
CHAPTER ONE

For the last two weeks I've led the Salamancan hunters. What a disaster. I can't believe that Father Juan's prayers and magick spells told him I was the one for the job. I'd laugh, if I wouldn't cry first.

Sometimes I dream that I have awakened from this nightmare and there are no vampires, that I'm home and loved and safe with my sister and my parents and my grandparents. Then I wake up. The Cursed Ones are real. My grandfather is dead. My sister has been converted. She is one of them, and my father is responsible. He betrayed her. He betrayed me.

Even if the war ended tomorrow, nothing would be okay.

But, of course, the war isn't ending tomorrow. Unless we lose. I'm starting to think that's

inevitable. Humanity is fighting an unwinnable battle, and sooner or later there won't be other bands of hunters to take our place as we fall.

*I can't think that way, not if I'm the leader.
But I do.*

I enrolled at the Sacred Heart Academy Against the Cursed Ones a little more than two years ago to learn how to kill the vampires. I come from rebel stock—my grandparents were radical protesters in the 1960s, fighting for social justice and paying for their actions by remaining underground for the rest of their lives. Esther and Charles “Che” Leitner are legendary for their bravery and sacrifice.

In honor of them I dreamed of becoming the Hunter—the warrior who would be given the sacred elixir that would endow me with super strength and speed. That honor fell to another, Eriko Sakamoto. But then our master, Father Juan, broke with tradition and gave Eriko a backup team. There are five of us, known also as hunters. She was our leader, until New Orleans fell.

Eriko never wanted to lead; the Hunter has always fought alone, and that was what she had expected. She asked Father Juan to relieve her of command. He did, and gave me her role. But of all of us I have the fewest skills—I'm not supernatural, and I had no fighting experience before I came to

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Salamanca. I think of myself as “just Jenn,” and I feel like a fraud.

The Cursed Ones are coming down hard on us. None of our allies survived our attack on the vampires of New Orleans. During the battle courageous New Orleanians rose up and joined the fight, but they were massacred. On the news, on the Net, there was not a word about it. But people heard; they knew: It was useless to fight the Cursed Ones. The vampires would always win, and they would show no mercy to the losers. Better to obey them to survive.

As the hunters of Salamanca, we push and we fight and we make trouble. And so the terrified people are beginning to think of us, and not the vampires, as the problem. Spain, where we live, is one of the few nations that has not signed a treaty with the Cursed Ones. Spaniards have been proud of us, calling on us to save their cities and villages from the vampires that brutalize them. But people on the streets have begun to mock us. They call us pulgas—“fleas,” a nuisance, an irritant.

If the resistance fighters like us lose the trust of humanity, we lose everything. The hunters of Salamanca need a victory. Something that can make everyone feel like there’s hope. We need it for the people looking to us for salvation. We need it for

ourselves, to remind us that we can fight and win together as a team. And I need it for myself, so I can be the leader that we so desperately need.

My fighting partner, Antonio de la Cruz, says that I need to have faith. I have no idea how he can say that after all that's happened—to us, and to him. I wish I could have faith. But in this world faith—like hope—is in very short supply.

*—from the diary of Jenn Leitner,
discovered in the ashes*

PAMPLONA, SPAIN

TEAM SALAMANCA: JENN AND ANTONIO, SKYE AND HOLGAR, AND JAMIE AND ERIKO

Where's our contact? Antonio wondered as he searched the shadows of the narrow brick alley, detecting shapes and movements only his crimson eyes could see. He spotted a few rats pillaging among the garbage cans, and a big black cat stalking them. The rats squeaked warnings to one another, but none of them ran away. They were used to cats, and humans, and vampires.

Then suddenly the rats squealed and screamed. At the same instant, the cat stiffened and yowled, then flashed past Antonio.

Antonio saw what had frightened the creatures of the night. At the other end of the alley Holgar Vibbard stood

silhouetted in his bomber jacket and jeans beneath a watery streetlamp. The Danish werewolf chuffed low in his throat, a greeting tinged with wariness. Holgar must be thinking the same thing as his vampire counterpart: *The local resistance has failed to show for our meeting. Has something else gone wrong?*

Antonio crossed himself—black cat, bad luck. He'd grown up in a small village in the Spanish countryside in the 1930s, when faith and superstition had been more tightly bound.

The absence of Moncho was another very bad omen.

It was ten o'clock at night in Pamplona, and Antonio smelled vampires everywhere. Of all the Cursed Ones, the scent of death lingered most lightly on Antonio himself, or so Holgar said. Being a werewolf, Holgar had a highly developed sense of smell, better even than a Cursed One.

Ever since Antonio's escape from his sire in 1942, he had never been tempted to return to the vampire fold. His loyalties lay with humanity, hopeless though their cause might be. His love, though intended for God alone, lay with the girl walking beside him. She was Jenn Leitner, the leader of their vampire-hunting team, for whose sake he had kept vigil every night for more than two years, and whose sister he had sworn to save from the stake. Heather Leitner had been changed into a vampire by their enemy, Aurora Abregón, and for the last two weeks Antonio had been attempting to reawaken Heather's

humanity, if indeed it was still there. He was beginning to have his doubts.

Ay, Jenn, you're so beautiful tonight, he thought, admiring the tangles of dark red hair escaping from the black knit cap that gently brushed Jenn's jawline. Petite, deceptively delicate in appearance, she could hold her own if a band of Cursed Ones came calling. Still, every protective instinct within him remained on high alert. During her two years of training at the Academia Sagrado Corazón Contra los Malditos—the Sacred Heart Academy Against the Cursed Ones—he had looked out for her. Now he served as her unofficial bodyguard, though none knew it. Antonio had been born in a time when men fought the battles and women preserved everything worth fighting for. Traditions, culture, children. There were so many things he couldn't give Jenn, and it made him feel powerless and ashamed. The least he could do was offer his own life in place of hers, should such a moment arise. Maybe tonight would be that night.

Jenn's skin was awash with the brilliant light of a storefront window. Her face was filled with longing as she watched a young couple a few meters ahead of them pointing into the store's second window. Antonio's acute hearing picked up the threads of their conversation—the girl's birthday was coming up, and her boyfriend was going to buy her a ring. They were two Spaniards, attempting to live a normal life under the fang.

Antonio followed Jenn's gaze and saw the couple ges-

turing at pearl rings. In the next case rows of dangling ruby hearts were clutched in the claws of gold and silver bats—since the war against the Cursed Ones, it was the most recognizable icon on the planet, the symbol of women saving themselves for a vampire’s kiss. Antonio caught Jenn’s reflection in the glass as her face hardened at their sight. He, of course, cast no reflection.

Wistfulness mingled with his tension. There was no chance for them to be like that couple; he would never throw his arm around her as she tried on rings and he pretended to be dismayed by the prices. She would never giggle and rise up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek to take the sting out of his financial sacrifice. They were hunters, and he was a vampire. And he had long ago promised himself to God alone, as a man intent on becoming a priest. Though he was a man no longer, his vow remained.

The couple wasn’t as happy as they were pretending to be. Antonio could smell their fear, watch their eyes dart anxiously up and down the boulevard. But they were trying very hard to take joy where they could find it. Jenn was just eighteen; she didn’t understand how people could continue to act as if the vampires hadn’t won the war. How Spain could pretend it wasn’t capitulating. But Antonio knew what it was like to fight against a truth so brutal that you had to find a way to forget, even if only for a few moments, the horror of what had happened to you.

Jenn glanced at Antonio, and he gave his head a quick

shake—*Nothing to concern you*. He forced down his bloodlust as she nodded back at him. She was unaware of the temptation she presented as she stood so close. He scented her, felt her heat. He wanted her. He always wanted her. But he would never have her. If he had still had the right to offer himself to her, he would have been faced with a terrible choice: break his vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity so that he could love her as men loved women, or deny the truth of his existence—that he had fallen in love with Jenn—and remain an obedient son of the Church?

Perhaps God Himself had blessed Antonio with vampirism, so that the choice would never have to be made. He balled his fists at the absurd notion. There was nothing blessed about what he had become. There was a reason vampires were called the Cursed Ones. A hundred reasons. And the God of his understanding didn't work that way. The Father of Heaven wasn't a capricious spirit, rigging tests and torturing His children to see if they deserved His love. God wanted to help. But He had to be asked.

Antonio stared at the crimson hearts reflecting a scarlet glow against Jenn's cheeks. There was no choice to be made. And yet he couldn't stop turning the question over in his head. He was obsessed with it. Vampires were known for their powers of mesmerism, able to charm their victims as men could charm cobras with the dip and lilt of a flute. Humans did it in their way—what else was flirting?—and for vampires it was just as natural and automatic. He fought

constantly not to mesmerize Jenn. But had she succeeded in mesmerizing him instead?

“Antonio?” Jenn murmured softly, as if detecting his increased agitation. There was cautious distance in her voice, where before there would have been warmth.

Before Jenn’s sister had been changed into a ravaging monster.

Antonio had seen a similar thing happen back during the war—World War II, *his* war—when the atrocities of the Nazis had become so hideous that the people of Europe and the Americas lumped all Germans into the same category. To them every German was a Nazi, evil to a man, to be hated and feared. Now that Heather had been changed—“converted,” in vampire parlance—it had become very hard for Jenn to distinguish him from the rest of *los Malditos*—the Cursed Ones—and to look upon him as the good vampire, the one she loved.

New Orleans had done this to them. Aurora Abregón, another Spanish vampire, had kidnapped Heather to lure Antonio to New Orleans, so that Aurora could present the traitorous vampire to her sire. Not only had Antonio avoided capture, but he had rescued Heather as well.

Who Aurora’s sire was, Antonio did not know. All of vampiredom hated Antonio for abandoning his sire and siding with the pathetic human race. His sympathies made him a target, and he saw now how dangerous it was for him to be around the team.

Around Jenn.

“Antonio?” she said again.

“*Estoy bien,*” he replied, assuring her that all was well with him. But it was not.

They walked past the happy pair. Antonio heard three heartbeats. The humans were going to have a baby.

To a casual observer he and Jenn looked like any other teen couple crowding the tapas bars and clubs and spilling onto the Spanish streets, though perhaps not as trendy. Jenn wore a dark gray hoodie over a black sweater and flared black jeans with clunky Doc Martens. Antonio had pulled on scuffed cowboy boots, low-slung jeans, and a simple black T-shirt. Jenn’s heartbeat picked up whenever he wore the boots. So he had taken to wearing them whenever possible.

It’s not good to tempt her. Or myself, he thought, but who on this earth was perfect?

Holgar’s position at the far end of the alley was accounted for. Half a block up, Jamie O’Leary, another teammate, was pacing and smoking like a chimney, a seemingly endless supply of cigarettes stashed in the pockets of his black duster. He wore black jeans as well. Nearly bald and heavily tattooed, the Irish street fighter looked like the ‘kicker he’d always been. He hated Antonio and Holgar both, and Antonio knew a day would come when Jamie would strike out against them. Not tonight, when Jamie had need of backup, but it would come.

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Jamie's fighting partner, Eriko, had pinned a black bob wig over her two-inch spiky hair, and she wore black leather pants and a black silk T-shirt with the Chinese character for "death" embroidered in red sequins. The hunters of Salamanca had fans as well as enemies, and they could be recognized. They had opted for disguises over magickal glammers, so that the sixth member of their team, the English witch Skye York, could save her energy in the event of an emergency. Given their track record since New Orleans, there probably would be one.

Skye had gone into Gades, a club two blocks up, to look for their contact, José Ramón, also known as Moncho. Gades was Moncho's base of operations, and he was an hour late.

Father Juan, the team's teacher and master, had sent the Salamancans to Pamplona because the Cursed Ones were to hold a festival celebrating Apis, one of their gods of death. Apis had originally been worshipped in ancient Egypt as the Apis bull, symbol of the risen pharaoh, and god of the underworld. The festival was to be a mockery of Pamplona's Running of the Bulls. The real Running of the Bulls was held every July, and people—mostly men—would dress in white shirts and trousers, red sashes and kerchiefs, and run ahead of the bulls stampeding toward the bullring. Later, in the afternoon, those bulls would be killed by matadors in a highly stylized dance of death. It was said that the tradition had sprung from the practice of

driving the cattle to market, but according to Father Juan, the real founders had been the bull leapers of Bronze Age Crete. Also according to Father Juan, the ancient Cretans had been plagued by vampires too.

Moncho had informed Father Juan that the vampires were rumored to be planning a running of the humans, perhaps on the feast day of St. Joseph, March 19. It was March 16, and the team had just arrived. Antonio wondered if Aurora was behind the plan, still hoping to capture Antonio himself.

Antonio touched the ruby cross that he wore in his left earlobe. Five tiny stones in a vertical line, two on either side of the fourth. To him, the seven rubies represented the very worst of the many mortal sins he had committed as a Cursed One. Sergio Almodóvar, his sire, had presented them to him with great ceremony during an orgy of death and debauchery, celebrating his fledgling's fine achievement—the murders of seven prominent Spanish Catholic clergymen.

Sergio had given Antonio the list of seven names. Five beloved parish priests; a bishop; and the most exalted and therefore the most difficult to attack, a cardinal. One by one, coldly and methodically, Antonio had tracked down these shepherds of God, ripped out their throats, and drunk them dry. Antonio did not transform them. There would be no conversion to vampirism for them, as there had been for Antonio. God had chosen them; let God take them.

“My evil priest,” Sergio had murmured adoringly.

Antonio's sire had accompanied him to each vicious death, to observe, to savor, to gloat. He said that Antonio killed with the style and grace of a flamenco dancer or a matador.

At the time Antonio had not known that all seven men were descendants of Catholics who had been active during the Spanish Inquisition. Descendants of the religious who had tortured and condemned heretics to burn at the stake. Sergio nursed a personal grudge against the Inquisition, the details of which he had never shared with Antonio, his protégé.

No one held grudges like Sergio.

No one mourned those deaths like Antonio. He remembered their faces, and prayed for their souls. Antonio had taken the rubies when he'd escaped, thinking to sell them to pay for lodging. Instead he had found shelter at the University of Salamanca and had had the rubies made into an earring, to remind him that he had fallen — and could fall again.

As he crossed himself, he and Jenn ambled past the entrance to another alley. Holgar was keeping pace. Ahead, Jamie dropped a cigarette to the ground. Antonio could smell the burning tobacco; the onions, garlic, and *piquillo* peppers cooking in the kitchens of the clubs and bars; wine; a dozen fragrances on the women. And vampires.

Then Jamie looked over his shoulder, turned, and straightened. Skye was flying down the street in her scarlet petticoats, black lace-up boots, and black velvet jacket.

"They're coming!" Skye screamed, her white-blond

Rasta braids bouncing like coiled springs as she raced toward them, waving her arms. “We’ve got to get the people out of here!”

“Oh, God, it’s happening *now*,” Jenn said.

God, protect her, Antonio thought. Let me die for her, if need be. But keep her safe.