

I SACRIFICE

in Woods

Book Three
Catcher Series



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Summary: After months in captivity, Aleria Hayes escapes and returns
to find that nothing is the same. The Watchers who believed her to be
dead no longer know if they can trust her. When Ali turns over a secret
communication from someone within the French Coven's ranks, the
Watchers and their allies soon realize that Queen Agrona's plans were
larger than previously thought.

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,
Fiction-Vampires]

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Glossary of Terms & Latin Phrases

Ancient—a vampire that pre-dates Christ.

Concilium—the original unified group of Watchers. Their duty is to watch and document the lives of vampires. If an immortal begins to cause undue harm to humanity they dispatch a Slayer to eliminate the deviant.

Conclave—the group of Watchers that separated from the Concilium believing that all vampires should be hunted down and exterminated. They believe that the ends justify the means, so human casualties are an acceptable consequence of the war.

Council—the remaining members of what was once the Concilium. They document the lives of vampires and other immortals. Their motto is that they only interfere if absolutely necessary. If a vampire begins to kill indiscriminately the Council dispatches a Slayer to stop the threat to humanity. They believe that all life has value.

Durateus Sword—Durateus is the Latin term for wood. Slayers developed a specialized sword with inlaid wood to make it effective on vampires.

Familiar—a human that serves a vampire. This may be in the form of performing duties or willingly allowing the vampire to feed on them.

Lux—also known as the Luc Casta, meaning “pure light.” Seers with the ability to resist the mind control of vampires, as well as, dreams and visions. The genetic line began with one of the Sentinel’s named Michael. The genetic trait is carried through females only. Aleria is the last of her kind.

Semideus—half-divine or a demigod.

Seer—also known as a prophet. One who has dreams or visions of the future or the gift of dream interpretation.

Sentinel—A group of angels that gave up their wings in order to live amongst humans and train the Watchers. With God’s permission they married and their offspring were the first Slayers.

Sire—the vampire that brings another vampire into existence, a parent of sorts.

Slayer—they work with the Watchers to keep vampires in check. They are the vampire’s foil and have the supernatural strength to combat them. They are human and therefore age, but at a much slower rate.

“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

--William Shakespeare

The Tempest I.ii.

PROLOGUE—NOT YOURS

They had been walking the grounds for nearly an hour in silence. “Dagan?” Bowen said.

“Yes, sire.”

“May I ask you something personal?”

He replied with a little reluctance, “Of course, sire.”

“What is your interest in her? I see the way you watch her.”

He exhaled and picked his words carefully. “She robbed me of any peace I had with one question.”

“And what was that?”

Dagan walked without responding for a long while. “She asked, ‘How could you give up heaven for this?’ She knew what I was and was daring enough to ask it.”

“Of course,” Bowen said with a muted sense of awe and sadness.

“She is like the Helen of myth...” Dagan noted.

“But Helen deliberately used her power. I don’t think Aleria knows she even possesses it.”

“And when she learns of it?”

The question, double-edged, sliced into Bowen and he didn’t know how to respond.

“Your mother fears her.”

“My mother fears no one,” Bowen retorted, but a slight shake in his voice betrayed his doubt.

Dagan shrugged, feeling no need to defend any of his statements. They walked for another length and peered out over the moonlit cove. The water looked black under the dim

light as lazy waves lapped at the shore and stone dock below.

Bowen looked over at Dagan and spoke, his voice low and rough, "She's not happy, is she?"

"No, sire," Dagan answered directly.

"I thought not," he breathed.

"Her care for you is genuine..."

"But?"

"She is not yours to have."

Bowen bent and leaned forward on the wall, feeling stricken. "Will she ever be?"

"Love can grow from obligation...but you will always have doubts, as will she. If she stays, you will never know why."

"My mother will never allow her to leave," Bowen responded with sad bitterness.

"No, she will kill her, even if she is not needed as a sacrifice."

"Then why say I have to let her go?" Bowen asked, frustrated. He looked out at the distant ocean.

"Your mother cannot control everything," Dagan stated flatly as he turned and walked away. Bowen stood feeling stricken by the conversation, his world crashing. He watched as Dagan disappeared around the corner and wondered what Dagan knew that he didn't.

Chapter 1—AURORA

I didn't think vampires could get cold, which was yet another surprise. I stood in knee-deep snow and wondered if it was late in the year for this type of weather. Moisture was saturating the legs of my filthy jeans, and my shoes were hopelessly waterlogged. My skin, a crisp 65 degrees, melted the flakes alighting on me.

I paced, hoping this would be my last night of waiting. Tomorrow was the anniversary of Laylah's death. I was pinning all of my hopes on Gabriel visiting his sister's grave. I knew of no other way to locate a Watcher or Slayer who wouldn't stake first and incinerate the corpse later.

The sun was about to rise. I trudged to the mausoleum and slid the heavy stone aside as if it were a screen door, replacing it once inside. I hadn't fed on anything except rats for a week and hated the unpleasant musk that tainted their blood and the way the fur stuck to my lips. I curled up on the dank, granite floor, wrapped my arms around my torso, and prayed that Gabriel would come tomorrow and stay after sunset.

When I closed my eyes, all I could see was Bowen's face behind my lids. I choked back the guilt of not really saying goodbye, though he must have known I wanted to. Not once had we engaged in more than a squeeze of consolation on the hand or shoulder. My grief for Joshua had crushed my heart.

I had had two shocks my final day in the castle. The first was when Dagan appeared in the room and handed me

the means to my escape. He was the head of Queen Agrona's Royal Guard and the general over the army she was creating. Dagan was the most massive being I had ever seen, a literal fallen angel walking on earth. He peered down at me with his almost black eyes and had simply said, "Thirty minutes before sunrise," nothing more. There was an escape route mapped out in the package, followed by instructions. I opened the door precisely thirty minutes before sunset to find the guards missing, and I followed his plans without wavering. They led me to London. I was able to get myself to the money and IDs that were stashed in Gloucester, and from there I headed to Enniskerry, Ireland.

My second shock was the way I felt with the knowledge that I might never see Bowen again. He had entered the room not long before I was to leave. I was standing on the bottom step leading to the bed. He gave me a crooked grin. If my heart still beat, it would have gone into a sprint. When I didn't say anything and continued staring at him, he did a double take and approached me slowly, a faint smile still on his lips. "Are you well?" he asked, concern creeping onto his face.

I didn't answer but held out my hands. He stood before me and placed his hands in mine, looking down at them. His hands were perfect like everything else about him. He was tall and blond and had the lean musculature of an Olympic swimmer. I ran my thumbs over his knuckles and pulled him a half-step closer. I dropped his hands and touched his face. *People had once worshipped him like a god...he looked like one.* I ran my fingers over his high cheekbones and arched brows and down his perfectly chiseled nose. I cupped his face as we stood nose-to-nose with the aid of the step, his blue eyes piercing and full of questions. *He must have sensed something.* I ran my right thumb gently over his lips, and for the first time, I willingly

drew his lips to mine. My impulse to kiss him was a surprise to even me. We had kissed once before many months ago at the warehouse in California, but it was irreparably twisted by the actions of his twin brother. I had kissed him because I had to, not because I desired it.

Bowen took in a startled breath at the last moment, clearly not expecting me to actually kiss him. His lips were soft and firm and tasted sweet. My lips moved slowly as I leaned into him. His hands found my hips as my arms encircled his neck. I pulled him against me, feeling the hard planes of his chest press against the softness of mine. My kisses became more feverish and I brushed the tip of my tongue across his top lip. They parted as he let out a little gasp. I ran my fingers through his blond locks and grabbed on hard, desperation driving me. His hands ran upwards, one accidentally catching the hem at the bottom of my shirt. I sucked in a shaky breath, feeling his hand on the bare skin of my lower back.

Kissing him was nothing like kissing Joshua, where I had always felt like my body was a network of sparks leaving me breathless. With Bowen, I felt like I had an ocean raging inside me, undulating and pulling at my very core—waves of emotion colliding and collapsing on one another. Our breathing was ragged and fast. He pulled me closer, his arms enveloping me, my feet barely on the ground. The barriers I had so carefully built were chaotically crashing in on me. I wished I could tell him everything I was thinking. *I truly do care about you, but I have to leave. I can't be here. You are amazing, and if my heart wasn't broken, a part of it would be yours. Goodbye.*

I felt tears well up in my eyes as I pulled myself away. He looked at me in an awe-struck daze, and I caressed his face again. *So beautiful*, I thought. I felt the warmth of a tear against my cool skin. I wiped it away with the back of

my hand and caught a glimpse of its color. There was a tinge of red in it. I said in a half-sob, "There's blood in my tears."

Bowen pushed some loose strands of hair behind my ear. "Is something wrong?"

My voice stuttered from an onslaught of emotion I had broiling under the surface. "No matter what, know I care about you, and I never wish to see you hurt."

He straightened up slightly and held my face between his hands, wiping the next tear tenderly away with his thumb. "I love you, Aleria. I always have and I always will."

Another sob escaped my lips. "D-don't say that. Please," I whimpered and looked down. I knew he loved me, but hearing him say it aloud for the first time...now...I had been so careful to keep him at a distance. I pushed past him and locked myself in the bathroom. He stood vigil at the door for a long while. He whispered my name and the words "I love you" again and again, as if I needed convincing of their truth. I anxiously watched the shadow of his feet reflected on the shiny marble surface beneath the door. When I finally exited, he was gone, and it was time for me to depart.

I sighed heavily as my thoughts returned to the present. I gripped the locket from Joshua in my palm and rubbed the North Star charm he had given me, as was my habit to soothe myself. With some effort, I was able to fall asleep surrounded by the decay of ancient corpses in coffins. I had a dream that I had dreamt before of graveyards, running, and a knife, but it was more fragmented this time. I woke a few hours later, my chest constricted. Though my bloodlust was under control, my emotions definitely weren't.

This time of year, days and nights were roughly split 50/50. I had been spoiled in the castle with its protective

windows coated by something...something I could never pronounce. It had made me feel like I was still human, being able to watch the sunrise and sunset. I certainly didn't need twelve hours of sleep, no vampire did. Dark and light, literally and figuratively, had become my eternal struggle.

I wondered how Joshua had been able to cope with the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped by day. Joshua...I gripped my chest and wondered how an unbeating heart could feel like this. I pressed my face against the cold stone and concentrated on breathing. The last thing I needed to do right now was cry. If Gabriel did show, I so didn't need watery blood dripping from my eyes. I looked at the watch Dagan had provided; it appeared the sun had just set. I carefully slid the stone to the side. The golden light of sunset was but a whisper in the air, the blues and purples of night washing away the sun's warmth.

I circled around the side of the mausoleum and was overwhelmed with joy when I took in Gabriel's large and lean figure sitting slightly hunched over on a bench near his sister's grave not a hundred yards away. His chocolate brown hair and olive skin looked darker in the evening light; the long fishhook scar on his left cheek was pronounced in the shadows, increasing the lethal image he always projected. But his grief was evident in his posture; at least, I knew it to be grief. Normally the silent warrior, I was one of the few people he actually talked to, and he had become family.

Without thinking, I smiled and ran to him, approaching from the side; I was about to say his name, but something stopped me in my tracks. I looked down at my chest. There was a Durateus blade stuck there like my own personal gravestone. I looked at him through wide eyes. Gabriel's expression of rage melted into horror when it

registered. I fell backwards like a slab of granite, unable to move; his blade was straight and true and had found my heart. My paralysis was complete.

“Aleria!” he frantically yelled. I felt him slide up next to me on his knees. My upper body convulsed as he withdrew the blade.

“I’ll heal,” I whispered. But he shook his head, the look of horror still fixed on his face. And then, without warning, I screamed out from a searing pain more horrific than anything I had ever experienced. My chest burned like a thousand fires. I felt sweat bead to the surface of my entire body, a sensation I hadn’t experienced since I had been turned.

I was vaguely aware that I was being carried. I was loaded into the cab of a vehicle...maybe a truck. I curled my body inward on the bench seat next to him wishing I could snuff out the blaze in my chest. I heard the tires screech as Gabriel accelerated out of the cemetery. He was yelling into the phone. I only caught bits and pieces between my whimpers and moans...something about “training room... ice...antidote...and...NOW!!” I tried to control the pain. I let out small pants. Gabriel swerved off the road and roared to a halt. I heard him throw the door open and launch himself from the cab, leaving me there. He returned after I had taken thirty small breaths. He gently placed a bag of ice on my eyes and barreled back onto the road.

“Ali...listen to me. I know it hurts. Keep the ice on your eyes. I am trying to protect your sight. You fight...I thought...” Gabriel paused. “Do *not* give up now.”

I pressed the bag to my eyes and concentrated on that, but I felt it melting rapidly. *How hot was I?* Not too much time later, we stopped. I was being carried again, this time down long runs of hallway, one after another. The bag over my eyes was completely melted and warm. I dropped it as

we entered a room with long industrial lights at regular intervals. My vision was dim, even though the lights were bright, and piercing my eyes. I squeezed them shut and turned my face towards Gabriel's chest.

I shrieked a moment later when I was unceremoniously plopped into a tub of ice water—I fought to get out instinctively. “Ali! Do not fight me! We have to keep you cool!” I tried not to struggle, but my mind was chaos. The heat was spreading through my body, and the cold felt like knives delving into my flesh. *I’m a freaking vampire! Why do I feel like this?* Someone put another bag of ice over my eyes. I felt more hands on me, maybe four sets, trying to keep me submerged.

“She is melting it too quickly,” Sebastian’s distinctively gravelly voice boomed. “Ian, get more ice from upstairs,” he ordered. *Ian’s alive*, I thought in relief.

“On it,” he answered, and a set of hands disappeared.

A new wave of pain ravaged me. I screamed out, arching my body. The bag of ice fell from my face. I saw Peter as he placed it back on my brow, alarm in his eyes. I felt more ice being poured on and a set of hands returning. Gabriel’s voice said, “The antidote is still 15 minutes out. Did anyone get him?”

“No.”

“Peter...Go!” A set of hands disappeared again.

Sebastian’s voice asked, “Is she a threat?”

“I don’t think so. I thought she was...” Gabriel’s words dropped off.

“Dead. They must have turned her to save her,” Sebastian conjectured.

Then it sunk in...all of them thought I was dead...as in dead-dead, not undead. Despite my efforts not to fight, I threw someone backwards when the next wave of pain hit me. I screamed out, “MAKE IT STOP! PLEASE!” I couldn’t

take anymore; this was far worse than being turned. “KILL ME!” I gasped. “Please!...I can’t!...I can’t!” And then I felt someone plunge into the tub with me. I was being held from behind. Arms and legs locked around me like iron, holding my body under the water, so strong I couldn’t move. A fresh bag of ice was pressed to my eyes. “Please...end it...end me...I can’t...” I wailed repeatedly. Ice was dumped on me over and over again as my body melted it off. I could hear the drain gurgling with the runoff of water. I finally succumbed to exhaustion; I couldn’t fight anymore...even if I wanted to. My arms and legs were limp, yet my chest was jerking from quick pants as I tried to breathe through the spasms of pain.

Someone entered, and I could hear another flurry of motion. Gabriel said, “Through the chest...at the entry.”

My arms were pulled away from my chest, and the person under me arched me upwards. I felt the jab of a long needle. An Aussie accent instructed, “She doesn’t have a heartbeat to push it through her system. We need to do that manually.” I felt Uriel do chest compressions; if I didn’t know any better, I would have sworn that my heart beat a few times. Then my arms and legs were being massaged in a circular motion pushing towards my extremities. I finally started to cool. I relaxed and leaned onto my captor. Whoever it was eased their grip slightly.

Gabriel’s voice sounded relieved. “Ali, can you hear me?”

I nodded and replied, “Yes,” my voice soft.

He lifted the ice pack from my eyes. “Can you see me?”

He came into soft focus. “Not well.” I blinked several times, and he came into sharper focus, but he was still blurry. “The light.” I cringed and squeezed my eyes shut. Then I remembered the name of the toxin he had mentioned months earlier. “Aurora.”

“Yes.”

“It works,” I said dryly.

He let out a single laugh, and the person behind me pressed their cheek against mine. “Yes,” he replied. “It works well.”

“Count me out of the next field test, ‘kay?”

“Done.” He reached in and pulled me from the water. I heard the other person slosh out, water sheeting on the ground.

My voice was slurred. “So tired.” I was handed over to someone else.

I heard keys being tossed and Sebastian’s voice say, “Peter, open up the other basement room. We’ll take shifts.”

“No, she stays with me,” said the person holding me, his voice unrecognizable.

“No,” Sebastian replied firmly.

“She’s my wife,” he rasped. I sucked in a breath and opened my eyes, still too weak to lift my head. In my blurred vision, I took in dark, wavy hair. “Joshua,” I mouthed.

“It’s true,” Gabriel confirmed.

Sebastian was silent.

I reached up and touched his face, afraid I was hallucinating or had heard incorrectly. My hand dropped to his throat and the deep scar that ran around as far as I could see. He was real, not a dream.

There were no more protests, so he exited the room with me and walked swiftly down another hall. I was thankful for the dim lights. He opened a door with his hip, and a moment later, placed me on a bed, not caring that we were both soaking wet. We lay on our sides facing one another, and I couldn’t stop touching his face, though it was difficult to move because my arms felt hollow. His green eyes blazed over at me, full of emotion.

“You’re dead,” I whispered, still confused.

“So were you,” he replied, his voice a rasp of air. He pulled me to his chest and wrapped his arms around me. He seemed to be in shock.

“I watched you die,” I said, still in disbelief. My voice muffled in his shirt.

“Gabriel watched *you* die.”

“I’m so, so tired.”

“Rest, love,” he whispered.

“You won’t go anywhere?”

“Never again.” He pressed his lips to mine and for a moment all distractions fell away. His lips felt warm and inviting and despite my utter exhaustion I felt electricity in his kiss. His body touched mine at every point easing me, calming me, healing me. Then I realized what he tasted like...home.

My energy waned and I tucked my head under Joshua’s chin. Despite my happiness, worry crept into my thoughts. I thought of the coded message I carried, my vision of the coming menace, and my feelings of guilt. Soon I plummeted into a vision of Moloch rising, his black wings spread wide as he soared over the devastation. The fallen one, who once had led angelic armies, now gloated while the world burned.

Chapter 2—SAFELY THUS

Something woke me. My eyes flew open. Unsure of where I was, I sat up startled and clutched my chest. There was a deep, dull burn pressing its way through me. I took a breath, though I had no need to breathe at all, and looked to my right. Joshua was sound asleep on the bed next to me. His dark, wavy hair twisted on the pillow and stuck up in places like he had been tossing and turning. Emotion knotted in my throat; I had really escaped. I shook my head, trying to clear my mind and figure out what was real.

“Are you okay?” Joshua whispered, while he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

“I just...I thought it was a dream.” I was still feeling disoriented.

He rolled on his side, propping his head on his hand and smiled. “Not a dream.” He looked a little thinner than before I had been captured, but he still had the same lean, soccer player physique.

I laid back down, rolling to my side to face him. He reached over with his free arm and pulled me closer. “The dreams I was having...they were so...” I trailed off, sorry I said anything.

“Prophetic ones? Or just dreams?” He ran his fingers lazily up and down my arm, searching my face. His eyes looked dark in the dim light, like emeralds, and I couldn’t see the gold flecks in them.

I hesitated for a split-second— “Just normal dreams... Nothing a hot shower and clean clothes won’t wash away.” I

fingering the collar of my shirt and grimaced comically at my clothing. I was still in the clothes I had worn for days; they were filthy, still damp, and itchy after being in the ice bath. I tried to fix my face with a pleasant look...but the dreams I had been having for weeks...there was a darkness in them that terrified me beyond imagination, and that was *without* mentioning the two visions I had dreamt the week before I escaped.

He narrowed his eyes at me, knowing me too well. "I..."

There was a soft knock at the door; I wondered if that was what woke me in the first place. Joshua got up and answered it. "Sebastian was wondering if you could see him now." It was Peter's voice.

"Sure," he turned and looked at me as he exited. "Be back in a bit." But I could see he didn't want to leave me.

"I'll try not to get kidnapped while you're gone," I smirked.

His face darkened.

"Too soon?" I looked at him doe-eyed.

He rolled his eyes. "Uh, yeah, too soon."

I walked to the door after him to see Peter. He stood awkwardly outside and stepped back when I came into view. I stepped into the hall and smiled, leaving the door open behind me. His light, brown hair was longer than I had ever seen it. Thick locks hung below his brows, occasionally catching in his lashes as he peered at me with cautious, brown eyes. Gentle curls relaxed on the collar of his shirt. I leaned forward as if to take another step towards him, and he stiffened. I rocked back on my heels, trying not to be offended, but hurt hit me hard. His voice sounded strained: "Sebastian would also like to see you in a half hour or so, if you are feeling well enough."

I nodded mutely and looked at the floor: generic, off-

white laminate squares glared up at me.

“Ummm...Gabriel will be there too... Just to let you know...”

I found my voice. “How have you been?” I asked softly, my fingers still aching to reach out and give him a hug. Peter had become my best friend. He was the only person besides Joshua that had known me for any length of time. I still felt incredible guilt over him getting sucked into this life because of me, even though he had repeatedly told me he had no regrets.

His breath seemed to hitch in his throat, and he took a half-step back and leaned against the wall. He shook his head slowly, the sides of his mouth pulling downwards. When he spoke, he revealed a bitterness I had never seen in him. “I woke in an alley next to a dead friend, after I watched that *monster* kill my girlfriend *and* kidnap my best friend. How do you think I’ve been?”

Instinctively, I started to move towards him, but he raised his hands. I backed towards the opposite wall and leaned against it.

Peter let out a frustrated huff of air. “Logically, I know you are still you, but...I need some time to process. I...” He paused. “I know what you sacrificed for me...*again*...and I feel like a complete jerk.”

I slid down the wall until I was seated and stared at my pale hands and the spider web of veins running beneath the surface of skin. My voice was low and rough: “I understand if you don’t trust me...or are scared of me...or just hate what I am now. I don’t blame you.” I dropped my head into my hands.

Peter let out a cross between a sigh and an exasperated growl. “It’s just...”

“What?” I looked up at him.

He slid down the wall, our knees just a foot apart. “I’m

sorry. I just had this rush of anger the second you came to the door—it's not at you. Gah!" He squeezed his eyes shut and hit the back of his head against the wall a couple times, then sat deathly still for a couple minutes.

I waited. I had been in my own personal hell. Peter and the others had their own version.

"We buried you, Ali."

"H—How?"

"We thought you were dead." He opened his eyes, tears at the brim. He cleared his throat and blinked them away. "Gentry...she was your double...she didn't have any family. Sebastian used an asset in the Coroner's office...changed the report: hair color from red to brown, eye color from green to lavender...Someone helped out and dyed her hair. The cause of death as a car accident...and that we were with you—Tyran had crushed the left side of her face when he threw her into the wall...and there was the broken neck. After the paperwork was done, and the story was set, we took 'you' home."

"Home," I repeated in a whisper.

"Sebastian sent Joshua and me with the body. Gabriel escorted us. Joshua was...he..." He swallowed again. "I convinced your parents to have an evening memorial. I reminded them how much you liked candlelight services. That way Joshua could be there. We thought it might help. Give him closure."

"Help?"

"Ali, he stopped speaking—*literally*. I mean, he had the neck wound, but the first time I heard him say anything in months was yesterday." The look in his eyes was far away, "The way he held onto your mom at the funeral..."

"My mom..." my voice trembled, and I felt tears tumble down my cheeks. Peter's eyes widened. "Don't freak. I know...blood in my tears."

“Your family will be okay. In a way, this could be good...you were never going to be able to go back anyway.”

“I know...I just thought...maybe...” my voice strangled.

“I just want to warn you: It’s not the same here, without you or Leslie or Gentry here...it’s been...”

“A house full of angry men.”

“And Uriel.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“We tried to carry on in the same way. Gabriel finally got Joshua to leave his room. They went out on a couple of missions, even though he still wasn’t speaking. Then we were doing some training, and he broke Ian’s arm.”

I gaped and put my hand over my mouth.

“It’s fine. It wasn’t a bad break, but Joshua...he sort of disappeared at that point. Like a phantom. I have been delivering books and blood to him. I don’t think he would have left his room if there was a bathroom in there. He just kept looking worse...I don’t know if he ever slept.”

“It’s all my fault,” I rasped. “I shouldn’t have gone out with everyone. I should’ve...” A new set of tears stained my cheeks.

He sighed and slid over to my side, placing his arm around my shoulders and pressing his cheek to my forehead.

“Careful...might be hungry,” I grumbled, bitterly.

“I’m sorry, Ali...I’m an idiot. Of course you are you. You’re way too stubborn to let even a DNA reorganization change you.”

“It’s fine,” I laughed tearfully. “I probably need to get used to it.”

“Hopefully Josh broke everyone in.”

“Doesn’t mean I’ll get accepted. I’ve been with the enemy for months.” I fluttered my fingers dramatically on the word enemy.

“And I’m sure you gave them hell.”

“Hmphf...I wish...I wish I did. Peter...for the first time ever...I saw my breaking point...a few more days in that dungeon...I was done. Tyran would have succeeded.”

He squeezed my shoulder. “You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

We sat quietly for a few more minutes. I could tell he wanted to ask me something, I could hear his lips part, he took a small breath and then stopped. “What is it?” I finally asked.

“Did you really get married?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“The night before I was taken...remember? I left town with Josh and Gabriel for a couple of days?”

“Gabriel agreed to that?”

“Reluctantly, I think. It was all a surprise to me. He asked me one night and the next, we were married. I had nothing to do with the planning. I know Joshua and Gabriel had a few arguments about it.”

Peter gave me a sheepish grin, “So...you guys...ummmm.”

“Really?”

He laughed.

I rubbed my leg and felt the packet I had taped to my leg. “I’m supposed to get something to Gabriel right away. Do you think I can interrupt them?”

“Come on.” He stood and offered me his hand and said, “I’ll show you the way.” He pulled me up. “That will take some getting used to,” he said, referring to my cold skin.

“Yeah, it did with Joshua.” I paused, “Do you think there are any clothes around here for me?”

There was a small shake in his voice as we walked down the hall. “I think we have a few of Gentry’s things that got swept up in the last move. I’ll get ‘em for you.”

“Thanks.”

We walked silently down the hall and made a left. He knocked at the second door on the right. We heard Sebastian’s voice: “Yes?”

Peter stuck his head in the door. “Ali has something for Gabriel. Can she interrupt you?”

“Yes...have her come in.”

Peter turned to me: “I’ll go find you the clothes. Be back here in a sec.”

“Thanks.” I circled around him and entered the room. There was an odd mix of emotion in there, like the relief you would have after finding you had survived a tornado, only to find out a hurricane was on the way.

The room was a serious downgrade from anything I had seen in the past. It had the appearance of being squished in on the sides, making it long and narrow. It must have been a storage room for files at one point. There were dozens of dilapidated filing cabinets shoved into one quarter of the room. There was a single desk, some folding chairs, and some oversized, fabric-covered couches that looked like they belonged in the 1970s, with their outdated floral prints in orange and olive green. The room smelled like dust and smoke, like someone had spent years in here smoking while they guarded the files. I wondered how much of it I would smell if I were still human.

Sebastian was seated in the middle of one of the couches. He had aged in the last few months; the grey streak that had been a stripe through the middle of his beard had infiltrated the sides. His wire-rimmed glasses lay askew on his nose. He still looked tidy, but he had a slightly messy edge, far from his normal immaculate appearance.

Gabriel and Joshua sat on opposite ends of the couch from one another. “You have something for me?” Gabriel asked, sounding surprised.

“Yeah.” I held up my finger for them to wait. Gabriel leaned forward slightly, it somehow felt aggressive. *Maybe the aggression was just in my head.* I dropped my shoulders slightly, feeling deflated. I grabbed a folding chair and sat lightly on the edge of it. I hiked up my pant leg, revealing something securely taped to my leg. I started unwinding the thick, blue, waterproof tape that was wound all the way around my leg several times. It had been there since I left the castle. I was given strict orders not to remove it until I passed it to Gabriel. It looked like a letter in a plastic sleeve. I crumpled the tape into a ball and stood before handing the packet to Gabriel. I sat down again and pulled my pant leg back down.

“Did you get out on your own?” Sebastian asked.

“No. I...”

Gabriel made an odd sound, and everyone looked at him. He sat looking at the paper in a state of shock. “It’s in the language of the angels.” He finally tore his dark eyes away from the page and looked at me. “Bowen didn’t help you escape? I thought from what Joshua said...”

“No...he didn’t know I was leaving. I thought it would be safer for him...if he didn’t know.”

“So that is from...?” Joshua asked.

“Dagan,” Gabriel answered, clearly stunned.

“Well, that is the second time he has surprised us,” Sebastian commented while rubbing his beard.

“Second?” I asked.

“He is the reason that I’m still alive,” Joshua said softly.

“He...” I stopped short and thought of those horrible moments. I had watched Tyran cut Joshua’s throat and Joshua fall from the castle wall into the ocean so far below.

“He what?” Josh asked.

“He did what I asked,” I said dumbfounded.

“Well...not what I asked. What I tried to ask. I was dying...my lung was filling with blood after Tyran accidentally stabbed me. All I got out was the word ‘please.’ He stood there, towering over me, glaring. He looked like he wanted to finish me right there.”

“Accidentally?” Gabriel asked, not understanding.

“Yes. Tyran and Bowen were fighting. Tyran ran Bowen through with his sword. He was so focused on his brother, he didn’t realize I was standing directly behind him. I remember being so happy that I was dying, that I couldn’t be used anymore, and—” I paused, “I thought you were dead.” I shrugged my shoulders and glanced at Joshua for only a split-second.

“I heard the queen screaming at Tyran as I looked at the water below, and then I noticed a small light wink at me in the trees across the cove. I concentrated on it. Then Dagan stepped up next to me. I heard the queen say, ‘Make sure he is finished.’ He spread his wings and looked down at me. I tried to say, ‘Please save him,’ but after I got the word ‘please’ out, I started coughing up more blood. He dove off the side, and I thought that was it.

“But it wasn’t. Moments later, I felt like a fountain of sparks was unleashed in my chest. I heard Bowen and Tyran arguing over me. Bowen said, ‘Tyran’s bite...my blood. Blood trumps bite.’ And the queen replied, ‘So it is written.’ And then Bowen took me. The sword had gone through Bowen and into me, his blood mixing with mine.”

“How long did it take to turn?” Joshua asked. I knew he was wondering if I suffered for days like he had.

“Not long...” I looked away from Joshua. “Bowen asked if he could help me. He asked for permission to accelerate the transformation. I told him he could...if he promised to keep me from killing anyone. He agreed. It didn’t take long after that...I don’t think...I blacked out at some point.”

“Did he keep his promise?” Sebastian asked.

“Yes.” I looked him square in the eyes. “I haven’t killed anyone.” But then I broke my gaze and looked down, a frown pulling at the edges of my mouth, and I spoke more softly. “I would have. I would have killed a lot of people.” I felt ashamed; if I could blush, I think my face would have been burning. I just wanted to leave.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Sebastian answered.

“Hi... I just wanted to let Ali know I found some clothes for her.”

“Ummm...do you mind if I clean up somewhere?”

Sebastian looked at me. “I have a few more questions.”

Gabriel intervened, “Sebastian...why not let her go? It will give me a few minutes to see if I can figure out what the message says.”

“I’ll come straight back,” I offered.

“See you in a few minutes. Peter, would you show her the way, please?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you,” I said as I ducked out of the room without really looking at anyone and followed Peter back down the hall. Once clear of the room, I breathed a sigh of relief and spoke: “Thanks for digging up the clothes for me.”

“No problem.” He led me to the bathroom and opened it up. He stepped in, opened the cabinet, and glanced inside. “Anything you need should be in here.”

“Thanks,” I said as he squeezed my arm and exited the room. Every inch of the bathroom was covered in tiny tiles in various shades of teal blue. The shower didn’t have a pan; the water simply flowed from the shower area to a drain in the center of the room. There was a white plastic curtain in a loose C-shape that kept the cabinet from getting sprayed. I flipped on the exhaust fan, followed by the water, and then

shucked my clothing off. The feeling of water running over my body was transcendent. I slowly scrubbed off a week's worth of grime and watched the sudsy water disappear under the curtain in its trek towards the drain.

My chest burned where Gabriel's dagger had impaled me. I scoured the area to remove the remaining crusted blood that hadn't been washed away in the ice bath. It flaked away, but the skin around the area was still agitated. The edges had knit together but there was a bumpy line dimpled with reds and pinks. It is common for mortal wounds to scar vampires, but something about this didn't look right. I still felt like heat was pressing into my chest. My healing abilities must've been slowed, as I hadn't fed in a day, and rodents were not very fulfilling. I toweled off and examined myself in the mirror. I definitely needed to feed. My veining was purplish-blue, the color deep like paint on alabaster. I looked at my chest wound again and cringed. It looked worse than I had thought.

I pulled on my clothes and headed out to find the others. Peter was waiting in the hall. "Hey, were you waiting here the whole time?" I asked.

"Nope...just got back a couple of minutes ago. You..." He stopped and looked at me warily.

"I...?"

"No offense, but you don't look so good. Do you need to eat? Or drink? Or feed?"

I sucked my lips inward. "Yes."

"Come on," he motioned and started down the hall.

I trailed behind him, but after we had proceeded a few yards down the hall, I felt as if icy fingers ran from the base of my skull, over my head, and onto my face. My vision blurred, and my knees buckled. Peter whipped around and started to reach for me. "Get away from me!" I cried as I hit the floor, deathly afraid I would hurt him.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Vision...get back...” I slurred as I felt it take me under.

I could feel heavy irons around my wrists cutting into me. My feet scratched at the floor. The room reeked of mold and soot. There were no windows or doors in the stone room that lay before me—only a passageway with a hall that I couldn’t see from where I was confined. I pulled at the chains, but my feet couldn’t find purchase, and I had no leverage.

I looked to my left. There was a vampire chained to the floor near me with a stake through his heart. The blood around his wound was dry, and the veins in his hands looked almost black in the light. His clothing was torn like he had been in a fight and dragged a long distance. There were holes in the knees of his jeans that were blackened with dirt. He had been here for at least a week, maybe more. He was starving.

I heard the clank of a metal door down the hall. Tyran emerged around the corner. My flight instinct cut in, and I flailed. Trying to break my bonds, I hit my head hard against the wall behind me, stunning myself. He grinned wickedly. I stopped my struggle.

“Back safely thus I see. Did your precious Watchers not want you?”

He continued his approach and stopped inches in front of me. I could smell the salt air on his skin. He raised his hand skimming the clothes along my side. I sucked in a breath trying to control my revulsion. He leaned in, his mouth close to my ear. I could feel his warm breath spilling across my cheek. “Do you know what a starving vampire will do to another? It is a sight to behold.” He ran his fingers down my face on the opposite side in which he was speaking. “It will be a shame to scar this pretty face of

yours.”

He pulled a small blade from his pocket with a circular hilt that he slid his thumb into and proceeded to cut my cheek. I felt blood gush from the wound. He stepped back and admired his work with a sadistic smile on his face. He placed the knife back in his pocket and pulled what looked like a large vial of blood from the other. He walked to the vampire that was motionless on the floor and sank to his haunches next to him. His hand hovered over the stake for a moment and he tore it out, then tossed it into the corner with a hollow sounding clank. He pulled the hood up to reveal his mouth. He opened the jaw and dumped the contents into his mouth. I could smell the fresh human blood which was still warm. A small moan escaped the mouth of the captive. I recognized the voice, and my heart sank. “Time to wake, brother,” he said, and with that, he disappeared from the room without a whisper.

I heard a beep and noticed a camera in the corner of the room. A small green LED light came on just as Bowen started to pull against the chains. He moaned again and yanked harder this time. Small bits of rock crumbled from the metal plate holding the fetters to the wall. He yanked again. This time it made a popping sound and both chains were loosed from the wall. He slowly rolled onto his belly and then raised himself until he was up on all fours. He grasped at the back of his head and pulled the hood from his head. He looked at me. His eyes glowing a brilliant blue, and his fangs were fully extended. A guttural sounding growl welled up from deep within him. There was no look of recognition on his face. It was that of an animal... fierce and ready to kill. I struggled against the chains. *Wake... I need to wake.* I panicked yanking at the chains until I felt blood dripping down my arms. *Wake! Wake!* His body coiled up and he sprang at me, hands and teeth tearing into my flesh.

I screeched. Someone had me. I shoved at whomever was holding me and realized I had woken. Joshua was on his knees in front of me holding my legs, saying my name over and over again. Gabriel was behind me pinning my arms to my body. I relaxed and leaned against him. “Sorry...sorry...sorry...” I panted, trying to shake the fear pulsing through me.

“So, I see the visions have continued,” Gabriel said facetiously.

“Is Peter okay?” I asked anxiously.

“Yes. He’s with Sebastian,” Josh answered.

“I’m okay. You can both let go now.” They relaxed their grip on me.

“What was that about?” Joshua asked.

“The usual—” I smiled ruefully and evaded the question. “Gabriel, I need to get away from you, I...”

“How long has it been since you fed?”

“Counting rats or not counting the rats?”

Joshua made a sound in the back of his throat.

“I know...gross...I didn’t have a lot of options in that graveyard. Didn’t have a cell to call the Red Cross emergency vampire delivery service...It’s been a week since I have had anything...substantial.”

I leaned forward so he could get out from behind me. He stood and gave me some space. “Go...feed...get some rest. We will talk when you are up to it.”

“Thanks.” I stood on shaky legs. Joshua put his arm around me and led me to his room. Once inside, he pulled out a packet of blood from the fridge and handed it to me. I sat with it in my hands staring down at it.

“It has to be better than rat blood.”

“I think anything is better than that.”

I pulled the cap off the end of the surgical tube and squeezed some in my mouth. I felt better almost instantly,

but it tasted horrible. “It’s like eating Tofu straight out of the package...when you were expecting a steak,” I groaned.

“Yeah...never said it was good... it’s not live blood.”

I drank down three units and curled up on the bed. Joshua crawled onto the bed behind me and settled in, spooning me. He rested his hand on my waist. “Mmmmm. Thank you.”

“Get some rest,” he whispered.

“I love you,” I said in return.

“And I you.” I felt him kiss my hair and I slipped into restless dreams. Dreams of running...and crying babies... and blood...and more blood.

Chapter 3—BLOOD OF THE SLAYER

I awoke...I don't think I had been asleep long. Joshua was still behind me, my head on his arm. I carefully rolled over, trying not to jar him from his sleep. His eyes opened to slits. "Sorry...I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't," he whispered. "Just enjoying being here with you."

"Mmmm," I blinked my heavy lids. After a long pause I said, "I still can't believe you are alive." I reached over and traced the angles of his face with my fingertips. "Dagan is certainly an enigma. How did he save you and not draw suspicion?"

"There was an underwater cave under the stone dock. He dragged me into it and revived me. He said he would send someone I trusted to retrieve me. When he went to leave, I asked about you. He simply said, 'Concentrate on healing,' and dove back into the water at the mouth of the cave. I don't know how much time passed by, but Dagan found Gabriel, and Gabriel got me home."

I ran my finger over the scar on his neck and spoke through downturned lips, my thoughts coming out in fragments: "If Tyran...two more inches and...I thought...he almost took your head."

"But he didn't," he answered as if my thought was coherent.

A smile flickered on my face. "Your voice...you sound more like you today."

"Do I?"

Speaking about his voice reminded me of how I was told he shut down when he thought I died. “Josh...If something ever happens to me again...I need to know you will be okay...I need to know you will move on.”

“We have forever now...nothing will happen to you.” But there was an edge to his voice. He didn’t seem himself, like he was shell-shocked that I was back, and there was emotion ready to well up in him at any moment.

“I know...I...It’s just that...” I closed my eyes.

“I am angry with you, though,” he said in an eerily calm voice.

“About what?” My mind raced, knowing there were a dozen things about which he could be upset about.

“You tried to take yourself out—before I could get to you. I felt it.” His look was keen and penetrating, and it made me squirm.

I closed my eyes for a moment, ashamed. “I did. I’m sorry. I lost hope...I was afraid if you came...what happened *would* happen. I tried to use a guard to kill myself, but Dagan intervened and literally tore the guard in half when he went for me.”

“That’s three for Dagan.”

I blanched involuntarily.

“Four?”

I sighed, “Long story short...me unescorted...sunlight...tested with my arm...” Joshua winced. “When I went to finish the job he pulled me back inside. He posted guards after that...and he...” I didn’t finish.

“And he what?”

“He said, ‘Not all is as it seems. Hope is not lost.’ I didn’t try anything after that. I felt like he wasn’t speaking about anything within the castle. I wonder if he was hinting about you.”

“Did you speak with him much?”

“Uh...no. I think that was two of ten sentences he ever spoke to me.”

He was quiet for a moment. “What was it like...being exposed to the sun?”

I took in a slow breath, trying to put it into words, “Not what I expected. In the movies, it is always fast. I didn’t know if my arm would turn to ash and fall off or explode into flame. I held my left arm in the light and watched. It was the same reaction a human would have except accelerated by a thousand. It turned pink...then blistered...it became purple...it watered and swelled...then black blotches appeared as the fat started burning up. It was excruciating...but it was better than feeling the way I felt. I started to lean forward and that’s when Dagan tore me from the light. It took a long time to heal...Bowen told me that if you don’t will yourself to heal, it takes longer.” I ran my fingers over the rent in his throat.

He put his hand over mine.

I added, “Mortal wounds will always leave a mark. Your body spends too much time repairing the internal damage, and the scars set in.”

“That explains a lot.”

“I don’t know how you did so well without a Sire to train you.” I looked at him; the awe must have clearly shone on my face. “I don’t mean to sound cheesy...but you are amazing.” Before he could say anything, I pressed my lips to his. He gathered me up against his chest. But when he did, the dull ache I had in my chest blossomed into a sharp pain. I smiled and pulled away a little before the kiss escalated into more.

His brows knit together, “You okay?”

“Yeah, I don’t think I have fully recovered. I still feel exhausted.”

“Do you want to talk about that vision yet?”

“No...but...there are a lot of things I need to tell you. Things that happened...things I did... I just...I thought you were dead and...” I felt a sense of hysteria rising in me mingled with guilt and the horror of the last few months.

He stared at me for a moment and then kissed my forehead. “Rest, love.” His voice was warm and kind.

I rolled into him and buried my face under his chin. He encircled me with his arms and rubbed my back. “I love you,” I choked.

“Love you.”

I drifted off to sleep with worry racing through my body. I woke clutching my chest. I squinted at the green letters of the alarm clock. It had only been an hour since I fell asleep for the second time. I sighed and rolled on my back and looked at him. His eyes were darting back and forth rapidly while his lips twitched as if he was speaking in his dream. I ran my fingers over the curve of his neck, and the intense look on his face smoothed.

I carefully sat up, trying not to disturb him. He murmured something I couldn't understand and rolled the other way. I pushed my pillow against his back, and he settled back into his dream state.

I rubbed at my chest and decided to use the restroom. I slipped out the door, trying to keep the fluorescent lighting in the hall from flooding into the room. I padded down the hall at human speed and entered the bathroom. I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. The bags under my eyes were better, and my skin no longer looked like alabaster with eggplant striations through it. But a sick feeling sank to the pit of my stomach.

I stood there for minutes, afraid to look, my fingers trembling while they hovered over the buttons of my blouse. I drew in a long breath and unbuttoned the top two buttons, pulling back the left side to look at the wound that was

puckered-looking earlier. It still looked red and irritated, but now there was a fine net of crimson spider veins creeping out from it in every direction. They were over half my breast and all over my sternum. I buttoned back up and leaned forward on the sink, pressing the heels of my palms against the porcelain to feel something other than panic. All that time wanting to die...and now all I wanted was to stay alive.

I swallowed hard and stepped into the hall. I wanted to talk to someone, and showing the infection to Sebastian seemed too much like having to show it to my own father. I didn't want to worry Joshua...at least, not yet. I settled on Gabriel, but I didn't know where anyone was staying in this place. All I had seen were long runs of hallway and a few rooms. I remembered a reference being made to basement rooms. *So were the others staying upstairs? Were they meeting in that room earlier to keep Joshua and me out of the sunlight?* I walked up and down each of the halls listening intently for the sound of breathing—Nothing. I found the only staircase that led upwards and started up the steps. I came to a door and opened it. A beam of sunlight came through the opening. I jumped back so fast I put my elbow through the wall. *A little bit of an overreaction*, I scolded myself.

I picked my way down a couple of steps and sat, listening for someone to walk near enough that I could call out to them. *Oh, to have a cell phone again*, I lamented. It didn't take long. Gabriel jerked open the door about ten seconds later to investigate the noise. He looked at the wall and then at me. I shrugged and bit my lip. "Sorry...wrecked your wall."

"Anger management problem?"

"Cute." The smile I had melted from my face, and emotion knotted in my throat. "Gabriel...can we talk

somewhere?” My voice sounded rougher than I meant it to.

He looked at me with an unreadable expression.

“Promise, I’m not hungry now.” I tried to smile as best I could.

He let out a short gust of air. “I am not worried about that. Come on.” He walked past me down the stairs and led me to the room where I had met everyone earlier. He turned on the lights and eased himself onto the longer of the two couches. He still looked cautious. I couldn’t tell if it was distrust or something else.

I sat opposite him on the other couch, curled my legs beneath me, and leaned one elbow on the armrest. Something horrible pricked at my consciousness, and the first thing that came to mind was to not show him the wound but to ask a question. I looked down at the black buttons on my shirt and spoke. “Has a Slayer ever been turned?”

He sat silently for long enough that I finally looked up. His face had darkened with some emotion, and he didn’t look like he was going to answer me.

“Please...I need to know.”

“Why would you need to know that?”

“Please, just humor me.”

“No. Slayers are either immune, or it kills them. Not a single one has been turned in history.”

I took in a stuttering breath. “The vaccine you gave me. It was designed for vampires?”

“Yes.”

“Does Aurora work on humans?”

“No.”

“What about Slayers?”

“No.”

“So there is no vaccine for Slayers?”

“I do not believe so. Our DNA is different. It should

not. It targets the strain of vampire DNA and superheats it.”

“What if a Slayer did need it?” I asked.

“They would be out of luck. By the time we could come up with one it would be too late.”

I shook my head as it felt like my stomach dropped to the floor. “Thanks...that’s all I needed to know.”

He looked at me, puzzled, and held my gaze.

My lip quivered. “I...” I didn’t know what to say. “My ancestry.” My thoughts got jumbled. “Ummm...Did Winslow tell you where he traced the Lux back to?”

“Yes, it originated with the Sentinels and the line of Michael. Michael married a Seer, and their daughter was the first Seer to be able to resist vampire mind control.”

“So the same bloodline as Slayers, but not a Slayer.”

“Correct.” Then the color in his face slowly drained away. “Ali...what are you not saying?”

I pursed my lips. “It’s nothing...just working something out. Thanks for answering my questions, Gabriel.” I stood and started to turn towards the door. Suddenly, Gabriel’s hand was encircling my left bicep. I sighed.

“What are you not telling me?” he pressed.

“I was just curious,” I let out, but my voice barely finished the last word.

“Even as a vampire you are a bad liar.”

I slumped my shoulders in defeat. I placed my right hand over my heart, wishing I could cover the evidence of my distress. Gabriel released my arm as I turned back towards him. My fingers rested on the top button. I looked down at myself for a long moment, and then I met his eyes that were fastened on me. Without taking my gaze off his face, I slowly unbuttoned the top two buttons of my blouse, opening it just far enough so he could see the wound and the veins

branching out from it.

His eyes blazed. “No...No...” he said firmly like he could stop what I was about to say and it wouldn’t be true.

An odd sort of peace washed over me. “It’s okay,” I said, my voice no longer shaking.

“It is *not* okay.” He held up his finger to silence me as he stood abruptly, putting his phone to his ear. “Sebastian, we need to get a blood sample to Research and Development...the group fine-tuning Aurora. Yes...Yes...I will leave in 15.” He hung up the phone. “Stay here. I am going to get a syringe to draw some of your blood. You will not be dying on me.”

I sank back onto the couch, dropped my head into my hands, and waited. A piece of me, a very large piece, was hoping Gabriel would say I was crazy, that my premise wasn’t sound. I felt like I was going to fall apart before I came in here, but the moment he agreed with my hypothesis, I felt calm.

He swept back into the room two minutes later and sat down next to me. He pulled a large syringe out of some plastic. I unbuttoned the cuff of my shirt and held out my arm. He took my arm in his left hand; his calloused hand was extremely warm. “You need to tell him,” he said with a grim firmness.

“Not until we know something for sure.”

“Ali...It is not right. You need...” But he stopped himself from saying something else, and clamped his mouth shut and flexed his jaw.

“Let’s not assume the worst. Can you just keep him busy or have Sebastian keep him busy?”

“Perhaps...” He released my arm without drawing blood. “You are coming with me to the lab. It is probably more efficient anyway.”

“Okay—when? It’s kinda bright out.”

He strode to the desk, plucked up a pad of paper and a pen, and thrust it at me. “Write Joshua a note. I will get you some gear.” Then he disappeared out the door, leaving it open behind him.

I stared at the blank piece of paper and finally scrawled a message:

*Gabriel took me to R&D to see the people who created Aurora. Don't know how long I will be, since I don't know where we are going.
I love you. See you soon. —A*

I folded the piece of paper and headed to his—er—I guess—our room. I passed silently through the hall and into the room. I quickly changed my clothes, placed the note on my pillow, and returned to the couch within seconds.

Gabriel returned with an armful of the Daylight gear that the French coven used. I looked at him surprised.

“We recovered these the day you were taken from the alley. There was one female with them. They should fit. We repaired the hole in the chest.”

“Thanks.”

I took the leathers and the helmet from him and started shoving my legs through the pants. I pulled on the protective hood to cover my neck before sliding on the jacket. She had been taller than me, but it was good enough. I held the helmet under my arm and trailed behind Gabriel to the stairs. Once there, I yanked the helmet over my head and followed him into the afternoon sun.

We took a blue, generic-looking four-door sedan in order to leave the van for Joshua. Gabriel promised to have Sebastian keep him busy. I reclined in the back seat, since I figured it would look rather odd to have someone in full motorcycle gear sitting in the passenger seat. We must have

driven for an hour or so—maybe more. I spent the entire time trying to steel myself; I needed to be prepared to hear: “We can do nothing to help you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed fervently. A knot formed in my stomach, and I wondered if God still heard my prayers...if I still had a soul in my body.

Chapter 4—MUTATIONS

At some point during my prayers—or maybe pleadings would be more accurate—I fell asleep. Gabriel wasn't exactly chatty, not that he ever had been, but I found this new level of silence frightening. I wished I could delve into his head and know what he was thinking. I woke when the car decelerated and turned onto what sounded like a dirt road. Within a few minutes, we stopped. I dreamt of Morpheus and the expression he had on his face when I saw him above the maze. I was finally able to put a word to the look on his face: *unnerved*. I unnerved him. I wondered if I had been the only person to discover his presence in a dream.

I got out of the car and followed Gabriel into what looked like a dilapidated barn. Dust rose from his footsteps as he trudged in before me. Gabriel stepped in front of a faded metal silo, about six feet in width, at the corner of the barn. He pressed a button on the front of the control panel and looked upwards. I followed his gaze and noticed a small camera in a knot of wood that framed the structure. I would never have noticed it if he hadn't pointed it out. After a moment, there was a metal clicking sound, and the front of the silo popped open. He slid his hand into the crevice and pulled it open.

"Ready?" He turned and looked at me, his face blank of any expression. I nodded and walked into the opening.

Once I stepped into the circular space, Gabriel moved in behind me and closed the door. Blue LED lights came

awake the second the door clicked shut, and the platform started moving downwards.

Gabriel turned around. "It is safe to take the helmet off."

I unbuckled the chin strap and lifted the helmet from my head, tucking it under my left arm and looking at him apprehensively. I opened my mouth to say something, but I couldn't put into words what I was feeling.

His non-expression softened, and he placed his hand on my shoulder. "We will find a solution."

I nodded. The elevator stopped, and the door opened. He dropped his hand to his side and turned to face the opening. We must have been a hundred or so feet down, as the coolness of the earth seemed to emanate from the walls.

Everything in the structure seemed to be made of cement, stainless steel or glass, capped with a rough rock ceiling. It appeared that we were in some type of natural cave that had been converted into a research lab. A small lobby greeted us with sterile-looking white chairs and a wall of thick glass with two sets of doors. The main lab was just inside the second entrance. There were two smaller rooms partitioned off in the far left and right corners. In the room on the left I could see people in white, lab-type clean room suits with goggles and long green chemical gloves. The one in the far right corner was dark. The center section had rows of tall tables with stainless steel tops that you would see in a science lab.

A tall, blonde woman with safety glasses looked up excitedly from her work and beckoned us to enter. She took off the glasses, tossing them on the work table as she walked over to the inner doors of the entrance and buzzed us in. We stepped through the first set of doors, and once those closed, she buzzed us into the second set. There was a piece of parchment paper taped to the door with the words,

“Abandon hope all ye who enter here” in calligraphy. I recognized the reference; it was the inscription over the gateway to hell in Dante’s *Inferno*. I would normally find it funny...but not today. I saw Gabriel read the sign too.

Once inside, anxiety welled up inside me and I moved stiffly. Gabriel put his heavy hand back on my shoulder. “Beth, this is Aleria...Aleria...Beth.”

She looked at his hand on my shoulder, then at my face, and smiled, but there was confusion in her expression. I held out my hand in greeting: “Nice to meet you.”

She hesitated, then shook my hand after it was left hanging in the air for a moment. “Nice to meet you, too.” She looked down at our clasped hands, then let go. When she did, she rubbed her fingers against her palm.

Beth was physically imposing; she had to have been close to six feet tall. Her face was a pleasant oval with a strong yet delicate nose and deep blue eyes rimmed with dark blonde lashes. She wore no makeup, save a tinted balm on her lips. When she turned to lead us to the other side of the lab, I noticed that her hair was swirled into a bun with dyed electric blue ends sticking out of the bottom.

She unlocked the door to the darkened room in the corner and flipped on the lights. It was an office with a desk shoved in the corner, a sofa, a set of bunk beds, and a small kitchenette with folding chairs haphazardly shoved under it. There was debris from a recent meal strewn all over it. She swiped a waste basket off the floor, headed to the table, and started shoving the pile of wrappers and spent napkins into the can. “Sorry about this. Go ahead and have a seat.”

Gabriel sat with his back to the corner so he could still see everything in the room, as was his habit; my back was to the door.

There was a long pause before Beth spoke: “Sebastian called and said you were headed this way...something about

Aurora?”

“Yes.” He looked at me and then at Beth. “We need you to run a blood sample. We have an anomaly. The antidote was not fully effective.”

“There is nothing wrong with the antidote,” she said a little defensively.

I spoke up: “It wasn’t the antidote. It was the recipient.”

“I don’t understand.”

I looked at Gabriel. I didn’t know how much information she needed. His lips tightened. “Ali has some Slayer DNA, but she carries a variation of the gene.”

“How is that possible? She’s a...”

“Yes, and we do not know,” he replied.

Beth looked at me. “I’ve heard your name before. I didn’t realize you were a vampire.”

“I wasn’t.”

“So you’re the one we are talking about...yes?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you know the antidote isn’t working?”

I looked at Gabriel, and he nodded. I stood and shucked off the leather jacket. I had a zippered hoodie with a low-cut, black sports bra on underneath that I would have felt comfortable wearing by itself. I unzipped the hoodie. Gabriel’s eyes widened for a split-second. My eyes shot to my torso. There were three wide, blue lines coming from the entry wound now, in addition to the network of thin, red spider veins. I gasped, “It’s worse.”

“When was your exposure?”

I shrugged. I didn’t actually know.

“Thirty-six hours,” Gabriel answered.

She pursed her lips. “Okay, let’s draw some blood. Why don’t you come over to my work station.” She had an air of brilliance, and her demeanor was friendly. My nerves

eased a little. Gabriel and I filed out behind her and she had me sit on a stool while she opened a kit marked “Phlebotomy.” She pulled on some blue gloves, then hesitated in front of me.

I smiled faintly and said, “It’s okay. I won’t bite... promise.”

“I’m not used to working with live patients,” Beth replied.

“Or undead ones,” I quipped and wagged my eyebrows.

She chuckled: “No...you are my first undead one.”

“Have you ever met one of us before?”

“I’ve only had samples.”

“I didn’t think so,” I said thoughtfully.

“Why did you think that?”

“Your reaction to touching me the first time.”

“Do you experience pain the same way?”

“Yes, but when you know it’ll heal right away, it’s easy to ignore it. As long as there isn’t too much blood loss, most wounds can heal in a short time. Our skin is thicker even though it looks thin. It’s harder to break the skin.” Beth picked up the type of needle you use with an evacuation tube. “You will need to use a syringe. I don’t have a pulse.”

She rolled her eyes at herself. “Of course.” She picked up a large syringe and proceeded to stick me with the needle, but had to work to get it through. “Definitely thicker,” she said under her breath. Then she drew some blood into a syringe and placed cotton over the needle as she removed it from my vein. When she lifted the cotton it had already stopped bleeding. “That *was* fast.”

Gabriel put his hand on my shoulder. “You okay here? I need to make some calls. Cell phones do not work down here; I need to use the land line in the office.”

I looked at Beth and then back at him. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

Beth stopped him: “Gabriel? Would you mind giving me a sample of your blood? Since we are dealing with the Slayer gene, it would be helpful. We don’t have any on site.”

“Anything you need,” he answered and picked up the rubber tourniquet out of the kit to start wrapping it around his arm. He became agitated, as it wasn’t going smoothly. I lifted my hands to help, but paused to wait for permission. He nodded, and I continued. I tied it off, swabbed the area with an alcohol wipe, picked up the needle, and inserted it. Beth handed me a glass evacuation tube. I inserted it, and the blood started flowing inside.

I looked at the blood. “I think you can finish this.” I handed him gauze and turned away. I knew my eyes were glowing, and my fangs had extended. I was still under control, but I didn’t want anyone to look at me. I took a few deep breaths through my mouth to regain control. I turned back around. Gabriel handed Beth a third vial and removed the needle.

Beth spoke to me while she put samples in tubes and spread things on slides and dropped vials in a spiny thing. “Were you a phlebotomist in a past life?”

“Uh, no...someone was just really anal about medical training the first four months of Watcher education.”

Gabriel grinned for the first time today: “Necessary...*not* anal.”

“Toe-may-toe...toe-mott-toe...You just say that because you benefitted from my mad skills.”

“I see you are in better spirits now...I will go make my calls.” Gabriel paused and looked at Beth. “Unless you need something else?”

“That was it,” Beth confirmed. Once he was out of the room and his voice could be heard on the phone, Beth asked, “*He* benefitted?” I looked over at the office. Gabriel was closing the blinds on the door.

“Yeah, we had a run-in several months ago in a train station. The vampire was able to mask her presence. She was very well-armed and managed to ambush us. It wasn’t pretty.”

“You seem to get along well. I’ve never seen him relate to someone like that.”

I exhaled. “He’s family.”

“How long ago...” She got an awkward look on her face.

“Was I turned?”

She nodded.

“A couple of months ago.”

“I had heard about your kidnapping...well, everyone did. I’m sorry.”

“Do you think I am contagious?” I asked as I gestured towards my chest.

Beth thought for a minute. “It depends...If the toxin did *not* mutate, then a vampire exposed to your blood would simply need to take the antidote. If it *did* mutate, it could be deadly. But at this point, we don’t know if it’s fatal to you.”

“Would it just be in my blood? Or would it be in my saliva too?”

“Again...it depends on mutation. But saliva is easy to check. Let me take a swab.” Beth walked to another table, opened a jar with long swabs on wooden sticks, and took two samples from my mouth. She then clipped off the tip of one of the sticks and plopped it into a vial, rubbing the other one onto a slide. She placed the vial into one of the machines and returned for the slide, which she slid under a microscope and peered into it. As she studied the slide, Beth pulled a blue ink pen from her breast pocket and scribbled in a spiral notebook. When she finished writing, she looked up at me; I was staring anxiously at her. She smiled and said, “This may take a few minutes.”

“Sorry,” I cringed and raised my hands to back off. I

strolled around the lab looking at equipment I knew nothing about and found myself asking, “Can you talk and work?”

“Yes.”

“Have you worked down here long?”

“My parents were Watchers—my dad a scientist...been running around the labs my whole life.” She paused. “This is all pretty new to you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...I had a pretty picture-perfect California girl life not too long ago. I like working with the Watchers, but now...” I paused to swallow. “Even if I live, they won’t be too accepting of what I am.” I changed the subject. “How does this toxin work? In dumbed-down terms please.” I gave her a strained smile.

“It uses some of the same principles as snake venom. It works much like a Cytotoxin. There is an enzyme that binds our introduced molecule to the strain of vampire DNA. But instead of ripping a hole in the cell membrane and causing necrosis, it seals it up and superheats it. The power of the sun from within.”

“That’s pretty much what it felt like.”

I wandered around while she worked. I noticed that there was a huge padded chair with its back to the lobby. It reminded me of an old-fashioned barber’s chair on steroids. It was made out of a thick metal and appeared to swivel and recline, but it had huge restraints on it. Heavy bolts kept the base in place. I stepped on the footrest and hoisted myself onto the chair. I sat on the burnt orange cushions and settled in. “Funny...this is the most comfortable chair in here.”

Beth looked up, “Huh...I guess that is ironic.” She must have opened up a container with blood in it. When the smell hit me my fangs reacted. I took a deep breath and willed them to retract.

The door to the lab in the corner opened, and four men

filed out. They stripped out of clean room suits and hung them in lockers I hadn't noticed before. They were so involved in conversation that they didn't notice me until they turned around. Beth was around a corner out of their line of vision. I saw fear on their faces and realized my eyes must be glowing. I crossed my legs and leaned back in the seat and smiled, trying not to look threatening. One of them called out, "Beth?"

"Hey, guys," she answered calmly. "You finish?"

"Yeah," he answered, not taking his eyes off of me.

I chuckled under my breath, "Beth—they think I'm here to eat them."

"Oh...Oh!" She dropped her pen and walked towards them. "Sorry guys, this is Aleria...she's here with Gabriel." She hitched her thumb towards the office. Their relief was palpable.

I waved.

One of them with black hair in little curls timidly walked towards me and held out his hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm Thomas."

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hand.

None of the others approached me, but they waved a greeting. In an odd way, it made me feel powerful. The truth is, I could have killed all four of them in under a minute if I had wanted to—but, obviously, I didn't.

I swiveled one of the restraints over my left arm. It was so large that it covered half my forearm.

They moved almost as a unit past me. A different one spoke to Beth. He had brown hair and a medium build with thick, black rimmed glasses. "We're going on a food run. Want anything?"

"Yeah, I'm starved. You know what I like. And bring something for Gabriel, too." She turned and went back to her work table. She shuffled some papers and moved to the

side closer to me with her back turned.

“Will do,” he said.

Thomas looked at me. “Ummm...do *you* need something?”

I smiled again. “Thanks, no.”

“Bye,” Beth said without looking up from the scope she was looking into. She set up another set of test tubes and started cutting off the tips of cotton swabs into them. She got a frustrated look on her face. “Urgh. These aren’t cutting,” she mumbled to herself and shook the scissors as if scolding them. “Aleria, are there scissors on the table in front of you? These are dull.”

“Please call me Ali...and yes. You want them?”

“Yes, please.”

I heard the first door buzz and then the second. There was a long pause before I heard the door shut.

I flipped open the restraint I had been playing with and snatched the scissors. I took about two steps towards Beth, then felt a crack followed by a searing pain in the back of my head. I stumbled forward throwing my hands out in front of me, but before I hit the ground, someone seized my arm and wrenched me over so I landed on my back. My head smashed onto the ground. I sucked in air to scream; but before I could, I suddenly focused on the Durateus dagger coming down on me. It drove straight into my heart. The only movement I made was the air escaping my lungs in a hiss.

I looked at the man hovering over me. I never heard him coming, even with my sensitive, vampire hearing. He had striking black hair that was shaved on the sides with the rest pulled into a ponytail. His skin was olive-toned; he looked like he could be of Persian descent. Then I spied the Slayer tattoo on his right shoulder. *Figures*. He pulled out another blade and stuck it in the side of my neck as if I was

going to jump up and needed to be held here. I then realized he must have fractured my skull. I could feel the tickle of the back of my head getting wet. I could also feel blood pooling under me; the blade had gone clear through. The blood reached the backs of my arms on both sides. *Not good.*

Two other figures flanked him: a man and a woman. The Slayer with the knife poking into my throat spoke, “Beth, are you okay?”

I heard glass smash on the ground and Beth’s voice. “What are you DOING?!”

Then I heard the office door jerk open and thunderous footsteps. “Stop...NOW!” Gabriel’s voice boomed.

All three of them backed away. Then Gabriel was at my side. The dagger was wedged between my ribs, and he had to jerk hard to remove it. He held my face between his hands. “Ali...speak to me.”

I blinked my eyes. “Ouch,” was all I could manage.

A little relief spread on his face, but not much. He unzipped my hoodie and looked at the wound. “Get me something to slow down the bleeding.” Beth handed him a pile of gauze. He pressed it to the wound with his left hand and felt his right hand slip under my head. “Damn it.” That was the first time I had heard a foul word pass his lips. “Kez, Amara, Samael... *what* are you doing here? I thought you were still in France.”

The one who stabbed me answered, “A whole lot of France is coming here. We were tracking three different hit teams. We came here to pick up some supplies while it’s light.”

Gabriel looked down at me and lifted the gauze from my chest. “This is not slowing down at all. You should be half-healed by now.” His expression was alarmed as he looked over at Beth. “Do you have a blood supply here?”

“Nothing pure. Everything has been used in some sort

of experiment. Our new supply is coming in tomorrow.”

“What does it matter?” the other one, with the light brown hair and flared jaw, muttered. “One less parasite to kill later.”

Gabriel’s jaw flexed. “Samael, she is one of us.”

“That *thing* is not one of us,” Samael replied flatly.

“Yet you fought alongside Joshua without complaint.”

His voice didn’t sound as confident. “That was...different.”

“This is Aleria. I *know* you have heard of her. She is under my care and is Joshua’s mate. You *will* help her.” I closed my eyes. “Ali...open your eyes and focus.”

“Why is she not healing?” the woman, Amara, asked. She sounded North African.

He lifted the gauze again, and I felt a new wave of blood ooze down the side of my chest.

“All three of you are donating blood right now. Beth...draw their blood.” I heard grumbles from one of the men, but they followed her to the other side of the room.

Gabriel rubbed his cheek, leaving a huge smear of my blood on his face. My lids were getting heavy. I looked up at him again. He shifted and pulled my upper body onto his lap and leaned against the side of one of the tables. He looked like Atlas...the weight of the world on his shoulders, but then his grim expression softened. He placed his wrist over my mouth: “Take it...I’m immune.”

I turned my head away. “No way,” I whispered.

“The hard way then...as always.”

I felt him reach into his boot and heard the familiar sound of a knife being drawn. He cut his wrist and held it over my mouth. I still resisted, but when I felt the warm blood on my lips, my body took over. I felt ashamed. I tried to will my fangs to stay put, but they wouldn’t. I bit Gabriel. His eyes tightened for a second, then I released the hormone

and he relaxed. There was a closeness in the feeding, but not intimacy. I concentrated on his heartbeat. It was more robust than anything I had ever heard. His blood was different too, stronger somehow.

My senses started sharpening as I drank. His eyes narrowed to slits. I felt the slowing of his heart, and more than anything, I wanted to keep going. I tried to move my arm and was able to—barely. I licked the punctures and the cut to close them up. Then I reached up and pushed his wrist from my mouth. I turned my head away from him and again had the sensation of a few phantom beats of my heart. I wished it could be true, but it only added sadness to my humiliation.

Gabriel seemed to come back to his senses. He lifted the gauze once again and said, “It is slowing.” His voice was sleepy.

“Thank you,” I whispered, not able to look at him.

“Consider it penance. As I said...you are not going to die on me.” Beth came over a minute later and handed him a bag of blood. He ripped the tube out and lowered it to me. “Cheers.”

I rolled my eyes and wished I had enough strength to do this on my own. After being force-fed two more pints, I rolled off his lap onto my side. “Please just give me a few minutes...this is horrible, Gabriel.”

I felt his fingers on my back and then in my hair. “These have closed up.”

I glanced at him as he stood to his feet. There were scarlet stains all over his clothes, and he was standing in my blood. He stepped to the edge of the pool, kicked off his shoes, and walked over to the others in the back of the lab. Beth was asking if I needed more, and Gabriel was saying to give me a few more minutes. She asked him another series of questions, but I tuned out. The others were silent. I put

my arm over my head to block out the light and curled into a fetal position. I wished I could transport myself somewhere else. I had never wanted to feed where anyone else could see me, much less feed off of someone I knew.

I struggled to a sitting position. Still drained, I pushed myself backwards to the table and leaned back against the leg. Then I heard Gabriel's tone turn sharp. "Why would you attack her unprovoked?" I could feel the tension in the room from here.

I chimed in, knowing exactly what went wrong. "It's not their fault," I said from across the room. "They thought they were protecting Beth from me." I twisted around and used the table to pull myself up on my feet, but had to lean forward on my elbows to keep myself from going over.

The Slayer with the dark complexion spoke: "She got out of that chair and headed towards Beth with those shears." Amara stood not far from him, looking defensive.

"Like I said, they thought they were protecting Beth. It happened...no blame on anyone." Gabriel's forehead smoothed. My knees got shaky, so I shifted to the side and eased myself onto a stool.

One of Beth's machines beeped. She walked over to it and removed a vial. A printer started spitting out a report; after it landed in the print tray, she pulled it out and started perusing it. She had a pen in her hand and incessantly clicked the tip in and out while she read. Nerves hit my insides the longer she read without saying anything. Finally, she looked up. She looked at me. "Good news...your saliva is clear."

My shoulders sagged in relief. "How long until we know about the rest?"

"It will take me days...sorry. It's complicated...and not my specialty."

I was confused. "You didn't create Aurora?"

“No...the creator of it is deceased. She had some seriously inventive thinking on this one.”

I asked, “Who is *she*?”

“Neka Rousseau—this was a personal project of hers.”

“She’s not dead,” I whispered.

“What?” Samael questioned, exchanging a look with Kez.

“She’s alive...or, at least, she was two months ago. She’s a prisoner in Agrona’s castle. I was in the cell next to hers for weeks.”

“It’s been years,” Beth said softly.

“They removed her from the cell each day to work on something. She was treated better than most of the prisoners. She looked fragile though. I never saw them feed on her...” I thought for a moment. “She’s the only one I never saw them feed on.”

“They fed on you?” Amara asked cautiously.

“I...I can’t...” I lost my breath. I shook my head, despising my reaction. The room went quiet.

Samael turned towards me. “How fortified is the castle?”

“There are hundreds of them. And their numbers are growing.”

Gabriel leaned in. “Growing?”

I told them about the maze surrounded by dungeons. The games they played—the feedings. And how they painted the contestants to indicate how many games they had survived: purple, then blue, and finally red if they made it to the final challenge. I explained how it reminded me of the Coliseum in Rome—how they watched the killing for pleasure and toyed with their prey. Then I told them, “If the contestant survived the third meet...their reward...was to be turned. They want warriors...survivors...to add to their army.”

They continued to ask questions for at least an hour, giving me a few breaks to regain my strength. By the end of it, I had sketched out as much of the floor plan as I knew. I indicated where guard stations were and routes I knew about. But I hadn't seen entire wings of the castle.

The hostility I had felt earlier towards me lessened.

"Where do they keep Neka?" Samael asked intensely.

"The furthest corner of the dungeon." I stood up and added, "Don't even think about it. All of you...these questions...I don't care how awesome all of you are. It's suicide."

"You got out...there has to be a hole in their security," Samael pushed.

"No, there isn't. I had help. I would never have gotten out."

"Maybe they will help again," Kez said, with hope painting his expression.

"I don't think so. And I have no way to contact the inside."

"Or maybe you don't want to bring them down?" Samael challenged.

I slammed my hand onto the counter so hard the stainless steel top dented. "No one wants to burn that place down to the ground more than me! And to make sure Tyran..." I heard Amara gasp. My body was shaking, and I was so angry I was on the verge of losing control of my emotions. I quickly turned my back to them just as my fangs sprang. I took a few deep breaths, put my hands over my face, and disappeared into the bathroom. I looked in the mirror, and my eyes were glowing lavender. My hair was matted with blood; my blood was simply everywhere. I stripped off the hoodie, wet down a wad of paper towels, and started sponging myself off.

The door opened. I spun and faced the corner to hide

my fangs, knowing I hadn't calmed down enough. I expected to hear Gabriel's voice, but it wasn't: it was Amara. She was about my height and very exotic looking. Her dark skin was smooth, her eyes the color of cinnamon, and her head thick with tiny braids. Her voice was comforting.

"Beth gave me some scrubs. She said there's a shower in the back corner."

"Thanks." I kept my back to her; I was trying to hold back tears.

"For what it's worth, I don't think you're protecting the French coven."

"Why don't you think that?" I said softly.

"I'm an Empath. I can sense what you're feeling."

"And what does that tell you about me?"

"I know you are fiercely loyal to Gabriel, and that is enough for me."

Worry hit my stomach when I remembered an overheard conversation in the castle. "Are you from the Abacha family?"

"Yes."

"Then you're in danger."

"How so?"

I leaned my head against the wall, still hiding my face. "The French coven is trying to raise Moloch. They need an Empath from your family...unless they already have one."

"As far as I know, no one is missing from my family."

"Then you need to be careful...don't let them draw you out." My teeth finally retracted. I turned holding the hoodie in front of my chest.

"What else did they do to you?" she asked.

"Who?"

She leveled her gaze at me. "Your emotional response, when you said you wanted to burn down that coven. I haven't felt something so strong in a long while."

“I’m going to go ahead and get that shower.”

Her face fell a little. “You aren’t alone. Others will accept you; don’t let the hot-headed Slayer Samael get to you.”

I touched her elbow as I passed by her: “Thanks.”

When I got into the shower, my mind flooded with information...cytotoxins...mutations...a lot of the French coven headed this way...meeting my first Empath...I tried to process everything as I washed all the blood away. I didn’t know if it was my imagination, but it seemed like the veining over my torso was getting better.

I towed off and pulled on the teal green scrubs that Amara dropped off. I fingered through my wet hair, trying to work through the tangles. I pulled open the bathroom door. As the edges of my sight started going dark I looked wide-eyed at Gabriel as a vision pulled me down.

Suddenly, I was back in that room with Tyran and Bowen. Tyran asked, as he pulled the stake out of his brother’s heart, “Do you know what a starving vampire will do to another?”

But this time, I said something else: “Tyran...please don’t do this...it’s a death sentence for him...”

Tyran looked at me and smiled malevolently as he unlocked the shackles on Bowen and left the room.

I came out of the vision sprawled on the floor, gasping, with Gabriel and Amara at my sides. Covering my face, I rolled on my side. My voice was strangled, and my vision blurred with tears: “It mutated, Gabriel. Aurora mutated.”

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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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