

CHAPTER 1

THE *ONE DAY I TAKE* off from training with Dad just *had* to be the day when I get ambushed by a bunch of vampires. I had been so looking forward to spending the day lying in my bed catching up on my reading, because this week's training had resulted in more than a few injuries that hurt even with my powerful half-vampire body. Even though Dad was twice my age, he really knew how and where to hit hard when he wanted, apparently under the assumption that I could handle it due to my body being technically stronger than his.

In any case, I had been looking forward to resting after church today and had even taken a shortcut through the back alleyways of Greensboro, the town I lived in, in order to get back to my apartment faster. Of course, I'd been sticking to back alleyways a lot recently, ever since I became a half-vampire, because they were usually darker than the main streets, which meant I didn't have to risk exposing myself to the sun and burning my skin or outright dying. I still didn't know exactly how much direct sunlight I could take, being a half-vampire and all, but I knew that direct sunlight hurt and I wanted to avoid it as much as possible.

Prior to my transformation, I used to avoid back alleys and dark places because I didn't want to get mugged or worse by random street thugs. After my transformation, however, I felt a lot safer traveling these places during the day. I'd been accosted a few times by idiots who thought I was easy pickings because I was a thin young woman in her twenties, but they usually learned their mistake when I would send them flying with a spell or leave them lying on the ground with a well-placed kick. Often times I just needed to flash my fangs or lift my sunglasses just high enough for them to see my red eyes and they would run away screaming about demons. I guess criminals really are a cowardly, superstitious lot after all.

But all this scaring normal human criminals must have made me complacent, because I should have noticed the pale-skinned, dark clothes-wearing men who followed me from church that afternoon. Unfortunately, all I could think about at the time was Pastor Jones'—who was the pastor at my church—sermon on repentance and how great my dark apartment was going to be after I got home. I was also distracted by my blood thirst due to not having drunk any blood since breakfast, which was not as bad as it used to be but still crept up on me every now and then. Kind of like my craving for chocolate.

So when I found myself trapped in an alleyway, with two vampires behind me and two vampires before me, I cursed myself for not noticing. Dad had taught me the importance of situational awareness and I had gotten better at it than when I was just a normal human, but my life had been so quiet for the past month or so that I had let my skills lapse.

I didn't know who these vampires worked for. Like all vampires, they were pale-skinned, with blood red eyes and fangs which were as sharp as knives. These ones were skinnier than some I'd seen, but I knew that physical appearance meant little when dealing with vampires,

because most vampires had unnatural physical strength that was not reflected by the size of their muscles. They looked like Newborns to me, the lowest rank in the Hierarchy, but even Newborns could be a threat if you weren't careful.

I normally wouldn't be so worried about killing them, but unfortunately I didn't bring my silver sword, Domination, with me today, because when Pastor Jones talks about wielding the 'sword of God,' I'm pretty sure that wasn't an invitation to bring your sword to church. It was possible to kill vampires without silver, but I still wasn't as good at magic as I was at swordplay, which meant my chances of killing these goons and getting out of here alive were low.

Nonetheless, I summoned two fireballs in my hands and looked up and down the alley. The vampires had not moved an inch since they blocked off my path, but that meant little because vampires could move very quickly when they wanted to.

"All right," I said, speaking in an effort to loosen my nerves, "who do you guys work for? Are you from the Vampire Council? Is the Lamb doctrine no longer in effect and am I fair game now or something?"

It made sense if they were from the Council. It had been well over a month since Lucius—a vampire I knew who was more handsome than any vampire had a right to be—had invoked something called the 'Lamb doctrine,' which basically meant he had been arrested by the Order of Vampires in my place. I still didn't know what Lucius' current status was, but I had been told that I would be safe from the Vampire Council for at least a month while Lucius was being tried for my crimes. That didn't mean that these guys were from the Council, of course, but it would make sense if they were.

One of the vampires stepped forward. He was basically identical to the other three, except with curlier hair and jagged claws. "We do not work for the Council, half-vampire. We have come from someone else, who is aware of your power and wishes to make you an offer."

"An offer?" I said. "What kind of offer are we talking about here?"

"An offer to join our master," said the vampire. "Our master is seeking to increase his own power and he wishes to have the power of a half-vampire on his side in order to do that. Being a half-vampire means you're quite unique."

"Yeah, I know," I said, "but I'm not particularly interested in working for your 'master,' especially without knowing who he is."

"Our master gave us strict orders to keep his identity secret from you," said the vampire, "at least until you agree to meet him."

"Sorry, but I'm not one for blind dates," I said. "Go back and tell your master that I'm waiting for the guy God has prepared for me, which probably isn't a vampire."

The vampire shrugged. "Our master did not say you would have any say in the matter. If you refuse to come with us voluntarily, then we will have to force you to come with us."

"Straight to the point," I said. "Well, at least I don't have to guess your intentions."

The curly-haired vampire gestured at me. Its fellow vampires rushed toward me from either side, but I immediately hurled my fireballs in both directions. Unfortunately, the vampires dodged my fireballs easily, but I summoned more fireballs and kept shooting them both ways. But aim was off, because I couldn't aim in two directions at once, and so I ended up hitting everything *but* the vampires.

So I cut off the fireballs and instead summoned an energy barrier around my body, just like Dad taught me. The barrier blocked the slashing claws of the vampires, who looked confused at

the sudden appearance of this strange barrier I had summoned. But I then thrust my arms out to my sides, causing the barrier to expand and smash against the vampires, sending them flying everywhere.

I shut off the barrier and turned to run away, but then the vampires recovered from the attack and flew back toward me on their wings. They landed around me and started to slash and stab at me, forcing me to dodge their attacks as best as I could. I ducked and fired a fireball into the face of the vampire directly in front of me, causing it to screech in pain and stagger away from me, but then another vampire slammed its shoulder into me and I fell onto the ground.

One of the vampires tried to stomp its boot on my face, but I rolled out of the way in the nick of time and got to my feet a few feet away. I raised my hand to throw another fireball, but then two cold hands wrapped around my wrists and jerked my arms backward. I looked over my shoulder in surprise and saw the curly-haired vampire who had been speaking to me standing there, his fingers tightly clinging to my wrists.

“You’re a quick one, half-vampire,” said the curly-haired vampire, “but our master wouldn’t be happy if you escaped us.”

The curly-haired vampire slammed his head into the back of mine. It was a harsh blow, much harsher than I expected, and I would have fallen onto the ground if the curly-haired vampire hadn’t been holding me up. Then he twisted my arms behind my back and slammed me onto the street, causing me to cry out in pain. The rest of his vampire friends soon surrounded us, including the one I had thrown a fireball at, whose face was still smoking, though it didn’t seem bothered by that.

“Now, we’re going to knock you out to make you easier to take back to the master,” said the curly-haired vampire. “We’ll try to make sure it doesn’t hurt, but we can’t promise anything.”

I struggled against the curly-haired vampire, but he had me in a very awkward position. I couldn’t use magic, because the pain in my twisted arms made me unable to concentrate. I looked up to see one of the vampires pulling back its boot, probably to kick me in the face, which would definitely knock me out and probably break my nose and some teeth at the same time.

Right before the vampire could kick me, however, his head suddenly went flying off his shoulders. The vampire’s body collapsed, and as it did so, I thought I saw a man wielding an ax before he suddenly vanished, though that might have just been my imagination.

“What was that?” said the curly-haired vampire, fear entering his voice for the first time. “Who did that?”

“I don’t know,” said another vampire, looking around uncertainly. “I think I saw a human, but ___”

A wooden stake suddenly burst through the vampire’s chest, sending black blood flying everywhere. The vampire screeched in pain before its head also went flying off, its body collapsing at the same time. This time, I was sure that I had seen a man wielding an ax standing behind that vampire, though he disappeared too fast for me to make out any specific details.

But I was never one to question my look. I felt the curly-haired vampire’s grip on my wrists loosen, so I summoned a fireball in my right hand, which burned the curly-haired vampire hands. It hissed in pain and let go, but then I kicked it in the gut, sending the curly-haired staggering backwards. I rolled over onto my back and held up my hand to shoot another fireball, but to my surprise, the vampires were not paying attention to me. They were instead retreating, looking this way and that as if trying to find a ghost.

“Where are you, human?” said the curly-haired vampire, his head whipping around wildly. “Show yourself.”

A deep chuckle came from seemingly everywhere at once. “A vamp demanding that I show myself? Please. You just don’t like the fact that I’m using your own ambush techniques against you. Not so fun when the hunter becomes the hunted, now is it?”

Without warning, another vampire’s head flew off its shoulders. The remaining three vampires all jumped when their friend lost his head, staring at his corpse as it fell onto the street with a dull *thunk*.

“How are you doing this, human?” said the curly-haired vampire, panic now obvious in his voice. “Stop it. It’s—”

“Scary?” came the voice again, masculine and amused. “Frightening? Anxiety-inducing? Well, now you know how all your victims have ever felt. Savor it, because you won’t live long enough to enjoy it.”

Another vampire’s head went flying off. The curly-haired vampire fired a strange dark energy blast at the spot behind his friend, but it missed and only hit the street, leaving a small crater where it landed.

A second later, the other surviving vampire’s hood was suddenly ripped off its head and tossed to the ground. The vampire screamed in pain, clutching its now-burning face that was exposed to the afternoon sun. But its scream was abruptly cut off when an ax appeared out of nowhere and sliced cleanly through its neck. Unlike the other vampires, this one simply collapsed to the street without further drama.

That left only the curly-haired vampire, who no longer looked as confident as he had even a moment ago. He was whipping his head every which way, rotating on the spot, looking desperately for the guy who was killing all of his friends. Me, I stayed where I was, because I figured it probably wouldn’t be wise to be standing upright when there was a crazy guy swinging an ax everywhere.

“Stop hiding,” said the curly-haired vampire, his voice stricken with panic. “Fight me, you pathetic human, fight me!”

A dark laughter echoed through the alley. “Fight me, fight me!’ You sound like my niece, but my niece at least has the excuse of being a five-year-old girl. What’s your excuse? Did your master steal your balls when he converted you? If not, I think I know what I’ll cut off first.”

That must have been enough, because the curly-haired vampire turned and ran away. He was making his way to the shadows behind a dumpster, probably intending to escape through the Shadow Way, but then I heard a whistling sound and the curly-haired vampire tripped and fell on his face. He tried to scramble back to his feet, but then he suddenly fell back down as if someone was standing on him.

As it turned out, someone *was* standing on him. In the next instant, a man appeared on top of the Newborn, pinning him to the ground with one of his boots. He wore long, red robes and carried a large silver ax at his side. His hair was long and brown, but I couldn’t see his face because his back was to me. His body was clearly muscular, though. I mean, it *had* to be, otherwise how would he be able to carry around such a huge ax with one hand?

“A sorcerer?” said the curly-haired vampire in fear. “What are you doing here?”

“I prefer the term ‘vampire hunter,’” said the sorcerer, whose voice was exactly the same as that voice which had been mocking the vampires during the entire fight. “And right now, I have a vampire to hunt. Namely, you.”

The sorcerer raised his ax above his head, but suddenly the curly-haired vampire held up a hand and a dark energy blast flew out of his palm. The sorcerer jumped backwards, but that freed the curly-haired vampire, which immediately got up and rushed toward the dumpster's shadow.

“He’s getting away!” I shouted.

The sorcerer, however, was already on it. He drew a knife from his belt and hurled it at the curly-haired vampire. The silver knife nailed the curly-haired vampire directly between the shoulder blades, causing it to scream in pain, but in the next moment it disappeared into the Shadow Way and we saw it no more.

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