

Prologue

Dover, England, 17 years ago

"Whoa. I never asked for the big gun."

Mikael macCumail glared at Vasilios of Sparta, his chief advisor, and stepped inside the humble townhouse. "I was with the Kent faction when yer call came in. It was the perfect excuse to slip away."

Shaking the snow from his hair, he strode down the dark hallway. He didn't miss the different sized boots littering the floor, and the coats—with scarves and mittens stuffed into their sleeves—hanging on pegs set at various heights along the wall.

When he reached the staircase, he stopped. "In the bedroom?"

Vasilios nodded and headed up first. "Same as always." The stairs squeaked beneath his boots. "No sign of a forced entry. No sign of a struggle, and no prints."

The Spartan didn't sound surprised. Neither was Mikael, who almost lost his footing when a small, red truck toppled down the stairs. As the toy struck the landing, he winced and lifted his gaze to his friend. "Ye can always count on a child to leave toys about. 'Tis a miracle most parents survive the rearing of their young."

Vasilios grunted.

As they reached the upper hallway and headed to their right, the smell of recent death and the stillness in the air stirred Mikael's blood. His chief advisor pushed the bedroom door open. Mikael came up behind him and halted at the foot of the bed. Loathing washed through him.

A couple was arranged on the counterpane. The woman's cheek snuggled against her husband's chest, his arm circled her waist. If not for their unusual pallor anyone would think them asleep.

Mikael's gaze lifted to scan the walls. The bastard responsible for these depravities always left behind his signature mark, usually by drawing two entwined snakes in his victims' blood.

"There." Vasilios pointed to the far wall.

Mikael walked over to the wall. The drawing was at shoulder level and as large as his fist. He brushed his index finger over it, knowing it was going to be wet and sticky. "Any leads this time?"

Vasilios answered a gruff, "No."

There never was. Mikael sniffed at the blood on the pad of his finger, sighed and rubbed his thumb over it. Two years of this and still no clues. It might as well have been two decades.

He faced the Spartan. His chief advisor looked haggard, more so when he stabbed his fingers through his spiky, black hair. Hatred glittered in his hazel eyes.

"I want this one, Mik."

"Ye will," he said. "'Tis just a different timeframe where our kind is concerned."

Vasilios shook his head as he stared at the dead couple. "And in the meantime we have to keep covering up for him."

"Ye know the rules. "

"I know, damn it. I know." Vasilios began to move about. He shifted objects around, ripped drawers open, and scattered clothes on the floor. It was the same each time the renegade vampire caused trouble; transform what would be a perplexing crime scene into what appeared to be a common robbery.

His chief advisor hated it. Vasilios was as much a pawn as the dead couple on the bed. Well-known in their world for his intellect and getting the job done, he'd apparently been chosen as a sparring partner for his nemesis to match wits against.

"The phone call came in as it usually does. Same voice; new crime scene." Vasilios knocked a lamp from the nightstand. He looked up. "The only pattern? The city I happen to

be in. I hate this, Mik.”

“He wants ye to catch him. He believes ye’re the only one who can.”

“Spare me the psych profile. I wrote the sodden thing myself.” He smashed his fist into the dresser mirror, then moved to stand over the couple. His jaw set in stone, he bent over the man and tightened his fingers around his neck until bone crunched.

Mikael watched him do the same to the woman. “This monster has been leading ye on a merry chase.”

Vasilios expelled a sigh as he moved toward the hallway. “This monster and all the others like him.”

Mikael followed. “What about the children?”

“That’s why I called it in. They weren’t in the house when I got here. From what I can tell, two boys and a little girl. The beds were slept in and the window in the boys’ room was open.”

“In this weather?”

Vasilios shot him a glance over his shoulder. “I figured they saw something and took off.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Exactly,” Vasilios muttered as he moved past a child’s bedroom.

Mikael stopped to peer inside. Lace clad dolls lined pink and violet walls. Girlish furniture twinkled with mauve glitter. A pink canopy hung above a bed of ruffled covers. A pair of bunny slippers seemed forlorn and deflated as they lay haphazard on the lilac carpet.

The fresh, clean smell of youth, like budding roses and soap, teased his senses. He crossed the threshold.

His foot settled on something soft. It was a teddy bear. He picked it up and was about to place it on a shelf when a homemade picture frame drew his attention. Surrounded by a border of painted macaroni, an impish face smiled up at him from the photograph. A girl child with large blue eyes, round, rosy cheeks and a crooked grin the devil himself wouldn’t be immune to.

Despite his sadness, Mikael smiled and trailed his knuckles against the glass. “What horrors have ye seen this night, sweet *colleen*?”

More importantly, where the hell was she? Did the boys take her with them? If so, where were they hiding? What did they see? Someone needed to track them down and erase their memories. Witnesses could not be left behind. And, Mikael wasn’t about to sanction the death of three innocent children. No. Wiping their minds was the only option he would consider.

A high-pitched shriek made him whirl toward the door. *Gods*. It sounded like... His eyes rounded. *Like a little girl*.

The bear still clutched in his hand, he dashed across the hallway and bounded down the stairs. Another shriek led him to the back of the house.

Vasilios stood by a swinging oak door, his back to the wall, his dark brow creased and eyes squeezed shut. He groaned. “Gods that caterwauling is painful on the ears.”

His own ears still ringing, Mikael agreed. “What happened?”

“I was heading to the kitchen to make it look like the break-in happened from there. The child is hiding in one of the cupboards and screams whenever I push the door open.” To prove his point, Vasilios did just that.

A painful shriek made Mikael grit his teeth. He pressed a palm to his ear. “I’ll deal with the lassie. Ye concentrate on yer work.”

Vasilios turned away. “Children,” he growled as he stomped back toward the stairs.

Mikael stared at the door then looked down at the bear he held. Cracking the door open, he squeezed the bear through and said in a proper British accent, “Mister Bear asked me to take him to you.”

The child remained silent. He willed the tension to drain from his shoulders. He heard her move inside a cupboard; heard the strong rhythm of her heart. As he edged his way inside, his back to the wall, her scent—budding roses and soap—wrapped around him.

The clanking pots gave away her hiding place. His gaze locked on the cupboard door. He moved to the cabinets, making sure to keep the distance of one cupboard door between them, turned and slid to the floor. Once settled, the teddy bear in his lap, he crossed his ankles and began to speak.

"Mister Bear says you can trust me."

He glanced around the tidy kitchen. Fresh cut daisies overflowed from a copper pot set on a scarred table. Two thick phone books stacked on a chair told him where the child usually sat. A child's drawings plastered the refrigerator door. His lips twitched. The wobbly signatures were twice as large as the actual drawings.

"Emily. A pretty name for a pretty child." The pots clanked again.

"What's that?" he asked in a singsong voice and lifted the bear to his ear. "Really. Huh. You chose her name?" A muffled giggle confirmed his progress. "That's very clever for a bear. What? Of course I won't hurt Emily. She was very brave tonight."

He frowned and pretended to listen to the bear again. "I'm sure she still loves you. No, I know she didn't mean to leave you behind. Yes, I understand. You want to be with her. But you see, until she comes out of the cupboard, you'll have to stay with me. What? No. I don't think she realizes how scared you are." The cupboard door creaked open. Mikael caught a glimpse of a white nightgown.

He settled the bear in his lap and patted its fuzzy head. "Try to sleep. Emily will come for you. She knows how much you need her." He shut his eyes.

It took a few minutes but, eventually, the door opened wider. Small, bare feet slapped against the linoleum tiles. Her shallow breathing and racing pulse shamed him, made him despise his kind. His slowly lifted his gaze.

Wide, cornflower-blue eyes stared at the teddy bear in his lap. A pudgy finger was stuffed into a pink mouth. Round, red tearstained cheeks glistened behind a tangle of golden hair.

The small bloodstains on her nightgown nipped at his temper. What exactly did she witness? It required little imagination to conjure possible images. Her pink toes curled. He looked up to see the yearning in her eyes. Something deep inside tightened.

"Would you like your bear?" The child nodded, and he held it out to her. She studied his features before reaching for the toy. For a fleeting moment, he understood what parents might feel for their offspring. It was the closest he'd ever come to being one.

Taking a risk, he climbed to his feet and held out his hand. If she bolted, he would be forced to catch and mesmerize her. Fortunately, after a moment's hesitation, she curled her tiny fingers around two of his.

Mikael led her out the kitchen door and down the hallway. When they reached the stairs, he lifted her in his arms and braced her weight against his hip. Hugging her bear, the child studied his face. A cold finger pad brushed over his eyelid.

"Pretty," she said and patted his cheek.

He grinned. "You're the pretty one. I'm just...old."

"Pretty," she insisted with a frown that told him she didn't like to be contradicted. This time, she gave his cheek a firmer pat.

His eyes rolled heavenward. "Fine. I'm...pretty."

He climbed the stairs and, when Vasilios stepped into view, he shook his head. The Spartan immediately stepped back out of sight. Mikael walked down the hallway and entered the room befitting the little imp he carried.

He put her on the floor, caught her bear as it was about to fall and made sure she clasped it before he turned toward the dresser. He rummaged through three drawers and finally produced a clean nightgown. Falling to one knee, he tugged the small child in front of him, drew the soiled cotton gown over her head and slid the clean one on, assisting her when her arms lifted to wiggle into the sleeves.

"Off to bed with ye now," he said, the English accent forgotten. He stuffed the stained nightgown inside his coat as she climbed up on the mattress, grabbed her teddy bear, settled back against her pillow and stared. Her eyes were so wide and so damn blue. They

rivalled the afternoon sky he hadn't seen in so long.

After drawing the covers over her, he brushed the golden hair off her brow. "Sleep now, sweet *colleen*."

She bellowed her name.

"How remiss of me. Sleep now, sweet Emily."

She smiled her approval yet didn't close her eyes. Mikael realized she had no intention of going to sleep and was at a loss. He sat on the corner of the bed. "I said sleep."

She shook her head.

"Are ye not tired? 'Tis late."

Her arm tightened around her teddy bear as she sat up. "Story!"

He inwardly snorted. The stories that came to mind were hardly fitting for such young ears. Feeling helpless, he asked, "Perhaps a song?"

"Story!" she shouted again.

"Has no one ever denied ye?" She smiled. "Figures." He glanced at the ceiling and finally shrugged. "I can't think of anything appropriate."

"Cindyella," she supplied.

He didn't understand. His knowledge of children's tales was miserably limited. He had a vague recollection of a German fable about a brother and sister and a witch who wanted to eat them. Hardly fitting on this tragic night. The Muses took pity on him because inspiration struck.

He leaned in. "Many, many centuries ago, in the magical land of Erin, four boys were born in the province of Ulster. The eldest was Laszlo, followed by Connor, then Mikael and finally Cathari. 'Tis said the gods favored them. They lived with their father, Cumail, by the edge of the sea. They were good boys, but they liked to play pranks. One day, Laszlo suggested they go into the forest where the gods lived. Their father had forbidden it, but Laszlo insisted they needed to prove their bravery. For a while they were brave, until they realized they lost their way. Darkness fell and Connor suggested they build a fire..."

Mikael came out of the bedroom, oddly unsettled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been near a child, let alone held one. His smile vanished when he noticed Vasilios leaning against the wall.

"Took you long enough."

"Aye, well, had to be dealt with proper. The lass is asleep. I wiped her mind. She won't remember me, nor the tragedy that befell this family."

Vasilios grinned. "Too bad. I think she liked you. She did say you were...pretty."

Mikael's glare caused the Spartan's smirk to widen. He headed down the stairs. "Something I hope ye'll not repeat."

"Why not?" Vasilios asked, following. "I'm sure the men will find it amusing."

"And I think the Siberian clan could benefit from yer visit." Both knew it was a spiteful threat. Vasilios shook his head, brushed past him and opened the front door.

Serious now, Mikael paused at his side. "Can ye track him?"

Vasilios scanned the deserted street. "Yeah. Hopefully, I won't lose his trail this time."

"Hmm. I'll contact the Kent faction. Make sure they find the lass's brothers and wipe their minds."

"Anyone else would have them eliminated."

Mikael shot him a warning look. "She lost her parents tonight, V. Ye would have me take her brothers, too?"

"Look, all I'm saying is it would be a hell of a lot safer without witnesses."

"They can't be witnesses if they don't remember anything, can they?"

"Fine. But when all this backfires in your face some day, don't expect me to clean it up."

Mikael snorted as his chief advisor walked away. "Backfire, indeed." He reached for his mobile phone.

It was a simple plan, really. The brothers were to be found, their memories erased and the mortal authorities anonymously alerted. Whatever clues were uncovered by the local police would lead to a dead end. In the mortal world, this heartless crime would remain

unsolved. But, in the immortal world...

Mikael caught a last glimpse of Vasilios as he bounded over a fence. Whatever this rogue's identity, he was going to pay.

Mikael gave the Kent faction his instructions. As he returned to Belfast, knew he would cherish the memory of the little girl. As for the rest, he considered the affair resolved.

What Mikael never counted on was the clansman who took his message didn't know what to make of the orders. With the decision to let those in charge handle the matter, he left the note on his faction leader's desk, though his superior wasn't expected back for two days. As he closed the door behind him, he didn't notice the gust of wind come through the chimney, nor did he see the slip of paper fall to the floor.

The following evening, when another clan member came to clean the room, he didn't think twice when he reached under the desk for a piece of paper and tossed it into the wastebasket.

Chapter One

Dover, England, Present Day

He smelled danger.

Mikael macCumail paused alongside the silent helicopter then resumed pacing in the dark. The gravel crunched beneath his patent leather shoes.

Danger? *Him?* Yeah, right. Fear was not a bosom companion. In fact, they rarely associated any more. He couldn't remember the last time he felt anything remotely resembling alarm.

He came to a stop by the helicopter's door, stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets and rocked back on his heels. As he breathed in the tangy scent of the sea mixed with the perfume of green, rolling hills, he longed for home.

Alone in the deserted parking lot, the damp air playing havoc with his curly hair, Mikael gazed at the marina across the street. A light mist stole over the harbor. The boats anchored in the shallow water danced to the gentle melody of the incoming tide. Somewhere in the distance, a buoy gonged a slow, solemn beat.

He glanced up at the moon's position, gauging the time, and frowned at the late hour. *Where's the bloody pilot?* Grumbling under his breath, he pulled his fingers through his hair and began to pace again. Tonight was one debacle after another.

When a canceled appointment cleared his schedule for the evening, the artist in him looked forward to getting his hands on the slab of Italian marble waiting in his studio. Such a perfect piece; his fingers twitched in anticipation.

An annulled meeting, though, in no way meant freedom. It meant rearranging his time to attend an engagement previously marked tentative on his calendar. The Kent faction was celebrating its one-hundredth anniversary. The invitation was extended more out of a courtesy but, since it was a mere helicopter ride away, Vasilios immediately made the arrangements.

His appearance at the commemorative ball was one of the numerous attempts to calm the wave of disquiet sweeping through his clan. Although well-received and shown every consideration, he'd been aware of the wary speculation and reproachful looks. Despite the council's efforts, restoring his image after violating the clan's most sacred law was going to require a hell of a lot more than appearing at social functions. But he had no regrets. Sarah was worth it. Two years ago, when faced with Sarah dying in his arms and as her vampire lover begged him to save her, Mikael shed his immortal blood and created his first and only fledgling. Something he vowed he'd never do. Now, he loved Sarah like a daughter and woe to anyone who tried to hurt her.

All things considered, however, it was nothing compared to what he had in store for them next—the Gemini Project—an alliance between his clan and mortal vampire hunters. Mikael almost laughed out loud. Both he and Vasilius agreed it made sense and, had his schedule allowed it, he would have loved to look in to it tonight.

The low, mournful wail of a ship horn jolted him. If the pilot didn't show up soon, he'd fly the bloody helicopter himself. He worked with a Blackberry and found that the time spent travelling was best used to catch up on e-mails and reports. Frankly, it was the only reason he tolerated not being his own pilot.

Annoyed, Mikael bit off an oath and yanked the bow tie from around his neck. He stuffed it inside his coat pocket next to his Blackberry. Still uncomfortable—formal attire always did that to him—he loosened the top three buttons of his starched dress shirt, then attacked the cufflinks at his wrists. They, too, were placed in his pocket.

He rolled his shoulders and rubbed the back of his neck. This didn't make sense. Dermott was meticulous in organizing his schedule. Mikael should contact headquarters to let them know there was some sort of confusion.

As he reached inside his coat's inner pocket, he froze at the sound of a low hissing *thoop*. He slapped at a sting on the side of his neck as if swatting a mosquito. When his fingers closed around a dart, he grunted in surprise.

He pulled it out and frowned at the purple stains on the pad of his thumb and index finger. His gaze instantly scanned his surroundings. A wave of dizziness punched the strength from his knees and he braced himself against the side of the helicopter.

Vision blurred, he pushed away from the aircraft, managing only a few steps before his thoughts muddled. People approached somewhere off to his left. They were close and moving in fast. He glanced down at the dart again then, acting on instinct, bolted.

Garbed entirely in black, her long, blonde hair secured in a thick braid, Emily Davenport was at home in the shadows. Once the sun set, her true existence began. Stalking. Tracking.

Killing.

She glanced down at the knuckle-duster on her left hand and flexed her fingers. There were no medals or plaques to celebrate the lives she and the other hunters saved, but she didn't need them. Dead vampires were reward enough.

Goddamn animals. They'd slaughtered her parents seventeen years ago and, despite being inside the house when it happened, she couldn't remember any of it. Whatever small fragments she managed to gather were too jumbled to make sense of. Maybe it was a blessing. Her brothers remembered all too well.

Emily's chest tightened. She took a deep breath and scanned the marina. A month had gone by, and she still couldn't bring herself to think about the night William died.

Not only did she lose her big brother, confidant and only ally, but the hunters also lost an excellent leader. Fair and levelheaded, William didn't need to bully or push his weight around to get things done. He had a way of making others want to get involved, want to give one hundred percent of themselves.

Unfortunately, Warren—who'd taken over upon William's death—was exactly the opposite. Too much of a dictator, he belittled and intimidated. The hunters were beginning to resent him. So did Emily.

Where William had confidence in her abilities and encouraged her to develop her fighting skills, Warren only criticized. He put her down at every turn, treating her with a condescension no other hunter—including Alexandra, or rather Lex as she preferred to be called, the only other woman in the group—would tolerate.

Something had to give. If it didn't, the Dover hunters wouldn't need to worry about vampires. They'd implode from within.

Behind her, the sound of pounding feet came out of nowhere. Emily dove for the bushes to her right and performed a practiced roll. She came up in a crouch just as a blurred figure streaked past. Three others followed.

"Damn it." She reached for the walky-talky clipped to the front pocket of her leather jacket. "Tracker Six to Base." When Justin, who coordinated their patrols back at the mill, answered, Emily rose smoothly to her feet. "Four targets moving east in the marina." She made regular rounds here and it was never this busy. Something was going down tonight.

"Roger that, Tracker Six. I'm sending in back up. Keep on them and signal when ready."

"Copy that, Base." Emily broke into a run as she reached over her shoulder for the sword strapped to her back. She was ready to take down any vamp that crossed her path.

"Base to all trackers. Base to all trackers. Six targets converging near pier twelve. I repeat: Six targets converging near pier twelve."

Obviously the group Emily followed just met up with two more vampires.

"Get ready to fry 'em boys and girls," Chauncey, a fellow hunter, said.

Emily's lips curled as his voice struck a vibrant chord in her and wrapped her in warmth.

"Shake 'em and bake 'em, man," Damian, Lex's boyfriend, replied.

Emily quickened her pace. The gong of a buoy masked her step. Pier twelve was just around the bend, and she braced for battle. When she cleared the trees, however, she came to a halt.

The vampires were already engaged in combat...among themselves.

Taking cover behind stacked containers, Emily shrugged her backpack off her shoulders and riffled through dart-guns, wooden stakes, binoculars and chain until her fingers closed around her crossbow. She reached for the bolts and quickly loaded one.

"Tracker Six to Base. Targets in sight. Ready to fire."

"Tracker One to Tracker Six."

Emily rolled her eyes as Warren's voice emanated from the walkie-talkie. She acknowledged his call.

"Stand down, Tracker Six," her brother ordered. "Wait for reinforcements. I'm leaving pier ten now."

Giving him a mental bird, she steadied her grip on her crossbow and settled her finger on the trigger. "Stand down my granny's fanny." Emily was following procedure, damn him. As the first hunter on the scene, it was her job to cover the others.

"Did you hear me, Tracker Six?" The airwaves crackled. "Em, damn it, answer me."

She was going to but Damian, Lex and Chauncey arrived, surprising the fighting vampires. Everything went to hell. Emily fired, striking a vampire in the back just as it was about to engage Chauncey. She reached for another bolt, loaded it and fired again, this time, giving Lex the opportunity to take a vampire's head.

One vampire seemed to be cornered on the pier. With the others fighting on land at its base, the monster was trapped. Emily dropped her crossbow, grabbed her sword and edged closer.

The creature stood under the glow of the lamplight, unsteady on its feet. It looked confused, as if unaware of the chaos around it. With one last bound, Emily landed on the pier.

The vampire held out its hand. For a moment, she forgot it wasn't human. Forgot it was capable of ripping her to pieces. He seemed so lost, so utterly out of place in his flashy suit and shiny black shoes. Dark curls whipped around his head. A thick corkscrew lock dangled over velvety eyes blazing with wild desperation. They sparked red when they narrowed on her sword. He took one faltering step.

Jolted into action, Emily raised her sword, but a loud boom startled her. Purple light exploded around her, turning night into day. A shock wave roared past. A purple ball of light struck the vampire in the middle of his chest. The blast rebounded, slamming into Emily like a fist. The force propelled her, and the vampire, backward. His flailing arms mimicked her own. They fell at the same time. Emily off the right side of the pier, the vampire off the edge.

Cold water closed over her head. It filled her mouth and nose. When she finally broke the surface, she gulped in a deep breath of air, coughed and pushed to her feet. The water reached her waist. She rubbed the sting of the saltwater from her eyes and shoved the stray

strands of hair out of her face. Damn it, she lost her sword.

Furious and weighted down by her clothes, she trudged toward the beach. The fight was over. Headless vampire corpses littered the sand. Another victory for the Dover hunters.

"Em."

She glanced up at the pier overhead as Chauncey leaned over, his face pinched with concern.

"You all right?" he called down.

She waved the question away. "Never better." She studied the bobbing black waves as they slapped against the beams bleached to a blinding white sheen. "Do you see that vamp anywhere?"

"No. And what the fuck was that?" he asked, making a sweeping motion with his hand.

"Hell if I know." Her gaze lifted to the sky. The night was clear. Stars twinkled like little white lights that reminded her of Christmas trees. Heck, there wasn't a cloud in sight.

"Damn," Chauncey said, looking toward the beach. "Warren looks fit to kill."

"Whatever," Emily muttered. She did exactly as William taught her.

"I heard him call you on the radio, Imp. You should've answered."

She glared. "Why? Because he's worried I'll shoot myself with my own crossbow? Come on, Chauncey. You know." Something thumped her leg and knocked her off balance. Emily glanced down. At first, she thought it was tangled rags and wood. She nudged it away but at the last moment, caught a glimpse of fingers.

Her right hand instantly went to the knife tucked into the side-pocket of her pant. The vampire floated on its back. Its hair clung in thick clumps on a face now as gray as its sodden, white shirt. Spiked lashes fanned out over its high cheekbones. Its lips were parted. Oily residue caused its skin to shimmer in the moonlight.

Emily scanned the length of its body, noticing its ripped jacket, the light furring on its chest. When the vampire didn't pounce, she pushed it with the tip of her boot.

She caught his collar with her left hand and prepared to stab it through the heart. Although not a fatal blow, it would paralyze the creature.

"Damn you to hell, Emily Davenport." Warren sludged through the shallows. His eyes blazed. He shoved her out of the way, produced a knife and stabbed the vampire himself.

He whipped around. "I've had it with you." He jabbed a finger in her face. "You're out." His hand sliced the air. "Done."

Aware of the entire band gathered on the beach behind them, Emily squared her shoulders. Her jaw clenched. "I'm sure the Canterbury hunters would be happy to have me."

Warren grabbed her upper arm and pulled her behind him. "First, you patrol without a partner..."

"I don't need a partner anymore." Trainees patrolled in pairs. William declared her a full-fledged member four months ago.

"I assigned you another one."

"I don't want another one."

Warren flapped his arms in exasperation. "See what I mean? You have no respect for my leadership, Em."

"Maybe if I had a leader worth respecting..."

He grabbed her arm again. His grip bit into her flesh hard enough to bruise. "Don't push me, Emily."

She twisted out of his hold with a vicious shove. "Whatcha you gonna do about it, Warren? Kill me?"

His eyes rounded, his face splotched red. He reached for her but Chauncey put himself between them and caught Warren by the shoulders.

"That's enough," Chauncey said.

Her brother struggled but finally, he glanced over at the others, nodded then stepped back. He plucked a silver flask from his coat with a shaking hand. As he drank, he shot Emily a look filled with loathing.

"I'm sorry I didn't die instead of William," he told her. "I know that would've made you happy."

Emily's jaw fell. "Warren, no."

"But I didn't." He took another swig from his flask and dragged a hand across his mouth. "And I'm the leader now. If you can't accept that, you're useless to me."

"Warren..." Speechless, Emily studied his familiar face. They'd never gotten along. Not really. As far back as she could remember, Warren had been mean. Pinching her. Pulling her hair. Grinding his knuckles into her arms until he left big, black bruises. He'd whined when William included her in any of their games. He'd sulked for weeks when William began her training.

As her big brother, William had been a combination of parent and champion to her. Warren had always just been annoying.

Did Warren envy the way she hero-worshiped William? In tormenting her, had he been expressing his anger? She didn't know what to say. Didn't know if any of her assumptions made sense.

Luckily, Damian drew everyone's attention. With the vampire washed up on the beach at his feet, he held the creature's jacket and searched the pockets. "What do we have here?" he asked, pulling out an electronic device. A black bow tie flopped onto the wet sand. "Blackberry," he read. He pushed a few buttons and tapped the screen. "Salt water's murder on these things."

He tossed it into the churning waves.

"Oooh," he crooned. "What's this?"

Everyone drew close as he held up his open palm, revealing two gold pieces. He shifted the square pieces around and the stones set in their centers caught the light and sparkled.

"Diamonds. Real ones." He clamped one between his teeth. "Twenty-four carat," he said. Damian pocketed them and flashed a grin. "Frankie down at the pawn shop will be mighty pleased."

They always emptied the pockets of fallen vampires. Anything of value was pawned in exchange for cash, which allowed them to buy weapons and gear. Although she understood the necessity, Emily still felt like they were vultures.

Warren hunkered down beside the vampire. He removed a ring with a gleaming red stone from the creature's pinkie finger. Then he patted the vampire's pants and found a thick wad of bills tucked in a diamond-studded cash clip.

"Bloody monster must have fed off a rich bloke," he said gruffly, pushing to his feet.

He counted the bills as Damian tossed the coat to Lex. She ran her hand lovingly down the lining, cooed at the label and the fabric.

"Versace," she said with a touch of awe. "One hundred percent cashmere."

"It's totaled," Chauncey said, tugging at an oddly twisted sleeve. "Salt water."

Emily's gaze veered to the vampire. Her mind flashed back to the striking image of it standing in its immaculate suit and holding out its hand. A chill went through her. Even now, staked, robbed of its belongings, stripped down to its ragged shirttails and pants, something about it made her uneasy.

She reached behind for her sword and bit off a curse when her hand closed around air. "Chauncey." She swept an arm toward the vampire. "Its head is yours."

The tall hunter stalked forward.

"No." Warren placed himself in front of the creature. "I'll take it back with us. Make it talk."

Emily exchanged a disgruntled look with Chauncey.

"I'll make it tell us where all the vamps in this town are hiding." Warren whipped around and kicked the vampire in the ribs. "Then when it's done spilling its guts, I'll spill them all over the floor."