

CHAPTER ONE

As my friend Yasuo the vampire Trainee would say . . . Headlines. As in, here they are:

1. Girl Genius Flees Crappy Home Life; Discovers Vampires over the Rainbow
2. Army of Females Vows to Beat Mold Girl into Vampire Operative
3. Girl Finds Success and Friendship and blah blah blah
4. Girl Pledges to Escape at All Costs
5. Girl Accidentally Kills Classmates to Survive
6. Girl Wins Massive Competition; Will Participate in Mission Off-Island
(repeat #4)

I sat with Emma on the sand, contemplating my situation, but my uncharacteristically optimistic outlook was squashed as I realized my butt was getting wet. I shifted, peeling the cotton shorts away from my skin. “Dammit. Are you sure he said the beach?”

Today’s gym class was to be held outside, and my friend and I had shown up early—partly because we took every chance we could to hang out, and partly because the new gym teacher totally freaked us out.

Ronan had been our instructor last term. Sigh . . . Ronan.

Talk about hot for teacher. But file that under Never Gonna Happen. He was a Tracer—meaning one of the guys responsible for tracking and retrieving girls like us to this sorry island—and that chilling detail kept my all-out schoolgirl crush at bay. Okay, that and the fact that he has some crazy hypno-voodoo-mojo where he can affect what I think just by touching me. Not exactly the foundation for a trusting relationship.

But Ronan was currently away to God knew where—just as well for my generally overwrought teenaged faculties—and some guy named Otto was his

replacement for the summer semester. He was a Tracer like Ronan, only this particular guy didn't strike us as someone to mess around with. Definitely not crush material.

"He said beach." Emma gave me one of her signature flat stares, and I rolled my eyes. I knew the saying went Still waters run deep, but did she have to be so damned still all the time? Sometimes a little expression was called for.

Sadly, I often had expression enough for the both of us. Like, just the thought of which bizarre oceanfront punishments might await us that morning had me getting surlier by the minute. Not to mention I was hyperaware of the damp sand now—it stank like dead sea creatures and it was lumpy with pebbles and jagged bits of shells that were digging into my skin.

"I hate beach days," I grumbled, not ashamed that I probably sounded like a four-year-old. But Tracer Otto had a thing for doing sit-ups while thrashing in the freezing surf, and I wasn't the biggest fan of swimming. I'd recently learned how, and I doubted I'd ever get used to the sensation of water whooshing into my nose and ears.

I thought of our new teacher's sharp, austere features and well-combed blond hair. "Or maybe it's just that I hate Otto. Him and that German accent. It's like he's auditioning for the role of Evil Nazi Number One in a remake of *The Sound of Music*."

Emma looked nervously over her shoulder. "You should hush."

"Yeah, yeah, farm girl. I'm hushing." I straightened my legs in the sand—even with the vampire blood to speed my healing, they were looking ugly, my knees mottled yellow and pale green with fading bruises. I scraped a shell from where it'd stuck to my calf and began snapping it into tiny shards.

Other girls began to drift in, wandering along the sand while waiting for class to start. Our numbers were fewer now—fighting your peers to the death had a way of trimming the student body—and I noted some were doing their best to conceal limps and other injuries, some fresh, some still lingering from the recent Directorate Challenge. It may have been summer term, but the vampires weren't about to let up on our physical trials to give us a chance to heal. Only the

strongest and the fiercest survived.

Emma sidled closer in the sand, reading my thoughts. She pitched her voice low, knowing as well as I that none of the other girls could be trusted. “Not many of us left.”

“And we’ll lose more this summer.” My words were a harsh whisper, but they were true. Our numbers would dwindle each semester, until only a handful of our original group remained.

I thought of the girls who’d died so far, and I tried not to consider what it might mean that I’d already forgotten so many of their names.

“I imagine more will arrive in the fall.”

I gave Emma a sour look. “More of these people?”

“Well, now that Lilac’s gone, they’ll need to give you a new roommate.”

I shuddered. “Is that your way of putting a bright spin on things?”

It chilled me, but Emma was right, and I studied the other Acari, which was the creepy name they had for us girls. It was clear the vampires had a penchant for good-looking teenagers—everyone here was pretty in some way, if not outright gorgeous. It was annoying and sexist and gross. The vampires weren’t exactly enlightened—they were a bunch of guys in power, some of whom had been around for hundreds of years—and I guessed it was no surprise that, in training an army of agent/assassin/guardian Watchers, they’d select girls who were easy on the eyes.

Other than that, we were a mixed bunch. Farm girl Emma, accustomed to hard work and solitude, was fairly unique on the island. Lilac had also been a rare breed—of the rich-bitches-gone-bad variety. We all had our individual talents, too. Mine was being a girl genius who knew how to take a punch (thank you, drunken, no-good dad). And Lilac had been a pyro—witness, for example, my shaggy, burnt-off hair.

But there was one distinctive characteristic each of us shared: We were all outcasts. Gang girls, runaways, you name it—we’d all fled our homes, and not one of us was missed.

Emma eyed the other Acari along with me. “I noticed some of the Tracers are

gone. They must be out gathering new girls.”

Her comment got me thinking. Was that where Ronan had gone? He was rounding up new candidates for the next incoming class?

As was the case for all good Tracers, his job was to identify, track, and retrieve fresh batches of Acari, doing whatever it took to convince girls that leaving life as they knew it for some distant rock in the middle of the North Sea, where they were either good enough to become Watchers for a bunch of vampires or they died, was a good idea. I didn't know how other Tracers did it, but Ronan had special powers of persuasion at his disposal.

So was he out there, right now, looking at some other girl with those mysterious green eyes and touching her with that melting, hypnotic touch? I scowled.

Emma guessed where my mind was. “That's probably why you haven't seen Ronan,” she said in a gentle, understanding tone that annoyed me.

“I wasn't thinking of Ronan.” I frowned, because I was totally thinking of Ronan. His complete hotness aside, he was one of the few people on the island—hell, he was one of the few people in my life—who'd ever shown concern for me. He'd managed to weasel his way into my consciousness, the dream of having a guy to look out for me like a thorn in my heart that wouldn't leave me be.

And, of course, I was also remembering how he'd duped me. When he'd approached me in a Florida parking lot, I'd thought he was just a hot college guy giving me some deeply soulful looks, but it turned out he'd been trying to hypnotize me. Hypnotize, for God's sake.

But my mind wasn't that easily swayed—being a kid genius had to be good for something, I guess—and he'd had to use both eyes and touch to persuade me to follow him onto the plane bound for this rock. *Eyja næturinnar*, they called it. The Isle of Night. Which at the moment was a laugh, because summertime, or the Dimming, as the vampires so annoyingly referred to it, meant zero hours of dark per day—just unending gray, gray, gray sky pressing down on us.

Once, I'd been afraid of the dark, but Ronan had warned me I'd miss the black of night. He'd known, just as he seemed to know and understand so many

other things about me. Really, if I'd thought about it, I could've said he was one of my first friends.

So I tried not to think about it.

Instead, I stared out across the roiling gray sea, pretending I didn't have any use for hot guys and soulful looks. And who was I kidding? I missed Ronan. Like, really missed him. Not just as a teacher, though I'd have traded just about any other Tracer for Otto. But something was—I don't know—missing without him around.

Like Ronan's steady forest-colored eyes, always so focused on me.

"Okay, so you're not thinking about Ronan," Emma said, and I heard the skepticism in her voice. She shifted, considering. Long speeches weren't her way, and she spoke slowly, choosing her words with care. "It just seems like you've been . . . distracted since the Directorate Challenge. I used to see you and Ronan talking a lot. But then there was the competition, and you won, and then I didn't see you two together anymore, and I thought maybe . . ."

Emotion stabbed me—so sharp and sudden, I had to scrunch my face against it.

She thought maybe I might miss him? She thought I'd taken him for granted? She'd guessed I was planning to make a break for it, but the prospect of never seeing him again made my chest feel as if my internal organs had somehow drifted out of place?

She'd be right on all counts.

I cut her off, saying, "I just have some questions for him, is all."

Like, a bunch of questions. Questions I'd never ask, of course. I'd won the competition, beating Lilac and winning a trip off-island and a shot at escape. But afterward, I'd caught him watching me, and something about the look in his eyes—regret? grief? longing?—haunted me.

What had the look meant? Did he know I planned to escape?

"Do you think he's jealous of Alcántara?" Emma's voice was barely a whisper, which was the wisest course when discussing a vampire—particularly Hugo de Rosas Alcántara, of the fourteenth-century Spanish royal court.

“Jealous?” It would imply there was something between Alcántara and me. Though I did suspect he’d had something to do with my winning. And then there was the way the vampire had scooped up my broken body to hold me close after my victory. But if Ronan was jealous, it’d mean he was interested in me. My belly churned. “No way. Ronan’s not jealous.”

He’d probably just been disturbed by the glimpse of my dark side, perceiving the secret, savage pleasure I’d taken in beating my rival. Because even I had trouble considering that. “Maybe the whole fight-to-the-death thing weirded him out more than he let on.”

Emma solemnly shook her head. “He’s more used to that than we are. You two are friends. He wanted you to win.”

“Friends?” I inhaled sharply. Friends was a dangerous word. Alcántara had warned me about friends. And besides, it wasn’t very friendly how Ronan had gotten me here in the first place.

I scraped my sandy fingers through my hair, cursing the jumble of thoughts in my head. I finger-combed some more, this time cursing my hair—such a hassle since Lilac burnt off my braid, leaving me with a shaggy, shoulder-length do. “Stupid hair.”

What I really wanted to say was stupid Ronan.

Although he and I had forged a sort of alliance, the memory of his initial betrayal made me surly. When we first met, he’d touched me, and I still felt his fingers hot on my skin. And yet the reason he’d touched me wasn’t because he’d wanted to—not because he was a guy and I was a girl—but because it’d been his job to touch me. It’d been his job to make me so warm and gullible and dopey that I’d found myself on an airplane bound for nowhere.

I thought of the new girls Ronan was out there gathering. And touching. Every one of them a total teen hottie, no doubt.

“Great,” I said. “Either way, he’s out there, finding new friends for us to spar with, snipe at, stab in the back, and eventually kill.”

Emma stared at me. If it weren’t for her blinking, I swear she could’ve been mistaken for a sphinx.

“Spit it out,” I told her.

“I still think it has to do with Master Alcántara.”

This time I was the one glancing around nervously. “Please stop saying his name. I’m scared you might summon him or something, like Voldemort.”

But I worried she was right. It did seem Alcántara had taken a liking to me. Whenever I caught the vampire looking at me—and I seemed to catch him a lot—it was as if he was plumbing the depths of my soul, puzzling through some sort of master plan written there.

It was hard not to feel disturbed by the whole thing, and not in an entirely unpleasant way. I mean, Alcántara was young and he was hot . . . or at least he had been several hundred years ago. But he was a bit like a panther—darkly seductive, and yet a predator nonetheless. To be feared and, according to Ronan at least, avoided.

“Yes,” Emma agreed, “best not to call attention to yourself.”

“I’ll say. But there’ll be no avoiding him when the time comes for our mission.”

“Do you know yet what you’ll be doing?”

“I don’t know where we’re going, I don’t know what we’ll be doing, and I don’t know why we’ll be doing it. All I know is I have to wait till the end of summer term to do it. Alcántara insists I need more training.”

What I didn’t tell Emma was that if all went according to plan, I wouldn’t get too much of a chance to consider our mission anyway, since I’d be too busy getting the hell off this rock.

That’s right: escape. It was all I thought about now. I’d begun considering it pretty much the moment I arrived, but then I got lulled into a sense of security, of family. I had smart teachers, was learning cool things, and making a couple of the closest friends I’d ever had in my life. I’d begun to believe that being a part of something—being a Watcher—might give me a sense of belonging, like finding the family I’d never had.

Until the Challenge, when I’d seen what the Isle of Night was really about, which was kill or be killed. I’d triumphed, and sure, partly it was because I was

smart, but I wasn't as strong as some of the other girls, and I suspected it was only Alcántara's help that'd pushed me over the top. I'd triumphed over Lilac, and she'd disappeared, and now I'd begun to worry that maybe I should cut my losses and find a way out of here before the vampires changed their minds and decided I should be dead, too.

I tried to think proactively about it all, but my mind kept wondering what might've happened to Lilac's body after I beat her, and how mine might suffer the same fate if any escape attempt were to fail.

There was movement around us, and we followed everyone's eyes up the beach. Tracer Otto was approaching, carrying burlap bags.

My shoulders sagged. "Crap. Adolph brought the sandbags." Sandbags were a pleasant little pastime wherein we scooped handfuls of sand into bags, and proceeded to run around in circles, carrying them over our heads. "Arduous and pointless."

A half smile quirked Emma's lips—the equivalent of a belly laugh from my redheaded friend. But then Otto turned our way, and she bristled. "Shh. Here he comes."

I tucked my head toward hers, quietly singing, " 'The hills are aliiiiive . . . ' "

She shot me a panicked glare. "You, hush!"

I smiled placidly as the other Acari joined us to sit in a row on the sand. I leaned over again, pitching my voice to the barest whisper. " 'Viss ze sound of muuuuziic . . . ' "

Tracer Otto stormed up the beach and proceeded to pace up and down the line, dropping the empty bags at our feet and instructing us in his best drill sergeant impression. "You will fill the bags," he said, in a decidedly German accent—all he was missing was a little whistle around his neck. "Without delay."

He reached the end of the line, and as he turned, I couldn't resist murmuring, "Vizout delayyy."

"Acari Drew." A mellow voice spoke from behind me.

Oh God. Too late, I noticed the shadow that had fallen on me. My skin rippled with goose bumps, as if a chill breeze were at my back instead of a

vampire.

I looked over my shoulder and had to force myself not to startle when I saw how close Alcántara had managed to come behind me. Stupid. Things like that could get a girl killed in my world.

He stood there, tall but not towering, with bottomless dark eyes, and smooth black hair that brushed the collar of his black leather jacket. He looked like a beautiful indie rocker . . . carved out of marble.

I hopped to my feet as reverently as one could when wearing damp, sand-encrusted gym shorts. It struck me that all the other Acari had grown quiet around me, and even Tracer Otto was standing in respectful silence. They knew as well as I did how the sudden appearance of a vampire could mean somebody's imminent evisceration. I only hoped it wouldn't be mine.

I cleared my throat, speaking slowly enough to ensure avoiding any tongue twisting. "Master Alcántara."

One side of his mouth crooked up in a wicked half smile, and I didn't understand how it was possible to feel cold on my skin but so hot in my belly, all at the same time. "Acari Drew," he repeated, stretching my name out on his tongue. "You have no taste for sandbags?"

Crap crap crap. I wracked my brain. What, exactly, might the correct answer be? No, sir, and I'd be a troublemaker; Yes, sir, and I'd be an intellectual dullard.

"So silent all of a sudden?" Though Alcántara addressed his next words to Otto, he held my gaze, speaking slowly as though imparting his message with significance. "Tracer Otto, it appears young Miss Drew doesn't relish the gritty futility of your selected workout." His smile grew broader. "I think perhaps Acari Drew craves more of an intellectual challenge."

Alarms shrilled in my head. Had he read my thoughts? Or was it just a weird coincidence that he'd spoken my mind?

"I . . . Yes," I stammered, second-guessing myself. What's the right answer? It came to me, and I buried my nerves with a bravado delivery. "And no. The challenges I crave are of both the mental and physical variety."

Alcántara barked out a satisfied laugh, and I felt a hot blush creep from my

chest to my hairline. How was it his laughter made my words echo in such a naughtily suggestive way?

Eager to change the subject, I glanced to the limp sandbag at my feet. "Is it time for the . . . for these?" At that moment, I'd have traded running up and down the beach with a sandbag over my head for Alcántara's uncomfortable stare any day.

"Yes—"

"No," Alcántara said, speaking over a visibly shaken Tracer Otto. "I am finding this exercise too . . . vulgar for Acari Drew." The vampire's voice was smooth as brandy, with a faint, sultry Spanish accent, his murmured "vulgar" managing to make sandbags sound like the crassest endeavor ever conceived by man.

I snuck Alcántara a tentative look, uncertain whether to feel thankful or terrified at just what other activity might be in store for me. The glint in those black eyes decided it, telling me the appropriate emotion was definitely terror.

"There is a different assignment for Acari Drew. Today Acari Drew begins an . . . independent study."

CHAPTER TWO

Breathe in, breathe out, foot up, foot down. We wound along the trail leading from the beach back to campus, and it was taking all my concentration not to make an ass out of myself.

Why vampires didn't choose to drive was beyond me—instead they just seemed to appear, and usually at inopportune times. Or, as I was currently discovering with Alcántara, they simply glided from one place to another, as though navigating a dinner salon instead of a rocky, rugged, uneven isle.

Stumbling a little, I amped up the mantra looping in my head. You are not an ass. You are sophisticated, graceful, and bright. Watch the rock—

While my eyes were on one rock, I tripped on another, stubbing the toe of my

sneaker hard and toppling to the ground, looking pretty much as unsophisticated and ungraceful as a girl could get.

“Shi—” I swallowed my curse, quickly correcting myself. Vampires were old-school in every sense of the word, and Ronan was constantly warning me about my swearing. “Sh-shoes. My feet are sandy in my shoes. That’s why I tripped.”

“Cuidado, querida.”

I dusted off my hands, as embarrassed by my lame excuse as I was by my epic fall. Picking the sharp pebbles from my knees, I mumbled, “So much for graceful.”

I heard a low, rumbling chuckle overhead. The shadows shifted, and Alcántara came into view, squatting before me. “If you but relax, the legs will be as supple as the mind.”

I felt his deft hands on my knee and elbow, and before I knew it, he’d arranged me so I was sitting before him. I was horrified, sprawled there in my damp cotton shorts and oversized sweatshirt—my legs seemed extra pale, the flesh extra mottled with bruises. But it got worse, because he took one of my sneakers in his hand, unlaced it, and slipped it free, and then the other, until both my feet were pale and naked before him.

I felt as if he’d bared more than just my pruny toes.

I’d lied—I didn’t trip because I had sand in my shoe; I tripped because my nerves made me clumsy. But if he sensed my excuse, he didn’t show it. Instead, Alcántara took turns cupping each heel, gently sweeping away every last bit of sand. The sensation of his hands rubbing rough sand over the delicate arch of my foot sent electric shocks zinging up my body.

I couldn’t have budged if I wanted to, I was so paralyzed watching his every move. He worked in silence, eventually lacing me back up, and as I came back to myself, he was sliding his hand over mine, his grip cool and firm on my buzzing skin.

He stood, pulling me with him, and I became aware of his nascent power. Hugo de Rosas Alcántara might have been lean, but he was strong.

Those dark eyes met mine. “Better?”

"I'm feeling much more . . . uh . . . supple now, yes, thank you." I felt the blood dump into my cheeks.

Great. First Alcántara witnessed me stripped of dignity, and now my violently blushing cheeks would make him so thirsty, he wouldn't be able to fight the urge to bite me and drink me dry. Well, maybe he'll make it quick. . . .

But instead he smiled. "You must have a care," he told me with that devil's grin. He bent over the rock that'd tripped me and easily pried it from the dirt. He held it before him in his outstretched palm. "We cannot have the best fighter on this island downed by a simple stone."

And then he crushed it to powder.

He dumped the dust from his palm, his fingers sprinkling it into the breeze. "You are working with me now, and we must let nothing stand in your way."

It was a kind thought, and yet menace had infused the words. I got the sense that Alcántara would allow nothing to distract me—not obstacles, not fear. And especially not people.

"Thank you," I managed. If I'd known winning the Directorate Challenge would mean this, I might've rethought things a bit.

He gave me a courtly nod in reply, strolling on, and I did my best to keep up, despite my trembling legs.

We walked, and time passed, and despite our little foot interlude, his features remained as still as marble. I imagined that, to an immortal, fifteen minutes of quiet was like the blink of an eye, but to me, the silence was excruciating.

I distracted myself by carefully scanning the path as we went, all the while trying to discern whether Master Alcántara breathed and wondering if his heart beat. Would I ever feel comfortable enough to ask?

Not daring to look straight at him, I snuck a peek at his legs and feet. Black denim. Thighs that were not too skinny, not too muscle-y. Simple ankle-high boots in a leather that wasn't too shiny, nor too weathered. This vampire might've looked the part of an indie rocker, but his attention to detail struck me as studied. He'd have been just as pitch-perfect in the seventeenth century, or the nineteenth, or forty years ago for that matter.

I stifled the nervous laugh that threatened to bubble free, picturing Alcántara in a seventies leisure suit and paisley shirt.

Surely he sensed my shifting gaze — nothing escaped the vampires — but still he remained silent, until it began to scare me, certain as I was that I'd start giggling at any moment. Unable to bear it any longer, I asked the question that'd dogged me since I won the Directorate Award. "So, what's my, uh, independent study, anyway?"

I knew our assignment would take us off-island, and my mind raced with all sorts of James Bond possibilities. Would I learn to fly a plane? Ski while balancing a rifle over my shoulder? Hack into state-of-the-art computer systems?

His black eyes went flat. "You really must work on your diction, Acari Drew. You are lovely, your wit amuses, and your mind has great potential, but your language betrays a certain lack of sophistication."

"Umm . . ." I began, earning a sharp look from the vampire. I swallowed hard, trying again. "I mean to say, what will be my independent study this term?"

We reached our destination, and I'd been so preoccupied, I hadn't noticed we were standing in front of my most detested spot on campus — the Arts Pavilion. It was a ridiculous name, and I was sure he'd named it, the head of the arts department and my least favorite person, dead or undead: Master Alrik Dagursson.

"Wait. What are we doing here?"

"I am delivering you to your independent study."

"I thought my independent study would be with you."

Embers smoldered to life in those coal black eyes. "I am deeply flattered, querida." He stroked a finger down my cheek, and I held my breath, vowing to guard my words more carefully from now on. "We shall have many hours together, you and I. But first you must begin with Master Dagursson."

I cleared my throat, focusing on the matter at hand and not the silken feel of his cool finger on my hot skin. "But he's my decorum teacher."

“And so the obvious choice to delve deeper into topics of manners, dining, and dance.”

“But I’m in my gym clothes.” I squirmed. My shorts were almost dry, but a thin layer of sand was caked to my chilly butt cheeks.

“And so an Acari learns to adjust.”

I’d registered the warning in his tone and tempered my voice. I had yet to figure out who these vampires were and what their goal was. I’d gathered that they were fighting some unnamed foe, which was why they needed to train us Watchers in the first place. But dancing? “I’ll need to know . . . manners for our mission?”

He brushed a wisp of hair from my eyes. “Yes. Among other skills.”

My heart leapt to my throat. Had he meant to give the word a double meaning, or was I just a hormonally overactive teenager?

“When you blush so, you resemble a cat caught with the cream.” He pressed the backs of his fingers to my cheek as though fascinated. “Such an innocent you are. Yours, such peculiar circumstances. You have been touched by man, yet you remain unsullied. Tempered like steel, with what wisdom you possess hammered into you.”

To call getting smacked around hammered with wisdom seemed a stretch, but I had no choice but to play along. Besides, it beat analyzing his other subtext, namely the whole unsullied-virgin thing. “My dad as blacksmith—that’s one way to interpret it.”

He chuckled at that. “Yes, a very pretty reading of an ugly childhood.” Cupping my chin, he added somberly, “Such a pretty creature demands no less.”

His hand migrated to my hair, twirling a lock between his fingers. “It’s a shame, really, what Acari Lilac did to your hair. Tan rubia. So very pale and fine. But it shall grow back, no?”

I managed a nod. Always the damned hair attracted attention. “I’m told blondes have more fun, though I’ll believe it when I see it.”

But instead of looking amused, he stared blankly. When he spoke again, his voice was subdued. “Do you know a vampire’s hair does not grow? This notion

that our hair, our nails, grow on after death — sadly, it is a myth.”

But then his voice strengthened again, his tone stern, laser focused, and back on topic. “I know you dislike topics in decorum. As I also know, I’ve shown you favor that some might deem unacceptable. And so I tell you now, Acari Drew, you shall dance because I bid it.” He still held a swath of my hair between his thumb and finger, and he gave the merest tug, holding it taut from my scalp. “You shall focus on topics in decorum because our mission requires it. And the first of these topics is dance.”

I tried to keep my face stoic but must’ve failed, because he added, “You can dance, Alrik has assured me.” He let go of my hair, and with it went the edge from his voice. “The key to elegance on the dance floor is to believe you are beautiful.”

“Beautiful,” I repeated tonelessly, wondering what sort of mantra I’d need to withstand a summer full of elegance. With Dagursson.

“You can say it, you can repeat it” — he paused long enough to make me once again question how many thoughts of mine he knew — “but you must believe you are beautiful. You must feel it, here.” He grazed a finger just above my left breast.

I held my breath, and my heart thumped to meet his touch, as though beckoned.

Alcántara let his hand linger, his fingertip gently pressing down on the soft swell of my flesh. My skin always felt cool in his presence, but this time flames licked up my legs, dancing into my very core.

I didn’t want him, though. Not in a sexual way. Not precisely.

The yearning I felt was more for the glimpse of something dark and forbidden. I wanted to go there in my mind, but never could I ever imagine going there in body.

The strains of some cloyingly classical tripe drifted through an open window. I fought the urge to grimace. How was it I found myself in this preposterous situation? I had to leave one vampire because another awaited me.

Alcántara took a step back. Without dropping my gaze, he tilted his chin in

an elegant nod of farewell. “Until we meet again, querida.”

He turned and walked away. Leaving me to wonder at the mess I’d gotten myself into. And how I might get myself back out again.

CHAPTER THREE

I stared at that bizarrely skinny back and steeled myself. Master Alrik Dagursson—the creepiest of the creeps. As far as I could tell, he’d been some sort of Viking in his time, though weren’t Vikings supposed to be all big and brawny? If anything, Dagursson looked like an aging rocker after several hard-lived decades of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Except maybe not the sex part.

He turned in that felt-you-looking sort of way, and I darted my eyes away. A few other students were there, all in their standard uniform—girls in gray leggings and tunics, boys in black denim and wool sweaters. I became acutely aware of the wedgie my damp cotton granny briefs had deposited between my sandy cheeks. I forced myself to stand tall and ignore it, but I felt like a moron.

I scanned the dance studio for a familiar face. And find one I did. I felt my face explode into a smile, because pretty much one of the only things that could make a special seminar in decorum palatable was my friend Yasuo.

“Yo.” He gave me a huge grin, apparently as happy as I was that we were in this together.

I made a beeline straight for him, and he scanned my clothes, cocking his head in amusement. “What’s with the outfit, Blondie?”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, feeling exposed standing there in my shorts and sweatshirt. “Alcántara pulled me from Tracer Otto’s gym class.”

Yasuo raised a brow.

“Don’t ask.” I stole a surreptitious glance at the other students. “Don’t get me wrong—I am totally thrilled that I’m not in this alone, but what’s everyone doing here?”

“Remedial dance.” He showed off an impromptu—and awkward—box step,

and I saw immediately why he had to put in extra time on the dance floor.

I smiled. "Yas can fight, but he can't dance?"

"Oh baby, Yas can dance. He just don't do . . ."

"Ballroom?"

"Yeah. That one." He extended his arms, combining a fluid wave with a little step-step slide. "And they won't let me pop and lock for extra credit."

"Go figure." I shook my head and had to admit he looked pretty awesome—like a chiseled, tall, and taut Japanese pop star. I gave him a playfully snarky smile. "So, do the smooth moves come naturally, or is hip-hop part of the Los Angeles public school curriculum?"

"Oh, Blondie, this is all one-hundred-percent natural, Yasuo Ito vampire mojo. All the better to wow the ladies."

"Yasuo Ito vampire Trainee mojo," I corrected him. Like the girls aspiring to become Watchers, a bunch of teenaged guys on this island were training to become vampires. The vampiric process was kept pretty secret from us Acari, but it seemed to me that a lot of the guys didn't survive it. And though Yas wouldn't give me any clues, every once in a while I could sense his anxiety about the whole thing. "Seems to me you're still a long way from vampiredom."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Ouch."

I sensed a shift in the energy around me, as if class was getting ready to start, and I stifled a giggle, whispering, "Yeah, because you're so sensitive."

"Attention." Dagursson stood at the front of the studio, clapping his bizarrely long, bony hands. His eyes swept the room, pausing on me for the merest second. If I knew Master Dag, he'd hate the sight of cotton, particularly damp, sandy cotton.

I shuddered, and Yas leaned down to whisper in my ear. "Dude looks like the Crypt Keeper's ugly cousin."

I concealed a smile, glad he was there to share my pain. "Sucks that the whole vampire-mirror-reflection thing is a myth." The mirrored walls at the front of the room made it seem as if there were ten thousand Master Dagurssons standing before us.

“You will each choose a partner,” Dagursson said.

Yas and I simultaneously stepped closer to each other’s side. Make that beyond glad he was there.

“Today we shall perfect the Viennese waltz.”

We simultaneously took one step apart, and at the look of horror on my friend’s face, I had to choke back a laugh, which unfortunately ended up sounding more like a snort.

“Viennese waltz?” I glanced up at Yasuo. He was so tall, and I was so not. “How, exactly, is that supposed to work? You’re too big.”

He put a hand to his heart. “I never knew you cared.”

I gave him a piercing look. “Shut up. It wasn’t supposed to be a compliment.”

“Get into position.” Dagursson’s voice bounded off the walls.

Yas and I obediently faced each other. He shook his head regretfully, taking my right hand in his left. “D., you slay me.”

“I think I know who slays you, and it ain’t me.” I’d seen how close he and Emma had gotten by the end of last semester, leaning closer than necessary to talk and catching each other’s eyes in little private jokes.

His right hand gripped hard on my waist. “Stop right there, baby girl.”

The music cut out, and we shut up in the sudden silence, waiting as Dagursson fiddled with his iPod. The sight was so weird, my mouth smiled, but my brows frowned. Apparently vamps liked cool tech toys, too—though, for all I knew, it was the iPod that’d been confiscated from me last semester. They’d never consider letting us have any gadgets, and they kept the computer lab under lock and key.

The music started, and some standard-issue Strauss piped into the room.

Ugh. Not on my iPod.

“Listen carefully.” Dagursson began to clap those freaky hands again, beating in time. “One-two-three, one-two-three. Do you hear the triple beat? Gentlemen, you’ll step with your left foot on the first beat. Ready?” He zipped back to the beginning of the song, shouting, “Four, five, six . . .”

Yas stumbled on the very first step, and it took a moment for us to find our

rhythm. "I feel like the freaking sugarplum fairy," he grumbled.

"That's ballet, not ballroom." Yas took too big a side step and earned a snarly look from me when I tripped on his foot. "That you're almost a foot taller than me doesn't help."

Yas wagged his eyebrows. "Not my fault I'm such a fabulous specimen."

"Spare me." I really was losing patience, and it wasn't just because of Yasuo. I wondered whether I'd be able to dance with any partner, or if I was just that lame. Was that why Alcántara insisted I take this class? Not because of our mission, but because he'd somehow found out I sucked so royally?

But then I remembered that last weird exchange of ours. He'd told me to believe I was beautiful. That the key to a good dance was believing my own elegance, my own grace.

I concentrated hard, and we danced in silence for a time, Yas mouthing the words One-two-three, one-two-three as he did a fairly clumsy job of a box step. "So why do we need to know how to dance, anyway?" he finally asked. But talking messed up his rhythm, and we both had to do a quickstep back into time with the music.

I shrugged in answer, which seemed to throw Yasuo off again, and so I snickered. "Maybe we'll have vampire prom."

He shot me an appalled look. "What is this, Twilight?"

"How should I know? I'm still getting over supposedly needing this for my mission."

"Maybe you'll have to dance with Alcántara," he teased.

The prospect gave me the chills. "Don't even say it.

Seriously, Yas. Literally, don't say it. Last time Emma mentioned his name, he appeared."

"One-two-three," he whispered, then added distractedly, "Hey, the guy saved you from gym class."

I guessed he had a point. "Yeah, and that creepy Herr Otto."

"Tell me about it," Yas said. "He's the dude who brought me in, you know."

My brows shot up. "Seriously?"

Yasuo had lost his mind when he saw his Yakuza father kill his mother. And then he'd lost his options when he turned around and killed his father. But I hadn't realized Tracer Otto was the one who'd found and retrieved him, and somehow I had a hard time picturing Otto trawling Hollywood Boulevard for prospective students.

I was about to comment, when I noticed Yas was doing strange things with his mouth as he concentrated. I shoved a little space between us. "What are you doing?"

He gave me a blank look, and so I mimicked the look of his tongue pulsing beneath his closed lips.

"Ohhh," he said with a grin, and then he bared his teeth, wiggling his canines with his tongue. "I'm gettin' my fangs, Blondie."

"Eesh." The sight of it took me aback. I'd never known how the vampires got their fangs, and here was the explanation right in front of me. The canine teeth became loose and fell out; then shiny new fangs grew in their place—we'd been administered regular doses of vampire blood since arrival, and it looked like this was one of the side effects for the boys. "Crazy. Wonder if the tooth fairy will come for you?"

We shared a smile that froze as we realized Dagursson stood at our shoulders. "It is my turn to dance with Acari Drew."

Yas gave my hand a quick squeeze, then with a respectful bow of his head, stepped back to let Dagursson cut in.

I tried to clear my face of expression, because I had a big picture of what happened to Acari who displayed revulsion in the face of vampire greatness. But instead of thinking about the ritual of the dance, I was concentrating too hard on looking calm, steeling myself for the moment his skin would touch mine, and so when Dagursson took one big side step, I didn't think; I just instinctively mirrored his action.

His beady eyes narrowed to slits. "No, Acari Drew. This is the time at which a man bows to his partner. I step like so"—he swept his hand, repeating the elegant side step—"and you curtsy."

I did my best curtsy, feeling like a total moron. Dagursson made an indistinguishable mmph sound, which I assumed wasn't complimentary.

He stepped closer and took me in his arms, and the proximity so freaked me out, I had to look away. To my surprise he praised me. "Very prettily done, Acari. Partners do not gaze into each other's eyes. A lady should tilt her chin up" —he pinched my chin between his bony finger and thumb to adjust my head — "up, up, up. Look over my shoulder."

He scowled at my hand resting on his upper arm. "That is all wrong. Your fingers are like little sausages. Extend them." I stretched my fingers out as long as they could go, listening to him drone on, "You are small. Compactly made. You must try to elongate your body as much as possible."

Jerk. He made me sound like a minifridge, when really I was just petite, thankyouverymuch.

The song was ending, and a new one was beginning; I braced myself for whatever saccharine musical history we were to be subjected to next. I needed to hear only a few notes before I knew. God help me. It was "Edelweiss."

I bit my tongue not to laugh. And then with the effort of not laughing, I needed to laugh even more. I thought I must've been turning purple from the effort.

To make matters worse, Dagursson began to sing under his breath to the music, but rather than the lyrics, he chanted, "Onnne, twooo, threeee . . . onnne, twooo, threeee . . . back, side, together . . . forward, side, together . . ."

I tried to focus, but I was only aware of the feel of his cold skin, one hand holding mine, the other a gentle touch on my back. He was close enough to smell, too, and it was a strange, blank scent, like paper, or powder.

He knew my thoughts were elsewhere and scolded me. "You must empty your mind, Acari Drew. The Viennese waltz is the most classic, the most elegant of dances, but you must feel it, not think it."

But rather than take his advice, I considered the creature holding me. Despite his hollow-cheeked and generally cadaverous looks, his movements were graceful and smooth. It blew my mind to think he'd been alive when

society had danced its first waltz — had already been alive for hundreds of years when ladies were donning tall white wigs for the first time and pasting black beauty marks on their white-powdered faces.

My mind was whirring away, and I was on autopilot.

But Dagursson was getting his groove on. “Now you will turn and open your body,” he was saying, and then he spun me.

I was so not prepared to spin.

I tripped. And I was unable to stop the words that burst from my lips. Two crisp, clear pops of sound. “Oh shit.”

Dagursson turned to ice and froze me with him, holding me apart as I balanced precariously on one foot. His hand at my back was firm now, the only thing preventing me from tumbling to the floor. But his other hand darted out, and a long, razor-sharp fingernail slashed my lip.

I swallowed my gasp, then licked my lower lip, tasting blood.

“A reminder, Acari Drew, to speak like a lady.”

He pushed me away from him, and I stumbled a few clumsy steps backward, miraculously managing to stay on my feet. “You must master your change step if you ever wish to dance proficiently.” Dagursson stared for a moment at my split lip. “Attend to that. We cannot allow facial scarring.”

And with one last clap of those freaky Crypt Keeper hands, he dismissed class.

Yasuo and I bolted for the exit, and I burst ahead of him, gulping the cold, fresh air. Only then did I realize that my thundering heart felt ready to bruise the inside of my chest.

Yas caught up to me, uncertain what to say. “That was . . .”

“Yeah.” I shivered. “Weird.”

We headed a ways down the quad path, and although I was eager to put the whole episode behind me, Yasuo was still clearly uncomfortable.

I elbowed him. “What? Did you think he was going to slice up my belly instead of just my lip?” Because we’d all seen that happen — I’d seen it on my first day here.

He nodded to my mouth. "It's a little . . . uncomfortable."

"Whaddya mean uncomfortable? I'm the one who got slashed by Dag's pinkie."

"You know, D." Yas was nearly writhing with discomfort now, staring at my mouth. "The blood."

"Is it that bad?" I licked my lip to see if it was still bleeding.

Yasuo darted his eyes away. "Don't do that."

"What is your problem?" I stared at his profile, and then it hit me. "Ohhhh. Is it hard for you to see blood?" Duh.

"Yeah. I'm only a Trainee, but already we can . . . We have . . . There's a hunger, you know?"

I grabbed his arm and playfully pursed my lips. "Want a taste, big boy?"

Yas recoiled, flinching away from me. He looked angry and just a little disgusted. "I said don't do that."

I stared blankly, totally confused now.

Yasuo sighed, sounding pained. "Listen, D. It's a hunger, but with the blood, it's more than a hunger. Like, it's a little . . . It's kind of—I don't know—sexual."

Floored, I was unable to say more than, "Oh." I mean, how does one go back to normal after a statement like that?

But then he made it worse by trying to dig out from his hole. "And you know I think you're pretty and all, but I just don't feel like that—"

"Stop." I put my hand up. "Seriously. Stop. So not an issue, okay?"

He drew in a sharp breath and let it out. "Okay."

We were such a lame pair, both of us blushing furiously now, and we upped our pace, walking briskly to the dining hall. The silence was uncomfortable, and I felt how each of us was wracking our brains to come up with some genial, plain-vanilla chatter.

Yasuo braved it first, though his voice was tight when he spoke. "So. You swimming later?"

"Why?" My answer was automatic. Ronan was MIA, and swim lessons with him were the only reason I'd ever get in the water. That, and maybe a gun to my

head.

Ronan. Damn the little pang I felt in my chest. I wondered if Ronan ever had hungers. . . .

I shrugged away the thought, quickly adding, "There's no way I swim if I don't have to."

"But didn't you hear? Ronan is back."

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