
CHAPTER ONE

For thousands of years the Cursed Ones hid in the shadows, fooling mankind into thinking they didn't exist. Then one day they just . . . stopped. Skeptics turned into believers one fateful dawn. And no one was ever safe again.

No one knows why they made themselves known. Why they chose a Valentine's Day in the early twenty-first century to reveal their presence. Some say it had something to do with the end of the world. Others that they simply grew tired of hiding.

I was twelve when Solomon, the leader of the vampires, first appeared on TV and lied through his fangs to all of us. Thirteen when the war broke out. Fifteen when the United States declared a truce . . . when, in reality, we surrendered, and the nightmare really began.

Even after that, many of us couldn't bring ourselves to actually say the word "vampire." It was as if once we admitted it, then we'd have to believe in extraterrestrials or government conspiracies, too. Or in witches and werewolves . . . in anything and everything that could destroy us. Because we could be destroyed. We lost something so precious—our faith that eventually everything would be all right. Because it wasn't all right . . . and few believed it ever would be again.

So among those of us who swore not to abandon all hope, vampires came to be called the Cursed Ones. We learned that it was the name given to them long ago by those few groups who knew of their existence yet never shared the knowledge. But the vampires weren't the cursed ones—we were. They had seduced us with their hypnotic smiles and talk of peaceful coexistence and immortality even as they had mounted a war against us. Then they sought to turn us into their slaves, and drink from rivers of our blood.

I'm nearly eighteen now, and I have learned something about myself I might never have known, if I'd been able to live an ordinary life.

But there is nothing ordinary about my life.

Nothing.

Including me.

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

CRUSADE

THE VILLAGE OF CUEVAS, SPAIN
TEAM SALAMANCA: JENN AND ANTONIO,
SKYE AND HOLGAR, AND ERIKO AND JAMIE

Barely sunset, and death exploded all around Jenn Leitner.

It was a trap, she thought.

The sky crackled with flames; oily smoke choked the air and burned her lungs. Jenn struggled not to cough, fearing that the sound would expose her. On her elbows and knees, her dark auburn hair loose and falling into her eyes, she crawled from beneath the red-tiled roof of the medieval church as it collapsed in a crash of orange sparks. Fragments of tile, stone, and burning wood ricocheted toward the blood-colored moon, plummeting back down to the earth like bombs. She dug in her elbows and pushed forward with the toes of her boots, grunting as a large, fiery chunk of wood landed on her back with a sizzle. She fought to stay silent as the pain seared through her. Biting her lip hard, she tasted coppery blood as she rolled to extinguish the flames.

Next to her, Antonio de la Cruz hissed a warning. The scent of her blood would fill the night air, attracting the vampires they'd been sent to hunt—but who were hunting them instead. When Jenn was little, her grandmother had told her that sharks could smell a drop of blood in the water half a mile away. She hadn't gone in the ocean since. Cursed Ones could smell blood more than a mile away. With sharks you could

choose to stay out of the water. With Cursed Ones it was different. You couldn't leave the planet. You were trapped.

Like we are now.

Antonio studied her with his deep-set Spanish eyes. Jenn gave her head a shake to let him know she was all right; she could keep going. She had no time to search through her jacket for the garlic-infused salve that would block the odor of her blood. She prayed that the stench of the burning buildings—and burning bodies—would cloak the scent long enough to allow them to escape.

Past the church grounds the oak trees were on fire, acorns popping, leaves igniting like tattered tissue paper. Smoke filled the inky night sky, smothering the faint glow of the moon, but the hellish light from the fires illuminated Jenn's and Antonio's every move. Combine that with her bleeding lip, and they were two very easy targets for the savage monsters bent on massacring the village.

Antonio stopped suddenly and held up a warning hand. She watched him closely. Wisps of his wild dark hair escaped from his knitted cap; his full eyebrows were raised slightly, and his jaw was clenched. Like her he was dressed all in black—black sweater, black cargo pants, black knee protectors, and black leather boots—and now coated with ash. She could see the glint of the small ruby-studded cross that he wore in his left ear. A gift, he had said, when she'd asked about it. His face had darkened when he'd answered her, and she knew there was more to that story. So much

CRUSADE

of Antonio was a mystery to her, as intriguing as the sharp planes and hollows of his face.

He was focused, listening. All Jenn could hear were the flames and the terrorized, outraged cries of the villagers from the surrounding houses and office buildings. Her world became Antonio's face and Antonio's hand, blotched with soot, and she tensed her muscles so she'd be ready to move again when his hand dropped. She wished she could stop shaking. Wished she would stop bleeding and hurting. Wished someone else could do the rescuing, instead of them.

But somewhere in the darkness the Cursed Ones were watching. She imagined them staring at her, and could almost hear their cruel laughter dancing in the acrid air.

Three vampires and six hunters stalked one another through the steamy inferno. *If the other hunters are still alive. If they escaped the burning church.*

Don't think about that now. Don't think at all. Wait. Watch.

Cuevas, a small Spanish town a couple of hours from their home, had been terrorized by a group of vampires for weeks, and their mayor had begged for help. Jenn was one of a group of trained vampire hunters called the Salamancans, graduates of the Academia Sagrado Corazón Contra los Malditos—Sacred Heart Academy Against the Cursed Ones—at the centuries-old University of Salamanca. Father Juan, their master, had sent them to Cuevas to rid it of the Cursed Ones.

Instead the vampires were hunting the hunters, as if they had known they were coming, as if they had lured them there. Jenn wondered how they'd known. Father Juan always sent the team out covertly. Was there a spy at the university? Had someone in Cuevas betrayed them?

Or is the Hunter's Manual right about all vampires?

Don't think.

Late that afternoon Jenn, Antonio, and the other hunters had parked in the woods and silently made their way to the church, where they waited, meditating or praying, and preparing for the battle ahead. The vampires appeared with the flat shadows of dusk, and in the literal blink of an eye—they moved faster than most people could see—they set fire to the stone ruins of the *castillo*, the brick-and-mortar shops of the nearby plaza, and the glass and steel of a handful of modern office buildings. Flower boxes lining the plaza, which had brimmed with pink and white geraniums, crackled like sparklers; windows shattered; car horns blared like Klaxons; and everywhere, everywhere, fires roared.

In their short two months' hunting together as a team, the Salamancans had fought greater numbers—once there had been as many as eleven—but those Cursed Ones had been newly converted. The younger the bloodsucker, the easier to defeat, as they would not have fully adapted to their new abilities . . . or their weaknesses.

Against older vampires, like the three lurking in the darkness, you could only hope they hadn't yet run up against

CRUSADE

a hunter. That they would have grown so used to slaughtering the helpless that they would underestimate those who knew how to fight back.

But the Cuevas C.O.'s had struck first, which meant they knew what the six hunters were capable of. By the time Jenn and the other Salamancans had smelled smoke, there had only been time to rouse Antonio from his meditations in the chapel behind the altar and crawl outside.

Now they were exposed and vulnerable. And—

Jenn blinked. Antonio was no longer beside her. Panic wrapped around her heart, and she froze, unsure of what to do. Directly in front of her an oak tree shuddered inside its thick coat of fire, and a huge limb snapped off, cascading into the dirt with a *fwom*.

He left me here, she thought. *Oh, God.*

Breathe, she reminded herself, but as she inhaled, smoke filled her lungs, and she pressed her hand over her mouth. Her balance gave way, and she collapsed onto the dirt. Jenn grunted back a hacking cough. The welt on her back burned like a bull's-eye; she was a prime target. And alone.

Where are you, Antonio? she silently demanded. *How could you leave me?*

Tears welled. Jenn gave her head a hard shake. She had to hustle. If she didn't move, she would die a horrible death. She had seen vampires kill people. But he wouldn't let that happen to her. Would he?

Don't think. Just move.

Jenn's fingernails dug into the dirt as she lifted herself up. Commando-style she worked her way forward, scrambling to the left when another large oak branch cracked and fell toward her like a flaming spear. She had to get away from the collapsing buildings and the falling trees before she could think about going on the offensive.

There was a whisper of sound, a *shushshushshush*, and Jenn rolled farther to her left just as a vampire landed on his back beside her. His pale blue eyes were opened wide in a death mask, and his breath reeked of rotting blood. She thought he groaned a word, maybe a name.

Then all at once the vampire collapsed into dust and was scattered by the hot winds. *One down*, she thought, covering her mouth and nose to avoid inhaling any of the vampire's remains. The first time Jenn had seen that happen, she'd been unable to speak for over an hour. Now she couldn't help the triumphant smile that spread across her face.

Jenn struggled to her feet; Antonio stood a breath away, his eyes blazing, the stake that had killed the vampire still clenched in his hand. He towered over her, six feet to her five-five. As she reached out to touch his arm, a blood-curdling scream ripped through the night air, and she took off in its direction, expecting Antonio to do the same.

Instead his body hurtled past her, landing in a pile of burning branches and leaves.

CRUSADE

“Antonio!” she screamed, then wheeled around in a fighter’s stance, facing off against the vampire who had tossed him through the air like one might toss loose change onto a counter. The Cursed One was tall and bulky, grinning so that his fangs gleamed in the firelight. His face was covered in blood. Her stomach lurched, and she tried not to think about how many of the villagers were already dead.

Jenn swiftly grabbed a stake from the quiver on her belt, gripping it in her right hand, and ripped open a Velcro pocket with her left to retrieve a cross. She desperately wanted to look back at Antonio. She dared not.

The vampire sneered at her and snarled in a thick Leonese-Spanish accent, “*Pobrecita*, I can hear the frightened beating of your heart. Just like the rabbit in the trap.”

He slashed her across the cheek with his talonlike nails before leaping back in a dizzying blur. Jenn felt the blood running hot and sticky down her cheek before she felt the sting.

Jenn circled him warily. *I’m a hunter*, she reminded herself, but the hand around her stake was shaking badly. Surely he could see it. If he attacked, there was a good chance she wouldn’t be quick enough. The specialized training she had received at the academy had taught her how to anticipate a vampire’s moves even when she couldn’t see them. They moved so fast, the Cursed Ones. Father Juan said that they moved faster than man could sin. He said they could kill

you and you would never know it had happened, but if you had been a brave and just person, the angels would tell you all about it, in song.

I'm not brave.

She took a deep breath and turned her head slightly to the side. Her best bet at tracking him was not to look directly at him. Movement was most effectively caught out of the corner of one's eyes. She had learned that at the academy, and it had saved her before. Maybe it would again.

But maybe not.

The vampire stayed visible, stalling, but more likely toying with her before he made his kill. Some vampires were matadors, drawing out the death dance like a ritual. For others the hunt was a means to an end—fresh human blood, pumped by a still-beating heart.

Movement in the shadows caught her eyes. Jenn fought not to react as one of the other hunters—the Hunter, Eriko Sakamoto—crept toward the vampire, her tiny frame belying her superior strength. Dressed in night hues like Jenn and Antonio, she wore a turtleneck, leather pants, and thick-soled boots that Velcroed halfway up her calves. Her short, gelled hair made her look like a tribal warrior. Fresh streaks of soot were smeared on her high, golden cheekbones.

The sound of the fires masked any noise from her approach. Eriko caught Jenn's eye, and Jenn began to edge to the right, placing the vampire between them.

“Hunters . . . *jóvenes* . . . you’re nothing special after all,” the Cursed One snarled.

“We’re special enough to turn you to dust,” Jenn growled, trying to hold the vampire’s attention. She focused on his fangs instead of his eyes, so as not to be mesmerized by him. That was one of the first rules of survival—to resist the Cursed Ones’ hypnotic gaze, designed to put their prey in thrall. “You’d better say your prayers. You’re about to die.”

The vampire scoffed, weaving closer, seemingly unaware that a hunter advanced behind him with her stake poised. The smell of Jenn’s blood cloaked the subtler scent of unharmed human flesh.

“Prayer is for mortals,” he said, “who must beg some deity to save them. And as we know, those prayers always go unanswered.”

“Always?” Jenn asked, feeling the blood oozing down her cheek. The vampire stared at it as if he hadn’t drunk in centuries.

“Always,” he replied.

Eriko kept her distance, and Jenn had a terrible thought: *She’s using me as bait*. Jenn began to back away, and the vampire made a show of taking a step toward her. Her hands were slick with sweat—from the heat, from her fear—and her grip on the stake began to slip. She worked her fingers around it. The vampire snickered.

Jenn took another step backward, her boot crunching

down on something. Her stomach lurched as sparks flew upward. What if it was Antonio?

She couldn't stop herself from glancing down. It was only a branch. The vampire launched himself at her with a hiss.

"No!" Jenn shrieked, falling backward.

The vampire landed on top of her, his eyes filled with bloodlust. His fangs were long and curved; she flailed, forgetting all her training, every maneuver that could save her. His breath stank of fresh blood, and she heard herself whimper.

Antonio.

Then, suddenly, the Cursed One was gone. Jenn pulled herself into a crouch, aware that she'd lost her cross. Eriko had yanked the vampire to his feet and was on his back, legs wrapped around his waist. He batted at her as she laced her fingers underneath his chin, forcing back his head. He hissed and grabbed her ankles, trying to peel her off him.

"Jenn, stake him," Eriko shouted. "Now!"

Jenn blinked. She took two steps forward, and then she stopped for a fraction of an instant. Just stopped.

She could no longer see Eriko or the vampire. They were moving too fast for her to track. She lunged forward, stabbing at the air. There was no contact. She caught flashes, blurs, but not enough to give her a target. Through her exhaustion Jenn kept swinging, as her mind raced. If Eriko died, it would be on Jenn's head.

Then she saw them. The vampire had been forced to his knees, and Eriko stood behind him, her hands still laced beneath his chin. Jenn ran to stake him as Eriko flashed her a fierce smile and twisted off his head. His headless body held its shape; Eriko threw the head into the advancing flames. It was something Jenn could never have done; she didn't have Eriko's superhuman strength.

"At least someone's prayers were answered," Eriko said, panting, as the body disintegrated. She trotted toward a crumbling stone wall to their left, which marked the north end of the church's cemetery. "Let's keep moving."

Jenn looked back to where she had last seen Antonio, but he wasn't there. Another surge of panic washed over her as she raced toward the spot. He was simply *gone*. He wouldn't have just abandoned them, though; he couldn't have *left*.

"Antonio!" Jenn screamed. "Wait, Eriko. Antonio!"

"Sí," he called. "Sí, Jenn."

Antonio pushed through the burning brush a few yards away, wisps of smoke curling from his charred clothes as he batted at them. His hands were blackened and peeling.

She ran to him and then stood hesitantly in front of him, frightened and ashamed of her doubts. "Are you okay?" she asked.

He nodded grimly. "I will be."

She began to shake. "I was worried. I thought . . ." She trailed off. It didn't matter what she had thought. All that mattered was that he was alive and there.

“You didn’t think I would leave you?” Antonio questioned, his gaze intense as he reached out to cup her cheek with his hand. “I was coming to help you and Eriko.” Then his soft expression flickered, and she saw his despair. He hid it well . . . though not well enough, at least for someone so focused on him as she was. The shadow in his eyes spoke of something he had refused to share with her—his deepest wound.

His darkest secret.

Tears stung her eyes. Jenn loved Antonio, and she wanted to trust him. But trust was something she’d left behind two years ago when she’d crossed the threshold of the university. She’d had to learn not to trust her eyes, her mind, or even her heart. Every time she forgot that, she nearly got herself killed.

“*Ay, no,*” Antonio whispered, gazing at her. “I would never leave you.”

Antonio stroked her cheek with his thumb, and she closed her eyes, leaning into the touch. Calloused, velvet. When his lips brushed hers, she returned the kiss with a sob. She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him. His lips were soft and yielding against hers, and the taste of him mixed with the faint metallic flavor of the blood in her mouth.

Leaning against Antonio, she whimpered, wanting more. Then, suddenly, he *was* gone.

Jenn opened her eyes and saw Antonio hunched over

a few feet away, eyes glowing and fangs protruding. Eriko strode up beside Jenn, a thick stake clasped in her hand. One throw and she could kill him.

“Estoy bien,” Antonio growled deep in his throat. He wiped something dark off of his lips and onto his black cargo pants.

Her blood.

“Eriko, I’m all right,” he said in English.

His deep voice always made Jenn shiver, but with fear or desire she was never quite sure. Sometimes when they were kissing she would forget, just for a moment, all that kept them apart.

Antonio was a vampire.

She forced herself to take a good look: the gleaming teeth, the hungry, feral look that had crept into his eyes, the way the muscles in his face contorted as he tried to overcome his bloodlust. He didn’t like her to see it, but she needed to. She needed to remember so that she could protect herself—and him.

Some vampires claimed to be able to control their cravings, but Antonio de la Cruz was the only one she had ever met who could actually manage it. Years of meditation, study, and prayer had given him the strength he needed. Or so he claimed.

But deep inside Jenn knew that every moment they spent together was eroding that strength. One day he wouldn’t pull away, and then she would have to kill him. If

she could. Or one of the other hunters would. Like Eriko. Or Jamie—

“Good,” Eriko said. “One down.” But she didn’t lower the stake. Muscular and petite, Eriko was a couple of years younger and a couple of inches shorter than Jenn. When they had graduated from the academy two months before, Eriko had been chosen from their class to receive the sacred elixir that bequeathed astounding speed and strength. The elixir was so difficult to make, there was only enough for one Hunter, capital *H*. Their leader.

“Antonio killed one too,” Jenn said.

Eriko raised a brow and glanced at Antonio, who nodded. His face was returning to normal. “There were only three, right? We’re nearly done.”

“Three’s what we were told,” Jenn said, relaxing only slightly. She pulled out her garlic salve and quickly applied it to her cheek and lip.

Eriko sighed and pressed the fingertips of her free hand against the spiky stubble of her hair. “The villagers might have miscounted. It wouldn’t be the first time that happened.”

Jenn swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Eriko,” she said. “I didn’t back you up.”

Eriko shrugged. “You don’t have the power I do, Jenn. You did fine.”

But Jenn knew she hadn’t. She had panicked. She’d been more worried about Antonio than anyone else, including herself.

Eriko looked past her to Antonio. “Antonio, on the other hand . . .”

“He was burned,” Jenn said, angry and defensive at the implication. “Look at his hands.”

“Bloody hell, that was all arseways,” a familiar voice fumed. Jenn turned as two figures approached. One was tall, with a nearly shaved head and heavy tattoos on his arms and neck, which made him look like a demon in the firelight. The turtleneck he had been wearing was gone, and only an undershirt remained. That was Jamie O’Leary.

For once the girl at his side didn’t disagree. From her black battle clothes—padded jacket, leggings, thigh-high boots—to her white-blond rasta braids, to the silver crescent-moon ring on her thumb, Skye York was covered with soot except where tears had cut paths down her pale cheeks.

Skye made circles in the air with her hand while muttering an incantation with the Latin refrain “*desino.*” Cease. One by one the fires in her vicinity were extinguished.

“Cursers all dead?” Jamie asked, gazing around. He looked at Antonio. “The ones we’re *allowed* to kill?” he added pointedly.

“There’s one more,” Eriko said. “I got one, Antonio got one, and that leaves—”

“None,” Jamie interrupted. “I got one on my way out of the church.” He showed them his singed palms. “Staked him through the back with a piece of burning timber. It was good and long and caught him in the heart.”

“That’s great; we’re done, then,” Eriko said, grinning at her fighting partner. Jamie grinned back, clearly relishing that both of them had managed kills. They hadn’t been near each other when the church went up in flame, but they had still caused the most damage. Energy practically sizzled between the two. They did seem to belong together, somehow.

After fasting, praying, and working magicks, Father Juan had matched them into fighting pairs, insisting that each fulfilled some complicated balance of yin and yang, light and dark.

Strength and weakness.

Jenn was paired with Antonio, much to her relief. Eriko and Jamie were matched, and they pushed each other hard and themselves harder. Skye and Holgar were the third pair, and they had a quiet closeness with each other that was enviable.

Like Jenn, Jamie had no special gifts or powers. But his ferocity and the fighting skills drilled into him by his family during his childhood in Belfast more than made up for it.

Eriko seemed unaware of the way Jamie looked at her. . . . It went beyond a Hunter-hunter relationship. It must have been obvious to Skye, too, as she turned away to concentrate on her incantations. Their gothy witch carried a torch for Jamie, and Jamie had no clue. Jenn wasn’t sure if the other team members knew, or if she was the

CRUSADE

only one who had figured it out. She felt both sorry for Skye and, frankly, bewildered, because Jamie was a jerk. He made no secret of his desire to be elsewhere; he didn't even believe that there should be a team of hunters. Jamie was only there because Father Juan had asked him to stay in Salamanca and serve the cause. If it hadn't been for his deeply ingrained loyalty to his church, Jenn was sure that even Jamie's attraction to Eriko wouldn't be enough to keep him from going home.

Finished with her incantation for the fires, Skye gently touched Jamie's palms, and his skin began to heal. Her delicate face nearly glowed as she infused him with her nurturing energy. Jamie sighed with pleasure but said nothing.

Skye turned next to Antonio. Moving into position while the sun was still up had weakened his system. He held out his hands, palms up, and Skye moved her hands over them and whispered in ancient Latin. Jenn felt herself relax slightly. She hated it when Antonio came close to fire. Fire was one of the few things that could kill a vampire. Vampires could also be killed by sunlight, a wooden stake through the heart, and decapitation.

"How many dead, *brujita*?" Antonio asked softly, calling Skye "little witch," as he flexed his fingers. "Villagers?"

Skye shook her head, her rasta braids swaying down her back. "At least fifty. When the fires started, the vampires killed the first few people who tried to escape the burning buildings. The rest were so afraid . . ." Her voice broke.

“Some of them stayed inside their homes and burned to death,” Jenn bitterly finished for her, sick knots twisting her stomach. “Then we failed.”

Eriko shook her head. “No one would be alive if we hadn’t come.”

“And about that,” Jamie said, spitting into the dirt. “How the bloody hell did they know—”

“Where’s Holgar?” Skye asked, glancing around for her fighting partner.

“Fried, extra crispy if we’re lucky,” Jamie muttered.

“Sorry to say it, Irish, but my ears weren’t burned off,” Holgar quipped, limping toward the group. His clothes hung in tatters from his body. Gaping wounds on his chest and legs had already begun to scab over. Holgar’s hands were bloodied, though whether it was his or someone else’s, Jenn couldn’t tell.

Jamie swore under his breath, but Jenn only could make out “. . . bloody werewolf.”

Jamie made no secret of the fact that there was one thing he hated even more than Cursed Ones: werewolves. The world at large had not been forced to accept the existence of humans who transformed into beasts at the full moon, but Jamie’s people in Ireland had witnessed their savagery firsthand. As far as he was concerned, vampires were the enemy, and werewolves were their treacherous accomplices. When the vampires had revealed themselves to humanity, the werewolves had elected to remain hidden,

passing as ordinary humans. There were few enough of them that they could pull it off, and they kept their numbers low by bearing few pups. They allied themselves with the vampires, who kept their secret in return. It was an evil bargain, and as far as Jamie was concerned, proved why they should be wiped out. They had destroyed the world, and for that they should be erased from existence. No exceptions, no mercy. Both Holgar and Antonio watched their backs around him, and Jenn wished Father Juan would release Jamie from his promise to remain with the team. When you were fighting for your life, you had to know that everyone on your side would come to your rescue.

Of course, no one can count on me, either. Jenn swallowed hard as the shame gnawed at her.

“Father Juan wanted us to check in as soon as we were done,” Skye reminded the group.

“Yeah, to see if we survived this bloody trap,” Jamie said. He narrowed his eyes. “Oh, come on now. You’re all thinking the same thing. Someone told the C.O.’s we were coming. We were ambushed.” He looked directly at Antonio. Antonio raised his chin and stared back stonily. The tension was as thick as the smoke had been earlier.

“Father Juan,” Eriko said into her cell phone. “*Hai*. We’re all fine. *Hai, bai*.” Jenn knew Eriko was tired. She was lapsing into Japanese and bowing her head with each syllable.

Jamie shifted his glare from Antonio to Holgar, and then to her. Jenn knew he didn’t like her, either. Loathed her, more

accurately. Because of Antonio. And for that Jamie had to watch *his* back, at least around Jenn's fighting partner.

"What happened to you?" Jenn asked Holgar. She noticed Antonio had moved a few steps away and was covering his mouth with his hand. The smell of blood on Holgar was great.

"Vampire. It was a bad time of it, but I finally got a stake through him."

"Feckin' hell," Jamie swore.

"Excuse me?" Holgar asked, clearly puzzled by Jamie's reaction.

"That makes four, not three," Antonio said quietly.

Instantly they were all on alert. Jenn yanked another stake from the quiver at her belt and spun to face the darkness. She fished in a pocket for another cross. They always carried multiples of each weapon. "Do you think there are any more?" she whispered.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by Eriko's occasional reply to their master as she continued to relay information.

"Only vampire I can smell is ours," Holgar said after a minute.

"I don't hear anything," Antonio added.

Skye cast a short seeing spell. "I think there were only four," she confirmed.

They all relaxed slightly. Antonio stooped down and picked up a charred piece of wood that had been part of

CRUSADE

the church. He drove it into the ground as though driving a stake into the heart of the earth itself. From a pocket of his cargo pants he drew a pennant. The thick white silk was emblazoned with a red cross consisting of four curved arms of equal length—the cross of the original Crusaders. A blue knight's helmet crowned with three white feathers—the color for the Virgin, the feathers to honor the Trinity—perched on the top arm of the Cross. Below, the word “Salamanca” was stitched in a font reminiscent of Spain's Moorish roots. It was the ancient crest of the Salamanca Hunter. The hunters wore matching patches on their left shoulders, which could be covered over with Velcro flaps.

“This town is under our protection,” Antonio announced as he fastened the flag to the stake. “The hunters of Salamanca.” Then he stepped back and made the sign of the cross over the pennant and then himself. It was a strange and miraculous thing that Antonio could do so, given that crosses made other vampires burn. As the only other practicing Catholic in the group, Jamie gritted his teeth, then did the same. As a White Witch, Skye was nominally Wiccan, and Eriko was Buddhist. Jenn's roots were Bavarian, and her family had long ago stopped thinking of themselves as Catholic. They weren't anything. As for Holgar, she had no clue what he believed. The rest of them bowed their heads briefly in respect of the flag.

Team Salamanca, victorious. But as Jenn stared at the flag, she thought of all the dead and dying in Cuevas and

couldn't help but wonder how she could protect anyone else when she couldn't even protect herself or her teammates.

A breeze picked up, and the flag fluttered defiantly, a symbol of all that had been fought for and lost—the hunters who had gone before and those who would come after. *God help us all*, Jenn thought.