

# THE FALLEN

PART TWO

ROBIN WOODS

◆ The Watcher Series: Book Five ◆

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Robin Woods

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Book Five  
The Watcher Series

EPIC

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Summary: Betrayed by the person she trusted most, Aleria breaks away from the safety of the Watchers only to become more entangled in the endgame of the Fallen. But fallen angels aren't the only threat. As Aleria's visions become something else entirely, mutiny threatens the new king of the French Coven, jeopardizing the delicate truce between vampire and humankind.

Now separated from Aleria, desperation pushes Gabriel to join forces with an unlikely ally as he tries to manage the chaos within his own ranks. But he must remain focused on one objective: stop Semjâzâ before he can enslave the world. The stage is set for an all or nothing battle to defeat the Fallen once and for all.

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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Aleria



“Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,  
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head.”

from *Titus Andronicus*

Shakespeare



Gabriel



“It is a characteristic of wisdom not to do  
desperate things.”

Henry David Thoreau

## Chapter 1—RECKLESS

### ALERIA

We soared past a road sign that said, “Welcome to Hell.” Well, maybe not. It said either “Welcome to France” or “French Border.” Same difference.

Bowen’s voice was subdued. “Tyran, we’ll stop in the next city.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to continue home?”

“She isn’t ready. We can’t return with her like this. The moment we walk through that door, a clock starts ticking.”

“God, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“You should have,” Bowen clipped tersely.

I wondered what they were talking about, but I didn’t bother asking. It didn’t even upset me that they kept speaking like I wasn’t in the car with them. I just didn’t care. I had retreated so far into my head that I did little beside breathe, blink, and follow basic commands.

Here I was, free to run into Bowen’s arms like Joshua had accused, yet I shied away from his touch and remained disconnected—broken.

What Tyran had tried to do for years, Joshua had done in seconds. I kept turning Josh’s words over and over again in my head, reliving what I had sensed through the blood bond. *“It’s your fault Sebastian is dead! It’s your fault Peter is gone...and Leslie and Gentry! All of it. You leave a trail of*

*bodies everywhere you go...If you weren't so damned intent on sacrificing yourself, then Sebastian would be alive...you had to go and serve yourself up on a platter to Moloch...I can't trust you anymore!...I can't be with someone I can't trust...I can't take it anymore. Love isn't enough to take this kind of abuse. True love shouldn't require this much suffering!"*

There was a phantom handprint on my face from his slap that seemed to both sting and make me numb, even now. And the result: I was petrified to let Bowen in, fearful not of being hurt, but that I would ruin him, too.

The chill of an oncoming vision pricked at me, but this time, I felt something else seeming to piggyback with it. I hadn't recognized this the last time.

Panting, I grabbed Bowen's hand as blood started to pour out of my nose. I felt his hands on my shoulders and saw a flash of worried, blue eyes. Then, my eyes rolled back into my head, and blackness squeezed out the light.

## GABRIEL

Three days had passed since Aleria had chosen to leave with Belenus and Taranis. *Driven out* may have been more accurate. She had been a husk, walking woodenly out with them. It was difficult to look at Joshua now.

My phone rang, and I pressed it to my ear. "Speak."

"She's with Blackthorne right now," replied Samael, his voice hushed.

"Follow her. Remember, she is the most dangerous thing you have ever tracked."

"I know. She took me out before I knew she was there during our last encounter, remember?"

“Be well, my friend.”

“Be well,” Samael replied as I tapped the red button ending the call.

Pressing the phone to my forehead, I wished that the mystery of Ana would reveal itself. *Friend or foe?* After Ali had departed, I had revealed everything I knew to Samael, needing his help. He had inferred more than I had realized, but still was angry that I had not confided in him earlier.

“Ian, kick Joshua out of bed. Sun sets in five. I want to be on the road in seven.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Ian. Even in the worst of times, Ian had used his humor to power through, but silence had closed around we few who were left.

Light faded as the sun went to rest for the day. I packed the last of the electronics just as Joshua appeared with his bags.

“May I help with something?” asked he, his voice low.

“Just get into the van. Take your stuff.”

He met my stare for the first time, raging winds behind his eyes, but dipped his head in acquiescence as he whispered outside using vampire stealth.

I thrust my fist in the air, squeezing it shut until it felt as if my knuckles would split, willing my anger back into place. Seeing him now brought to mind the look on Aleria’s face the moment after he had raised his hand to her. Exhaling, I shook my hands out, allowing calm to fill my chest and ease the muscles in my shoulders.

Ian strode into the room. “Final sweep. Place is clean. Ready to depart.”

“Meet you outside.” My voice was neutral once again.

I took one more breath, making one last visual check before I slung my bag over my shoulder and exited.

While Samael tracked Ana, I had my own prey. Phineas had been holed up in Luxembourg for forty-eight hours, and now he was on the move. I was going to find out what role Phineas had in all of this. He had been a pawn before, but now, I feared he was a player—a *key* player.

## ALERIA

I woke and found myself in a bed, with bloodstains down the front of my shirt. Looking around, I spotted a fresh dress on a hanger hooked on the top of a simple armoire. When I moved, I realized my pants were gone. I had no idea how long it had been, so I grabbed my disposable cell off of the nightstand and checked the time. Seven hours of my life were missing, and there was nothing of the vision left in my brain, no matter how hard I tried to remember. The same blankness I'd had before, but this time, there wasn't even a remnant.

"My brother said that you usually wake not long after having a vision," Bowen said from somewhere in the room.

I was startled, but didn't move or even look at him. I hadn't spoken in days and still didn't really want to. Samael's voice about my codename was on repeat in my head: "Do you know what Cassandra means... 'she who entangles men.'" I had reduced Joshua to a paranoid, screaming mess who blamed me for the loss of everyone he had cared about in the last three years.

I glanced at Bowen for a millisecond, more to see where he was located than anything else. He was in a chair in the corner and looked exhausted. I steeled myself. I couldn't let him get close; I had to keep my defenses up, lest I drag him down too.

“Is that correct?” he asked when I didn’t comment.

I felt as if I was swimming to the surface from beneath leagues of water, trying to find my voice. I drew in air. “Minutes, usually.”

“You *are* in there.”

I turned my head and looked out the window, avoiding eye contact, but I couldn’t see anything except the reflection of the room and Bowen in a chair in the corner with a book propped in his lap. I focused my eyes on the bedspread, feeling his desire to come closer.

“I need to return to the castle tomorrow evening. Morpheus can’t stave off the wolves any longer. I will have Tyran wait here with you until you are ready. We are about two hours from home.”

“That won’t look good for you.” A statement, not a question. It had been three weeks since I had departed the coven with Tyran, and four days since leaving Gabriel and the others. Returning to the coven without his new bride would weaken his position.

Bowen paused and walked to the bed, sitting at the foot, a few inches from my toes. I pulled my feet away, wrapping my hands around my knees. I peeped at him; his face remained passive, but my retreat had bothered him.

“No, it won’t,” his reply plain.

I bit my lip, trying to rouse some sort of feeling. Squeezing my eyes shut, I fought with myself for a moment. “I’ll come.”

“Not until you are ready.”

“I am...or will be tomorrow.”

“You won’t. You can’t even look at me right now.”

I opened my eyes, but had to psych myself up to make eye contact. “I’ll be ready. I’m at your disposal.”

He screwed up his face. “What does that mean? ‘At your disposal?’ You aren’t chattel or a tool for me to use.”

I could no longer take the eye contact, my voice sounding dead. “I’m whatever you need me to be.”

“The way he treated you—he isn’t worth mourning. You shouldn’t give him a second thought! Where are you in there? I want the girl with fire in her belly, ready to defy a queen and face off with a god!”

My voice was still empty when I replied, “I’ll do whatever you want. I won’t undermine your reign. I’ll stand by your side and smile and nod and be whatever you need.” I kept my voice even as I uttered the worst thing I could possibly conjure to push him away. “You want a lover? Go ahead.” I flipped the covers off half my body and allowed my bare leg to fall open. “You can complete your conquest—consummate the marriage. I’ll lie still. I won’t resist.”

He couldn’t hide the disgust on his face. He flicked the covers back over me, stood, then whirled away from me. “You aren’t just some *conquest* to me, and you know it. How dare—” he stopped abruptly. He stilled, looking at the ground, his anger close under the surface. He didn’t say anything else; a scoffing sound escaped his lips.

A moment later, I heard a door shut. It wasn’t slammed, but almost.

*Well done.*

Tyran entered a minute later, slowly clapping. “*Bravo*. So, is this rock bottom? Or do we still have a ways to go? Any more collateral damage, sissy?”

I met his hard stare and blinked, keeping my mouth shut.

He flopped on the bed next to me and propped his head up with his left hand. The covers came partially off with his

weight on the bed, but I froze and didn't recover myself. He ran his fingers up my right thigh, and when they drifted a little too close to the inner part of my leg, I flinched.

He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer. "Not so ready to throw your body away, are you?"

I started trembling.

"What would you have done if he had taken you up on your offer?" He made a small circle on my knee over and over with his index finger.

"Please stop," I whimpered.

Tyran smiled and rolled onto his back. "You knew he wouldn't. So why did you do it?"

I slid under the covers further, pulling them up to my chin, wishing they were a magical shield to keep Mr. Probing Questions out of my head.

"I'm a terrible person; let's just leave it at that. Please leave. I would like get some extra sleep."

To my surprise, Tyran got up and sauntered to the door. Then, he laughed. He turned and hung his hands from the top of the frame, leaning into the room. He laughed again. "You truly believe that, don't you? That's why you did it." He really started laughing then, and I had to listen to him as his voice echoed all the way down the hall.

## GABRIEL

Joshua was on a run to purchase batteries for the comms. He still was not acting as I would have expected. I turned to Ian. "If you truly believed that your wife had been cheating on you, and you had driven her away, how would you be feeling just four days later?"

Leaning back in his chair, Ian pondered, "I think I

would still be running on anger. Justifying my actions.”

“Does Joshua seem angry to you? Has he uttered one negative comment about Aleria?”

“No. He seems...”

“Anything but angry...subservient.”

“Guilty,” offered Ian.

“I am missing something.”

“You don’t think...I mean...what if Ali...I don’t want to doubt her, but the dude is a king and wanted to be all up in her business. If I was a chick, I would have been all over *that*.”

I raised my brows at him.

“I’m man enough to say it. The dude is hot.”

I suppressed the rare urge to roll my eyes.

“Then again, Joshua isn’t a slouch. I would probably do him, too.”

“I am glad to see your humor has returned. May I now have my Lieutenant back?”

Ian rubbed at his sore shoulder from the Strigoi bite.

“Yes, sir. What would you like me to do?”

“Test the tracker one last time. We tag Phineas tonight.”

## Chapter 2—CURSE

### ALERIA

When I woke, I became aware that the sun had set and that Tyran was pressed against my side. His breathing was slow and even. It jarred memories of him sleeping next to me while I had been dying of Aurora. I was surprised that Tyran would sleep when there weren't any sentries safeguarding us. It made me wonder where we were; I couldn't sense Bowen in the vicinity. I had been delivered to this bedroom unconscious and hadn't left it since.

Feeding and bathing were high on my priority list. I yawned and stretched; Tyran was instantly alert. It was apparent that he had been sleeping next to me in order to keep track of me while he rested.

He looked around the room, and then at his watch. "Damn it."

"What's wrong?"

He didn't answer, but instead virtually vanished from the room. He was back seconds later. "He never came back."

A balloon of ~~I-deserve-to-be-tossed-in-an-active-~~volcano rose up. "This is my fault."

"Yes, it is."

*And there's the gut punch.*

"I'm foiling your little plot to drive him away the

second he returns. Your actions are not protecting him; they are hurting him.”

“If you tell him why I pushed him away, then I will have hurt him for nothing. I am a curse. Can’t you see that?”

Tyran dropped his snarky routine to speak in earnest. “Your ex was right about one thing: you are too ready to sacrifice yourself for others. You can have my brother and a kingdom to spare, yet you choose to live in some self-imposed prison in an attempt to protect him from your vast evilness.”

Suddenly, his face was inches from mine. “You want to know how I have survived centuries without going insane or walking into the sun to end the tedium? I. Drink. In. Life. I take whatever I can get and revel in it. You want him? Take him—but do it the *right* way. Be honest with yourself, for once, and let go.”

“What if I am cursed?” I protested.

“Then we can all be cursed together, as if we aren’t already! You are not weak, so stop living in fear. I won’t allow it!”

“You aren’t the boss of me!” I shouted.

“Maybe I should be!” he growled back. Then, almost as if he couldn’t help himself, he added, “If you knew the things he has done for you!”

“I know what he’s done for me!” I retorted.

But then a memory surfaced. I looked away, trying to lock onto the thought. After we had captured the Strigoi for the delivery, Tyran had covered our escape. Afterwards, he had caught up and said something before passing out.

I looked at Tyran again. “He did something I don’t know about,” I stated, louder than necessary. “In the truck in Romania, you said ‘he took on my punishment.’ What did

you mean by that?”

Instantly, the anger drained from his face and was replaced with something unreadable. “Nothing.” His voice went out for a moment. “You choosing your ex has been punishment enough. You should never have left with the Slayer after the sacrifice had been stopped.”

“That is not what you meant,” I accused. I knew he was lying. His expression became stone, and I quickly realized that pushing him now wouldn’t help me get the info in the future.

A little more nicely, he said, “You will fix things with my brother.”

Needing to get away from him, I crawled out of bed, feeling angry—mostly because he was right. The thought of being with Bowen terrified me—more than terrified me. It had never occurred to me just *how* deathly afraid of it I was.

I realized I was pacing back and forth in nothing but a t-shirt and underwear. When I turned back to Tyran, he was looking at my face and not my undies, which surprised me almost as much as the fact that he was giving sage advice. Advice I intended to follow. But when I thought of speaking to Bowen, embarrassment crept up my limbs, filling me with galactic-level dread. I didn’t know if I could face him again. My impulse to run overcame me.

*Fight or flight.*

“Flight” was blaring in my head like a siren attached to a Broadway sign on top of a carnival.

Tyran must have seen something in my expression. “Oh, no you don’t.” He jumped up and ripped the hanger from the edge of the armoire, then started shoving me and the dress towards the bathroom. “Shower. You stink of dirty laundry and dried blood. You’ll feed when you get out.”

“Tyran—” I started to argue.

“I would be happy to scrub you down.” His expression became wolfish as the surly side of him surfaced.

I grabbed the clothing from his hands.

“Do I need to guard the door so you don’t sneak out? Or can I find you someone on which to feed?”

I hung my head. “I won’t go anywhere.”

He patted me on the head patronizingly. “Good little sissy. I’ll be back shortly.”

I took a long shower, part of me wishing I could wash myself down the drain with all the suds. Afterwards, I tugged the dress over my curves, the fabric clinging to my still damp skin.

At that moment, I heard the door in the hallway. Dabbing my dripping hair with my towel, I opened the bathroom door. “Tyran, I—”

Bowen was sitting on the edge of the bed resting his elbows on his knees, hands dangling, head bowed. His shirt was rumpled.

I swallowed hard.

“After I pulled you out of that dungeon, in all of the months we spent together, have I ever *once* been reckless with your heart?”

Petrescu had accused me of being reckless, but that had been an act. What I had said to Bowen had been calculated for optimum effect—and it *had* been reckless, in a way.

“Never,” I finally choked, my heart thudding painfully in my chest.

“Then I ask you not to be reckless with mine.”

I stood there, feeling too many emotions to move.

Bowen rose and headed for the door.

“Wait,” I implored breathlessly.

He stopped, but didn’t turn to look at me. In fact, he hadn’t looked at me since he had returned.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, without any sort of preamble, half-surprised it had popped out of my mouth.

His shoulders shifted just enough that I knew he had heard me. After an uncomfortable silence, he spoke. “I am aware that you are hurting and that you are afraid of getting hurt aga—”

“That’s not what I am scared of. I mean...I *am* hurting. And I’m not exactly rushing to trust someone like I had Jo—” I stopped short of finishing his name. “I...I know I can trust you. That’s not what...I...you...”

Bowen turned, his brow furrowed with confusion.

The words hung in my mind a moment before I could latch onto them. “You terrify me.”

“I would nev—”

“Not like that. The thought of you. You’re so...I...We will never date. You will never buy me popcorn at a movie or talk to me on the phone until I can’t hold my eyes open any longer. This isn’t simple. You are a king. We are already married, even though I don’t feel like we are! There was no minister and no you!” I threw my hands up, exasperated. “It’s all or nothing. Do you have any idea how intimidating this situation is...and *you* are? Even among vampires, you stand out.” I had to gulp down air to continue before I lost my nerve. “But more than anything, I’m afraid that I will destroy you. Everyone close to me gets hurt. Look what I did to Jo—,” I gulped air, “*him*.”

There was a flash of anger in his eyes. “*He* did that to himself. You had done nothing wrong.”

“I told your brother that I am a curse. I meant it. I am

beyond petrified that I will ruin you. Ruin—as in, cannot ever be repaired.”

Bowen stood in front of me, looking lost. “Isn’t that *my* choice, and not yours, to make?” he asked as he cautiously approached me.

I felt raw. As if I had flayed myself open.

He tucked a strand of dripping hair behind my ear.

Something in the energy between us changed; I held my breath as he slowly leaned in and gently brushed his lips across mine. Then he kissed me so softly, I wasn’t sure if it had happened.

I felt conflicted.

Guilt surfaced, from letting someone else, besides *him*, touch me, as well as the guilt over the manner in which I had pushed Bowen away. I think Bowen could feel it too.

He pulled back and looked me in the eyes, examining me. After a long moment, he said, “I spoke with Morpheus while I was out. We will wait another week before returning. You are in mourning, and I want you to be as ready as you can be.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. I was so thankful. “I’m so, so sorry for hurting you.”

“I forgive you.” Then he pressed his lips to my ear, “And *when* I do bed you, you will not be lying still. You will be pleading with me *for more*.”

I looked at him, half-shocked.

He gave me a grin, more seductive than I had thought possible, and kissed me once again before striding from the room. It was feather soft, and not much more than a peck, but it had warmed me.

I stood there, trembling and scared...

and part of me...

wanting more.

## GABRIEL

I red-buttoned the call, then ran my hand through my hair simply for the movement. There were too many pieces that did not fit. “Phineas told Blackthorne that he is still in France.”

Ian furrowed his brow, his confusion reflecting my own. “You didn’t tell Blackthorne that Phineas was lying?”

“No.”

“I thought that if Phineas was up to something, Blackthorne would be behind it.”

“Agreed.”

“Or Rousseau trying to get back in on the action.”

“You did not see her after the meeting with Ali and Ana. Whatever hole they dropped her in, she is changed. She wanted to meet with Ali alone. I denied her request.”

“You weren’t curious?” questioned Ian.

“Ali did not need to relive past betrayals. She had enough on deck to think about. I wanted her to have a clear head.”

After a moment, Ian stated, “I miss her.”

My regret of the way she had left had been my constant companion. I wished that I had spoken to her and offered her some solace.

I was moving our small band to southern Belgium. The borders of both Germany and France were close, placing us strategically. It seemed most of the persons of interest were moving in the northern region of continental Europe and London. I wondered for a moment if I should call them “beings” of interest since few were actually human. Then I realized that Ali had made that quip over a year ago. She

was not dead, but certainly part of me was mourning.

With precision, I marked the map with all of the locations in which we had tracked Phineas in the last two days. He had been a busy boy.

## Chapter 3—VIOLATION

### ALERIA

I timidly wandered into the living room of our suite with that awkward feeling you have after a fight with someone. We had talked, but I wasn't really sure if I was wholly forgiven.

Bowen reclined on a couch, while Tyran was perched on a captain's chair. There was a reporter on television, spouting on about the shift in economies across continental Europe and the world. I closed my eyes, not wanting to hear anything remotely negative. But then I remembered something that Tyran had said to Gabriel.

"Has Switzerland closed its borders?"

"Yes, they are open now, but they were for several days," Tyran answered.

Bowen added, "Dubai, London, Hong Kong, Toronto, Paris, Tokyo, San Francisco, Singapore, and New York have all gone on an alert of some sort due to threats."

"That's a lot of cities," I commented. "Do you still think that this has to do with the Fallen? Or terrorists?"

Tyran shrugged. "I believe I have said this before: control the money, control the world."

"If the Fallen can unify the world against a common enemy, it would be much easier for them to seize power," Bowen mused.

“Do you believe they are puppeteering a terrorist organization to take the fall?” Tyran questioned.

“How would anyone orchestrate something that large?” I asked, not really expecting an answer. It was overwhelming. I had been so focused on what was going on with me, that I had lost the bigger picture. Someone was playing chess while I was still playing tic-tac-toe.

“We start with what we can control,” Bowen stated.

“And what is that?” I asked.

“Our coven.”

*Our.* I was part of his coven whether I liked it or not. I sighed. I was keeping him away from the very place he needed to be.

I moved towards the couch, but before I could sit, the chill of a vision came over me. As I dropped to my knees, I felt hands on me, but the blackness devoured me before I could register who had me.



I was standing in an open field. Trees rose up, splitting the ground in a large circle around me. And as they did, the sky darkened, and the air stopped moving. A light came shining from above, and I had to cover my eyes. When I looked again, there was a gigantic moon hanging just above the trees. I was no longer in a clearing—I was in a graveyard.

Ancient monuments stood all around me as a reminder of the long dead. I started to walk, but as I did, I didn't seem to make any progress towards the trees. A breeze began to pick up, the air scented with smoke and incense.

An ornate mausoleum rose up directly in front of me from a series of flat gravestones, much like the trees had moments before. Ivy quickly sprouted and raced up the

building's columns and onto the roof. But as soon as it covered the roof, all of the color faded from green to grey and the ivy began knitting together to form something.

After a few more seconds, the shapes appeared to be gargoyles. I wanted to run from their horrific faces. At that moment, the ground began to shake, and some of the cement fell away to reveal beautiful, stone angels beneath. I stared up at them in awe. They were exquisite. Then their faces twisted in anger, and to my horror, one took flight. His terrible wings were so wide, they almost blotted out the moon.

He seemed to hover there for a moment, suspended in terrifying beauty, before diving straight at me. My legs wouldn't work. I was stone-still, just like the statuary in the graveyard. The angel knocked me on my back, and he straddled me, wrapping his large, stone hands around my neck.

I tried to call for help and to throw him off, but I couldn't move, though I didn't stop trying. So, I attempted to gather details and memorize his face, but it was somehow blurry. Vines began to spring from the ground. They encircled my wrists and ankles. After I was shackled by the growth, one continued to travel across my palm until it perfectly circled my wedding ring finger and turned to stone, weighing my hand down.

The stone angel's face was still indistinct; though I had the impression he smiled. He released my neck, and the vines immediately constricted my throat. With renewed zeal, I tried to break free.

His hands then went to my stomach. He placed them side-by-side, and when he did, my belly began to swell as if I was with child. Panic surged through my veins.

He spoke, and to my terror, he sounded like there were many voices all at once. I listened, but I couldn't understand a single word he uttered.

I felt hopeless.

The moment I stopped struggling, the vines around my neck eased enough that I could raise my head. I stared at my swollen belly, and then everything on my body began to crack. A great reddish light shone from beneath—it looked as if it was lava beneath a thick crust. A debilitating, burning sensation surged through me. I cried out just as my body was consumed, and I turned to ash.



I woke, gasping in Bowen's arms. I wrenched myself away and skittered into the corner like a fearful, wild animal. My eyes darted around the room as I tried to control my breathing, but I couldn't; it was like an irrepressible spasm.

My hands flew down to my belly. It was flat, and there was nothing wrong with me. Suddenly, the ring on my finger felt confining. I desperately tugged it off and throwing it onto the carpet a few feet in front of me.

Bowen made a move to come closer, and I shrieked. "Get back! Don't touch me!" I knew I was being irrational, but there was just no containing it. Everything was closing in on me. I could still feel the vines around my wrists and ankles, and the ring turning to stone on my finger.

Tyran got onto his knees in front of me. His voice was completely calm. "Ali, I need you to tell me what you saw." I tried to remember if he had ever called me "Ali" before. It seemed to jar me from my hysteria.

I pressed my palms to the flooring and concentrated on calming my body. My sprinting heart began to slow. I

closed my eyes, and as I had done a hundred times with Gabriel, I recounted the vision. When I was finished, I opened my eyes. Bowen met my gaze, but the emotion on his face forced me to look over at Tyran. His face was composed.

“Was anyone altering your dream?” Tyran asked. I realized he was framing his questions just like Gabriel in order to help me. I had to make myself not think about Gabriel and how much I missed him.

I thought for a moment. “No, no one was in my head this time.”

“Have you ever had a vision quite like this?”

I shook my head. “Not in the form of a vision that overtakes me. Nightmares...prophetic nightmares, yes. When I was still human, and the Oneiroi were injecting themselves into my dreams, that scene was no worse.” I thought about the nightmare about the subway car coming to life and all the people melting into the ground like candlewax, leaving pools of blood. Then I continued. “But they weren’t in this dream. I am being warned about something.”

I took another cleansing breath as if I was doing yoga, then leaned against the wall. I felt like an idiot. I noticed the ring on the floor, but couldn’t even think about putting it back on again; I rubbed at my finger as if it were burning.

“You turning to ash could simply be from your recent sun exposure. You fought Ananiel in a cemetery. Much of this can be explained, sissy.” Tyran’s tone was soothing, and he was being very rational. But there was more to this.

My thoughts started to clear, and I realized part of the reason I was so rattled. “The child. It was a violation. I don’t know any other way to describe it.”

“Like you had been forced to bear a child?” Bowen’s

voice was uneven.

I swallowed. “I don’t know. I need time to decode this.” I stood up. “I think I just need to be alone for a little while. I...I’m sorry.” I couldn’t look at Bowen as I left.

As soon as I was in the safety of my room, I curled up on the bed, hugging a pillow. My own words kept repeating in my head: *It was a violation.*

## GABRIEL

“Gabriel,” Ian called me from the other room.

“You have the traffic cam footage?”

“You won’t believe what I found!” hollered Ian.

Sliding the tablet away from me, I quickly trotted into the den. Ian was positioned in the corner and had the curtains pulled shut over both windows.

“Phineas was meeting with someone all right.”

Ian clicked play. The traffic cam caught Phineas slithering into an alcove next to the front of a building in Germany. Ian punched fast forward. Several minutes later, someone stepped into the alcove with him for a total of thirty-six seconds. When the person left, my blood cooled.

“Can you get a close up of his face?”

“I wish; this isn’t the movies.”

I shot Ian a disapproving look.

He raised his hands. “Sorry, I wish I could. I tried, but the resolution is too low, and it became too pixilated. If the light was better, maybe, but dusk is difficult. And whatever, we still have important info just from that.”

“We do. Whoever he was meeting with was not human.”

“Yup, way too big for human, unless he has taken up

meeting with Danish bodybuilders.”

“Danish?” I questioned, almost afraid to ask.

“Aren’t the Dutch the tallest people on the planet? I thought they were. Maybe not.”

“Keep at it. I am going for a run. I want for us to have time to spar before lunch.”

“Soooo...you want to kick my ass for being so charming the last few days.” He winked. Ian had been extra mouthy, but even more efficient and dutiful.

I grinned. If I had wanted to kick someone’s ass, I would have asked Joshua to spar. Since driving Ali off, he had been the example of perfection in his duties and manners. Doing everything I had asked and more. Always ready with a please and a thank you. But he had not said a single word in regards to his behavior from a week ago. I still felt as if I was missing a piece, and I was not alone in those thoughts. Ian had confirmed as much.

## ALERIA

The sun had risen during my hours of solitude. I was still curled into a ball on the bed, hugging a pillow, and had hardly moved since retreating to my hotel room. It took hours, but I had been able to work my way through the sense of violation that had been so oppressive after the vision. I had left the door open the entire time I had been in here, partially so I could hear, but also because I felt scared.

Bowen’s presence outside the door interrupted my musings; he had just been speaking to someone on the phone. It was a relief to feel him near me. I didn’t really want to be alone anymore, and had debated on slinking back to the other room, but I felt like an idiot for my reaction after

the vision.

“You can come in,” I offered.

My back was to him, but I didn’t move. He walked around the bed and came into view. His emotions were tightly controlled.

“I just wanted to check on you.”

I patted the empty space on the bed next to me. “Will you stay?”

He seemed to deliberate a moment, and then sat on the bed with his back to me. I wished I could see his face. The set of his shoulders seemed burdened.

“Was that Morpheus you were speaking to on the phone?”

“Yes.”

“Do we need to go back today?”

“I promised you another week. We have six more days.”

“I know you pro—”

“Aleria.” He said my name like a caress. “You aren’t ready...and after what I saw in the other room...” His back was still to me.

I stretched and put my hand on his forearm. “I’m sorry.”

He turned his head and looked at my hand. “You always apologize for things not your fault.” He paused. “You had so few visions the months you stayed with me. You woke from nightmares, but after what you have gone through, I would have expected nothing less. Is this what your life has become?”

Tyran had had the same question not long ago.

“Five weeks ago, I had control. I would lose consciousness, but most of the time, I managed to do no

more than drop to a knee. I recovered in minutes. Gabriel or Jo—” I swallowed, “would talk me through them, just as you saw Tyran do. Tyran had seen Gabriel help me. Before the sacrifice, my visions increased in volume and intensity. My guess is that this is the same...or maybe I’m defective.”

Bowen finally turned a little more to see my face. I managed to smile a little. He exhaled. I pulled my arm back when he had laid down and rolled so that he was on his side facing me. It felt quiet and intimate and...nice.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Defective?”

“Yeah, you may have been married off to a faulty model.”

His brow furrowed, and the humor drained from his face. There was something deeper bothering him.

“You can ask me anything,” I prompted.

“Were you holding something back in regards to your vision?”

“No, I told you everything I could remember,” I answered, confused.

He seemed to hesitate. “Was it about me? Is that how you feel about our marriage? Trapped and violated?”

“No,” I replied, remembering that I had ripped off my ring and threw it away from me. “No. You have never once made me feel unsafe—ever. I mean, after the evil twin thing was resolved and everything.”

“But do you feel trapped?”

I reached out across the bed and took his hand. He laced his fingers through mine and waited expectantly. “By the situation, but not by you. Please don’t question how much I care about you. I know I joked that I was defective. Truth is, I’m broken, just not in that area. I don—” I stopped when he squeezed my hand.

It was apparent he was choosing his words carefully. “I have never seen anyone dismantle someone who they cared about with such...precision. I have witnessed unbridled cruelty and experienced it myself. Yet, I cannot comprehend what I witnessed.” He paused. “I want you, but I would never have wished for you to be hurt in this manner.”

I pulled his hand to my face and pressed it to my cheek. Bowen always made me feel comforted and wanted. “Thank you,” I murmured against his palm.

Now that he was in here with me, I realized how tired I was. I had been afraid to sleep. The vision had drained me, and I had been in here, obsessing over every detail for hours—forcing myself to replay it over and over again. The absolute horror of it had made me feel very human and almost afraid to even doze off.

“The sun is up. I should let you get some rest.” He started to pull his hand away.

“Please stay.”

He looked at me cautiously.

“I know I needed space, but I really hate being alone after visions like that. *Please...*”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything. He had the same cautious look on his face from moments before.

I readjusted and scooted closer, resting my forehead against his chest. He reached around and rubbed my back in slow circles. It was hard to believe that with being unconscious for all of those hours that I would be wide awake, but I felt exhausted. My body started to relax, and Bowen’s breathing became more even.

“You always smell so good,” I murmured into his shirt, my voice heavy.

He didn't say anything as he kissed the top of my head. I pressed myself a little closer, and the hand rubbing circles on my back slowed. I could feel his fatigue.

Barely above a whisper, I said, "I think you still owe me a story."

"I do?" he breathed.

"When we were in that basement, infected with Aurora, you told me that *when* I survived, you would tell me a story from when you were younger."

"I remember now. I believe the next time we were alone enough to really talk, we were in that cave, and you tried to kill me."

"Does that mean you take it back? What's a little attempted murder between friends? In my defense, Dagan's blood did cause temporary insanity. That would have been my defense anyway."

A single, tired chuckle came out of him. "I will tell you any story you would like to hear. You did earn it back when you saved my life soon after."

I listened to him breathe for a long while, then I asked for one more thing. "And I would like to know what punishment you took for me."

There was no response. It was then I realized that Bowen had stopped breathing altogether. He had heard me just fine.

## Chapter 4—I WILL

### ALERIA

When I woke, I could feel it was still daylight. Bowen was no longer asleep next to me. I sat up, trying to shake the blariness from my eyes, when I became aware that there was a hushed, yet heated conversation going on in the next room. I listened for a moment, debating what to do.

Bowen hissed, "...She wasn't to know—ever."

"I did not tell her. I give you my word."

"She knew enough to ask. She spoke of the 'punishment I had taken for her.'"

Before, I may have stayed in here and listened, but feelings of betrayal crept in, and I refused to succumb to them. I got out of bed and walked to the living area of the suite. I leaned in the doorway and waited for them to notice me. Tyran had said something I didn't hear; it must have been a denial of some sort.

Bowen was angry. "You and Morpheus *both* promised me."

I kept my voice even. "Promised not to tell me what?"

Bowen froze for a moment. "I thought you were sleeping."

I felt like saying something snarky, but I refrained. I simply let my gaze go between both Bowen and Tyran until one of them spoke.

"Tell her."

Bowen gritted his teeth. “No.”

My instinct to run was kicking in. If it wasn't still daylight, I might have grabbed my bags and set off on my own.

I tried to think, despite the charged air in the room. “Do I have a right to know this?”

They replied simultaneously.

Tyran: “Yes.”

Bowen: “No.”

“Does this have to do with me?”

Bowen answered, “Yes, but it is not what you think.” He glowered at Tyran and cursed, “Damn you.”

I placed a shaky hand over my heart. “I can't...I can't take any more betrayal.” I spun around to leave the room.

Tyran blurted, “*Succedaneum.*”

I stopped, but kept my back to them.

Tyran continued, “When you were human, and he pulled you out of that dungeon, there was a price to pay. Our mother whipped the flesh from his back.”

I slowly faced them.

Bowen sounded defeated. “Taranis, *please.*”

Tyran glared at Bowen. “He endured it three times in order for him to keep you with him...and away from me. If you hadn't been turned with his blood, he would have had to continue every single day after you went to sleep until he couldn't endure it any longer.”

I looked at Bowen. “I thought you were with me the whole time.”

He said nothing.

“Morpheus guarded you while he was away. Mother used Pyralis on him to prevent him from healing too quickly. He had to bear it and feel it as a human would.”

“Pyralis?”

“A version of the blue liquid you were made to drink in order for the branding not to heal for the sacrifice. It is saved for only the worst criminals.”

“Why? Why would you do that for me?” I asked Bowen as I searched my memory, wondering how I had treated him then. I closed my eyes. “When you pulled me out, hadn’t I just told you that I had spent months hating you?” I leaned against the wall and slid down until I was sitting on the floor. The weight of this was too much.

Tyran smirked. “I think my job here is complete.” He bowed, making a flourish with his hands. “Now, I will return to bed after being so rudely awakened.”

Bowen scowled at Tyran as his brother strutted from the room, but I think that Tyran was genuinely upset about something. The set of his shoulders was stiff. Bowen sat on the couch straight across from me and stared at the coffee table instead of making eye contact. I could still feel his anger as clearly as my own heartbeat.

“Why did you keep this from me?”

“There are many, many reasons.”

I waited.

He sighed. “I have never wanted you to feel obligated to me. If you came to love me, I wanted it to be for *me*. Not because you felt guilty or indebted due to my protection.”

“And?”

He finally looked up at me, his blue eyes bright. “I hadn’t admitted it to myself at the time, but even then, I loved you. Need I have another reason?”

Both reasons were valid. I couldn’t dispute that.

He stood, walked over, and sat down next to me on the floor. “Aleria, I saw into your very heart within those first

two weeks. If you had known, guilt would have driven some of your decisions. You are impressively good at guilt.”

I laughed softly. He did know me. I looped my arm through his and leaned my head on his shoulder. “Thank you. Thank you for so many things.”

We sat there for a long while.

Finally, I got on my feet and offered Bowen my hand. “You should probably get some sleep—since you were just pretending before in order to ambush your brother.”

He smiled tiredly. “Did your Watchers not teach you the definition of ambush?”

“Testy when you get called out for fake sleeping,” I teased while he pulled himself up.

“The definition of ambush is?” He grinned and headed towards his room.

“Bowen?”

“Yes?”

I hedged a moment in the doorway to mine. “Would it be selfish of me to ask you to stay with me...to hold me? I still don’t want to be alone.”

He didn’t reply, but walked towards me and took my hand, leading me to the bed. Both his expression and emotions were unreadable. He stopped, expecting me to lay down where I had been before, but I circled to the other side of the bed and crawled under the covers. He hesitated.

“You like to sleep on your left side,” I explained, answering his unasked question.

A wisp of a smile passed over his face. He stood there for a moment longer, then crawled in with me. I rolled so that my back was to him. He slid his left arm under my head and wrapped his right around me, his breath warming my neck.

Bowen whispered into my ear, “I promise not to fake sleep this time.”

“Do you promise to be here when I wake up this time, too?” My heart beat unevenly when I asked.

“I will,” he murmured against my hair, but it felt like he was saying much, much more with those two words.

## GABRIEL

I dropped the binoculars onto my lap. “I want to know what Phineas purchased in that shop.”

Ian grinned. “Did you see the dirty look she gave him when he left?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my in,” replied he. Ian rolled his sleeves to above his elbows revealing his sleeves of tattoos. He flipped the visor down and disheveled his hair. “Loan me that?”

I removed the leather cuff I wore over my Slayer tattoo.

Ian snapped it onto his wrist and stuck a piece of gum into his mouth. “Be back in a few.” He hopped out of the van and jogged down the stairs of the parking garage and into the electronics store from which Phineas had just vacated. The store had a glass front and an exit in the rear of the building.

Raising the binoculars once more, I scanned the street to make sure Phineas’ cab was not returning and checked the rest of the street for someone tailing him, then focused back on Ian inside the store.

He was speaking to the female clerk behind the counter. She leaned against the rear shelving, with arms crossed, listening. Ian appeared to be distressed. After a

moment, he leaned in closer; his grin widened as her arms dropped to her sides. She was no longer defensive.

I quickly scanned the street once more for unfriendlies, then focused back on Ian's op inside the store.

The clerk ran her fingers over the design she had inked on her collarbone. She leaned her head back when she laughed at something he had said. She was exposing her neck when she did so: basic biology; she trusted him.

After he spoke to her for another ninety seconds, he ran his hand over the counter next to the register and tapped it. She nodded, and her demeanor changed. He had her.

She pulled a receipt from the register and allowed Ian to see it. He leaned on his elbows, speaking as if it were a secret. She pulled out a pen and wrote on his palm. He spoke for a moment longer, and then exited the store, his pace quicker. He turned to the left, taking an alternate route back. I scanned the street and the garage behind me in the monitors while I waited.

Ian swung the passenger door open. "He bought a thumb drive *and* some decryption software. The kind you get on the black market. The owner of the electronics' store is a hacker. And the worst news: Phineas was in there over a week ago and purchased something. She didn't help him, so she had no idea what he got." Ian shut the door and strapped in.

"Good work." I briefly examined the GPS and proceeded towards Phineas' next location.

"You don't want to know how I got her to tell me?"

"You were the Romeo."

"I am dead sexy, but no. That wasn't my approach. I told her Phineas was dating my sister, and I thought he was

getting her into something he shouldn't. Then, I played Romeo to seal the deal."

"As I said, good work."

"Sometimes, I don't think you appreciate my awesomeness, Gabriel."

"I should have said you were a honeypot, rather than Romeo, with all your girlie whining."

Ian coughed and got back on topic. "Do you think he got something from a member of the Fallen that he needs to decrypt?"

"That is a distinct possibility."

Ian was quiet for several minutes. "If Ali was here, she would say I just channeled my shiny shirt from the club and would then give me crap about it."

I squeezed the steering wheel and concentrated on the road. I hated the hole her absence had left; I prayed we would have her back when this was over.

## ALERIA

"You aren't sleeping," Bowen whispered.

"I did for a little while...and neither are you." I rolled over and pulled a pillow under my head so I could see his face. There was just enough light from the hall to make things visible. If I had been human, he would barely be a silhouette. "I keep running that vision through my head over and over."

"You will find clarity soon."

"And what is keeping you up?"

"Kingly duties," he answered vaguely.

It took me a minute to work up the courage to ask him something. "I know your favorite color and your favorite

music through different ages. I know that you love Russian literature, which I think is boring, by the way. That you value human life, even though most of our kind doesn't. And even that you prefer O positive blood."

After too long of a pause, he prompted me, "Are you working up to some type of conclusion?"

"How many times have you been married?"

A gentle smile upturned his lips.

"What?"

"I have waited for you to ask me that for a long time. You never did in all of those months."

"It seemed..."

"I know why you didn't. You avoided all topics having to do with romantic entanglements."

"You never asked about Josh," I countered, forcing myself to say *his* name.

"You were in mourning. I didn't want to ask for something you weren't willing to offer. The answer is twice...and close to a third. Two for duty, and the third would have been for love."

I was quiet for a moment. "I can't imagine an arranged marriage. Did you love them?"

"I was twenty years of age when I was first wed to Belisama."

"Her name was Belisama and you, Belenus?"

"She had been born for me; the name was tribute. The arrangement had been made before she had been conceived."

"What was she like?"

"She was striking and clever. Even though we were betrothed, I still courted her, making grand gestures and I fell for her completely."

"She must have been crazy about you."

“I thought so, but less than a year after we were wed, her true nature surfaced. She was trained to be a royal—the ruthless variety. We had our own lands; she was seen as a bright star who loved her people, but then she started secretly enslaving them. She kept it hidden, even from me, for longer than I care to admit. The maze beneath my mother’s castle was inspired by her actions. It was the warlike part of her deity.

“She pushed, and her cruelty increased until there was a revolt. Hundreds came. The peasants turned out to be more intelligent than we had given them credit. They waited and watched, logging all of our movements, our numbers. We received a distress call from a fortification a half night’s ride away. We sent riders to assist. When our numbers were depleted, they came. It was one for the storybooks. Pitchforks, fiery torches, crossbows...it was a bloodbath.”

“But you survived.”

“We could have all escaped. There was a tunnel through the catacombs. She didn’t even care about our own guard. She had said it was ‘their duty to die for her.’ It disgusted me. It felt like dishonor, but I left. She and all that had aided her in her tyrannical deception perished that night.

“I vowed never to be so naïve again. Consequently, I have hated the politics that come with the throne ever since. Yet, I have studied them as to never be taken advantage of.”

“What did you do afterward?”

“I returned home. My mother sent an army the next night and slaughtered every human that they could find for ten miles around the fortress. There was a rumor that those who instigated the plan escaped. But there was no proof.

“I wanted to go to ground. Sleep for a few decades, but Queen Mother had other plans. Another marriage was arranged—a princess from the Italian Coven.”

“How long until you were married again?”

“Weeks.”

“How did you feel about that?” I asked, trying to understand.

“I was bound by duty. It didn’t matter how I felt. Concordia and I were together for two decades. Her sister had a child, so she went to her homeland to visit. The caravan fell under attack during daylight. After the raiders had taken all of the valuables, they burned everything. My wife, her attendants, and her vampire guards burned to ash from either the sun or the flames. A few of the human guard escaped and returned with word of the attack. I hunted the raiding party down. I killed them—all of them.”

“You loved her,” I stated.

He exhaled. “We respected one another. She was a good companion, but she wasn’t the first thing I wanted to see in the morning. When she traveled, I missed her, but I wasn’t urgently yearning for her return. I cared and was grieved when she was killed.”

We quietly looked at one another for long enough that I could have drifted off to sleep. “And the third?” I finally asked.

“She was human.”

I blinked.

“My mother had left me alone after Concordia. I swore to her that if she tried to force me into another marriage that I would disappear. Taranis had lost his fiancé while I was with Concordia. For once, my mother didn’t try to control us. I met Amée a century later. She was everything

that I had never experienced. After a year, I proposed and wanted it to last forever.”

“What happened?”

“There was a terrible plague. I was so fearful that I would lose her to sickness, I convinced her to let me turn her.” He paused, his voice rough. “She didn’t survive the transformation. She died in my arms and it was entirely my fault.” I felt a wave a grief from Bowen in just recounting the story for me.

I sat up, suddenly wide awake. “People don’t always survive being turned?”

“No. You didn’t know that?”

“No!” This fact somehow rocked my world. It made me feel even luckier to be alive. Then my empathy kicked in, and I remembered the incapacitating grief I had experienced when I thought Joshua had died. I focused on that sense of shared loss and not my break from Joshua. This wasn’t about me; Bowen was reliving his heartbreak for me. “I am so incredibly sorry that you went through that.” My words felt insufficient. I released a halting breath, then laid back down beside him.

He started to speak. “When...” I felt another surge of emotion from him. He closed his eyes. “When you were turned, it was so horrific. I knew that you would lose your human life, but I had feared that I was going lose you entirely.”

Hesitantly, I moved closer and placed my hands on both sides of his face. He didn’t open his eyes. I could feel him still trying to mask his emotions. I wanted to comfort him further, and suddenly found my lips on his.

He didn’t react at first, but then his lips parted, and I felt his arms encircle me. His raw emotion was all

encompassing, as it too, surrounded me during that kiss. Afterward, he pressed his forehead to mine for a moment, then gave me three soft kisses. He readjusted, so that my head was tucked against his chest and his arms around me. I realized he was once again being kind and not pushing me to do anything further.

Bowen murmured against the top of my head. “You have a power over me that I have never allowed anyone else. I don’t understand it.”

“And you are married once again and didn’t get to choose it.”

“I chose you a long time ago.”

## Chapter 5—DENIAL TO DEPRESSION

### ALERIA

“Aleria,” Bowen whispered.

He was still curled behind me. I smiled. “Mmm hmm?”

“I need to get up, but I promised I would be here when you woke. I told Morpheus I would call thirty before sunset to check in.”

I rolled over to face him. His t-shirt was wrinkled, and his hair a mess—I liked it. Part of me had had this tortured, bad-boy prince on a pedestal. The entire time we were in the castle, he had gotten up earlier than me and had been fully dressed. “Thank you for letting me know.”

Even after the openness and intimacy of our conversation last night, I wasn’t ready for more, and I shied away from kissing him.

He pressed the back of my hand to his lips, holding it there. After several seconds, he kissed and released it. Then I blinked, and he was gone. I didn’t even sense his weight leave the bed.

Once alone, I stretched and lay there, trying to ignore the desire to retreat back into my semi-comatose state. Depression wasn’t good on me, but the moment no one was around, it was all I had felt. I was struggling with the want to simultaneously pull Bowen closer and push him away.

I sat up and thought about changing into real clothes.

But second my feet hit the floor, I noticed a yellow light flashing from a small LED bulb in the ceiling. I hadn't noticed it was there before. It reminded me of the emergency lights that flashed during the fire alarms at my high school, except they were yellow.

I flew into the living room and realized lights were flashing in every room.

Tyran had his phone to his ear and held up his hand to keep me quiet. "Bridget, darling, do we need to worry?...How many?...Are they inside the hotel?...Human?...Yes...Yes." He hung up.

"Watchers were spotted a few hours ago in a café across the street. An assault team of unknown origin has breached the building. Thermal readings were inconclusive. It is unknown whether the two are connected or whether they are here for us. There are royals from Egypt here, but my instincts say they are after us. The team disconnected the video feed, so we have no clue where they are." He looked to Bowen. "Stay or go?"

"How many?"

"Ten or more."

Bowen and I answered in unison, "We go."

I was dressed in seconds. We ditched most of our luggage. We kept the money, weapons, and travel documents. Clothes could be replaced.

Tyran led the way to a back stairwell labeled "twelve." I had no idea we were that many floors up. The curtains had been closed when I had finally gotten out of bed. We sped down two cases, and just as I passed the door on the ninth floor, there was a small explosion that blew off the door half way and tossed me over Tyran. I landed on my back on the next landing. I was instantly on my feet, with Tyran at my

side. Despite a few singe marks on my clothing, I was fine. I glanced up at Bowen; he hesitated, gave his brother a nod, then disappeared through the doorway.

Tyran put his hand around my bicep, but I shrugged him off and looked intently at the doorway. Bowen reappeared sixty seconds later. He paused to pull a four-inch blade from his ribcage, but then kept moving. As he passed by me, he handed me the blade. It was a small Durateus throwing knife, which could mean only one thing: Watchers. He was rubbing something between his index finger and thumb afterwards.

“There are three more groups, five to a team,” Bowen informed us. We started down the stairs again, but this time with caution, not speed. “They waited until the security system was down for the other teams to enter.”

Tyran asked, “Human? Vampire? Slayer? Or...”

“Human, but...”

Tyran stopped and grabbed his brother’s hand, smelling the substance Bowen was still rubbing between his fingers. Then Tyran immediately looked at the wound in Bowen’s ribcage. “Damn it. Do you want to try for the car or head for the sewers?”

“Sewers,” Bowen decided. We started descending the stairs again.

“Should we just hide and wait for sunset? It’s not that long. Or should I try to talk to them?” I offered.

“Sissy, it’s not the Watchers. They coated that blade with Pyralis. They have weaponry from both sides.”

“Could they be herding us into the sewers?” I wondered.

“Possibly, but we won’t come out where they would expect us,” Bowen whispered.

At that moment, I heard the distinctive click of an assault rifle on the stairs a few stories below us. Bowen winked at me, and then jumped on top of the railing. He drew his arms in, crossing them over his chest, then dropped down the middle of the stairs, landing at the bottom without a sound.

Tyran grinned and flashed in the direction of the gunman—I followed. But when we arrived, Bowen was spinning around, taking out the last of the hit team. I stood amazed—Bowen was faster than Tyran. Part of me wished I had witnessed more, and the other part of me wondered why we needed to run if Bowen could take out two of the teams with such ease even when wounded, but I trusted his instincts. Bowen had also used deadly force, and knowing him, there was a reason for it. He didn't kill humans without reason.

We didn't more than pause; Tyran picked up one of their earpieces as we continued to the third floor. We waited at the door for a moment while Tyran listened. "They know you killed the second unit. They must be monitoring vital signs...they expect us in the parking garage any second now. Unit coming from above to drive us that way." Tyran took off the comm and tossed it to the ground.

I looked at him questioningly.

"It went dead," he explained, answering my silent question. "They must have shut down the slain team's communications."

We slipped through the third floor exit, and Bowen quickly led us to a utility closet. Once inside, Tyran and Bowen moved as if their minds were linked. Bowen stripped off his shirt and pants, tossing them into the utility sink. Tyran had grabbed bleach and dumped it over the clothing.

Bowen grabbed a rag, wet it with something, and wiped his blood away. He then swiped some duct tape from the shelf.

When he was about to tape the knife wound shut, I asked, "Do you want me to seal it shut?"

"No. Pyralis. I don't want it in your system. We just need to rid ourselves of anything that smells of blood in case they have trackers." He quickly taped the whole section of his ribcage. "Do you smell blood?"

I sniffed. "No."

"No clothes, brother." Tyran grinned at Bowen. "It's a nice look."

Bowen raised a brow at his brother while he stood there in his fitted boxer briefs, socks, and designer shoes.

"Want me to search one of the adjacent hotel rooms for clothing?" Tyran asked.

Bowen shook his head. "Let's go."

I was thankful I had never had to escape somewhere in my underwear. Fleeing in Petrescu's dress shirt and boxers was more than I ever wanted to experience again.

Tyran pulled a shelving unit away from the wall. The whole thing moved like it was on hinges, along with the plaster wall, to reveal a ladder going down into the darkness. Tyran started down. Bowen urged me onto the ladder, and within seconds, he was above me and had shut the secret access panel.

We descended in utter blackness. When we reached the ground, Tyran took my hand, and soon after Bowen took my other hand. We slinked along, and I was glad they seemed to know in which direction to go.

We came to a stop, and Tyran let go of me. There was the faintest clunk and a sliver of blue light that infiltrated our space. The light disappeared, followed by another clunk.

He spoke softly in the suffocating darkness. “They are waiting at the south junction for us.”

Bowen commented just as quietly, “Above, they had two sets of powder-coated restraints with them. They wanted to capture at least two of us. One of them had a tattoo in the language of the angels. I assume whatever they have waiting out there and in the parking garage is a little more formidable.”

“Powder-coated?” I whispered.

Tyran explained in a voice so low only we could hear, “The shackles the Seekers used on you to fulfill Cadeyn’s bounty. It is a version of Pyralis that makes the bonds too painful to break.”

I thought back to the torrent of pain when I had tried to free myself. Bowen had to be feeling that in his ribcage right now, but he was acting unaffected.

Bowen whispered, “We need to go deeper and get to the junction under the Opera house.”

“I will draw them away,” Tyran responded.

“No, we stay together. You know we would normally face them, but there is something unsettling about this. Too many unknowns.”

“Better I draw them away, then.”

“No. Need I make it a command?” Bowen countered.

I felt Tyran’s hand on my arm; it slid down until it enveloped my hand. He started tugging me forward. Bowen still had my other hand. We walked along a long passageway in the pitch black. Sometimes it became narrow, and we had to squeeze through. Other times, it sounded like the space was wide.

Tyran dropped my hand as we came to a dead end. At least, I *thought* it was a dead end. There was a corner that I

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could feel with my free hand where I groped in the darkness. I wasn't sure how Tyran and Bowen were navigating this place with such confidence and speed. Then I heard the grind of metal, followed by the smell of fresh water.

"I doubt the humans have scuba gear," Tyran reassured.

I groaned a little, memories of evacuating the Academy into the maze beneath London resurfacing. Before thinking, I asked Tyran...

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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](http://www.robinwoodsfiction.com)