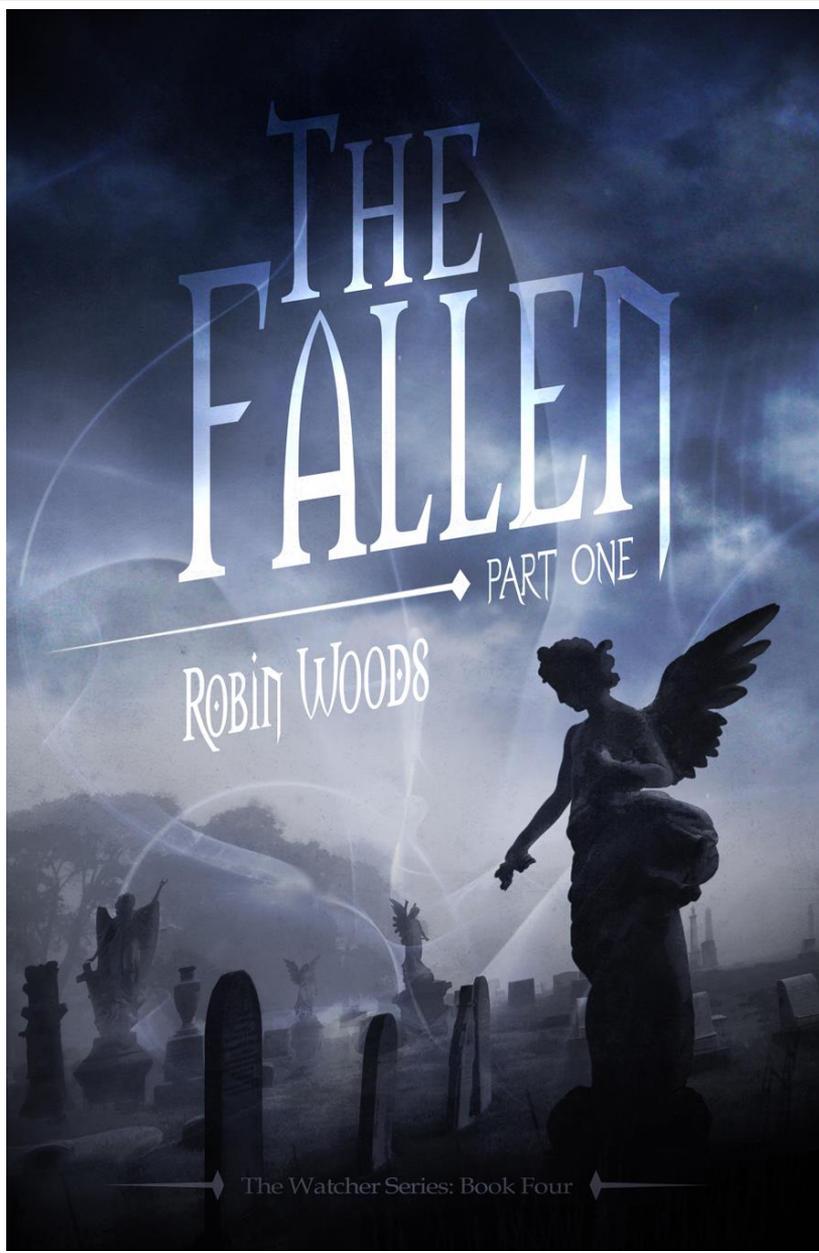


THE FALLEN

PART ONE

ROBIN WOODS

The Watcher Series: Book Four



THE FALLEN: PART ONE

Robin Woods



Book Four
The Watcher Series



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Summary: Ambushed by the French coven, Aleria is taken captive by old foes and learns that Dagan's last words have proven eerily prophetic: the Fallen are coming—and she doesn't have the power to stop them. Now, as she tries to unite humans and vampires against this new threat, she realizes that the hatred that they have for one another might be the greatest enemy of all. Will they stand together or die alone?

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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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 and/or willingly allowing the vampire to feed on them.

Lux—also known as the Lux 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.

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.

Watcher—a member of the Concilium, Council, or Conclave. See “Concilium.”

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“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

- Winston Churchill

Chapter 1—MISSING

Lights like a sea of flashbulbs exploded in my vision, but when my eyes fluttered open, I realized it was all in my mind. My entire head was wrapped with some sort of cloth. I thrashed to loose it, but it was too tight. My senses were cloudy; I realized that I had been drugged. It took an effort to remember the last moments before my abduction, but only fragments resurfaced.

Rolling onto my back, I tugged at my bound wrists, but was met with agony. My restraints were coated with something that felt like a white-hot torch flaying my skin whenever I struggled. I clamped my teeth together to stifle my whimper.

A car door slammed, and only then did I grasp that I was in a trunk. Muffled laughter could be heard—the congratulatory kind. I sucked in a breath of anticipation. The trunk opened, and I was hoisted up. The hood on my head caught on something, and a puff of fresh air wafted under the cloth. It was cold...*and familiar*. My mind raced, trying to identify the scent.

It felt like I was being carried up a long staircase, then down an extensive hall. A set of doors opened, and from the hollow sound, it seemed as if I were now in a large space.

My head cracked on the ground after my body was roughly dumped on the floor. Disoriented and feeling vulnerable, I struggled onto my knees, balancing myself the best that I could with my wrists and ankles bound.

The moment I realized my location, the hood was ripped away.

My shoulders were grabbed from behind, and my forehead was pressed to the marble tile. One of my abductors growled, “Bow before your king.”

I swallowed hard and looked up only using my eyes, resisting the urge to lift my chin. Bowen entered from a doorway behind the throne and stood with a shocked expression—his blond hair longer than the last time I had seen him. Instantly, he was in front of me, raising me to my feet. He let out a shaky breath, and before I could utter a word, he cupped my face and kissed me.

I jerked back, and his eyes locked on mine—his expression a warning.

“Remove her fetters,” he rasped.

“My liege, she killed—”

“You question me?” he retorted with icy calm.

Instantly, and with trembling hands, one of my captors unlocked the shackles and backed away, not receiving the congratulations he seemed to expect.

There was a long pause. I rubbed at my wrists as they healed.

My captors were addressed. “Thank you for your service. See Morpheus for payment. You are dismissed.” The King placed his hand on my shoulder as the mercenaries filed out of the room. Then he spoke to someone still lingering behind. “Cadeyn, did you do this?”

No response.

“Did you place a bounty on her head when I expressly *forbade* it?”

“Yes, sire. Permission to speak freely?” Cadeyn asked in a reverent tone.

“Granted.”

“I posted the bounty before you had told me not to do so. It was revoked after our discussion. As you are aware, many Seekers go dark once hired. Consequently, I was unable to verify the change in orders. I apologize. You should have been informed, and I accept any punishment you see fit.”

“Deliver her to my quarters unharmed. We will discuss it later. I realize blood has been spilled, but her life is not yours to take. If you harm her, your life and any you have sired are forfeit. Am I *clear*?”

“Perfectly.” Cadeyn’s square jaw flexed as he looked at me. His unnerving yellow eyes narrowed to slits. He approached me and placed his hand around my bicep, squeezing harder than necessary. Then, he practically dragged me from the throne room.

I was on alert as we walked down a passageway to the grand staircase in the lobby. He glanced down at me as we ascended the stairs. There was no need to wonder what he was thinking. He wanted me dead, and he wanted to be the one to do it.

We approached a room at the end of the hall. I had never been inside, but I had seen the ornate doors with the gold filigree swirling around lions and fleur-de-lis before.

Two guards stood at attention.

“She is to wait in the king’s apartment.”

The one on the right nodded and swung his door open. We strode inside, and the door shut behind us. Cadeyn released me, and I quickly backed a few steps away. I knew I was as strong as he because of the power Dagan had given me, but I wasn’t stupid. Revenge was a powerful motivator, and he was far older than I.

I forced myself to be still and returned his piercing, yellow-eyed gaze. Cadeyn didn’t seem to be in a hurry to

leave.

After an uncomfortable minute of staring, I decided to speak. “Did you love her?”

He blinked at me, and a little bit of the rage on his face seemed to be replaced with something else.

“My great-grandmother,” I clarified. “The day I was to be sacrificed, you asked me if I was related to her.”

“I know of whom you are speaking.” His voice was much softer than before.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

Cadeyn looked away, and I could see the memories drifting across his expression. She *had been* something to him, but his face darkened after a moment.

“You killed my brother, and for that, there is no forgiveness. You cannot manufacture some sort of sentimentality with me because you look so much like her. You are *not* Rosemond.”

I frowned. “I know. I was simply curious. She kept her younger years a secret. If you hadn’t said something, I would never have known she had even seen a vampire...much less...” My words trailed when I realized I was speaking too much.

He stepped towards me and ran his index finger down my cheek, cocking his head to the side. I could sense his murderous rage still simmering beneath, but his words were soft. “The same lavender eyes...same skin...same dark tresses...” He took my hand and pressed my wrist to his nose. “You even smell like her, despite the fact that you are one of us.”

I stood motionless and didn’t respond.

“Your beloved Belenus will be along shortly. Do not attempt to leave.” He then bent to my ear and whispered, “And know this: my respect for him and the throne are the

only things keeping me from taking your head. And when that day comes, it will *not* be quick.” He smiled thinly at me, and then vanished from the room as only an aged vampire could.

The moment the door closed, I searched my pockets for my phone and hidden tracking device—nothing. I sat down hard on the upholstered trunk at the end of the bed, feeling sick that I couldn’t contact Joshua or Gabriel.

It didn’t take long for me to start pacing while I waited, still unable to put all the events prior to my capture in order.

When the door opened, I took in a breath to speak. His blue eyes flashed as he held up his finger to silence me. He walked to the wall and flipped open a panel, pressing a series of buttons. A low hum seemed to wash out all sounds beyond the room.

He looked over at me. “We can speak freely now.”

I sucked in a breath, then asked, “Tyran, where is Bowen? You may be fooling everyone else, but not *me*.”

He looked at me with wide eyes. “I don’t know.”

Chapter 2—FREELY

For a long moment, Bowen stood silently in front of me, looking lost. Something in the energy between us had changed; I held my breath as he slowly leaned in and gently brushed his lips across mine...once...twice...three times. Then he *really* kissed me. His lips were soft, and I was barely able to keep my knees from giving out. My hands inched around his waist, feeling the hard muscle moving beneath his skin, as he twisted his hands in my hair and pulled me closer. I ached for more. Involuntarily, a soft moan escaped me as the kisses grew in intensity.

His breath was uneven, and he broke away from my lips just long enough to murmur in my ear. “I have longed to kiss you freely for the last three years.”

I sat up, gasping. It had been a dream, but I felt as though I could still taste him on my lips. I smoothed the satin nightgown I was wearing and quickly tried to discern what type of dream it was—if it had been prophetic or normal. I was worried about Bowen, so it would be natural for those thoughts to be carried into my dream. Though, dreaming about kissing someone who was not my husband was a little conflicting. I sighed and wondered if I needed to feel guilty when I had no control over the dream.

There were bigger issues than guilt, however. I thought through the possibilities: If the dream was prophetic, then Bowen was alive. But if I was kissing Bowen without restraint, then what of Joshua? Bowen had said he

had been wanting to “kiss me freely for three years,” placing the dream at least six months in the future. That is, if the dream was at all prophetic. It made my head hurt.

I once had dreamt that I was married to Bowen and quite pregnant, but with the emotional quality of the dream, I couldn't tell if there were any reality to that one either. There was something about Bowen that could spin me around, making everything seem unclear.

I couldn't sense either Bowen or Joshua. It was like there was some sort of electrical buzz or interference whenever I tried to reach out through our blood bonds. I couldn't breach the barrier. Tyran had felt the same way when trying to sense his brother. Glancing down at my hands, I realized my wedding band was missing and couldn't remember if it had been on my finger when I had arrived at the castle.

I broke from my reverie when I realized that Tyran was standing at the foot of the bed, staring at me.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“I'm fine.”

“Did you dream anything?”

“Nothing of consequence,” I answered evasively.

“I apologize for leaving so abruptly. I trust you slept well? Besides the dream.”

“Yes, thank you.” I pulled the sheets further up my chest, feeling vulnerable due to the thin fabric of my nightgown *and* because Tyran was being nice. Pleasant had never been a part of his repertoire, unless it was the lead-in to gloating about an evil plan.

He looked at me pensively. “How did you know?” he questioned.

I furrowed my brow. “Know?”

“How did you know that I wasn't Bowen?” he clarified

as he sat on the bed.

I leaned back against the abundance of pillows. Bowen and Tyran were identical twins, but all similarities stopped there. Tyran was seriously clueless about a few things. “My first tip...Bowen would never have kissed me when he first saw me.”

“He wouldn’t?”

With effort, I controlled the impulse to roll my eyes. “I’m married...to someone else...”

“Of course,” he replied.

“And...” I added, hating myself, “you don’t kiss the same.”

He raised an eyebrow.

I shook my head. “Never mind.” I refused to compare them.

He leaned back on one arm, and the typical Tyran smirk spread across his face. “Oh, do tell.”

“Tyran, let’s not forget that I hate you. I shouldn’t have said anything,” I grumbled.

He feigned a pout. “You like me a little.”

I glared at him. “Don’t let my telling the Watchers *not* to kill you go to your head. Maybe I will like you someday.” I knew that was a stretch, but somehow, Bowen’s voice sounded in my head, asking me not to bait Tyran. I sighed. “I understand you. You will need to be happy with that at the moment.”

He leaned in closer to me with seduction in his eyes. “I’m a changed killer. You will like me.”

“Why are you pretending to be Bowen?”

All of the playfulness melted from his face. “He asked me to.” A look of genuine anguish held his features—a true rarity. “He came to my room a few hours before sunrise a month ago. He was a wreck. He said, ‘You need to be me; I

have to take care of something.” Tyran gently touched my knee with the tip of his finger. “I asked him if you had changed your mind.”

I moved my leg out from under his fingertip. “And what did he say?”

“He said: ‘I would move planets if that were true.’”

I looked down at my lap, feeling awkward and embarrassed.

Tyran continued, “Then he said, ‘The night we unleashed Hell on our own parents, we literally unleashed Hell. I need to make alliances. God promised to never again wipe the earth of humanity, but if what I heard is coming is true, even God may change His mind.’”

“I argued with him for a few minutes, but his determination was ironclad. I have no knowledge of where he went—or what he meant by unleashing Hell. I simply know that it is of the utmost importance for me to impersonate him. He said that all of our lives depended upon it.” Tyran paused, then uttered in an ominous tone, “And you know my brother; if he says it is so...”

I completed the thought: “Then it is so.”

After a long silence, Tyran whispered, “I fear for him.” This was the second time within the same conversation that his sincerity had surprised me.

My lip trembled. “Me, too.” Sucking in a breath, I wondered if what I was about to divulge was wise. I clamped my eyes shut and confessed. “I may know what he meant by unleashing Hell.”

He rested his hand on my knee when I didn’t immediately continue. “Are you going to make me grovel?”

I pinned him with my eyes. My words came out in a rush. “Tyran, something in me wants to trust you, but I am struggling. All the hate I have inside can pretty much be

traced to you and your mother. You weren't allowed to kill me in the past because you needed me, and consequently, I was never able to hold my tongue around you. So, here we are now. I am no longer helpless, but you have no reason to keep me alive. Despite my strength, you have numbers on your side. But I—“

“Please be assured. I do not want you dead. I told you: I am a changed killer. I will not spare any of your Watchers, but I will not harm *you*. My brother still loves you. If this was his choice, you would be queen and in this bed every sunrise.”

I nodded. “When your mother opened the Hellmouth during the sacrifice, all of the Hellmouths on the planet opened. There are 198 other members of the Fallen—the 200. Any of them, or all of them, could have escaped...”

“And my brother, the noble idiot, wants to try to do something about it on his own.”

I dropped my head into my hands and murmured through my fingers, “Sounds about right.”

I felt Tyran move slightly and looked up. He had straightened his spine and was looking towards the door. “News of your tragic love story with my brother has spread throughout our ranks.”

“How would anyo—”

“Let us see: Do you recall, just over a year ago, being in public when you broke the guard's bones to get to Bowen while he was chained to a pillar? And why was he chained to said pillar? Because he tried to kill his *own mother* to protect you. Then, there was the part where my mother almost killed him when she falsely thought he had slept with you, ruining your purity for the sacrifice. And then, after my father had stopped her, you were willing to give my brother the last drop of *your* blood to save him. Need I go on?”

“No,” I rasped. Apparently, it wasn’t a secret to anyone that I had fallen in love with Bowen during my months of captivity. I had thought my husband, Joshua, had been killed—it was an epic mess. After finding out that Dagan had spared Joshua, we had been reunited. I loved him more than my own life, but part of me would always love Bowen. I had worked hard to put those feelings in a little box and bury them deep.

A bitter sort of chuckle emanated from Tyran; I had almost forgotten what we had been speaking about. “Then, you ran off with a Slayer to save *humans*. Your story is tantamount to a Greek tragedy. Even vampires talk. I wou—”

“I get the point,” I said, briskly cutting him off. “Now, why are you making it?”

“Do you believe that my brother asked me to take his place?”

I thought for a moment, then replied, “Yes.” He would play with Bowen’s emotions and even torture him half-to-death, but I knew in my gut that he would never actually kill his brother, even for the throne.

“In addition to your insipid love story spreading, your hatred of me is also legendary.”

I wilted and looked at my hands. “I am not going to like this.”

“There is one way to solidify the belief that I am Belenus...your precious Bowen.” He glanced at the door again. “I swear on his life that this is not a trick.”

My eyes flew to his as I opened my mouth to question him further. I was shocked when, in a blink of an eye, Tyran had his shirt off, flipped the privacy switch off, and was on top of me in bed. I gasped, just as someone began to knock forcibly.

I started to protest, but he placed his index finger over my lips and mouthed the word “*please*.”

The second the door flew open, Tyran’s lips came crashing to mine. He kissed me while he ran his hand up my leg, pushing up my nightgown, and pulling my leg around his waist. I sank my nails into his back angrily and bit his lip. He opened his eyes as he continued to kiss me, despite the fact that I wasn’t cooperating. At that moment, I sensed his fear through my blood bond. I couldn’t recall a moment in the past when I had sensed any fear in him.

I cringed, hating myself and realizing that he was right. My rejection of him could endanger Bowen, so I kissed him back...and was not entirely prepared for Tyran’s emotional response.

Tyran tore his lips from mine a second later and glared at the being that had come inside. “How *dare* you enter without permission!”

I looked over to see Icelos, the cousin of both Bowen and Tyran, fall on one knee and bow his head. Internally, my hackles were rising. He was a member of the Oneiroi and had tortured me in my dreams, but he had also been more than happy to see me sacrificed to raise Moloch. Now, he had his sights on Bowen’s throne.

“I beg your forgiveness, cousin. I thought that when you hadn’t answered...she may have...” He looked up, meeting my eyes. “I thought that perhaps she had harmed you.” Then Icelos slowly looked back and forth between Tyran and me.

“As you can see, I am well. Get out,” Tyran snarled.

“I beg your pardon, my King,” Icelos hesitated.

“What is it?” Tyran spat impatiently as he rolled off of me and sat up.

“We have...an issue that requires your presence, sire.”

When Icelos spoke, he carefully watched me. He continued speaking about a visitor who had just arrived. Then I realized Icelos was stalling, and he was suspicious—not only of me, but of Tyran. He didn't believe Tyran was Bowen. He had probably been looking for proof so that he could go for the throne himself.

I kept my sigh internal. *Oh, hell.* Shoving down my revulsion, I sat up behind Tyran and eased behind him. I ran my hands around his waist and onto his bare chest as I peered over his shoulder at Icelos. I slowly kissed across the back of his shoulder. Tyran affectionately ran his fingertips over my hands as they caressed his chest. Suspicion faded from Icelos' expression.

Tyran replied to something Icelos had said, and then looked over his shoulder at me with soft eyes. "Can you spare me for a little while?"

I smiled up at him. "A very short while."

Tyran kissed me lightly on the lips and turned back to Icelos who was already on his feet. "I will be down in a few minutes. Make our guest comfortable."

"As you wish." He bowed and backed towards the open door, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see that he was still watching us. *Maybe he wasn't entirely convinced.*

I cringed internally once more and pulled Tyran to my lips, feigning unguarded affection. Tyran turned and lowered me to the bed as I kissed him. We froze the second we heard the door click shut.

Tyran's face lingered over mine, and I wasn't sure if he wanted to ask me something or kiss me. His emotions were so erratic that I couldn't decipher them.

After an awkward amount of time and in the kindest tone I could muster, I whispered, "Please, let go of me."

Tyran's lips turned downwards as he retreated off of

the bed. He immediately went over to the privacy device and turned it on again. He scooped up his shirt from the floor and stood somberly, turning it right-side out again. When he was about to pull it over his head, I stopped him.

“Wait.”

He looked at me, confused.

I slid towards him and caressed the skin on his ribcage beneath his left arm. “Your tattoo—it’s gone.” There was only a wisp of pink where the name “Áine” had once been. I hastily removed my fingertips when I realized I was still touching him.

Tyran pursed his lips. “I cut it out. It has healed now.”

“Why...Oh!”

“I am my brother; there can be no evidence.”

I nodded.

Tyran swiftly pulled his shirt over his head as he turned, heading to the door. He glanced back at me, pausing with his hand on the handle. “I’ll return as soon as possible. I’ll send a familiar with clothes. You should feed.”

“Thank you,” I replied as he retreated into the hall.

I sat fiddling with the silky fabric of my nightgown. My thoughts started drifting to Joshua, but I had to force myself to focus. I had to get out of here in order to get back to him. After several minutes, I padded to the bathroom to splash water on my face. I examined myself in the mirror. My cuts and bruises had already healed from fighting my captors, but Tyran was right—feeding was a priority.

I was startled out of my thoughts when I heard a male clear his throat in the bedroom. I quickly dried my face and hands, all the while wishing I had a robe. As I reentered the bedroom, I crossed my arms over my chest.

Morpheus stood in the middle of the room, his presence

filling the space. My initial impulse was to hug him in greeting, although we didn't have that sort of relationship. Perhaps it was simply from seeing a friendly face. Virtually everyone I knew in the castle wanted me dead. I finally nodded a welcome. "Morpheus."

"Aleria."

A faint smile was on his lips, but it evaporated when he looked over at his companion. Judging by the sour look on the human's face, she wasn't pleased to see me, though I don't think we had ever met. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, with dark, wavy hair much like my own. Unlike mine, her eyes were dark and her skin slightly olive. But by every account, she was beautiful—the kind of exotic beauty that men took notice of whether they wanted to or not.

I stood there, uneasily, in the silence. From his expression, I knew Morpheus well enough to know that he wanted to say more, but this wasn't the time or place.

He placed his hand on the girl's elbow and urged her forward. She looked over her shoulder at him.

"Remember," he warned.

I kept my face blank despite my curiosity.

She curtseyed and moved towards me, offering me the clothing in her hands. "I am at your disposal, Miss."

"I'll leave the two you alone," Morpheus nodded at me and disappeared from the room.

I gently took the clothing from the human and flashed to the bathroom to get dressed. I reentered not a minute later in the dark jeans and black sweater she had brought to me. The girl sank to her knees next to the chaise lounge and sat on her heels. She quickly unbuttoned her sleeve and readied herself. When I approached, she raised her arm in offering.

Part of me was ravenous for live blood. I had had

nothing but bagged in the last year, though there were Watchers willing to be familiars, which had surprised me. Maybe the climate had changed, or they simply felt that I was important or different in some way.

There was something about this that made me uncomfortable. I sensed something...

I sat and took her arm, running my index finger over her pulse point. Her heart was racing. I licked my lips and spoke tentatively. "You are the king's familiar?"

"Yes, Miss." Her voice was trembling ever so slightly.

"What is your name?"

"Celeste, Miss."

I nodded, then bit down on her wrist. She didn't flinch; this was something she was used to. But her heart was still racing strangely. She tasted pleasant, and I could see why she was a favorite, but there was something else. Then an icy sensation slithered from the base of my neck, up and over my head. I was going to black out. I gasped, trying to force the vision to stop, but then it took me.

Celeste was shaking me, her panicked voice a little too shrill. My consciousness slowly returned.

"Miss...Miss...are you okay? Should I ring for someone? Miss..."

I willed my eyes to open and seized her wrist. "Don't play innocent." I moaned and held my head with my free hand. "The toxin she gave you to drink won't work on me. You are bold, I give you that."

I pulled her close and placed her hand over my heart. She was terrified, but her expression was quickly replaced with confusion. "Your heart beats," Celeste squeaked.

"You go and tell Zahra that if she wants me, to come and get me herself." I grit my teeth and leveled my eyes at

Celeste. “I appreciate the comfort you have given the king. I realize I threaten everything you thought you were going to get. Know this: you may have heard stories about me and my aversion to killing, but I have my limits. I *will* end you if you come at me again.” I twisted her arm behind her back as I pulled her to me, biting her in the neck.

I fed again. I concentrated on pulling the toxin from her system. It was painful, but I could feel my body burning it off. Zahra hadn’t meant for her to survive this. I flooded her system with the hormone and felt her relax. I wanted her weak and scared and unaware that I was saving her life. I didn’t want this to be conceived as weakness.

Her heart strained, and I stopped a moment later. She could no longer stand, so I scooped her up and placed her on the chaise lounge while I paced the room. My strength was returning quickly, but uncontrolled anger surged through my veins. Flashes of Zahra flicking her long, auburn hair over her shoulder while she played her malicious games hit me—her full lips curving into a wicked smile when she knew that she had hurt me.

I clenched my jaw as I remembered her throwing my tray of food on the ground while Agrona had me locked in the dungeon. This was followed by images of her hunting in the maze while I was forced to watch. I could no longer take it when I pictured her wiping Peter’s blood from her lips, leaving him seconds from death.

I picked up Celeste and strode towards the doors, my voice booming, “Open.”

The doors swung wide. Four guards stood at the ready. I threw Celeste into the first one’s arms.

“I need to see Zahra.”

“Our orders are for you to remain here.”

“Feel free to try to stop me.”

The second one reached for me, and I felt his bones snap in my grip as I turned and kicked the third one into the wall. I spun the second guard around and threw him at the fourth before he had time to reach me.

The first guard dropped Celeste to the ground and jumped over the others. I spun around, breaking the leg off of a table, and in the same sweeping movement, planted the stake into his heart. He fell like a stone—paralyzed.

I somersaulted back to the table, breaking off another leg and shearing it into two pieces, and immediately drove the splintered wood into the hearts of the two guards that were readying for a second run at me.

The second guard whose arm had not yet healed staggered backwards away from me.

“Run, and I *will* catch you,” I warned.

He stopped.

“Tell me where I can find Zahra, and I will stop at paralyzing you.”

“The dungeon. They just brought in new runners.”

“Runners?”

“Humans...to hunt.”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “Of course.” I drove the wood into his heart and eased him to the ground.

I stood, smoothing my hair and straightening my sweater. While marching down the hall, I noticed some blood on my knuckles and smudged it away.

I knew perfectly well that no good could come of my present action...

...but I didn't care.

Chapter 3—NOT NOW

Without breaking stride, I burst through the doorway leading to the underbelly of the castle and its dungeons. My encounters with two more sets of guards were brief. In mere seconds, I incapacitated them and dragged them out of sight. Even after a year, I still didn't know of all that I was capable. Dagan had given me an immense amount of power in his last moments on Earth. And since Dagan's death, Gabriel had been training me daily to help access that ability. Everything was beginning to feel more natural, but I still didn't understand how to tap into that strength most of the time—it just happened.

After marching down a few staircases and through some narrow halls, I could make out the sounds of the main chamber. A knot twisted in my stomach the closer I came to the maze. I rubbed at my eyes with the back of my hands and tried to focus. I could smell the toxin Zahra had used on me coming through my skin.

Just as I rounded the corner to the first walkway overlooking the maze, which was still obscured by the cages, I was knocked into the wall with what felt like a freight train. The impact rattled my teeth, and the back of my head throbbed from my collision with the wall. I fought to open my eyes, though I didn't recall shutting them in the first place. Someone's forearm was locked across my chest.

The world tilted to the side as I was finally able to take in the identity of the person pinning me to the stone

surface—Morpheus. He leaned in, sniffed, and his eyes widened for a split-second. Shifting, while still restraining me, he pulled leather gloves from his pocket and put them on. He grabbed my face with his free hand. The smell of the leather was overwhelming.

“Come with me. You are not thinking clearly,” he commanded in a harsh whisper.

“I’m going to kill her.”

His eyes were condemning. “Not here. Not now.”

I was about to protest and throw him off when I felt the stake enter my heart. He hadn’t hesitated for even a moment. I went limp in his arms. Fear seized me with the realization that I hadn’t been staked since my heart had been restarted—and I wondered if this was it. But I felt nothing, save the pain from the wound and the helplessness of paralysis.

Morpheus leaned in, careful not to touch my skin, and murmured, “You can despise me later.” He gathered me up, and I watched as the staircases and hallways blurred by.

We arrived outside the king’s chamber, and the guards were still piled up on one another, my makeshift stakes through their hearts. Morpheus pushed through the doors and swept into the bathroom, dumping me unceremoniously into the tub.

He set the plunger and started the water as he rifled through the drawers. He dumped what looked like Epsom salts in the water, and then disappeared. A few moments later, he was back with thick rubber gloves up to his elbows. He stopped the water, which was now up to my chin.

“Do you trust me?” he paused, pursing his lips.

The only movement I could manage was narrowing my eyes.

He grinned and reached into the water, plucking the

stake from my heart. A small stream of blood flowed into the water, floating like tendrils around my billowing sweater. He sat on the ledge of the tub furthest from me and leaned against the wall. His long, black hair was disheveled, and with the addition of the gloves, it made him look a bit like a mad scientist.

The hole in my chest was closing up; I risked a slow breath. Soon my heart labored to life. My limbs still felt thick, but I moved my arm and wiped some water from my face.

“You mind sharing your master plan?” Morpheus was scolding, but there was humor underlying his tone.

I looked at him through heavy lids. “Yeah, to kill Zahra.”

He frowned. “And what were you going to do afterwards?”

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples, not answering.

“The toxin I smell on you...” The muscle in his square jaw flexed, and he looked as if he was choosing his words carefully. “It kills humans; they become violently ill soon after they are exposed to the toxin. I found Celeste in the hall; whatever you did saved her. It wasn’t designed to kill vampires, though.” He hesitated. “It causes some type of madness that makes them kill. Make no mistake—the infected vampire dies, but usually because he is executed in retaliation for whomever he killed under the influence of the toxin. Are you *sure* it was Zahra?”

I didn’t know how Morpheus had managed to connect all the dots, but he was obviously thinking more clearly than I was. I nodded. When he waited for more than a nod, I spoke softly. “I saw it. When I fed.”

“A vision?”

“No. A new ability. When I feed, I often see glimpses of things that have happened that involve strong emotion. Much like the blood bond, even if it isn’t live blood. It’s different than visions, but I don’t know how to explain it. It’s smaller...not as epic.”

“Not just the present, but the past, too?”

“I don’t know how it works. It just happens sometimes.” I swallowed hard. “If the toxin wasn’t supposed to kill me...”

Morpheus stood abruptly and left the bathroom. I sat in silence in a cooling tub, listening to the occasional drip from the faucet, not knowing what to think.

After a few minutes, I lifted my sweater and examined my chest wound. It was completely healed, so I gathered my energy and started actively scrubbing the rest of the toxin from all of my exposed skin.

I stood and slogged over the side of the tub, scattering water all over the bathroom as I shut the door and threw the bolt. Once I felt secure, I peeled off my wet clothes and showered, despite having just been in the tub. I could still smell remnants of the toxin on my body.

After I finally felt free of the contaminant, I securely wrapped myself in a towel and risked entering the colossal bedroom. To my relief, it was empty. I padded to the door in the corner looking for what I hoped would be a walk-in closet. Once inside, I settled on jeans and a button-down shirt, rolling the hem on Bowen’s denims until they weren’t dragging on the ground. As I returned to the bedroom, drips of water from my wet hair tickled my skin as they made their way between my shoulder blades.

I gasped when I realized Tyran was back. He sat with his index fingers pressed just above his brows. To my surprise, he didn’t look up at me. After turning on the

privacy field or device or whatever it was, I eased myself down on the chaise and watched him.

He finally spoke after over a minute. “What happened while I was away? Your emotions were...” he trailed, waving a hand in the air.

I gathered my thoughts before speaking. “I need to leave here.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. After drawing in a deep breath, he dropped his hands in his lap and met my gaze. “Semjâzâ.”

I blinked at him, fearful of why he had said that name. I knew it well. Semjâzâ was a member of the 200 angels who had been sent to Earth by God—one of the original Watchers. The 200 had corrupted the world instead of protecting it. They had mated with humans, creating the Nephilim. Semjâzâ was one of the worst—he had taught humans how to make weapons of death and use various enchantments and dark magic. He was one of the main reasons God had decided to flood the earth and wipe out all traces of their crimes from existence.

After my mind raced for a few moments, I simply repeated the name. “Semjâzâ?”

“He was just here, Aleria. He was the visitor. And he gave no indication of seeing me before, so I have no idea whether Bowen ever went to his camp.”

“What did he want?”

“Besides world domination?” Tyran fell backwards onto the bed and put his hands over his face. I watched his chest rise and fall.

“Do you know how many of the 200 escaped with him? Do you know where they are staying?” I wanted to barrage him with questions, but he seemed a tad bit overwhelmed at the moment. And I had to keep in mind that this was *Tyran*

who I was dealing with. When he didn't answer for a long while, I flashed to the bed and sat on my knees next to him and looked down.

When he still refused to make eye contact, I pulled one of his hands from his face, despite my opposition to touching him.

He peered up at me. "I see why my dear brother didn't want this job."

"It was more than that, and you know it." I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Do you know their plan?"

"Pieces." He gave me a pained look, and it took all of my willpower not to push.

"So, fallen angels have been running around on Earth for an entire year, and this is the first we see of them?"

"Something isn't right about all of this."

"Just *something*?" I challenged, noticing he hadn't really answered any of my questions.

Tyran made a frustrated sound and covered his face again. He actually seemed—human.

I eased down and laid on my side, propping my head on my hand. "I need to leave this place," I restated from earlier.

He sighed. "And what happened while I was away?"

I cringed. "Celeste was sent with clothing, but when I fed..." I tried to think of something diplomatic. I rolled onto my back. Who was I kidding? I was never diplomatic with Tyran. "Zahra gave me some type of toxin. If Morpheus hadn't stopped me, I would have killed her...and probably interrupted your meeting."

He sat up. "What *type* of toxin?"

Suddenly, the thought occurred to me that Bowen might have been the target. I sat up as well, my eyes a little wild as I tried to assess whether my logic was sound. I wasn't exactly thinking straight when Morpheus had spoken

with me a half hour ago. “I don’t know the name,” I finally managed. “But Morpheus said it wasn’t intended to kill me; just to make me kill.”

“And you *know* it was Zahra?”

I nodded in affirmation. He didn’t even question my sincerity.

“We need to get out of here.”

“We?”

“Yes.”

“And where will *we* go?”

“To your Watchers, of course.”

“Of course.”

He grinned a little, but there was a trace of worry in his eyes. “Do you think you can keep them from killing me on-sight?”

I rolled my eyes. “And I would want to stop them because...”

His smirk spread to a wide smile. “Because we are going to figure out how to save the world.”

Chapter 4—I DO...NOT

I looked down at the wedding ring on my left hand. It was breathtakingly beautiful. The dream-sort of ring that you would clip from a fashion magazine, knowing you would never actually have one. Just the sight of it made me feel sick to my stomach. Clenching my fist, I willed away the tears pricking behind my eyes. I walked down the steps of the castle to a smiling Tyran awaiting me in front of a sleek sports car. When I reached him, I leaned into him, kissing him like you would expect any newlyweds who were about to depart for a wedding tour. Cadeyn, Phantasos, Icelos, and Zahra stood out in the crowd, their eyes heavy on my back.

Tyran stepped back and opened the passenger door, taking my hand to assist me inside. I slid into the black leather seat, not bothering to buckle myself. He said some words in parting to the crowd on the stairs, and then we drove into the night—as husband and wife.

I spoke after an hour of silence. I think Tyran was enjoying my brooding. “How long until we get to the hotel?”

“Another thirty minutes, *wife*.”

“Please don’t call me that. You know I am not,” I choked.

“Technically, you are the bride of Belenus and my Queen.”

“I am not. I’m already married.”

“And when are you going to accept that you are one of us? You are governed by the laws of immortals and the

night. You are *not* human. A marriage between immortals supersedes anything from the human realm—*especially* a royal one.”

“No,” I replied resolutely. “I realize that we had to get married in order to get out without suspicion. And that it was the only way to leave the throne safely vacant for a few weeks. But...no.”

Tyran shrugged. “Ask your Watchers. Ask Gabriel. You are my brother’s wife, whether you like it or not.”

I turned my head away from him and watched the darkened landscape speed by. Wishing I could feel something from Joshua and praying that I had made the right decision. Hoping I hadn’t nullified my vows to him and ruined everything.



I opened my eyes when we came to a stop and heard the driver’s door open. We were at the valet entrance of a grand hotel somewhere in France. Men in gold-corded uniforms gracefully scurried around, bending to meet the needs of the VIPs.

My door opened, and a white-gloved bellhop offered his hand.

“Miss,” he smiled.

“Thank you,” I responded, as I swung my legs from the car onto the ground.

Within minutes, we were being ushered into the penthouse with an entourage from the hotel. Once tips were given and the door closed behind them, Tyran pulled a small electronic device from his bag. He began to sweep the room, motioning for me to speak while he searched. I started babbling on about innocuous things as he did indeed find listening devices, but no video.

“Join me on the veranda?”

“Absolutely,” I crooned.

He swept the area in a much more nonchalant manner that perplexed me. Then he joined me at the railing and gathered me to his chest. I flinched slightly when he first touched me.

Tyran leaned into my ear, whispering ever so softly. “There aren’t any devices out here, but whoever has the room wired might be watching us.”

I smiled and nodded, playing the part, all the while wondering if it might have been one of the branches of the Concilium. If it were, this display would make them think that I was a traitor. I wondered how I could be this powerful and yet still be so powerless?

Tyran put his arms around me, cupping my head to his chest. I wasn’t sure if this was for show or if he was actually comforting me. I spoke into his shirt.

I still kept my voice at a whisper in case our observers had parabolic microphones. “I need to check in with Gabriel...let him know that I’m not dead. Or...more dead.” I rolled my eyes at myself.

Tyran released me and entered the suite. When he returned, he had a cell phone. “It’s untraceable,” he uttered as he placed it in my hand.

I shook my head. “I prefer to get my own.”

Tyran chuckled. “Still don’t have faith in me?”

I leveled my eyes at him. “Nope. I have developed a few trust issues over the last two and a half years.”

He smirked. “I suppose that is warranted.”

A tight-lipped smile was all that I managed. I was still struggling with this understanding version of Tyran.

One hour later, I sat hugging my knees on the veranda with my newly acquired cell phone. We turned up the stereo to help cover my conversation. I stared at the outdoor

speaker and took a deep breath.

First, I tried calling Joshua's phone, using a relay station and keying in his code. I prayed as the phone made a series of clicks—but then went dead. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried again, hoping that I had misdialed. I knew I hadn't. It didn't even go to voicemail.

I choked down my rising fears that something horrible had happened to him and punched in Gabriel's digits. He picked up on the first ring.

"Speak."

I swallowed. "Please tell me he is okay."

"*Thank, God.* Where are you?"

"I'm..." I hesitated. I hadn't really escaped, and I wasn't sure how to explain. "I'm secure...for now. I need a safe house. I need to bring someone in. This is *big* and must be quiet."

"Where do you need it?"

I thought for a moment. Tyran stepped out on the veranda and looked at me expectantly. I mouthed the word "Where?"

He shrugged and mouthed the name of a city. I stared at him for a moment, not knowing how we would get there without alerting the security team shadowing us. This would definitely be a deviation from our itinerary. But, from his expression, I guessed he must have already had some plans in mind.

"London," I finally responded.

"I will send an address to this phone in three hours. Be well."

"Wait—Gabriel?"

The line went dead, and a curse slid through my lips.

Tyran chuckled. "I don't think I have ever heard you utter a foul word."

I withered a little, knowing it was out of character.
“He didn’t answer me.”

“About?”

“Joshua. Something isn’t right.”

“You still trust in Gabriel?”

“Yes...with my life, many times over. But he is keeping something from me.”

Tyran opened his mouth to ask another question, but I waved him off.

“How are we getting to London?”

He smirked. “Don’t worry your pretty little head. I have been doing this for much longer than you have.”

“I’ll add patronizing to the list of things I hate about you,” I growled and returned to the room, leaving him on the veranda.



Twenty-four hours later, I was pulling my hood further over my head as I glanced up at Tyran. Being in London again brought up a strange mix of emotions—both that of nostalgia and loss. In the short time after fleeing this city two years ago, I had lost too many people whom I had loved.

Tyran nudged me, and I snapped back to the present as we exited the Underground less than two blocks from the safe house. I had to admit that Tyran had some faithful followers. We had traveled to the next hotel in which we were booked. The room had been bugged like the other; so, we had found a “problem” and switched to a new suite.

Once settled, familiars who looked much like us holed up in the original room, posing as us. Tyran and I had a week to get back to the hotel before we had to move to the next hotel on the honeymoon tour schedule. The familiars wouldn’t be able to pass for us out in the open. I prayed there would be no need to return.

When we mounted the last step and emerged at street level, a gust of wind brought smells of the city swirling around us, and with it, an aching need for caution. Gabriel's abrupt end to the phone call was continuing to nag at me. After taking a winding route to the meet, we stood in the alley across the street.

I pulled out my phone and sent Gabriel a text. "U there? Running L8."

"Almost there. Four minutes."

I stared at the reply message. If it was someone posing as Gabriel, then they knew him really well—he never abbreviated.

As we watched the building from our hideaway, Tyran breathed, "Are you sure you trust him?"

I exhaled. "I trust him. I just don't trust the Conclave...sometimes," I quickly amended.

Two shadows approached from the North-end of the street, moving quickly. Within a moment, Gabriel's long fluid strides became clear. I focused on his companion and realized, within a few seconds, it was Ian. I breathed a sigh of relief. He was the only close friend I had left from Signum Academy.

When they reached the building, Gabriel made a hand signal to Ian, and he peeled off and trotted down a small alleyway at the far side of the building. They weren't taking any chances, either. I slowly counted...one flight...two flights...three flights...then waited. The light went on in the first two windows on the third floor, and a shadow passed by the window a moment later—a second shadow. I assumed it to be Ian.

We waited in silence for five minutes, monitoring every movement on the street. I simply couldn't shake the feeling scratching at my insides. But there was the perfect amount

of activity on the street and no signs of trouble.

Tyran placed his hand around my bicep. “Are we doing this?” he queried.

Pursing my lips, I nodded in assent. We moved in a blur into the building and up the steps, stopping only when we reached the door. I knocked with the code, letting Gabriel know that it was I and that I was not under duress. There was the sound of a chair scraping on the floor inside, then the sound of heavy footsteps as they tromped to the door. It swung open. I froze.

A dark-haired man I had never seen smiled lazily and motioned us inside. “Ah, he’ll be relieved you’re here,” he stated, all full of warmth and sunshine.

I hesitantly took one step inside and heard, what sounded like, another chair scraping on the wooden floor, but this time, there was a muffled sound with it: the sharp intake of breath and the groan of wood.

At that moment, everything seemed to slow down. The man in front of us dove to the floor and rolled out of the way as I took one more step forward. There was a distinct metal click. It took a split-second for me to comprehend the sound—that of a firing pin hitting the back of a bullet. It was a small sound, but it rang in my ears.

I was too stunned to move, frozen by the betrayal. And *betrayal* was the only word that echoed in my head until I glanced down at my body and watched multiple rounds pierce me: right arm, right shoulder, right lung, stomach...I couldn’t break my feet free from the floor. Tyran suddenly appeared in front of me, taking the next rounds in his chest as he shoved me aside.

My eyes closed briefly as I hit the floor, and then I observed Tyran moving towards the shooter. From my new position, I could see around the corner, and I realized what

the scraping sound on the floor had been—Gabriel was strapped to a chair and was struggling to get free. Three men were trying to hold him in place as he strained against them. Two others were desperately trying to contain Ian.

Tyran fell on the aggressors like a wave, churning and spinning until their bodies were left in awkward angles. The bullets hadn't even slowed him. Despite myself, I had to marvel at how he could control the pain.

I tried to get my mouth to work. Time seemed to speed back up as I bellowed: "We need them alive." My chest spasmed, and I coughed up blood from the effort.

He didn't listen. I watched the last of the assailants hit the floor dead. Tyran dragged the body slumped over Gabriel towards me, and dropped it with a thud next to my head.

"So much for not shooting on-sight. Drink this before it gets cold," he ordered without any ceremony.

"Why did you kill them all?" I croaked.

Tyran frowned. "I saw no need for mercy," his tone matter-of-fact. He turned his attention towards Gabriel.

Gabriel was as unmoving as a statue, his eyes pinned on Tyran, making no move when the tape was ripped from his mouth. He didn't speak.

Tyran glanced at me, and then back at Gabriel. "Aleria, you still trust him?" I could swear there was some humor in the voice.

"Let him loose," I managed while shoving onto my back. The feeling of uselessness was overwhelming. I rolled my lips inward, berating myself internally: *FAIL*.

Taking a deep breath, I lifted the neckline of my shirt to examine my wounds. I was healing, but Tyran was right. I needed to feed to speed up the process; I was leaving myself weakened, and the bad kind of backup could be on

the way.

Ignoring the fact that Gabriel and Ian could see me, I dragged the arm of the would-be assassin to my mouth, his blood still warm and inviting. I had no need of showing restraint, so I took it all. By the time I was done, I was whole again. I sat up and checked—no scarring.

Ian stood, rubbing his wrists and scowling behind Gabriel. I realized Gabriel still hadn't moved or said anything.

"Gabriel, are you okay?"

He blinked slowly at me. "Why did you hesitate?"

I sighed and looked down at my hands. There was blood splattered on them. "Do you have to be my instructor all the time? I know I messed up."

"She thought you had betrayed her," Tyran stated. I hadn't realized he had circled around in back of me.

I glared at Tyran and opened my mouth to protest, but couldn't. It was true. "You aren't invited to Christmas," I growled at him. I turned back to Gabriel. "Are you okay? Do you know who they are?"

"How did you come to be here with *him*?" Gabriel asked.

"Who?" Ian interjected.

I flashed a fake smile at Ian. "Ian meet Taranis, or Tyran, Prince of Darkness and torturer of my soul."

"Full of ire, aren't we?" Tyran breathed next to my ear. Gooseflesh rose on my neck, and I scowled at him.

"Tyran...you aren't Bowen? I assumed..." Ian gaped.

I managed to contain my next comment, especially when I took in the expression on Gabriel's face.

"Uh, guys?" called Ian.

We collectively turned to look at him. Ian was standing in an opening against the back wall where false

panels were left ajar. I hadn't even noticed the room itself. It was no wonder Gabriel and Ian had been taken by surprise. The men had been completely hidden.

Ian pulled out a duffle and tossed some of the contents on the floor: syringes with green liquid, heavy shackles with a powdery coating, a stack of glossy photos, and so on.

I moved with inhuman speed to take possession of the photos. The top ones were of me taken with a night scope over the last few months—participating in a mission, walking with Joshua, and training with Gabriel. I had flipped through at least a dozen, then gasped and tried to casually shuffle a few pictures to the back.

“What is it?” Gabriel asked, moving towards me.

I shook my head. “Whoever is responsible for this is well-connected. These pictures...” I swallowed. “They are all of me. How can they have pictures of me on an operation, in my private life, *and* in Agrona’s castle?” I handed him the top dozen, hoping he wouldn’t want more. The ones I held back would need some explanation. I glanced at Tyran, worry clear on my face.

Tyran appeared at my side and relieved me of the rest of the photos. His expression hardened, and he spoke, “We need to vacate the premises immediately.”

“Agreed,” Gabriel replied gruffly. He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “But first, check their pockets.”

Ian quickly shoveled the contents back into the bag, though Tyran held onto the photos. We each searched a couple of bodies and gathered up what we could find. Tyran and I stripped the jackets off of two of them to cover our bullet-riddled attire. We were off and into the night in less than ten minutes after the whole ordeal had started.

We stealthily sped down the fire escape and made our way through back alleys to the Underground. Tyran

casually pulled me into a different train car. He sat with his back to the car containing Gabriel and Ian.

Tyran's voice was soft. "The photos—"

"I know. I'm going to show Gabriel—everything."

"You know what it looks like."

"And you know someone in your inner circle is involved."

He shook his head. "There are guards...others."

"Now who's in denial?" I countered. Tyran ran his hand up my arm, but I pulled away. "Please don't touch me," I sneered, emotion welling up to the surface. I felt my lip quiver and noticed Gabriel watching me through the windows between the cars. I wiped at a tear that had decided to make an appearance.

"I won't harm you," Tyran assured.

I exhaled. "It's not that." I closed my eyes. "I need you to not harm them. I know you gave me your word, but I need to hear it again. You won't hurt Gabriel or Ian...ever."

"I am but your servant," Tyran grinned. But he looked at me pointedly. I wanted to believe him. I needed to.

The train rounded a corner, and an advertisement caught my eye. It was all in sepia tones with a picture of Winston Churchill and one of his famous quotes: "If you're going through hell, keep going."

My eyes went to Tyran again. "Keep going," I whispered to myself. But I feared that I was only just past the gates and still had to pass through the rest of Hell.

Chapter 5—SOFT

We exited the Underground after a few stops, and found a utility room where we scanned ourselves and the bags for tracking devices. Nothing. Not even in the bag we swiped from “team evil”—whoever they were.

Like a fine-tuned machine, we returned to street level and hailed two cabs. Gabriel insisted that I ride with him. I wasn’t comfortable with Tyran riding alone with Ian, but I guessed I had to trust him at some point. I had already brought him in, and he would have nothing to gain by hurting Ian.

The moment the door shut, and the cab sputtered from the curb heading towards the Windsor area, Gabriel shut the privacy glass and spun to the seat opposite from me. His voice was firm, yet not unkind when he urged, “You need to tell me what happened, kiddo.”

“Just now? Or when I disappeared?”

“The night you disappeared.”

I blew out a long stream of air through my teeth, gathering my thoughts. “I did as asked. I took the two recruits for a training exercise. I had them on the roof with targeting rifles equipped with high-powered scopes. They were practicing finding and shooting me with the lasers to document their kill shots. They were doing well for their first time tracking an immortal—a seventy-five percent average on pinging my chest plate. I had to work to avoid them.

“I had jumped from a third-floor balcony to the fifth floor of an adjacent building when there was a click on the comm unit. I tried to respond, but only static came over the line. I thought maybe they had run out of charge, it was interference, or they were just messing with me. They had joked about going silent before we had started.

“After not hearing anything for two minutes, I headed back their way. I could see the end of a rifle over the edge of the building, so I jumped upwards to the ledge. The moment I alighted, someone grabbed my ankle and yanked me onto the rooftop. I landed flat on my back, but managed to capture the hands of a vamp with a syringe as he tried to plunge into my chest.

“One of the recruits must have broken loose. The vamp on top of me went limp, and when I had shoved him off, I saw that he had been staked.

“At that moment, everything turned to chaos. I got up and took the heads of three of them...or four. I incapacitated at least one more. I then tried to get to the recruits, but one already had a broken neck.

“When I turned to help the other, I was shot with some kind of taser—it must have been modified to work on me somehow. I remember falling forward. They put a bag over my head, and I felt a needle in my neck. I woke in the trunk of a car in France two days later.”

I rubbed at the back of my neck where they had jabbed me with the needle, though it had completely healed long ago.

“Gabriel, the other recruit...did he—?”

“Both were found dead next to piles of ash. We did not know if one of the mounds was you. Your wedding band was recovered, and Joshua could not sense you. There was also evidence...”

“Evidence?” I rubbed my ring finger, now encircled with Bowen’s ring.

“That you had turned against us.”

My throat instantly constricted. “I would never...I...I couldn’t...I...”

Gabriel put his hand on my knee. “I did not believe it. Not for a moment.”

“So where *is* Joshua? Why isn’t he here? Why wouldn’t you answer me on the phone?”

Gabriel leaned back in his seat, removing his hand. “The Conclave came for him the next day. Said there was new information that had come to light. That you were a traitor, and they had to verify Joshua’s loyalties.”

Everything in me stopped, and I felt a deadly calm wash over me. “And what are they going to do to him to find out?”

“They will not kill him,” Gabriel assured.

“Unless they think they are right.”

Gabriel’s jaw flexed as he sat silent.

“Where are they holding him?”

“I had Ian working on that when you called, but you were my priority. I spoke with Joshua twenty-four hours after he was detained. He said that he was being treated fairly, but I have not been able to speak with him since, and the tracker on his phone has been disabled. He did not disclose his location.”

Gabriel moved to my seat and wrapped his arm around me; I stiffened a little, and he pulled me closer. I must have looked like I needed comfort—truth is, I did. I realized it had been a very long time since anyone besides Joshua had really touched me. Not even Gabriel, and he was like family. I wrapped my arms around his torso.

“I am glad you are all right,” he said, softly.

“Gabriel, I really messed things up.”

He squeezed me a little harder. “You did your best with the recruits.” His next words sounded reluctant. “And having Tyran as your backup prevented any further tragedy this evening. They were obviously prepared for a familiar or a neophyte of some sort—not someone with the strength of an Ancient.”

I let out a long breath. “That isn’t all I’ve done. I have some explaining to do before you see the rest of the pictures.” I paused. “*I* would have doubted me if I had seen them first.” I pulled away a little and looked through the front windshield. “I don’t like Tyran alone with Ian.”

“I needed you to be able to speak without Taranis’ interference.”

“I know.”

“And I would like to know how you ended up here with your arch-enemy as your ally.”

“Like I said: I have some explaining to do...and you aren’t going to like it.” I became distracted when I saw some signs for Slough and knew we were getting close to our destination.

“How well do you trust Tyran?”

I dropped my head in my hands. “I don’t. But...he is an honest villain. At least I can say that.” I paused thoughtfully. “He has changed.”

Gabriel chuckled, but there was little humor. “Into what?”

“I wish I knew.”

The cab rumbled to a stop, and my initial impression was that we were going to a safe house in the area, but we were simply retrieving a car that Gabriel had stashed. After exiting the cabs, all of us embarked on the second leg of our journey in one vehicle. We drove an hour into the

countryside, passing endless hedgerows, and finally reached a cozy-looking cottage.

Ian put the sedan in park and looked to Gabriel for instruction.

“We will bunk here tonight. There is a windowless basement. The house and perimeter are wired with a security system, so I will know if something or someone is coming for us.”

I had to force myself out of the car and was unable to decide what my aversion was. I finally decided it was dread—my first full day of rest since my abduction would be spent sleeping in a basement, alone, with Tyran.

The home was full of furniture covered with sheets. It had been in disuse for a long while, judging from the generous coat of dust. All of the guys made a security sweep, but I stood just inside the entrance and watched each of them as they checked every possible hiding place. Tyran opened a door that had to lead to the basement and disappeared into the darkness. I took advantage of the break from his presence and found Ian, who was now taking inventory of canned goods in the kitchen.

I asked, “Are you okay? You haven’t spoken since your ride with Mr. Malevolent.”

“He certainly doesn’t hold anything back, does he?”

“No.” I sensed Tyran coming back and ended the conversation, even though I was dying to know what had been said. “Are you guys gonna sleep, too?”

Ian ran his hand through his dark, strawberry blond hair, his proliferation of tattoos peeking out at his wrists. “Yeah, I’m dead-dog tired. It’s been almost forty-eight hours since Gabriel or I slept.”

I patted his arm. “Glad you are going to get some sleep.” I turned to go back to the main living area, but Ian

caught my arm.

He lowered his voice. “Tyran said you would return to France with him when this is over.”

I shook my head. “If that is what he thinks, then he will be sorely disappointed.” I scowled at Tyran sitting in the other room, wondering what else he had said. Maybe I needed to add “loose lips” to his list of attributes. But Tyran never uttered anything idly—it was always calculated.

I walked into the other room. “Gabriel, why don’t you give me the control for the perimeter alert system? I have had plenty of sleep. I can wake you if something needs to be checked out.”

I expected him to fight me on it, but he didn’t. He plucked an electronic tablet from the table and handed it to me. He pointed to the diagram. “This is the north end. If a sensor goes off, you can activate the thermal reading or camera and hit this to get a visual.”

I nodded and tapped through a few screens on the control, making sure I understood. “Get some sleep. You look horrible,” I smiled.

Gabriel grinned back tiredly in return. “See you at sunset. Hopefully no sooner.”

Tyran and I reached the basement just as the sun crested the horizon. There was a pile of bedrolls covered in clear plastic in the corner. Tyran dragged out two and tossed them in a V shape on the edge of the room, furthest from the stairs. I had a twinge of memory of being locked in a basement with Bowen, which had all been Tyran’s doing.

Cringing internally, I refrained from moving the bedding to the other side of the room. Not tipping my hand that his proximity bothered me was proving difficult. I needed to be an ice queen, unmoved by his presence.

It was silent for well over an hour while I stared at the

security system screen. I thought that maybe Tyran had drifted off to sleep when his voice startled me. “You are angry with me.”

“No,” I answered a little too abruptly.

“You have no need of hiding anything from me.”

“Just don’t mess with my relationships with my people. You may think you are enlightening everyone, but telling Gabriel I doubted him, or Ian I’m moving to France...”

He didn’t respond.

There was another long silence—I could almost hear him thinking.

“I was wrong to try to break you, but I have no remorse for my actions.”

I already had my mouth open to protest, then came up short. *Had he said he was wrong?*

“What I did to you made you strong. You are better because of it; the Watchers would have coddled you and made you soft.”

“They *never* babied me.”

“They instill humanity when they are fighting something inhuman.”

“If they acted without mercy and empathy, then they would be no better than what they were fighting. *We* would be no better.”

“*You are* better than them. And when you rule, you will need that strength.”

“I AM NOT PLANNING ON—” I roared, and then realized I was yelling loud enough to be heard upstairs. I finished in a hushed tone, “—ruling.”

He smiled at me, but it was a soft smile. His voice matched his expression. “This is what you were born for. This is what was written.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about. “I have free

will,” I moaned.

Just when I had thought he had fallen asleep, he spoke one last time. “Do you feel free?”

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About the Author



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.

For more information and extras, visit her website at www.RobinWoodsFiction.com

