

THE
NEXUS

ROBIN WOODS

◆ The Watcher Series: Book Two ◆

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Book Two
The Watcher Series



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Summary: After fleeing home to protect her family, Aleria “Ali” Hayes settles in to her studies to become a Watcher. When a surprise informant reveals the French Coven's unprecedented use of resources to locate her, it becomes apparent that there's something about her not even she knows. Her fate becomes entangled in an age-long power struggle between vampires and Watchers. While Aleria fights for the survival of her life and her love, she discovers that her free will may be trumped by secrets buried for over half a century.

The characters and events depicted in this novel are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, are coincidental. All historical persons are used in a fictitious manner.

[Fiction-Fantasy, Fiction-Young Adult, Fiction-Paranormal,
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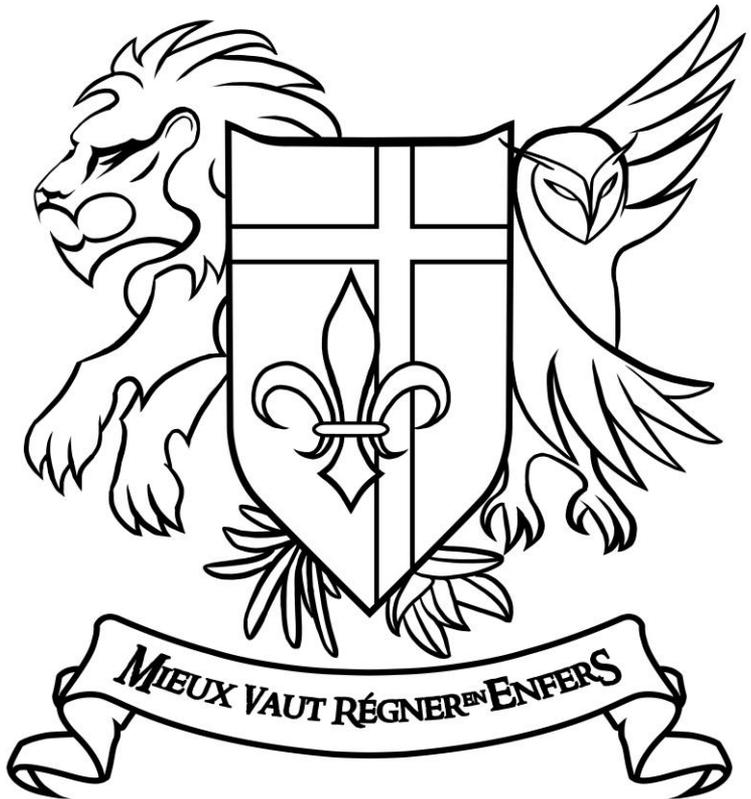
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“Prefer et obdura: dolor hic tibi proderit olim.”

–Ovid

*Be patient and strong;
someday this pain will be useful to you.*

The French Coven Coat of Arms



Prologue—PROPHECY

October 2nd, 3:00 AM

Private Archive in the London Library

The air in the library was cold and stale, and the books themselves reeked of dust. Gabriel sat in the wood and leather booth in the far corner of the building and pressed his thumbs into his temples as he strained over his notes. He was haunted by something elusive. He could feel something coming and hoped to find some clue as to what it was.

There was a flash of movement, and Gabriel jammed his hand inside his coat for his Durateus dagger. In what seemed to be one movement, he had leaned across the table and placed the blade at the throat of the visitor who had silently joined him. The veins on Gabriel's arm stood out like ropes as he blinked, shocked by the identity of the intruder.

Bowen sat calmly on the bench with hands raised in surrender, his light blond hair glinting in the light from the wall sconce. There was not a hint of aggression in his posture. "I did not come here to attack," he said in a reassuring voice. "Please, you will want to hear what I am going to say."

Gabriel eased back into his seat, still tensed to fight, and sat awkwardly silent. "I didn't sense you," he finally

said.

"I, unlike my brother, can mask my presence. It's beneficial at times," he said tipping his head to acknowledge the powerful Slayer sitting so close to him.

Gabriel's jaw flexed and his dark eyes narrowed with that bit of information, then he nodded for Bowen to continue.

"I..." he paused. "I don't know if by some miracle she is with you and hasn't been seen. But I..." Another pause... "feel *compelled* to protect her." His face appeared tormented.

Gabriel's body was stone. He did not react. Bowen's fierce blue eyes were fastened on him analyzing every breath. Gabriel knew Aleria was being hunted and wondered if this was a trick to see if Bowen was getting close, to see if he was in the correct city. But Gabriel's gut told him to believe Bowen. "We are protecting her," he vaguely acknowledged.

"All of your training facilities are under surveillance. My brother is obsessed with finding both her and Joshua. My mother is supporting the effort with unprecedented resources."

"Why?"

"My brother simply wants Joshua dead," he said with a shrug, "but there is something else with Aleria. I believe she is important. You are familiar with the exile of the Devourer? When he was banished from our realm?"

Gabriel nodded.

"There were seven Watcher families that were responsible...all royalty in their own lands...and to reverse the banishment, my mother needs the blood of specific members of each family." He paused, "And a member of the

Lux.”

Gabriel shifted uneasily in his seat, not liking what he was hearing. “Specific members? The Lux?”

“People with specific genetic traits...like a warrior from the Van Heerden family or a Polyglot from the Sato family...” his words trailed off.

“What does this have to do with Aleria?”

“We have a partial copy of one of Ahijah’s personal journals. He was the Old Testament prophet who originally warned King Solomon to cease consorting with pagan women or be punished by God. In later journals he prophesied about every aspect of the Devourer’s banishment and...” He closed his eyes as if he wanted to shut out the next two words, “his return.” He pulled his mouth down in the corners. “I don’t want to return to the old ways, but I will not betray my family.”

“Isn’t speaking to *me* a betrayal?”

Bowen exhaled harshly. “Besides the surveillance, I haven’t told you anything you didn’t already know.” He struggled for a moment. “I have to protect her,” he said shaking his head.

“What makes you think the prophecies have something to do with Aleria?”

“How many girls have you known with lavender eyes? As I said, I only have part of the manuscript, but what I do have...” His thoughts became more fragmented, as he spewed out his ideas. “She fits...eyes of amethyst, humble life...she was to unite what was once divided...that could be your Concilium...and her nightmares. I don’t know about the rest. I don’t have access to your archives.”

“But she would have to be from one of those families.”

“What if she is? What if her ancestors fled to America

during the French Revolution? Many were believed to have perished at the guillotine, but what if...”

Gabriel sank back in his seat, weighted down by the possibilities. A surviving member of the Lux...the hope of having a seer amongst the Watchers again...the threat of having Aleria captured...the chaos that would follow if the Devourer was ever to return. His thoughts continued to race.

Bowen slid an envelope across the table and then vanished without a word. It contained surveillance photos of everyone at Signum Academy except Joshua and Aleria. There was also a single slip of paper with the title of Ahijah’s journal, *The Nexus*. Gabriel was out the door within seconds, headed to awaken Sebastian.

Chapter 1—SIGNUM ACADEMY

“You are acting awfully cavalier about my pain,” I said in mock irritation.

He tried to stifle his grin, “Cavalier?”

“You know indifferent, offhand, uncaring, thoughtless, *condescending*...You need another synonym or two?”

“No, I know what it means. I just wanted to see how many you could come up with. Five is quite impressive for such a mentally challenged person.”

“Urgh!” I tossed my book at him. Peter ducked and let out a roar of laughter. “Not all of us were born with the foreign language gene. You are impossible.” I started thrusting my books into my bag and stood up.

“No, no, no, no. Sorry, sorry. Please sit back down. I promise to help.”

I looked at him through narrowed eyes and measured his sincerity. I exhaled hard and sprawled back onto the sofa. “Fine, but I have reached my limit of teasing today.” I started to laugh, feeling a little stupid for my tantrum, even though it was partially justifiable. I looked back at Peter who had settled back onto the other couch again and was fanning the pages of the book I had flung at him. His light brown hair was tousled like he had rolled out of bed after a nap and hadn’t checked the mirror. His skin had grown pale without the help of the California sun. He had spent so

many hours in the pool playing water polo that he had radiated a golden glow even in the winter. Now his natural blond streaks were almost gone. Our relocation to England had altered him dramatically.

“You know you are remarkably good at most of this stuff,” he said earnestly.

I sighed, feeling conflicted, but appreciated the olive branch, “Not as good as you, genius boy.”

“Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses.”

“And Sebastian seems to know mine. This is my own personal hell—not one but *two* foreign languages. I think my head may spontaneously combust one of these days.” I dramatically reclined, pressing the back of my hand to my forehead.

“At least you wouldn’t have to conjugate anything in Latin.”

“Or French.”

“Don’t worry, I would write a nice epitaph for your tombstone. Something like *Here lies Aleria Hayes, she has seen better days, in Latin and French was no good, too bad she never understood.*”

“I better not combust if that’s the best you can come up with.”

“I was on the spot.”

“And poetically gifted you are not.”

We both laughed. Bad poetry aside, Peter kept me grounded. He had been a close friend for over three years, but here in exile, he was my best-friend. Besides Joshua, he was now the only person in my life who has known me for more than a few months.

While I pondered in silence, he grew thoughtful.

“You ever get homesick?” he asked, raising his dark

brown eyes to meet mine. It was the first time he had voiced that question. It had been four months since we had fled here to protect our families. Of course, the parental units were under the impression that we had earned scholarships to an exclusive academy in London. They didn't know that the academy was actually run by the Council, which was part of the Concilium of Watchers. Nor did they know about vampires and their conflict with the aforementioned Watchers and how we mere mortals had been swept up in the middle of it.

"Yes, sometimes, but we are always so busy I don't really think about it that much." I frowned. "I guess that makes me kind of heartless doesn't it?"

"I've always thought you were a little heartless." His eyes widened, and he put up his hand before I could react. "Sorry...no more teasing...really."

"It's fine. I was just being a baby." I paused for one beat. "No comments; I know I just opened myself up *again*."

He laughed.

"It's going to be hard being away for the holidays isn't it?" I said somberly. I thought about my thirteen-year old brother dressing up in his Halloween costume, stuffing his cheeks with too much turkey at Thanksgiving, opening Christmas presents with religious zeal—all without me. If we couldn't solve some very serious issues with the French coven, it would never be safe for me to go back. I may have to "die" in an accident while abroad and disappear. I looked back at Peter and felt miserable. He had been all but forced into this life because of me. He had been kidnapped and thrust into the vampire world as a pawn to control me and had nearly died because of it. Well, he actually had died in surgery for about sixty seconds.

“Yeah...it will be hard to be away, especially at Christmas.”

“Do you regret it? Choosing to come?” I asked.

“Sometimes.” A pang clenched my heart, and guilt flooded in. I tried to be still and not react. He rolled onto his stomach and gathered a throw pillow against his chest, resting most of his weight on his elbows. “I know it’s better I’m here. I just couldn’t risk my family. And part of me is really excited. I love learning about all of this...and I actually like London. I can’t wait to be a Watcher out in the field. It’s this whole world that I would have never known about.” He paused thoughtfully, chewing on what he had said. “No...I don’t regret it. I like this life.”

My heart started beating regularly again, and I tried not to exhale in a noticeable gust. I didn’t want him to realize I had literally been holding my breath awaiting his answer. I looked at the antique grandfather clock next to the entrance of the common room. “It’s 5:40. We better get changed. Sunset is in twenty minutes. We are supposed to be in the mat room by 6:10.”

“I guess the break is over.” He stood, stretched, and let out a long groan. “Time to get our butts kicked.”

“Speak for yourself. I plan to do the kicking.”

“See you in thirty, I—” he said but stopped talking abruptly as we heard someone frantically running down the hall. Gentry emerged, visibly shaken, her red hair wild and pale skin so white it was almost translucent.

Her light green eyes were wide, “Meeting in room 110 right now, grab anyone else you see. Go now,” she commanded, her voice uncharacteristically trembling a little. She sprinted down the hall.

Peter and I looked at one another for a moment, then

simultaneously sprang up and ran to the stairs. I could hear Gentry behind us as we sped down the last hall. The large classroom was already full. All faculty, staff, and students—about twenty in total—were abuzz with nervous energy. I surveyed the room for a place to sit. Peter found a seat in the front, and Leslie motioned to me in the back, as she slid over to make more room for me on the table where she was sitting. When I initially met her I had wondered how she could possibly be a Watcher in training. She appeared to be more supermodel than stealth. Her long and lean body should have been stretched across a spread in *Vogue* rather than a life of secretly documenting the movements of vampires. Her long, blonde hair was perfectly straight and cut into long layers, accentuating the highlights and her high cheekbones. Her skin was creamy and fair with a beautiful golden undertone. A few faint freckles dotted her long nose adding cuteness to her elegance.

I shuffled through everyone toward the table. It was tall so I had to jump a little to seat myself next to her. Leslie looked at me, her wide grey-blue eyes apprehensive. A horrible feeling gripped my stomach. I nudged her shoulder with mine, and she tilted her head and smiled thinly at me as we waited.

Sebastian entered the front of the room like a gust of wind and stood before us. Gabriel and Joshua entered behind him and stood to the side, both leaning against the wall. Sebastian's tweed jacket was rumpled like a discarded paper bag. I had never seen him with a hair out of place.

He launched into the briefing: "I am ordering an immediate evacuation of this facility. You have thirty minutes to pack your things. Bring only what you can carry. Destroy anything personal that you are not taking with you.

Pull hard drives if you cannot take the computer. Leave nothing that can be traced. You will need three days' worth of clothing. You will get wet leaving here, so wrap anything you want dry." He surveyed the faces in the room, but it seemed like he looked at me a split-second longer than everyone else. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gabriel's stare at me with a peculiar expression, but I kept my focus on Sebastian, wanting answers. Gabriel's eye contact made me realize that Joshua kept his gaze away from me, without wavering. He stayed focused at the front of the room. *Am I imagining this?*

Ian, one of my classmates, raised an arm covered in a sleeve of tattoos and started to ask "Sir? Why?" He was never afraid to ask questions, even if that meant having someone irritated with him. But somehow his cool factor and keen mind seemed to keep his constant questioning from getting annoying. He was six feet tall with light hair that had a reddish cast. His jaw was all hard angles, which seemed in opposition to his full lips, the top one being fuller than the bottom. His blue eyes were so dark they almost appeared navy, but the odd color seemed to fit his rock-star-like presence.

Sebastian held up his hand and exhaled noisily. "We have lost contact with all of the other academies in the last three hours. Four experienced Watchers have gone missing; they are presumed dead after the message we decoded from one of them. We are out of time. Go now. No more questions. Meet in the basement. Leave the lights on, so we appear to be here." With that, he left the room. Everyone seemed frozen for a moment reeling from the information. Then with a purpose, everyone erupted from the room.

I lingered for a few seconds as everyone rushed off.

Reality seemed to slow and sounds became indistinct and hollow as though I were trapped under water. In this daze I was only vaguely aware of Gabriel stepping out with a grim expression. When I realized I had lost sight of Joshua, I started to leave the room. Then, suddenly, he was behind me and gently caught my arm. He turned me to face him, holding both my arms firmly. “I need you to promise me something. Can you do that?”

I nodded mutely, still feeling numb.

“When we evacuate, I won’t be with you. You need to stick with Gabriel. No matter what. Don’t leave his side.”

“I can’t ask him to babysit me. Everyone needs—”

“Promise me.” His green eyes were fierce.

I wanted to argue, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was somehow involved in what was happening. “Okay,” I said hoarsely. He pulled me against his chest and kissed the top of my head.

“You better go pack,” he said as he released me. I started to turn and head for the door. “Ali, wait,” he looked at the door warily, then grabbed my wrist and spun me back towards him. He took my face in both hands and kissed me urgently. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him as close to me as humanly possible. A calm pulsed through my body as his cool lips moved with mine. “Sorry, but you better get packing. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“I love you,” I said breathlessly and smiled the best I could.

“I love you too,” he replied. His eyes were filled with warmth, though his face was fixed with worry.

Then I turned on my heel and dashed up the stairs and barreled to the postage stamp sized room that I shared with Gentry. We had only known each other a short time, but she

was already a trusted friend. I had seen her briefly in San Francisco the day I moved to England. We looked enough alike that she had been one of the decoys for my extraction. All it took was a pair of sunglasses, temporary hair dye and a curling iron. Even my parents would have had to do a double-take. Having Gentry around was kind of like being able to have my friend Kaela around; somehow she always saw through everything I tried to project.

When I entered she already had most of her things packed; I had thought I was efficient until I started rooming with her.

“You done already?” I asked, knowing the answer. I started putting my things in the oversized Ziplocs she had left on the dresser for me.

“Of course, darlin’. I didn’t feel the need to hang about after the meetin’,” she teased in her adorable Irish accent.

“I didn’t ‘hang about’, Gentry.”

“Sure ya didn’t. You *needed* to talk to the hot vampire. I get it,” she winked and started forcing the air out of some of my bags, sealing them, and loading them into my backpack for me. My romantic relationship with Joshua was a secret. It was becoming increasingly hard to keep it that way since everyone in school was being trained to be observant. I think most dismissed it since Joshua and I had known each other all our lives. They expected there to be a close relationship. Gabriel had had it figured out since the beginning, but had always turned a blind eye.

I put on some dark clothing that would dry quickly and sat on my bed for a moment trying to think of anything I might have missed. “Gentry...” I paused wondering if I should ask.

“Time is a tickin’ here. What’s on your mind, love?”

I sighed, “Was it just me? Or did both Gabriel and Sebastian...never mind...” I remembered my journal. That would be disastrous to leave behind. I reached under the mattress to procure it and sealed it in a bag.

A funny look twisted itself across her face. “Now that ya mention it...” Her words hung in the air.

“I didn’t mention anything. It’s fine,” I said shaking my head as I stuck a knife in my boot.

“They both looked at you more than the rest of us. I had disregarded it, but...”

I sighed, “...Which means that they think that Bowen’s coven is most likely to blame.” I dropped my head into my hands.

“Time to go, love,” she said as she strapped her backpack on. I agreed, and did likewise. We left our room for the last time and navigated our way to the basement.

Gabriel arrived with a pack over his shoulder and a canvas bag in his hand. He unlocked a door marked “Storage” with a brass key, he ducked into the room for a moment to light a torch on the far wall. We all strained to see inside. Instead of an industrial room lined with shelves and stacked with dusty boxes, the large space was empty, and there were ancient looking stone walls befitting a castle. A murmur went through the room as we looked at one another in surprise. Gabriel opened the canvas bag and handed Ian a compact electric lantern as he motioned him into the room. As each of us filed in, he handed us a lantern.

The room was cool and smelled like some of the medieval cathedrals I had visited while heavily disguised on my days off. The odor resembled dust, wax, incense, and a hint of iron. Joshua arrived with an odd shaped pry bar and some ornamental looking metal object about the size of my

hand. He tossed the metal item to Gabriel, who walked over to an ornate design chiseled into the wall. He pressed the object into the center of the design, and it fit snugly. Then he proceeded to twist it clockwise. There was a sound of sliding stone beneath us and a clank, as if something had unlocked. Everyone instinctively moved to the edges of the chamber. Joshua bent down and lodged the pry bar into a deep groove that must have appeared after Gabriel twisted what I now realized was a key. I expected him to try to lift the stone, but instead he pulled it down like a lever, and the entire section of the floor sank down a few inches. Gabriel twisted the key counter-clockwise in the wall, and a mammoth stone in the ground slid to the side. Only blackness could be seen beneath. Joshua stepped into the gaping hole in the floor and disappeared. I listened for him to land but there was nothing. *Of course, he's a vampire so that doesn't mean anything.*

Light began to glow from the opening. I heard Joshua's voice call, "Okay, I'm ready."

Gabriel walked to the edge of the hole and looked down. "Good." Turning to us, he spoke quietly, "Toss Joshua your bag, then follow. He will help steady your landing. Quickly, go."

One after another, members of our group disappeared through the opening. Within a couple of minutes, I turned and looked around. It was my turn; only Gabriel was left. He motioned me towards the entrance with an open hand and a grin. He seemed to enjoy the adventure of this much more than anyone else, or at least he wanted it to appear that way to me. I peered over the edge—there was about an eight-foot drop down to a stone platform of some sort. I could hear some murmuring drifting up from below. It

sounded muted, like the others were in a passageway a little farther away from the room beneath me.

I dropped my bag and sat down at the edge, dangling my feet into the hole like a small child. I suddenly felt like I was five years old sitting next to my mom on the piano bench wishing I was big enough to reach the pedals. I slid off the ledge and hit the ground hard enough that my feet tingled. Joshua steadied me when I arched backwards. If I had taken a half step back, I would have toppled off the ledge onto my head. I noticed that we were essentially alone and that everyone had moved down the hallway because the room was quite small. He gently kept hold of my arms and projected his voice to Gabriel. "Is that it?"

Gabriel looked down at us. "Yes, you ready?"

He shrugged and then looked at me with the same concern he had shown earlier. Then I realized we were missing someone. "Where's Sebastian?" Gabriel nodded to Joshua and disappeared from view.

Joshua replied softly, "He wants everything to appear like business as usual. I am going to escort him to his weekly meeting with the Concilium as I usually do when Gabriel isn't attending. Well...it will look like we are heading that way. We have an alternate exit plan." I opened my mouth to say something, but he squeezed my elbow and glanced towards the passageway. All within a second I slumped my shoulders slightly, set my jaw in protest, then exhaled in defeat. I already knew he wasn't leaving with me. He looked towards the murmuring, gave me a quick grin, kissed my forehead, and jumped up through the opening above with ease. I heard him say, "Take care of her," in a low voice.

Gabriel reappeared, and I scrambled off the platform.

At that moment, I realized we were actually in a tomb and this was the entrance to a network of catacombs. Shelves were carved into the south wall where bones rested, crowded together. Gabriel landed on the lid to the crypt and strapped on his pack. As the ceiling started to close, I looked up and watched Joshua until the room went dark. Gabriel handed me the lantern I left on top of the crypt and then urged me forward.

As soon as we walked into the next chamber, quiet fell over the crowd. There were twelve students including myself, three Slayers, and three Watchers who taught classes. Gabriel always commanded everyone's respect. He was a born leader, head Slayer, and very physically imposing. He always spoke openly with me, which was not the norm for him. He was usually the quiet warrior and when he did speak, people listened. Of course the jagged fishhook shaped scar on the left side of his face didn't hurt the image.

Gabriel addressed everyone, "I will take point. We need six teams. Leaders, I want each of you to have two students with you at all times. Let's move out." Peter had already moved to my side. Gabriel acknowledged him as our third, and we started moving towards the next chamber with considerable speed bearing in mind the darkness and the uneven ground. I glanced back. Gentry and Leslie were with Uriel, the second Slayer, right behind us.

We walked...and walked...and walked, past chamber after chamber of petrified remains in what seemed to be an unending network underneath London. Gabriel always proceeded with utter confidence. I thought I would have gotten hopelessly lost within a few minutes even though my sense of direction was normally good. We entered one large

room after another with exits spiraling out like spokes on a wagon wheel, but Gabriel always knew exactly which one to take. Finally, we came to a different kind of hollow where there were no carved-out cavities for remains, and the far wall was a grey brick archway that reminded me of a trip to Rome with my parents during sophomore year. I could hear running water in the distance.

We went through the archway and proceeded down a long tunnel towards the sound of the water. The walls were not as reflective as the previous carved natural stone. This type of rock seemed to devour the light from my small lantern. I glanced at it, hoping the battery life was very, very long. We had already been walking for hours. The temperature felt as if it dropped with each step and the sound of water increased as we continued on. It sounded like we were headed for a very large cavern.

We exited the tunnel, and my perception was correct; we entered a huge room and stood on a large terrace that sloped down to a series of stairs descending into a huge pool of midnight water. The reflection of our lanterns looked like yellow stars. There was a similar platform on the far end of the room at least one-hundred yards away. Circular ducts on the walls spilled water into the main pool. At water level there were a few half submerged tubes keeping the pool from overflowing. I figured this was where we would get wet, but I prayed we were going to use the stairs on the far side and not one of the tubes half filled with water.

Gabriel's voice startled me as I hadn't heard anyone speak in over an hour. "Take five and prep yourselves to go into the water. We will be heading to the far side," he pointed to the stairs mirroring the ones we were on. There was an audible sigh of relief in the crowd. *So I'm not the*

only one having claustrophobic thoughts about the prospect of crawling through water-filled ducts.

I sat down on the frigid ground and pulled a granola bar from my pack. Leslie looked at me longingly so I handed her a spare one. She smiled and eased down next to me. It was a small slice of heaven to be off my feet. I looked over at Gabriel. He had pulled some type of laminated blueprint out of his bag and was examining it. I closed my eyes and rubbed them with the backs of my index fingers, wishing I could lie down, but with all of us sitting on the platform there wasn't much room left.

I heard Ian ask, "What is this place? It seems like we are really deep underground."

"We are," Raphael, the third Slayer answered, "the Romans started building an aqueduct system here when they occupied this area but they didn't get too far. This is channeling an underground river. We will start ascending towards the sewer system soon."

Great. Sewers. It was hard to keep from sighing. I gritted my teeth and determined that I would keep a good attitude...even if we had to go through the sewers. I shivered at the thought.

"Time's up," Gabriel's voice echoed.

Peter stood up, offered me his hand, and hoisted me onto my aching feet with a groan. I resealed my bag of snacks and secured my pack as I moved toward the water. Gabriel waded in silence, not making so much as a splash. He waited at the bottom of the steps, the water to his waist. I stood hesitant for a moment. The water was as black as coffee. I half-expected some creature to rise from the depths and pull me under. I clenched my jaw as I descended the steps and tried not to let my teeth chatter. When I reached

the bottom, we moved forward. I kept my arms up to keep as dry as possible, but I could feel the bitterly cold water that was already at my chest soaking my clothing. We reached the other side and went up the steps before continuing into the next chamber and stopping. The air here was so much warmer than the water that I felt a little better.

After another five minutes of walking, we reached a huge junction of eight passageways with at least ten feet between each of them. We were about to proceed to the passageway on the eastern most wall when I stopped dead in my tracks, simultaneously grabbing Gabriel's arm. He whipped his head towards me. I peered at him through terrified eyes. I was frozen with fear. He looked toward the tunnel we were about to enter, and his eyes widened as if he could hear or sense something the others couldn't. He abruptly turned to face everyone and made some hand signals I could see out of the corner of my eye. I sensed some movement; they must have signaled a reply. The group moved back three tunnels on the eastern wall, and all lanterns were snuffed out. Everyone was so silent it seemed as though the passageway was empty.

My legs felt rooted to the ground as I remained in the junction with Gabriel and Peter, my eyes glued to the mouth of the cave we had been about to enter. Gabriel broke into my consciousness when he put his hand on my shoulder and started leading me to another passageway. We went one passageway past the one from which we had entered and stopped a couple of yards into the tunnel. We took off our packs and quietly placed them on the ground. Gabriel drew his Durateus sword, and I sorely wished I had something more than just the throwing knife in my boot. Finally we cut

our lights, faced the junction...and waited. All I could hear was the drip of water and the beat of my heart.

After a few minutes we heard movement, but it was faint. Suddenly the junction was filled with silvery-blue light. The movement wasn't far off like I had initially thought—it was simply the whisper-quiet steps of vampires. The light stopped moving and everything fell silent. Shadows of men lined the walls. I heard a gruff voice say, "This way."

The light started to dim as the vampires filed into the passageway from which we had originally come. I counted the shadows as they slid down the walls...seven...eight...nine...ten...I wondered how many I couldn't count. If we had been in the junction we would have been slaughtered. There was no way we could have fought against that many vampires, even with three Slayers.

Then I was hit with a presence so strong I didn't realize for a moment the ground was swirling up towards my face. I felt like my bones went soft and the air was liquid. I couldn't breathe. I was jerked to a stop right before my cheek met the stone floor. Gabriel hoisted me up and pinned me to his side with one arm. My head bobbed back, and I looked up into his face. There was just enough light filtering from the junction that I could see an outline of his features. He gently shook me and nodded his head. I realized he wanted me to explain what just happened. I slowly mouthed, "Tier-ran," almost unable to form the syllables with my lips.

His mouth thinned into a hard line and he shifted his weight leaning slightly towards the entrance. What looked to be a single light moved closer to our location. I prayed that the smell of the sewers was enough to mask our scent if

they had a vamp with a heightened sense of smell with them.

A voice boomed from a few yards away, “Sire?”

Silence.

“Sire?”

The light retreated from the entrance. “Be right there,” Tyran replied, his voice sounding reluctant.

We waited... I could feel Tyran’s presence fade. *Can he feel my presence? Obviously not as strongly as I felt his or he would have stormed into the passageway.* I was dismayed at my incapacitated reaction. Was it because I had felt safe for all these months? Had the connection grown stronger? In my memory I could still feel his body pressing down on me and his teeth plunging into my neck. Anytime I thought of Tyran, Bowen’s twin, a sense of overwhelming dread snaked through my body and made me feel ill. To me he represented all that is evil about vampires.

We continued and joined the rest of the group again, but I was so wrapped in thought I hardly noticed the rest of the journey. My feet moved robotically beneath me. We finally emerged from the underground in a basement and, after traveling through several electrical tunnels, arrived in an underground garage. There were three vehicles parked in the corner. One of them was a small tour bus like the ones you take at the airport. Over half of our group boarded the bus, and Raphael took the wheel. Uriel got in the driver’s seat of a taxi with Leslie and Gentry in the back. Gabriel opened the back of a delivery truck for Peter and me. I looked through the front window as well as I could and watched everyone depart in different directions.

The lights of the city faded away as the night wore on and we drove in silence. I wished my clothes would dry. I

thought I had chosen clothing that would dry more quickly. My fingers and toes felt almost numb. I wanted to change out of my wet clothes, but there was no way I was going to attempt it with Peter in the back with me. He moved closer to me and put his arm around me. I flinched.

“Are you okay?” he whispered, worriedly.

“Yeah, sorry.”

“You’re shivering.”

“Sorry, my mind was somewhere else. I guess I’m still a little freaked about our close encounter.”

“Yeah, I don’t care to ever see him again either.”

I nodded in agreement but fell silent. I couldn’t shake the feeling of Tyran’s presence. The heat from Peter’s body started to help me relax, and my shivering dissipated. I pulled in a deep breath and scrunched my nose; the truck smelled like old cardboard with a hint of diesel exhaust.

I sucked in a short breath and Peter squeezed me a little. “What?”

“I forgot to e-mail my parents and the girls this morning,” I said, dismayed.

“Me too. It was a busy week...and now...”

I shrugged, “I’ve written them every Friday since we have been here. I hope they don’t worry. I was going to send the pictures of us on that day trip to Windsor.”

“I’m sure they will assume you are busy...and not running for your life from a bunch of blood-sucking vampires.” He leaned his head on top of mine.

“Yeah,” I replied softly. “I’m sure you’re right.” I closed my eyes and tried to let my sudden homesickness go. I took in another breath and felt sleep come over me.

I knew I was dreaming, yet I didn’t wake. I stood in

front of an ancient stone structure fronted by countless steps. They were bathed in flickering amber light, cast from fires in massive granite bowls lining the stairs. I felt drawn to the top; I climbed the worn steps towards the precipice; there were at least a hundred stairs. It felt like I was walking in slow motion with warm breezes swirling around me.

I reached the summit of the incline where a thick coat of ashes swirled and muffled the sound of my footsteps. There was a grand stone altar centered on the platform, and behind it rose vast pillars beyond which I could not see. A wall of black smoke churned from somewhere behind them. Fires in large golden receptacles threw off a feverish heat that caused sweat to trickle between my shoulder blades.

Then a presence I had never felt before enveloped all my senses. There was a trace of something that rang familiar. I looked at the rear of the platform, and the immense figure of a man stepped through the smoke, walking menacingly toward me before stopping next to the altar. His hair was the color of flax, and his shoulders were broad. He wore an ornate golden breastplate embossed with the head of a horned calf over his abdominals, and two owls with mighty wings spread over each side of his chest. There were some other shapes and symbols that I couldn't see clearly.

He removed his armor and dropped it to the ground. It landed with a heavy clank, despite the blanket of ash. There was an enormous scar that blazed across his chest. It was silvery, like it had been there for a very long time. I moved my gaze to his face and saw he was looking down at me, his eyes shockingly blue. His features were beautiful...and cruel. His greedy expression made my blood

run cold.

His body shuddered slightly, and I gaped in amazement as magnificent black wings covered in feathers spread out behind him. They looked slick and wet. Droplets of dark liquid splattered on the ground beneath his wings. I stumbled a couple of steps backwards when I identified the substance. His wings were drenched with blood.

I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. I tried to draw air into my lungs to scream, but he already had me by the throat.

He whispered my name. I struggled wildly, gripping his hand and trying to tear it away from my throat. I scratched at his face, but he refastened his grip so I was unable to pull in enough air to scream. He grabbed painfully my wrist.

He whispered in my ear again. I could feel the heat of his breath, "Aleria, I'm coming for you."

I woke in terror screaming his name, though he had never told me what it was. I was disoriented and it took me a moment to realize that the van wasn't moving and that I was pinned to the floor. Peter was holding down my right arm and clutching his face with the other. I searched his face and found his eyes filled with both alarm and concern. I looked to my left, and Gabriel was holding my other arm, his expression as concerned as Peter's.

I took a deep breath and relaxed my body when I realized I was still fighting them. Once they recognized I was conscious and in control, they released me. I sat up, still a little confused.

I asked, "Peter...did I?"

He nodded. His jaw was tight.

My stomach twisted, and I felt ghastly. "Let me take a

look at it please.”

He backed away from me and sat down obviously angry. “I’m fine, don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t like that at all. Then I realized that Gabriel still hadn’t made a peep. I looked over at him, and he still looked horrified. “Gabriel, what’s wrong?”

“The name you screamed...” He didn’t finish. Peter and I looked at one another and back to Gabriel.

“What about it?” I shrugged.

Instead of answering me, he asked another question: “What were you dreaming about?”

I recalled the nightmare with as much detail as I could. The more I said, the more I didn’t like Gabriel’s reaction. Then I ended with the name I knew, yet I had never said aloud before today. Gabriel winced. With an audible shake in my voice, I asked, “Who is Moloch?”

He answered slowly through downturned lips, “The Devourer.”

Chapter 2—100

Gabriel returned to the driver's seat and resumed course. All of us sat in silence for a long while, lulled by the movement of the vehicle. I rested against the side of the van, folding and unfolding my hands in my lap. The name Moloch was nagging at me. I had heard it...or maybe read it somewhere, but whenever I seemed to get close to its significance my mind would shift and it would elude me.

I glanced over at Peter and noticed a small trail of blood seeping from the scratches I had gouged on his face. I sighed, feeling horrible again, and crawled over to my bag and rummaged through it for the first aid kit I had packed. I pulled out some alcohol wipes, gauze, and a bandage. I slid across the floor towards him and detected a change his posture, almost recoil, as I approached. I smiled weakly waving the supplies. He nodded in consent, but it was very apparent that he was still angry. He looked away avoiding my gaze. I furrowed my brow and dipped my head, "Peter...I am so, so sorry...I..."

He turned his head towards me and I gazed up at him. He had a wounded expression; he moved his jaw like he was going to speak, his lips about to part, but then he reconsidered and remained quiet. The energy between us was all wrong.

I finally whispered, "I would never hurt you on

purpose...” my voice thin. His eyes rolled towards the roof of the van as he allowed me to dab at the scratches with the alcohol. He didn’t wince or react; it was as if I wasn’t touching him. I couldn’t figure out what was going on in his head. His breathing was slow and steady...and infuriating to me. Obviously I had hurt more than his physical body somehow. I didn’t know why his being upset with me vexed me so much.

I placed the bandage over the deepest gash a little harder than necessary and abruptly got up and headed toward the cab. There were several boxes blocking the cab, so I haphazardly crawled over them, collapsing them a little. I wasn’t sure how Gabriel seemed to get back and forth with ease. I finally reached the passenger seat and plopped down with a harrumph; the old vinyl seat whooshed under me and released a smell I could only describe as old. I peered into the back. Peter had reclined on the floor with legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. He had his left arm around his torso and his right hand over his heart, and had pulled a black beanie over his head, obscuring his eyes. I couldn’t tell if he could see me or not, his stoic expression no indicator.

I couldn’t stand it, so I closed the sliding door behind the cab. After a while, Gabriel broke the very loud silence. “Is Peter asleep?”

“Sleeping...sulking...what’s the difference?” I said glumly without looking over at him.

He cleared his throat, but it was the kind of clearing you do when you attempt to cover up a chuckle. I felt irritated by the strangled noise and darted my eyes in his direction. Sure enough, he had a crooked grin on his face that tugged at his scar.

“Gabriel, aren’t you the strong, *silent* type?” I huffed.

He sucked in some air between closed teeth and let out a single laugh as he glanced in my direction.

I exhaled in a gush, “What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, amused.

“Well obviously you have some great insight, O’ Powerful Keeper of All Knowledge,” I responded melodramatically.

He chuckled outright this time. “Time...just give him time.”

“I didn’t mean to scratch him,” I said, half angry and half bewildered. The words hung there, and Gabriel didn’t comment. No comfort given. I have rarely felt the need to fill silence with speaking, but my mind was screaming and going in a hundred different directions. Peter being upset at me was the last thing I could handle. “Everything was normal just an hour ago. Is he really that mad? I just don’t get it. I have never seen him be so infantile.”

Gabriel raised his eyebrow and quietly said, “...time, gracious one. Maybe you should look at things from his perspective.”

I nodded and folded my arms across my chest, “Sure thing, Mr. Finch,” but my *To Kill a Mockingbird* reference only made him chuckle again. *Yes, I am being ungracious! Case made. Fine.* Then I felt humbled. I felt like Gabriel knew something I didn’t, but I decided to let it go.

Suddenly something occurred to me, “Hey, where are we going anyway?”

“Holyhead...from there we will sail to Dublin.”

“How long to Holyhead?”

“We will be in Gloucester within twenty minutes. We need to pick up a package...then it will be about four hours.”

I batted my eyes, “A midnight cruise and a trip to Ireland, what more could a lass like me ask for?” I said as lightly as I could, desperately trying to shake my sour mood.

“Home to the motherland, eh?”

“Half of me anyway. My dad is full-blooded Irish.”

“And your other half?” he said quizzically.

“Ugh, after meeting the evil twins, do I have to claim it?”

“French...” his voice drifted off, I could see his wheels turning. “Do you know when your family originally came to the U.S.?”

“I’m not totally sure. It was a long, long time ago. I’ve heard two stories, but I’m not sure which, if any, is true.” I reflected for a moment about my great-grandmother. I could still smell the honey and milk lotion she used to rub into her delicate skin. I looked a lot like her. All of my most striking features were hers: my curves, my thick, dark hair, and my porcelain skin. But the most important feature we shared was our eyes, the rare genetic quirk...lavender eyes. One in millions and millions they say. I twisted the Claddagh ring on my right hand; she had given it to me the last time I had seen her alive. I had never seen her without it.

Gabriel’s voice cut into my thoughts, “Lost you there for a moment.”

“I’m sorry,” I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. I drew in a deep breath. “My great-grandmother lived to be one hundred years old. I used to spend some time with her each summer up in Ashland, Oregon. She was strong...and there was something about her. Towards the end she told me some stories. She said our family came here during the French Revolution, that we were royalty and being hunted by evil. It was weird. I made some comment about humanity

being evil sometimes and I'll never forget what she said, "This evil was not born of man." I stopped my story briefly and remembered the fierceness in her eyes. It terrified me; they seemed to flash when she said it. Whatever this evil was it was very real to her.

"I asked my grandmother about it and she said Nana was delusional. She said our family did flee from France, but it was because they were Huguenots fleeing religious persecution, that our family had been here for fifty years before the revolution. I don't know wh—"

I completely lost my train of thought when I looked over at Gabriel. I was so absorbed I hadn't realized that he had pulled off the road. He was scrutinizing me with utter seriousness. I looked doe-eyed and shrugged my shoulders, "Now what did I do? Or do I just have something horrible hanging from my face?" His jaw flexed. *Right, not the time for levity.*

"Did you ever do any research? Or follow up?"

"A little. I logged onto that ancestry site and tried, but there were some name changes or something. I didn't get further than Nana. None of the names I had matched anyone on record. So I didn't really think about it much after that." We sat in silence for a couple of minutes, the car still idling. Then there was something at the edge of my memory...a name coming to the surface. "You know...there was a name I never checked." I chuckled humorlessly to myself, *figures*. "When my great-grandma passed I went up with my mom to help clean out her house. I found some documents with a name I didn't recognize..."

"What was it?"

"Rosemond Le Clair...I thought it was a beautiful name. There was a picture of her when she was

young...probably around my age. I was surprised at how much I look like my great-grandmother. I have her eyes. She was with two men in the photo and there was something familiar about both of them. I asked my grandma if she knew anything about the picture or the documents, and she said she didn't know anything...Said my great-grandma had things she shouldn't."

He drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he murmured something like, "That bloody vampire is right, isn't he..." He pulled out a phone. I started to ask something, but he held his finger up, so I leaned back in my seat and waited patiently. I may have the liberty to harass Gabriel from time to time, but I know when it is important to take orders. "Sebastian...yes...yes...no, as planned...no, it was necessary. It appears *he* may be right. We can't wait. I need to retrieve it now. We need to know what is in that prophecy. No, we can't wait. If we have a *problem* they may go after it too. No...no...as is. I know. I will...Yes...be well." He hung up and looked intensely into the distance. It seemed as if he had made some sort of decision and then abruptly pulled back onto the road.

I looked at him periodically to see if it would be safe to ask him what all of this was about, but his body language seemed to say, "Ask and lose a limb." My head swirled with so many questions it made my stomach queasy. Who was right? What prophecy? What couldn't wait? What did this have to do with me? I had the ominous feeling that the night was just getting started.

Chapter 3—SHOES

We arrived in Gloucester and parked the van near an active railway station. There were groups of revelers everywhere headed home after a Friday in the pub. After stashing our bags in a locker, we took a cab to a location a couple of kilometers away. We were deposited in front of a tattoo parlor. Once the cab was out of sight, we walked a few doors down to a still bustling pub nestled between two other businesses. It was a four-story building, the bottom floor faced with wood paneling and painted black, the name painted gold in a Celtic-looking script. The upper floors were painted a creamy yellow with windows trimmed in white. Lace privacy curtains obscured the view into all the upper rooms. There were people sitting at outdoor tables rapt in conversation. Many were speaking too loudly from either excessive drinking or a humming in their ears from the music. The establishment smelled of ale, stewed meats, and cigarette smoke.

We trailed behind Gabriel as he entered. His head swept back and forth as he scanned the crowd for threats; I did the same. I didn't see any. The patrons seemed like normal people who were laughing and telling secrets on any given weekend. A very loud lady spilled her drink on another woman's ugly floral shoes. That caused a stir. A skinny, awkward guy was hitting on a blonde way out of his league. It all seemed ordinary.

Gabriel circled to the edge of the bar closest to a hallway leading to the back of the building. A heavy-set man with greasy skin and a bad case of bed-head drooped over the edge of a stool; he seemed to recognize Gabriel. He held up his finger over his lips for a split-second. I would have missed the gesture if I hadn't been looking at him so intently. Then he stood as quickly as he was able with a heavy limp and trudged behind the bar. He pulled out a box the size of a loaf of bread and slid it towards Gabriel. The man nodded as acknowledgment of the exchange and then lumbered off in the opposite direction. Gabriel stuck the package under his arm and indicated that we should follow him to the back exit, the opposite of the way the other man had gone. The whole exchange from the moment we walked in the door was less than ten seconds. But those few seconds robbed me of all the peace I had managed to muster up since my dream. It wasn't safe here. I glanced back over my shoulder at the crowd and wondered why it wasn't safe. *A vampire? A familiar? Who?*

We moved quickly down the hallway and out the back door. Gabriel took an abrupt left and headed down an alley at a trot. We came to the back door of the tattoo parlor in front of which we were dropped. He confidently walked into the shop. We entered a small, run down office that stung my nose because of the overwhelming smell of rubbing alcohol. A tiny, compact woman, inked seemingly everywhere save her pixie-like face, looked up. She had abundant hair with intense purple streaks that fanned out in an amazing display; it swayed like feathers when she stood. Before she could say anything, Gabriel made a couple of signs meaning "stop" and "silence." She nodded and without speaking, lightly walked to a William Blake painting in the corner of

the room. I recognized it as the *Michael Binding Satan* that had been in my school textbook last year. *Creepy, like most of Blake's paintings*, I shuddered. She pulled the thick, black frame away from the wall and stuck her hand behind it. She drew out some keys and tossed them to Gabriel. He snatched them out of the air without so much as a jingle. *How does he do stuff like that?*

She pursed her lips in a smile and led us towards the front of the building. We walked through a worn door into a hallway that had cracked and peeling paint in three different colors. There was a burgundy curtain at the other end of the hall separating the store front from the back of the building. I could hear the busy electric needles in the front humming away, along with the sharp breaths and low moans that accompany pain. She rolled back the carpet runner on the floor and stuck her finger into a recessed hole and extracted a black, iron loop and heaved a little. A door popped up. She placed her left hand on the edge to help ease it up quietly and then opened it wide. I looked into the entryway and saw nothing. Dark as black velvet. She pulled a couple of glow sticks out of her pocket, cracked them, and tossed them into the abyss. Then a dull, yellow light emanated from below. There were more than a dozen grey, stone stairs disappearing deep underground. There wasn't enough light to see beyond.

Gabriel motioned for us to descend. Peter led the way; I was relieved. I wanted to make a joke about the spooky tunnel to ease my nerves, but that would not be adhering to silence. I started to reach out to touch Peter's shoulder. I was so close I could feel the heat of his skin, but I snatched my hand back. If he had shrugged my hand off I didn't think I would have handled it well. When I was halfway down the

stairs, I turned and looked back up at the entrance. Gabriel had the tattooed girl's hand in both of his and held it there. They looked at one another for a long moment, with an expression that said volumes, her bottom lip quivered even though she had a faint smile pulling at the edges of her mouth. They touched foreheads, and Gabriel started to turn to follow us. There was some serious history there. I had to squelch my curiosity and scamper down the rest of the steps before he caught me gawking.

By the time I got to the bottom, Gabriel was behind me and the door at the top of the steps was sealed shut. The tunnel ran parallel to the street; I couldn't see the end either way. It was only a few inches taller than I was, so the boys had to bend down. Peter and Gabriel picked up the glow sticks as we started to walk to the left, and I fell in between them, Peter in the rear. I wished I had the flashlight out of my bag.

I brushed my arm against the wall and winced. Rocks stuck out of the rounded walls and ceilings, some flat, some jagged. *Of course I manage to find a pointed one. After today, I think I have had enough of underground passages. Maybe that will be my New Year's resolution, eh? No more fear-provoking-underground-treks in tunnels, catacombs, sewers, or otherwise. With my luck if I continue these types of journeys I will run into a mutated race of mole people bent on ruling the world, and I will be their first human sacrifice.* I sighed and continued groping my way through the darkness as I continually tripped over unseen obstacles. I wondered if this might have been an escape tunnel during one of the world wars. I was afraid to speak since Gabriel hadn't said anything yet. Could vampires hear us all the way down here? We had to be at least two stories

underground. My apprehension grew as we padded over the dirt floor. I could taste the dust we were kicking up.

There was a large amount of rubble of some sort on the ground that I stumbled over. I mildly twisted my ankle—the kind of torsion where it really smarts, but there’s no permanent damage done. Gabriel touched my arm lightly and motioned overhead. There was a large stone protruding from the ceiling. *That would have taken me out for sure.* I exhaled. I smiled in thanks, but he had already turned. I couldn’t see if Peter was stumbling as much as I was. He did have a light, though. The lace from my shoe caught on something, and it pitched me forward. Peter latched onto the back of my shirt before I fell completely. He hauled me up a little and then held my elbow while I freed my lace from some kind of metal debris that was twisted like a skeletal hand where the ground met the wall. *Well, he may not be speaking to me, but at least he won’t let me injure myself.*

We walked for several more minutes and then came to a halt. There was a warped, rusted metal ladder leading upwards. We climbed up through a hole that was so small my back was scraping each time I reached up for the next rung. Dust filtered down on me from above as Gabriel squeezed through the opening. We stopped, so I assumed he had reached the top. There was the sound of stones sliding. When we emerged, I expected to pop up through a manhole cover, as I glimpsed stairs leading downward it was apparent we weren’t at ground level at all. We came out on a raised brick platform and were at least one-story up. Then I realized it was the veranda in front of a grand church. It had huge columns across the front, and we had come out of one. Gabriel pushed back the heavy, stone cover plate where we had emerged to cover the tube leading back to the

tunnels.

We entered the church through a sturdy wooden door darkened with age and laden with black wrought-iron embellishments. The lobby was perfumed with incense, so I speculated the church was Catholic or maybe Orthodox. Gabriel marched directly to a clothing donation box in the far corner. He rummaged through it and tossed some items at us. Both Peter and I started altering our look. I pulled on a canvas, charcoal button-down shirt and wrapped a black and lavender scarf around my neck. Then I tucked my hair into the black newsboy style hat Gabriel had tossed me. *I don't want to think about whether these clothes are clean. Not that I am at the moment. Soaking in a hot tub would be heaven right now.* For a make shift outfit, it actually looked rather coordinated. Peter looked down and out; his sweatshirt was very worn, and his baseball cap was beyond distressed. Gabriel quickly pulled on a beanie and cable-knit sweater, and we were out the door.

We took another cab to the train station where we picked up our bags, and Gabriel gave us a crash course in stashing IDs. In the cab he had opened the all-important package we had picked up at the pub. There were three sets of new IDs and papers for each of us. I wondered how long this backup plan had been in the works. We each left a set at the station in different lockers. I tried hard to remember the information that had just been dumped on me. I was so desperately tired at this point; it had to be pushing midnight. We hopped on a train going north. I was so grateful to be sitting. My legs ached and pulsed. I wasn't being very good at monitoring my surroundings for threats either.

I lazily looked around and tried to keep awake. The

rhythmic sounds of the rails started to lull me. There was a woman with a baby carriage at the other end of our car, softly murmuring to her infant. My eyes drifted to her shoes, weird black wedges with raised velvety roses—ugly. Then my mind sluggishly came to a realization. Her outfit was different, her hair was different, and the baby carriage was new, but that was the woman in the pub that had been doused by the drunken lady. I wasn't sure how, but I knew she wasn't human. I felt oddly drawn to her.

My heart started hammering. I took a deep breath and yawned to attempt to calm myself down. Gabriel was seated across from me, but I couldn't catch his eye. He was intently looking into the next train car. I couldn't see what he was examining from my angle.

Peter was seated on my right between the woman and me. I tried not to look at her too often. I wanted to say something to alert the boys. *Think, stupid, think!* I forced myself to remember overheard conversations about codes and tactics. We hadn't gotten to any of this in class yet. I finally decided to start an obviously fictitious conversation with Peter. But it needed to be real enough that if the ugly shoe lady knew who we were, she could be fooled.

I angled my body a little towards Peter and took his hand. I spoke softly enough it seemed I wanted privacy, but loud enough so Gabriel could hear. "Sweetie, are we meeting with the others at 2:00 tomorrow?" I squeezed his hand and thought, *possible threat on your two*, over and over.

He ran his other hand through his hair casually, "Ummmm...Yeah, 2:00 o'clock." He was playing along, but I couldn't tell if he knew I wanted him to look to his two o'clock.

"I can't believe Rachel is going to be forty next week.

Can you imagine having little kids at that age? It must be exhausting.” *Fortyish woman in the corner with a kid!!!*

Gabriel shifted, and I could see him looking at her reflection in the opposite window. He scratched his face with two fingers—translation: yes. My stomach sank. *There isn't a baby in that stroller is there?* I prayed it was empty and not filled with something terrifying.

My hands started getting sweaty, but I didn't release Peter's hand. Peter leaned in and whispered, “Start strapping your bag on...now giggle.” I did.

“Oh, you are horrible,” I laughed and pushed him a little knocking my bag to the floor. I groaned and picked it up and swung it over my shoulder.

“And you're not,” he retorted. He tickled me, and when I pushed him, he slid something out of his side pocket and into his hand. The train started to slow. Gabriel hitched his thumb in his pocket and turned his body away from the woman slightly. When the doors opened, he counted down with his fingers. When he got to one, we sprinted off the train onto the deserted platform, Peter in the lead. The doors slammed shut behind us.

Peter pulled me forward, but I frantically looked back past Gabriel and saw that the woman had managed to get off the train too. *I had to be right, she's too fast to be human.* She had shed her innocuous looking coat and stood on the edge of the platform like a warrior goddess dressed in black leather. *What is with evil vampires and their penchant for leather anyway? Cliché much? And why didn't Gabriel sense her?* She had some gun-like contraption in her hands that didn't look welcoming.

Within two seconds of exiting the train, I heard a metallic click followed by a whooshing sound behind me. I

looked back again. She had fired that thing at Gabriel. A net was flying through the air, but instead of weights, it had horrid looking eight-inch spikes at its edges. It hit Gabriel with such force that it knocked him a couple of feet into the tile covered support column and locked him in place. The net made a winding sound and tightened, trapping him. He had spikes through his shoulder and thigh that pinned him to the post. It looked like the net was almost cutting into his skin. He fought to breathe but managed to yell, “Ruuunnnn!”

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Robin Woods lives in Northern California with her very patient husband. When she is not torturing her high school English students or chasing her two small children around, she is sitting in a local coffee shop wondering how vampires like their lattes.

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