and then turned and walked away, looking back once before disappearing up the steps. Rosa, Letta, and El were saying goodnight to their fathers. I had just enough time. Damien was waiting for me.

“Forgive me for scaring you earlier.”

“More like a shock than a fright. You looked quite surprised yourself.”

“I’ve never encountered someone who answered me—with their mind, I mean.”

With our Watchers coming to escort us, and the girls finishing their goodnights, I was running out of time and I still had so many questions.

“I’ll meet you at sunrise in the stables.”

“Don’t worry, Katrina. You can speak to me whenever you wish,” he said; and then with a parting bow we went our separate ways.

“Thomas, I need to speak with Mother before I retire.”

So we headed towards their quarters. My parents had lingered in the gardens. I hated to disturb them again, but I was still determined to ask her about Damien's mother.

"Father, can I steal Mother away from you again, just for a few minutes?"

"Of course, my dear. Take all the time you need."

We walked to a bench, which nestled between archways covered in jasmine. The scent was intoxicating and it provided a cozy private location.

"What is it, Katrina?" she said as she took my hands in hers.

"I have so many questions, Mother, but we'll have plenty of time for most of them when we get home." I took a deep breath. "Tonight on the way back, I was watching the way Damien looked at you. There was so much sadness in him, that I vowed I'd find out what happened to his mother. Can you tell me anything? Did she go with you and the others?"

She looked down at our hands as if trying to find the right words.

"Katrina, while it's admirable for you to want to ease Damien's pain, did you ever stop to think that finding the truth and revealing it to him could *add* to his pain?"

"No, I never thought that, Mother, perhaps because I was not told what happened to you, and yet here we are tonight, together, happy—and I have a twin sister waiting for me back in my quarters. I guess both Damien and I hoped his mother might also come back and they'd be happy too."

“I think you should be careful what you ask for. Listen Katrina, if Damien wants to know more about his mother he should ask his father.”

“Oh, just as I asked mine, over and over, with no reply other than *now’s not the time?*”

“I’m sorry, Katrina; it was too painful for him.”

“Because he still loved you so much. We all realize that now, Mother.”

“Yes,” she said as her face lit up at the thought of him. “And I realized how much I still love him this week. All right, I can tell you as much as I know. It will be up to you to pass the information on to Damien or not. Damien and Luena’s mothers are sisters. They did not come with us in the exodus, and they were banished.”

“Banished, why?”

“Because it came to light that they had started rumors pitting clan against clan, created fledglings, and endangered all of us by killing humans and inciting fear and hatred. It’s taken your father years to get back the peace. We’ve learned to blend into every part of human society with no need for them to fear us. This is why your father has worked so hard to make sure any uprisings are dealt with quickly and severely. Damien’s father couldn’t bear to enforce the ultimate penalty, death, so the two mothers were banished with the knowledge that they would have no second chance. If they were ever involved again in treachery they would be killed.”

“It sounds as if Luena turned out just like her mother. Damien says she’s evil.”

“Your father hasn’t been able to prove it, but he thinks she was in contact with her mother and aunt, and they’re probably together now.”

“So, you think Luena resented her father and planned this attempted overthrow and war as revenge for her mothers’ banishment?”

“Yes, and it’s also why your father is so insistent that the trip to the Americas proceed as soon as possible. If Luena and her kind entrench themselves in America, none of us will be safe; it would endanger all we have worked so hard for.”

“Is it why no one is allowed to know the location of your sanctuary? In case we have to hide again?”

“Absolutely, but also to keep those safe who offered us that sanctuary. They risked their very existence to harbor us.”

“Thank you, for trusting me with this information, Mother. I have much to think about.”

We hugged each other.

“I’ll see you at lunch. Kiss Father for me.”

“I will.”

As we went our separate ways I saw Quinn waiting for me, and Thomas joined Mother to escort her back. Quinn smiled and I melted. As I approached he opened his arms, and as I put mine around his waist and buried my face in his chest, he closed his arms around me. I could hear his heart pounding, his sweet scent again filling my head, and I wanted to taste him. Why was there never enough time for us to be alone? I looked up and the look on his face said he wanted me too. We kissed urgently this time. I used my teeth to open a tiny cut on his tongue and let blood drip onto my

tongue and trickle down my throat. I knew my vampire saliva would keep the cut open as long as I wanted. We both moaned and pulled each other closer. Then I heard...

"Katrina, please stop."

I broke the kiss with such a start it made Quinn go for his sword.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what? What did you hear?" he asked as he whirled around.

Then out of the corner of my eye I could just see someone walking away.

"Damien," I said under my breath.

"I don't see anything, but let's get you back to your room. I shouldn't be watching you that closely while I'm on duty, but I'm not sorry."

I laughed, "You've got no complaints from me."

Kate was the only one still up when I got back.

"Okay, tell it. What's going on?"

I told her just enough to satisfy her for tonight. This had truly been a memorable evening, I thought as I undressed, brushed out my hair, slipped on a nightgown, and eased between the down-filled bedding. I closed my eyes, slowed my breathing, and called with my mind.

"Damien, can you hear me?"

"Yes, it's amazing."

"Nice trick earlier."

"It was for your own good. It's dangerous, Katrina; that's why it's forbidden, in case you've forgotten."

"How did you know?"

“I’m a vampire. I can smell blood, remember—not as well as you, but then, who can?”

“Can you read people’s minds?”

“No, but sometimes I can put thoughts into a receptive person’s subconscious.”

“That first night when I saw you and Luena on the stairs, you...”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“How far away from each other can we be to communicate this way?”

“I don’t know. As I said, I’ve never had anyone answer me before. You probably can talk to your sister like this too, since you’re identical twins.”

“Mirror.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Maybe we’ll try it on the way home. Father also mentioned the idea to us earlier, but we really haven’t had a chance to try. Damien what is Luena’s gift?”

Silence.

“Damien, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. She can control the weak-minded, get them to do...things.”

“Oh, I see.”

I could tell the subject bothered him so I dropped it.

“Could you communicate with her?”

“I never tried. I told her I could only put ideas into receptive minds. By the time I discovered my gift I was older and I knew what she was all about. I set out to try to protect myself and those I cared about. I’m glad to be free of her.”

“I’ve got to get to sleep; I’m meeting someone very early in the morning.”

“Whoever it is is lucky. Then I’ll say goodnight. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight.”

I did sleep well, but not long; I was up and out just before dawn. Thomas wasn’t on duty yet, I took a vampire guard with me to the stables. I decided it was time to talk to Father about easing off my Watchers. My level of training and fighting capabilities should call for some middle ground between having a Watcher with me, at arm’s length away, and having no Watcher at all. Watchers could be near, but without being so in my face. Hadn’t I proven I could take care of myself?

Once again Damien had the horses ready.

“Good morning Nulla, Theo.”

“What about me?” said Damien, popping out between the two horses.

“Of course you,” I said with my mind.

“You’re getting better; you didn’t have to concentrate so hard that time.”

“I’m a quick study,” I said out loud.

“Obviously,” he said. “Would you like to ride Theo this morning?”

“I’d love to!”

He helped me onto the much taller stallion, mounted Nulla, and off to the back gate we went. I checked the air as we exited the grounds: good, nothing out of the ordinary for a change. Theo was a dream to ride, spirited and graceful, more like flying than riding.

“How much did your father ever tell you about your mother?” I asked as we slowed and walked through the forest.

“He didn’t tell me anything. It seemed to anger him when I asked.”

“How about Luena? Did she know anything?” I asked; of course I already knew she did.

“She blamed Father for our mother’s leaving, and her anger turned to hatred. I always felt my mother and her sister had gone into hiding with the others, but I don’t know for sure. I don’t suppose your mother mentioned them?”

“I...I asked her last night if she knew what happened. She could only tell me that your mother was not hidden with them. The other thing she said was that the truth sometimes can be more painful than not knowing at all. Maybe you should just let it go, Damien.”

He pulled Nulla to a stop, so I stopped Theo.

“I’m tired of people making those decisions for me. Katrina, if you know more, please tell me. Wouldn’t you want to know? I think you’re strong enough, so why wouldn’t you believe the same about me?”

He was looking straight ahead and I was looking straight at him. How could I feel so passionate about two men?

When he turned toward me again we just stared at each other, and time seemed to stand still. I had blocked out everything except him; no sound penetrated the space between us except for our breathing, it was like being under water—only us, and silence. I had to tell him what I knew.

I told him exactly what my mother had told me and waited for his reaction.

“Damien?”

I could see his jaw tighten as I was recounting the story.

“Are you all right?”

How could he be? This was his mother we were talking about.

“Thank you for telling me, Katrina. It’s just going to take me some time to absorb the truth. Since I heard that your mother and sister had returned, I have been fantasizing about a similar reunion of my own.”

“This news doesn’t mean they were involved with Luena. There’s no proof of that. Your mother may have changed. For that matter, she could have been coerced by her sister, just as you were.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know what to believe about her, but I do believe in you, so is it such a stretch to believe it about your mother?”

He softened as he entertained the thought.

“I’m so glad you’ve come into my life, Katrina Von Dracek. Remember what I told you that first night?”

I had to think back.

“You said I could save you.”

“And so you have.”

“Don’t forget, you saved my life too.”

“The fates, it seems, continue to want our paths to intertwine.”

He smiled that intoxicating smile of his.

“We’d better get back. Remember, I’m going home this afternoon.”

“You would have to bring that up. All right, let’s go.”

As we turned the horses, I heard in my mind...
“*Race you.*”

And we took off, our horses seeming to enjoy the race as much as we did.

“I let you win,” he laughed as we led the horses back to the barn.

We handed Nulla and Theo off to a groom. “Give them both a bath and a rub-down, please.” Damien told him.

“Do you wish them to be left in the breeding pen again this afternoon, My Lord?”

“*What?*” I exclaimed.

Damien grabbed my arm and started to lead me away, but I jerked forcefully away from him.

“How dare you breed our horses without my permission!”

“It was supposed to be a surprise next year, but okay, I’m sorry. But don’t tell me you wouldn’t love a foal fathered by Theo.”

I had to admit he was right, and as I pictured a black colt running alongside Nulla, I sighed.

“Katrina, admit it.”

“All right, all right, but I would have liked to have been asked first.”

“That kind of spoils the surprise, don’t you think?”

I just shook my head. “You’re hopeless. I’m going to stop at the training grounds before I change for lunch. I’ll see you later,” I said.

The girls were doing their full speed fighting today. I couldn’t believe how far they’d come in just a few days. I think Rosa was right; the fact that we’re all together seemed to have enhanced all our skills, as

well as our gifts. I couldn't help feeling there was a reason we had all been all brought together at this time, in this place. There was more at stake than just Luena's army, and we had to be ready.



CHAPTER TEN

All our things were busily being loaded onto wagons and Mothers coach. Pack horses were strung together and waiting lazily for someone to pull them ahead. All our horses were being saddled when I returned to the stables after lunch. I hadn't seen any reason to change when I was just going to spend all day riding anyway. I had eaten quickly and hoped to say goodbye to Damien, but he was nowhere to be found. On the other hand, I told myself, I could say goodbye to him—or anything else for that matter—any time I wanted.

“*Damien?*” I called in my mind. No response. He was either too far away or didn't want to hear me. I thought, *maybe it's for the best.*

“Hi, Nulla. Ready to go home, girl?”

I scratched her neck and leaned against her shoulder. Everything in my life had changed; and now, even Nulla was going to be a mother. I could tell that already from her changing scent. All my life I had wished to do more, be more, and now all that kept running through my head was my mother's warning:

Be careful what you ask for.” Were all this

excitement, stress, and change finally getting to me? I walked over to say goodbye to Theo, but he wasn't in his stall. No Damien, no Theo. I thought I'd see them one more time; otherwise I would have said goodbye this morning. What else was there to say anyway?

"Let's go, girl, time to go home."

I led her out of the stable into the bright afternoon sunlight.

"Going somewhere?" I heard, and there, mounted on Theo, was Damien.

"Time to go home," I said.

He laughed, "You'll have plenty of company on your way. You won't be lonely."

As I look up at him, the sun silhouetting his face, I was overwhelmed with sadness. I was truly going to miss him.

"I'll be with you," I heard in my mind. *"Always."*

Tears filled my eyes.

"I can't do this. I can't say goodbye to you. I'll see you in a month. We'll talk then."

He turned Theo and cantered away.

Grooms were leading the other horses out now. The time had to be close, and everyone would be waiting. I mounted and rode towards the front gate. I was right; everyone was gathered, the girls in their riding clothes, now sporting new short swords and daggers at their waists. It was going to be so great to have them with me.

"Katrina, good," said Father. "It's a long trip home, so let's get started."

Everyone else mounted up. Father joined Mother in her coach, his horse tied on behind, and off we went.

“I’m so excited!” exclaimed Kate. “Did you know that Father sent word for our rooms to be prepared? They’ll be ready when we get home.”

“No, I hadn’t heard. That’s great. You’re going to love it there, Kate, It’s so beautiful—open meadows, a large lake where swans raise their young, a forest full of game—but the best part is that for the first time we’re all going to be together, a complete family, right?”

“Plus three extra sisters, don’t forget.”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s any chance of that,” I laughed.

When we got to an open place I instinctively took a breath in just to check our surroundings. I recognized a scent in the air right away, and looking around I spotted a black horse at the top of the hill on our right, mane blowing in the wind, his rider still, watching us pass.

“*Goodbye,*” I said silently.

“*Soon,*” was his only reply.

Rosa came back to ride with us.

“Gunter was telling me that at our camp tonight we’ll have a chance to hunt, and he suggested that we all go together for the first time.”

“Rosa, that’s a fine idea,” I said.

“We should find time each night to practice our skills,” said Kate.

“You’re right; we can’t waste whatever time we have along the way,” I said.

Eleanor was riding with Thomas, and Letta was riding with Avery and Cedrik. I looked around for

Quinn; he was riding next to the coach with Gunter. I pulled Nulla to a halt.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said to Kate and Rosa.

“Hi,” I said to Quinn as he caught up to me.

“Hello,” said Quinn dismissively. “I haven’t seen much of you today; I’m sure that means Damien did.”

“Quinn, what do you want me to say?”

“You don’t have to say anything. It’s really none of my business.”

“So why did you bring it up?”

He looked at me with that “I wish I could stay mad at you” look, and I couldn’t help it, I started to laugh and so did he. Then he just shook his head and said, “What am I going to do with you?”

“I’ll try to think of something.”

We talked the rest of the afternoon about the girls, our training, and how we couldn’t wait to be home at last. It was effortless, relaxed, like old times. Finally we arrived at the place Gunter had talked about, a nice open area to make camp for the night. I was always amazed at how efficient the men were at setting up our camps, each on task until the job was complete, tents set up, horses cared for, fires made, and cooking started. Gunter gave orders for a hunting party to find some small game for dinner.

“Okay, girls, it’s all right for you to go hunting too, but stay to the west and don’t stay too long,” said Gunter.

“Yes Father,” mocked Rosa.

Then we all gathered in the meadow to decide how to go about our first hunt together.

“First, let’s figure out how to use our gifts to get the best appraisal of our surroundings,” I said, looking to the others for suggestions.

“I’ll bring the wind so you two can ‘see’ even further away,” Letta said to Kate and me.

“Good, Letta, go ahead, while the rest of us hold hands. It’ll enhance our sight and scent.”

The breeze blew and Kate and I closed our eyes. I took a deep breath in and held it for just a moment. I couldn’t believe how many things I could pick up—deer, rabbits, a fox with three kits, and a bear. Looking further than I ever had before, maybe five or six miles, I sensed there must be a cottage. I could smell its fire, a man, woman, a little girl, a dog, horses, and sheep. It was amazing with so much game and no danger in the scents. I opened my eyes.

“That was great!” exclaimed Kate, “I could see with such detail, including a little white cottage with a small barn and sheep, horses, a dog, and three people. I didn’t detect anything dangerous to us, did you Kat?”

“No, but I could detect things so much further away than I ever could on my own. Let’s go out and hunt. I saw lots of deer. Letta, Rosa, you go to the right; El you go straight in; and Kate and I will go left. We’ll circle and meet in the middle.”

In a flash we were off. With our speed and strength no animal was much of a challenge, and in minutes we had all taken down prey and fed. As I started to head to the circle’s center to meet everyone else, Kate raced by me. My first thought was that something was wrong, but I didn’t sense any danger. She circled and as she

came close this time she reached out and said, “You’re it.”

She then raced away giggling; I raced after her around trees, over logs, swinging off branches. It was exhilarating, and we could see the others now.

“Kat’s it,” Kate announced.

Now they all scattered, but I was too quick for El.

“You’re it, El,” I said and then raced away.

We all laughed and raced around the forest until everyone had been it at least twice.

“That was fun,” said Rosa, as we all collapsed together on the ground. None of us had had sisters growing up—at least not living with us—but we were making up for that now. We knew we should get back, but we wanted this time to ourselves. It was just getting dark, and although we could see in the dark, we still wanted Letta to start a fire.

“We’ll gather some wood,” said El.

“Don’t bother,” said Letta, and she held out her hand. A flame appeared right on her palm, we all gasped.

“Isn’t it hot Letta?” asked El.

“It can be, but not if I don’t want it to be. Like now, it’s just for light, but let me show you what else I can do since I’ve been practicing.”

Letta grabbed the flame and threw it at the tree next to us. As she intensified her stare, the flame grew, engulfing the entire base, and we could feel it getting hotter and hotter. Then she closed her eyes and it disappeared, leaving the trunk smoldering and black. She then pointed her finger in the air, and a flame appeared on the very tip, and then she wrote her name

in the air with fire. We all clapped and shook our heads, our mouths gaping with awe.

“Wow, in just a few days you’ve improved your skill so much,” I said.

“Wait until you see what Rosa can do,” said El.

We all looked at Rosa then.

“All right, give me your daggers.”

She took hers out as well and laid them on the ground. We could see her start to concentrate and the daggers rose head-high. Then at a speed we could hardly see, they flew straight into the still smoldering tree within millimeters of each other, as if in the center of an invisible target.

Rosa beamed with pride. “I’ve been practicing too.”

“No kidding,” said Kate.

We practiced every night on the way home and found that the five of us now could enhance each other’s gifts without having to hold hands. It was enough just to concentrate collectively on whatever we were trying to do; but holding hands or placing our hands on whoever was the source of the gift gave the ultimate enhancement of it. Between travel, swordplay, and skill training, the days flew by, and in a week we were within sight of Castle Mormont, our home. The stone walls glowed in the fading sunlight, and the dark slate tiles of the turrets gave off hues of purple and blue. I had never seen anything so beautiful.

“Welcome home, Elizabeth,” said Father, as he helped Mother out of the coach. I could see the emotion in her face and tears filling her eyes.

“Oh, Fredrik, I had forgotten what a magical place this is.”

Father hugged her and kissed her forehead.

“Now, girls, why don’t you go and see if your new quarters are to your liking.”

I had forgotten all about our new rooms being prepared while we were gone. We hurried excitedly up the stairs. Instead of my two rooms on the left, there was now a door where a hallway used to be. Opening the door, we found that my two rooms were now two separated bedrooms, with another three across the wide hallway. Each bedroom was lovely. Mine had remained the same, just as I wished. Kate was next to me, the others across the hall. The once empty turret room at the end of the hall was now a common room, with lovely overstuffed chairs, a stone hearth and fireplace, and a wood table with five chairs so we could dine in if we wished. It was even lovelier than our quarters at the palace. We even had doors on each side of the fireplace which opened onto a private balcony. While the others were exploring their rooms, I went out on our balcony, closed my eyes, and concentrated.

“Damien, are you there?” I thought to myself.

After a short while I heard.

“I’m here.”

“We’re home... I miss you.”

“I’m right here,” he said.

Then Kate called, “Katrina?”

Our link was broken, I decided I might as well see what she wanted.

“What is it, Kate?” I asked as I came inside.

“Sarah is here. Do you want to have a bath now or later?”

That sounded so good.

“Now, please.”

“I’ll let you have a nice long soak, and then I’ll wash your hair. Would you like something to drink?” said Sarah.

“No, thank you, but could you see if the rest of the girls want to eat here? I know I would.”

“I’ll ask them. Isn’t it grand that each of your rooms now has one of these beautiful copper tubs? There are even copper pipes to let out the water to the outside.”

“Yes, it’s lovely. Father really out did himself this time.”

“I’ll be back in a little while then,” she said.

I sank down as far as I could without going under, the hot water soothing my muscles and the soft scent of lavender soothing my senses.

“*Katrina?*” I heard in my mind.

It startled me at first, because I was so relaxed.

“*I’m here,*” I replied. “*I’m taking a bath,*” I said smiling, thinking of his reaction.

“*Now I wish I could see, not just hear you.*”

“*I bet you do. I wasn’t sure we’d be able to communicate this far away. I’m glad we can.*”

“*Have you told anyone we can hear each other?*” he asked.

“*No, that’s just for us,*” I said.

“*Just for us,*” he replied, “*Father just arrived, and I’ve got to go.*”

Sarah came in to wash my hair and comb it out with sandalwood oil, she helped me into a clean outfit.

“There was a beautiful young lady under all that dirt after all,” she said, hands on her hips, looking very

pleased with herself. “The other girls want to eat here as well. Is there anything special you’d like?”

“I think Rosa is missing her Italian food, so maybe her people could make something for us. And some dessert please; not fruit but Bavarian cream pastries.”

“I’ll see to it right away,” she said.

It felt so good to be home. I snuggled down in one of the new overfilled chairs.

Now that we were back, I needed to get to the library and start my regular studies again.

“Hey, Kat, I could have stayed in that bath all night,” said El as she came out of her new room.

“How’s your room? All settled?” I asked her.

“It’s great. Sarah had everyone buzzing around like worker bees getting everything unloaded and put away, but that bathtub has to be my favorite thing.”

“Mine too,” sighed Letta as she came in, “and I must be least a pound lighter after washing all the dust and dirt off.”

“Sarah, that smells fabulous,” said Rosa, as she followed her into the common room.

“I smell dinner,” said Kate. “I’m starving.”

We had pasta with chicken, a fresh salad, tomatoes, cheese, hot bread, red wine, and of course my favorite dessert.

“I couldn’t eat another thing,” I said when I took my last bite of pastry.

“Thanks for ordering something from my home, Kat. That was just what I was craving,” said Rosa.

“I think we all enjoyed it, didn’t we?” I said.

Everyone agreed.

“What does everyone want to do tonight?” I asked.

“Can we just sit by the fire and relax, talk, drink wine—a girls’ night in, no training at all?” said Kate.

We were all for that, so when Sarah came in to clear the food away we asked for some additional wine and snacks for later, then settled in around the fire, some of us in chairs and some on the floor.

“Is there anything you need or would like changed? I really want you to feel at home,” I said.

“I can’t think of a thing, Kat,” said Letta.

“Me neither,” said El.

“Well, I for one think Father outdid himself getting this done ahead of us; I can’t wait for you to show us the whole castle and grounds, Kat.”

“That’s just what I told Sarah earlier, the part about Father; twins really think alike. We can look around right after breakfast if you want; Gunter said we could take half the day off.”

Letta laughed, “A whole half-day, he’s too kind.”

“Kat, you haven’t talked about Quinn at all the last few days,” said El.

“You know, you’re right. I haven’t even thought much about him lately. That’s strange isn’t it?” I said.

“Not really,” said Rosa, “When you fed directly from him you had that very powerful connection for both of you; but it wears off gradually unless you keep renewing it, so maybe what you thought was love was just that blood lust bond.”

“Mother mentioned something about that. So it’s probably worn off for him too. Is that what you’re saying Rosa?” I said.

“While it’s true you both care for each other, the intensity you felt recently was probably due to the feeding.”

“I’m so glad to have all of you; I never had anyone to talk to like this before. You all at least had your mothers.”

“True, but mine isn’t that interested in me,” said Rosa.

“Mine has two other children by her new lover,” said Letta.

“My mother is lovely, but wants to be my sister more than my mother. She’s probably trying to get Father to come and get me as we speak,” laughed El.

“I guess I’m the only one that had a Mother to really talk to, and all I could think about was how much I missed having my father around,” said Kate.

“Well, we have each other now, and that’s what matters. Don’t you feel that this is our destiny or something, that we’re together for a purpose, but we just don’t know what it is yet?” I asked everyone.

“Kate, I know you can’t tell us where you and Mother were, but can you tell us about the others that were there and what your hosts were like? It’s all so mysterious.”

“Well Kat,” she said trying to be very serious, “I was so small when we arrived there, I had no idea there was anywhere else in the world to be. Now looking back, it almost doesn’t seem real to me. So much has happened in the last few weeks to all of us. I’ll tell you, but we must keep it to ourselves, all right?”

We agreed and she began.

“I grew up amongst a very large population in a vast city. Buildings that ranged from four or five stories carved right out of sheer canyon walls to underground caverns carved into dwellings, with grand chambers used for meetings and festivities. We came from all over the world—all races but humans are welcome.” She paused to look into each of our faces. We were all leaning in with anticipation.

“What I tell you now will seem like pure fantasy, a made-up story, but it’s all true, I swear to you. Our group; the vampires, were the smallest. Elves had the largest population, followed by dwarves, gremlins, wizards, minotaurs, and the many wizards and healers made up the rest. We also accepted into sanctuary rare animal species like my favorite, the unicorn, and even griffins. These shared our existence, all living in peace. As stunning as this sanctuary is, the knowledge that many of us live by hiding in plain site is as much of a shock as seeing them all together—leaf fairies, wood nymphs, pixies, and of course vampires and witches.”

“I remember reading our history in the library and fantasizing about the world as it once was,” said El, “and now you’ve seen that world, you’ve been there and you lived in it...how amazing.”

“Remember, I didn’t know it was unique, it was just my reality. It was a challenge for all the different species and races to live together in peace, until everyone realized our only way to survive was to get along with each other, or at least be tolerant.”

“Tell us more about the elves themselves; what are they like?” said Rosa.

“Just like anyone else, it depends on the elf. But on the whole they are a lot like us, very long-lived of course. They keep to themselves, and they’re smart, very disciplined, and graceful. The women are beautiful, the men handsome. They have slightly pointed ears, most wear their hair very long, and except for eyebrows they don’t get body hair of any kind or beards. Like us, the women don’t have children until they’re in their mid-hundreds, when they look more like twenty five. They never rush anything as they, like us, have all the time in the world. This sometimes frustrates other races so everyone has to have a lot of patience. It was a magical childhood I suppose, but the isolation got to be suffocating. Knowing I had a father and a sister on the outside made it even harder, so Mother finally agreed it was time to come home.”

“Do you think we could ever go back with you someday?” I said.

“If ever there was once again a need, they would take us back. The elves truly believe that their time will come again, because eventually humans will kill each other off. You realize, of course, that not only peaceful races are in hiding. Evil elements of all the races also exist, along with demons of the underworld, and they seek to destroy not only the humans but all peaceful races. Someday a call may come to return, not to save ourselves but to join the fight to save all the peaceful races of Sangustae.”

Kate was right, it sounded like fiction, a bedtime story told to children; but we vampires exist, so how could I not believe her? Besides, I already knew these

different races had existed, I just didn't know they *still* existed. The thought that they were secreted away in Sangustae made me, and the rest of us, happy. We talked for several more hours about what Kate had told us, then dragged ourselves to our rooms to go to bed at last.

We all slept in, had breakfast, and set out to see the castle and the grounds: the stables and gardens, ballrooms, meeting rooms, beautiful guest wings, dining hall, chapel, and at last the grand library, with its twenty-five-foot ceilings painted in frescos of angels, fighting demons, rows and rows of books, manuscripts and scrolls, a spiral staircase that led up to a walkway that circled the room's second-story level, giving access to the books stored there. Oak tables sat on top of hand-tied Persian rugs. The girls exclaimed its magnificence; and although I'd always taken it for granted, I had to admit that it was a magical room.

"No wonder this is your favorite room," said Letta.

"We'll be spending a lot of time here working on our studies," I said.

"I know what I want to study," said Rosa. "I want to study plans for our birthday party, and it's less than a month away."

"We need to ask Father when the meetings are scheduled. Your families will be coming, along with members of the Council," I said. "The journey to the Americas will begin as soon as the meetings finish."

"Girls, come on, we're going to be eighteen, and this party has to be fantastic," said Rosa.

"Are we going to have a theme party, a dinner, or a ball?" said El.

“How about all of the above?” suggested Letta.

“Why not? Okay, any ideas on a theme?” I said.

“I always like a masquerade ball,” said Rosa.

“Let’s just have a dinner,” said Kate.

We all just looked at her as if she were crazy.

“Then we’ll get Father to let us go to Paris.

Remember, Gerhardt said the World’s Fair is going to be there, and we could ride along with everyone traveling to port. They will no doubt be going that way anyway, and I’m sure Philepe will let us stay at his chateau.”

“That has to be the most brilliant idea ever. We can shop, and you know Gerhardt will love showing us around,” I said.

“So that’s it then; we’ll ask Father soon,” said Kate.

We all agreed. Then we headed off to lunch. We still had training today, concentrating on horsemanship skills, which was my favorite activity.

I was looking forward to seeing Quinn, but I was more curious to see how he reacted to me than how I felt when I saw him. We were still excitedly talking about our birthday celebration when we arrived at the stables. Our horses were ready and waiting, but before we got to them we heard yelling and a rush from both our front and rear by at least a dozen “enemy” soldiers.

“Swords!” I yelled.

“Circle!” yelled Rosa.

Then they were on us.

“Thought you could surprise us, did you, Gunter?” I said.

“You looked very distracted earlier, but you have proved your readiness, girls. Good job,” said Gunter.

“Now mount up and we’ll meet you back at the training grounds.”

The Watchers’ little ambush put us in the right frame of mind and we had a great session. Quinn didn’t seem to pay any attention to me, so I guessed Rosa was right about the feeding causing what we had felt earlier.

We decided since we were already riding to take a tour of the castle grounds outside the walls. Beautiful fields, planted with vegetables, oats, hay, wheat, and sunflowers. Vineyards and fruit trees seemed to stretch on forever.

“Since we’re out here, we might as well hunt,” said Letta.

“Okay,” I said closing my eyes and taking in a breath. “There’s a herd of deer about a half a mile to the west.”

We dismounted and ran into the forest. In minutes we had achieved our goal; we fed and raced back to our horses. Just then it started to rain; without warning a spring shower was in the process of soaking us.

El called out, “Letta, try to stop it.”

We could see Letta look up and concentrate; and to our surprise the clouds cleared above our heads and showed us blue sky, while all around us it continued to rain. All the rest of us then instinctively concentrated with her and gradually the area of blue sky became larger and larger, until the rain had completely stopped. Letta closed her eyes, and we all looked at each other and started to laugh.

“That was great!” said Kate.

It seemed that every day we discovered something new to do with our gifts. Kate and I practiced speaking to each other with our minds. We could do it, but it was nothing like what happened between Damien and me, which seemed strange. We tried it with the other girls too, but none of them could hear us.

We left our horses at the stable, where I gave the groom instructions to keep an extra eye on Nulla and to include more grain into her diet, since I was sure she was in foal. As mad as I was at Damien at the time, I had to confess I couldn't wait to see what I was sure would be the most beautiful little black colt in the whole world. I wouldn't be disappointed if it was a filly, but for some reason I was sure it would be a colt. I was starting to have feelings like that more and more these days, sensing things before they happened. I made a note to myself to look up such things in the library. Enhancing that trait could be very helpful, especially now with five of us helping.

"Let's change for dinner. I can't wait to ask Father about our birthdays," I said.

"I can't see why he wouldn't let us go, do you?" said Kate.

"Maybe we should ask Mother first, to make sure she's on our side," I said.

"Couldn't hurt. Do you want to go right before dinner?" said Kate.

"All right," I said.

"I can't wait to slip into that copper bathtub," said Rosa.

"Sarah is going to grumble about our hair again," said El.

“What’s new?” I said, “At least she’s letting your ladies help her more now.”

“That’s true, but she’s still rules the roost,” said Letta.

“That’s never going to change, but I can tell she loves taking care of all of us,” said Rosa.

When we got back Sarah was busy filling tubs. She grumbled about how bad we smelled and of course how awful our hair was. There was the most amazing perfume in the air from the oils and bath salts; it was exotic, with lavenders and sandalwood, hints of vanilla and mint. I undressed and dropped my clothes outside my door as ordered. As I walked naked by the mirror, I glanced at myself. The girl I used to see looking back at me was gone, and in her place was a strong, lean, but very shapely woman. I sank into the steaming hot water, got my sea sponge nice and soapy, and washed over my face and neck. It felt so good, suddenly a smile came to my face—a devilish one at that. Last time I was in the tub Damien was here with me, at least in my mind. Why not try to contact him again? I closed my eyes and tried to picture him, his handsome face, dark eyes, sexy smile, and then I called out with my mind.

“Damien, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“What have you been up to?”

“Oh I’ve been out every evening with a different girl; I just hate to disappoint any of them.”

“Glad you’re having fun. We’ve been working hard, no spare time at all.”

“No time for your Watcher boyfriend...or should I say no snack time?”

“Very funny, and he’s not my boyfriend, just my friend. Once the blood lust wore off we realized that’s all it was.”

Silence...

“Damien, are you still there?”

“I’m here; I’m just in shock. No boyfriend?”

“Well I wouldn’t say that; there is someone special in my life.”

“That didn’t take long, you moved on quickly.”

“Actually it took me a while to realize how much I cared about him.”

“Does this someone know how you feel?”

“He does now.”

“Me? You’re talking about me? Because I think you were right, it was just the moment, ‘pure lust’ I think you said.”

“So perhaps we should just both move on then, I guess. Well I better let you go; I wouldn’t want any of your conquests to be kept waiting. Goodbye, Damien.”

He laughed. *“You didn’t really believe all that did you? I’ve been in love with you since that first night.”*

Then, as if on cue, Sarah danced in to do my hair and I couldn’t concentrate enough with her talking to keep “talking” to Damien. *Damn.* As soon as she finished washing and complaining I was alone again at last.

“Damien?”

Nothing. He must have been otherwise engaged as well. I sighed and got up reluctantly out of the tub.

“Katrina?”

It sounded as if he were right next to me and I jumped.

“I’m here; Sarah came in to wash my hair again.”

Then a wicked thought came into my mind. I stood in front of the mirror once again; a much cleaner image of me was there. I concentrated as hard as I could both on my reflection and on Damien.

“Katrina! Did you just send me a...picture?”

“Hope you liked what you saw, my reflection.”

“How’d you do that? And yes, I liked it, but I was surprised and couldn’t quite focus on it because it didn’t last long enough. Try it again.”

“Sorry, that’s all you’re going to get. When are you coming? I was hoping for a few extra days before your meetings and our birthday dinner.”

“Only a dinner, not a week of parties?”

“We decided that going to Paris with your group and staying a few days in Philepe’s chateau would be more fun. The World’s Fair is there and we can shop.”

“Sounds exciting, I’ll come as soon as all my plans are complete. There’s a lot to do; money must be transferred and I am sending as much ahead as I can. Maybe I can arrange some time in Paris as well. Our family has an apartment overlooking the river.”

“That would be wonderful.”

We didn’t need to say anything more. We could be alone.

“Everyone is waiting for me, I’ve got to go.”

“Soon then?”

“Soon.”

I dressed quickly and came out to meet Kate.

“About time,” said Kate impatiently.

“I’m ready now. Let’s go.”

“I told the others to meet us in the dining hall,” she said.

We arrived just as Mother was finishing dressing for dinner and Father was still in his office. Perfect timing.

“Oh, girls, it’s so nice to see you. We haven’t spent five minutes alone together since we got back,” Mother said.

“Sorry, Mother; we’ve just been so busy,” said Kate. “Can we talk to you about our birthday plans?”

“Of course. I can’t believe you’re going to be eighteen. After this landmark birthday, others from now on won’t have much of an impact, since you won’t age much for several hundred years. What do you have in mind?”

“We’d like a dinner to celebrate with all our families, and then we’d like to accompany those going to the Americas to Paris and stay there for a few days shopping and seeing the sights,” said Kate.

“The World’s Fair is there, Mother, and I just know Philepe will let us stay at his chateau, and Gerhardt can show us around,” I said.

“And you want me to help you convince your father to let you go, is that it?”

“Would you, Mother?” I pleaded.

“You’ve been working very hard, as you said, and have proven you can take care of yourselves. I think I can persuade him. He’s already let you drop your personal Watchers; but I’m sure he’s going to insist you take some with you on this trip, so you’ll have to be ready to agree to that.”

“We won’t need them, but that’s fine by me, and I’m sure it’ll be fine with everyone else too,” said Kate.

“Very well, then. I’ll speak with him and find out the date for your celebration dinner.”

We both hugged her.

“Thank you, Mother. We knew you’d understand,” said Kate. “Are you meeting Father over there, or is he coming back here?”

“He’s coming back to escort me. I’ll wait; you go ahead. I know you probably can’t wait to tell the others your news.”

“Thanks again, Mother,” I said.

One last hug and we were out the door. We hurried over to the dining hall, where the girls were waiting for us outside.

“Well, what did she say? Is she on our side or not?” said El.

“I’m so sorry,” I said with an exaggeratedly sad face, “but I think you’re just going to have to pack *for Paris!*” I said, throwing my arms up over my head and laughing.

We all squealed and jumped up and down like little children.

“She’s going to talk to Father, but if she’s happy about it he’ll be fine with it. We’ll have to take Watchers along, but that’s no problem,” said Kate.

“She’s also going to find out what date we can have our celebration dinner,” I said.

“You don’t think your fathers will have a problem with it do you?” said Kate.

“I don’t think so,” said Rosa.

“Definitely not,” said Letta.

“My father might need some convincing,” said El sheepishly.

“Well, when everyone arrives we’re going to show them our training progress. If that doesn’t convince them that we can take care of ourselves, nothing will,” I said.

“It’s not that,” said El. “I used to go to school in Paris, an all-girl boarding school for our kind of girls, vampires and witches. I was fifteen at the time and shy; I was popular enough, but I kept to myself, which made me an easy target for a group of girls that supposedly ran the place and who, for some reason, decided I was a threat. Since their group was a combination of witches and vampires, they terrorized me in different ways, like spells for spiders in my bed, or chasing me and roughing me up. The leader of the group, Marna, was the daughter of headmaster, so no help there. Finally, when I’d had enough, I begged Father to let me come home. Those girls must be in their last year now.”

“Well it’s obvious to me that they were jealous of you, and we all know bullies are cowards when they’re by themselves. Maybe we’ll just look them up when we get there,” I said.

“I think I know this Marna. Is she tall, thin, flat chested, with black wavy hair?” said Rosa.

“That’s her,” said El.

“Whenever my father has business in Paris we attend parties and help raise money for these private schools throughout Europe. She would be at the get-togethers, trying to impress the boys and get into our

conversations, and it turns out she did become quite popular with some of the boys, if you get my meaning.”

We did.

“Let them see you now, El—beautiful, strong, and confident,” I said.

“With four sisters that have your back,” said Kate.

“Thanks. There’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you all. I need to practice my healing, and I heard the local mission has a hospital. I’d like us to volunteer there a few hours a week. What do you think?”

“I’m in,” I said.

Everyone else agreed.

“Father sends food once a month; we might as well take it ourselves,” I said.

“You all are so wonderful. What would I do without you?”

“You’re not going to get the chance to find out,” said Letta. “Now let’s eat. I’m starving again.”

“Your mother has informed me that I am allowing all of you to make the journey to Paris with the Americas envoy—of course pending the approval of your fathers,” said Father at dinner. “You have made excellent progress in your training, and Gunter assures me your fathers will be very impressed when they see for themselves. You will have to take Watchers with you but they will be discreet. I want you to have a good time, and even though I know you can take care of yourselves, I’ll feel better if your Watchers are there with you. They have been around for centuries for a

reason, and they see, hear, and watch in a different way than we do. Are we all agreed on these terms?"

"Yes," all five of us said at the same time.

"Thank you, Father, Mother," I said.

"Now, it has also been decided that the Council will begin on the twenty-second of June, so your father and I thought the party could be between your birthdays on the nineteenth. Meetings are to end on the twenty-fifth, with preparations to be completed no later than the twenty-eighth. You should be on your way to Paris then."

Father laughed, "I've sent a message to Philepe, asking him if he can accommodate all of you at his chateau, and I expect he will reply tomorrow. Gerhardt will, I'm sure, be very happy to entertain all of you with parties in the evenings and tours and shopping during the afternoons. You may look forward to your training after this trip; it will seem much less tiring."

"I think we're up to the task, Father, and as long as we're taking our Watchers, I see no reason not to fit in some training while we're there," I said.

With all that settled we finished our meal and headed back to our rooms.

"We need to go to the library tomorrow. We need to study," said Kate.

"Considering what El told us of her experiences with witches, it appears that we will have to know how to counteract spells," said Letta.

"I know several books and scrolls that can help us," I said.

"We can ask Mother. She had a lot of experiences with witches at Sangustae."

“Good idea. We’ll need all the help we can get. Time isn’t on our side; it’s only a couple of weeks away,” said Rosa.

“You forget how much better we are together than we ever were apart. So far anything we try seems to be easier as long as we’re together, and I’m sure this will be no different,” I said.

“I guess we’ll find out,” said El.

“We also have the advantage of surprise. No one but us knows that we have the gifts we have, and how together we can enhance and strengthen each of those gifts,” I said.

“True, the whole purpose to our training is to be prepared in every way we can, so that we as individuals and as a race can survive,” said Rosa.

“That’s why the envoy to the Americas is being sent, to make sure we establish ourselves early on in this new land,” I said. “I hope when they return we can be part of this new covenant.”

“Absolutely,” said Rosa. “I think we all agree on that.”

“I wish we could go on this first trip,” said Letta.

“We’ll be ready as soon as they get back; I just hope they don’t take as long as they think,” I said. “They will be sending messengers back and forth to keep us up to date as often as possible. That’s the advantage we have as vampires: speed. Unencumbered, we can cover hundreds of miles in mere minutes.”

Of course I hoped to have more personal updates from Damien; we had our own secret, he and I.

“I’m going to bed; I’ll see you in the morning.”

I changed into a simple nightgown and combed out my hair.

“Katrina?” I heard.

“I’m here; I was just getting ready for bed.”

“Me too, but I wanted to tell you, I’ll be arriving on the fifteenth.”

“Good! We’ll have a few extra days. We are to leave for Paris no later than the twenty-ninth.”

“I’ve sent Ivan to make all my arrangements in France and Portugal, where we are to disembark, so that I can spend some time with you in Paris...that is if you still want that”? Katrina?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Very funny.”

“Of course I still want that. I know the girls will understand if I’m not around for a few hours.”

Then I closed my eyes so I could remember what he smelled like; when it came to me it was like he was right next to me, it was so real.

“What are you doing?”

“Remembering.”

“I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“I know but...”

“It’s a long time for me too, but we’ll both be busy and we can ‘talk’ whenever we have a chance.”

“Our lives are so different now, with so many changes in such a short time. And that trend is going to continue. You’re going to the New World without me.”

“I’m only going so that when the time is right our new coven will have everything in place to be successful and safe. We need to make sure those that

would jeopardize our safety by trying to take advantage of this New World and establish an evil and dangerous coven, do not succeed.”

“You’ve see signs of such evil making its way into this New World?”

“Yes.”

“This is why Father pushed for a delegation to be sent there for so long isn’t it?”

“Yes, and why he has been a target.”

“Luena— is she part of this, Damien?”

“I’m positive it’s what she wants. Without the power she sought here, it’s likely she’s looking for new kinds of power.”

It was nearly morning before we stopped talking. I couldn’t stop thinking about what this all meant. Would Luena try to stop our envoy? I decided I wasn’t going to be able to sleep, so I got dressed and headed over to the library.

“You’re up early,” said Quinn as we met in the courtyard.

“So are you.”

“I’m on duty at least for a few more hours.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Still thinking about me all the time? You have to just let it go unless—”

“Hate to disappoint you, but I have other things on my mind.”

“So you’re in denial, then?”

I stopped and turned towards him. He was smiling that mischievous smile of his, and those beautiful blue eyes twinkled in the moonlight. I just had to laugh and

so did he. We hadn't seen much of each other since we got back, so we caught up on the way to the library.

“Quinn, I want you to send someone ahead to Paris and to the port cities to observe, see if there's anything suspicious going on. If there are other vampires heading to the Americas, we need to know about it. Send someone who is familiar with Luena. And Quinn, can you keep this just between us? Remember how evil she is, and that she's probably not alone.”

“Consider it done. You know your father has people looking for her already.”

“I'm sure she's aware of that fact, too. I just want a new set of eyes to look, as we say, look in plain sight.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

We parted ways, and then as I got to the library I sensed I wasn't alone. Gerhardt; I'd know his scent anywhere.

"Show yourself," I said, and sure enough he stepped out of the shadows.

"Gerhardt, what are you doing here?"

"I brought your reply personally."

Then he folded his arms over his chest, crossed his left foot over his right, and rested his shoulder up against the wall. There was something different about him, I decided, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"So what is your father's reply?"

"Of course you are welcome to stay as long as you wish, and I for one can't wait to show all five of you around my city."

"*Your city*, I see."

That ego, I thought to myself.

"You're here awfully early."

"I misjudged my own speed."

"I see. All the years we've known each other and you still continue to amaze."

“I could say the same thing about you. Who knew when we were just youngsters you’d turn into such a warrior—and a beautiful one at that.”

“Why Gerhardt, saying such lovely things about someone besides yourself is again amazing.”

We laughed.

“Well, I should get back. There’s much to do before your arrival.”

“You’re not coming to the meetings?”

“Oh yes, I’ll be back don’t worry. I’ve got a special birthday gift for you.”

Then he handed me an envelope with his family seal on the back.

“Just to make it official. I’ll see you Katrina. Say hello to the girls.”

“I will,” I said, and then he was gone.

That was so weird, and it gave me something else to talk to Quinn about: having someone watch Philepe’s chateau. *Wait a minute*, I thought. *Damien said he sent Ivan ahead, I could ask Damien to have Ivan...* No, that wasn’t a good idea, I decided. We needed to keep this to ourselves, but we’d need to keep an eye out for Ivan, too.

As for the reason I was in the library, Father had just received the latest maps of the Americas, and I wanted to study them. They were lying on the table; Father must have studied them already. The vastness of the wilderness surprised me and drew me to it. Cities dotted the coastlines; I ran my finger across the map from city to city, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, New Orleans. As my finger crossed over New Orleans I felt warmth and a vision

of a woman I'd never seen before walking towards me, filled me with apprehension; then the vision was gone. *Who was she?* I wondered. I felt she was evil, but that was all.

"Quinn said you were here," said Kate, as she came into the library. "How long have you been up?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I came to study the new maps Father just received. Kate, I'm glad you're here; do any of the areas on this map give you any feelings?"

She looked over the map and to my amazement began to run her finger from city to city, just like I had. When she got to New Orleans, she jumped back.

"What happened?"

"I got a shock from some kind of energy."

"Try again, and I'll concentrate with you, let's see what we can 'see.'"

We closed our eyes, and as soon as her hand was over that area of the map, I could feel Kate shaking. Once again I saw the same woman walking towards us. She was wearing a dark blue dress with a white ruffled collar. Her brown hair piled on top of her head was topped by a matching small blue and white hat, and a parasol was held over her right shoulder. As she got closer our tension mounted.

"I knew you'd join us," she said, "You had a choice and you made it. Once we eliminate the rest of the new coven, there will be nothing to stop us from doing whatever we wish with these easily manipulated humans. Come, my son, let's join the others."

Then the vision was gone. We had seen the same thing and it had shaken us both. Who was she, and whom was she talking to? She had called him her son.

Just then the others arrived and we told them about what had just happened. We even tried again with all of us this time, but nothing new happened; we just got a repeat performance of the vision we'd already seen.

"So someone is to betray us," said Rosa.

"That's what it sounds like, or the person she was talking to could be trying to infiltrate their coven," said El.

Kate just looked at her and said, "Always the optimist."

"Why would we get this vision if it wasn't meant to warn us?" said Rosa.

"We haven't had visions enough to know what they mean yet, but I felt evil in that woman," said Kate.

El, Letta, and Rosa spent extra time studying the new maps, while Kate and I moved on to the books on witches, wizards, and magic. We needed to know all we could about spotting them. I of course would have an identifying scent once I knew it, but we would need more for the others and we'd need protection. Even though it's forbidden to use magic for anything but good, El's school experience was proof there are always those who break those laws and those who are just evil, and if all those who were evil joined forces we needed to know how to fight them as well as protect ourselves.

"Hello ladies, how are the studies going?" said Mother.

"Okay, I guess, but we could really use your experience to help us," said Kate.

"What would you like to know?"

“How can we spot a witch or warlock? And is it possible to block their spells or reverse them?” I asked.

“Well let’s start with the first question. Witches and warlocks have marks, like a birthmark in the shape of a pentagon, usually on their neck, either behind the left ear or on the back of the neck just below the hairline. They can be covered easily, however. Remember these are not humans or other races that learn magic, but a separate ancient race like ours.

“They are long-lived as well. They don’t live as long as we do, but they’re around easily in the hundreds of years. They have a strong anise scent, so especially Katrina will be able to use that; but all of us have enhanced senses; so it will be another way to identify them. However, the scent, too, can be masked.

Most warlocks and witches are good and abide by the laws of our councils. Just like rebellious vampires, violators of our laws are sought out and dealt with swiftly. If you think you may be challenged by a witch or warlock; there are talismans that can block their spells and magic that you can learn to reverse and protect. If you find an evil witch or warlock, don’t confront them alone. Seek out allies to help you, law-abiding leaders of the local covens.”

“If we can block their spells they will be no match for us, and we can take care of them ourselves,” I said.

“They also have many ways to hide, and most have individual gifts just as we do. They may be shape-shifters so they can blend in and disappear. Usually each individual can only change into one kind of thing, either a living or an inanimate object. So you would

need to be on the watch for something that seems out of place or was not there before.”

“Great, once again so much to learn in such a short amount of time,” said Letta.

“You’ll never stop learning, my dear, and you haven’t told me why you think you’ll come across such evil.”

“Well, we don’t know; we just want to be prepared. What we do know is Luena and her mother and possibly Damien’s mother are evil and seeking to recruit others to join them, even if they have to turn humans into vampires to do it. We want to be prepared for anything.”

“I can get talismans made for each of you. They will each contain a spell which will protect you. I’ll request them from a wizard so they will not be detected by witches or warlocks. I will also I’ll ask him for any other items which may be of use.”

“Thank you, Mother,” said Kate.

As she stood she asked, “Would you like to take a break for lunch?”

“That sounds good. I didn’t eat breakfast, and now I’m starving,” I said.

We enjoyed a nice lunch and it gave me a chance to give Father the message from Philepe.

“Gerhardt brought it himself, Father. Don’t you find that strange?” I asked.

“That is odd, but he has always been unpredictable. I think he gets that from his mother,” said Father. “Oh, I almost forgot, I’m sending provisions to the mission this afternoon. Do you still want to take it yourselves?”

“Yes, thank you, Father.”

As soon as we finished lunch we went to the stables to get our horses so we could accompany the two wagons filled with food and clothing for the mission.

“How far is it?” asked El.

“Just a few miles east, between us and the village,” I said.

As we rode along, I couldn’t get the image of that woman in our vision out of my head. Was she Damien’s mother, and was Damien the one she was talking to? No, that couldn’t be, I told myself, but I couldn’t be absolutely sure, not yet.

We arrived at the mission and helped unload the supplies before heading to the hospital. We were all excited to finally help El enhance her healing gift. We were shocked when we entered the hospital area of the mission and saw cot after cot filled with men and women, young and old, some as young as fifteen.

“Father Jonas, what has happened? Why are so many hospitalized?” I asked.

“The villagers started coming down with some unknown illness two weeks ago. Our physicians do not have a diagnosis, let alone a cure,” he said.

“What kind of symptoms do they have, Father?” said El.

“They seem to be in a catatonic state now, but when they first come to us they are weak and pale, with no appetite, and suffering from memory loss. It is as if they were the walking dead.”

Our eyes widened and our stomachs tightened.

“Can we help, Father Jonas?” said El.

“Thank you my child. We have been overwhelmed.”

The physicians were using leeches and trying whatever herbs they could think of. We followed father Jonas to a small room, where we each received fresh linens, cloths for washing, and basins with clean water. He left us then to attend to his own duties, which were many.

“Where should we start, El?” I said.

“You know what we need to look for, signs of vampire attack,” she said.

We all knew it, but hearing it out loud was still shocking.

“Might as well start here,” said El pointing to the bed next to her.

In that first bed was a pale young man no more than fifteen years old. It was so sad. He was totally unresponsive to our touch, just staring straight up to the ceiling, dark circles surrounding his eyes. El examined his neck, chest, and down his arms to his wrist. There was a bruise on the inside of his left wrist, and what to anyone other than a vampire would look like an ordinary scratch, something he might have gotten working on his farm. We quickly examined the others and without exception they each had similar wounds in different locations on their bodies. We huddled together at the end of the corridor so no one would hear us.

“It’s obvious a vampire is at work here,” said Rosa, “He’s changing areas of the bites so no ordinary human would suspect; but we’re not human or ordinary, are we?”

“It doesn’t help them to use leeches. They *need* blood. They’re so far gone now they’ll die soon if we don’t do something,” said El.

“First let’s see if we can enhance El’s gift enough to help them. If we can get them to improve by at least half, I think their own bodies will be able to heal themselves. If not, we can try again in a few days,” I said.

“Okay, let me give it a try,” said El.

We gathered around the young man and El placed her hands on his chest. We all concentrated on the healing with her, and slowly his color started to improve and he began to cry. Two physicians came running from the other room.

“What has happened? What have you done?”

“We only washed him and gave him the herbs you provided,” said El.

They examined the boy and were amazed at his sudden recovery.

“He’s turned the corner. I think he said he’s hungry! Come, we must make more of the herbed drink.” One doctor said to the other physician.

We hugged El and got right back to work. All of the patients improved, and all but a few were to the point where we were sure their own bodies could heal them over time. We spent the rest of the day giving them soup, water, and of course the miracle herbs.

It was early evening before we got back, and we were exhausted, but we had to tell Father what we had seen at the mission, although we agreed to keep our part in the healing to ourselves for now.

Father sent out both Watchers and the elite vampire guard.

“We need to find this rogue immediately,” he said. “This is just the kind of thing that can bring our whole race down. I don’t know if this is just one rogue vampire, fledglings, or another distraction to draw us out. You go and get your rest. We’ll speak of this again tomorrow.”

We got back to our rooms, where Sarah had dinner waiting with several jugs full of much needed crimson. We ate and drank our fill and afterward felt somewhat renewed.

“You did wonders today El,” I said.

“I’ll go back in a few days to see how they are. You know that we were lucky none had died. Then, we’d have a whole new problem to deal with.”

“That’s true, and Father has already dispatched Watchers to check the surrounding villages to make sure they don’t have victims as well. He’s also sent word to other clans to be on the lookout for any signs of rogues in their area. Usually when we have a rogue there are murders, but I’ve never heard of anything like this before,” I said.

“Vampires have always taken advantage of plagues or wars, when nobody notices one more death, but we don’t start them. Not that I’m aware of anyway,” said Letta.

“Well, let’s talk about it tomorrow. Sarah has our baths ready and I’m still exhausted, even after the crimson,” said El.

It was evident that the healings had taken a lot out of her. She looked drawn and pale.

“See you in the morning, then,” I said.

I undressed and sank into my fabulous bath once again. *What a day*, I thought. *One continuous and strange day after another.* Sarah woke me when she came in to brush out my hair, she got me into a nightgown, and I slipped into bed, thinking that no bed had ever felt so good to anyone. I fell right to sleep and didn't wake until Sarah pulled open the drapes and let the morning light stream in.

“Breakfast is ready, if you'd like something,” she said.

Go for a ride, I heard in my mind.

“Just some fruit please, and something to drink. Is anyone else up?”

“They're already at the training grounds. You know Gunter.”

“I think I'll go for a ride this morning. Tell them I'll meet them later.”

I rushed to dress, eat, and get over to the stables.

“I brought you something, Nulla.”

Her ears pricked up and she leaned out as far as she could. I offered her the apple and she took a big bite. I rubbed her forehead and patted her neck as she finished it up.

“Need any help?”

“Quinn, hi. No, I can get it.”

“I wanted to let you know I decided to go to Paris myself and send Avery to Portugal. I also think sending someone to the ports in France and England would be a good idea. If they don't want to call attention to themselves they might use a less-used departure point.”

“That is a good idea, but I worry that sending out so many more people may be too conspicuous.”

“I don’t think so, since your father has already sent Watchers out, and many have returned and others will be sent.”

“If you think so, I trust your judgment.”

He was smiling at me, that twinkle in his eyes.

“What?”

“I was just thinking how much you’ve changed from that little brat in braids I used to chase around these very stables.”

“Ha, it seems like yesterday we were riding our ponies into mock battles and wishing our fathers would let us go along on their journeys.”

He came closer to me and took both of my hands in his. “You know that some things never change, Kat. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what, no matter where.”

“I know,” I said and I gave him a big hug. “But thanks for reminding me. That works both ways, you know; there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you or your brothers.”

I looked up at him.

“You be careful in Paris. And did you hear that Gerhardt was here yesterday morning?”

“I did. I’ve never liked him, but his father is a good man.”

“Don’t you find it strange that he would come all that way to bring that message himself?”

“Not really; he’s never been one you would call normal. He probably had nothing else to do.”

“There was something different about him yesterday; I can’t put my finger on it, but something. So if you could keep an eye on him and the chateau you might find out something. Also I remembered that Damien was sending Ivan ahead to prepare things for him, so keep an eye out for him as well.”

“He gives me the creeps, but he’s always been loyal to Damien.”

“He also may be loyal to Luena. That’s what we need to know.”

“All right, I’d better be going. I don’t have that vampire speed you know.”

“As I said, be careful.”

“I will. I’ll see you soon.”

He turned and left and I led Nulla out so I could saddle her. After I finished we walked outside, where I mounted up and rode over to the front gate. As I cantered over the hill and past the vineyards I heard.

“Katrina, I’m here.”

“Where?” I replied, as I took in a breath and looked around. His scent was strong; he couldn’t be far.

Pinpoint him, I told myself as I pulled Nulla to a stop. Another breath revealed that he was in the woods to my left. My instincts told me to “see” if anything or anyone else was nearby, but I detected just animals.

“Let’s go, Nulla,” I said, and we cantered on.

There in the woods was Theo, beautiful Theo, and stepping out behind him, Damien, his hair and his cape being tossed by the wind. He was taking off his riding gloves when I rode up beside him.

“I wasn’t expecting you for at least another week.”

“I couldn’t wait, and I’ve completed all the preparations I could, so here I am; but I can go back if you wish.”

I swung my left leg over Nulla’s shoulders and hopped down right in front of him.

“I don’t think so,” I said and put my arms around his neck. My stomach was full of butterflies as his eyes met mine.

“Why didn’t you just come to the castle?”

“I wanted some time with you alone.”

He put his arms around my waist, pulled me closer, and leaned down and kissed me. It was not the needy, lustful kiss from before, but a deep loving one that made my knees weak. I didn’t want it to end, but all too soon he pulled back.

“I missed you,” he said without speaking.

“I’m right here,” I replied.

We spent the morning in each other’s arms, and then headed back. Whatever lay ahead we would handle together. At least in these moments, my doubts were gone.

“Well, well, it’s amazing what you can find out in the woods,” said Rosa as we approached.

“Nice to see you too, Rosalinda,” said Damien.

“Are you joining us for lunch, or do you have something else planned?” said Rosa.

“We’ll join you as soon as we get the horses taken care of,” I said.

We walked Theo and Nulla back to the stables and left instructions for their care and feeding.

“Nulla is looking in good health. I see you are giving her extra oats. Is there a reason for that?” he teased as we walked away.

“You know very well what the reason is.”

“And you aren’t upset about it anymore?”

“I should be, but now I’m sure it’s going to be a colt that looks just like his beautiful father.”

“You might be disappointed; I don’t think you should get your heart set this early.”

“No, not usually, but... I’ve seen him.”

Then I instantly regretted telling him that.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I’ve been having premonitions,” I said reluctantly.

“That’s a feeling; you said you’d *seen* him.”

“Well it started with feelings, but now it’s more like visions.”

Why was I having this feeling that I shouldn’t be telling him this?

“In that case, we should pick out a name for him.”

Just like that, he let it go; no other questions, nothing, which I found really strange.

“Look who just arrived, Father,” I said as we entered the dining hall.

“Damien, good to see you. How is your father?”

“He’s fine, thank you. I completed all my preparations early, so I decided to come ahead. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, I’m sure everyone is glad to have you here,” said Father. “You remember Elizabeth.”

“Of course. How nice to see you again. You look lovely,” said Damien, as he bowed slightly and took her hand.

“I hope your trip was uneventful,” she said.

“Lonely, but yes, uneventful.”

“We’ll talk of your upcoming trip this afternoon,” said Father.

“Of course, Fredrik. I look forward to it.”

The girls arrived then.

“How was your training?” I asked.

“Gunter is relentless,” said Kate, “but he’s really happy with us.”

“He just wants our fathers to be impressed with our progress,” said Letta.

“I’m sure they will be,” said Mother. “You’ve all been working very hard.”

“Your father tells me you had a surprising afternoon at the mission yesterday.”

“That’s for sure. Thank goodness for El; she really saved the day,” said Kate.

“What happened?” said Damien.

“The mission hospital was full of sick patients and their physicians didn’t know what was causing their illness or how to treat it. We discovered it was caused by vampire feeding; and with El’s gift of healing, she was able to make them well enough so they could recover on their own,” I said, not totally sure we should reveal our gifts yet.

“I have forces out, as we speak, looking for this rogue vampire,” said Father.

“Never a dull moment,” said Kate.

“These attacks seem very odd,” said Damien.
“Fledglings would normally kill because they can’t control themselves; but this seems more like someone trying to be discovered.”

“The bite sites were varied, as if to prevent humans from seeing a pattern; and the ages also were varied, as if the choices were random,” explained El.

“How did you keep the fact that you were healing them a secret?” said Damien.

“Oh, they think they found a combination of herbs that finally started to work, and the patients had no memory of what had happened to them,” said El.

“Father Jonas told us that people had been falling ill for several weeks now. He said he would let us know if they received any more with the same symptoms.”

“These things can start panic in the villages, and if people suspect for one minute that a dark force is responsible, no one here will be safe,” said Father.

“Humans are always quick to blame, even without any proof,” said Mother.

“True. Once again, I think you helped avert a disaster,” said Damien smiling.



CHAPTER TWELVE

We finished lunch, and Damien left with Father to discuss the travel plans, so the five of us headed over to the library to study.

“So you just *happened* upon Damien in the woods?” said Kate suspiciously.

“I’m going to have to go into the woods more often if that’s the case,” said Rosa.

“How long were you out there before you informed us?” said Letta.

“Just a few hours.”

“And...anything you want to tell us?” said Letta.

“No, we just wanted some time alone...to talk.”

“Talk, I see.” said Kate.

“Oh my gosh, remember when we talked about how dangerous it was to feed from humans directly because it could be addicting? What if it’s a young vampire biting these villagers and that’s what’s happened?” said El.

“Where did that come from, El?” I said.

“I don’t know it just popped into my mind.”

“He or she would have to be strong enough to be able to stop feeding before killing the person,” said Rosa.

“And probably about be our age or a little older,” I said.

“Your father will take care of it, don’t worry,” said Letta.

“Yes, he will have them killed, but if the vampire responsible could be isolated for a while they would get better. The addiction would wear off like it did with Quinn and me. Maybe El could even help them,” I said.

“You don’t even know that’s what it is,” said Rosa. “Or is it one of *those* kinds of feelings you’re having about it?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe if we all concentrate together Kate and I will see something more.”

We hurried to the library and sat around the table at the far end of the room. We held hands to make the strongest connection possible. A bolt of energy slammed me into the back of my chair. When I closed my eyes I could see a room, small and dark except for a fire in the fireplace. A young man sat on a cot across from it with his head resting in his hands. I could feel the fear and sadness that was surrounding him, and at that moment I knew we had to help him. The door opened, and in strode a tall dark-haired man wearing brown leather pants, a bronze long sleeved shirt, and a dark leather vest.

“So, are you willing to tell me all I wish to know, or shall I bring in your next victim?”

As he spoke he walked closer to the young man and was followed by a swordsman of incredible stature, almost the height of the door.

“It’s been days since you fed, so I know you won’t be able to resist. Tell us where to find the leaders of your kind and I will end your torment by killing you swiftly. My father and his followers died trying to extinguish your evil from this land, and I mean to avenge their deaths by finishing the job, no matter what I have to do. That I happened upon you feasting on a deer was a gift from the gods, helping me in my effort. Sooner or later you’ll either talk or some of your kind will come out of hiding to end the plague you are creating; and I will use them to lead me back to your—what my father called—you coven and put an end to your kind once and for all.”

Volator, I thought to myself.

The young man raised his head then and looked up.

“Do what you must. I am not from these parts and know no one. I have only been as I am for now these past three years and have no knowledge of these covens of yours or the leaders of which you speak. For all I know I am the last of my kind. So either kill me or leave me alone with the horror which you have laid upon me.”

He was handsome—of course most vampires are—with blond hair and light eyes that I assumed were blue. He was very likely a made vampire, and a very rare vampire indeed.

I realized we needed to do several things now—pinpoint where they were, call back the warriors, and reinstruct the Watchers. First for the pinpointing.

“Kate, can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“We need to find out exactly where they’re holding this guy. You ‘see,’ while I seek the scent. The others will help.”

I took in a deep breath and tried to find them. I hoped Kate was having better luck, since I hadn’t smelled them before and my senses were becoming confused by all the other humans and vampires around.

“You’ll help us even without consent; you can’t stop yourself. Bring in supper for our young friend.” The huge swordsman retreated and returned with a young girl no older than sixteen. The girl was sobbing, her hands tied in front of her. A peasant’s dress clung to her small frame; her bare feet and dirty unkempt hair made me think she must have been held for some time. She trembled as the man pulled her forward to place her directly in front of the young vampire.

“I beg you, kill me instead,” the young man pleaded.

“If you don’t tell me what I want to know, you leave me no choice.”

And with that he pulled his dagger and cut the girl’s arm on the inside of her elbow, deep enough to let blood rush down her arm. As she screamed he shoved her forward. He was right, there was no way the new vampire could stop himself from feeding like a ravenous animal. The swordsman had to turn away, but the other man watched intensely, as if sickly pleased by the sight.

Soon after the young vampire began feeding, the girl stopped crying and went into what I can only

describe as a trance, after which she seemed to wobble and become faint. That's when the man pulled her away and quickly headed for the door and handed the girl to the swordsman.

"Drop her at the mission gates like the others. We don't want dead bodies that will turn the villagers into mobs. We only want to draw the vampires out. It says in my father's journals that they protect themselves by taking care that no one will draw attention to their kind like this."

With that said, he backed out the door, which he slammed behind him and locked.

"Got him," said Kate. "I see him coming out of a stone two-story building that looks like it was once an inn or something. There's an old sign on the front, that says 'Fair'—no 'Fardale'— and a number two."

"I think I know where that is," I said to her, and I turned my gift toward that area. Yes, I smelled the bloodlust. Ten miles to the south there was an abandoned mill—that must be it! I didn't sense a guard close by, which meant they were very sure of themselves, but if he wasn't trained by his Volator father and only learned by reading his journals, he wouldn't know much. For that matter, no human did.

Even most of what his father thought he knew was legend and completely wrong, but he did know that we protected each other and knew enough to stop the feeding in time, so the victim wouldn't die. He also knew to try to draw us out so we would fall into his trap. What he didn't know was what kind of a fight he was in for.

“Okay, we’ve got it. Did everyone see what Kate and I saw?”

“No,” they all said, shaking their heads.

“Well, we’ll just have to explain later. I have to get to Father as fast as I can,” I said.

Kate and I ran to Father’s office, where he was still speaking with Damien.

“Father, I need to speak with you at once. Kate and I have used our gifts to locate the rogue vampire, but it’s complicated, so you need to trust us when we say you must call back the vampire guard right away, or we’ll all be in danger.”

“I’ll send word at once. What of the Watchers?”

“Tell them to watch the abandoned mill at Fardale and track those who come and go. We must find them all. They are Volator.”

I could see the shock on both Father’s and Damien’s faces. Father left then to make sure word was sent immediately, and Kate went back to the library to tell the girls.

“Damien, I need to know how much information Luena gave to the Volator leader before they attacked us.”

“She used her Watcher, as far as I know, and only gave them enough information to be able to attack your caravan.”

“Did she give names ahead of time? This is important.”

“It was to be a crime of opportunity. She said to get rid your father, but not to endanger the rest of us, so I don’t think names were important. Why?”

“This man we saw in our vision is the son of the leader you killed, and his father left journals which he is using to try to exact his revenge and pick up where his father left off. His goal is to try to eradicate our race from the earth. So not only must we find him but we must find the journals as well.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help. What do you need me to do?”

I had to stop a moment to think about it, and then it came to me. “Maybe you could go out to the mill with the Watchers. Once you see this man, you could put the idea into his mind that the journals are in danger of being stolen, so he will lead you to them. On second thought, I should go with you, because I’ve seen him.”

Kate came walking up behind me.

“Oh no, you’re not going anywhere without me this time. In fact, you promised all of us that the next time we would all go together. You may need us,” she said defiantly.

“You’re right, but we should let the Watchers observe him for a couple of days, but no more,” I said.

“Why the rush?” asked Damien.

“Wait until Father returns. Then Kate and I will tell you everything we saw.”

“And heard,” said Kate.

When Father returned, we told them all about our vision and the young vampire.

“You see, Father, it’s not his fault. They’re forcing him to feed on these helpless humans. He can’t help himself,” said Kate.

“This isn’t about him anymore, as much as its about the Volator,” said Father, “The journal must be recovered.”

“Katrina suggested that I go with the Watchers and put a thought into his head that the journal is in danger of being lost, so he will lead us to it.”

“So, we’ll watch him for a few days to find out how many others are with him,” I added.

“No more than a couple of days, Father or they will bring another victim,” said Kate.

“We’ll have to send Eleanor to the mission again, or they will figure out the herbs are not really working,” said Father. “We’ve assigned a Watcher to the mission so we can follow who ever leaves that poor girl there. I’m glad you had this vision; how did it come about?”

“We...we just wanted to help, so we used our gifts of sight and scent to detect anything unusual, and this is what came to us,” I said and Kate nodded in agreement.

I caught a knowing look on Damien’s face and had to look away.

“Once again, daughters, well done.”

Kate and I smiled at each other and felt relieved, hoping we had saved the young vampire and protected all of us.

“We’d better get back to the library. The girls will be wondering what’s going on. I didn’t have much time earlier,” said Kate.

“I’ll be right there,” I said.

“Father, the girls and I want to be included in any plans to eliminate the Volator.”

“All right, you’ve earned it, I promise. Be ready, because we may have to move at any time. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have much to attend to.”

“So what really made you look for this rogue?” said Damien.

“I think by the look on your face earlier, you figured that out. It just occurred to us that it could be a young vampire that got addicted to the blood lust and couldn’t stop, but I had no idea we’d ‘see’ what we did. Can you imagine what that poor young man is going through? From what he said in our vision, he’s been alone as a new vampire for three years. It’s amazing.”

“You seem infatuated with him already. Should I be jealous?”

Of what, a vision? I just think he deserves a chance.”

“He’s going to need a lot of help to recover from this, as well as some training. There’s no way of knowing if he will ever fully recover.”

“This vampire is special, I can feel it. He’ll make it if we can get him out of there.”

“You saved me,” Damien said as he came close and kissed me on the forehead.

“I think you can do better than that,” I said looking up into his intoxicating brown eyes.

He leaned down and met my lips in such a gentle loving kiss, it again sent shivers up my spine. As I ran my hands up his chest and around his neck, the kiss turned more urgent and I felt tingles other places too.

As the kiss broke I said, “That definitely was better.”

He gave me another short kiss. "I aim to please; you have only to ask."

"I'd better get back. Care to walk with me?"

"It would be my pleasure. After you, my Lady."

We walked back toward the library hand in hand.

"I'll see you at dinner," he said and kissed me goodbye.

I sighed as I walked away, wishing things weren't always so complicated.

"Did you have a nice 'chat' with Damien?" said Rosa.

"Very nice." I put my hand to my head and faked a swoon, just for their benefit.

"Well while you were 'chatting' I was telling everyone everything Father said about what we saw," said Kate.

"Father agreed to let us, all of us, be included in any plans to take out the Volator. He said we'd earned it, but no one knows how talented we really are, and I still think it's important to keep that to ourselves, at least for now."

"I can't stop thinking about the young vampire we saw, and how he begged that man to kill him. It's apparent that he'd rather die than continue feeding off those defenseless humans. It's so awful, we have to help him as soon as possible," said Kate.

"Father promised we'd move before they make him do that again," I said.

"Anyone for some work at the training ground?" said Letta.

"You're right, we need to be ready," said El.

“Did Kate tell you you’ll have to go back to the mission tomorrow? That young girl needs your help.”

“Poor thing. Of course I told Father Jonas to send word, so I probably should wait until he does. He might get suspicious if I just show up.”

“If he doesn’t send word, we’ll think of something you had to bring to him, to cover up the fact you know he has another sick girl,” said Kate.

We headed down to the training area for a complete weapons workout with swords, daggers, and spears, including horseback and group work.

“Spending hours fighting sure makes you smelly,” said Kate, when we finished the practice, her nose wrinkling.

“To think I used to just glow or at the very worst perspire a little. Now I progress right through to stink,” laughed Rosa.

“Have our lives taken a turn or what?” said El shaking her head.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but having a purpose in life is exhilarating,” said Letta.

“You’re right,” said Rosa. “Before, it seemed as if my days just ran together, but that life seems so useless now.”

“Well that’s all changed forever. We were meant to come together for a reason; I can feel it,” I said.

“I think we all can,” said El as we continued walking back.

“I hope Sarah has our baths ready,” said Kate.

“And a snack. I’m starving, and we can’t hunt until we’re sure it’s safe,” I said as we got to the door.

Sure enough, as we got close to our apartment we could see water being carried in and empty buckets carried out.

“I love Sarah,” I sighed.

“Me too,” said the others in unison.

I reveled in the hot, sweet water as I soaked in bubbles up to my chin. I normally would be calling to Damien, but today he was here, and I would see him in a little while, so I just relaxed and washed the day from my skin.

After Sarah got done complaining about my hair as she washed it, I brushed almond oil into it until it was soft and tangle-free. I dressed in a simple but sexy dress of sage green silk, featuring an empire waist with a square neckline. It showed just the right amount of cleavage.

I checked myself out in the mirror before heading out to the balcony to let my hair dry in the wind and decided that I looked good. The sun was low in the west, casting shadows off the forest; the breeze made them dance across the ground. My thoughts went once again to the young man I had seen earlier today. He had looked so hopeless, but it was the pain there that still stuck in my mind.

I wished I could assure him that help was coming. I concentrated as hard as I could on his face with his tussled hair hanging across it. I wanted to see him again. “Show me,” I said to myself, and then there he was, this time standing in front of the small fire, just staring into it. I wished I knew his name.

“*It’s going to be all right,*” I said to him with my mind.

He looked up and then all around, as if startled by something—as if he'd heard me! That wasn't possible; made vampires didn't have gifts—did they?

“Hang on a little longer, help will come soon,” I said, concentrating with my mind as hard as I could.

He looked around again. It *was* true; he *had* heard me!

“Who are you? Where are you?” he said aloud.

“I’m a friend. Don’t be afraid; it’s your vampire gift that my mind can talk to yours, which makes you very special.”

“Ha!” he laughed out loud. “Very special’—that’s a laugh. I’m a freak, a monster.”

“No, no you’re not. What’s happened to you is not your fault. Please just hang on a little longer. What’s your name?”

“Eric,” he replied.

“Well, Eric, I can’t tell you my name yet, but I’ll try to send you my image.”

I concentrated on the reflection I just saw in the mirror and then on him.

“You’re beautiful! But how did you find me?”

“I can’t tell you anything more right now. Have faith in me Eric, just for a few more days. Be strong. Now I have to go.”

“No, please don’t leave.”

“I’ll contact you soon.”

“That was amazing!” I said to no one in particular.

“What was amazing?” said Kate.

“I was worried about that young vampire, so I looked for him and there he was.”

“So he’s all right?”

“Yes, he’s all right, and you won’t believe this, but he heard me. His mind actually heard me.”

“You’re kidding. Didn’t it freak him out?”

“Of course at first and that’s what he called himself, a freak and a monster. I just wanted him to know help was coming and for him to hang on a little longer. Oh, and I found out his name is Eric.”

“Eric? You’re right, Kat, this is amazing. I hope he feels a little bit better now, thanks to you.”

“I do too.”

“Katrina, please come in so I can do your hair, it must be dry by now,” said Sarah.

Kate laughed, “Well you have your orders; you’d better go.”

Sarah dressed my hair, this time by rolling the sides back and pinning them with an enamel pin that matched my dress.

“Thank you, Sarah.”

“Now be off, or you’ll be late for dinner.”

The five of us headed out, the “beauty patrol,” as Gunter called us. I was looking forward to seeing Damien, but there was a young man alone in a small room not far away who was filling my thoughts. He was also all anyone wanted to talk about at dinner.

“It’s too bad there’s no way to tell him help is on the way,” said Damien.

“Oh, Katrina took care of that,” said Kate.

I shot her an angry look.

“What does Katherine mean, Katrina?” said Father.

“Well...” I said still glaring at Kate. She had her head down, avoiding eye contact with me.

“Something quite unexpected happened this afternoon,” I said, knowing what I was about to say was going to hurt Damien, as speaking with each other with our minds had been our secret, something we shared alone until now.

“I decided to see if I could look in on him; and after being able to do that, I found that physically he’s the same but he was in such anguish about his situation that I wanted to assure him that help was on the way.” I looked around before I said, “I projected from my mind to his that help was coming. I spoke to him and to my astonishment he seemed to hear me! I told him not to be afraid, that I was a friend and he just had to hang on a little longer.”

“And she found out his name is Eric,” said Kate, and then looked right back down.

“This young man is definitely unique,” said Mother, “a made vampire on his own, seemingly living as we do and now showing signs of having a gift.”

This news left everyone shaking their heads. Damien wouldn’t look at me; I reached my right hand out under the table and placed it on his knee. When he didn’t respond my heart sank, knowing that he was saddened by the disclosure that I was able to communicate with someone else in our secret way. I didn’t take my hand away; instead I slowly moved it up his thigh. He was calling my bluff, and now I had to follow through, so I continued to move my hand slowly up his thigh. When I reached the top, to my surprise he still didn’t stop me. Just then dessert arrived, and so I started to pull my hand away. That’s when he placed his hand over mine and gave it a

squeeze. I smiled and turned my head to look at him, but he still wouldn't look back.

"I'm glad you were able to call back your forces in time," said Damien.

I pulled my hand away then and started to enjoy my dessert.

"Yes, and we have Watchers in place. You must be ready to join them at any moment, starting tomorrow, so we can put our plan into action."

"We're ready, Father," said Kate.

"You're sure they're ready, Fredrik?" said Mother.

"Gunter assures me they are, and Katrina of course has proven herself for some time now, as Damien can attest; isn't that right Damien?"

"I'd trust my life to her," he said.

Then it was my turn not to look at him.

"We're ready," I said emphatically. As I looked at each girl, they nodded in agreement.

"I hope you can rid us of the latest drama quickly," said Mother. "If not, we'll have to warn the Council and guests set to arrive sooner than ten days from now."

I had completely forgotten about all that. Once Damien was here the others didn't really matter to me.

"Father, it can't be just a coincidence that the Volator turned up here after attacking us in Austria, can it? I could try to find the Volator we saw in our vision. At the very least it could save us some time, and at the most we will see this journal or hear if there are additional dangers."

"Absolutely; go ahead and try Katrina," said Father.

“I’ll go right now. I’ll let you know what happens as soon as I finish.”

“Do you want us to help you?” asked Kate.

“Let me try alone first. I think you’ve helped enough for one night,” I said focusing on her with a glare.

“Damien, can I talk to you for a minute outside, please?” I said.

“Of course. If you’ll excuse us,” he said as we rose to leave.

When we got outside I asked Damien a question.

Do you think you can put suggestions into someone’s mind from long distance?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried.”

“Well, let’s try tonight. I know we’re stronger together than apart.”

We walked into the library and pulled two chairs together, facing each other.

“Let’s hold hands. I’ll send you the image of the Volator we saw; then if we both concentrate on his image, we should be able to find him. If we can’t pinpoint him, we’ll ask Kate to join us.”

Then I closed my eyes and brought the image to my mind and sent it to Damien.

“Got it,” he said back.

After several minutes of concentrating together the vision started to form. The man was standing outside some kind of shop; he seemed to be waiting for someone. As he paced back and forth he was joined by another man, not the huge swordsman from before, but someone else.

“About time,” he said to the new arrival. “Well, did you find anything new? My father’s journal says he was going to journey to Romania again to follow up on a lead. We know that he disappeared somewhere between here and there, with about twenty-five other Volator. The fact that we happened to come across our young friend not far from here must mean there are others, and Father’s journals have told me how we might draw them out.”

“There are so few of us left, Weldon; maybe we need to wait until we can build up our force. Ten of us are not going to be enough to subdue and kill these creatures. Besides, maybe the boy is telling us the truth, that he’s alone and there are no others.”

“All right, if nothing happens in the next two days we’ll get rid of him and move on.”

“Okay, Damien, try to put the idea into his mind about the journal. He needs to look at the journal.”

After a few seconds I could see the man’s expression change.

“I think it’s working Damien. Keep it up.”

“I need to go check on something in my room. Where are the others?”

“They’re camped outside of the village in the woods.”

“Did Carl drop the girl at the mission as I told him?”

“Yes, and he should be back at camp soon.”

“I’ll meet you there tomorrow afternoon. We’ll get reports and make our plans.”

They parted. The one named Weldon headed up the stairs beside what we now could see was a beer hall.

The vision let us follow him up the stairs and down a hallway to a room at the very end. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the dark wooden door with the number five carved crudely into it and went inside. The room was simple, lit by a single oil lamp. We could see that it contained a small bed with an iron headboard, a wash stand and one wooden chair. He looked around, including out the window, then went to the bed, lifted the mattress, and pulled out what looked like a large, leather-bound book. He opened the book, checked several pages, then closed it and put it back under the mattress. Then he left the room, and after relocking the door went downstairs and into the beer hall.

“We did it,” I said. I jumped up and hugged Damien and gave him a quick kiss.

“Let’s go tell your father. We should be able to finish this tomorrow.”

After one last kiss and we rushed out of the library and out into the night.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Everyone was anxiously waiting for us in front of the dining hall.

“Did you see anything or hear anything?” asked Kate.

“Yes and yes. He’s in the village of Draden, he has a room above the beer house, number 5, and the journal is hidden under his mattress. He spoke with another man out in front of the beer hall and mentioned that there are ten Volator, nine of whom are camped outside of the village in the woods. We heard the other men call the leader ‘Weldon,’ and he will be meeting the rest of them at their encampment tomorrow afternoon. He said if they have no news then he will get rid of Eric and move on.”

“We will send Watchers there tonight, to watch and confirm everything, and then we should be able to act on this tomorrow afternoon,” said Father. “I’ll speak to Gunter right away; he’s escorting Elizabeth back to our quarters.”

Soon Father came striding back towards us and we heard horses thunder out the front gate.

“They’ll be in place in a couple of hours,” he said confidently.

“The Volator will all be together tomorrow afternoon, and the woods are a perfect place for an ambush,” said Damien.

“We need someone to get the journal and someone to free Eric, all at the same time as the ambush,” said Father. “How many men will you need, Damien?”

“None; the girls and I can handle this by ourselves. Keep the Watchers in place, just in case, and forces in the woods ready to clean up after us.”

Damien then turned his attention to us girls and said, “Letta, you get the journal and anything else he left in the room. With your speed no one will see you. When you get the journal, pass it to a Watcher; we’ll have someone wait just outside town. Then come join us in the woods. El, can you free Eric? Watchers will be nearby to help you get in, but with his blood lust you’ll have to take him back yourself; we can’t trust him with a Watcher.”

“Yes,” she said confidently.

“Get him back here as fast as you can, and take crimson with you. He should feed before you leave, otherwise the Watchers may not be safe,” he added.

“I’m strong enough, don’t worry,” she said.

“I know you are...you all are. We can handle the ten in the woods. We’ll meet just outside their camp tomorrow morning, once they are all there. El and Letta will tend to their tasks and we to ours,” said Damien.

“Are we all in agreement then?” said Father.

We all agreed.

“Rest up, then. You’ll leave at first light,” said Father as we all rose to leave the room.

“I’ll meet you in a few minutes,” I said to the others.

“We knew that was coming. Come on, everyone, let’s go,” said Kate. “Thank you for trusting us, Damien. It means a lot.”

“Your father said you’re ready, Gunter says your ready, and I’ve seen Katrina in action, remember?”

“We know. We’re just glad to see you have confidence in us too,” said Rosa.

They turned and headed for their rooms to rest.

“I’m already tested, but they’re not,” I said, my anxiety for the girl’s safety tomorrow showing on my face.

“Are you having doubts? Because if you are, this would be a good time to voice them,” he said.

“No, it’s just...”

“What? Listen, we’ll have back-up. The Watchers will be there, and besides, you and I could handle ten men by ourselves.”

“That’s true,” I sighed, not feeling much better.

“Instinct will kick in with them, just as it did with you. Their training has made their reactions automatic, just like yours. Isn’t this why they came to train with you in the first place?”

“You’re right, I’m worrying for no reason. It’s just if anything ever happened to any of them I don’t know what I’d do.”

He put his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me to him. He kissed the top of my head and I

wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his shoulder.

“When were you going to tell me about Eric?”

I pushed myself back so I could look into his eyes. There was still some pain there.

“I was as shocked by it as everyone else was,” I said. “It was totally different from what you and I have; he can’t answer me back with his mind.”

“You didn’t at first, either.”

“It wasn’t intimate with him. It’s not what we have.” I assured him.

He smiled and kissed me, and then he gave me a warm embrace.

“I love you.” I had not meant to say that but now that the words were out of my mouth, I knew them to be true. Was it too soon? Yes, but I knew that it was right.

“I hope you mean that,” he replied.

“I do.”

“We’d better get some rest. Sunrise comes quickly.”

“I’d hoped for some idle, restful days together before the others arrived.”

“If I remember correctly, swordplay can make one quite aroused,” he said with a wry smile.

That brought back the memory of how much I wanted him that day, bringing butterflies back to my stomach. There would be no reason to pull back next time.

“We’ll just have to see if that still holds true,” I said as I walked away. I turned back to look at him one more time. “Damien...”

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry,” he said.

When I got back, the girls were gathered around the fireplace, giddy with excitement.

“Finally we’re going to use our training. I don’t know how I’ll ever get to sleep,” Rosa said.

“Damien really took charge tonight. He didn’t seem to have any doubt that we could handle our tasks,” said Kate.

“He has every confidence we’ll be successful tomorrow, but we do need to rest. We need to be at our best in the morning.”

Why was I so apprehensive, I wondered as I changed for bed. Maybe it was just that my other battles had been more spontaneous, with no time to think about them. I had only to react, and that was a better way, I decided.

Everyone was ready; I knew that. *Oh, go to sleep*, I scolded. *Staring at the ceiling isn’t helping anything*. I fluffed my down pillow and put it back under my head. I closed my eyes and willed myself to sleep.

The dream started with me walking down a tree-lined street. It was night, and the gas lanterns were flickering, casting a golden glow up and down the street. Once again a woman was walking towards me, but this time it was as if I were looking at her through someone else’s eyes.

The street didn’t look the same, either. As she came closer I could see it was the same woman, but she wasn’t wearing the same dress. This one was black, with a sweetheart neckline and long sleeves, buttons from her elbow to her wrist. Before she reached me she turned and entered a shop, so I kept walking. When I got to the window of the shop I could see her

talking to two other women. *Why am I dreaming about these women?* I thought, *And isn't it strange to be talking about your dream while you're still dreaming?* Then she turned around and came back out the door.

"I'll contact you soon," she said, and walked right by me as if I weren't there.

I looked through the window at the other two women, who were looking at dresses. There was something familiar about them. They made a purchase and started for the door, and as they came out one of them said. "I can't wait to show her."

"She'll be here in a couple of days," the other one said.

They didn't seem to see me either, and they just strolled away.

I woke up gasping for breath. *It was just a dream*, I told myself, but I didn't believe it. It was a vision trying to show me something I needed to know. Who were they, and where were they?

"I don't have time for this right now."

I flopped back down onto my pillow.

"Well, that was a restful sleep; I might as well get up."

So I dragged myself out from under my down-filled cover and over to the window. Dew lay heavily on the ground and shimmered in the last light of the setting moon. I decided there were still a couple of hours left before dawn, but I dressed, gathered my weapons, and headed out. The only thing lighting the outer room was the last of the coals glowing in the fireplace. Now what? I decided to go over to the kitchen and get something to eat and drink. I'd need extra crimson

today, we all would. Avery was outside, having just returned from watching the ports. Lately we had been seeing our Watchers less but today his presence felt comforting.

“You’re up early. Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked.

“I’m heading over to the kitchen; I’m starving again.”

“I could wake Sarah for you.”

“No, don’t do that, I’m fine. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“I’ll be here,” he said. He had that same adorable smile and twinkling blue eyes all the Voss brothers had.

I made my way across the courtyard, the first one to disturb the dew I’d seen from my window. Klaus, the cook, was already baking bread when I arrived, so the kitchen smelled wonderful. I chose some pastry and asked for some eggs and ham with potato pancakes. Klaus had been making me breakfast my whole life.

“Help yourself. There’s fresh crimson in the crocks in the cool room.”

I slid off my stool and headed to the cool room across the hall. I chose a crock, removed the cork stopper, and drank directly from the container. It was both sweet and salty. I can only describe the feeling it gave me by saying it was like pouring water on a dry sponge: every cell in my body was being filled by the liquid life, and my energy was being replenished with each swallow. *That’s better*, I said to myself. I brought the crock back to the kitchen, and Klaus had my

breakfast waiting for me. You'd think I'd never eaten before, from the way I inhaled it.

Klaus enjoyed a good belly laugh.

"It's a pleasure to see you enjoy your food. I'll pack you something to take along. Now finish what's left in your crock. Sarah will be over soon."

"Thanks, Klaus; you always make me feel good."

"Everyone feels better on a full stomach. You stay safe today, you hear?"

"I will."

I felt much better as I headed back to my room. As I passed Sarah in the courtyard on her way to get something for the girls to eat and drink, I promised her I had left a few things for them in the kitchen.

Everyone else was up now, getting ready. Sarah brought breakfast, and all the girls drank generous servings of crimson. Kate braided my hair and we made small talk trying to ignore the tension in the air.

"We have some time, and I think we'd feel better if we took a look at the encampment. It's the only thing we haven't seen," I said finally.

We all agreed and sat down together at the table.

"Now. Let's concentrate. Kate, let's focus on the huge swordsman we saw. He's supposed to be at the camp. Let me know when you can visualize him."

"Got him. He's asleep by the fire."

"Ah. I see him too."

In a few minutes we could see several crude tents surrounding a central fire pit, and there was our giant. It was quiet, maybe too quiet. Where were the horses and guards? I took a deep breath so I could "see" better.

“Oh no!” I said.

I smelled death, and something else. We looked around, then saw that the swordsman wasn't sleeping. He was lying on the ground, his sword still in his hand, his throat ripped open. We looked for the others. In the woods, bodies littered the ground. This was bad—very bad—because now I recognized what else I scented. Fledglings.

I broke concentration then.

“We have to go *now!*” I said.

“*Damien,*” I called with my mind, and then told him we were leaving right away, and why. Where were our Watchers I wondered; were they dead or on their way back? There was no time; we had to hurry.

“Listen, we have to stay together; we may need to enhance our gifts. Our plans concerning Eric are changed. We can't worry about him right now, because if those fledglings get to the village all hell is going to break loose.”

“I told the guard to follow. They'll clean up the site,” said Damien as he joined us. “How many are there, could you see?”

“No, no time to look any further. I should be able to tell once we get close. Let's go.”

We ran out the gate and into our battle formation. Damien and I in the lead, followed by Rosa and Letta, then Kate and El. It took mere minutes to arrive at the site at full speed. We slowed and drew our swords. I scented when we got close. We had to get between them and the village.

“There are at least fifteen, this way,” I called as I led the way.

The forest was littered with death—the missing horses, as well as Volator who must have been fleeing, all dead, ripped apart. Someone had kept the fledglings from feeding for awhile, effectively creating ravenous killing machines that were absolutely crazed by blood lust. We made a large arc so we could get in front of them and block their path to the village, and then we headed straight for them.

“Spread out!” yelled Damien. “Don’t let any of them by you!”

We curved the arc around, moving Kate and El forward so we formed a half circle. Now we’d close and meet in the middle as we finished them off. I smelled them before I saw them; they were somewhat spread out but easily inside our formation. They had slowed; having just fed they weren’t as frantic as they must have been earlier. They were covered in blood, and if we hadn’t had crimson this morning it would have been overwhelming to us. Other than their unnatural strength, and their teeth of course, the fledglings didn’t even carry weapons.

“They aren’t trained,” said Damien in my mind, *“Just monsters. You take the right four, I’ll take the left. NOW!”*

Of course they weren’t expecting us. I almost felt sorry for them—almost.

I had drawn my sword, and now I drew my dagger as well. The first one went down easily. The next two came at me together; I struck low, spilling the guts of the first and dodging the other, taking him out from behind. My fourth turned and ran towards Letta, who had two dead at her feet and was fighting another.

“Letta!” I yelled.

Both she and the fledgling she had engaged looked over; then she ran her sword through his chest and easily avoided the charging fledgling. He went right by her. Then it occurred to me, they weren’t charging her; they were trying to get away now. Letta took her dagger as I took mine; we threw them at the same time. Each dagger found its target in the back of a fledgling. As we looked around, El was just pulling her sword out of a fledgling lying on the ground, with two others dead close by. I scented again to make sure none had gotten away; they had not. There had been twenty-one fledglings all together. Damien was making sure they were all decapitated so they stayed dead. As I finished my survey of the battlefield, I was so proud of the girls. Their performance has been on par with that of the vastly more experienced Vampire Guard.

“Letta, how about some rain, just a light one?” I suggested.

“With pleasure,” she said.

I could see her concentrate, and instinctively we all helped. Soon a nice light rain was washing the blood off us all.

Suddenly I knew we had to go back to the camp.

“Damien, we have to go back. You go to the village, take care of the leader, get the journal, and then meet us back at the encampment,” I said.

“Fine. It shouldn’t take me long,” he said, and then ran off towards the village.

The light rain stopped when I said we had to go back. Now I had to ask Letta for something else.

“Can you give me a breeze coming from the west, Letta?”

“Of course.”

The light breeze came and I took in a breath, knowing what I was scenting was going to be painful.

“Let’s go,” I said, and we ran together back to the forest behind the encampment. I turned over the first body, tears streaming down my face. It was Gregor, a gaping wound in his chest, his eyes still open in a lifeless stare. The girls were all sobbing now as I walked the few feet further to the next one. It was Cedrik, the sweetest of the seven brothers, a broken neck his demise. Then we heard a guttural moan and turned to see a third man slumped in front of a tree like a rag doll.

“Thomas!” I cried.

“Oh no!” El screamed, and we ran over. He was unconscious, blood was coming from his ears and his nose, and he was barely breathing.

“El, we can save him, can’t we?” Kate cried. “We have to try.”

“Everyone! We have to concentrate. I’ll put my hands on Thomas, and you all put your hands on me. Please, everyone, compose yourselves, we must hurry,” El said, tears still running down her cheeks.

El put her trembling hands on Thomas’s chest. When I saw her face go calm, I closed my eyes and put both my hands on her back. Rosa, Kate, and Letta followed. I could feel energy flowing. This had to work; it just *had* to. After what seemed like ages, El moved, and I opened my eyes to see El kissing

Thomas's forehead. His eyes were open, but he didn't seem to be aware.

"El, did it work? Is he all right?" said Rosa.

"He's better, but still not good. I don't think we should move him yet."

"The guard should be here any second. We can replenish and try again," I said, looking desperately around.

We heard something behind us and instinctively drew our swords and surrounded Thomas.

"Damien, thank God," I said as he came closer.

He glanced around and knew why the group was filled with sadness.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

This made us all start to sob again.

"Thomas is barely alive, and we need to feed if we're going to be able to save him," said El.

He looked puzzled. I had forgotten that he didn't know we enhanced each other's gifts.

"El's gift is healing, remember? That's how she helped those villagers at the mission. What you don't know is that if we concentrate together, we can enhance our gifts and make them stronger. But right now we're too weak to try."

"I passed the guard on the way here. I'm sure they brought supplies, and I'll go get them right now."

"Did you get the journal?" I said.

"He was gone when I got there and the journal with him. The Watcher had been knocked unconscious. I found him rubbing the back of his head."

"We'll have to worry about that later. Hurry Damien," said El.

“Of course. I’ll be right back.”

And he was, with a pack that was filled with dried meat, cheese, and flasks of crimson. Damien handed each of us a flask, which we eagerly emptied. Once we felt reinvigorated, we knelt quickly next to Thomas to try again.

“Let me join you.”

“Thank you, Damien,” said El.

Once again she put her hands on Thomas, this time on each side of his head, and closed her eyes. The rest of us, including Damien, placed our hands on her. When we closed our eyes, I could feel the energy was much stronger this time, and in a few minutes I was shocked by the loudest blood-curdling yell I’d ever heard. It was filled with horror and it was coming from Thomas. He was awake and leaning away from the tree, his eyes wild, and I at once knew he was reliving the deaths of his two brothers. El had broken away and was trying to calm him, but he was having none of it.

“Thomas, please! You’re not well,” she pleaded.

He pushed her away and got to his feet, then immediately started to sway. Damien stepped forward to steady him.

“There’s nothing you could have done,” he said to Thomas.

“*Nooo...*” Thomas cried.

Damien helped him to his brothers’ side, where he fell to his knees and pulled Cedrik to him, cradling him in his arms like a child, wailing and rocking back and forth.

We were all crying, not knowing what to do. Damien put his arm around my shoulders and pulled

me close. I hugged him back, and as I looked up at him I could see tears rolling down his cheeks as well. The guard arrived a few minutes later. El was finally able to pull Thomas away and held him close, where they stood, both quietly crying together. I'd never felt so sad.

The guard silently went about their business, burying the dead and dismantling the camp so it looked as if it had never existed. Then they carefully wrapped Gregor and Cedrik in linen and gently carried them through the woods to a waiting wagon. Thomas and El followed and rode away with them on their final journey home. The rest of us stood in silence, tears still flowing, my head throbbing with pain.

“You saved Thomas, remember that,” said Damien.

It didn't help right now, but later I was sure it would.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I felt awful. I had so many questions, but I knew one thing for certain: this attack had Luena's name all over it.

"We forgot all about Eric," said Kate.

"Well, nobody is going anywhere alone," said Damien. "Katrina and I can go if you want to go back. The brothers are going to be beside themselves."

"Quinn is still away on Watcher business, and he isn't due back for a few days. I'll have to have Father send someone for him."

"I think we'd better stay together. This might be another trap. It's not far, so it shouldn't take that long," said Kate.

"Kate's right, I think we should stay together. That's our strength," said Rosa.

"Okay, let's go," I said.

We ran through the forest and along the creek until we could see the old mill in the distance.

"Let's stop and take a look around," I said. "See anything, Kate?"

"Nothing evil. How about you?"

“There’s our Watcher and Eric, but nothing else.”

“Good,” said Letta. “But stay alert.”

We slowed as we approached the Watcher. He told us no one had come all night and we were the only ones to show up today. We told him it was all right to go back and that we had lost two Watchers, Gregor and Cedrik. He was shocked but didn’t ask any questions; then he silently slipped away. We walked into the mill and up the stairs where we knew Eric to be from the vision. The door was right at the top.

“Eric, it’s all right. We’re here to help you,” I called through the door.

The door was solid iron, with two locking bolts and a padlock. Someone clearly wanted to be sure no one got in or out.

“I’m strong, but I don’t think I can break down this door,” said Damien.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Letta, how about a little heat on the lock?”

She smiled, then stared at the lock until we saw it engulfed in fire. It burned until it turned red.

“Now, how about a little cold?”

“No problem.”

Again she stared at the lock, then opened her mouth and blew. We could feel how cold her breath was, and as soon as it hit the hot metal the lock shattered.

“Amazing, simply amazing,” said Damien.

“She’s been practicing,” said Kate, filled with pride.

Then all we had to do was slide the bolts out and open the door. Eric was standing in front of the bed.

“It’s you!” he said when he saw me.

“Yes, let’s get you out of here,” I said.

He was weak but didn't hesitate to follow us out of the mill and into the morning light. Sunlight usually bothers made vampires, but Eric seemed fine, probably because he was so glad to be free.

"Thank you," he said, seeming not to know what to do next.

"Here, drink this," said Damien, handing him a flask.

He took a whiff and then gulped it down, draining every drop in just a few seconds.

"You'll come back with us now. We'll help you get your strength back and anything else you need," said Kate.

"There are two of you," he said, looking a bit frightened.

"I assure you, there's only one of each of us," I said. "But yes, we're sisters.

"Twins," said Kate.

"Identical," said Damien.

"Mirror," I said.

Rosa and Letta rolled their eyes.

Then Rosa said, "Let's go home."

"What happened to the men who imprisoned me?" Eric asked as we walked.

"All but one is dead," said Damien. "The leader escaped. Someone must have warned him. He's gone for now, but I don't think we've seen the last of him."

"We'll find him," I said sternly, looking straight ahead.

"How do you feel, Eric?" said Rosa. "I think we have food in the pack."

"I feel better than I have for a very long time."

“If you can run we’ll get back in just a few minutes,” said Damien.

“Yes, I think I’m strong enough.”

We ran until we were close to the front gate. It was a very solemn castle we returned to. El and Thomas had stopped at the mission, we learned, in order to give El a chance to heal the girl we saw in our vision and give Thomas some time with father Jonas to pray for his brothers and make funeral arrangements. I felt a lump in my throat. Father came into the courtyard after a few minutes; Kate and I ran into his arms and started to cry once again.

“I’m so glad you are all all right. We’ve been so worried,” he said.

“If only we would have sighted this earlier,” I said.

“Don’t blame yourselves. Whoever is making these fledglings is at fault.”

“It has to have been Luena. I can’t think of anyone else who would do such a thing,” said Damien.

“Who is the young man with you?” said Father.

“Oh, of course. Father, this is Eric. He’s the one the Volator had locked in the mill,” I said.

“We’re all sorry you had to go through such an ordeal,” said Father. “Let us get you to your quarters so you can wash up and rest. I know everything is very confusing to you now, but there will be plenty time to explain things once you get your strength back. Ah, here’s Andrew. Andrew would you please show Eric to a room by Damien’s in the north wing and make sure he gets everything he needs? Thank you. We’ll talk soon, Eric.”

“I just want to thank you for saving me, and I don’t mean just today,” said Eric, looking at me.

“You’re more than welcome Eric. Saving you keeps us all safe,” I said.

He went with Father’s page, Andrew, leaving us to finish our earlier conversation.

“What of the leader of the Volator?” asked Father.

“After we took care of the fledglings, which didn’t take long, thanks to the girls, I went to the village to finish our task. I found the Watcher had been knocked unconscious and both the leader and the journal were gone. Who warned him or where he went I don’t know.”

“Damn,” said Father clenching his fists.

We recounted what had happened when we got back to the encampment and how lucky we were to be able to save Thomas.

“I’m proud of all of you. Once again you have managed to avert a situation that could have been disastrous; but it’s a sad day for us all. We lost two good men. Loyal and honorable they were, and we’ll miss the terribly,” Father said, sadness filling his eyes.

“We have to find Luena,” said Damien. “We can’t keep putting all of us in danger like this. And these fledglings weren’t more than a few weeks old—starved, wild, and untrained, with not a weapon amongst them. They were victims as well.”

“I agree, that has to be our top priority, Father,” I said.

“We’ve had people out looking since the last incident and have found nothing,” said Father.

“That reminds me, Quinn is still out looking. He doesn’t know what’s happened. Can we send someone to find him and bring him back?”

“Of course. I’ll send someone right now. Why don’t you get cleaned up and rest? I’ll see you at dinner if you feel up to it, but if not, we’ll understand.”

“I’ll go look in on Eric. He probably has a million questions, and I have a few for him as well,” said Damien.

He gave me a hug. “You all did well today. I’m proud of each of you.”

We nodded but nothing was going to make us feel good about today. We were dirty, tired, and sad. The first two could be fixed; that last one was going to take some time.

We walked to our rooms in silence. What was there to say? Sarah didn’t say anything to us when we came in; she just hugged us and handed us each a towel. Although we needed to eat and drink something, no one even looked over to the table; we just headed for our rooms to be alone with our thoughts. I sank into my bath, put my hands over my face, and sobbed uncontrollably until there were no tears left and my stomach ached. What was I going to say to Quinn? I’d just be there for him and all the other brothers. That was all any of us could do now.

I swore at that moment, with every ounce of my being, that I would find Luena and make her pay. I had just vowed to kill my boyfriend’s sister, but no one, not even Damien, was going to stop me, even if I had to do it alone or die trying.

“Sarah,” I called, rising from the bath, my anger now sustaining me.

“Yes, Katrina? Are you all right?”

“No, but I need my strength. Please bring me some crimson and something to eat.”

As she turned to go I said.

“Sarah, I’m sorry about my hair.”

She smiled at me. “It’s all right sweetheart, I can fix it.”

I drank and ate my fill. Revenge was a very powerful thing, I decided and it was what I would need when I was up against Luena. She would learn that she’d picked the wrong family to cross, and I would make sure she regretted it.

Sarah washed my hair without fussing at me and I could feel my strength returning. As Sarah was getting me something to wear I told her to make sure the girls ate and drank too, as we had work to do. When I came out the others were around the table eating, drinking, and looking like death.

“So,” I said with a sigh, “I know how sad we all are, but right now I’m angrier than I am sad, and I’m not going to stop until Luena pays for what she’s done. That’s what’s going to keep all of us going now.”

I could see their faces brighten and their posture improve.

“Where do we start?” said Rosa.

“We start by getting our strength back as soon as we can, enhancing our sight, and finding Luena. Once we do, we’ll watch her—telling no one, trusting no one—as we prepare for whatever it takes, until we can take

her down, and whoever or whatever is with her. Are we agreed?"

They each agreed, and then we heard the door.

"El!" I said, and as I did, we all rose and rushed over to her. She was weak and pale, and just as we reached her she collapsed into our arms.

"She's barely breathing; she'll be in a dormant state in minutes if we don't do something." We had crimson, so we tried to drip some into her mouth by tipping her head back and letting it run down her throat.

"It's too cold," I said desperately. "Bring our Watcher in here, whoever he is."

Rosa rushed to the hall.

"There's no Watcher out here!" she said.

"Yell for help, Rosa," said Kate.

"We need help up here!" she shouted.

I heard boots running down the hall, and then through the door strode Quinn. *Oh no*, I thought, *why...*

"She needs fresh blood Quinn. I'm so sorry," I said as I looked sadly up to him.

He said nothing, but pulled his dagger, slashed a vein in his wrist, and put it to her lips, all the while looking into my eyes. All I saw there was sadness and questioning.

We all wondered why this had happened. As the warm blood dripped into El's mouth, signs of life started to appear. She became less pale and she started to moan, until at last she grabbed his arm and drank greedily.

Quinn's eyes closed as he felt the blood lust. This would be the last pleasure he would feel for many days I feared. We pulled El free as soon as color appeared once again in her cheeks, and then gave her crimson to finish her need. Now it was Quinn who was weak. Kate and I guided him over to a chair so he could rest until he regained his strength.

"He needs some juice, if you could, please," I said to Sarah, who was anxiously waiting in the hall, trying to stay out of the way.

"I'm here, Quinn. I won't leave you."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

He smiled and went right to sleep. I woke him when Sarah returned with the grape juice.

"Drink this; it'll help you get you strength back."

He gulped the cup of juice down and then went right back to sleep. I was thankful for him; the reality of tomorrow would come all too soon. I cradled him in my arms all night, whispering to him that it would be all right, but knowing it wouldn't be.

Quinn finally woke early the next morning; he thrashed and jumped up ready to fight.

"It's me, Quinn, your Katrina. I'm here."

He stared at me as if he'd never seen me before, and then a calm came over his face.

"I have to go home."

"Yes," I said, and then I went to him and embraced him. He returned the embrace and we held each other for several minutes; then he kissed the top of my head and pulled away.

"My family needs me now."

“I know, but I’m here. Always.”

He hugged me one more time and then turned and walked out. I followed, closing the door behind him, then leaned against it and once again started to sob. Rosa, Kate, and Letta came over from by the fire where they had been sleeping and embraced me; and we all had another cry.

“How’s El?” I said, wiping tears off my cheeks.

“Sleeping,” said Rosa.

“She’ll be fine, we’ll all be fine,” said Letta.

“This is the last time Luena is ever going to cause us pain, I swear,” said Kate.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The funerals were the very next day. Father Jonas performed the service and Cedrik and Gregor Voss were laid to rest in our family cemetery, next to their parents.

The brothers were helping each other be strong and Gunter thanked us for saving Thomas's life. After the services, Father and Mother had everyone come for lunch and thanked the brothers for their service to our family. Then Gunter cheered us with stories from their childhood and told how much mischief the seven of them could get into.

It was the closure we all needed.

Damien was wonderful during the days that followed. He was right there when I needed him and knew instinctively when to leave me alone. He spent some time with Eric, explaining his new life as a vampire, discussing what training would help him, and telling about our laws and other things all young vampires normally learn at a very early age. Eric didn't come out much yet, the whole human blood

thing needed to wear off, but we went over to see him often.

One problem remained uppermost in our mind. Luena was still missing, and even with our combined talents we were unable to sight her.

“Why can’t we find her?” said a very frustrated Kate.

“Maybe she’s gone to the Americas already,” said Letta, sounding defeated.

“That could be, but that’s not what I’m feeling,” I said. “I’m going to talk to Mother. I think Luena’s blocking us somehow, and maybe Mother knows something we can do to counteract it without tipping her off.”

“Good idea,” said Kate. “We’ll go to the library and see if we can find anything about it in those old scrolls.”

“Sounds like a fine plan. Let’s go,” said Rosa.

On my way over to Mother’s I saw Quinn coming toward me. I was glad to see that he looked a little better.

“How are you?” I said as I gave him a hug, which he returned.

“I’m healing, I guess. I feel as if I’m just going through the motions and trying to stay busy. The nights are the worst.”

“It’ll get better,” I said hugging him again.

“I wanted to talk to you about Paris. Do you have time now?”

“Of course. Let’s go to one of the meeting rooms, where we’ll have some privacy.”

“If you want me all to yourself, you only have to ask.”

It was nice to see that mischievous smile back.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said smiling back at him.

We entered the first chamber of the row of meeting rooms and closed the door behind us.

“First of all, I saw no sign of Luena, either on the way or in Paris, although I did see a lot of activity at the apartment that the family owns there, including Ivan having quite a heated discussion with a woman just outside the building. I didn’t recognize her, but I did see her again going in and out of Philepe’s estate, along with two other women. I noticed that they seemed to wait outside until Philepe left before going in the side gate instead of the front one.”

“That is strange,” I said. *Could these be the women from my vision?* I wondered.

“Nothing unusual was reported from any of the ports we sent Watchers to.”

“Thank you, Quinn. It’s all good information, but I just don’t know what it means yet.”

“I wish I had more,” he said, clenching his fists.

“We’ll find her, Quinn. She’s going to pay for what she’s done.”

“I will do whatever I can to help; just let me know.”

“I will. I’m on my way to speak with Mother now. Maybe she knows something that can help us.”

We got up to leave.

“Kat, I know Gunter thanked all of you before, but when I think about the fact that we could have lost Thomas too...”

He dropped his head, overwhelmed by the thought.

“I know, we feel the same way. I just can’t help thinking if we’d only gotten there earlier.”

Now it was my turn to be overwhelmed, tears once again filling my eyes. Quinn came over and we held each other until we could compose ourselves enough to speak.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s still so close to the surface, it doesn’t take much to bring tears.”

“Well, if you need any more cheering up, just let me know,” he said smiling down at me.

I laughed as he wiped the tears from my cheeks, then he kissed me on top of my head.

“All right, I’d better get back; I’ll walk you over to your mother’s.”

“I’ll see you later,” I said as we arrived and I walked up the stairs.

She was out on the balcony having tea when I came in.

“Katrina, good, come join me. How are you?” she said as she opened her welcoming arms.

I thought to myself about how many times during my childhood I’d wished for a moment like this.

“As well as I can be, I suppose,” I said, not wanting to leave her embrace. She smelled like lilies of the valley and she let me linger there as long as I needed to. Reluctantly I released her after a few moments.

“Come sit; have some tea and relax for a moment. It doesn’t seem like we’ve had more than five minutes alone together since I came back.”

“There has been a lot going on, hasn’t there?”

“Yes, and people will be arriving in less than ten days for the Council meetings and your birthday dinner.”

I had forgotten all about the dinner.

“I think we should keep it simple, under the circumstances. I don’t think any of us is in the mood to celebrate.”

“Of course. Just close family and friends then.”

“There’s something else I want to talk to you about, Mother.”

“Go ahead,” she said as she poured the tea.

“Father must have told you we think Luena was behind this latest fledgling attack.”

“He did,” she said as she took a sip from her cup.

“Well, we’ve been trying to sight her. We have to find her. Mother, before she succeeds in destroying us. Even with help from Rosa, Letta, and El, Kate and I can’t ‘see’ her. The only thing I can think of is that she is somehow blocking us, keeping anyone from finding her. Do you know about anything like that, and if so, is there any way around it without her knowing?”

She smiled, “Well, is that all?” She sighed.

“Remember when I said that I would get you each a talisman to protect you from spells? She could have one that makes her virtually invisible to those trying to find her the way you are. If Luena is in league with witches and they are using their power to protect her, your task will be great indeed. I’ll speak to my wizard friend again. If anyone knows how to circumvent their powers, he’s the one.”

“Thanks again, Mother.”

I relaxed a little then, knowing we might get some help. I drank my tea and we had a pleasant, simple mother-daughter talk about men, fashion, and the like. Later I headed back to the library to see if the others had found anything there. They all were looking through scrolls and books when I arrived.

“Find anything?” I asked.

“Not anything for finding Luena, but lots of other interesting things,” said Kate.

“I think we should all read this book about fledglings—how to create them, how to control them, about their training, even what goes on with their bodies and minds as they change. This chapter on why some are evil when they are turned and some aren’t may explain how Eric survived on his own for so long,” said Rosa.

“We do seem to keep coming across them, that’s certain, but we don’t have time to do anything but kill them,” I said.

“I, for one, want to know more. We’ve all learned basic things, but what if we feel we have to change someone?” said El.

Looking concerned, Letta said, “You know it’s forbidden.”

“Except in special circumstances. Moreover, it still happens; we’ve seen bad ones, but then there’s Eric,” said El.

“Tell us what this really is all about,” I said.

“What if a human we love may not survive unless we change him?” she said.

“Are you taking about what happened to Cedrik and Gregor, or is this just about Thomas?” said Rosa.

“I was thinking about Cedrik and Gregor. If there were a way I could have saved them, I want know about it, and if there is ever a next time I want to be prepared. As for Thomas, I love him, and if he were ever hurt beyond my ability to heal him with my gift, I want the other solution, as an option.”

“I do think that would fall under special circumstances,” said Rosa, looking to me for confirmation.

“Well, then, we’d need to know how to care for them once they’re turned, just in case. You’re right, El, every option should be available.”

“That’s far removed from what we’re supposed to be finding out, but I agree,” said Kate.

“So do I,” said Letta.

“Very well, that’s settled. Mother thinks that Luena may have a talisman from a witch or wizard, and that’s why we can’t find her.”

“They may be physically hiding her as well, for all we know, which would make finding her not only difficult, but even more dangerous than before,” said Rosa.

“Did she have any ideas about how to help us?” Kate asked.

“She’s going to ask the same wizard who’s making our talismans. She said if anyone knows, he will. Do you know anything about this wizard, Kate?”

“Only that he’s over five hundred years old and very powerful. He’ll help us; I know he will.”

We studied all afternoon, then decided to go take a nap before dinner.

“Remember when our days were filled with trivial pursuits, like chatting with friends, shopping, parties, and walking in the garden with a nice young man?” sighed Letta.

“Yes, but are you saying you’d like to go back to those days, Letta?” said Rosa.

“No, but maybe one or two dull days wouldn’t be bad,” she said.

We all laughed and agreed. We got back to our rooms and Sarah had snacks and wine waiting. We found we were all famished and ate everything but the tablecloth.

“Mother asked about our birthday dinner today and I had completely forgotten about it. We thought, if it’s all right with all of you, that we should keep it very simple, with just close family and friends attending.”

“I know I’m not in much of a mood to celebrate,” said El.

“Are any of us?” said Kate.

None of us were.

“I know it’s still a couple of weeks away, but I could really skip it all together,” said Letta. “I do look forward to seeing my family though.”

“What’s happened definitely makes one get one’s priorities in order,” said El.

“We have the benefit of time; living a very long life lets us do many different things. Humans have no such luxury, which makes our Watchers’ dedication to us quite amazing to me,” I said.

“You’re right, and I don’t think we appreciate them enough,” said Letta.

“Most of us have never been as close to our Watchers as your family has, Kat,” said Rosa.

“Gunter’s family have been our personal Watchers for generations, and that doesn’t happen very often,” I said.

“If we’re going to rest, we had better do it,” said Kate.

“I think I was more hungry than tired. I’m going to go see Eric,” I said.

Rosa laughed, “And if you just happen to see Damien, I guess that would be all right with you too?”

“You don’t think I’d have an ulterior motive for visiting Eric do you?”

“No, of course not,” said Rosa. “Say hello for us.”

“I will. Have a good rest,” I said as I headed out the door.

I felt better than I had for days, so I took a small detour through the gardens, which was full of blossoms—roses and lilies, passion vines and gardenia—their scent mingled together rivaling the finest Paris perfumes.

“The lilies suit you; beautiful, sweet, yet spicy.”

“Hello, Damien.”

He had his arms crossed and was leaning up against an ivy-covered archway at the north end of the garden.

“How are you?” he said as we started walking towards each other.

“Better today, thank you, and you?”

“Better now that you’re here.”

He was right in front of me now. I ran my hands over his chest and up around his neck. He was just what I needed, and just what I wanted.

"I missed you," I said without speaking.

"I'm right here," he replied.

It had become something comforting to say to each other and still gave my stomach butterflies. We kissed then, that gentle loving kiss; and we held each other as close as we could, but still not as close as I wanted.

When the kiss ended we just held each other for a while. He kissed my neck and I kissed his.

"You know what I'd like?" I said looking into his dark eyes.

"What's that?"

"I'd like to have a whole night alone, just you and I."

"So you'd like to wine and dine me so you can have your way with me? What kind of a man do you think I am?"

"My kind," I said as I kissed him once again, this time more hungrily. When that kiss ended we embraced, nuzzling into each other's necks. This time my only thought was the one I spoke to Damien's mind, *"Drink?"* I asked. I could feel his body tense, and then I felt the moan along the side of my neck, I never wanted anything more.

"Please," I pleaded with my mind.

"I love you," was his only reply, Then sweet pain came as he pierced the throbbing vein in my neck. While he drank I felt nothing but euphoria, my head falling to the side as I begged him to drink more. It hurt much worse when he stopped, leaving me wanting, and then I heard...

"Your turn."

My eyes popped open in shock, but his eyes were filled with such passion, my fear subsided. He kissed me and I could taste my blood on his lips. The moan I heard this time was mine. As the kiss ended and he leaned his head to the right to expose his neck to me, my heart was pounding.

I took my hand from his back and ran my thumb the entire length of the vein, which made him tremble slightly. I kissed the base of his neck and then sank my teeth into the vein that lay beating just beneath the surface. When the blood covered my tongue, like sweet salty wine, I could feel his energy flowing into me, a current of blood's pure pleasure. I didn't want it to end, but I knew it had to, so I pulled away, licking the last trickle of blood from his neck, knowing he would heal in seconds without any trace. When I looked up into his face, his eyes were closed, and he looked so peaceful. Feeling invigorated, I kissed his lips gently and then his ear, and he sighed and squeezed me closer.

"I'm going to come to this garden more often."

"Good idea."

"Were you just visiting the gardens or were you headed somewhere?"

"I was going to visit Eric, but I admit I was hoping to see you."

"I'm sure Eric would love a visit. Why don't you go over there now and meet me back here at sunset for a private dinner."

"Sounds wonderful; it's a date."

One final kiss and we headed off in different directions. I was practically skipping down the path. That was the most amazing experience I'd ever had.

Soon I was at Eric's door, hardly remembering how I got there. *Compose yourself*, I thought as I knocked on his door and was shocked when Eric opened it. He looked so different; a smile beamed across his face, and he looked healthy, so unlike the gaunt, lifeless man we'd rescued only days before.

"It's so good to see you, Katrina; come in."

His shoulder-length blond hair, the color of wheat shimmering in the morning sun, was now wavy and vibrant, not the matted, dull straw from before. His skin was smooth, color had returned to his cheeks, and his blue eyes were vibrant and full of life.

"I hope you feel as good as you look."

"Well thank you, I do, and if it weren't for all of you I'm sure I'd be dead. Now, with all your support and kindness, I feel hope for the first time. Damien thinks I'll be fully recovered soon, and then I can venture out. I'm hoping you'll have time to show me around."

"Oh, I don't think you'll have any shortage of people willing to show you around, Eric. Do you have any idea what your plans might be once you're healthy again?"

"Not really. Damien has mentioned his expedition to the Americas, and although my training won't be completed in time for this trip, the thought of going next time is exhilarating."

"Well I think you should stay and train with us. We have everything here to help you fulfill whatever

dreams you have. I have no doubt you'll be a tremendous asset to all of us."

"That's a very generous offer, and if everyone else is as sure as you are, I'd love to stay."

"It's settled, then. I'm glad."

He smiled at me, and I thought to myself, *He's gorgeous.*

"Has Damien been able to answer all your questions?"

"All the ones I could think of and those I never knew to ask. He's been very kind, and he's a good instructor."

You have no idea, I thought.

"Someday I'd like to hear your whole story, Eric."

"My memory is still coming back in bits and pieces. I hope soon I can put them together."

"El might be able to help you. I'll send her by tomorrow."

"Thank you. Maybe someday I'll be able to repay all of you."

"You've been through a lot, Eric. Just concentrate on getting well. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Come back and see me again soon."

"I will, but now I'll let you rest."

"Thanks again for everything."

"You're welcome."

I opened the door and found Kate on the other side ready to knock, an arm full of books and a surprised look on her face.

"Well look Eric, more company. I said you wouldn't be lonely."

“I thought you’d be gone by now, so I brought Eric something to read.”

“I see that, and the pack?” I asked as I gestured to the leather pouch slung over her shoulder.

“Well he has to eat, you know.”

“Of course. I’ll leave you it, then; have a nice visit,” I said to her with a smile and a wink.

I turned to see Eric smiling back at Kate.

“Goodbye, Eric, I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes, soon,” he mumbled, not taking his eyes from Kate’s.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Why was I thinking Eric needed company? My mind drifted back to Damien then. We were going to have dinner alone, and there wasn’t much time before dusk. I needed to change, so I headed back.

“I want something that will look good with my green eyes,” I told Sarah as I sat in my bath.

“How about the hunter green one?” Sarah said as she rifled through the dresses hanging in my armoire.

“Pretty, but too formal.”

“How about the burgundy one then? You look so pretty in that one.”

“I love it too, but it’s so wintry.”

“This is perfect,” she said as she brought it over for me to see.

It was perfect: greyish lilac silk, empire waist, square low neckline with short cap sleeves. The empire waist was accented with hand-embroidered white and yellow daisies.

“That’s the one.”

“When my hair was almost completely dry, Sarah twisted it around strips of rag cloth, rolled it up to my scalp and tied them. Then she helped me get dressed before brushing it out so it fell in soft curls down the middle of my back with thin strands from the sides drawn up and pinned with flowers.

“Lovely, just lovely,” she said, as she stepped back to take a look.

With just a touch of perfume behind each ear, I headed out. The sun was just setting as I walked to the gardens. When I got halfway across the courtyard I spotted Damien. He wore black pants, a black vest, and a light blue shirt, and his hair was pulled back. He was magnificent.

He smiled, with one arm bent, his hand resting across his waist, the other behind his back. As I got close to him he sighed.

“I never thought it could happen, but it has.”

“What, what’s happened?” I said frantically looking around.

He stepped forward and pulled a bouquet of flowers from behind his back.

“You’re even more beautiful than you’ve ever been before, that’s what’s happened.”

I could feel the heat on my cheeks.

“Lilies, my favorite,” I said as I took in their sweet fragrance.

“As I said before, they suit you. How about some dinner?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

He offered his elbow, which I accepted, the huge lily bouquet cradled in my other arm.

We turned the corner and entered the gardens through one of those ivy-covered archways, and what I saw next took my breath away.

The garden was aglow with candles and candelabras flickering in the moonlight. In the center a small table set for two made an intimate setting for our dinner. The atmosphere was truly magical. Damien guided me over and pulled out my chair. He took the bouquet from my arm and put it into a vase that was waiting for it on a side table, which also held the wine.

Once he took his seat, silent discreet waiters brought course after course, each with complementing wine choices. We laughed and held hands in between courses; there definitely was heat between us. With all that had happened since we met something had not changed the connection between the two of us.

What I had thought in the beginning was menacing turned out to be a smoldering passion. Luena had tainted him, making him seem evil; freeing him from her gave him his humanity back. Now he was mine—I was so proud of that, he was all mine—tears filled my eyes as I thought that thought.

“What’s wrong? What have I done to make you cry?”

“I can’t believe you’re mine. They’re tears of thankfulness.”

He stood and came to me and, taking my hands, he pulled me up and into his arms.

“We were meant to be together, my love. Never forget that, no matter what happens. For the rest of our lives, nothing and no one can keep us apart for long.

We will always find a way to be together, for our minds and our hearts are linked, always.”

He kissed me passionately, and I knew he was right; we were meant to be together.

“I don’t want to leave you tonight.”

“We have a lifetime, Katrina, now I’ll escort you back to your room, your reputation intact, as your father would expect.”

“Thank you for such a lovely evening; it’s just what I needed.”

“I look forward to many more.”

We walked back, arm in arm, across the courtyard. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, I stepped back into his arms and kissed him deeply, after which I whispered to him, “I want you, all of you, and soon I will have you.” Then I turned and walked up the stairs to my room without looking back.

“Have a nice evening?” asked El.

“I did. It was nice to be together and not have to kill anyone. How’s Thomas doing?”

“He’s staying busy helping Gunter with arrangements for the Council members and their families, who will be arriving soon. Besides the sadness, I think he’s secretly feeling guilty.”

“Guilty? Why would he feel guilty?”

“Because he’s alive and they’re not. I’ve tried to talk to him about it, and so has Gunter, but I just don’t know what to say.”

“You could ask him if his brothers would want him to be dead too, or if he would want Gregor or Cedrik to feel that way if it had been one of them that had lived instead of him.”

“That’s a good point, I’ll talk to Gunter about it again, but he probably just needs more time.”

“Can I ask you to do something tomorrow?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Would you go and see Eric? He’s having trouble with his memory, and I thought maybe you could help.”

“All right, I’ll go in the morning.”

“Kate’s been spending a lot of time with him. I think she’s quite taken with our handsome new resident.”

“I hope she’s cautious until we know more about him. Well I think I’ll go to bed,” she said.

“Me too. See you in the morning. Do you want to go work out early?”

“Not too early, all right?”

“All right,” I said as I walked into my room; but then I didn’t feel like going to bed yet, so I took the flowers from my hair and took my brush with me back into the common room. I sat in front of the fire, where I brushed my hair mindlessly and reflected on my day.

I closed my eyes. “*Damien?*” I called.

“*I’m here,*” he replied.

“*What am I going to do without you for all those months?*”

“*I’ll be as close as this, and I’ve decided that I may not stay with the whole group. I think I can save time if I go out on my own or just with Demitrie and of course Ivan. Then we can meet up with the group later, tell them what we’ve seen, and head back.*”

“*As long as you can stay safe, I’d love to have you back sooner.*”

“Would you like to go for a ride in the morning?”

“I’d love to.”

“Just after sunrise then?”

“Perfect.”

“Goodnight, Katrina.”

“Goodnight, Damien.”

Now I was ready for bed. It had been a wonderful day. As I got up from my chair something outside caught my eye, so I opened the door and went out onto the balcony. I saw Mother standing in the courtyard. She appeared to be waiting for something or someone, and then out of the shadow a man appeared dressed all in black, except that his hair was snow white. She greeted him with an embrace and they headed off. *The wizard*, I thought. *Good; we should have some answers soon.*

I must have fallen asleep seconds after my head hit the pillow. I awoke just before dawn, totally refreshed, having had no strange dreams and no visions.

I dressed in my riding clothes, tied my hair back, pulled on my boots, and left to meet Damien at the stables. It was a beautiful morning; the crisp cool air filled my lungs and I could hear Klaus singing as I walked past. When I reached the stables I called out, but Damien wasn’t there. Nulla was eating her oats and hay.

“Hey, girl, finish up and I’ll give you a good brushing. I guess I’d better get a brush then, hadn’t I?”

I went to the tack room to get the brush and noticed that Theo wasn’t in his stall. *That’s strange*, I thought, but I got the brush and headed back to Nulla. She had finished her oats and was now happily eating hay. I

opened her stall door and walked in. After I finished brushing her I brought her out so I could saddle her.

“*Katrina?*” I heard in my mind. “*Meet me in the meadow.*”

“I’ll be right there,” I replied.

I finished saddling Nulla and mounted up. *Damn*—something wasn’t right.

“Open the gate,” I yelled, “and be alert!”

I galloped through the gate and around the corner to the right and into the meadow. I could see Theo in the distance, but where was Damien?

“*Damien?*” I called with my mind. No answer.

I lowered my body over Nulla’s neck and asked her for more speed. I didn’t recognize the scent; I just knew it wasn’t good.

When I finally got to the top of the hill where Theo was standing, I could see a blanket had been laid out with a willow basket covered with a red checkered cloth sitting at one corner.

“Damien?” I called out loud.

“Over here,” I heard from my right. I dismounted and left Nulla beside Theo. As I got around the other side of the hill I could see Damien; he had his back to me, and turned when he heard me get close.

“I want you to meet someone,” he said.

When he stepped aside, there was a woman standing in front of him. She was about my height, wearing a black riding habit including crop and hat, but I didn’t see another horse. I couldn’t get a good look at her face because of the shadow from her hat. Damien held out his hand to me, which I took. My heart was

pounding—this couldn't be good—but Damien seemed happy and perfectly calm.

“Katrina, I want you to meet the Countess Daniela Daminov, my mother.”

I wanted to run. I was sure Damien could feel the tension in my body, as he put his hand on the middle of my lower back to steady me. She held out her hand for me to shake, which I did. It was ice cold, and then our eyes met. I hoped the shock didn't show on my face, for she was one of the women from my vision, one of the three I'd seen in that dress shop.

“How nice to meet you,” I somehow managed to say.

“She's beautiful, Damien, just like her mother.”

I managed a weak smile.

“I was just passing through. I have been visiting friends in Bulgaria and Romania. When Marcus mentioned you were here, I knew I had to see you,” she said to Damien. “It's been so long. Your father never believed I wasn't involved in the trouble all those years ago; guilt by association I suppose, Antoinette being my sister. Your father said he wouldn't let me near you. I know I can't stay here, Damien, I wouldn't think of it, but I hope we can get together in Paris someday and get reacquainted.”

“As a matter of fact...”

“*No!*” I was yelling to him with my mind. No reply; why couldn't he hear me?

“I'll be in Paris later this month on business, and I'll be staying at the apartment. Perhaps we could get together then.”

“I’d love that, Damien, really,” she said. “Well I’ll leave you, then; I know I’m not welcome.”

She came closer to Damien and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“I’ve always loved you, my son; please believe that.”

They hugged each other and then she walked off into the forest.

Knowing this meeting was a dream come true for Damien, how could I tell him I felt his mother was evil?



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I called to you earlier. Did you hear me?” I said.

“No, what were you trying to tell me?”

“That something was wrong. How about just a few minutes ago, did you hear me then?”

“No.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange we couldn’t talk to each other?”

“I suppose...what are you saying?”

I looked into his eyes.

“*Can you hear me now?*”

“*Yes.*”

“Does your mother know what your gift is?”

“No one but you knows.”

“Then she must have a way to block our gifts, maybe to keep anyone from finding her.”

“But that makes sense, don’t you think? She’s been banished, after all.”

“Mother said she was fine unless she got involved in any trouble again, so why would she need to hide herself like that?”

“She might worry that with all this new trouble someone might think she’s involved, even if she’s not; and we don’t know that she is involved do we?”

“No, not for sure. I just had a bad feeling when I was coming here.”

“It’s probably just because you couldn’t talk to me. I want to know my mother. You of all people should understand that.”

“Of course I do. I just want you to be careful, that’s all. A lot has happened lately, and her just showing up a few days after we lost two Watchers makes me nervous.”

“I understand, but I just have to give her the benefit of the doubt. I promise I’ll keep my perspective. Let me tell you this, if I get any proof she’s aligned with Luena, I’ll...I’ll...”

“You’ll what, kill your own mother? Of course not. That’s what worries me; they know you’ve always wanted to know her and they may use that to get you to their side. Even if she isn’t involved with them they may still use her to get to you, by threatening to harm her. That’s what Luena did to you before. We’ve got to think about this very carefully and plan for every scenario. Please, Damien?”

“You’re right, you’re right, but we have plenty of time to figure this out.”

I pulled him close then.

“You know I want you to have a happy ending like mine, right?”

“I do, but there’s nothing more important to me than you.”

As I hugged him, over his shoulder I could just make out the form of a woman just inside the tree line. I drew in a breath, knowing I wouldn't forget her scent, and wondering what else I might learn about her from that scent. I detected some kind of herb and lilac. Maybe she just wanted one last look at her son. My vision had told me the feelings I had about her today were right, but for Damien's sake I hoped I was wrong.

"I wanted to surprise you with breakfast."

"I was surprised, all right," I said. "So your mother just walked out of the woods?"

"I hadn't seen her for years, but of course she looked the same. I was as shocked as you were. She said to me essentially what she just told you."

"But why now?"

"I don't know. All this time, and especially since the return of your mother, I've dreamed of this moment, and now I don't know what to make of her visit. What if she was under her sister's influence as much as I was under Luena's? And what if you hadn't believed in me?"

"You proved yourself before I believed in you."

"I want to give her a chance. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course, but trust your instincts and don't shut me out. We're in this together, remember?"

"I know you're right, and I do trust your instincts. It's just that..."

"She's your mother, I know."

"We'll figure it out somehow. Now how about that breakfast?"

This was my life now, never a dull moment. We had a pleasant breakfast, but we both had much on our minds. Over and over I felt a pit in my stomach when I thought of his mother; this wasn't going to end well.

"I'll race you back," I said as I galloped off. He let me win, I knew, but that didn't stop me from rubbing it in as we walked back to the stables and handed the horses over to the groom.

"Thank you for breakfast."

"Thank you for being so supportive. What are you up to now?"

"I'm going to work out with El, and probably the others will come over once they drag themselves out of bed. How about you?"

"I plan to bring Eric to start his training today with Gunter, so I'll see you there."

I put my arms around him.

"Whatever happens, I'm here for you. We'll figure this out together—not just me, but all of us, remember that."

"I will. You have changed my life, and I'd never forget that. There's nothing I wouldn't do for any one of you. Now, I'd better go see if Eric is ready for his first day out."

"You're sure he's ready? I'll bet he can't wait; he's been alone and a prisoner so long. Now he has a fresh start with a new family to support him."

"Kate especially has been giving him some extra attention hasn't she?"

"She has, but I'm thinking she'll have some competition for his attention now that he's venturing out."

“See you over there, then.”

“Very good.”

What a strange morning, I thought, shaking my head. El was already at the training grounds going through drills with Thomas. I couldn't believe how good the girls were. Four girls who, just weeks earlier, had been social princesses were now vampire warriors.

“Great job, El,” I said as they finished.

“She's brutal, just brutal; no mercy whatsoever,” said Thomas, smiling with obvious pride.

“What kind of training do you want to do, Kat?” he asked.

“I think sensory skills,” I said. “That's where we walk the course blindfolded and have to use all our other senses to fight. It's the most advanced of all our drills, but once mastered it fills you with the confidence needed to do anything else,” I said to El.

“Do you want to do it together or separately?” said Thomas.

“Together, please,” I said.

“You really think I'm ready for this?” said El.

“I know you are. Let's take a few seconds to get focused.”

We held hands, closed our eyes, and slowed our breathing.

“Ready?” said Thomas.

“Ready,” said El.

We walked to the course, which was about fifty yards long, lined with lots of different things, such as sheep pens, wagons, horses, guard dogs, and whatever else Gunter's devious mind might have come up with.

When we got to the start of the course, Thomas handed us our wooden practice swords, tied on our blindfolds, and we walked side by side onto the course.

“Tune in with your hearing first, and then smell. We need to talk to each other the whole way, and above all trust yourself; your first instinct will be right,” I said.

“Men on the right!” said El.

We fought off two men easily.

“Stop!” I yelled as rocks flew in front of us. As we walked on, men came from above us and behind us, and we had to duck under swinging planks and jump over covered pits, until finally we felt we were at the end.

“Six men,” I said. “We’re surrounded.”

“Back to back!” yelled El just as they were on us. We turned in our circle formation, fighting two, three, four, and all six at once.

“That’s it, thank you gentleman. You can take your blindfolds off now.”

“Okay Gunter, if you’re tired,” I said with a smirk, as I pulled the blindfold off my head.

He laughed. “I’m man enough to admit it. Good job, you two.”

“That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen,” said Eric.

“You should see what they can do at full speed,” said Damien.

“Nice to see you out and about, Eric,” I said, smiling at him.

“It’s nice to be out and about, thank you.”

“Gunter, this is your new student, Eric,” said Damien.

“Well, let’s get right to it, then, if you’re ready?” said Gunter.

“Looking forward to it,” said Eric.

“Good, we’ll get you fitted and then we’ll do an assessment of your skills.”

And off they went.

“I guess Gunter doesn’t waste any time?” said Damien.

“No, I’ve never known him to,” I said.

“Thomas, would you and El like to have lunch with us?” said Damien.

“That would be great. Give us an hour or so,” he said.

“Perfect. I need to go talk to Mother for a few minutes,” I said. “I’ll meet you in a little while. Let’s eat in the gardens.”

Damien smiled, “My favorite place.”

“Mine too,” I said smiling back at him.

“Look,” said Damien as he motioned with his head for me to look at the training behind me.

There were Kate, Rosa, and Letta watching Eric as he worked with Gunter. He had taken his shirt off and they were practically drooling over him. I had to admit he was pretty gorgeous.

“Don’t you girls have some training of your own to do?” I called to them.

They turned and scowled at me, and Damien and I laughed. As they turned and walked away, Kate actually looked back and stuck her tongue out at me.

“Oh that’s mature,” I yelled back at her, and to Damien I said, “I’d better go if I’m going to get back in an hour.”

I gave Damien a quick kiss and headed over to see Mother. I was interested not only about her visitor, but also about what she had to say about Damien's mother showing up this morning.

"Hello, Mother," I called as I entered.

"I'll be right out, sweetheart," she called from her room.

I went to the sofa. Just as I sat down, I heard in my mind, "*You're as beautiful as your mother.*"

I turned around but no one was there.

"*Who are you?*" I asked with my mind.

"*I am Allwain. I have come to instruct you in the ways of magic.*"

"Katrina, I want you to meet someone."

I stood and turned toward her voice. It was the man I had seen with her in the courtyard.

"I've already introduced myself, Elizabeth," he said.

"Nice to meet you in person though," I said as they approached.

He was amazing; there was such an aura around him, it made his pale skin glow, turning it almost translucent. His hair of course, was snow white, as I had seen that last night. His eyes were a blue-grey; and although I knew how old he was, I would have thought he was middle aged—and maybe he was, for his race.

"I feel great danger, Katrina. You, your sister, and your friends have been brought together for a reason. You are to become Protectors of the Races. I'm here to give you every instruction I can to help you. No one but you can know that I'm here for now. I must observe and evaluate each of you and anyone you associate with while I'm here; this is why I have come

to you now. In a week of the full moon you will all turn eighteen, and if all goes well we will do our protection ceremony on the last night of the full moon. Secrecy is paramount, Katrina, do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Something strange happened this morning."

Mother and Allwain looked at each other, as if they knew what I was about to say.

"Damien and I were to go for a ride this morning. He wasn't at the stables, but called to me to meet him in the meadow. When I arrived he was having a conversation with someone...his mother, and that's not all that was strange. While he was with her, he couldn't hear me with his mind."

"So that's what we felt this morning," said Mother as she looked to Allwain.

"What do you mean?"

"We felt uneasiness in the air this morning. We too tried to see what it could be, but saw nothing," said Allwain.

"You were right, Katrina," said Mother. "They are blocking us somehow."

"She swore she only came to see Damien and she asked that he believe that she was innocent of the charges against her. Damien so wants to believe her; she is his mother, after all."

"And what do you think, Katrina? What do your instincts tell you?" Allwain said.

"That she's evil and she is trying to use Damien. I think she believes she can turn him."

"Do you think they can, Katrina?" said Mother.

“No!” I said. “Before, Luena used the people he loved in order to control him, and I’m afraid they’ll try that again with us. We need to know how to fight them.”

“You were absolutely right, Elizabeth, she’s ready,” he said. “Now go about your regular routine. I’ll be observing, strategizing, and preparing.”

I hugged Mother.

“Thank you both. I feel so much better now.”

I *did* feel better as I left to meet the others for lunch. Our birthdays were next week, and people would be arriving soon. Then we were going to Paris, and what was to be a celebration trip now seemed to be so much more. When I got to the gardens everyone was already there.

“There she is,” said Kate. “How was Mother?”

“She’s fine, still making plans for next week. How was your workout?”

“Good. We didn’t do anything as advanced as what you and El did, but Gunter seemed pleased,” said Rosa.

I joined them on the rug on the ground.

“Eric, what about you? How did you like your first day with Gunter?”

“I enjoyed it. I don’t know if he did, but I did,” he said with a big grin.

“Gunter said you did well,” said Kate. “Look what he’s done with all of us in such a short amount of time.”

“That’s true,” said Letta. “In a few days he’ll have you believing too.”

“I’m just glad to be out of my room,” Eric said. “Not that it’s not lovely; in fact compared to my last room it’s amazing, and now I have all of you as company. You don’t know how fine that feels.”

“We’re glad you’re here too,” said Kate.

That’s true enough, I thought. She’s really glad.

“What’s for lunch? I’m starving.” I said.

“Well, let’s see. Klaus gave me a little bit of everything,” said Damien, while he looked through the basket by his side. “There’s smoked meats and sausage, chicken, cheeses, bread and pastries, plus two kinds of wine.”

“That’s it?” said Rosa. “Well, maybe Sarah will get us a snack later.”

We all laughed. We ate our fill, and we laughed at Thomas’s really bad Gunter imitation. As I looked at the group, except for Kate, of course, we were all so different; but now we were very much a family. Even Eric, whom we hardly knew, fit in as if he’d always been with us.

Now I could see what Allwain meant; we had all come together for one purpose, to protect the races from whomever or whatever threatened them. I felt strong emotion then—pride, love, and fear—for all of us.

We worked out every morning and studied every afternoon. Even Damien and Eric joined us in the library. Eric had much to learn about us. El had tried to help him regain his memory, but so far nothing had worked. He said not having his memory didn’t bother him as much as it had, because he was making new memories with a new family now.

Rosa's family was the first to arrive for the birthday celebration and the Council meeting. El's and Letta's were next, and it was nice to have them here. Gunter put the girls through their paces for their fathers, who were shocked at how much not only their skills had improved, but their confidence as well.

"Very impressive, Gunter," said Rosa's father, Michael.

"Yes," said Letta's father, Ricardo. "And in such a short amount of time. It's hard to believe the amount of improvement in their skills."

"We're very proud of you girls," said El's father, Edward. "You've all worked very hard, and although I had misgivings about your going to Paris to celebrate your birthdays, I've changed my mind. Now I think anyone who tried to harm any of you wouldn't stand a chance."

"Does that mean I have your permission to go, Father?" said El.

"Yes, yes it does; you've earned it," he said.

"Ricardo and I agree and also offer you our blessings," said Michael, but he wagged his finger, and added, "As long as Watchers accompany you."

"Thank you, Father," said Rosa and Letta.

Our dinner was to be tomorrow night, just family and a few close friends including of course Damien, Eric, Thomas, Quinn, Avery, and Simon. In the back of my mind was the fact that the last night of the full moon week was Sunday.

After dinner Damien wanted to take a walk in the gardens.

"We haven't had much time alone, have we?"

“Not enough for me, that’s for sure.”

“How many days can you stay with me in Paris?”

“Three, three days.”

“And three nights,” I said just before I gave him a kiss, one that said more than words could.

“I look forward to spending that time alone with you, more than I could ever say, but for tonight I wanted to just be here in the gardens, our favorite spot, so I could give you this. Happy Birthday Katrina,” he said as he pulled a box out of his pocket.

I opened the box slowly, my hands shaking a little. Inside was a gold filigree heart, the most intricate, beautiful thing I had ever seen. It was just over an inch long and not flat but puffed like a real heart. As I inspected its perfection, I noticed something red sparkle from inside it, reflecting the moonlight. Damien lifted the heart out of the box and opened it like a locket. But instead of a picture it held a very large blood-red ruby cut in the shape of a heart.

“It’s my heart,” he said. “And I’m giving it to you.”

Then he stepped behind me and placed it around my neck; the long gold chain let it hang over my heart just between my breasts.

“I love it, Damien,” I said as I threw my arms around him.

“I had it made especially for you in Salzburg by our family’s jeweler.”

“It’s just beautiful! Thank you,” I said and kissed him again.

I didn’t want him to go on the expedition, but I knew he had to. We had to get established there as soon as possible.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“I thought you couldn’t read my mind.”

“I don’t have to have any special skills to know that you’re thinking about the time I’ll be away.”

Tears welled up in my eyes.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to start crying, it’s just that we just found each other, and now you’re leaving.”

He laughed, “There was a time you wanted to be rid of me.”

“That seems a lifetime ago.”

“Your father did a fantastic job preparing you. When you were challenged and had to mature practically overnight you were up to it, and you will survive being without me for a little while.”

“Oh, I know I can; I just don’t *want* to. Who’s going to keep you out of trouble?”

“I’m going to be too busy to get into any trouble.”

“Damien, when Kate and I were going over the new maps of America we got a really bad feeling when we put our hands over New Orleans. Kate actually got a shock, and we both sensed evil there—something we didn’t get from any other city.”

“New Orleans...I believe Philepe has been there. I could ask him about it. Anything else?”

“Not really. From the map, the vastness of the wilderness drew me to it. Will you be going anywhere in the west?”

“We’re going to cover the entire country from east to west, north to south. What I’m really going to look for is a place where we can share our lives together.

All of us have family legacies—well, except Eric—but now we’ll have a chance to do something on our own.”

He made it seem even more exciting than I had already imagined for myself.

“You’ll find it, I know you will, and I can’t wait to start our lives together in that New World.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Hey you two,” I heard from a familiar voice.

It was Quinn, with that mischievous grin beaming across his face, eyes twinkling in the moon light.

“Gunter sent me to find you. He wants all of you to join us for a little celebration tonight, just something simple for your birthdays; how about it?”

“It’s very thoughtful of him.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Damien.

“Gunter thought it would do everyone good,” added Quinn.

We walked together to the Watchers’ compound. A fire was burning and everyone else seemed to already be sitting around it—except that there were five brothers now, not seven. The thought left a lump in my throat again, and I had to bite my lip so I wouldn’t cry. I reached over and gave Quinn’s hand a squeeze, but I couldn’t look at him or I knew I’d break into tears. He squeezed my hand back, then let it go.

“Look what I dragged in,” he said.

“Well good,” said Gunter. “Grab something to drink and have a seat.”

We laughed and told stories, sang folk songs, and even danced a few jigs.

“Now since we’re celebrating your birthdays, we have something for you,” said Gunter.

“We all worked on them,” said Thomas.

Gunter handed each of us a small leather pouch.

“Well, go ahead, open them,” said Quinn.

I opened my pouch and poured the contents into my hand. It was a silver bracelet with double oval silver links, from which five silver charms dangled: two stars, a sun, a crescent moon, and a heart.

“Five girls, five charms—and the hope that wherever you are it will make you think of us, and how much we love you,” said Gunter.

“Happy birthday,” said Thomas, raising his cup in a toast.

“Thank you all,” I said.

We all stood.

“We love them,” said Rosa, “but I want to thank you, Gunter. If you hadn’t trained Kat and Quinn so well, we probably wouldn’t be here tonight.”

“That’s right,” said Letta. “And thank you for putting up with all of us these many weeks.”

“That’s true enough, but you can nominate him for sainthood another day,” laughed Quinn. “This night is for the five of you. You’re now a part of our family, so happy birthday this year and every year.”

“Hear, hear!” said Thomas.

We all drank a toast, and then we said our goodnights.

“That was really nice,” I said to the girls as we made our way back.

The others all agreed that it had been a special evening and a wonderful thing for the brothers to have done for us. “I didn’t want to ask you earlier, but show us your necklace Kat,” said Kate.

“Damien gave it to me earlier,” I said as I stopped to show them.

“It’s beautiful,” said Rosa.

Then I opened it and they all gasped.

“That’s the biggest ruby I’ve ever seen,” marveled Letta.

“He said it’s his heart, and he’s giving it to me.”

“Ahhh,” they all sighed.

“I’m going to miss him so much when he goes to America.”

“The time will pass quickly. We’ll keep you busy, and we planned to go to each of our homelands remember?” said El as we started to walk again.

“You’re right, that’s going to be fun,” I said, “And Damien is going to try to be back sooner than the others. Thanks, you all always make me feel better.”

We had a group hug.

“I love our bracelets, don’t you?” said El.

“Yes, that was so thoughtful. See why we’ve always loved them so much?”

“I certainly do,” said El.

“We all do, Kat,” said Letta.

“Avery and Simon were still so quiet tonight,” said Kate.

“It’s still close to the surface for all of us; it’s going to take some time,” I said.

When we got upstairs I decided to tell them about Damien’s visitor this morning.

“Did any of you have an odd feeling this morning?”
I said.

“Something woke me up, but I didn’t know what it was,” said Kate.

“What do you mean Kat? What’s happened?” said El.

“Damien had a visitor this morning when he went for a ride...his mother.”

They gasped

“Did you see her?” said Rosa.

“Yes. I went out to meet him and he was there in the meadow speaking with her. I recognized her...from a vision I’d had recently. I’d seen her with another woman who I now believe is Luena’s mother. The two of them met up with a third woman—the one Kate and I saw in the image we got from New Orleans.”

“But you still don’t know who she is, right?” said Kate.

“No, not yet.”

“Seems odd she just happened to show up now, after all these years,” said Rosa.

“What did Damien think about it?” said El.

“She’s his mother, and he’s dreamed of reuniting with her, just as I did with my mother; but I talked with him and I believe that he realizes he needs to be cautious.”

“What do you think, Kat? In our vision the other woman felt truly evil,” said Kate.

“He wants me to keep an open mind. He also reminded me that he was under Luena’s influence because she threatened the people he loved, and he suggested that it may be the same with his mother.

My thought is that I'd rather err on the side of caution, because my gut says she's using him. They want him on their side, and I think they will use anything or anyone to achieve their goal."

"Which is?" said Rosa.

"To destroy our family, for one, and then rule the vampires. If it means killing all the peaceful clans, just as they tried to do in the clan wars, they'll do it."

"They'll have to go through us," said Rosa.

"That's right, and so far so good," said Letta.

"We were right too—I mean about them blocking us, because none of us saw or felt anything before Damien's mother, whose name is Daniela, by the way, showed up," I said.

"That's right. What did Mother have to say about that?"

"She's working on it; we should know something very soon." *Sunday*, I thought to myself, *the last night the moon looks full*.

"And we'll be going on our trip to Paris soon," said El.

Suddenly we all got strangely quiet.

"What's going through everyone's mind right now? What exactly are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm feeling anxious," said Kate.

"Me too," I said.

"When El mentioned Paris I got chills," said Letta.

"Something is going to happen there, but I feel we have to go," said Rosa.

"That's exactly the way I felt," said El.

I gasped and said, “I just remembered something. You know that Quinn was gone before everything happened with Eric, right?”

Everyone nodded.

“I sent him to Paris to watch, without anyone else knowing, not even Damien. When he got back, and after the funerals, he told me what he saw. He said he saw Ivan at Damien’s family apartment, having a heated discussion with someone—a woman. He also saw the same woman outside Philepe’s chateau with two other women. He didn’t recognize them, but they seemed to wait outside the chateau until Philepe left, and then all three entered—through the side gate, not the front, which he thought was strange. What do you all think?”

“That those women are the ones in our visions,” said Kate.

“That means Damien and Luena’s mothers are, or were, in Paris. But didn’t you say she told Damien she had just been in Romania and Bulgaria?” said Rosa.

“And who’s the third woman, the one you both saw in New Orleans? And what were they all doing at Philepe’s?” said El.

“Obviously Philepe isn’t involved, because they didn’t want him to see them,” I said.

“She doesn’t seem to be blocking us,” said Kate.

“I don’t think she has any idea someone might be looking,” I said.

“We get these visions for a reason, and so far it’s never been good,” said Kate.

“I have a feeling the mystery woman is the key,” said Letta.

“I think you’re right,” I said.

“So should we try to ‘see’ what she’s up to and where she is, and maybe we’ll see the other two as well,” said Kate.

“She might get tipped off if we try it now. I say we wait until we get to Paris, but just have general look just before we go,” I said.

“That sounds like a good idea,” said El.

“Everyone else agree, then?” I said.

They did.

“Remember, we have to keep these things between us, agreed? What a day. I’m going to bed,” I said.

“*Goodnight, Damien,*” I said as I slipped into bed. “*Thank you again for the beautiful gift. I love it, and I love you.*”

“*Goodnight, Katrina. You’re welcome, and happy birthday. I’ll see you tomorrow.*”

We worked out again in the morning, but in the afternoon we went over to see if we could help Mother with anything for that night or the next week.

“Thank you all, but I have plenty of help, and I want it to be a surprise, so go relax. Rest and pick out a nice simple but elegant dress, and be ready to come back here when I send for you,” she said.

“Looks like we have the afternoon off,” said Rosa.

“I don’t feel like resting. We’re not that kind of girl anymore, are we?” said Letta.

“Let’s go hunt; it’s been too long,” I said.

El laughed, “Sarah’s going to yell at us.”

“She probably was going to do that anyway,” said Rosa.

We knew only how true that was; we laughed as we walked over to the front gate.

“Sorry ladies, you can’t go anywhere without Watchers,” said the guard.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said.

“Those are the orders,” he said.

“Problem, ladies?” Thomas asked.

“The guard says we can’t go out without Watchers,” said El.

“Those are your father’s—all your fathers’—orders. Do you still want to go out?” he said.

We looked at each other and shrugged.

“The moment’s passed now,” said Letta.

“I say Watchers can come,” said Kate.

She looked at me and gave me a wink.

“If they can catch us,” I said.

Kate and I leapt to the top of the wall; El, Rosa and Letta followed; we all looked down at poor Thomas; and then we turned and jumped down on the outside of the castle wall.

I could hear him in the background yelling for the others as we ran into the woods, still laughing.

“Now then, they’re going to be mad, so let’s scan the area,” I said.

I took a deep breath, sensing nothing out of the ordinary.

“Anything Kate?”

“No...oh, now I sense Watchers riding perimeter.”

“I don’t feel right,” said El suddenly.

“We have to get to the Watchers. Let’s go,” I said.

It took only seconds to get in front of them.

“Thomas!” El yelled. “Stop, we need to go back! Something isn’t right.”

“All right, let’s go,” he said.

“What is it?” asked Simon.

“We don’t know. Let’s just get back,” I said.

“What’s happened?” said Gunter.

“Nothing, but something is not right—we all felt it,” said El.

“Don’t send Watchers, but someone should go out without being seen to see if we can find out something,” I said.

“Done,” he said and started back.

“That was really weird,” said Letta.

“It’s nothing like we’ve ever felt before,” said Rosa.

“I’m going over to talk to Mother,” I said.

“I’ll go with you,” said Kate.

“We should all go,” said El.

“She’s probably still in the reception hall,” I said.

She wasn’t, so we went over to her apartment.

“Mother, are you here?” I said.

“I’m here; I’ll be right out,” She called from the back room.

She didn’t look well when she came into the front room.

“What’s wrong, Mother?” said Kate.

“I don’t know, I just don’t feel right,” she said.

“We felt it too,” said Kate.

“Someone doesn’t want you to go through with the ceremony,” said Allwain.

“Who are you?” said Rosa.

“This is Allwain,” said Mother. “He’s Lord of the Wizards, and he’s here to help you.”

“I have produced amulets and talismans to both protect you and alert you to danger. We won’t be able to wait until Sunday for the ceremony; we’ll have to do it tonight. I have prepared the chapel, so after dinner you must make your way there. Do not let anyone else know where you are going. Someone within these walls is a traitor,” he said.

We were all in shock. Someone we knew was betraying us. *Who?*

“Go back to your rooms, meditate together, and heighten all you gifts in preparation for the ceremony. You must be prepared for anything and be able to concentrate only on me tonight. I’ll see you at the chapel,” he said.

Then he turned and went back into his room, leaving us to gather ourselves and try to absorb all he had told us.

“You girls stay together. Dinner will be promptly at seven, and I’ll see you then.”

We were in a state of disbelief. We just looked at each other for a few minutes, not knowing what to do next.

“All right, another day in our dull lives. What now?” said Rosa.

“Let’s head back,” I said. “No wait, I’ve got an idea. There are passageways under the entire castle, and I think we need to go check them out. If I remember, one leads to a chamber right underneath the chapel. That’s where we should meditate.”

“You’re sure about this Kat? You don’t think the guard should check it out first?” said Kate.

“Everyone has always told me to trust my instincts, and this is what my instincts are telling me right now.”

“Can we get there from here without being seen?” asked Letta.

“I think so. Kate, can you see, is there an entrance nearby?” I said.

She closed her eyes for a moment.

“Yes, down the stairs, at end of the hall, just before you get outside,” she said.

“Do you see anything or anyone inside the passageway?” I said.

“No, but it’s dark; and remember, there are things we can’t see,” she said.

“We can handle the dark,” said Letta. “Let’s go.”

Down the stairs and to the right we went, until we got to the end of the hall where Kate had said the entrance would be.

“It’s a stone wall, Kate,” said Rosa.

“I used to run around in these passageways with Quinn when we were kids.”

I pushed on the right side of the wall, and it instantly pivoted open. I let my vampire vision adjust so I could see, because our night vision makes the pitch black look like a night with a full moon. Stone stairs led us down into the passageway. Letta was the last one in, and she pushed the door shut behind her, then met us at the bottom of the stairs.

“I didn’t scent anything or anyone in the passageways,” I said. “Let’s keep going. I know the chapel is to the west, so it should be straight ahead.”

After another fifty feet the passageway opened up onto a large chamber. Most castles had these

passageways and chambers as safe havens, escape routes, and storage areas; this chamber was large enough for about forty people to sit comfortably on the floor, and I could see stairs at the far end that must have led directly into the chapel.

“Remind me to make sure we can get out that way,” I said pointing to the front stairway.

“It’s a lot like the dungeon,” said Kate. “Damp, dark, and musty smelling.”

“I can fix that,” said Letta.

She stared at the floor in the center of the room and a small fire appeared.

“That still amazes me every time you do it,” I said.

“Let’s sit and hold hands,” said El as we sat around the fire.

After we got settled we closed our eyes and let the energy flow between us. We sat like that for about thirty minutes. When I finally felt both peaceful and renewed, I opened my eyes.

“I think we’re ready to move on,” I said.

El asked, “What should we look for?”

“Let’s ask to see the traitor,” said Rosa.

“I wonder if we really want to know,” said El.

“We may not want to know, but we have to know,” I said. “We may be able to use whoever it is to find the others trying to harm us. So concentrate and repeat to yourselves, ‘show me the traitor.’ And no matter what we see, don’t break the circle.”

Our grips tightened as we concentrated harder and harder. Finally we started to see an image, and slowly the cloudy figure was becoming clear.

It was Eric.

“*Nooo!*” I heard Kate moan, and she tried to pull away; but I held her tight. We had to see. Eric was in his room, seemingly asleep, and then he sat up abruptly in his bed, throwing his hands to his head as if in extreme pain. It seemed to pass after a few seconds, and as it did he got out of bed. He looked strange, his eyes open but lifeless. He left his room and wandered from building to building, watching everyone. He saw us training, Damien and me alone in the garden, and Allwain arriving; then he went back to his room, lay back down, and went right back to sleep. The image faded away, and we opened our eyes.

“Don’t tell me we were set up,” said El.

“This whole thing with Eric—all we went through, the Volator, all those poor villagers—was just part of a plan to get him close to us?” said Rosa.

Sadly Letta said, “We lost Gregor and Cedrik too.”

Kate was quietly weeping.

“But what else could we do? Yes, they used the Volator, the villagers, the ones they made sick, and the ones they turned, but they still had to be dealt with, didn’t they?” I said. “Damien told me Luena’s gift was being able to control weak minds. She must have been controlling the leader of the Volator, and not just this time.”

“And she’s controlling Eric,” said Kate.

“That’s why he can’t remember anything and why I couldn’t help him,” said El.

“You mean he doesn’t know?” said Letta.

I could see the look of hope in everyone’s eyes, especially Kate’s.

“No, I don’t think he does,” I said shaking my head.

“Now the trick will be to keep tonight a secret without tipping off Luena that we know about Eric,” said Rosa.

“Luena would know the ceremony is always performed on the last night of the full moon which is Sunday,” I said.

“Oh my God, Luena hasn’t been after your father,” said El. “She’s been after you—and then us!”

We stared at her, knowing she was right.

“Who do we know that is absolutely trustworthy?” I said.

“Our Watchers,” we said in unison.

“We need to get back to our apartment, now,” I said. “But first let me make sure we can get in and out of the chapel from that stairway, and then we’ll go back the way we came.”

We went to the stairway at the far end of the chamber. Kate and I detected nothing in the chapel, so I went to the door and pushed against it; the door stuck at first and then opened. I peeked into the chapel and since I could see all the way to the back of it to the entrance doors, I knew it was empty. I had to see where the door was and how it opened.

“Come up to the door, Kate,” I whispered. “I need to see how it opens from the inside.”

When I entered the chapel I saw that the door was exactly behind the altar, and when I closed it, it was impossible to see where it had been. I could see no handle, so I pushed on the left side of where I knew the door to be, and it pivoted easily.

“Kat, come on; we have to go,” whispered Kate.

So I exited and closed the door carefully behind me.

“Okay, Letta, kill the fire,” I said.

“Is everything clear? Do either of you ‘see’ anything in the passageway now?” said Rosa.

“Everything looks fine to me. How about you, Kat?”

“All clear, but be careful. It’s what we don’t see that I’m worried about.”

“Let’s run!” said Letta.

We were at the bottom of the back stairs in seconds. Rosa pushed the stone open and peered out.

“See anyone?” said El.

“No, it’s clear,” she said.

We left the passageway and came out to the courtyard, where we found Thomas.

“I wish Mother would give us more to do for the dinner,” said Kate.

Good cover, I thought to myself.

“Oh well, let’s just go and get some rest, as she told us to do,” I said aloud. “Thomas, can we see you and your brothers back at the apartment please? I’d like to talk to you about our Paris trip.”

“Right now?” he said.

“Yes, right now,” I said, giving him an urgent, wide-eyed look.

“Of course. I’ll get them as soon as I get you back.”

Rosa’s Watcher was at the bottom of the stairs as usual, so Thomas left us to get the others.

“Any visitors, Max?” asked Rosa.

“No, my Lady. Any instructions?”

“We’re going to rest for a while after we speak to the brothers, so please don’t let anyone else up unless it’s an emergency,” she instructed.

He nodded and we continued up the stairway and down the hall to our rooms.

“Who’d think it would be so difficult to act normal,” said Letta once we got inside.

In a few minutes there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said and all five remaining Voss brothers entered.

“We can’t explain much right now, but you’re the only people we trust without question.”

“What is it you need us to do, Katrina?” asked Gunter.

“After dinner tonight I need someone to keep Eric and Damien entertained, but they cannot realize they’re being kept away from us.”

“I’ll ask your father to take Damien aside with some of the others to go over plans for their trip,” said Gunter.

“Excellent,” I said.

“I can take Eric hunting,” said Avery.

“You need to keep him in sight, so maybe training or games would be better,” said Thomas.

“We also need Watchers to guard the lower entrance to Father and Mother’s building and at the chapel, both front and back, and these things must be done discreetly,” I said.

“Now this is the last thing we need. The five of us need to get to the chapel after dinner tonight without being seen,” said Kate.

“You and Kate can escort your mother, who may have a headache, back to her room, and then you can use the passageway underground that leads to the chapel,” said Gunter.

Of course he knows of all the passageways, I thought. He's the lead Watcher, our protector, so he has to know all the castle secrets.

"There's another passage that leads to the storage room for the chapel."

"Does it have an entrance directly into the chapel, and can they get to it without being seen?"

"The closest entrance to the dining room would be in the kitchen pantry; it leads to that storage room and there's a door from it directly into the chapel," said Thomas.

"That's right. The rest of you can make your way there while everyone is saying goodnight," said Simon.

"Actually, this was supposed to be a surprise, but your father has planned fireworks for after dinner," said Quinn.

We all looked at him as if he were crazy.

"I know, it was supposed to be simple; but he's had it planned since we got back. He did ask us if we minded a celebration under the circumstances, and we all agreed it was fine. It'd be what Gregor and Cedrik would want. We all want you to remember their lives, not their deaths, and how much they cared about you. Anyway, it'll be the perfect time to slip away," said Gunter.

When the shock wore off we realized he was right.

"Now then, here's the plan," said Gunter. "After dinner everyone will head outside to see the fireworks. As soon as they start, your mother will say she doesn't feel well, and Katrina and Katherine will go back with her to her apartment. A few minutes later, the rest of you will separate yourselves from your families and

head to the kitchen; Thomas of course will be with you. Quinn will be with Katrina and Katherine as their mother's Watcher, and he'll guard the passageway entrance once you're in. Your father will keep Damien busy. Avery will be with Eric, and Simon and I will be at the Chapel. There will be plenty of Watchers around your fathers while they're in the meeting with Damien, so we won't be missed. Is everyone clear?"

We all nodded our heads.

"All right, we'll see you at dinner," said Gunter.

I walked them to the door.

"Thank you all. I knew we could count on you," I said.

"I'll go now and speak with your father about our plans," said Gunter and turned to leave.

As they were leaving, Sarah came in with a tray full of snacks, wine, and crimson.

"How about a little something to help keep your strength up?"

"Just what we needed, Sarah," I said.

"As usual," added Kate.

She smiled and put the tray on the table.

"Do any of you need anything else?"

"I don't think so. Thank you, Sarah."

"Then I'll see you in a few hours and we'll get you all ready for tonight," she said as she headed out the door.

"I didn't realize how hungry I was," said Letta as we finished every last thing on the tray.

El said, "I wish we could have hunted, but the crimson will give us longer-lasting energy."

"I just thought of something," said Kate.

“What?” said Rosa, looking a little anxious.

“We need to wear our weapons under our dresses, just in case,” she said.

“How are we going to get to them in a hurry if we need them?” I said.

“How about skirts and blouses instead of dresses? We can wear our leggings underneath and just rip the skirts off if we have to,” said El.

“That’s a great idea,” said Letta.

“We should probably have things specially made so when we get to Paris we can hide our weapons and still get to them easily under a dress.”

“If we make it through tonight, I’ll get right on that,” Rosa quipped.

“Kat, what do you think about Eric? In our vision the Volator said they happened upon him feeding on an animal in the forest. Do you think that’s true, or that Luena actually made him?” said Kate.

“I don’t know for sure. He said he’s been a vampire for about three years, but that might be something she put into his mind. None of sensed any evil in him, though, and we could sense evil in the other visions,” I said.

“Even when someone or something is blocking us, we still sense something is wrong; but we don’t with Eric,” said El.

“He’s an awfully good actor if he’s in with them,” said Rosa.

“Allwain will know,” said Kate.

“Let’s go rest for a little while, but after we get ready let’s channel our gifts before we go,” I said.

I flopped down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. What kind of a feeling did I have about tonight? I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing. I felt power around me; my skin tingled and was hot, my face felt flushed, and then it was gone and I fell asleep.

“Wake up sleepy-head, time for your bath,” said Sarah. “You could have at least taken off your boots before you took your nap,” she grumbled.

“I meant to,” I said sheepishly.

Girls started coming in with hot water and I could hear water going into the other tubs as well.

“I’m glad your father had that huge new water vessel made so we can heat all this water at the same time,” Sarah said as she added bath salts, lavender, and mint to the water. “All right, into the tub with you and have a good soak. I’ll be back in a little while to wash your hair.”

I sank down in the hot, sweet-smelling water until it was up to my chin. It felt delicious. In a little while Sarah came back and washed my hair, rinsed it, and combed it out.

“You sure you want *this* outfit?” she asked, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

“Yes, I’m sure, thank you, Sarah. I can get dressed myself.”

“All right, if you’re sure. Oh, and Gunter sent over some fresh crimson. Why he thought you needed more I don’t know, but it’s out there on the table if you want it,” she said as she closed the door.

I took out a clean pair of lambskin leggings and put them on over some silk undergarments and a pretty lavender off-the-shoulder blouse. Then I strapped my

short sword and dagger as close to my hip as I could and covered everything with a full light-grey skirt. I put on the necklace that Damien had given me for my birthday, and, even though one was gold and one silver, I added the bracelet from my brothers onto my left wrist. I brushed the charms with my finger and took a look in the mirror. I couldn't have seen the sword if I didn't know it was there I decided. Then I brushed my hair, slipped on my shoes, and headed out the door.

“You all look just lovely,” gushed Sarah.

She had made us each a small bouquet of flowers.

“Happy birthday, girls. I love you all,” she said, tears filling her eyes.

“We love you too, Sarah. Thank you,” I said.

We each took a little bit of the crimson Gunter had brought and headed out the door, down the stairs, and across the courtyard. We were joined by Thomas and Simon, who looked even more handsome than usual, I thought. Quinn and Avery met us at the door. Father and Mother were already inside, as were most of our friends and families.

“You all look beautiful, as usual,” said Avery.

Quinn added, “Happy eighteenth birthday, ladies.”

When he smiled, it was still hard to not melt. I couldn't help myself; I walked over to him and brushed the hair from his brow with my hand and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you, Quinn.”

We went into the reception hall, which was full of flowers and candles. We set our little bouquets down on the side table and were greeted with happy

birthdays from all our friends and families. Damien was standing by Father, and when our eyes met my stomach fluttered. He was gorgeous in his white open-collared shirt, dark pants, and boots. His hair wasn't tied back tonight but was left free and sexy; and as he walked over to me our gaze never wavered until he kissed my cheek.

"Happy birthday, Katrina," he whispered.

His hot breath on my neck gave me chills. I closed my eyes so I could bask in his scent.

"Happy birthday, darling," I heard Mother say.

"Thank you, Mother," I answered, "Where did Father go?"

"He went to check on something," she said as she winked at Damien. "What a beautiful necklace."

"My birthday present from Damien," I said and proudly held the heart up for her inspection.

"You have excellent taste, Damien," she told him.

"I think so," he said as he smiled at me.

"And what's this?" she said as she examined my bracelet.

"The brothers made one for each of us; five charms for five beauties, they said."

"Lovely, just lovely. Oh, there's your father, over there with Katherine. I'm going to wish her happy birthday. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Oh, there's Eric, let's go say hello," said Damien.

It's all right, I told myself, *it's not his fault...I don't think*. He looked healthy, happy, and ever so handsome.

"Thank you for inviting me," he said. "And happy birthday."

“Thank you, Eric, and you’re welcome, I’m glad you have your health back. Are you sleeping well?” I said, thinking back to our vision.

“I still need a lot of it. Sometimes I fall asleep right after dinner and I don’t even remember dreaming. I sleep like a rock,” he laughed.

His eyes were full of life. I hated Luena for what she’d done to him.

“Gunter said he’s learning almost as fast as the girls,” said Damien.

“Speaking of Gunter, here he comes.” I nodded in the direction of the approaching Watcher.

“Happy birthday, Katrina,” he said as he kissed my cheek.

“Thank you, Gunter. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Just then Mother called out, “All right everyone, dinner is served. Katherine, Katrina, Rosalinda, Arletta, and Eleanor, please lead the way.”

“Happy birthday, Katrina,” Father said while giving me a big hug. He had a huge smile on his face, and I knew he was happy that his family was together again and that we could share this day. It was an important occasion, after all, the last birthday vampires really celebrate, a rite of passage since we age so slowly from then on.

The dining room was simply beautiful. Delicate tendrils of wisteria in hues of purple and lavender had been draped from candle chandeliers, from large floor vases, and down the middle of the long table, filling the room with the soft, sweet aroma of summer.

“What do you think?” said Mother.

“You’ve outdone yourself Mother; this is stunning,” Kate said as we all stood in the doorway looking at the elaborately decorated room.

We all agreed it was divine. We took our seats and had a wonderful meal. However, I felt a current of tension; the closer it got to dessert, the more anxious I was becoming. All too soon it was over. We were presented gifts from our families, mostly jewelry and money for shopping in Paris.

“Now for my surprise, we’ll need to go outside,” said Father.

We all looked at each other quickly and followed him into the moonlit night.

The fireworks started immediately and everyone *oohed* and *ahhed*. The show was fabulously loud.

“Katrina, suddenly I don’t feel well,” said Mother.

“We’ll take you back to your room, Mother,” said Kate.

“I’ll go with you,” said Damien with concern.

“No, it’s okay,” I said quickly. “We’ll be back as soon as she’s in bed.”

“It’s just a headache. I’m sure I just overdid it today.”

Quinn was right there, and he escorted us away after informing Father of our intent.

“*It’ll be fine; I’ll be right back,*” I told Damien with my mind, hoping it was the truth.

Mother was holding her hand to her head, playing the part perfectly, and Kate and I were on either side of her, our arms around her waist. Once we got into the entrance to the building we rushed to the end of the hallway, and mother went upstairs. I pushed the stone

and it pivoted open. Before we went through it, I looked at Quinn's face. He looked frightened, but gave me a determined nod to go ahead. Kate and I went in, rushed down the stairs, and ran through the passageway. We entered the large chamber room and stopped.

"We forgot to meditate and channel our energy. Let's do it quickly now," I said, holding out my hands.

We held hands and energy again pulsed through us; we could see Allwain waiting for us in the chapel above.

"Let's go," said Kate.

And we ran up the stairs and pushed the door open. Allwain had his back to us, but turned as we entered.

"Come stand in front of me and meditate until we are all together. Hurry. There's not much time."

A sound came from our left, the other door opened, and in rushed Rosa, El, and Letta.

I could still hear the fireworks. Their lights danced across the chapel, making the stained glass figures in the windows seem alive.

"Quickly," called out Allwain. "Form a circle facing out."

The fireworks ended now, but another sound was filling the air—thunder. Then lightning flashed in what just moments ago had been a starry night sky.

"Think of nothing but me. Repeat everything I say, and don't let go of each other or open your eyes until I'm done. I'll be speaking an ancient language you won't understand, but the forces of good and evil will, so repeat it just as you hear it. Are you ready?" he said

in a loud voice. He was almost yelling now, the thunder was so loud.

“I can’t stop it,” said Letta.

“It’s all right, just close your eyes and concentrate on me. Block out everything else,” he said as he started to chant.

We held on with all our might and repeated every word. We heard a loud noise and felt the wind, a wind so strong I had to lean into it to stay upright, but we held tight. Allwain was shouting and so were we as we kept repeating the ancient chants with the wind swirling around us like a cyclone. We were determined to finish. The current of our combined powers pulsed through us faster and faster as we continued, and even though my eyes were closed I could see the lightning as if it were inside the chapel now. Finally the wind was so strong I felt my feet lift off the floor, but Allwain kept shouting and we kept repeating.

Then abruptly he stopped.

“They are protected now and forever, under the laws of all that is good and right in this world and the next. Evil be gone from here.” As we finished repeating the last word the chapel went silent and we dropped with a thud to the floor still holding each other’s hands so tight I couldn’t feel my fingers anymore.

“You may open your eyes now. It’s over,” said Allwain, sounding weak and exhausted.

I slowly opened my eyes.

“Is anyone hurt?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” said Kate, looking around.

We all started to get up and brush ourselves off.

“Wait until Sarah sees our hair,” said El.

We all laughed.

“How about you, Allwain? Are you hurt?” I asked.

“I’m not as young as I used to be, and it’s taken a lot out of me, but I appear to be in one piece.”

“Let us help you,” said El. She walked over to him, placed her hands on his chest, and closed her eyes, and we all joined her by placing our hands on her back to make her gift much stronger than if we just concentrated with her. In a few minutes she pulled away.

“How do you feel now?” she asked him.

“I...I...feel...*young!*” he said, full of surprise.

He looked younger, too.

“Amazing, El. Good job,” said Rosa.

Gunter, Simon, and Thomas came running in with swords drawn.

“What’s happened? Are any of you hurt? We couldn’t get in.”

“We’re fine,” I said.

Quinn and Avery came running in next.

“They’re fine,” said Gunter. “Everything’s fine.”

“I’ll go and speak with your mother,” said Allwain as he left through the secret stone door.

Our Watchers stood by expectantly; I could see that Gunter was asking for an explanation without speaking the words. The silence grew and finally Gunter gave me the look and the shrug. The brothers knew if I could tell them I would.

“We’d better all go see our families and tell them we’re all right,” said El.

Gunter was just about to leave when he turned back and asked, “Was there thunder and lightning in here?”

“Yes, wasn’t there outside?” I said.

“No,” they all said together.

“We had quite a wind as well,” said Letta.

Thomas said, “Not out there.”

“Amazing. I’m sorry we can’t tell you more,” I said.

“We understand that it’s safer for all of us,” said

Gunter

Then, out of nowhere, Eric came rushing toward me. He was so fast the brothers couldn’t see him, and so close I couldn’t get to my sword in time. His eyes were like glowing coals.

“*Die!*” he screamed, in a voice that wasn’t like his.

Then I couldn’t see him anymore, for Damien had jumped in front of me at the last possible moment.

“Damien!” I screamed and grabbed his shoulders.

He slumped against me and we both fell to the ground. Eric’s sword was protruding from him just below his rib cage.

The brothers had Eric on the ground, and Quinn with his sword raised was just about to separate Eric’s head from his shoulders, when I cried out, “Stop! It’s not his fault! Bind him and take him to Mother’s.”

I looked at Gunter. He knew the man he had seen in the chapel was there. Eric was so strong it took all five of them to hold him down and bind his arms and legs, but when they were finished he suddenly went limp and they carried him off to Mother’s.

Quinn stayed by my side. My concentration was now on Damien.”

“We need to get the bleeding stopped, *now!*” demanded El. Looking up at Quinn she directed, “As soon as I get my hands next to the wound, pull the sword from him as quickly as you can, Quinn.” She said to the four of us urgently, “Help me.”

I hoped we had enough strength left to save him. She put her hands on Damien, and Quinn quickly pulled out the sword. Blood gushed from the wound, soaking his shirt and covering El’s hands.

“The sword pierced an artery,” she said, as she closed her eyes. Just like before, we placed our hands on her back and concentrated with her. *Heal, heal*, I thought, as hard as could, *please heal!* I felt hot, the energy draining from me to El and, I hoped, to Damien. After what seemed like hours but probably was only minutes, El pulled back and I opened my eyes.

“I healed the wound, but he’s gone dormant because he lost so much blood. He’ll recover, I think; I just don’t know how long it’ll take. We’ll try again tomorrow when we’ve regained our strength. There’s nothing more we can do for him tonight.”

Quinn called for guards, who were standing close by.

“I’m not leaving you,” Quinn told me, and Thomas agreed; so the guards took Damien to his quarters.

“There’s nothing you can do for him tonight but go back and rest, so you’ll have enough strength tomorrow to help him. I’ll have Avery stay with him all night. Where’s his Watcher anyway?” said Thomas.

“Damien sent him ahead to take care of business in Paris for his trip,” I said.

I was weak, dazed and in shock from what had just happened. “I feel a little dizzy,” I said.

“Me too,” said El.

“We need to get back to our rooms. Gunter left crimson for us earlier, remember?” I said, thinking that it took a lot of effort just to speak.

Quinn and Thomas helped us get back. Of course Sarah was frantic, wondering what had happened. She poured us each a cup of crimson, which we gulped down; then she filled our cups a second time, and again we gulped them down.

I felt better—not perfect, but better. “I’m going to see Mother,” I said and tried to stand.

“Not until tomorrow you’re not,” said Sarah sternly.

“I should go and sit with Damien.”

“*No!*” everyone said at once.

“You’re going to bed right now, all of you. Now scoot,” Sarah said. “And what in heaven’s name happened to your hair?”

“Ohhh,” we all groaned, and rolled our eyes.



Elizabeth Loraine

About the Author

I always knew I was supposed to write a book someday but as my family grew; my artistic bent was fulfilled through interior design, painting and garden design work. Now as my son and daughter left home and I left commercial design and painting, I had more time on my hands for ignored creative desires.

I have been a lifelong fantasy fiction fan and for year's devoured books that depicted vast worlds, populated by heroic characters. But a particular focus of my reading enjoyment for many, many years has been vampires and vampire lore. My passion for the subject you could say has spanned the 'Bellas'; from portrayals of them by Bella Lugose to books about them featuring Bella Swan.

Although I found their world exciting, filled with romance and adventure, somehow at '*The End*', I always wanted to know more. Vampires after all, are well known to be long lived; where had they come from; where had they been; what had they done; what had then seen? I longed to know their timeline and history.

From that curiosity and those questions, my creative side picked up a pen and a notebook and out came The Royal Blood Chronicles. These books feature young, strong, self reliant, intelligent, interesting woman as lead characters. No wimpy women victims allowed here.

Continue following Katrina. Enjoy her vampire past and look forward the exploits in her future.

Elizabeth Loraine

Look for
The Protectors
Book Two of Royal Blood Chronicles

For updates, excerpts and more
about the author check out:

www.royalbloodchronicles.com