

Kingdom of Ashes

BOOK I

IN THE NIGHTFALL SERIES

ELENA MAY

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Chapter One

In the Shadows

Six candles were hardly enough to illuminate the stuffy cellar. Myra raised a hand and rubbed at her eyes. Her head throbbed, but if she stopped writing, she would lose her mind. She considered lighting a seventh candle but pushed the thought aside. The last patrol had returned empty-handed, and she could not afford to waste supplies to satisfy her whims.

The sound of feet tapping against stone startled her, and she put her notebook down at the knock on the door. “Come in,” Myra called with as much cheer as she could muster.

The wooden door cracked open, and her cousin peeked in. “The General is looking for you,” Thea said. “He requested you come to the Headquarters immediately.”

Myra sighed. Calling one of the many underground cells “Headquarters,” or Zack “General,” did nothing to make their pathetic, ragtag team a real army. “If Zack wishes to talk to me, he can come here himself. You’re not his messenger.”

“He’s busy, and this is important,” Thea said with a serious expression on her youthful face. “We captured another one.”

Myra snorted. “That’s what you call ‘important’? Zack should have figured out by now that we can’t learn anything useful from that filth.” She tucked her notebook underneath a moth-eaten blanket and walked to the candles, extinguishing them one by one. “Let’s go, then. Better not keep *the General* waiting.”

She followed Thea down the narrow torchlit corridor. Her cousin ran forward, her short golden ponytails bobbing up and down at every step. Myra found it hard to keep up with the pace and enthusiasm, but she tried to remain hopeful for Thea’s sake.

About thirty Warriors had gathered inside the Headquarters, waiting for them. Myra spotted Lidia and Thomas, and, of course, *the General*. “Zack, what—”

He cleared his throat. “Captain Andersen, how good of you to join us.”

Myra resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “You called for me, General Wong.”

“Follow me,” Zack said.

Myra looked at her cousin. “You should go now, Thea.”

The twelve-year-old pouted. “I’m a part of the Resistance too! In less than four years, I’ll be allowed to join the Warriors’ Council. I want to see the prisoner!”

“Why would you want that?” Myra asked. “There’s nothing glorious about fighting a war or interrogating prisoners. Until you learn that, you can’t be one of the Warriors. Go now. Grandma Pia is giving a talk at the school. You should attend as many lessons as you can.”

Thea gave her a glare but complied. Once the girl was gone, Myra followed Zack and the rest of the Warriors into a small

candlelit cellar. The air was heavier in this place, but she was certain their guest did not mind.

The prisoner was standing with his back towards the stone wall, heavy chains holding up his shackled hands. Another set of thick fetters encircled his ankles. The Resistance had discovered long ago that vampires possessed superior strength, but so far the titanium chains had been effective in detaining the captives.

Myra narrowed her eyes and looked over the prisoner. She had seen only a handful of vampires, all very different in looks, but all had been the same in their vanity and arrogance.

The first thing Myra noticed was his clothes. The bright lilac tuxedo complemented the vampire's dark complexion but made him look no less ridiculous. Vamps always dressed in style—or what they perceived to be style—while Resistance members wore whatever they could get their hands on. She wondered what the vampires would do once all the clothes ever made wore out beyond repair. They had destroyed all of the humans involved in production, and as far as she knew, they had set up no system to replace the goods they used up. These creatures could only consume and destroy and never create anything new.

“So this is the famous Resistance?” the prisoner asked, his sharp white teeth glistening under the candlelight as he gave his hosts a smug grin. “More pathetic than expected.”

“You must be quite the fighter yourself to be captured by creatures as pathetic as us,” said Thomas, and Zack threw the red-haired Warrior an approving look. “If we are pitiful, what does that make you?”

“We’re not here to exchange lame insults,” Myra interrupted and glared at the vampire. “We’re here to give you a choice. You can die quickly, or your death can last weeks if you refuse to answer our questions.”

“So, what are you two supposed to be?” The vamp glanced between Thomas and Myra. “The good and the bad cop?”

“What’s he talking about?” Zack asked.

“It’s an Old World thing,” Myra said impatiently. “I’ll explain it to you later.” Really, did Zack ever read books? He was almost ten years older than her, but he knew less about the Old World than she did.

Zack turned back at the prisoner. “You heard your options. You can talk now, or you can wait for us to make you cooperate.”

The vamp snickered. “You are wasting your time. The WeatherWizard is heavily guarded; you can never reach it and live to tell the tale.”

“We know everything about the WeatherWizard,” Zack said. “We wanted to ask you a few questions about Prince Vladimir.”

The vampire laughed—an ugly, mirthless sound. “You cannot seriously think you can plan anything against him. The Dark Prince will swipe you away with his little finger. You kids have no idea what you are getting yourselves into.”

“Perhaps you’ll be willing to tell us,” Zack said. “Lidia?”

The petite woman stepped forward. “Yes, sir?”

“I’ll leave you alone with him. Make him sing. If he refuses, Thomas will take the next shift. One of us will be with him at all times until he agrees to cooperate.”

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“I can make him talk,” Lidia said and threw the prisoner a look. She walked to the wall and took a hammer from the rack. It looked huge in her small hand, but her grip around the handle was strong. “I have an idea or two.”

“I know you do,” said Zack. “We’ll be in the Headquarters in case you need us.”

Myra tried to ignore the vampire’s snigger at the word “Headquarters,” hoping beyond hope that the prisoner would speak before her shift came.

Several stone walls separated the Headquarters from the prison cellar, but they did little to muffle the hellish screams. Myra closed her eyes for a moment. “Zack, if you don’t need me here, I’ll go to the clinic and help Dr. Dubois.”

Her leader nodded absentmindedly, and she stood up, barely stopping herself from running towards the door. Once the screams were out of earshot, her pace slowed down. As usual, the corridor leading to the clinic was crammed with people. Patients occupied every bench; many more were standing. Myra sighed, feeling tired just looking at them, and opened the door to the doctor’s cellar.

Dr. Dubois stood bent down, feeling a patient’s stomach. Gary, her aide, waited next to her with a basket full of vials.

The old woman looked up and smiled at her. “Ah, Myra, it’s good to see you. Do you have time to stay and help?”

“Sure. I saw the line on my way here—I think we need to open a second examination room. Do you think any of your apprentices are ready?” *They better be.* Dr. Dubois was the only one among them trained in medicine in the Old World, and she

was over eighty years old. She had been training a few aides, but none of them knew as much as she did.

“I’ve considered this,” the doctor said. “They need to start working on their own, but Lidia is the only one close to being ready. Have you seen her? She needs to be here, learning.”

“We have a prisoner. Her skills are required for the interrogation.”

Dr. Dubois frowned. “I know she likes killing vamps more than she enjoys healing people, but she needs to show some responsibility. Besides me, she’s the closest thing to a doctor we have, and she hasn’t come to the clinic at all the past three days. You come more often than she does.”

“It’s not her fault,” Myra said. “She’s one of our best Warriors. Zack has many tasks for her.”

“We have plenty of Warriors. We don’t have any doctors. Lidia has a head for medicine—more than anyone else I’ve seen—but she won’t learn unless she comes to assist me.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Myra said. “Do you need help with your patient?”

“I’m fine,” the man in the bed said, and Dr. Dubois smiled.

“Yes, he’ll be fine. Gary is helping me. If you have time, can you walk through the queue and check everyone’s symptoms? If it’s something straightforward, give them instructions and send them back to their cellars. If you spot any emergencies, send them ahead of the rest.”

“Sure,” Myra said and left the room. She hated the responsibility of deciding which cases were important and which were not, but someone had to do it. She had considered becoming Dr. Dubois’s apprentice herself, but had discovered that her true passion lay elsewhere.

Myra gazed around the corridor and spotted a pale face at the front of the queue. She frowned and knelt beside the woman. “Nina, what’s wrong?” Myra asked.

“It’s Erik,” Nina said and nodded at her nine-year-old son. “He’s thrown up three times in the past couple of hours.”

“Do you also have diarrhea?” Myra asked him. The boy nodded, and she turned back to his mother. “Did he drink any unboiled water?”

Nina shook her head. “I always boil his water before I let him drink.”

Myra raised her eyebrow at Erik, who was now determinedly avoiding her eyes. “Do you have something to share?” she asked.

The boy looked down. “The water in the underground spring felt so cool and fresh. I hate the taste of boiled water. And it always stays warm, even when you leave it to cool.”

Myra smiled and squeezed Erik’s hand. “I know,” she said. “I also tried fresh springwater once, when I was younger than you. But you have to learn to put up with boiled water. You don’t want to be as sick again as you are now, do you?”

He shook his head and looked away.

Myra looked up at Nina. “He’ll be fine in a couple of days. Give him plenty of water—*clean* water. He needs to stay hydrated. His sickness will pass on its own.”

Nina frowned. “Are you certain? Perhaps he should see Dr. Dubois?”

“I’m quite certain,” Myra assured her. “I’ll come by the children’s cellar and check on him tomorrow.”

She stood up and moved on to the next patient. “What is it, Irene?”

“It hurts,” the girl said. “Everywhere—my arms, my legs, my back. Even my face.”

Great. As common as tummy problems were in their community, this affliction was much more prevalent. “Does it hurt more when you exert yourself? Do your legs hurt when you stand and walk?”

“Yes,” Irene said. “And my arms hurt even with the slightest bit of exertion. When I open a door, or even when I brush my hair.”

“Have you been taking your vitamin D?”

Irene nodded. “Every three days as instructed.”

“We should increase your dosage,” Myra said. “I’ll talk to Zack; perhaps we can spare some supplies.” But even as she spoke, she knew it would not be enough. It would never be enough. Irene needed natural sunlight. They all did.

Someone cleared his throat. Myra looked up, seeing a blob of red hair at the end of the corridor. She raised an eyebrow at Thomas. “Are you here as a patient?”

He snorted. “I’d rather die in my own bed.” He took a few steps and approached her. “Zack needs you at the Headquarters. The search party is back.”

Myra followed him, her steps quick. Finally, some real news. This last patrol had taken longer than expected, and she was beginning to worry.

Thomas and Myra entered the Headquarters, and Zack greeted them with a smile. “Captain Sanchez,” he said as he turned to the tall woman sitting next to him. “Everyone has assembled. Do you have anything to report?”

Alerie Sanchez stood up from her seat. “We met no vampires on the way. All of us returned alive and unhurt.”

I should have joined the party, Myra thought. She had almost asked Zack to let her go before her fears had stopped her. She did not feel ready to go Outside, but every day spent in those dark cells made her lose a bit of her mind.

Zack grinned. "It's been a while since a patrol report started like this. Please, go on."

"We found the ruins of a city thirty miles south of here," Alerie continued. "We looked through houses and shops, but the place has been searched. The vamps have taken almost everything, but we still found a few useful items."

She brought a sheet of paper close to the candle. "We found seven cans of peas, three cans of corn, thirteen cans of pork, two bars of chocolate, fourteen large candles, twelve pairs of trousers of various sizes, two pairs of slippers, one pair of flip-flops..."

Myra bit her lower lip as she listened to the list. "Is any of the food still edible?"

Alerie snorted and took a can out of her bag. "It says, *Expiration Date: March 2531.*"

Everyone laughed, but there was no joy in the sound. The food had supposedly expired over forty years ago. "With cans you never know," Myra said. "Some of it may still be fine."

"Did you find any grains?" Zack asked. "Wheat? Rice? Corn?"

Alerie shook her head. "No. We searched everything. Someone had been there before us."

"What about medicines?" Myra asked.

"We found a few pharmacies, but they were pillaged. Nothing was left."

"Why would vampires need medicines?" Thomas mused.

“They don’t,” Zack said. “They knew we would find the place sooner or later. They wanted to cut off our supplies.”

Everyone fell quiet. Thomas ran a hand through his red hair, and Zack buried his face in his hands.

“We need the medicines,” Myra murmured, wincing as her voice shattered the silence.

“We do,” Zack agreed. “But as we don’t have them, we need to take necessary measures. For starters, we must reduce everyone’s dosage of vitamin D.”

Myra looked up. “Zack, we can’t! The current dosage is already too low. Most of our people have never seen sunlight, and it shows. You haven’t been to the clinic often enough, but I have. Every day we have more cases of bone pain, even amongst children.”

“A little pain has never killed anyone,” said Zack.

“It’s not just pain,” Myra protested. “This deficiency could lead to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease or cancer. Now *those* have killed plenty of people.”

Zack rubbed at his forehead. “We have no choice. There are four hundred and thirty-seven of us here. Our current dosage with the available supplies gives us enough supplements to last a little over four months.”

“And this is not the only thing we lack,” said Thomas. “I think we’ll run out of food before we have time to start worrying about cancer.”

Zack nodded and looked at Alerie. “Captain Sanchez, did your party hunt down any game?”

“Two rabbits,” she replied, her words emphasized by a cry from the prison cell.

Myra bit her lip and stared at the stone floor. *Two rabbits for hundreds of people.* She looked up and saw the same worry in her commander's eyes.

"Alerie," Myra said. "Did you come across any living woods?"

Alerie shook her head. "Everything was dead and barren."

"The rabbits must have come from somewhere," Myra said. "There must be patches of habitable ground. We need to find them."

Zack looked about to reply, when the door blew open and Lidia walked in. "The filth refuses to talk," she said as she collapsed into a chair.

"That's because he hasn't talked to me yet," Thomas said and got up.

Myra gave him a smile. "Good luck. And Zack, if you have no more need for me, I'll go check on my cousin."

"Very well," Zack said. "You're all dismissed."

Myra walked out of the Headquarters, and all the Warriors followed one by one.

"Hey, Myra, wait," Alerie called and caught up with her. "You should bring Thea to my room. I have something for her."

Myra remembered Alerie's report and grinned. "Is it what I think it is?"

Her friend smiled. "Don't get excited. There is barely enough for all the children. There will be nothing left for you and me."

"That's fine," Myra said. "Alerie, I wanted to talk to you. I've been thinking about joining the next patrol."

Alerie stopped in her tracks and looked her up and down. “You are eighteen, right?”

“Nineteen.”

Alerie nodded. “Nineteen. Yeah, why not? You’ve been a part of the Warriors’ Council for three years now. Most people start raiding later, but plenty of younger Warriors have successfully participated in patrols. How is your training going?”

“I’m passable with the gun and crossbow. Not so much in hand-to-hand combat.”

“None of us can hope to defeat a vampire hand-to-hand anyway. I must warn you, though—even if you’re perfect at hitting an unmoving target during a training session, shooting at a real vamp is something completely different.”

“I’m sure it is,” Myra said. “But in general, you don’t think it’s a bad idea?”

“Depends. I think it makes sense for you to go, as long as you go for the right reasons. If you feel you’re ready and want to contribute, then fine. But that’s not the main reason you want to go, is it?”

Would Alerie laugh at her if she confessed her true reasons? “Honestly, I want to go Outside. I want to see what it’s like.” Myra winced. Now that she had said it aloud, the words sounded even more childish than they had in her mind.

Alerie snorted. “Everyone does. But the Outside isn’t everything it’s hyped up to be: barren ground, rotting and dead trees, and thick clouds covering everything in shadow. Not much to see.”

Myra gazed at the dark corridor, barely illuminated by the meager torchlight. “Anything is better than this.”



Chapter Two



Old World

Myra entered the small chamber and walked to the long table in the center, lighting all the tall beeswax candles. A gloomy light washed the room, playing across the half-empty shelves against the wall. Were Old World libraries ever so small or so dark?

Myra's eyes moved across the top shelf, stacked with textbooks, encyclopedias, papers, and articles. She reached out to a chemistry textbook and flipped through the pages. The margins were filled with questions she had noted down, things she meant to ask Grandma Pia or Dr. Dubois. Myra frowned. The questions were so many; no one would ever have the time to sit down with her and answer every single one.

Perhaps she had to reread the section and try to figure out some of the answers herself. Myra sighed. Preserving the knowledge of the Old World was important, and she wished to learn everything humans used to know and pass it on to the younger generations. Yet, she had no energy for studying right now. All she wanted was to sit down with a good novel in her hand and lose herself in worlds far away from here.

Myra's eyes moved to the lower shelf, where she had arranged all the fiction titles. She raised the candle and illuminated the thick covers. She had read and reread each of these books so many times that she had stopped counting. It had been years since a patrol had found a new novel during one of the raids. In all likelihood, they would never find anything new again.

Don't be lazy, she told herself. Stop wasting your time with books you can recite by heart. The shelves won't restock themselves. You have to contribute.

She knelt on the floor and reached out underneath the lowest shelf, pulling out a box filled with papers and notebooks. A cloud of dust rose in the air, and Myra coughed. She took the top notebook, labeled *Ranger's Quest*, and opened it at the bookmark. Her novel was going very well. She had written over two hundred chapters now, each more exciting than the last. Myra smiled and grabbed a pencil. Perhaps she could steal some time for this before Thea finished her lectures.

Myra grinned as she jotted down words on the paper. She had reached the point where her protagonist, Maryabella, had to fight a band of trolls. Thea always complimented her on her ability to write action scenes, and Myra smiled, anticipating her cousin's reaction once she read the new pages.

Myra paused and absentmindedly chewed on her pencil, staring at the page. She had to describe the scenery—green woods, a running stream, blue skies above. And yet, she had never seen any of those things. She had read about them in many books, but had never experienced anything she was writing about. Did her descriptions make any sense at all?

Would someone who had seen the Old World laugh at her works?

She sighed and ran her hand through her hair. A few wavy brown strands remained in her hand, and she threw them to the floor with a quick, frustrated flick of her fingers. She wanted to write well. She wanted to create vivid worlds that would come to life. But how could she do this when all she had known was fear and darkness?

She could never become a better writer unless she went Outside and saw more of the world. She had to stop being a coward. It was time to ask Zack to send her on a patrol. And yet, there was no protection Outside. Anything could happen Outside.

I have to be more like Maryabella. She's brave, adventurous, and a good fighter. I won't find adventures in books I've read ten times. I'll find them out there.

Yet, she knew how selfish that was. Warriors went Outside, risking their lives, so they could find food and clothes for everyone. She wanted to go so that she could become more sophisticated and find inspiration.

Myra rubbed at her forehead and placed the notebook back into the box. She glanced at the mechanical clock on the shelf. Thea's lesson had to be over by now. She smiled and stood up—it was time to give her cousin a happy surprise.

Myra knocked before entering the classroom. Grandma Pia had finished her talk some time ago and was now answering the kids' questions. A group of about forty children surrounded her; the youngest among them had barely turned five, while the oldest were Thea's age.

Myra loved listening to the old woman. Pia was one of the few who had long and extensive memories of the Old World. She had been a little older than Myra during the Nightfall, and she always entertained and educated them with tales of the time before.

“Why did people make the WeatherWizard?” a little boy asked. “Didn’t they know vamps could come out if the sun was gone?”

“Scientists created the WeatherWizard for greater control over how many rainy and sunny days each place would get,” Grandma Pia explained. “Most days were made sunny so people could enjoy their time outside. But there was also rain to allow crops to grow and to stop the summer days from becoming unbearably hot.”

As she spoke, Grandma Pia sketched little pictures using chalk on the blackboard—a circular sun with rays going in all directions, clouds, raindrops, houses, streets, and little human figures carrying inverted basins on sticks; *umbrellas*, Myra’s memory supplied. Grandma Pia had told them that people of the Old World used umbrellas to keep the rain away.

“Rain was turned on late at night, to avoid inconveniencing people,” the old woman continued. “Sleet and hail were eliminated, as they could damage many plants. You have never experienced rain, children. On a hot day, rain may be refreshing, but it is mostly unpleasant. This wasn’t the only reason for the Wizard, of course. It also allowed control over greater problems, like tsunamis and hurricanes.”

“Tsunamis sound nasty, but I’ll choose them over vamps any day,” Myra said.

“No one expected what happened,” Pia said. “People in the Old World had no idea vampires existed. There were tales, but they were all attributed to legends and turned into fiction. At the time, vampires were far fewer. They always hid in crypts or caves, going out only at night. They hid their existence well.”

“And then people devised the WeatherWizard?” Thea said.

“Yes,” said Grandma Pia. “And about a century after the Wizard’s creation, this one vampire realized he could use it to take the world away from humans.”

“Vladimir,” Myra murmured.

Pia nodded. “He was once just another vampire, but ever since the Nightfall he’s been styling himself as their Prince.”

Myra snorted. “If he wishes to go around giving himself fancy titles, he should have at least changed his name. Honestly? *Prince Vladimir*. He sounds like some Old World Dracula wannabe. It’s hard to take him seriously.”

“He conquered the world,” said Grandma Pia. “It’s hard *not* to take him seriously.”

“He didn’t conquer the world,” Myra said. “He destroyed it. He rules over an empty world of ashes and death.”

“How did he stage the Nightfall?” a girl asked.

“We never learned all the specifics,” Pia replied. “In any case, the preparations must have taken years. He gathered his armies down below, and once all was ready, his accomplices took over the WeatherWizard and covered all landmass where vampires dwelt with permanent clouds.

“And then the Nightfall began. The conquest was short as humans were unprepared. We tried to fight them with full-spectrum lamps, but artificial sunlight never worked against the demons. Vampires killed by the thousands and turned the hu-

mans they considered beautiful enough, so their numbers kept growing. Nowadays vampires are many, and we are few. Even if the WeatherWizard is destroyed, the fight will be long and hard. These creatures have a taste for ruling the world. They won't give up easily."

"Is the whole world dead and covered in clouds?" a little boy asked.

"All areas our scouts explored are dead," Grandma Pia said. "Though there must be patches of life here and there. Our scouts have hunted down animals, so there must be living plants."

"There have to be," Myra added, facing the boy. "Vampires need blood. They destroyed us, so now they have to feed on animals. They need to leave parts of the world alive to let animals survive."

"Are there any other humans left besides us?" Thea asked.

"I can't say," Pia admitted. "So far our patrols haven't found any other survivors."

"I hope we meet other humans," Thea said.

Myra had little hope that would ever happen. Ancient spells protected their cellars so that no vampire could find them unless led by a human. Druids had put the wards back in Roman times when people still believed in vampires, and all of their attempts to recover and recreate the spells had failed. She could not believe that there were other places protected by similar wards, or that human communities could survive without protection.

"I hope so too," Pia said, "but to the best of my knowledge, all humans that remained Outside were either killed or turned. I have to say it's strange. Vampires can survive on the blood of

any animal, yet they have always preferred humans. Now that they have practically extinguished our kind, human blood is hard to find.”

They must be really happy whenever they capture one of us, Myra thought.

“So human blood is their favorite?” a seven-year-old girl, Monica, asked.

“They prefer it to animal blood,” Pia explained. “However, there is one single thing they like even better. Vampires enjoy drinking small amounts of each other’s blood, not as a means of sustenance, but as part of the games they play.”

Myra sighed. This information was not suited for children. “Thank you, Grandma Pia,” she interrupted before the old woman could elaborate. “Your tales are exciting as always. I have to leave now. I’ll take Thea with me, but I’ll come by to talk to you later.”

“I’ll finish my work in the school in about an hour,” the old woman said. “After that you can find me in my cellar.”

Thea stood up. “Grandma Pia, I have one last question before I go. You said people in the Old World had legends about vampires. What kind of legends? Were they true?”

Pia smiled. “A few were true, I guess. They did know about stakes, and beheadings, and fire, and sunlight, of course. However, most of their so-called knowledge was silly superstition. Humans believed vampires were repelled by such things as crosses, holy water, even garlic.”

“Garlic?” Thea snorted. “Now that would have been handy.”

“I suppose they needed some sense of false security,” Myra mused.

Monica cleared her throat. “Vamps breathe,” she said and blushed as all eyes turned at her. “My mom interrogated one, and she said he was breathing. Can we suffocate them?”

Grandma Pia shook her head. “They breathe so that they can talk and sense smell. They suffer no harm from lack of air.”

Myra stood up. “Come, Thea, we have to go.”

Thea said goodbye to the children and followed Myra out of the room. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“Alerie returned from a patrol,” Myra said. “She found something you might like.”

Alerie greeted them, and Myra and Thea entered the small cellar.

“I’m so happy you finally found some, after so many years,” Myra said with a smile.

“I wish I could give you more, but it’s better than nothing.” Alerie handed her the small piece. “We found only two bars, and we need to make sure all the children get a bite.”

“I’m not a child,” Thea protested.

“Problem solved, then,” Myra said. “Nothing for you.”

Thea glared at her. “What is it, anyway? And why is it only for children?”

“Let’s go to the children’s cellar, and I’ll show you,” Myra said.

Once they were in the room and seated on Thea’s pallet, Myra held out the precious object for her cousin to see. “It’s chocolate,” she said. “We haven’t found any since before you were born. I’ve tried some, and now it’s your turn. I must warn

you, though—it’s expired and smells a bit funny, but I think it’ll still be good.”

Thea stared at the small piece as if she were afraid to take a bite. “Is there enough for everyone?” she asked.

“It’s enough for all the children who have never tried it before,” said Myra.

Thea looked up. “Do you want to share it?”

Myra smiled. “I’ve had a few pieces before you were born. Chocolate was easier to come by back then. This one is for you. Enjoy.” She paused, wondering if she should continue. “Thea, chocolate was your mom’s favorite food. She liked it a lot. I think you’ll like it too.”

Thea played with the dark piece in her hand. “Then perhaps I should save it for her. In case she comes back.”

Myra looked away. “Thea, no one has seen her in over ten years.”

“But no one found a body either,” her cousin reasoned.

Myra sighed. That much was true. “Do you miss her?” she asked.

Thea shook her head. “To be honest, I can’t say that I do. I miss the idea of her, I think, but I don’t remember her. You’re my family now.”

Myra stared at the chocolate in silence. It was so unfair. Aunt Sandra had loved her baby girl more than anything, and now her daughter did not even remember her. “Try it,” she said.

“Only if we split it,” Thea declared stubbornly.

Myra was about to protest when she spotted something on the low wooden table next to the bed. She frowned and

reached out, picking up the red silken ribbon. “Thea, where did you get this?”

Her cousin’s face brightened. “Remember the goods Thomas brought from his last patrol? He scavenged what he thought was useful and was going to throw away the rest. He told us to look through the stuff and see if we liked something. I found this!” She reached out to pick the ribbon from Myra’s hand.

Myra sighed. “Do you even know what it is?”

“Of course,” Thea said, scolding. “I’m not a baby. I’ve read books and seen pictures.” She tied the ribbon around one of her twin ponytails. “See? Don’t I look pretty? Now I just need to find a second one.”

Myra stared at the ribbon, bright crimson against Thea’s dark-golden hair. She had never seen anything like it except in old photographs. Myra frowned and gave her cousin what she hoped was a stern look. “Why should it matter? It’s the vamps who want to look pretty. We are above such trivialities.”

“Says who? Humans of the Old World wanted to look pretty all the time.”

“Yes, they did, and don’t you know how it ended? The prettiest of humans became vampires. Is that what you want to happen to you?” Myra untied the ribbon from her cousin’s hair. “We are better than that.”

“Better?” Thea said. “Why would wanting or not wanting to look good make you a better or a worse person? It is only one of the many facets of your essence and it neither negates nor validates your other qualities.”

Myra stared at her baby cousin at a loss of words. “A facet of your essence? It doesn’t negate your qualities? *Where* did you learn to use such words?”

“At school,” Thea replied with a grin. “So do I get to keep the ribbon?”

Myra handed it back. “Fine, if it makes you happy, but don’t lose sight of what really matters.”

A soft knock came from the door, and Myra fell quiet and looked up. The door opened and Lidia’s dark curly head popped in. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” she said. “But the prisoner isn’t talking, and Zack says it’s your turn.”

Myra suppressed a shudder. “Do I have to? You enjoy this. Feel free to take my shift if you like.”

Lidia grinned. “I don’t hate it, I admit, but I’m practical. I’ve seen enough to know that I can’t make this one talk. Your tactics are different. Perhaps you can do something with him.”

Myra had no desire to do anything with the prisoner, but if Zack insisted, she had little choice. “Fine,” she murmured. “Let’s get this over with.”



Chapter Three



Survival

The vampire prisoner stood on unsteady legs, supported only by the chains that kept his arms up. Angry cuts and bruises decorated his face, arms, and bare torso. His fingers hung down, bent at unnatural angles. Still, he looked up and gave Myra a grin. “The next one,” he said. “Let’s see if you can come up with something more creative.”

Myra tore her gaze from him. She would never break him with pain. If Lidia and Thomas had failed, she stood no chance. Her best bet was to be the good cop, as the prisoner had said earlier.

“I’m not here to torture you,” she said.

He snorted. “Right. So you fight for love and peace among all beings?”

“Far from it,” she said. “I know it will be pointless. My commander insists on me interrogating you, but that would be a waste of both your time and mine. I’m not going to make this even more unpleasant than it already is for either of us.”

“Who says it’s unpleasant?” the monster said. “I am enjoying myself.”

She forced herself to smile and sat down in front of him. “I admire you, really. You are ready to suffer so much in order to protect your Prince. He must be a remarkable vampire to inspire such loyalty.”

He laughed. “Is that your way of getting me to talk about His Highness?”

Myra bit her lower lip, but did not allow her smile to falter. Too obvious. “I’m just curious. He united all vampires and brought them together to work for a common cause. I admit I can’t imagine how he rules over the entire world. How do you even communicate with the faraway places? You have let all technology, except the WeatherWizard, fall to waste. It must take ages to send a message.”

He remained silent, but she pretended not to notice. “I guess your society must have something of a feudal structure. The Prince is the ruler in name, but every small region is under a local vampire lord or lady, who in theory reports to the Prince, but holds all the power.”

He stared at her and grinned. Myra sighed. She had done a poor job hiding the fact that she was fishing for information.

She stretched her legs on the floor, faking a yawn. “I should have brought a book along to pass the time. This is such a waste. I keep telling Zack we should just focus on survival and forget this nonsense, but he never listens.”

“Yes, you should,” the vampire finally said. “You’ll get yourselves killed if you go after the Prince.”

“Exactly,” Myra cried, trying to sound enthusiastic. “Last time we tried to do something major against your kind, it led to the Great Massacre, and over half of our Warriors died. If

we target the Prince, it will be even worse. That's what I keep telling everyone."

"And your commander disagrees?"

She snorted. "Have you met Zack? He's obsessed. *Kill the Prince. Kill the Prince.* It's like a mantra to him." She stood up, brushed the dust off her pants, and took a few steps away from him. "Forgive me. I know you don't want to talk to me. I'll let you brood in peace."

He laughed. "No, please. I am bored. Tell me about Zack."

"He's not thinking straight," Myra said. "He wants to attack the Prince full force. Can you imagine?"

The vamp laughed. "Honestly, I cannot. Your pitiful Resistance cannot hope to stand against an army of eight hundred vampires. You are right—this is insane."

Eight hundred vampires. Myra fought hard to suppress a grin. They already knew the Prince ruled over the world, but naturally, it would be impossible to call all vampires from faraway places to his aid if he was under attack. The Warriors' Council had often wondered how many soldiers were in the Prince's immediate vicinity, ready to rise, and finally they knew.

She wished she could mock the monster and inform him that he had fallen into her trap, but she kept her facade. If she wanted to get any additional information out of him, she had to keep this up.

But what if the prisoner was deceiving her? What if he had seen through her game and had said that number to trick her? Perhaps the vamps were fewer and were vulnerable to an attack, but he had said a higher number to discourage any attempts. Or perhaps the number was greater, and the vamp

wanted the Resistance to underestimate the Prince and fall into an ambush.

Myra looked at the captive, bound and helpless, tortured and in obvious pain, and yet still cocky. Did he still have the presence of mind to deceive her?

“Yes, I know we’d all die long before coming anywhere near the Prince,” she said. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know if I’d want to kill him even if I had the chance.”

“How so?”

“He conquered the world,” Myra said. “I keep thinking about the Nightfall and how he organized everything. It’s quite incredible. Honestly, I find him fascinating.” She walked closer to the vampire. “Tell me, what’s he like?”

The prisoner’s dark eyes narrowed. “Why, you sneaky little idiot. You think you can manipulate me into talking about the Prince? Who do you think you are?”

Myra bit her lower lip and looked away. She had pushed too hard and too fast. She would never get anything more from this captive, but perhaps she could do better with the next prisoner.

She looked up and raised a hand towards a trail of bleeding cuts on his arm. “You bleed, and yet your heart doesn’t beat. How does that work? I’ve always wondered.”

“I thought you would have figured that out by now,” he said. “The dark magic that gives us life circulates our blood.”

“And this dark magic is fed by blood?” Myra said. “I see. That explains a lot. I’ve seen Old World depictions of vampires, and they were all sickly pale, while you’re not. I guess that’s how people of the past imagined the risen dead to appear. But truth is, the blood that flows through your veins gives you some color. Though I suppose you can never get a suntan.”

“Well, neither can you.”

She glared at him. “Yes, thanks to your Prince, my people have never seen the sun. You must be letting sunlight reach the ground in some places. Where are they?”

“Look, my dear. You said it yourself—let us not waste each other’s time. If you are not going to torture me, I suggest you go back home and do whatever you people do around here.”

Myra stood up and walked slowly and deliberately to the far wall. She picked a stake from the rack and held it up so the prisoner could see it.

“I could end it, here and now. Tell me what I want to know, and I’ll grant you a quick death.”

He smiled. “And what part of ‘I’m enjoying it’ did you miss?”

“I’m not going to torture you,” Myra said walking back to him. “But once my shift is over, one of my friends will come to relieve me, and they won’t be so gentle. I want to spare you the pain. Please, I want to help you.”

“Do I look like I care what you want?”

She gazed at the chained and hurt prisoner. Soon her friends would come one by one and resume their torture. The vampire claimed he enjoyed the torment, but she had heard his screams. Myra had no pity for this monster. He had killed many humans and would kill more if given the chance. Yet, abusing him did not seem right. At this point, he would reveal no new information. How long before they, the humans, turned into bigger monsters than the vamps?

Myra took a deep breath and plunged the stake deep into the vampire’s heart.

“He could have talked,” Thomas said.

Myra raised her water glass and took a slow sip. The thirty Warriors seated around the Conference Table at the Headquarters were all staring at her, and she was willing to bet that no more than one or two of them approved of her action. “He wasn’t going to talk,” she said. “He accidentally revealed information about the army size, but he wasn’t going to say anything more. We were wasting our time, when we could be doing something more productive.”

“I agree with Myra,” Lidia said. “This vampire wasn’t cooperating. We need to find one who will.”

“And what if we never do?” Myra challenged. “Even if a prisoner talks, do we really think any information will help us assassinate the Prince? And if we do assassinate him, will it solve all our problems? Will it help us destroy the Wizard and restore humanity?”

“Killing the Prince will cause disorder among the vamps and give us an opportunity to strike,” Thomas said.

“Do we really know that?” Myra said. “Perhaps the Prince will simply be replaced by another tyrant and we won’t even notice the change.”

“I can’t imagine that vamps appoint heirs,” said Thomas. “They never plan on dying. If the Prince dies, it will surely lead to some kind of a civil war.”

“You’re just guessing,” said Myra.

“What do you suggest, then?” Thomas asked.

“We could skip all the dubious intermediate steps and jump right into an attack on the Wizard,” Lidia suggested.

Thomas snorted. “Our Warriors are too few.”

Myra's eyes darted towards Zack, who was sitting at the head of the Conference Table, strangely quiet. "Thomas is right," she said. "We're not ready to attack, but there might be something else we can do."

An elderly Warrior cleared his throat, and everyone fell silent. "Our Warriors are too few, you say," Andre said. "Well, there is a very easy way to get more."

Zack stood up and started pacing back and forth, but said nothing. Andre followed him with his eyes before continuing. "I'm turning seventy next year. I'm one of your best and most experienced Warriors, and I won't be allowed to fight." He stood up from his chair and stared at Zack. "Remove the age restrictions. Allow everyone who can hold a weapon to be a Warrior."

"Yes," a girl, Estella, cried, and all eyes turned at her. "I turned sixteen last week, so this is my first Warriors' meeting. A week ago, I wasn't allowed to fight. Back then I could fight just as well as I can now. Age shouldn't come into it."

Zack stopped in his tracks and swept the room with his gaze. "We could remove the upper boundary and allow the elderly to fight, but only if they volunteer. I will not force anyone over seventy to take up arms." He looked at Estella and added, "But I won't allow children to fight."

"But—" she started to protest, and he interrupted her.

"Enough. I am not allowing anyone under sixteen to be a Warrior. In any case, even with the babies and the oldest among us fighting, our numbers are far from enough to get through the Wizard's defenses."

Myra sighed. That much was true. Removing the upper age boundary would only add a handful of Warriors to their ranks.

After all, few in the Resistance lived beyond the age of forty, and ten years ago the Great Massacre had further diminished the number of older fighters. “We can’t launch any attack if we starve to death,” she said. “There might be a way to find better food supplies.”

“Speak,” said Zack.

“The animals we hunt down must be feeding on something. There must be growing plants somewhere, which means the vampires leave the place sunlit. If we find that place, we could find edible plants and more animals to hunt. Moreover, if the place is sunlit, it will be safe during the day. Zack, I know how important the attack is, but we need to have a sustainable food source before we attempt anything.”

“Why would the vamps keep a sunlit place?” Thomas challenged.

“They do need something to eat after all,” Myra said. “They couldn’t let all animals die out.”

“If such a place exists, they must have set up some traps for us,” Zack said. “I don’t think it’s safe to go searching for it.”

“May I suggest something crazy?” Estella said.

“You’re now a member of the Warriors’ Council,” Zack said. “You have as much right to speak as anyone.”

Estella grinned. “Rat farm,” she said. “Think about it. Right now we kill and bake the rats that we capture right away. What if we kept them alive and put them together, so they could reproduce and multiply in a controlled environment? They’re low maintenance, and if the farm grows, we would have a steady meat supply.”

“It does sound crazy,” Thomas said.

“Yet it makes sense,” said Andre. “I like it.”

“They do multiply fast,” Zack mused. “And require little food to survive.”

He paused as the door opened, and Alerie stepped in. “General Wong. I have some news. We’ve captured another vamp.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Thomas was the first to speak. “Another? We capture two vamps per year if we are lucky, and now we have a second one in just a couple of days?”

“They are coming closer to our hideout and becoming more dangerous,” said Lidia. “We can expect more encounters in the future.”

“Any casualties on our side?” Zack asked.

“Tory and Daphne are dead,” Alerie said softly. “Three more are wounded but will recover.”

Everyone bowed their heads. Myra had not known the fallen Warriors very well, but it stung nonetheless. Death was ever present in their lives, and their small community was growing even smaller. The Resistance had numbered over two thousand shortly after the Nightfall, and now there were less than five hundred of them. Tory had two daughters, she suddenly remembered and closed her eyes.

“Is the captive secured?” Zack asked.

“Yes, she is chained in the prison cellar,” Alerie replied.

Zack nodded. “Very well. Let the vamp rot there for now. We’ll interrogate her later. First, we’ll take the time to bury and mourn Daphne and Tory.”

Myra knocked on the flimsy door and entered once she heard a reply. The cellar was dark, save for a single lit can-

dle. Zack was sitting at the desk poring over some papers, a half-empty mug in his hand.

Myra leaned on the desk next to him. “What’s this?”

“I’m reviewing the inventory,” her friend and commander said. “I don’t need to tell you things don’t look good.” Zack ran his hands through his hair. “How am I supposed to do this? How am I supposed to feed hundreds on *this*?” He waved the paper listing their supplies.

Myra placed a hand on his shoulder. “Zack, we don’t expect magic from you. We are all facing this together. We’ll figure it out.” She took the paper out of his hand and left it on the desk. “Have you seen the new vamp? Any chance she may talk?”

He shook his head. “I let Lidia start the interrogation. I haven’t seen the prisoner yet.”

“More and more patrols fail to return unharmed,” said Myra. Suddenly the idea of joining the next party seemed less appealing.

“I know,” Zack said, looking tired. “But we can’t stop sending them. We are consuming the food faster than we are finding new supplies.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “Zack, you were quiet at the conference today. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really. I just hoped Alerie would find more food.”

Myra smiled sadly. “We all did. Honestly, I hoped she’d find some glutinous rice. I was looking forward to your New Year’s cakes.”

Zack gave her a blank look. “What?”

“You do know it’s Chinese New Year next week, right?”

“Honestly, no.” Zack raised an eyebrow. “And you didn’t seriously expect me to make cakes, did you?”

She frowned. “Zack, you haven’t celebrated in the past five years. What happened? This holiday used to mean so much to you.”

“It meant a lot to my grandmother,” he said. “I never cared much. After her death there was no point in pretending anymore.”

That’s not true, Myra thought. I’ve seen you laugh and enjoy the holiday. Need is turning us all into beasts.

She took the inventory list from the desk and brought it to her face. “So you focused on fighting and surviving for one more day,” she said. “Have you ever wondered what your grandmother would think if she were still alive, watching you? We have become animals—eating, fighting, killing, and hiding in our dark holes. When was the last time we celebrated Holi, or Hanukkah, or Christmas, or Ramadan, or anything at all?”

“People of the Old World celebrated the coming of spring,” said Zack. “They celebrated the solstices, and the equinoxes. What would these mean to us when we have no spring? When we have no sun?”

“It doesn’t mean we should forget our cultures,” Myra said. “We’re so busy surviving that we have forgotten about all else. Zack, I finished writing another short story yesterday. Let me give a lecture at the school and make the kids read it.”

He snorted. “I’m sorry to be blunt, but the school system doesn’t exist to satisfy your ego. We have plenty of Old World books for the kids to read and discuss. I’m sure they can learn more from them than from your stories.”

“How would you know?” Myra said softly. “You never read any of my works. Besides, if you must know, we have exactly one hundred and seventeen fiction books in the library. This is

hardly enough. We need new works, and we need to encourage the children to create art on their own.”

“The children need to train to become Warriors,” Zack said. “The combat training is our top priority. We can’t destroy the Wizard with art or science.”

But can we be humans without it? “Alright,” she said. “Let’s say we train every day and somehow destroy the WeatherWizard. What then? We’ll have to rebuild human society from scratch, and we need to be equipped with the right tools. Humans of the Old World had so much knowledge—on math and science, history, philosophy, art. They worked for millennia to accumulate it; we can’t let it go to waste. And, most of all, we can’t let the human spirit and the desire to create go to waste.”

“I agree that knowledge in a variety of subjects is important,” Zack said. “But there will be no world to rebuild unless we destroy the Wizard here and now.” He paused. “Still, I see your point. Perhaps it won’t hurt to organize another spirit-lifting event. We won’t be celebrating Chinese New Year or any other specific holiday. We’ll simply celebrate life, culture, and the strength of the human spirit.”

Myra smiled and placed a hand on his arm. “Thank you. How can I help?”

“You’ll stage a play. One of your own or something from the library. Something funny and uplifting. And, Myra, I can’t spare any Warriors at the moment. You should use child actors for all parts.”

“I can work with that,” she said and paused. Someone was knocking.

Lidia entered at Zack’s invitation. “General,” she said. “I think you need to meet the prisoner.”

KINGDOM OF ASHES

Zack frowned. "Is the interrogation going well?"

"I'm not interrogating her," Lidia said. "Or torturing her for that matter. She's speaking freely. And she wants to talk to you."

"What do you mean she's speaking freely?" Myra asked. "Is she ready to reveal information about the Prince?"

"I think you had better come," said Lidia. "Both of you."



Chapter Four

Heroes

Myra stared at the prisoner. The vampire was dressed in a red blouse and wore a wide, short skirt over her tight black leggings. Black lace gloves covered her hands, and her dark brown hair, streaked with golden highlights, fell around her shoulders in soft, silky waves.

The Resistance is fighting hard to get food and medicines while vamps have access to hair products. How a dead woman could have such perfect hair, Myra would never know. She ran her hand self-consciously through her own mousy-brown shoulder-length hair, which would turn frizzy at the slightest hint of moisture. She knew the vampires would never pick her as one of them.

As soon as the thought came to her, she realized how ridiculous it was. She would rather die than be turned. And yet, a silly and vain part of her was irritated at the knowledge that she never stood a chance to be a part of the world she hated.

The captive grinned at the many Warriors surrounding her. She held her head high, her dark eyes bright.

“I hear you have information for us?” Zack said. “What is it, and why do you wish to share it?”

“And I hear you wish to assassinate our beloved Prince,” the vampire said. “And I can assure you that nothing would make me happier than to see His Highness part with his haughty head.”

“Right,” Zack said. “And I’m supposed to believe you?”

“You would be a fool to think His Highness is the most fit to rule among us, and no one strives to overthrow him,” the captive said. “But before you start throwing questions and accusations at me, let me make the rules clear.”

“The rules?” Lidia blurted out. “You’re our prisoner, and you want to set the rules?”

Zack raised his hand for silence. “What is your name?” he asked the vampire.

She smirked. “Rim.”

“Very well, Rim,” Zack said. “Name your terms.”

“No torture,” Rim started. “I will tell you all there is to know about Prince Vladimir, but if you so much as touch me, I will stop talking.”

“If you wish to work with us, why did you kill two of our people?” Thomas said.

She snorted. “What was I supposed to do? I was minding my own business when your people attacked me. I never planned to get captured, but now that I am here, and I learned that we share the same goal, I think we should all try to make the best of it.”

“Fair enough,” said Zack. “Your terms sound reasonable. No one will torture you.”

“I am not finished. I am going to share everything that can help you assassinate His Highness, and nothing more. If you ask any questions I deem irrelevant, I will leave them unan-

swered. And”—she paused—“you are to release me once I have told you everything.”

Zack and Myra exchanged a glance. The vampire had been blindfolded when the Resistance had brought her inside, and she would not be able to find their hideout. Still, the request posed another problem. “What are you planning to do once you’re free?” Myra asked. “Are you going back to the Prince?”

“This question falls into the ‘irrelevant’ category,” Rim replied.

“We can’t agree to those terms,” Zack said. “Your proposition is suspicious as it is. I find it much easier to believe you’re sending us into a trap. And now you want us to release you? And I’m supposed to believe you’re not running back to the Prince to tell him exactly where you’ve sent us?”

“Believe what you will,” the vampire said. “These are my terms.”

“What if we release you after we’ve killed the Prince?” Myra suggested. “Our party goes and does the job, they return safely, and then we let you go. How does that sound?”

Rim fiddled with her chains, as if testing them. “Thrilling,” she said. “Am I supposed to place my trust in your skills? What if you fail? I will end up rotting in this hole forever.”

“Trust what you will,” Zack echoed. “These are our terms.”

The vampire grinned. “Well, well, General, you are starting to grow a spine. Fine. I will talk to you, and you will release me after the Prince is dead. You will, of course, not mistreat me in the meantime. Can you give me any guarantee you will keep your side of the bargain?”

“I can give you my word,” he said. “I’m afraid I can’t give you anything else.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Rim said. “Very well. I will trust a friend’s word.”

“You claimed to have information about the Prince,” Lidia said. “Where does he live?”

“He is based in the Palace,” Rim said. “It is an old castle, up in the Highlands.”

Myra nodded. It made sense; most former cities were turning to ruin, slowly falling apart, while medieval stone buildings were easier to maintain.

“How far away is this castle?” Zack asked.

“Less than ten miles from the place where your people captured me, though I am not surprised you have never discovered it. There are many patrols on the way, so I suppose your people met them and turned back. I can draw you a map, or help one of you draw it since I doubt you will untie my hands. I can also show you how to avoid the patrols.”

“That would be helpful,” Zack said. “Now, about the Prince. Who is he exactly?”

“An arrogant upstart who thinks the world belongs to him.” Rim’s face twisted into a grimace.

Myra sighed. “Can you try to be more specific and less subjective?”

Rim shrugged, as much as her fetters allowed. “He is the one who destroyed your world and caused the deaths of millions of your people. What more do you need to know?”

“Fine,” Zack said. “How much power does he have? How many soldiers does he command?”

“Over eight hundred soldiers are in the Palace alone. Many more are in nearby castles or in the camps around the Wizard

and can be called if needed. You cannot attack the Palace full force if that is what you are planning.”

Myra stole a look at Zack. *Over eight hundred soldiers.* This matched what the previous prisoner had said. Oddly enough, Rim appeared to be telling the truth.

“And the nearby castles will answer if he calls?” Myra asked.

“A local noble-vampire rules over each castle, but they all report to His Highness. A few may disagree with him, but they will still send troops if he asks. He holds too much power; no one would oppose him openly.”

“You said some of your people wished for his death?” Myra asked. “How many? Are they in the Palace too?”

Rim glared at her. “Little girl, I hope you realize that the people you send to assassinate His Highness can be captured and tortured for information. I would not risk any intelligence on my accomplices leaking to the Prince. Let us just say that most people at the Palace are still loyal to the Prince, or are too afraid to oppose him. You will not find allies. You must rely on yourselves.”

“You said we can’t launch an assault on the Palace,” Zack said. “I assume you have other suggestions?”

Rim rolled her eyes. “Must I make your plans for you now, General? Obviously, you need to send a small group of assassins. One or two will be best.”

“And how would my people get close enough to the Prince and live to tell the tale?” Zack asked.

“You cannot enter the Palace. It is a proper castle, with a moat and a drawbridge. You cannot get inside, and even if you do, you will not make a single step before someone spots you. You will have to kill the Prince once he is outside.”

“Does he regularly leave the castle?” Thomas asked.

“Almost every day,” the vampire said. “One option is to catch him while he is hunting, though he is usually not alone and it will be harder. The better alternative would be to attack when he is reading in the Rose Gardens.”

“Rose Gardens, you say?” Myra said. “Are real roses growing there? That must be one of the places you keep sunlit. Are there any others?”

Rim laughed. “None of your business.”

Zack cleared his throat. “Fine. Then let me ask you another question, and if you refuse to answer this one, our deal is off. You claim your Prince spends time alone in those Rose Gardens. You claim that you, and possibly others, wish for his death. If killing him is so easy, why haven’t you done it already?”

“I never said it would be easy.”

“Is he well guarded?” Lidia asked.

“He thinks he can guard himself,” Rim said. “He is an exceptional fighter, but he is not infallible. I admit we might have had opportunities. The main reason we hold back is caution. Many vampires would oppose a violent overthrow, and we wish to avoid a rebellion. If the Prince is killed by your people, it will unite us and help me and my associates place our preferred ruler on the throne.”

“How would the vampires know it was us who killed the Prince?” Zack asked.

“They will know,” she said.

“The Rose Gardens,” Myra said. “Are they sunlit every single day? All day?”

“At this time of year, yes,” Rim replied. “Your people will be safe there during the day.”

“And what if the Prince learns my people are coming and switches on the clouds?” Zack asked.

“This is not how the WeatherWizard works,” Rim explained. “The control is not instantaneous. You can program all weather changes in advance, by the minute, but if you want to make an unplanned change, it may take a few days to take effect.”

Zack nodded and walked out of the room. He returned in a minute, carrying paper and pencils. “Alright, then, let’s do this,” he said.

They sat for over an hour, Zack jotting down all the details—vampire patrols on the way, numbers, the Prince’s nightly comings and goings. Once he was satisfied, he handed Lidia his notebook.

“Lidia, please continue the interrogation. Rim will walk you through the route, and you’ll sketch a map. Everyone else, please join me in the Headquarters.” Zack turned to Rim. “We have a deal. Help my captain draw the map, and we will kill Prince Vladimir.”

“Alright, just say it,” Myra muttered when she could no longer stand the aura of smugness radiating from her commander.

“You want me to say it?” Zack asked, and a mischievous twinkle appeared in his dark, catlike eyes.

“Most certainly not,” Myra admitted. “But *you* want to say it, and I can’t stand watching you sit there and bask in your glory.”

“Alright, then, I’ll say it.” The General made a dramatic pause before continuing. “*I told you so!*”

“So what?” Alerie challenged. “You were right, Zack. After capturing and interrogating tens of vamps, one was bound to talk. We have everything we wanted to know about Prince Vladimir. What are we going to do about it?”

“We have to act fast,” Zack said. “The Prince has no idea we have this information. Now is the best time to send an assassin.”

“Zack, that would be suicide,” Myra said. “There’s so much about this I don’t like. For starters, how do we know Rim isn’t sending us into a trap?”

“The vamps would benefit from such a trap only if many of us go, and they destroy us all with one stroke,” Zack said. “Rim suggested we send only a couple of Warriors. Why would she do that if this were a trap? The vamps gain nothing by killing one or two of us.”

The door opened and Lidia walked into the Headquarters with a few papers in hand. “I have the maps,” she said. “The Rose Gardens are well outside the Palace. The vamps want to keep the Palace in shadow at all times, for obvious reasons.”

“Good,” said Zack. “Did you get any more information?”

Lidia nodded. “We talked a bit about the vamps’ means of transportation. Apparently they mainly use horses and carts.”

Myra looked up. Horses? Horses would need grass. The vampires would have to take them to living fields, so some sunlit spots had to be close to the Palace. She had seen horses only in pictures, but she hoped to see real ones one day, and to travel in a cart. It sounded magical, but there was no place for magic in her life.

Zack nodded. “I can imagine electrical and hydrogen cars are out of the question. Sun-powered ones even more so.”

“They do have some old gas cars left,” Lidia said. “The engines run on propane, but the vampires’ fuel supply is limited and only very important vamps get to drive them on special occasions.”

“And by ‘very important vamps’ you mean the Prince?” Alerie asked.

Lidia grinned. “Apparently he’s the only one driving. Our captive was bitter about it.”

“Speaking of our captive,” Myra said, “what should we do with her?”

“We’ll kill her,” Zack said.

She stared at him. “What? Zack, you can’t. You gave her your word.”

“She killed two of our people,” he said. “Will you tell Tory’s daughters that we’re releasing their father’s murderer? You got a chance to stake the vamp who killed your parents. Surely you understand why others need the same justice.”

“Staking him brought me no peace,” Myra said.

“Letting him go would have brought you even less peace, believe me,” Zack said. “What’s wrong? You hate vamps more than most of us. Every vampire has to die if we are to restore human civilization. Surely you know that.”

“I hate vampires as much as anyone,” she said. “But what I hate even more is watching us become monsters like them. Zack, you gave her your word. If you break it, we’re no better than them. Yes, she has to die, and she will. But not now. Not like this.”

Zack was silent for a moment, but nodded slowly at last. “Very well. Once we’ve killed the Prince, I will set her free. I hope we won’t regret it.”

An anguished scream echoed through the hall, and Myra paled and turned to the door. There, behind a high cupboard, peeked a little girl. Her dark eyes were wide and moist, and she was shaking her head. *Shanice*, Myra's mind supplied. *Tory's daughter. Ten years old.*

A whimper escaped Shanice's lips, and she turned around and bolted out the door. Zack sighed and looked at Thomas.

"Tommy, please, take care of this," he said.

Thomas nodded and ran after the girl.

Zack ran his hand over his face. "I'll have to talk to Shanice later," he said and turned to Myra. "Something else is troubling you?"

"The vampire told us all about her Prince," Myra said, "And perhaps she wants us to succeed. Yet, she doesn't seem worried that we might use the ensuing chaos to attack the Wizard. Why? My guess is, she doesn't expect any chaos. They already have a substitute ruler in place and the transition will go smoothly. What if we don't gain anything from the Prince's death?"

"I can't believe that," said Zack. "Rim may have a ruler in mind, but other vampire factions likely have candidates. There's no way to avoid chaos once their leader is gone. Perhaps Rim hasn't guessed that attacking the Wizard is our final goal, so she's not worried. Lidia, do you think you can find these Rose Gardens?"

"Sure, the map is clear."

Zack hesitated. "I wish to send only a couple of good fighters. Lidia, I hate to ask this of you, but you would be my first choice. Alerie, you'd be my second. I'd like to send you both."

Lidia seemed taken aback, but quickly recovered. "It would be my honor, General Wong."

“Mine too,” Alerie whispered.

“Zack, you can’t send Lidia,” Myra protested. “She is too valuable. We can’t afford to lose her.”

“I know,” Zack said. “She is one of my best Warriors, but we are all valuable.”

“This is not about fighting,” Myra insisted. “Lidia is the only one among us with adequate knowledge of medicine. Dr. Dubois is over eighty. If something happens to her, we’re left without a doctor.”

“I know it’s important to have a doctor in our community,” Zack said. “But if we don’t do this here and now, we won’t live long enough to worry about disease.”

“If Lidia fails, we’ll lose all chances of survival,” Myra said. “Even if we destroy the WeatherWizard and overthrow the vamps, we’ll have no doctor. The medicine books in our library don’t cover all topics, and there is only so much you can learn from a book.”

“If Lidia fails in the mission, and we don’t assassinate the Prince, we’ll all die anyway, sooner or later,” Zack said. “It’s an all-or-nothing gambit. I will send a few Warriors, and if they succeed, we all live. If they fail, we all die. I have to send the ones best suited for the task.”

“Fine, but must you send Lidia?” Myra said. “Thomas is also a good fighter.”

“Thomas is needed here,” Zack said sternly. “I will ask you not to question my decisions. I have reasons for them.”

Andre stood up in his chair. “I’ll go. I’m a good Warrior, and I am more disposable. I’ve lived longer than any of you. Death doesn’t scare me.”

Zack massaged his temples. “How many times do I need to say it? This is *not* supposed to be a suicide mission. I’m not sending whoever is most disposable. I’m sending whoever can do the task best. Andre, you’re a great Warrior, but you are past your prime. No offense.”

Myra fell silent, thinking on Zack’s words. He had a point, and yet sending their only potential doctor on such a dangerous mission seemed insane. What if Lidia and Alerie did succeed, but were killed on the way back? Then the Resistance had a real chance of survival, but they wouldn’t last for long with no knowledge of medicine. Myra closed her eyes. Her heartbeat accelerated until her ears started ringing. “If you must send someone,” she said softly, “send me.”

“Myra, don’t be ridiculous,” Lidia snapped.

Zack shook his head. “I made it clear that we want to send a good fighter. You’re average. Your strength is strategy. You have no experience in fieldwork.”

“And how am I supposed to gain any experience if you never send me out? Zack, I want to learn.”

He sighed. “Captain Andersen, do you realize that Prince Vladimir’s assassination will be the single most crucial mission the Resistance has ever undertaken? I can’t take the risk that this task will fail, and I will not use it as your training exercise.”

“My strength is strategy, you say,” Myra argued, “and I believe we will need more than brute force to assassinate the Prince. In fact, I think brute force will have nothing to do with this. You’re sending Alerie, and she is an excellent fighter. You need her partner to be someone with a different skill set.”

Alerie stood up. “Myra, this is a serious mission that could change our future. We don’t have time for this. If you want to play the hero, do it in one of your theater plays.”

Myra felt like she had been slapped. Play the hero? Was that what she was trying to do? She had to admit it had felt good to volunteer. Her heart had pumped with excitement when she had said the words. She was offering to sacrifice herself to save their community. She was like the characters in the books she loved to read, fighting the oppressors and doing what was right. She knew she had not thought this through, but it mattered little. After all, Zack would never accept her offer anyway.

Zack leaned back in his chair. “Myra has a point,” he admitted. “Vamps are better fighters than any of us. We cannot expect to defeat them in combat. We must rely on stealth and careful planning as well. Myra, do you think you can do this?”

“I can do this better than anyone else in this room,” Myra stated with confidence she did not feel. The moment she spoke the words, she wondered if she could take them back. What was she doing? This mission was suicide, she had said so herself. She had always dreamed of going out there, of seeing more of the world, but not like this.

With a pang of guilt, Myra realized why she had made the offer. She had been certain that Zack would refuse. If she had thought there was any chance the General would pick her, she would have never volunteered. She was a coward. That was the safe way to play the hero, so she could later lie to herself that she had done the right thing.

“Very well,” Zack said. “Captain Andersen, the task to assassinate Prince Vladimir is assigned to you.”



Chapter Five

Innocence

Torch flames danced in the gloomy corridor, like snakes fighting to devour one another. Myra reached to the stone wall to steady herself. Light and shadow played around her, creating images on the wall—battles, blood, death. She took in a deep breath. Her head was spinning, but she had to keep walking. She had to reach the children’s cellar and tell Thea what she had done. But what could she possibly say?

If you want to play the hero, do it in one of your theater plays.

Was it all a dream? Or had the play become reality? She finally saw it all clearly—the moment she had volunteered, she had not believed any of this was real. But it was. She was really going *Outside*, really sneaking into a vampire’s lair.

The task to assassinate Prince Vladimir is appointed to you.

The Resistance had been trying to assassinate the Prince since long before her birth. How could she hope to succeed where so many experienced Warriors had failed? What had she been thinking?

“You look gloomy today.”

Myra jumped, staring at her cousin who was standing in the middle of the passage barring her way. “Thea, sorry, I was distracted.”

“Clearly,” Thea said. “What’s up?”

Myra opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. *I should have planned this in advance.* “Can you join me in the library?” she said after she finally found her voice. “I have something to show you.”

Thea nodded and fell in step next to her. “What is it? Did Alerie find any other super-food?”

“Do you always think about sweets?” Myra asked, forcing a smile. “You’ll learn soon enough. A little patience won’t hurt you.”

Thea stayed silent until they reached the library. They entered and Myra raised her candle, casting light over the shelves. She loved the sight of books, the feel of paper in her hands, the characteristic smell. She often told herself that she wanted to go outside and experience adventures just like her favorite characters, but in all honesty, she would have been happy to spend her life in the library, reading one novel after another.

Reading. That was what she was always doing. Reading other people’s adventures, and reading her own. Up until today her fate had been written down, every single day predefined. Get up, train, study, cook, clean, wash and sew clothes, hunt rats, discuss plans at the Headquarters, interrogate prisoners, eat, sleep. She had been a reader of her own life, and the story had been dark and dull. Now the time had come to become the writer of her own fate and to decide what happened next.

“Can you believe that in the Old World, authors often romanticized vampires?” Myra wondered as she took in the titles.

“Grandma Pia said people had no idea vampires existed,” Thea said. “For them it was only a fantasy.”

“A strange fantasy,” Myra said. “I wonder if any of those authors would exchange their place with mine and come and live it for real.” She trailed her hand over the row of books, brushing off the dust. “Ah, sorry, Thea. I brought you here to show you something.”

She knelt down to reach the bottom shelf and took out a box filled with her notebooks. “Last week I finished writing another play for the kids. It’s about two little pandas, exploring the world. I thought you and Anastasia could play the main roles.”

“Sounds great,” Thea said. “When are we performing?”

Myra hesitated. “Thea, I’m going Outside on a mission, and I don’t know how long I’ll be away. I’m showing you the play because I want you to organize the performance in case I am delayed. You’ve seen me directing before; I know you’ll do fine.”

Thea had blanched. “What kind of a mission is this? And why do you sound like you don’t expect to come back?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I’ll come back,” Myra said, trying to hide the tremors in her voice. “Where else would I go?”

Thea’s lower lip trembled, and her eyes were filling up with treacherous moisture. “You better come back. If you don’t, I’ll sabotage your play and make a tiger eat the baby pandas.”

Myra laughed at that. And then, she cried. And as she held her distraught cousin, she whispered promises she did not know how to keep.

Zack took his high chair at the end of the Conference Table and leaned back. “What is your plan?”

Myra unfolded the map and placed it on the table. “We need about three hours to reach the Rose Gardens. We should leave three hours before dawn, so that we arrive there in the early morning. If the place is sunlit, there will be no vampires before sunset, and we’ll have plenty of time to investigate the terrain before the Prince arrives.”

“That’s assuming Rim didn’t lie about the vamps keeping the sunshine on,” Alerie said.

“For now let’s assume Rim was telling the truth,” Zack said. “Otherwise we have no starting point.”

“Alright, then,” Alerie said. “We leave, we follow the route Rim outlined, and provided she told the truth, we reach the Rose Gardens by sunrise. Then what?”

“We’ll have the whole day to look around the Gardens and find a good hiding spot,” said Myra.

“And we’ll sit and hide, waiting for him to appear?” Alerie laughed. “Now I see why we picked you for this mission. A brilliant strategy indeed.”

Zack frowned. “Captain Sanchez, now is not the time for sarcasm. If you have something to say, say it.”

“Myra has no field experience,” Alerie said. “She’s endangering herself, and she’s endangering me. Even worse, she puts the mission at risk.”

“How am I putting the mission at risk?” Myra asked. “Alerie, I understand your concerns, but I can assure you I won’t do anything to give away our position. I’ll follow your orders. You’ll be in command; I’ll just advise.”

Alerie stood up, walked behind her chair, and squeezed the backrest until her knuckles turned white. “Advise? How exactly will you advise when you have no idea what we are doing? You suggest we simply hide in the garden and wait? Do you even know how keen a sense of smell vampires have? Has it occurred to you that the Prince might catch our scent no matter how well we hide?”

“Yes, you need to conceal your scent,” Zack said. “Captain Sanchez, I assume you have a suggestion?”

“Of course. There are some very old fish cans in the storage. We could check if anything is smelly enough and rub it on our skin.”

“Wouldn’t the Prince wonder why there’s dead fish in his garden?” Myra said. “If the gardens are anything like what Rim described, there should be fresh grass and flowers there. We could rub those on our skin instead.”

Alerie reached out to pick the map and stared at it. “If you say so. Any thoughts on the actual killing?”

“You’re the expert here,” Myra said.

“You are *the strategist*,” Alerie shot back.

Zack sighed. “Captain Sanchez, I cannot tolerate this hostility. You are one of my best Warriors, and I’d like to have you on this mission. Myra claims she can contribute, and I trust her. I need both of you, and I need you to work together.”

Alerie frowned and stared back. “As you command, General.” She looked at Myra. “So? Any ideas?”

What answer did Alerie expect? All the vamps Myra had staked had been chained and incapacitated. Her only experience came from talking to the Warriors who had been out on patrols.

“Vampires are quicker and stronger than us,” Myra said. “I’ve heard that the best way to kill them is to weaken them first. It’s best to start with the guns. Once they’re wounded and slower, we can take crossbows and go for the kill.”

“Yes, you’ve heard this,” Alerie said. “While I have actually done it, several times. Myra, I know you have good intentions. And I promise to guide you and help you achieve all you are capable of on this mission. But you must understand that saying something and doing it are two different things. We start with guns, then we take crossbows; it sounds so easy when you say it. Yet, I can tell you it won’t be easy at all.”

“I know that,” Myra said. “Prince Vladimir has destroyed human civilization. He rules over the world and has armies at his command. Killing him can’t be so simple.”

Saying it aloud made their mission sound even more hopeless. Really, what were they thinking? This was the vamps’ leader they were talking about. He would never put himself in any position that would endanger his life. Myra stared at the map showing the road they had to walk. What had she gotten herself into?

Myra held her empty backpack and gazed at the supplies on the pallet. Guns and bullets, crossbows and arrows, stakes, water flasks, biscuits, smoked meat, blankets, a notebook and pencils. “Do you think that’s enough?”

“You’re the strategist,” Alerie said. “You tell me.”

Myra ran a hand through her hair. “Why do you have such a problem with me? You said it yourself that it’s a good time for me to start going Outside.”

“I meant you could start joining raids in search for food,” Alerie said, “not that you should join the Resistance’s most important mission ever. Look, Myra, I have nothing against you. You’re a good, caring person, and you’ve contributed to our community. In fact, I like you, and that’s one of the reasons I don’t want to see you killed. Which is exactly what will happen if you come with me.”

“Can you try to have a little faith in me? I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you? Well, then—are the supplies enough?”

Myra sighed. No matter what answer she gave, she would never convince Alerie that she was ready for this. “The food here is enough for a week. If all goes well, we should accomplish the mission and return in less than two days.”

Alerie sat on the pallet and started putting the supplies in her backpack. “Still, we may need to camp out at the Gardens for longer if necessary. We don’t know for certain that the Prince will come on the first day. Or he may come with company, and then we would need to hide and wait until he returns alone.”

“Rim said he goes there almost every day.”

“Almost,” Alerie said. “How many days in a row would he typically miss? How often would he bring others with him?”

“I guess we should talk to the prisoner again and ask her the specifics.”

Alerie took a crossbow from the pallet and started checking the string. “And the notebook and pencils are necessary because...?”

Myra looked at the floor. Alerie would not be happy to hear she was hoping to find inspiration out in the open and do some writing. “We might need to record information on the way.”

“We should record as little as possible. Anything we write down could fall into enemies’ hands.”

“I know how to use our secret code,” Myra said.

Alerie snorted. “Ah, the code. That’s one of Zack’s worst ideas. The vamps have lived for centuries and witnessed the rise and fall of all kinds of sophisticated encryption systems. Do you think they can’t crack a simple Vigenère code?”

Myra had never considered this. The code had seemed so intricate and complicated when Zack had first taught her how to use it, and she had honestly believed it to be unbreakable. Alerie was right—the vamps were beasts, but they were likely more knowledgeable than any of the Resistance.

Alerie raised an eyebrow. “Do you still think you’re up to this? It’s not too late to turn back.”

Myra looked away. “I don’t know. This mission is unpredictable, and I can’t say if I’m better suited than anyone else. What I do know is that I’ll never forgive myself if I let Lidia go instead of me and leave our people without a doctor. And honestly, even if we succeed, we still have many battles ahead. Our army isn’t big enough to assault the Wizard, whether the Prince lives or not.”

“It’s much smaller than it should be,” Alerie said. “Zack is wrong, keeping the minors from fighting.”

“You can’t mean that.”

Alerie put the crossbow in her backpack. “Why not? Adulthood is a fluid notion. At some points in human history, twelve was a respectable age to fight in a war, to make your own living,

or to get married. And a few of the minors are very good fighters. Better than some of our Warriors.”

“Better than me, you mean? This isn’t about ability or maturity. They’re children. They haven’t lived long enough. We can’t place them in danger like that. And, to be honest, I can’t imagine Thea holding a weapon.”

“She’s like a baby to you,” Alerie said. “She’s twelve, you know.”

“I know. But I’ve held her when she was this big.” Myra put her hands two feet apart. “It’s hard to think she’s grown up and even harder to imagine her fighting. I hope to end this war before she has to.” She reached out to take a stake from the supplies and twirled it before placing it in her pack. “I’m going to talk to the prisoner. Will you join me?”

Alerie stared at her scattered supplies. “I suppose packing can wait.”

The heavy door came into view and Myra gasped and stopped in her tracks. The prison cellar was one of the few places in the Resistance with metal doors—the patrols had found only a handful of these in abandoned towns, and Zack had decided to install them in the dungeon, where security was the most important. Yet, Resistance members could never be sure that the titanium chains and the metal doors would be enough to contain vamps, so it was customary to have a guard or two in the passage in front of the door whenever they had a prisoner.

The corridor was empty.

Myra’s throat grew tight. “Where are the guards?”

“Sean was on guard duty today.” Alerie grabbed Myra’s arm. “The vamp has escaped. I don’t know what she’s done to him, but it can’t be good.”

Myra shuddered and took a step towards the closed door, but Alerie pulled her back. “Wait. The vamp couldn’t have gotten out unnoticed. We have too many patrols on the way. She’s probably still in there, biding her time.”

“Should we call for reinforcements?” Myra asked.

Alerie put a finger against her lips and walked away from the door, gesturing at Myra to follow. Once they had taken a turn into another section of the corridor, Alerie stopped. “If she’s in there, she was probably listening to us and planning her next move. She might want to take us hostages and use us in her escape.”

“Rim doesn’t even know the way out,” Myra said. “She was blindfolded when they brought her in.”

“She could have memorized the steps and the turns,” Alerie said. “But I agree—I don’t think she’ll manage to get out. Still, if she’s running free inside the Resistance, she can do a lot of damage before we kill or recapture her. Sean is probably dead already, and she could kill others. We need to get reinforcements, but we can’t abandon this post. If she’s still in the cell, we need to watch her moves.”

“Should we split up?”

Alerie nodded. “I’ll stay here. You go and tell Zack.”

“Are you sure? If Rim is free of her chains, she’ll be stronger than you.”

“I know,” Alerie said. “But I don’t see any other options. Go.”

Myra had barely taken a few steps when she stopped, listening. Someone was running down the corridor, approaching them. Thankfully, the steps were heavier than what she would expect from their delicate vampire prisoner.

She gasped as a tall man appeared in front of her. He wore a shirt of faded red, his head was shaven, and a dark woolen patch over his left eye socket concealed the damage done in an old battle.

“Sean!” Alerie cried. “What happened? Is the vamp out?”

Someone else was approaching, running almost as fast as Sean had. *Oh no, this can't be good.* Myra's heart stopped when Zack appeared.

“Shanice was here,” Sean said breathlessly. “She said Zack was looking for me. She claimed he ordered me to leave my post and come immediately.”

“As you can imagine, I've done no such thing,” Zack said. “Come, and let's hope it's not too late.”

Myra's heart raced as she followed them back to the cell. “She couldn't have gotten in, right?” she said, her voice breaking. “The door is locked at all times.”

“All Warriors have keys, Tory included,” said Alerie. “Shanice could have taken his keys, or someone else's.”

Myra opened the door to the prison cellar, her hand shaking. It was unlocked. She breathed in sharply as she walked in and pressed a hand against her mouth. Alerie pushed her aside and cursed.

Alerie and Zack were saying something, but Myra could only gape at the scene in front of her. Shanice stood there, her face, arms and gown spattered with blood. A bloodied stake was in her hand, and her empty eyes stared into nothingness.

The prisoner's body hung from the chains, a stake in her heart. A few more wounds surrounded the stake—the killer had not hit the heart the first time. A bloodied hammer lay on the ground, perhaps used to drive the stake in.

Myra's eyes moved back to the ten-year-old girl. "What have you done?" she breathed.

Shanice turned angry dark eyes at her. "You planned to let her go. She killed my dad. And you planned to let her go."

Sean looked away, shaking his head. "It's my fault. I should have known."

Zack frowned. "We'll discuss this later. This isn't about you."

Alerie knelt in front of Shanice and tried to take the stake from her hand. "Shanice, there were bigger things going on. The situation was more complex than—"

"Complex?" the girl cried and pulled back. "She killed my dad. What's complex, exactly?"

Alerie took a step back to give the girl more space. "In the end, we want to defeat all vamps," she started, but Shanice glared at her.

"I don't care what you want! It doesn't matter anymore!"

Myra stared at the girl's clothes, stained with blood. It would wash away, but she doubted anything could erase the blood from Shanice's memories.

"What is done is done," Zack said. "Come, now, Shanice. Let's go to your mom."

"You go," Myra said. "I'll take care of the body."

"Shanice, come." Alerie pulled the girl out, practically dragging her. The bloodied stake was still in Shanice's hand. Zack and Sean silently followed.

KINGDOM OF ASHES

The door closed with a bang. Once the sound of fading footsteps died away, the prison cell was silent as a tomb. Myra forced herself to look at the vampire. No, not a vampire. A body. A *human* body. Rim had been a human woman once, before some vampire had killed her and turned her into a monster. Myra sighed and started with her grim task.

Rim is Shanice's first kill, Myra thought as she unlocked the shackles around the vampire's wrists. How many children had to turn into soldiers before all was said and done? Myra pressed her lips together and stared at the body. If she had any say in the matter, Shanice would be the last.



Chapter Six



New World

Myra stumbled and waved her arms before she regained her footing. The sparse torches did a poor job illuminating the steep passage, and she strained her eyes to see better. Soon the corridor became so narrow that two people could not walk side by side, and Myra fell behind. If one was to lead, it had to be Alerie. She had walked this path countless times, while Myra had never gone past this point.

The corridor led them on a long descent, going even deeper underground before returning closer to the surface. Myra's heart pounded so fast it made her ears ring. She was going *Outside*, into the world that had once belonged to her ancestors; in the world where people had lived, and laughed, and created. She had dreamed about this moment so many times, and yet all she wanted now was to turn back and run.

Myra had spent so much time in the library, reading about heroes and their fights. She had written tales of her own about brave adventurers fighting oppression. And Myra had wanted to be like the characters in her books and go on her own

adventure. Now she was on a quest, the fate of the world in her hands. Why was she not happy?

Myra reached for the stake hanging at her belt, clutching at it as if it were a lifeline. Saving the world was a hero's job. She was a dreamer, not a hero. The only adventures fit for her were the ones she had in her mind, from the safety of her own bed. What had she done? And was it too late to turn back?

They passed by a pair of guards, and Myra greeted them even though her throat was so dry she could barely make a sound. Sweat broke across her palms and her heart threatened to burst out of her chest. When were they going to reach the entrance? With every turn, she expected to see the end of this dark underworld, yet it never came.

Finally, the air felt fresher and much cooler. Myra pulled her worn-out denim jacket tighter around herself. She smelled something in the air, something strangely familiar, and yet she could not say what it was.

They passed by the last pair of guards, and there it was at last: a large hole in the stony wall, hidden from the outside world by a curtain of dead branches and protected by ancient magic. Once they left, there would be no protection. No safety.

Alerie pushed the branches away and left the cave without a moment's hesitation. Myra froze, taking a deep breath to steady her heartbeat. It did not help. She exhaled slowly and stepped Outside.

All was dark at first, until Alerie lit a torch, and their surroundings came to life. They were in the middle of a dead forest, leafless branches cracking in the wind and fallen, rotting trees littering the stony ground. Night had fallen and the vam-

pires had allowed the clouds to disperse, revealing twinkling stars and a crescent moon.

The wind caressed Myra's face, and she smiled. She had read so much about the moon and stars, and now here they were, not in a picture, but right above her head, vivid and real. It was worth it. All her fears, all her worries, all the risk, it was worth all that. If Myra were to die right now, she would die happy.

She took a deep breath, savoring the smell of moist earth. Yet, there was another scent, one much more pervasive, and finally Myra realized what it was.

It smelled like *nothing*.

For the first time in her life, Myra was not surrounded by the scent of many people stuffed in a small place, baking food, rats, burning fire, rotting wood. Many smells mixed with each other deep in the Resistance's hideout, creating a unique blend. It felt strange to lose it. Strange, and good.

Myra reached out and placed a palm against a tree's bark. She felt connected, a part of the world. This world had belonged to her grandparents once. One day, it would belong to her and her friends.

"Come," Alerie said, and Myra followed.

After they walked for about half an hour, the trees started to disperse. Myra could see no more than a few paces ahead, as far as the torchlight reached.

"We're coming close," Alerie said.

"Close to what?" Myra asked.

"To this." Alerie stepped aside, letting Myra peek behind the tree.

The forest suddenly ended. They had reached what had probably once been a field, but was now a desert. No plants, no animals, only stony emptiness, as far as the light could reach.

“That’s good,” Alerie said. “We’re going in the right direction.”

“Aren’t we too exposed here? The vamps can see us from far away, and we can’t see in the dark.”

“Our prisoner said there were no regular patrols on this route,” Alerie said and walked forward. After a few steps, she seemed to realize Myra was not following. She turned back. “What’s wrong?”

Myra hesitated. “Nothing. It’s just that I never thought I would be going so far away from home.”

“The dank caverns are not your home,” Alerie said and gestured around her. “*This* is. It’s time we reclaim it. Come.” Alerie stretched her hand.

Myra took it and stepped forward. “Are we still above the caves?”

Alerie laughed. “Your sense of direction needs improvement, doesn’t it? The underground tunnel is running the opposite way. I know it’s hard to tell left from right when you’re underground, but you need to start learning. Here’s the map. Which way should we go?”

Myra took the paper and studied it under the torchlight. Alerie was testing her. It was her chance to show that she was not clueless, but she was not sure how. She had seen many maps in old atlases, but had never used one to find her way. All she could see was that the dot saying “Rose Gardens” was to the upper right of the point marked as “Woods.” “Northeast?”

“Obviously. I was asking which way that is.”

The map remained silent, giving her no answer. Myra looked up. “Do you know?”

“Of course I do.”

“How?”

Alerie grinned. “Think.”

“You know this terrain by heart?”

“That too. What else?”

“The stars? You can use them to figure out the direction.”

Alerie snorted. “Stop stating the obvious. Which way should we go? I’m still waiting for an answer.” She smiled. “Come, now, Myra, we both know you’re a nerd. I’ve caught you many times, studying maps of the stars. Surely you remember something.”

Myra bit her lip. Her maps had looked very different. For one thing, they had not been twinkling. The stars had been just stylized dots, with lines connecting them to show the constellations. She could not relate her maps to what she was seeing, but she would never admit this to Alerie.

She fell silent and gazed at the stars. The more she looked, the more her eyes adjusted to the dark, and more twinkling little dots appeared. She tried to find the bigger ones and to recognize familiar patterns. She gasped. “Ursa Major.”

Alerie grinned. “Very good. See, it’s not hard. Now, keep looking.”

“The others are harder to recognize,” Myra complained, but to her surprise, now that she had spotted one constellation, the others started coming. “That one’s Cassiopeia,” she whispered, “and there is Pegasus.”

“Are you looking for something specific?” Alerie prompted.

“Ursa Minor. At the end of its tail is Polaris—the North Star. It will show our way north. And there it is!” Myra was grinning now, her heart pumping wildly. She had read so much about travelers using stars to navigate, and now she was one of them. She was an adventurer.

“Lead on,” Alerie said.

Myra looked up. “Well, northeast should be a bit to the right of Polaris, I guess.”

Alerie rolled her eyes. “That’s not very specific, is it? Luckily, I know exactly which way we’re going.”

“Of course you do,” Myra said. “You just wanted to torture me.” She gazed at the map in her hands. Even though the route was clearly marked, she still had no idea how to reach those Rose Gardens. Being so dependent made her uncomfortable. If she lost sight of Alerie, she would have no idea how to find her way.

As they walked on, encountering no signs of vampires, Myra started to breathe more easily. She grinned, savoring the wind on her face, the fresh air in her lungs, and the twinkling stars high above. Words and sentences twirled in her mind as she thought about her book. A story started to take shape—a new chapter of Maryabella’s tales. Myra’s fingers curled into fists and her heart beat faster. Her hands itched to grab a pencil and write it all down. If only she had the time and safety to put it all on paper!

Her character’s adventures mirrored her own—Maryabella was tracking her missing friends through a stony desert, with the wind in her face and the moon and stars to light her way. In her head, Myra described every step, every stone, every gust of wind. Her smile grew. The words were coming to her so

easily. It was working. Seeing the world would help her become a better writer, just as she had hoped.

The stony desert stretched endless before them; it was a miracle Alerie still knew the way. The wind blew in their faces, with no trees to stop it, and Myra's fist clutched her jacket at the front. After a while, the wind's caress turned from refreshing and exciting to mostly annoying.

They walked for almost an hour when Alerie stopped and brought the torch forward. Myra frowned. Dead branches covered the ground ahead, laid down like a carpet for as far as the light could reach.

"That can't be natural," Myra said.

"Why would the vamps make this?" Alerie murmured. She bent down to take one of the branches and used it to push the others aside. Underneath was nothing but stony ground, and they continued on their way.

The progress was slow since Alerie insisted on testing the way and removing all branches before they stepped anywhere. Myra was not sure why that was necessary, but her opinion changed when Alerie pushed aside a few more branches, revealing a gaping hole beneath.

"A trap," Myra whispered.

"No animals live here," Alerie said. "It's placed for the Resistance. For us." She looked up, her dark brown eyes meeting Myra's. "Rim said nothing about this."

A shiver ran down Myra's spine. "You think she lied to us?"

"I don't know. But we failed to keep our end of the bargain. It's only fair she failed to keep hers."

"In any case, there must be more traps underneath the branches."

Alerie nodded. "If the vamps set this up, they must be re-turning to check on the traps. This place isn't safe. Let's back-track and go around the covered area."

They returned to the point where the branches had first appeared and started circling around. To their surprise, the covered area stretched on and on. The wind grew stronger, blowing in their faces and pushing them back. Myra put a hand in front of her face to stop the dust from flying into her eyes. She could barely see anything. The torchlight flickered in the wind, the flames dancing in all directions, thinning and almost disappearing.

After half an hour, the covered area gave no sign of ending. Why had the vamps built such a large trap area? That must have taken a lot of effort, and they were not known for hard work.

The road took them far away from the original path, and Myra had no idea where they were or how to find the Rose Gardens. Hopefully Alerie knew what she was doing; otherwise they were lost. The wind was blowing from all directions, whipping at their faces. Myra could no longer see what she was stepping on.

Prince Vladimir controlled the WeatherWizard. He must have decided he wanted strong wind, at this time and place. Why? Was it another line of defense around the Palace?

Alerie stopped in her tracks and raised a hand.

"What is it?" Myra asked.

"There's something ahead of us." Alerie walked forward slowly, raising the torch.

A thick wall of dead trees rose ahead of them.

“Another forest?” Myra whispered.

“We should continue our way through the woods,” Alerie said. “We’ll be less exposed, and we won’t steer far from our original path.”

“Rim claimed there were no patrols on our original route,” Myra said. “We know nothing about this place.”

“I think we should take everything Rim said with a grain of salt. We’re on our own now. We should trust our instincts.”

The woods grew thicker as they ventured deeper, but all the trees were still dead—rotting trunks, some fallen on the ground and some still standing. Myra had expected they would provide protection against the wind, but the tempest was as strong as ever.

She looked up, trying to get a sense of their direction from the stars. Only, the stars were gone. Over an hour was left until sunrise. Why would the vamps need clouds?

Something hit her face. A drop of water, cold and wet, and then another, until the wind was blowing the rain full force into her eyes. Myra unbuttoned her jacket and put it over her head, trying to stop the torrent of water and air.

The torch flame sizzled and hissed, and then it was dead. Darkness engulfed them, pressing around them on all sides. Not a single light could be seen, neither on the sky, nor around them. All was black.

Myra shivered from the cold, her clothes soaked. Alerie grabbed her hand so they would not be separated in the darkness, and they walked on, not sure where they were going.

“We need to find shelter,” Alerie said. “We have to wait for the rain to stop.”

Myra nodded, then realized her friend could not see her. “What if it never stops? The vamps control the rain. What if they’ve made it rain until sunrise and then all day?”

“We have no choice. We can’t go on like this. We have enough food and water for a week. If we find shelter, we can wait for a few hours, even days.”

Finding shelter was easier said than done. They walked through the darkness, blindly feeling their way. Myra saw nothing but black.

Vampires could see in the dark. They were quiet and stealthy. What if there were vamps around them, watching them? What if they were just a few steps behind? Myra shuddered. At any moment, a vamp could grab her, sinking sharp teeth into her neck and drinking her alive.

A sharp, painfully bright light tore through the skies, illuminating the dead forest for a second. Myra gasped. “What was that?”

“A bolt of lightning,” Alerie replied, her voice drowned in the thunderous boom that followed. “Come, we should keep moving.”

Keep moving, but where? Were they even going in the right direction? Myra strained her eyes, trying to see something, anything, but all was blackness.

Another flash of lightning tore through the sky, and Myra squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands against her ears. When the thunder was over, Alerie grabbed her arm. “Did you see that?” she asked.

“See what?” Myra had been too afraid to look, but now she realized her mistake. The bolts of lightning were their only chance to examine their surroundings.

“I saw a large wooden house. Four stories high. We can hide there until the storm passes.”

“What if vamps live there?”

“A house like that needs maintenance,” Alerie said. “It looked to be in bad shape. Vamps wouldn’t pick a place such as this. Come. I remember where I saw it.” She pulled her arm, and Myra followed.

Another bolt of lightning illuminated their path, and this time Myra saw it too: a large building, right in front of them. “We are almost there,” Alerie said. Myra’s feet sank into thick mud as she followed. The water had soaked through her shoes, and her socks and feet were completely wet. She no longer cared about vampires and danger—as long as the house was dry and warm, it would be all she needed.

Alerie pushed on the door. “Come on, it’s unlocked,” she said and pulled Myra inside.

Even though Myra’s clothes were soaked and she was still freezing, it felt so good to be away from the wind and rain. She leaned against a wooden wall and slowly exhaled. “Do you think the torches in our backpacks are dry enough?”

“Time to find out,” Alerie said. “I’ll light one for now, but we have to be careful—light is easy to spot in the darkness.”

Myra heard some shuffling and in a minute a bright flame was dancing merrily before her eyes. She could not help a mad grin. Finally she could see something other than endless blackness.

Now that there was light, Myra saw that they were standing at the end of a long corridor. They followed it to the rotting wooden door at the far end, into a spacious living room. The chamber was empty, apart from a table, eight chairs, a cupboard, and a

cast-iron wood burning stove. Alerie opened the cupboard. “No food, no kitchenware,” she murmured.

Myra examined the stove. “No one has used this in a while. And everything’s dusty.”

“The inhabitants were probably killed during the Nightfall, or shortly after,” Alerie said. “We can use the stove to dry our clothes. But come; let’s first check the other rooms. We need to make sure the place is safe.”

Myra opened the next door, and her breath caught in her throat. She stopped in her tracks, pressing a hand against her mouth. Pieces of a shattered mirror were scattered all over the floor. Among them lay the remains of two people, the skin and flesh so decomposed that only the bones remained, pale under the torchlight.

Alerie pushed her aside so she could step in. She knelt by the skeletons and reached out to examine them. “The vamps must have drunk them and left them here,” Alerie said softly and stood up.

“They lived so close to us,” Myra choked. “Do you think this happened after the Nightfall? We could have met them. We could have helped them.”

“The Palace is too close to this place. They couldn’t have survived long here,” Alerie said. “Even if they died after the Nightfall, it must have been long before we were born. Come, now, let’s search the other rooms. We may find something useful.”

They found nothing; no medicines, clothes or durable food, only the rotten remains of a third person. “This makes no sense,” Myra said when they stopped to take a break on the

fourth floor, after examining the last room. “This could have been a comfortable home for twenty people.”

“And an uncomfortable home for a hundred,” said Alerie. “Yet, we found only three. What happened to the rest?”

“Perhaps the vamps couldn’t eat everyone and took the remaining humans to finish them later,” Myra whispered, her stomach turning. “And what happened to all the supplies? I can’t imagine the vamps needed them. Did they really destroy everything just to prevent us from finding it?”

“I don’t know,” Alerie said and approached the wall, pressing her ear against it. “The rain is still strong. Let’s make camp for a few hours.”

“Should we light the stove and dry our clothes?” Myra asked.

Alerie frowned. “I’d love to, but I’m worried about the light. There could be vampires in the woods.” She walked to the window. “The shutters are closed, but there is a crack between them. The light would be visible.”

“If we do nothing, we’ll freeze to death,” Myra said.

Alerie nodded. “Very well. Let’s use the stove, but we’ll put it out as soon as the clothes are dry.”

Myra walked downstairs to light the stove and hang her jacket on a chair in front of it. She picked up their backpacks and carried them back to the room on the fourth floor. She shuddered. They were staying in this house full of death. She wished she could do something for the dead people, but she could not bury them in this rain. She had never before seen a human skeleton, she realized, startled. She had seen so many dead bodies, but never one so decayed that no trace of the person remained.

“We should take some rest while we wait for the rain to stop,” Alerie said once Myra entered the room. “After we leave this place, we’ll likely make no stops before the Rose Gardens. One of us should keep watch.”

Myra was certain she could not sleep anytime soon. “I’ll take the first watch,” she said.

Alerie nodded and stretched out her sleeping bag on one of the beds. Myra sat by her side, watching the flames. The rain kept tapping against the roof and the wooden walls. A bright light shone through the shutters, and a loud thunder shook the house.

A shudder ran down Myra’s spine, and she stood up, smiling, facing the shut window. Out there, behind these flimsy wooden shutters, the storm was raging. Out there was the world, wide and dark and dangerous and terrible. Out there was her true home, scary and insecure and unknown. And now that she had seen it, she could never go back to the life she had lived before.



Chapter Seven



Temptation

Myra put down the pencil and stretched her fingers. Her eyes ran over the last paragraph she had written. Her heroes were now facing a thunderstorm and fighting to find their way through the woods. Myra grinned. Writing came so easily out here—she had already written over twenty pages while Alerie slept.

She tilted her head to the side, listening. The rain had stopped. She walked to the wall and peeked through the crack between the shutters. The sun had started to rise, but the clouds were so thick that it was impossible to see much apart from the dark shapes of rotting trees.

Myra walked downstairs, put out the stove, and picked up her jacket. It was already dry and felt warm around her shoulders. She returned to the bedroom and stretched. She had to wake up Alerie—now that the rain had stopped, they could resume their journey. They had lost some time already, but still had a very good chance of reaching the Rose Gardens well before sunset. Myra reached out to shake Alerie, but her hand stopped midair and her eyes turned to her notebook.

She was almost done with the current chapter. She would not get another chance to sit down and write before they accomplished their mission, and there was still so much she wanted to say. The words were fresh in her head, burning to be written down. What if she forgot it all before she had the chance to put her thoughts on paper?

Myra took her pencil once again and went on writing. The journey could wait. They would have many hours in the Rose Gardens before darkness fell, and a few minutes would make no difference.

She kept writing on and on, the words flowing through her mind faster than she could write them down. *Just one more paragraph*, she thought. And then, *just one more*.

Alerie stirred, and Myra quickly pushed the notebook back into her backpack. "Alerie," she called. "The rain stopped."

Alerie blinked and stood up, instantly alert. "What time is it? We should get going."

"About half an hour after sunrise," Myra said and took her jacket from the chair. "Our clothes are dry already, so we can leave right away. We are good on time."

"We are already behind schedule," Alerie said. "We were supposed to be in the Gardens already." Her eyes widened. "Give me your jacket," she whispered.

"Why?" Myra whispered back. She complied, startled by her friend's urgency. To her shock, Alerie wrapped it around her burning torch. Darkness fell over the room. "What are you doing?"

"I had to put out the light, and all around us is wood," Alerie said. "Look." She tapped on the crack between the window's closed shutters.

Myra squinted and saw a few lights not far away. “Vamps?” she breathed. “Do you think they saw our light through the crack?”

“I saw theirs,” Alerie said, “Ours must have been easier to spot, and they have better eyesight. Stay here and watch them. I’ll go and bar the doors.”

Myra laid down her backpack and took out a gun and a crossbow. She squeezed the gun’s handle, her palm starting to sweat. She swallowed hard. This was not good. Even if they fortified the house, they could not defend it for long. They were only two against...how many? She squinted through the crack, until her eyes focused on the figures; there were about ten. Not good at all.

The window had no glass, only two sets of shutters, one that opened on the inside and one on the outside. The crack between them was too small to shoot through, but it gave her a good vantage point. And, despite Myra’s fear, she could not help but stare in awe.

She had met only a few vampires in the Resistance’s prison. She had never seen many of them at once, and never out in the open. And now she was observing them in their natural habitat as they interacted with each other. Curiosity won over terror, and she looked more closely.

Vampires preferred long hair, she noted, men and women alike. Whether this was some current fashion trend or they were imitating their Prince, she did not know. Not only was their hair long, it was also well maintained, even if not always tastefully. One of the male vampires, for instance, clearly hailed from what had once been northeastern Asia, and Myra expected his hair to be jet-black and perfectly straight—just

like Zack's. Instead, it was curled and bleached to a strange orangey color.

Their clothes followed a similar trend. Each of them had apparently put great care into picking their outfit, with varying degrees of success. The garments combined a hodgepodge of styles from the different places and periods the vampires had lived through, mixed with more contemporary and practical clothing. Kimonos and high-heeled boots, leather jackets and saris. Heavy woolen ponchos, fez hats, khaki pants, Victorian shirts and vests, jeans, red and purple turbans, sometimes put together in seemingly impossible combinations.

"So these are our enemies," she whispered as Alerie returned and crouched next to her.

"Yeah, a motley band of peacocks," Alerie said. "Unfortunately, they fight better than they dress."

A face popped right in front of the crack, and Myra stifled a scream.

Alerie rushed to the table, broke off a leg and handed it to her. Without thinking, Myra shoved it through the handles of the inner shutters, effectively barring the window.

"The other windows," Alerie called as she reignited the torch and secured it to the wall. "I've already blocked the front door, and all other doors leading here."

Three more windows remained in the room, and Myra frantically grabbed a chair and broke off a leg. They were on the fourth floor. Had the vamp climbed up the wall? Were there any others?

Her question was answered when someone tried to break the window shutters Alerie had just barred. There were vamps at two of the windows at least, trying to get in. She had not

even seen them approach. They were not a part of the main group she had observed; she was sure of that.

Out of the corner of her eye, Myra saw Alerie look at the map for a long moment before she held it over the flame until it turned to dust. Wild banging sounded from all four windows, and she and Alerie exchanged a panicked glance. “Get ready,” Alerie said, raising her gun. “We shoot at the first vamp who comes in.”

A loud thud from behind made Myra turn around. Someone was at the door. Alerie had barred all doors on the way, but the windows at the adjacent room remained vulnerable. The vamps must have gone through and come to the door. She shivered. There were vamps inside the house.

“I saw at least ten around the torches,” Myra said. “Who knows how many more might have come here unseen?”

“I’ve escaped direr situations,” Alerie said, pointing the gun at one of the windows.

“Have you?” Myra doubted that, but now was not the time to panic. The window burst open and she and Alerie fired at the same time.

One bullet hit the vamp in the throat, and the other in the chest. He hissed and pressed a hand against his chest wound, but remained standing. Myra raised her crossbow. He was weakened now, and slower. She had to act before he had time to recover.

She fired a wooden arrow, but missed his heart. The projectile hit the vampire in the shoulder and propelled him a step back. He pulled the arrow out of his flesh, broke off the metal tip and hurled it forward while Myra reloaded, but failed to hit her.

Alerie released her arrow before Myra could fire. It struck true this time, hitting the vamp straight in the heart. He fell to the floor with a thud, limp and lifeless, and his skin grew pale and taut in seconds.

Myra was taking quick, ragged breaths as she lowered the crossbow and raised her gun once again. They had done it. They had killed a vampire. This had been the first time she had engaged the enemy in combat, out in the open. And they had done it. She had no doubts now. Alerie and she could kill the Prince once they met him.

“One down,” Alerie said. “Dozens to go.”

A second vampire crawled out of the open window, and another after her. Just then, two of the three barred windows and the door burst open at the same time. Myra gasped and took a step back as more vampires swarmed into the room, pointing swords, daggers, arrows, and guns at them.

She recognized the bleached-orange-haired vampire she had seen earlier—so the vampires she had observed had joined the fray after all. He raised his bow and fired two arrows in rapid succession, and Myra yelped as her gun was knocked out of her hand. A quick look showed her he had disarmed Alerie with the other shot.

An idea came to her then. It was a desperate gambit, but she knew nothing could make their situation any worse. After all, their vampire prisoner had claimed some of their people opposed the Prince.

“Rim sends us,” she called. “We’re here to help you get rid of the Prince.”

The orange-haired vampire laughed. “I am sure His Highness would love to hear that. Too bad we are not taking you to him.”

Alerie raised her crossbow, but another vampire shot it out of her hand. “You’ll kill us, then?” she said, glaring at their attackers. “I can assure you, we’ll take many with us.”

The orange-haired vampire grinned, exposing his sharp teeth. “I wonder how you plan to do that. You mistake our intentions—we will not kill you. Surrender now, and we will let you live.”

“They want us to surrender so they can torture us for information,” Alerie whispered, and he rolled his eyes.

“No point in whispering, we can hear you perfectly well.” He frowned. “You are wounded. Did this fool throw some blade at you?” He glanced at the dead vampire on the floor. “I thought my orders were clear.”

Only now did Myra notice the crimson spot on her friend’s shirt. The vamp had not missed after all. “Alerie...”

“I’m fine,” Alerie said.

Myra paled. It appeared to be a stomach wound, but the bloodstain was large, and it was hard to say where exactly the arrow tip had struck. This was bad, very bad. Her friend needed immediate help.

Alerie was right. If they surrendered, the vampires would most likely interrogate them. A quick death was preferable, and who knew what these monsters had in store? Besides, Myra was not sure she trusted herself to keep quiet under torture. She had never tested her endurance, and had no desire to. Yes, fighting to the death made the most sense.

There was only one problem with that option: Myra had no intention of dying. She clenched her fists, trying to stop her shaking. If they did not surrender, the vampires were going to kill them. There was no way around that. The vamps would

bite them and suck them dry. There would be pain, and blood, and fear.

Myra bit her lip, taking deep breaths and trying to calm down. The vamps would bite her, their sharp fangs piercing her skin and flesh, and they would devour her like she was some animal shot down for food.

“If we surrender,” she said, “will you take care of my friend’s wound?”

“Of course,” the orange-haired vampire said.

“Myra, that’s a bad idea,” Alerie cried.

Myra looked at her, trying to meet her eyes and give her some signal. It was not cowardice, she told herself. If they refused, the vampires would either kill them, or injure them badly and capture them anyway. It would mean the end of their mission. Surrender bought them time. Perhaps an escape opportunity would present itself later, and the risk was worth it.

She held her friend’s gaze for a moment until Alerie nodded. Myra smiled and nodded back. “We surrender.”

She tried to fight her panic as the vampires took away the stake at her belt and bound her hands. She had been helpless before, but now was worse. She had no means to defend herself. They could do anything they wanted to her, and she could do nothing to stop them.

Myra struggled instinctively against the vampire tying the rope around her, but it made no difference. She took a deep breath, trying to fight her panic.

“Yong, should we interrogate them now?” a female vampire asked.

The orange-haired vamp shook his head. “No. Resistance members are tough. We will get nothing out of them here. We will take them to the Dark Cell.”

“The Dark Cell is occupied,” another vampire said.

“No matter,” Yong said. “We can keep them in the dungeons until it is empty.”

Resistance members are tough. Myra was not at all sure she was tough. And what was that supposed to mean, anyway? Had they tortured other Resistance members?

Don't panic. This was to be expected. The vamps were planning to torture them; she had known that when she had surrendered. It mattered not. She would find a way to escape.

“You said you'd help my friend,” she said.

“I did,” said Yong. “I need both of you alive and healthy for long enough to speak. Natalia, take a look at the wound.”

The vampire called Natalia knelt down, and Myra's heart sank as she looked at Alerie. Her friend had appeared well only moments ago, but was now deathly pale, her face bathed in sweat and her breathing labored. Myra felt bile rise in her throat. The vamps would patch Alerie up, only to kill her slowly later.

Myra gasped when Natalia tore Alerie's shirt and wiped the blood from her stomach, revealing a large blue-black bruise. “What are you waiting for?” Myra snapped. “Stop the bleeding.”

The vampire looked up and shook her head. “The arrow tip has hit her liver. The internal bleeding is strong. She will not survive the road to the Palace without surgery.”

“Well, then,” Yong said. “Let us not waste the fresh blood.”

It took Myra a moment to realize what the vamps meant to do. “No!” she screamed. “Wait, no, please, we surrendered. You said you wouldn’t kill us if we surrendered!”

Yong shrugged. “I did, but she is dead anyway.”

“Please, there must be something you can do to help her. You didn’t even try. Please, just try, I’ll do anything!”

“Anything?” the vampire raised an eyebrow. “Would you tell us how to find the Resistance’s hideout, then?”

Myra froze, her blood draining from her face.

He grinned. “I did not think so.”

Yong made a gesture with his hand, and two vampires bit Alerie’s neck, while Natalia bent down to drink the blood from the open wound. The vampires’ skin grew pale, almost transparent, and Myra could see dark veins running underneath; veins, carrying Alerie’s blood. Alerie gasped, too weak to cry, but the scream that tore from Myra’s lips was loud enough for them both.