

The Vampire Games

Stephanie Archer

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THE VAMPIRE GAMES

My name is Bianka, and I live in a world a lot like yours. Or at least, I used to.

Then I got harvested.

Taken into eerie darkness underneath the surface of my world, I've learned that cities like mine—Hidden Oaks—are just places that the vampires keep humans until it's time to drink their blood.

Now it's my turn. They're harvesting me.

But I'm fighting hard, and the vampires have noticed. A sponsor is buying me. A handsome, mysterious vampire with piercing eyes, who wants me to fight other humans in The Vampire Games. If I lose, I'll be harvested. If I win, I'll join my sponsor, Phillip, as one of them.

I'll be turned into a vampire.

All I must do to spend an eternity with Phillip is sell my soul.

The scary part? I'd do a lot worse for him than that.

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the
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Chapter I

If I had realized that my whole life would change when the men showed up at school, I would have run as I could. I never would have stopped.

Not that it would have mattered. There was no such thing as running fast enough or far enough to escape from destiny, and it was definitely destiny's cold bite that I felt that day.

But I would have tried. Maybe that would be one less regret for me to suffer on the dark nights that followed.

It was a beautiful June day. The sun was getting hotter with the advent of afternoon, and my fellow graduating seniors were sitting on the lawn eating lunch.

I don't remember now what we were

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talking about, but I bet the conversations had filled with pleasant end-of-year kinds of things. What our graduation parties were going to be like. What we were planning to wear. How glad we were that our tests were finished. How done we were with school. College stuff. Those blissfully mundane subjects that seem so important when your world is tiny.

That's my best guess, anyway. Like I said, I don't really remember what we talked about.

What I do remember was this: The sun was so hot on my shoulders that I feared sunburn, so I moved under the shade of a tree beside Marc. He was my best friend, a guy so gorgeous that he looked like he'd been designed by the Greek gods. He had no idea what the sight of him did to the girls at school, but I did. It was impossible not to notice their constant giggling and blushing.

Somehow, product-of-the-gods Marc liked to hang out with me. Me, of all people, all boring and brown-haired and ordinary. He saw me coming and he smiled.

I sat beside Marc. When the shadows slid over me, heat's stinging kiss subsided.

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More than anything else, I wish I'd appreciated the blazing heat.

Marc brushed his hand over my shoulder. "You're getting freckles, Bianka."

I remember those words clearly because they had made me blush furiously. My freckles were an embarrassment. One of my biggest sources of self-consciousness, at the time. As long as I wasn't looking in a mirror, and as long as my best friend wasn't remarking on them, I could pretend that they were invisible.

The conversation after that is hazier. A lot of the time I spent with Marc was blissfully inane. We used to get in trouble for flicking potato chips at each other in class, so I wouldn't be surprised if we'd done some of that.

Mostly we sat, we talked, and it was boring.

That was probably one of the last boring moments of my life.

Then *they* showed up.

A group of men emerged from a black car. None of the other students seemed to notice them, even though they were all dressed in

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suits and sunglasses—hardly normal attire for a public school like ours, where even the teachers wore jeans.

The men didn't look at me when they were passing by even though I stared. It was as though they lived in a totally different dimension. They seemed to glide inches above the surface of the pavement and were left untouched by the gazes of the other students—invisible, despite the fact that they almost glowed in the sunlight.

They went inside and turned straight into the dean's office.

I was curious to know where they had come from. I'd been reading a lot of books lately, so I halfway expected them to have emerged from some kind of creepy black helicopter.

There was no helicopter in the parking lot.

There was a black car, though. And someone was looking at me from the back seat.

Someone with intense blue eyes I would be able to remember the rest of my life.

He was seated in the backseat of the black

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car that the other men had come in. I couldn't see the rest of him because his windows were tinted, but the intensity of his gaze filled me with a strange sensation.

When I think about it now, I wonder if I was feeling the shift of destiny.

"Bianka," Marc said. "What are you looking at?"

I shook myself free of the mysterious man's gaze and tried to focus on my friends again.

But I could still feel his eyes on me, even after he left.



There was one more class after lunch. Somehow, I managed to keep from falling asleep during chemistry, despite the sluggishness that came from a post-lunch carb fest.

The bell rang at two as it always had, every single day leading up to that one.

Boring, predictable life.

Then I went home.

I lived in a cul-de-sac near West Street. The homeowners association took care of our front yards, and they did it well; all of the

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houses had uniform green lawns like big square emeralds in front of our doorsteps. The hedges were trimmed into tidy cubes. The trees didn't have a single twig out of place.

Going to my house after school, you'd expect to find a fifties housewife cooking dinner—and you wouldn't be that far off from reality, to be honest. My mom was kinda like that. She wore the pearl necklace and everything. A classic beauty. She took good care of her hair, her dress. She always greeted father with a kiss and never cried where we could see her.

Except for that one time.

Just that once.

When I headed up the steps after school that day, I realized that the curtains in my living room were open. I could see men talking to my parents inside.

Men wearing black suits and sunglasses.

Men who were so graceful that they almost seemed to float an inch off the carpet.

The sight of them should have triggered me to run, but I was distracted by the memory of the blue-eyed guy I'd seen at

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lunchtime. The memory of his gaze clung to me like fog on Halloween.

The sight of those strangers in my living room didn't make me run. It only made my heart jitter, skipping a beat.

I hoped the blue-eyed stranger would be with them.

That was why I walked straight inside like a moth to the flame.

Stupid moth.

The blue-eyed man wasn't there. It was just the guys in the black suits, my mom with her dress and pearl necklace, my dad with the newspaper folded on one thigh.

They didn't even say hello to me.

"You have to go with them," Mom said right off the bat. She sounded weird. Like she had been crying.

Until that moment, I'd never seen her cry before.

Not that I'd spent a lot of time thinking about what my last words might be, but if I had, I like to think I'd have said something cleverer than, "What?" But that was what I said to my Mom. *That was it.* The last word she would hear from me: "What?"

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The haze was wearing off, and I was starting to get scared in the absence of the blue-eyed boy.

I really should have run.

Too late, Bianka.

The men led me outside to a car. Their hands weren't rough, but they were firm. They guided me in a way that brooked no room for struggle.

The blue-eyed man wasn't in the car, either.

It didn't occur to me that I should fight.

As I slid into the back seat, it felt like my story was ending before it could begin, and all my hopes and dreams were left behind with the closing door.

Chapter 2

I didn't start panicking until the car doors shut and one of the men moved toward me with handcuffs.

I mean, actual handcuffs. Not the kind of plastic stage prop we had used in drama class, but metal handcuffs like the police use on criminals. I wasn't merely being taken on a car ride. I was being arrested.

Or something worse than that.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, desperate as I tried to avoid their grasp. They ignored my attempts. They were graceful and strong; I was clumsy and weak, and there was nowhere for me to run. "What's going on?"

The black-clad men cuffed my hands and feet, chaining them together so that they were connected. It limited my mobility in a

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big way. I couldn't even lift my hands above my head unless I lifted my feet too. I wouldn't be able to fight back or run. Not that I would have stood much of a chance against so many adult men at that time—those skills would come later.

“What are you doing to me?” I asked.

No reply.

Once locked into place, they didn't look as me, much less speak.

Frustrated and scared, I looked out of the window and tried to breathe.

I couldn't make an escape plan if I didn't keep breathing.

Watching the outside world did nothing to calm me down. We drove into an unfamiliar industrial complex nestled against the mountains. I'd never had reason to go to that part of town before. It looked so much scarier because it was so foreign to me, and going into a tunnel in the mountains—with armed guards blocking the entrance—brought my fear to a peak.

Our vehicle paused at the black mouth of the tunnel. The driver exchanged words with the guards outside.

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I was on the verge of tears. “Did I do something wrong?” No, that wasn’t right. I knew I had done nothing, committed no crime. I might not be able to resist the urge to cry, but I wasn’t going to whine. I wouldn’t beg. And I wouldn’t be ignored. “Tell me what you’re doing!”

They looked at me blandly when I tried to stand within the vehicle.

One of the men shoved me back against the seat.

Hard.

He was so strong. I’d never felt anyone that strong before.

But still, they didn’t respond.

The vehicle lurched forward. We slid out of sunlight into shadow blacker than night.

And we kept going.

The tunnel angled downward, drawing us deeper into the earth underneath the mountain. It was a one lane road with no other traffic on it. We were the only people in the oppressive, breathless shadows underneath the mountain. Even if people had tried to escape in the other direction, they wouldn’t have been able to pass us.

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One way in, no way out.

“Where does this go?” I asked, louder than before, demanding to be heard.

At that point, I was mostly asking to hear the sound of my voice, not because I thought they would respond. In the near-silence of the rumbling engines, it felt more and more like I was in a coffin rather than a car.

Was I still breathing?

I couldn't tell anymore.

The road took a tight turn to the left. I thought we were spiraling deeper still, like the tunnel had become a corkscrew into the earth.

Flexing my hands into fists, dizzy with adrenaline, I looked between the men and their unremarkable faces. They were each probably in their thirties—an exceptionally well-preserved thirty, I thought, but with jaws too heavy to be any younger.

If all of them were as strong as that one man who had pushed me, there was no way I'd be able to escape with a physical confrontation.

“What did my parents do?” I asked. Because that was the only option, wasn't it?

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My parents were the ones who had turned me over. They had said I needed to go with these men. And I hadn't done anything to warrant this treatment.

One of the men whispered to the other.

None of them looked at me.

Just get through to the end, I told myself. It'll be better once we leave the tunnel.

Of course, we didn't end up leaving the tunnel; it just widened into two lanes, and then four lanes. It seemed to be an industrial setting, much like the place we had driven before the tunnel, but it was dark enough that it was hard to tell. The lines painted on the floor reminded me of a launch pad, or a missile silo. Somewhere that we might go before hopping a rocket to the moon.

The walls vanished completely. We drove along a concrete pad with no visible surroundings.

Shadows engulfed the car.

I leaned closer to the tinted windows, trying to catch some hint of what was outside. "Is this a cave?" My breath fogged the inside of the glass.

The headlights caught a nearby wall.

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They illuminated my worst nightmare. Something far worse than I ever could have imagined finding at the bottom of that horrible tunnel.

There were people hanging from the walls.

Humans were tied up in rows, dangling within individual indentations that reminded me of statues in front of churches. They were strapped into place. Everyone's eyes were shut, like they were sleeping. But it wasn't natural to sleep like that, hanging from walls as they waited.

Waited for what?

I couldn't imagine at the time.

But it confirmed every horrible fear that had slithered through my skull until that moment.

These men—these powerful, anonymous men—didn't intend for me to ever go to college.

It would have made sense if I'd screamed or cried or...or *something* at that point.

That would have been the sane reaction.

But as soon as I saw those sleeping bodies, I think my sanity was gone.

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I couldn't scream.

My hands were balled into fists so tight my knuckles had turned white. All I could hear was the rushing white noise of blood flowing through my head.

Keep calm. Get out of the car. Find a way to escape.

The car stopped alongside a platform, which no longer reminded me of a launch pad. Now that I had seen all those people hanging from the walls, that platform made me think of a gallows.

There was a mechanical lift on the platform. It was clearly a way to slot people into those cubbies on the walls. To lift them up to the rows where they would hang, asleep and waiting.

Hopefully they were asleep.

The men grabbed my arms. I was still numb as they dragged me out of the car. Without the tinted windows, I could see far better—and I wished that I couldn't. The people hanging had actual faces that I could make out. I thought I recognized some of those faces, but I wasn't sure.

It stood to reason that I would imagine

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familiar faces. It had to be my imagination, didn't it? I was living a waking nightmare.

There was no way I had gone from boring, ordinary senior year of high school to... whatever this was.

I heard my name called quietly, hoarsely.

"Bianka."

Like I said, I thought I'd gone insane. I didn't react to my name the first time because I assumed that I had to be imagining it.

The men walked me toward the platform.

"Bianka."

This time, I looked up.

Another black-suited man was standing on the scissor lift positioned atop the platform. It looked like he had just finished strapping a new person into one of those wall cubbies, up in the third row, about forty feet off of the cement floor.

And then I did cry out because I noticed Marc hanging limply from the wall.

Beautiful, golden Marc, who had eaten lunch with me just that day.

Marc, who had remarked on my freckles, making my face burn with embarrassment.

Marc, beloved by every girl our age, and a

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few of the boys too.

My best friend was in this nightmare with me.

His pleading eyes were locked onto me as the black suit men dragged me forward. There was an empty indentation in the wall. Straps were waiting to embrace a new person.

Those straps were waiting for *me*.

“Marc!” I tried to break free of the men holding me, but it was hopeless. “What have they done to you?” He couldn’t move. He looked too tired. *Drugged?* “Marc! Please!”

His eyes drooped closed.

Marc was unconscious, like everyone else.

It was my turn next.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, I stiffened. I dug my heels in.

I wouldn’t walk up those stairs.

Back in my freshman year of high school, I had been encouraged to pick up an extracurricular to make my college applications look better. Since I used to be in gymnastics as a kid, I decided to pick up wrestling as a way to hone my fitness.

I was never that good at wrestling. At

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least, not as good as I had been on the parallel bars.

The coach had said I lacked the fire to win. Like I wasn't adequately motivated to fight my classmates.

It turns out that fear is a great motivator.

The men tried to force me up the stairs and I reacted with my eight semesters of wrestling experience. Eight semesters where I hadn't been able to pin anyone my size or bigger. Eight semesters of competing for ribbons.

Now I was competing for my life—and Marc's.

I lifted my knees, threw my weight forward, shoved hard.

One of the men went rolling over my shoulder. I flung him to the ground.

I twisted to run, but my ankles were still cuffed, with only a few inches of space to shuffle. I didn't get far before they grabbed me.

They weren't as gentle with me as they were before.

Fingertips bit into my biceps. They wrenched me back. My spine bowed, and

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tears leaped to my eyes.

“No!” I cried.

Suddenly, the man on the scissor lift crumpled.

It was impossible to see all of what happened next.

Someone shoved me to the concrete.

Above me, fists thumped against flesh. Men grunted. They rained to the ground around me.

I rolled onto my side to see that a new guy had arrived.

He wasn't wearing a black suit like the others were, nor was he like the sleeping people strapped to the walls. He was pale-fleshed and fast. His hair was dark brown. It swept over his eyes, shadowing his gaze in the cavernous darkness. As deep as the shadows were in the space under the mountains, the shadows within this boy's soul were so much deeper, and I felt lost by merely glancing into them.

He was fighting my captors.

When one of the black suited men hauled me to my feet again, the new arrival jumped between us.

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I had never seen anyone move so fast in my life. It was like he wasn't even human.

This new arrival jumped between the men holding me. The grips on my arms tightened so severely I knew I would bruise.

Another hand grabbed me, but when I flailed against it, a voice said, "Bianka, I'm not with them. I'm getting you out of here."

I looked up and met the eyes I'd seen in my school's parking lot.

Shocking blue eyes.

They almost seemed to glow.

And then, as I struggled one last time to catch my breath, the world went dark around me.

Chapter 3

I woke up to find myself alone in bed.

I sat up. I was no longer wearing the jeans and t-shirt that had been my outfit for my last day of high school, picked so carefully out of my closet in the hopes of making a good, lasting memory among my friends. Now I was wearing white. It almost looked like a wedding dress. It must have cost more than everything I owned.

Someone had changed my clothes while I was unconscious.

It was impossible not to imagine what that must have entailed. All those black-clad men handling my limp body, stripping me of my shirt, my jeans, my shoes. I pulled on the neck of the dress to look down. My bra and underwear were still on. That didn't make me

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feel much better.

Suppressing a shiver, I eased out of the bed to inspect my surroundings.

The bedroom was cave-like, though much smaller than the one with all the bodies—and there were no sleeping people strapped to the walls, thankfully.

For the moment, I was alone.

I didn't seem to be in a prison, though. The bed and dresser were far too ordinary for that. Someone had even left a crystal vase on top of the dresser, cradling a half-dozen white roses.

My fingertips slid over the petals of one of the flowers. It was velvety-soft.

Someone had picked those flowers fresh.

My hand slid down the stem. A red ribbon bundled the flowers together, tied in a neat bow that reminded me of a heart.

Flowers, ribbon, vase.

These flowers had been left just for me.

I was sure of it.

“Ouch!”

I had been careless and a thorn had bitten me. I sucked my thumb into my mouth and tasted blood. The coppersy flavor was a

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reminder of the very real danger I was facing.

This was not an unusual hotel.

These flowers were not a romantic gesture.

I had been abducted with the blessing of my parents, and Marc was here, too.

I paced the walls, looking for a way out. There were only two doors. One led into a bathroom, and the other was locked. There was a vent, which was probably how I had air in...whatever this place was, but there were no windows.

Day or night, summer or winter, I had no idea. There could have been a nuclear apocalypse outside and I wouldn't have known.

I was still deep under the mountain.

"Great," I said to myself. I wanted to sound tough, but it came out wavering.

A soft, golden light flickered on when I moved into the bathroom. Motion-activated. I twitched in response, unable to shake the feeling that I had been seen by inhuman eyes.

The bulb illuminated a large tub, a toilet, and a sink, but no mirror. There hadn't been

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a mirror in the bedroom, either, so there was no good way to check how I looked.

What I could see of my body wasn't too bruised besides my arms where the strange men had been holding me, and I wasn't bleeding. When I patted my face, it wasn't painful or tender. It seemed like I was okay.

Well. As okay as I could be, given the circumstances.

I washed my bleeding hand in the sink. The blood continued to flow freely.

What were the odds that a creepy cave-bedroom would have bandaids?

I was about to search under the sink when I heard a click in the other room. I rushed to the bathroom door, nearly tripping over the hem of my skirt, to see what was happening.

A man slipped into the bedroom, ghosting silently from the door. The golden bathroom light spilled over his pallid skin.

It was him.

The boy who saved me.

Was it possible that he had collected those roses for me, too?

He was placing a tray next to the bed, not looking at me when I walked in. I was pretty

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sure he knew I was there, anyway. Every time his gaze seemed almost pointed in my direction, it would skip ahead or move back. He was making a physical effort not to look my way.

His brow was furrowed, hard to see under the shadow of his dark face, but he definitely looked troubled.

I lingered outside the bathroom door, injured hand cradled against my chest. My heart beat wildly within my ribcage.

Though our eyes didn't meet, there was a connection. The air between us had weight and texture.

Gravity wanted to compel me toward him.

But fear held me back.

I hadn't been able to fight back against those men in the black suits, who vastly overwhelmed me with their strength. This guy had defeated all of them. He had beaten them down and saved me, even though he looked like he couldn't have been any older than me.

If he decided that I needed to die, I would be helpless.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice barely

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above a breathy whisper.

The man's eyes remained fixed to the tray that he had brought inside. "It doesn't matter."

I was clinging to the doorframe like it could save me. *Wouldn't that be nice?*

I took a breath and forced myself to release the door. The step I took toward him was simultaneously the easiest and the most difficult step I had ever taken. "You have to let me go. I...I'm graduating from school, and..."

"I can't."

Can't, or won't? "Please. My mom, she might be in—"

"I brought you some food." He pushed the tray forward. The plate was covered in a silver dish so I couldn't see what it was hiding.

For the first time since he came inside, he met my eyes. His eyes were as captivating and intense as ever. I couldn't look away.

But he could. He ducked his head.

Without the distraction of his bright gaze, I could study the carved lines of his face, the perfection of his pale skin. It looked like he'd been trapped in this cave system for a long

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time. There was no hint of tan on him.

I'd imagined earlier that Marc had been carved by the Greek gods. By contrast, this boy had been imagined in the fever dreams of Lucifer, the Morning Star. He was sinful perfection, masculine beauty untouched by age.

He wore low-slung jeans and a snug black t-shirt that hugged his lean muscles. He looked like a guy who could have attended my high school, or maybe the local community college.

Yet fate had brought him down into these caves, just as I had been.

But he'd escaped, just as I hoped to do.

And then he had saved me.

I was transfixed by the shape of his lips and the muscle flexing in front of his ear when he clenched his teeth. I wondered if he realized how the tension emphasized his jawline. There was no way he could realize how painfully handsome he was. Standing across from him, I felt plainer than ever, the dirt beneath a blossoming plum tree, dry and dusty.

Why would he have saved me?

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The spell was only broken when he opened his jacket and pulled out a sunflower, ruffled but almost painfully bright next to everything in the room. He placed it on the tray and backed away without lifting his head.

That pathetic, cheerful sunflower made my heart ache.

Yes. He must have brought me the roses, too.

My new captor was trying to brighten my gloomy hideout.

“Thank you,” I said.

He didn’t reply.

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, battling myself for words. I had so many questions.

But only one that I couldn’t resist asking.

“Why do you keep avoiding my eyes?”

He gave a low chuckle and raked a hand through his hair. His bangs flopped over his forehead again. “You know when you’ve been in darkness all night and step outside to see dawn for the first time? It hurts to look into the light.”

There was a lump in my throat. I tried to

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swallow it down, but it felt like trying to swallow razors. “Are you saying that it hurts to look at me?”

“I’m saying you’re the first sunlight I’ve glimpsed in a long time,” he said.

My heart skipped a beat.

I reached for the sunflower.

He stiffened. “What happened to you?”

I realized he was looking at my thumb. It had stopped bleeding, but there was still a crimson pinpoint where I had stabbed myself with the thorn.

“The roses.” I withdrew my hand self-consciously.

His eyes tracked the motion of my thumb as if he couldn’t look away from it. Nostrils flaring, he smelled the air.

He ripped the crystal vase off of the dresser and moved for the exit. But when he drew nearest to me, he hesitated, missing a step.

Still, he was staring at my hand.

I had the strange urge to offer it to him. For what, I wasn’t sure. I doubted that he had bandages, though I momentarily entertained the ridiculous thought that he’d be able to

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give me superhero bandaids like the school nurse.

Would his skin feel as smooth as it looked?

“Don’t take the roses away,” I said softly. “I like them.”

His eyes flicked from my hand to my lips.

“I’ll be back for you,” he said. His eyes were shaded underneath, almost bruised. He was painfully beautiful for a man. Certainly even more beautiful than Marc.

“Marc,” I said suddenly. The frown on the man’s face increased, but I charged ahead. “He goes to my school. I saw him, and he was trapped...*there*. Can’t you help him?”

“Forget about him,” the man said roughly. “Forget about everything.”

And with that, he stalked out of the room.

He took my roses with him.

Considering I had only known that those roses existed for the space of mere breathless minutes, it ached to lose them so abruptly. It ached worse than losing my parents.

At least I had the sunflower.

I picked it up, stroking the ruffled petals. It was as beautiful to me as those

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pristine white roses. Maybe more beautiful.

Now that Marc had come to mind, I couldn't get him out of it.

I felt strangely safe in this cave. Far safer than I had felt in the custody of the black suited men.

But Marc wasn't safe.

It was one thing to be scared and take time to figure out a plan for myself. It was something else to abandon him—and other people—there to die.

I ate the food on the tray. I had no idea when my last meal had been, and I didn't know when my next one could come. The food seemed like something I could get at the corner store, a slightly stale sandwich and a bag of chips, but I felt better eating it. It gave me strength.

Lifting the sunflower to my nose, I inhaled its earthy scent.

What had that man smelled when he sniffed the air?

My blood.

The thought rose unbidden to the surface of my mind.

I pushed it away.

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He had locked the door before leaving, so the vent by the wall seemed my best option for escape. I dug my fingernails underneath the cover to loosen it.

I took one last look at the sunflower, sitting on the now-empty tray, and crawled into the vent.

Chapter 4

I had never tried to crawl through an air duct before, and I couldn't say that I liked it much. The duct trembled under my knees as I crawled. It also felt incredibly small. If adrenaline hadn't been pumping through my veins, I don't know that I could have gotten past the first couple feet without turning around.

I had no idea where I was going, but I couldn't stop.

Marc was out there. Going back simply was not an option.

I slid my hands and knees along the metal slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible. The air was surprisingly warm, in much the same way that the water from the faucet had been warm.

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When I came across a juncture, I took a right turn. And I took another right at the next juncture.

That was what I used to do in the corn maze every autumn. Follow the right wall. It was a reliable path to the exit.

Not this time.

I wasn't in a maze. The labyrinth I'd found myself in was far more convoluted than the one built at the Gardner farm, or even than the one that had housed the Minotaur of myth.

It didn't take long before I became completely lost.

After a few more turns, I couldn't have found my way back to the room I'd been trapped in if I'd wanted to.

Still, I kept going.

Forward. Ever forward.

I had no other choice.

An indeterminate amount of time passed, thumping around in the vents like that. Eventually, light appeared ahead.

Hope fluttered weakly in my stomach.

Squeezing through the duct, I found myself at a vent looking into another

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cavernous room. I pressed my face against it, searching for the place where Marc was being held.

I saw gears grinding, helmeted people holding bright torches, conveyer belts with parts on them—but I didn't see Marc.

People spoke softly. I could barely hear them.

I shuffled deeper into the ductwork.

It wasn't long before I heard voices again. "...drained another set of useless humans."

Stiffening, I paused to listen.

"They need to stop going through them so fast," another voice said. "The value goes down if we flood the market, and we get less long-term value on the humans if they're disposed of so quickly."

"That's what I said, but you know these management types. It's all short term. How can we boost our profits to make ourselves look good now? That kind of thing."

They were talking about humans as though they were some kind of product. It made sense in a perverse way. All the rooms I'd seen, aside from my temporary bedroom, had looked like a factory.

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I had an uneasy suspicion about what kind of product that factory might churn out.

My body trembled so hard I had to crawl away. It wouldn't do me any good if I got caught because I rattled the ducts right by the ears of my enemy.

I crawled in a haze for a little while after that. Right turns, left turns—I stopped keeping track.

Once I got to a place that seemed further away from anyone who could possibly hear, I curled up and breathed until my heart stopped pounding in my ears.

Those people wanted to drain my blood, and they wouldn't even use my name when they did it. They could kill me without ever acknowledging me as more than...than a *product*. How many had they killed already? How many died since I even got here?

I had to find the room.

Marc. He needed me.

I started crawling again.



It was at least a couple more hours before I found the large chamber with all the sleeping people. I had almost given up on the hope

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that I would ever find it, but I did by a merciful stroke of luck.

What tipped me off was the sound of quiet groaning. It sounded like there were people half-awake and hurting nearby.

I followed those chilling moans to a place where the duct work widened and found a vent.

The cave seemed emptier and less bustling than before. I didn't see the men in the black suits. All I could see was concrete floor and a lot of people sleeping against the walls.

I couldn't be sure I was alone, but this was probably as good a time as any to try.

"Marc," I whispered to myself.

I was doing this for Marc.

It was much easier getting the vent cover off this time. I pulled it into the duct and set it down quietly before lowering myself onto the catwalk below.

My bare feet thudded against the catwalk.

I froze, looking at the humans suspended on the walls surrounding me. Marc had been alert enough to say my name. What if someone else was awake, and they called for

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help?

But everyone around me had their eyes closed. The only noises they made were those pained breaths.

Nobody was awake enough to call out.

My heart ached for them. If I hadn't been rescued by the mysterious guy with the blue eyes, I would have been up there too. I would have been asleep, unable to do more than groan.

Unable to save Marc.

Why had I been so lucky?

No, not lucky.

Chosen.

The beautiful blue-eyed boy had chosen *me*. Boring Bianka. Luck had nothing to do with it.

It was critical that I took advantage of that strange twist of mercy to save the others.

I tried to orient myself in the room. It was so big, with so many people I didn't know pinned to the walls, that I was initially overwhelmed by the task.

But then I spotted the platform where I had fought earlier.

Marc was over there.

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It was a couple hundred feet away. Too far from the vent I had left open. Even so, I reached it in a short minute of jogging. My muscles were sore from my struggle against the guards in the black suits, but it didn't slow me down.

Once I reached the platform, I didn't know what to do. The scissor lift would be noisy in the silence. Its engine was rusty and old. I remembered how it had groaned when activated. As soon as I activated it to reach Marc, we'd surely have a hundred men in black suits on our tails.

Marc and I would have to run if we hoped to escape.

Would running be enough, though? If those men were supernaturally strong, wouldn't they also have supernatural speed?

I climbed into the scissor lift and found the controls, but my hands were motionless on the buttons, reluctant to press.

My eyes tracked up the wall to Marc.

He was asleep.

Would he be in running condition when I awakened him?

Would I even be capable of rousing him?

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I have to try.

With my eyes closed, I pushed the button to raise the scissor lift.

It whirred and creaked and jolted, and I had to grab the railing more than once to keep from falling to my knees.

If there was anyone close enough to hear, I was finished.

The people hanging around me didn't even twitch.

Within seconds, I was on Marc's level.

He looked so much worse up close, like he was...well, like he was dying. But I didn't see any injuries on his body. He was still wearing the clothes from his last day of school, just as I had been.

"Marc," I whispered hoarsely. He didn't seem to hear me. I patted his face, and his eyelids fluttered. "Marc, listen to me. You need to wake up."

His eyelids fluttered again.

I searched the scissor lift for something that would wake him up and spotted an IV running into Marc's sleeve. It was filled with a clear fluid.

As I'd feared, they must have been

drugging him.

I gritted my teeth and removed the drip as carefully as I could. I winced the whole time as the needle slid out of his skin. I wasn't a doctor or anything, so I didn't know if I was hurting him. But the same sedation that kept him from hearing my voice seemed to keep him from feeling the tug on his arm.

Clear droplets shivered on the tip of the needle. I let the tube dangle.

"Marc," I whispered again, cupping his cheeks in my hands. "Marc, wake up."

Finally, his eyes opened.

Those big brown eyes that had glinted at me from across so many classrooms. Those eyes that I had gazed into while practicing portrait drawing in art class.

Relief flooded my veins like a different kind of drug.

"Bianka?" he asked.

I pressed my forehead to his, clutching his shoulders. "Marc. *Marc.*"

We gazed at each other from inches away, breath mingling.

I only allowed myself a moment to rejoice. One moment.

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Then I loosened the straps on his arms and legs. “We have to get out of here. Can you move?”

“I’ll try,” Marc said.

With my help, he got his legs over the railing into the scissor lift. All his movements were sluggish, but he was bending his knees and flexing his hands. I tried not to be disappointed. Any movement was better than none. I had just been hoping that he would be much faster.

Finally, he collapsed onto the scissor lift.

His eyes opened wide.

He screamed at the sight of everyone pinned to the walls.

I clapped my hands over my ears, like that would keep anyone from finding us. Marc’s fists flailed. He struck me when I tried to help him stand. “Stop it!” I said. “I’m trying—no, you’re hurting me, stop!” I still don’t think he heard me at that point. And I couldn’t fight him and get us both out, so I said, desperate, “Marc, look at me. It’s Bianka. *I need you.*”

His breathing slowed. “Bianka? That’s you?” He spoke much more clearly this time.

“Yes. It’s me.” I went back to the controls

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on the scissor lift. “We need to get out of here.”

That was, of course, when the alarms started.

I slammed the “down” button on the catwalk. It glided to the platform.

A nearby set of double doors opened. Men stood in the archway. They wore black suits.

“Hide,” I hissed to Marc, pulling him behind the platform.

We ducked.

Marc leaned heavily against me, still incapable of standing. I eased him to the floor and held my breath, praying we wouldn’t be spotted in the shadows behind the platform.

But then I heard loud sniffing. The men were scenting the air, like they were bloodhounds or something.

Someone yelled. “Over there!”

They could smell us.

“Run!” I screamed, and I pulled Marc behind me as we dashed across the cavern.

There was nowhere to go except that road—that one-lane path that could take us back

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to our homes, to civilization, to the parents who had told me I needed to go with the men in black suits.

It had been such a long road. I would never be able to escape on foot, even if Marc hadn't been slowing me.

We had to make it out. *We had to.*

The alarms cut off suddenly.

A dozen black-suited men stepped in front of us, broad-shouldered, pale, and angry.

We were surrounded.

"Bianka," Marc whispered in my ear as they closed in.

I squeezed his hand and waited for them to kill us.

At least I wouldn't die alone.

Chapter 5

Marc and I weren't killed, though.

Not immediately.

Instead, we were taken to an office overlooking the cave.

It was furnished in glossy dark wood with huge TV screens along the lefthand wall. The furniture was all black leather. The decorations were gleaming brass.

Security shoved us to the floor in front of the desk. The leather chair swiveled. "Is this the cause of the alarm?"

A man sat in that chair, wearing a tailored white suit with no tie. The collar gapped around the hollow of his throat. He was pale, as was everyone I had seen living in this creepy underground darkness, but he reminded me of a coyote for some reason.

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Maybe it was the way his nose sloped toward his mouth and narrow chin. Maybe it was the cruelty simmering in his gaze.

Maybe it was the fact he looked at me like I was edible.

“Yes, Lord Hector,” said one of the men who had brought us into the office. “They were trying to escape the Cistern.”

Lord? Cistern? Do these people think they’re from the Dark Ages or something?

Marc was limp beside me, sagging weakly against my side. I sat up straight and strong for both of us. “You’ll never get away with this,” I told the man in the chair. “People will notice we’ve gone missing. They’ll search for us. And when they find you, this whole creepy underground cult thing is going to get busted wide open.”

Amusement lingered on his thin lips. He looked over my head to speak to the guards. “Was anyone helping them?”

“No,” said the guard. “It seems that she broke herself free on her own, somehow. And she came back for this thing.” He nudged Marc.

Protectiveness surged within me and I

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tried to stand up. “Don’t touch him!”

They shoved me back to the floor. My knees struck glossy wood.

“Hold her upright,” said Lord Hector.

They lifted me. I thrashed, trying to summon memories of wrestling class again, but to no avail. These men knew I was a fighter, and now they were prepared for me.

Lord Hector strolled in a circle around me, analyzing my body with clinical detachment. He squeezed my biceps like loafs of bread at a supermarket. “Hmm.”

“Keep your paws off me,” I hissed.

He shoved my chin up and pushed my lips back to expose my teeth.

“Good condition,” he said. “Which one did she come from?”

He still wasn’t speaking directly to me. I wouldn’t be ignored like that. They had hurt me, they had hurt Marc, and who knew who else they could have hurt? I wouldn’t take this indignity. “I came from Hidden Oaks!”

“Sector nine,” said the guard.

“Nine is one of Dawn Hold’s, isn’t it?” Lord Hector asked. “Did Phillip pick them for Harvest?”

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“No, my lord. It was a random selection.”

They may as well have been speaking Latin for all I understood them.

“She’s feisty,” Lord Hector said, but he seemed to have lost interest in me. He sauntered back to his desk and sat down. “Send both of them to the Grinder.”

A chill rolled over my shoulders. “What’s the Grinder?”

But now Marc and I were being dragged away.

I kicked. I fought.

It didn’t matter.

We left that warm, comfortable office, and were taken to a chilly hallway.

“I’ll find a way out, Marc,” I whispered to him. Our shoulders bumped together as we were walked down that concrete path into darkness. “I’m going to get us out of here. I just need your help. Okay?”

“Bianka,” he said, as though my name were the only thing left that he could say.

I understood how he felt.

Sanity had fled the both of us.

Security handed us off to a new group of people. They weren’t men in black suits like

the ones that had taken me. They were wearing different uniforms in general, something more like jumpsuits. But they were as impossible to get away from as the men in the suits, and maybe even more impossible, considering I couldn't move an inch and I wasn't even chained.

Everyone in this creepy cave system was so strong.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked. "What's happening?"

One of the jumpsuits sneered at me. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Someone had finally spoken to me. The fact I wasn't being treated like an animal made my heart skip a beat, even though his words had been so cruel.

Better to be a hated human than a *product*.

"Let me go!" I demanded.

A hand slapped me in the back of the head hard enough that I staggered.

"Hey!" Marc protested. He tried to break free, but he had even worse luck with it than I did, considering he kept slumping. The drugs still hadn't left his system.

How could they treat us like this? He was

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too weak. He needed time to recover.

We weren't dogs.

"He's hurt!" I said. "He needs a doctor!"

"He's fine. They don't send anyone to the Grinder unless they can put on a good show," the same jumpsuit said. They walked us through a doorway into a new hallway. It was lightless except for a dim red glow. The crimson bulbs reduced everything around me to black and crimson images so stark that it hurt my eyes.

Another one of the guys in jumpsuits groaned. "Ignore her. It's not worth it."

"Please," I said again. "Talk to me. Tell me what's happening. Something—*anything*. What's the Grinder?"

We turned into another hallway, and they shoved me. Hard.

Before I could so much as catch my breath, I was falling.

I screamed.

My stomach lifted into my throat.

I landed on something soft.

A moment later, Marc thudded next to me. We were unhurt.

Something clanged shut above us. Metal

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against metal. It echoed against concrete.

“Look,” someone nearby said. It was dark in whatever pit we were in, but now that I heard a voice, I could hear breathing, too. “They brought more into the Grinder. They’re still getting newbies.”

“Yeah. Too bad for them.”

We weren’t alone.

Before I could panic, dim lights flickered on in the pit. Marc and I were in a small, unremarkable concrete box. The floor was covered in mats. Marc and I had landed on a stack of them, which had obviously been situated to catch people dumped into the room.

All of the other mats had people lolling on top of them. They looked as weak and fatigued as Marc. A few of them looked almost as angry as I felt. And some of them were tan, as though they had seen sunlight as recently as I had.

These weren’t volunteers. They were captives, just like me.

And none were chained or unconscious.

There were a dozen of us in here. They would have been free longer than Marc—

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which meant fewer sedatives in their system. For the first time, I thought there was a chance that we could escape.

A woman who must have been my age nodded at me from her own mat. “So what did you do?” she asked as Marc and I climbed off the pile.

Marc responded. “Tried to run.” His voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat. “She tried to save me.” His hand slipped into mine. I tightened my fingers around his, clutching his arm. Marc and I had never been terribly touchy-feely, but right now, I needed that human contact.

The woman tucked some of her messy red hair behind her ear. She was so greasy, I doubted that she’d showered in weeks. “Were you sedated?”

“Yeah,” Marc said, sitting beside her.

She handed him a bottle of water. “You too, girly girl?”

I didn’t know if it was a good idea to bring up the man who had saved me. I still didn’t know what to make of that. I was still wearing the dress he put me in, and it was torn and dirty at this point, nearly as messy as the

outfits the others were wearing.

“I escaped when I first got here,” I said. It wasn’t entirely a lie. I thrust my hand toward her. “My name is Bianka. You?”

“Lisa,” she said. We shook. It was a weird, formal gesture—not something that I would have done with anyone from my school. What teenagers shook hands? But it seemed important now. I needed friends. Allies. The handshake sealed our amicable new relationship.

“Have you been here very long, Lisa?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “There’s no light. I can’t tell day or night. I could have been in here for days or months. And these other people have been in this place even longer.” She gestured to the others lying on the mats around us. They were wisps of humans, barely more than skeletons, dirty and fatigued. It scared me how many appeared to be my age, too. Teenagers—not products, but *people*—who had been stolen from their lives, stripped of their dignities, and abandoned to darkness.

“But what is ‘this place?’” I asked. “Who

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are these people? Not the people in this cell, but the people who captured us. They're a cult or something right?"

"People?" Lisa snorted. "Don't know that I would call vampires people."

Chapter 6

My mouth was so dry that it hurt.

The word Lisa had spoken resonated through my whole body.

Vampires.

It was impossible.

I lived in a boring, ordinary world. I went to high school. I did extracurriculars. I had applied to colleges in nearby towns. My plan was to get a degree in general studies, and then decide what I wanted to do for real in graduate school.

There wasn't anything supernatural in a world like that.

I stuttered. "V-vampires?"

Lisa looked like she felt sad for me. "What, you think they were taking blood for kicks?"

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I hadn't seen them taking blood at all.

But the way that the man with the sunflower had looked at my bleeding thumb...

No. He didn't want to drink my blood.

He had brought me flowers.

"They took me from my home," I said.
"They were at my school."

"Yeah, that's how they work." The woman waved her hands, indicating the pit around us. "You think this would exist if the people who counted didn't know about it? They take you when you're young, seventeen or eighteen, and they suck you dry over the years. Our blood keeps them from aging."

My mind was whirling.

Vampires. In my town.

I had thought we'd be fine if we got out of the mountain. I thought we'd be able to go home, hug our families, go to college.

But they all knew.

My parents knew.

The school knew.

I'd suspected that had to be the case, but having it confirmed made me queasy.

Was there anywhere I could be safe?

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Marc's hand slipped into mine again. He shared his water bottle with me but I only took a sip. I'd had a little something to tide me over while in that bedroom, so he needed it a lot more than I did.

"We can't go home," Marc whispered to me. Desperation aged him a good decade or two. I wondered if I looked as haunted.

"There's a way out of this," I said.

My mind was still whirling, but I'd quickly shifted gears from shock to planning.

There were a lot of people in Hidden Oaks. Thousands of us. Even if the vampires were stronger than we were, I suspected we had numbers on our side.

I needed to learn what my parents knew.

And we needed to rally to fight back.

My hand tightened on Marc's. "We'll find a way out of this," I said, firmer than before. I caught his eye. I forced him to look at me. "I promise."

"You're good, Bianka," he said, "but even you aren't that good."

I started to respond when a part of the wall opened.

Only two people—vampires, probably—

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came inside, and I half expected the prisoners in the room to rush them. There were enough of us to overcome that pair. I stood up so that I could fight back.

But when the vampires walked in, all the humans shrunk back. They looked like dogs that had been kicked too many times.

I still was not a dog.

Never.

My hands were shaking again. I clasped them together to stop the trembling.

The vampires stopped in front of me, Marc, and Lisa. Marc kept staring at the ground like he still wasn't entirely awake, blinking hard.

If they took Marc, he wouldn't have a chance. I prepared myself to fight for him.

But they grabbed Lisa.

It surprised me for some reason. She didn't seem surprised; she threw her elbows in their faces and kicked out with both feet. They just grabbed her arms and twisted them behind her until she cried out.

"Bad move," one of them said. "You'll need everything you can get."

"For what?" I asked, leaping forward.

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The other vampire barred me. “Sit down, blood bag.”

Blood bag? That was the specific kind of product they intended us to be: livestock that held food for the vampires. He’d dared to call me something so undignified.

I wanted to punch him for it, but I swallowed down my violent urge. Without assistance, numbers weren’t on my side.

They dragged Lisa out of the pit.

A screen flickered to life in the wall. It was a TV, very much like the ones in Lord Hector’s office.

When it turned on, everyone in the pit came to life. They herded nearer to me, clumping as close as they could to get a good view of the television. Not everyone did—Marc, for one, stayed exactly where he was—but there were people brushing my arms and sitting on the mats nearby.

They looked like they were hunkering down to watch a must-see TV event.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Shut up,” one person said beside me. “It’s starting.”

The screen showed a deep pit ringed with

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seats. The sound of roaring approval came in from...somewhere. I didn't see any speakers, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

None of the humans around me cheered.

The camera zoomed in on the pit.

A door opened, and the woman I had just been talking to was dragged out and tossed onto the dirt. Lisa got to her feet and brushed her hands on her clothes, getting dust off.

Nothing about the situation seemed to surprise her. Grim determination carved her face into hard lines.

Her mouth moved. She was yelling at the people sitting in the bleachers around this pit—this thing that Lord Hector had called the Grinder—but I couldn't hear anything she was saying. It looked foul, though. Lisa was probably using every single bad word that she had ever heard and making up a few to add spice.

The camera cut to another door.

Another woman came inside. She wasn't dragged, like Lisa had been. Her jaw was set and her hands were balled into fists.

A sickening idea came over me.

The Grinder looked a lot like an old

Stephanie Archer

Roman coliseum to me.

But there were no lions in this coliseum.

I didn't know if I wanted to watch what was going to happen between Lisa and her opponent. But I couldn't look away.

A bell rang, the crowd cheered, and the second woman went after the first.

They both fought, and I don't know if I expected spears or what, but I was shocked when the first fist connected with a nose. Maybe it was the sound of cracking bone and the sight of bright red blood.

The crowd sounded hungry.

"Lisa doesn't have a chance," someone murmured beside me.

That was the only thing anyone said during the fight.

I wish it hadn't been true.

Lisa got her hits in. She might have broken the other woman's arm at one point, and she definitely bruised her eye. But the other woman had several inches of height on Lisa, and that alone would probably have given her the edge.

When Lisa fell to the ground, the other woman took her opportunity, straddled her,

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and wrapped her long fingers around the fallen woman's throat.

I didn't hear the choking sounds.

But my imagination was good enough to fill in the blanks.

That was the end of the fight for me. I turned away, shaking with tears as I stumbled back to Marc.

For the first time since I had been taken from my parents, I sobbed.



Lisa was dead.

It didn't take me long to realize that.

Even though I was trying not to look at the TV screen, the reactions of the people in the cell with us said enough about her fate.

A frisson of disappointment ran through our fellow prisoners. They returned to their mats, sinking to the floor to languish in the gloom again.

For a few electric minutes, they had been alive. Awake. And they had wasted that energy by watching the battle instead of trying to gather themselves to turn their violence where it mattered.

By the time I lifted my head, enough

people had moved away from the TV that I could see the screen. The woman who had killed Lisa was being taken away by vampires. She wasn't reacting to anything: the crowd above her, the men rushing her out, the woman lying behind her. She looked blank. Like there was nothing happening within her skull.

I couldn't imagine what that must feel like, killing someone for a bloodthirsty audience.

Lord Hector had called it the Grinder.

I understood now that meant we were all waiting for our turn to fight.

"Marc," I said, clutching my best friend's arm. "We have to do something."

"Just tell me what to do," he said, voice still rough. His eyes were still foggy. "I can't think, Bianka. All the sedatives...I still feel like I'm dreaming." He tried to focus on me. "Am I dreaming?"

My eyes burned. "I wouldn't dream anything like this in my worst nightmares."

Voices echoed through the cell.

"Another! Another!" The vampires kept chanting that again and again.

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Another. Another. Another.

I got a lump in my throat. Someone else was going to die.

The door opened again. Two more vampires entered.

I could see them as vampires now; they had a sharper, leaner look than any of the humans around me, even the ones who had been drained of blood. It wasn't even that they were leaner. It was just like they were walking weapons. Predators. Supernaturally strong and fast and capable of smelling blood on the air.

And they wanted to watch us fight.

We could have easily overwhelmed them if we'd worked together, but the people on the mats didn't move. Nobody thought about rebellion except me.

"Get on your feet!" I urged, dragging Marc to his feet. "They're not going to take another one of us!" I linked my arms with him and extended my hand to the others on the mats. "Come on! Get up!"

But they weren't moving.

Marc was still staring at me, blinking heavily.

Stephanie Archer

The vampires ignored my attempts at rallying the others.

“This one,” said a female vampire. She pointed at Marc. “Him.”

Their hands reached out to grab my best friend.

I thought I’d felt scared before, at so many points. When I’d left my home. When I had been dragged into the darkness under the mountain. When I’d been chased and put in the cell.

But the second I saw them come for Marc, I knew he would die. He could barely talk to me. He would never survive a fight.

It had been bad enough seeing Lisa fall during the competition. If Marc went out there, I would get to watch him fall next.

The idea was torture far surpassing anything else the vampires could do to me.

There was only one thing to do about it. I didn’t have to think about the options, because there were none, as far as I was concerned.

Marc didn’t stand a chance in a fight.

I did.

“Take me!” I pushed him behind my back.

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“I’ll fight!” The words fell from my numb lips. It was easy to say them as long as I didn’t think about what I was volunteering to do.

They tried to shove me aside to reach Marc.

I shoved back.

“Take me, you monsters!”

Arms wrapped around my shoulders, and I flipped the female the way that I had flipped a vampire earlier. The movement came more smoothly. I had found that fire that my wrestling coach had longed for again. When the second vampire attacked, I jabbed elbows and knees at his gut, clumsily going for his stomach, his face.

He easily slapped my hands aside, even as he laughed at the woman on the floor.

“Feisty,” he said. “They’ll love her.”

“She did volunteer,” the female vampire said, glaring hatred at me.

I had volunteered to fight.

To die.

For Marc.

They marched me toward the door.

I let them take me, but I snuck one more look at Marc over my shoulder. Marc, who

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was still obviously hazy and sick, but was looking at me as they carried me off.

He was the last thing I saw as the door closed.

Chapter 7

The hall leading from the cell to the arena was narrow and dark. It felt like I was crawling through the air ducts again—or like I was crawling into a grave.

As we approached the arena, the ceiling shook with the roars of the crowd. They were excited for the fight to come.

I couldn't even feel afraid anymore.

The door into the arena was a tall archway blocked by glass and iron. The glass was decorated with a bold logo in reverse—something clearly meant to be seen by the crowd, not by the competitors.

As cold vampire fingers secured a collar around my throat, I tried to imagine what that logo would look like the other way around. It was sort of like a blooming flower

surrounded by beaming rays of light.

I wished that I had brought the sunflower with me.

Where was my blue-eyed hero now? That boy who had been strong enough to defeat all those vampires, and compassionate enough to feed me?

I had run from him. Rejected his kindness.

The collar locked tightly around my throat.

My eyes fell shut. They were no longer burning with tears.

This will be worth it to protect Marc.

I couldn't regret escaping, since I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd failed to protect my best friend. I only wished that I could see the blue-eyed boy again one more time. I wanted to thank him for everything he'd tried to do, even if I had failed him and myself in the attempt to escape.

The vampires used the collar to lead me to the glass doors, which swung open.

The shouting of the audience reached a peak. They wanted to see me die, and they most likely would.

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Or that's what I thought until I walked out the door and saw the fragile old woman standing on the other side.

All thoughts of Marc fled from my mind.

The competitor I was being pitted against was shorter than me, and bone thin. She had the same collar around her throat that I had around mine as well. While she was crouched kind of like the previous fight's winner had, she made no move to come toward me.

I stared up at the bleachers surrounding the arena.

Hundreds of vampires looked back at me. They were as beautiful, pallid, and graceful as the others I'd seen in this dark world. They were still cheering, but I couldn't hear it over the thudding of my heart anymore.

It didn't occur to me that I should be fighting this old lady until waves of pain washed over me, and the crowd started to chant the word "fight" over and over.

I dug my heels in.

"No," I said. "No!"

The pain intensified. It was coming from my collar.

Stephanie Archer

A shock collar—another indignity, one more way to communicate that I was nothing more than a dog to these vampires.

When I still didn't move, the pain just kept climbing. It hurt so much that my vision went white and I was barely aware of anything around me.

When the pain stopped, and my eyes cleared, the woman was rushing toward me, much faster than I would have thought she would be able to move. She might have been old, but she'd clearly survived to reach the Grinder for good reason.

I leaped out of the way before she could punch me. It didn't look like she knew how to punch very hard, but I definitely didn't want to take the chance.

She swung her fist and I pushed her aside. Not hard—it looked like I should have been able to break her hip, so I couldn't bring myself to get violent.

The woman didn't give up.

She threw herself at me again.

Bony, frail fingers dug into my shoulders. She shoved her face into mine. "Kill me," she hissed.

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“What?” There was no way I could have heard her right.

She kicked out wildly.

I pushed her off of me and backed away.

“Kill me,” she said again, almost too low to be heard over the roaring crowd. She didn’t sound particularly fierce or murderous. Her eyes welled with tears. “Please.”

My heart thudded harder still.

Digging my fingertips into the shock collar, I searched for a latch. If I could figure out how to open it, I could release both of us.

The collar responded with a powerful shock.

I dropped my hands.

“Kill me!” the woman cried.

“No!” I yelled back. “I won’t fight you!”

The white pain shocked through my body again. I could barely hear my own cries over the boos that resounded.

My audience was disappointed.

Good. I won’t perform for you.

The pain stopped again, as though encouraging my head to clear enough for the fight. I was wobbly on my legs, barely aware

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of everything around me, and I thought of Marc. If he'd gone, would he have been alert enough to even choose whether or not to listen to the woman? I couldn't believe he would kill her.

The old woman stumbled forward.

I couldn't tell if she'd been shocked again as well or if she was tiring from the little fighting we'd done.

"You have to," she said, clinging to my arm with one hand and swinging up with the other. I grabbed her arm and found myself struggling against her. "Just kill me."

"No!"

We grappled. We fell to the ground.

The white light struck again, and it was the worst it had been yet.

I tasted coppery blood.

If I didn't let this woman kill me—or if I didn't kill her—then the vampire collar was going to kill me.

The injustice of it burned like fire through my veins.

Earlier that day, or the day before, I had been thinking about college. I had been worried that Marc had noticed my freckles

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and enjoying the sight of ants carrying potato chips ten times their size through the grass.

Who were the vampires to deny that to me?

I didn't deserve this pain.

The collar shocked again and again, so painful that my back arched.

Everything was pain. Pain and rage and the wild shrieking of a wind during a hurricane.

My blood pounded through me, body thrashing.

Leering, screaming vampire faces whirled around me, pale as death but filled with excitement.

Blood lust.

My skin burned.

Stop. Stop. Stop!

I would have done anything to make the pain stop.

Kill me, the woman had said.

Apparently she would have done anything to make the pain stop, too.

Who was I to deny that to her?

We were all entitled to our own lives, and that meant we should have been entitled to

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dignified death as well. Not everyone was meant to fight and survive. We were masters of our own bodies, regardless of what the vampires thought.

It was hard to accept that with the shock collar clamped under my jaw.

I thought the pain would never end.

Eventually, it did stop. It wasn't endless, but close. It felt like a thousand years before the collar stopped shocking me.

Even when the pain ended, it took a very long time for my vision to clear. So long that when I finally saw the arena again, I wasn't entirely sure it was real or that I was even alive.

I touched my body with my hands. I felt intact. And then I looked down at the dirty ground by my feet.

The old woman was dead underneath me.

Vampires were cheering louder than ever before.

"No," I whispered.

There was no responding shock of the collar this time because there was no reason to urge me to fight.

The fight was over.

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I killed her.

In the haze of the blood lust, wracked by agony, I had fought. My mind had railed against instinct and loss.

She'd asked me to kill her.

And I had.

Vampires emerged from the glass doors decorated with the flower and sunbeams. I lifted my fists instinctively, afraid of the pain they would inflict.

My hands were stained with blood.

Her blood.

“No!” I cried.

The vampires dragged me out of the arena.

Once I started screaming, I couldn't make myself stop.

When we were out of the arena, one of the men dragging me slapped me hard across the mouth. It didn't hurt. Or maybe it did, but the collar had hurt so much more that I couldn't feel the slap.

I did stop screaming. Instead, I cried as they dragged me through the halls and away from the Grinder—too late. Much too late.

Chapter 8

The vampires shoved me into a tiny room with half a dozen others. This room was even smaller than the cell where I'd been held until the fight. There was no space for mats, no room for sitting. Our shoulders bumped against each other with every slightest movement.

The other people smelled like body odor, so these humans must have been enslaved even longer than I had been.

These were definitely humans, though. Most of them had dried blood caked on their skin, and everyone looked bruised and dirty.

I even recognized the woman who had killed Lisa. She was staring at the wall like she couldn't see anything else in the room.

I knew the feeling. I couldn't even make

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myself speak to the others for fear I would start crying or screaming again.

This room was where they put the winners from the Grinder.

I was in a room of killers.

And I had just become one of them.

The old woman had begged me to kill her. I had been blinded with pain when it happened, but did that make any difference? Did it make me better than the others? Or had all of them done what they needed for similar reasons to mine: not just for our own survival, but to release the losers from bondage, and save our friends from certain death?

The thought of the friend I had been trying to save—Marc—was almost enough to give me strength.

Almost.

I felt so weak with fear.

Another door opened.

The vampire who greeted us didn't have to say a word. The others filed out, shuffling into the hallway as though they had been commanded by a voice I couldn't hear.

I hesitated to follow. I didn't want to be a

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sheep like these people. But hadn't I made my bed? I'd been obedient despite my best efforts, without making a conscious decision to do so.

The vampire's eyes narrowed, reminding me of the cost of disobedience.

I stumbled out with the rest.

The room on the other side of the door was dark, illuminated only by a crimson bulb. I couldn't see beyond a few inches of floor in front of me.

"First human!" yelled the vampire who had let us out of the room.

I lifted my eyes to shade them from the red light, struggling to focus on my surroundings. We humans had been led out onto some kind of stage or a platform. The room was no arena, but it had space for an audience, too. There were approximately two dozen chairs. Every one of those chairs was occupied by a person.

If you could call vampires people.

Their eyes flared weirdly in the red light, staring at us intently. We all hung back against the wall, milling in a group.

Sheep being surveyed by the wolves.

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That was me. A very deadly sheep riddled with regret.

A vampire grabbed the boy next to me. He was as ordinary as the rest of us with narrow shoulders and nervous eyes. When the vampire touched him, he started to cry. The boy was pushed to the front of the stage.

“He was selected for the Grinder after all sedatives failed on him,” the vampire said. “His Grinder fight was a draw against the opposition. They knocked each other out. We’ll start his bidding at five crowns.” The vampires in the audience murmured among themselves.

I swallowed down the taste of bile. *It’s a slave auction. We’re being sold.*

The only question was...for what purpose?

One of the audience members lifted a finger. “I’ll take him for three.”

“Three crowns? Anyone else?” asked the announcer.

Nobody spoke.

“Three it is. Sold to the Miner!”

The boy collapsed onto his knees. “No!” He was hauled off the stage, a mess of sobs.

“Miner?” I whispered.

The girl next to me whispered back. “Slave labor. They’re digging more caverns. They work the slaves until they can’t work anymore, and then...” She trailed off when the vampire announcer looked at us.

She didn’t have to finish speaking. I could only imagine how much work it must have taken to create caves the size of the one that Marc had been sedated in. If all the slaves had been similar in build to that boy, then they must have been carved with the blood of a thousand lives.

The announcer’s red eyes skimmed the winners, and he stopped on me.

“Second human!” he shouted.

And now I was pulled out of the flock.

I was so afraid from all my time in the caves that I couldn’t manage to feel more fear now. My heart couldn’t beat any faster. If it did, I thought that it might just erupt within my chest.

His cruel hand was so tight on my wrist.

But I wouldn’t cry like the boy had. I wouldn’t give any of them the satisfaction of showing fear if I could avoid it.

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The vampire grabbed my hair and pulled my head back, baring my throat. I made a gurgling noise.

“This one won her fight against a seasoned escape artist, a wily old human who had made three attempts to break out of the Waiting Room. *This* human was first spotted when she escaped before sedation. Rather than trying to return to the surface, she attempted to free another human. Today was her first day in the Grinder. She killed her first opponent within five minutes.”

Five minutes? How was that possible? It had felt like we had been fighting for an entire lifetime.

My knees wobbled. I clenched my jaw and forced myself to stand upright.

“We’ll start with twenty crowns,” the announcer said.

Was I really worth four times as much as the boy? What were they basing that worth upon?

The idea that I could be more desirable simply because I was deadlier made some horrible kind of sense. These were nightmarish creatures, and I had proven that

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I could fit into the dreamscape with them.

I tried to peer through the red light to see the faces of the audience.

Who else was buying us, and why? Was I about to end up in the mines, performing physical labor until I dropped dead?

“Thirty crowns!” someone yelled, and the crowd murmured as the vampire onstage let go of my hair.

I wavered, tempted to run. But where would I run? There was a cage behind me and a group of eager buyers in the crowd.

Everyone was looking at me.

“Do I have thirty-one?” the announcer replied.

“Thirty-five!” one voice yelled.

“Thirty-six!” a second said.

It went like that for several minutes. As the numbers climbed higher, generally without prompting from the auctioneer, the crowd began to shout with excitement.

The number approached forty-five crowns.

I had no reference for the currency. Crowns could have been pennies, or dollars, or thousands, and I never would have known.

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But the excitement made me think it was a lot. I didn't feel proud. I didn't feel pleased. Numb horror had taken up permanent residence in my soul.

"Forty-six!" the auctioneer yelled at the peak. "Going once, going twice..."

"Sixty," a voice called, loud and clear.

The voice sounded familiar.

I tried to peer into the red light to see who had just claimed me for sixty crowns, but a lot of the vampires jumped to their feet, shrieking so loud it hurt my ears.

Sixty must have been a lot.

The auctioneer didn't seem like he wanted to calm the crowd. He simply called, "Sold!"

Another vampire seized me.

I was dragged offstage, and even the humans I'd been with, who I had barely noticed during all the commotion, were staring at me as I was taken away.



Another hallway. Another room.

It was all a blur to me.

My captors didn't take me very far. This new cave was small and roughly-hewn,

obviously not a place meant to be seen by important people. It was filled with several human-sized cages, each of which had naked iron bars, with nothing to make them comfortable for the prisoners.

The first boy—the one who had sold for three crowns—was in the one nearest the door. He had stopped crying.

They threw me in a second cage.

The vampires stared at me for a moment, almost like they were waiting for something. I didn't know what. Did they want me to react the way that the boy did? Were they such sadists that they hoped to see me dissolve into tears? I was breathing hard from all the adrenaline and fear, but I wasn't shrinking away from their grip as he had, and I also wasn't curling into a ball on the floor.

If I had to guess, I probably looked... blank. Too overwhelmed to look scared, too scared to look threatening.

Finally, one of them snorted. "Overpriced."

"You don't know," the other said. "It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?"

The first didn't look convinced. "Well, he

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wants her pronto. No waiting period. She's going into training immediately. And what the little prince wants..." She said "little prince" in a nasal voice with a sneer. Her opinion of my buyer was not positive.

She pushed on the side of my cage, and it rolled. I hadn't realized it was on wheels until it moved smoothly with only the slightest creaking.

My cage passed the one with the boy in it. He looked at me with pleading eyes.

I turned my head away.

The vampires pushed my cage out into a room that was shockingly well-lit and sort of beautiful. The floor was white tile. There were windows on each wall, and the yellow glow of sunlight filtered through the frosted glass, which was imprinted with more of those flower-and-starburst symbols I'd seen in the arena. I wondered if the sunlight was real. It couldn't be—not so deep underground, and not when the light was so dim. It was the wistful reenactment of sunlight, just like the plastic potted plants in the corners were the wistful reenactment of nature.

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Even if the decorations were fake, my cage was ugly in comparison to all of it.

The only other furniture in the room was a settee. The cushion was dark red. I couldn't help but think it was meant to hide blood stains.

Was this where the "prince" who had purchased me would drink my blood? That was what vampires did, right? They wanted blood.

They positioned my cage a few feet in front of the couch and then left me.

I wasn't alone for long.

The door behind the settee opened and another vampire stepped in.

"No," I whispered.

Standing in front of me was the man—no, the vampire—who had rescued me earlier, blue eyes as intense as they had ever been.

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