

Artemis' Warriors

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Chapter 1

Serena Longer

Black clad figures streamed from the woods surrounding the old clapboard farmhouse. Silvery beams from Grandmother Moon glinted off gold-encased blades. The first frost shimmered on the fall-brown field before running, booted feet smashed the crystalline blanket. When the first figure bounded onto the porch and kicked the heavy plank door the frame splintered and the door bounced against the kitchen wall. A human child screamed. A figure darted in and swung a sword. The scream abruptly ended as the child's head splatted to the floor.

Clan Mother Ruby Dellefore, a large woman with long strawberry blonde hair swinging around her shoulders, jolted to her feet. Her chair crashed to the floor. She leapt over the chair and snatched a long-bladed knife from the wood block that held the kitchen knives then launched herself over the rapidly emptying table at the knot of men pouring into the house. Blood sprayed when she cleaved the head from the nearest black clad warrior. Body and blood turned to gray ash before the man and his head touched the wood floor. With her free hand, she grabbed his short sword from the heap of empty black clothes. Slashing and hacking, she worked her way between the emergency exit tunnel and the invaders. She darted left then right. A sword swished past her head, neatly severing her ear. A lunge forward and her sword buried to the hilt in an invader's chest. Her other hand swung the long knife. His head bounced to the floor. The body slid from the slick blade and slumped next to the head. Slowly, the head and body began disintegration.

Vampires and four humans surrounded a small group of children. Blades danced under the incandescent lights as they slashed a pathway toward the steel door behind the clan mother. A fountain of blood spewed into the air as an invader's sword cleaved a defending human nearly in half.

On the far side of the room, a seven-year-old huvam raised the heavy barrel of a shotgun. The blast knocked her backward. An invader's head shattered into a cloud of ash. Before she regained her feet, a sword lobbed her head from her shoulders.

A pack of black-garbed invaders rushed the clan mother. Two young vampires stood one on each side of her. Swords flashed and clanged. The clan mother caught the blade of a sword on the side of the kitchen knife. A hard twist of her wrist flung the sword aside and she lunged. The tip of her blade entered the invader's heart and she ripped upwards.

The groan of gears overrode the sounds of battle. As Clan Dellefore's vampires herded the humans into the Safe Tunnel, the invaders renewed their desperate attempt to reach the fleeing group. The door crashed down and the click of multiple locks sounded louder than the clashing blades.

A fierce grin stretched Ruby Dellefore's lips as her battle cry rang out, "Death is life unborn!" She whirled into the midst of the invaders. Arms and hands; heads and bodies dropped under her insane charge. Intent on the havoc she wreaked, she didn't see the sword that entered her back and shredded her heart.

I bolted up in bed. A hand clutched at the phantom pain slashing through my chest. I threw the handmade quilt aside and leapt to my feet. "Gregory!" I yelled for the General of the Guardians as I jerked on black pants, black shirt and black boots. Long, wavy mahogany hair got swept into a tight knot at the back of my head. Short sword strapped around my waist, I checked the loads in the .44 mag then slapped it in its shoulder holster. My knife sheath hung between my shoulder blades where it could be easily reached.

As I bounded down the curved staircase and into the spacious living room, Gregory dashed from the door to the left of the stairs. We met in the middle of the room; he clasped my hand and dematerialized, transporting both of us.

The stench of blood wafted from the room beyond the broken door. Soft footfalls shuffled across the wood floor inside. I met Gregory's eyes--normally a warm amber they now flamed a bright gold--with my own spring green eyes which would be blazing emerald with my anger. I tilted my head toward the doorway. He gave the barest nod to acknowledge my directions. As I stepped from the porch and into the kitchen, a black-garbed Vampire lifted his head from the neck of a child. Blood dripped from his fangs as my sword slashed through his neck. His body and head ashed out as the child's body thudded to the floor.

A thump to my right drew my attention. I twisted in time to see another Vampire ash out as Gregory took his head. Crouched in fighting stance, I surveyed the room. Nothing moving, except me and Gregory. I stooped and felt the child's neck, but she was already cooling to the touch.

He picked his way amid the carnage and over to my side. "We need to secure the rest of the house."

I nodded and followed close behind him. Death had not been confined to the kitchen. In the living room, the bodies of two young Vampires from the Dellefore Family lay sprawled, hands still clutching swords. Their heads lay a few feet away. Sorrow gripped my chest in a vise. "Too young to ash out. These must be two of the five Ruby petitioned to Turn this past summer."

"Clan Mother Dellefore chose well. They died defending their human." He tipped his head toward the far side of the room. The body of a boy, who couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old, lay crumpled beneath an open window. "They must've told him to run."

I toed a pile of black garments. "They gave a good showing. How often can youngsters, even two of them together, defeat an old Vampire?"

"Let's check the other two floors of the house." He bounded up the creaky staircase with me right behind. No sense in stealth at this point.

In the second floor nursery, the broken body of an infant made a tiny heap on the floor next to his cradle. A floral print dress lay in a heap beside the child. An imprint in the second cradle caught my eye. "Did House Dellefore have two human infants?"

"Yes, a boy and a girl." He slipped into the adjoining bathroom then ripped open the door to the walk-in closet. Sword tip lowered partway, he strode over to where I stood, staring into the empty cradle. Jaw clenched, nostrils flared, he reached out and ran a gentle finger along the imprint on the tiny sheet. "I hope to Goddess they didn't take the child with them. I'd rather find her little body than for that to happen."

"We need to finish." I led the way up the narrow, steep stairs to the third floor. In the dimly lit hall, I stopped and listened. No heart beats, only the ticking of a clock. An old-fashioned clock, the windup kind; why would any of Ruby's people have a windup clock? With a shrug, I dismissed the musing. Maybe it'd been a family keepsake or a novelty. Together we cleared the first three bedrooms and the single bathroom. At the end of the hall lay the last room. *Tired. There's nothing here. Need to get back downstairs and clean up the mess.* I turned and bumped into Gregory. "Come on, nothing's up here, except for us."

Halfway down the stairs, I shook my head and grabbed his shoulder. When he twisted around, I held a finger to my lips and rolled my eyes up toward the third floor. A head cock told me he didn't understand why we should return to the top floor, but he crept up the steps behind me. At the top of the stairs, I closed my eyes and called on Hecate, Mother of Magic. Warmth flooded my body as my eyes opened.

Green light bathed the corridor directly in front of the last bedroom door. Sword half-raised, I marched to the door, flung it open and shoved through the pulsating feel of the "go-away" spell.

A square room without even a closet, it held a king-size sleigh bed, a cherry wood dresser with a mirror, a chest of drawers that matched the dresser and an armoire made of oak. White plain curtains hung limp at the single window that looked out over the backyard and toward the woods. Everything shouted that this was a man's room. The ticking of a clock reached my ears, the metronomic tic-tic-tic lulling me. The need to turn around and leave shoved against me. From the corner of my eye, I could see the muscles corded in Gregory's neck as he fought the clock's ticking, too.

No clock graced the top of the furniture. My eyes dropped to the side of the bed. A long duvet touched the bare wood floor. I tipped my head toward the bed. He crept over to the head of the bed. At a nod from me, he heaved it to its side.

A girl in her early teens sprang to her feet, short sword held at the ready. The tip of the sword trembled, the only tell of her nerves. An infant lay quietly on a small blanket behind the girl, sucking her thumb.

"Be at peace, child." I raised my hand, palm forward. "I am Serena Longer, First Councilwoman of the North America Region. Clan Mother Ruby Dellefore belonged to me."

Eyes narrowed, she jerked her head sideways. "Who's he?"

"Gregory Trueson, General of the Guardians."

A single tear tracked down her mocha cheek. "How do I know you're telling the truth? That you ain't one of them?"

Oh, Ruby, I hope this child has been instructed. I don't want to traumatize her needlessly. I pulled my shirt off, turned my back to her and lifted my hair. When the girl spied the pentacle birthmark on my left shoulder, her sword clattered to the floor. She sank down, pulled the infant onto her lap. A sob burst from her then she caught her breath and visibly swallowed down her emotions.

I folded my five-foot-eight frame into a squat, so our eyes could more easily meet. She needed to look at me for a few minutes so the calm I exuded would overcome the fear and anger radiating from her. "Look at me," I commanded softly. When she met my gaze, I felt my Power blaze in my eyes, changing them from spring-green to emerald. "What is your name?"

The trembling eased and her heart rate slowed. "I...I'm Huvam Brandy Myers."

"How old are you, Brandy?"

"Thirteen." She sniffled and palmed away tears.

Gregory stepped out into the hall as he pulled a cell phone from his pocket. "Who taught you the 'go-away' spell?" I tucked a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

"Mama Dellefore. She said...she said she didn't have much magic and...and one day soon I'd have to go to Phoenix Estate and train with Matriarch." A sob caught in her throat then escaped.

I wrapped my arms around her thin shoulders and gently tugged her against my chest. The baby lay wide-eyed, silent in her lap, her eyes tracking my movements. "Did you use a spell to keep the baby quiet?"

She pulled away and shook her head. "N...no. Mama Dellefore said not to use any spells that she hadn't given me permission to use. Rena's just a quiet baby. Nanny says she's an old soul. That she understands stuff."

I held out my arms. "Will you let me carry her downstairs? We have things that must be done."

"I...I can carry her." The baby clutched against her tiny breasts, Brandy followed me down the stairs.

As we reached the landing of the second floor, her head swiveled toward the nursery. With a gentle tug on her shoulder, I guided her toward the stairs. "Come on."

She planted her feet, chin tilted up, daring me to lie. Tears stood in her eyes as she stared down the hall. "Nanny's dead, isn't she? And little Joey is too, isn't he?"

I gave a slow nod of my head. "I'm sorry."

"I...I couldn't carry bo...both of them. Nanny told me...told me to take Rena. She's smaller than Joey. She said it was be...best to have a chance to save at least one of them."

Finger beneath her chin, I turned her face up until I gazed into pale blue eyes. "Brandy, a warrior, any warrior, realizes that there will be casualties. As sad as it is, and as much as we may wish it different, we can't save everyone. If it hadn't been for your bravery, little Rena and you would both be dead, too. Do you understand?"

She inhaled a shaky breath. "Y...yes, ma'am."

At the bottom of the stairs, I halted and waited until she faced me. "You have to make a decision. Many of your Family are in the kitchen, slaughtered. I won't lie to you. Inside that room is a nightmare, but we need you to help us to open the Safe Tunnel. If you can't, I understand and you can leave by the front door and wait for us in the backyard. It's safe now. We can open the door, but it'll take us about an hour to figure out the locking mechanisms."

"Do...do you think anyone made...made it inside?"

I laid my palm against her smooth cheek. "I don't want you to get your hopes up, but I believe some of them did."

"Why? Why do you think that?"

"A Vision woke me, Brandy. That's what brought us here."

She handed Rena to me and squared her slight shoulders. Chin up, she made her way into the kitchen. A gasp and then a sob wrenched from her, quickly muted. Keeping against the wall, she made her way to the steel door. Gregory stood to one side and as I passed, I handed him the baby. When Brandy laid a palm flat against the door in the middle, I laid a palm above hers and the clacking of locks releasing sounded loud in the stillness of the house.

The tips of six gold-plated short swords gleamed as the door opened and I held my hand palm outward. "Be at peace."

The swords lowered until their tips touched the old planks of the floor. Heads bowed. "First Councilwoman Longer, we greet you. I am Vampire Peter of the Dellefore Clan and Head of Security." The skinny vampire at the center in front dropped to his knees and held his sword up toward me, across the palms of both hands. "Take my head for I am unworthy to live. I failed my Clan Mother."

"Stand and face me." Too weary and heart sore to be patient, I knew my eyes flashed emerald fire.

He climbed to his feet and raised his face. Wrinkles encased light blue eyes beneath soft brown hair. "How old were you when you were Created?"

"I was sixty-two and had lung cancer when Clan Mother asked if I would like to be Vampire."

"You must've served her well as a human for her to offer such a gift." Since he was one of mine, I searched his presence with my inner eye, but didn't feel the scratchy itch of deceit. "What were your instructions as Head of Security in case of attack?"

"Clan Mother said to get as many humans, huvams and young Vampires into the Safe Tunnel as I could. I was to call to me six of my Vampires to assist, if it was possible to do so. If our Clan Mother did not open the tunnel, we were to remain inside of it for forty-eight hours. After that I was to lead the survivors into the woods and hide them until I could contact you, First Councilwoman."

"It appears you have done as you were told, Peter. Why do you say you failed?"

Tears filled his eyes. "My Vampires could've saved these souls." His arm swept wide to encompass the survivors. "I should've been by her side. I should've died next to her."

"You have served her well in the way that she wished. Be honored that you now live for her, and for those of her Family whom you have saved." I stepped aside. "For those who wish, wander among your dead and say your good-byes then gather in the backyard. You will wait there for transport."

Peter squatted next to Ruby's clothes until the last human and the last Vampire walked outside. He reached down and picked up the silver clan mother medallion. The silver chain

dangled from his hand as he made his way to me. “She always said if I could, not to let the medallion lay where the wrong person might pick it up.” He held it out to me.

I felt the weight settle in the palm of my hand. “You loved her very much.”

“I loved her more than life itself. I had no desire to be Vampire, except to continue to serve at her side.”

“Will you continue to serve her, Peter, though her body has turned to ashes?”

“How can I serve one who is no longer with me?” he cried out, anguish twisting his angular features.

“Clan Mother Dellefore loved her people and gave the ultimate gift, so that some of them might live. Will you lead them?”

His head dropped to his chest as if the burden of this day had become too heavy to bear. When he raised his face, the hardness of a purpose shone from his eyes, overlaying his grief. “I will lead them, and protect them, for all of my days, until I, too, shall become ashes and blow away on Sister Wind.”

I stepped forward and placed the Silver Clan Mother’s Medallion--the official symbol of a Clan Leader--around his neck. “From this day forward, for as long as you shall live, for as long as you honor your Clan Mother Ruby Dellefore by caring for and protecting her clan, you shall lead Clan Dellefore.”

He fingers curled around the medallion and tears tracked down his wrinkled cheeks. “I feel unworthy of such honor. I am only a Created Vampire.”

“You were one of Ruby Dellefore’s most trusted people. Now, go outside and gather your People.”

The floorboards of the porch creaked as he stepped into the yard. I turned to Gregory. “Where is Brandy?”

He tipped his head toward the backyard. “I told her to take the baby and, once she had said her good-byes, to go outside and wait.”

I nodded. “Did you get a chance to call Deng?”

“Yes, he will send his people when I call for cleanup. He’s just brought in a couple of youngsters, so the bodies won’t go to waste.”

My stomach clenched. How I hated the thought of ghouls eating the bodies of my people. Eyes closed, I let the tension drain from my shoulders and back. *The bodies are but empty houses to which they will never return.* I opened my eyes.

After a moment, he said, “I instructed him to burn the house to wipe out any evidence.”

“And the Guardian unit?”

“Guardian Janelle leads the cleanup unit. She’ll phone me as soon as her people salvage all that needs to be taken and then I’ll phone Deng.”

As I walked out into the brightening dawn, the sound of a bus reached my ears. Transport had arrived.

Chapter 2

Serena Longer

Western Washington continued experiencing a warmer-than-normal fall. Nights of crisp coolness interwove with days like this one. The bright yellow sun heated up the interior of the car to eighty-five degrees--according to the thermometer that hung from the rearview mirror--about ten degrees hotter than I really enjoyed. Even so, the only cool air in the cherry red Jaguar came through the open windows. Refrigerated air felt unnatural, and slightly unpleasant, to my enhanced senses. In spite of the heat, the three hour drive from Lost Man Mountain in the Cascade foothills to Seattle had been pleasant, the traffic lighter than normal.

Of all the times for Baskell to ask for an audience! Once we helped Peter get the remnants of the Dellefore Family settled, Gregory and I materialized back at my house on Phoenix Estates. With only three hours before my meeting with Baskell, I showered and changed into something more suitable to my position. The drive to Seattle required two hours and fifteen minutes, so I backed my Jaguar out of the garage and headed down the mountain. At least, this gave me respite from fussy Vampires and their demanding retainers. How I wished they had all decided to follow Baskell's example and lodge somewhere else. But the Regional Head who hosted the Worldwide Centennial Conference was required by tradition to offer room and board to attendees; unfortunately, most of them accepted the hospitality.

I had hoped the drive would afford a chance to relax. When the pleasantness pushed away the images of the slaughter, the face of the latest huvam victim haunted me.

Discovered by human authorities in a rest area minutes south of Portland, Oregon, the twenty-three year old huvam had been raped and her throat torn out. She had not died there. Posing as the girl's aunt and only living family, I met with the lead detectives and others on the case. It had been many years since I'd used Persuasion against humans. By the day's end, I felt as limp as a dishrag, but they had released the girl's body to me and had accepted the suggestion that a drug lord with large vicious dogs had committed the crime. While I'd been busy with the medical examiner, Gregory had inserted a USB key Alexis gave him into the ME's computer and followed her instructions. The key opened up the hospital's records and a back door to enter the police files. From Phoenix Estate, Alexis altered the records.

We had buried the child the day before yesterday. To be hit so soon after the loss of the huvam with the loss of most of Clan Dellefore wrapped a cloak of despair around my soul. Even the wind in my face could not ease the ache in my heart.

I feared my meeting with Baskell would bring more sorrow. Unwilling to dwell on what might be waiting, I deliberately recalled the history of Misty Past Restaurant where we would meet.

In Seattle's earlier days, the red brick building that housed the restaurant had been a two-story hotel. Old multi-paned windows still stared down on the waterfront. Solid oak doors with long brass handles replaced the original doors, victims of time and perhaps of the anger of bygone residents.

The charm of the building had drawn me eight years ago as Hauk Morningstar and I walked along the waterfront. Though I preferred female lovers, they could not give me what I needed: an heir. As a human male, Hauk could provide what my position required; however, he'd become more than a mere sperm donor. I had cared deeply about Hauk.

That long ago day had been filled with laughter and azure skies until we came upon the derelict structure. A poster nailed to a piece of plywood announced the building's scheduled demolition. The curse of a long life offers only one absolute--everything will change and much will vanish beneath the weight of the years. It hurt my heart to think of this old building being reduced to rubble and carted away to make space for another soulless glass and steel monstrosity. Hauk had pulled me close and whispered, "Stop fretting, Love. I won't allow it to be destroyed."

A month later, he handed me the key to the battered front door and laughed. "Don't know what you're going to do with it, Love, but she's all yours." Two weeks later, a Guardian found Hauk's body, blood drained, crumpled in the woods to the east of the estate's wrought iron gates. Gregory's best Tracker failed to parse the scent of the guilty Vampire from Hauk's corpse. His death remained unavenged and the building had become too painful for me to visit. It sat untouched for three years.

Five years ago, on the exact day that Hauk's body had been discovered, Alexis Night Runner, one of my dedicated blood and lust donors, and a woman I found myself dangerously attracted to, had bullied me into a jaunt to Seattle in an attempt to break me out of the melancholy that gripped me for a month every year around that awful date. If I had realized where she meant to take me, I would have refused to go in spite of her ability to persuade me most times.

When she drove to the old building and parked in the lot on the east side, I turned on her, furious. "What is the meaning of this?"

Calmly, she met my eyes. "It's time you faced a few of your demons, Serena." She tipped her head toward the building. "I thought we'd start with this one."

A feeling of betrayal twisted a knife in my heart. "How could you, after what I told you?"

She reached across the console and grasped my hand between both of hers. "Because I love you. Because Hauk Morningstar loved you and would not want this grief and guilt to be your constant companion." When I didn't speak, she withdrew her hands and got out. She walked around the hood of the car, pulled my door open, and tugged me from the seat.

At the front door, she held out her hand. I dug around in my purse and pulled out the key ring. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges. I frowned and looked at Alexis.

She stepped inside and pivoted to face me. "I've made sure that the building received appropriate care."

Such kindness made a lump in my throat and I couldn't speak.

One muscular arm around my shoulder, she led me from room to room. Each room echoed with Hauk's masculine laughter. Finally, I could stand the pain ripping my heart no longer. Sobs tore from me as I crumpled to the dusty floor. Alexis knelt beside me and pulled me against her strong chest. With my arms pillowed against her breasts, she rocked me. After the last sob hiccupped to silence, she loosened her arms and leaned back.

I stared into her dark eyes, laid a hand against her smooth cheek. Hunger gnawed my stomach and I shifted forward. My lips found hers and my tongue traced a wet path along her bottom lip. A moan worked its way out from deep inside her.

My tongue pushed between her lips and plundered her mouth. She tasted of cinnamon and vanilla. As I pressed her to the floor, her hands unbuttoned my blouse and pulled it from the waist of my slacks. Thumbs rubbed my nipples through the thin cloth of my bra. They puckered and fire flared in my groin. My fingers fumbled with the buttons of her shirt, but at last the cloth fell to her sides and her un-tethered breasts beckoned me. Tongue flicking first one then the other nipple, my hand glided down her taut stomach and beneath the waistband of her jeans. When my fingers reached the band of her panties, I burrowed under it and made my way to her mound.

With a moan, I touched the heat and wetness between her thighs. Lust surged and I broke away from her lips. Desperately, I tore at her runner's shoes, tossed them aside and stripped her jeans and panties from her. Hands trembling, I divested myself of my slacks and panties; bra and shirt as well, desperate to feel her skin against mine. Kneeling between her strong thighs, I dipped my face to her sweetness. My tongue ravaged her as my fingers slid inside her womanly wetness. I reached up and pinched her nipple, wringing a loud moan from her. When her hips bucked against my mouth, I rode the motion as the fire inside my groin raged.

Her fingers tangled in my hair. "Yes," she whisper-shouted. "Yes." Her climax ripped through her.

When her body settled to the floor once again, I climbed up her slender torso and pressed my aching groin against her wet mound. She sprawled her legs wide to give me greater access. I rode her slowly then faster as the ache built and my body tightened. Her tilted her pelvis enhanced the contact between our clits.

My hand clutched her hip. I crushed her lips beneath mine as the first wave hit me. When my body stopped jerking and clenching, I rolled off and laid my head on her shoulder. With the steady beat of her heart beneath my ear, I slept.

The Denny Street exit loomed ahead of me, yanking me fully back to the present. Weaving through city traffic, I made my way to the waterfront then up Front Street to the restaurant. A valet in a wine red jacket and black slacks rushed to open my door as I glided to a halt under the portico. I removed the silk scarf that kept my long mahogany hair from becoming a tangled mess and laid it on the passenger seat. The door swung open and the valet offered his hand. "Ms. Longer, how nice to see you again. Are you enjoying our glorious weather?"

He helped me from the car then tucked my hand on his arm and led me to the front entry. "Yes, Hans, I am enjoying the respite from the chill mornings. How are your wife, Teresa, and your son, little George?"

Hans beamed. "Quite well, and thank you for asking." As he released my hand and stepped away, he said, "Have a pleasant dinner, Ms. Longer."

The doorman, an elderly gentleman named John, smiled at me. Baskell would call him another one of my strays if he knew I'd taken the old man from a flophouse bed and panhandling on a street corner. He had always resented my interest in helping the humans who found life more difficult than some. Dregs of mortal society, Baskell had sneered. How quickly and thoroughly he had shed his own humanity those years ago. Or perhaps, he never saw himself as part of humanity, but somehow above it?

His arrogance disturbed me, yet he had played a part in keeping my people safe during the hard years our herstorians named The Time of Hunting.

"Ms. Longer," the hostess in a feminine version of red jacket and black slacks met me as I strolled across the red carpet. "A gentleman, Mr. Baskell Arundia, arrived a few minutes ago. He said he is to meet you here. I've taken the privilege of seating him at your table."

"Thank you. If you would lead the way?"

"Yes, ma'am." She wove a path between intimate tables for two. Candles glowed, casting soft yellow light on the diners' faces.

A smile tugged the corners of my lips upward. Even as a young huvam, I had enjoyed feeding others, whether human or Vampire. Often I wondered if that trait derived from my humanity or from the touch of Artemis.

As we neared a table in the far corner of the room, Baskell stood up. A broad smile showed off his incredibly white, straight teeth. On the battlefield that long ago day, his teeth had been black with rot, his body broken and dying. The Change cannot replace that which is gone, but it heals what remains.

Even lying in the blood and amidst the slaughter of his fellow soldiers, he had been a beautiful specimen of humanity. Only his nose, bordering on being too sharp was less than perfect, yet that simply accentuated the perfection.

Broad shoulders tapered to a slim waist that led to muscular thighs. How well I recalled the way his flat, hard stomach felt beneath my fingers; how the heat of his mouth upon my lips bruised and demanded; met the urgency of my tongue with his own as his stiff shaft stoked my lust until it nearly consumed me. Yet, passion can only fill a woman's bed, and is too soon spent. He'd been the occasional banquet to feed the lust or to donate blood, but instead of feeling honored to be one of my donors, he had demanded more. Even had I believed in True Love, no male could ever succeed in that aspiration.

He stepped gracefully around the table and pulled a chair out for me. "Serena, so glad I could entice you from your lair."

I regarded him silently then gave a slight incline of my head as I accepted his courtesy and sat. *How desperately I want to disregard the rumors, but can I?*

Seat resumed, he placed his elbows on the chair arms and steepled his fingertips together. A slyness played across his face, or was I imagining that?

“Baskell, I hear much about you these past years.” Eyes upon his, I observed every nuance of his face, his body and wished I could probe his thoughts as our herstory said some of the Ancients could do. The closest I’d seen to that Power belonged to Gregory. He held the rare Gift of being able to read the minds of the Guardians if they sipped his blood on a yearly basis, one of his requirements of those who chose to follow the path to become a Guardian.

Baskell’s smile sharpened as if it were a blade. A hint of fang flashed from beneath his full upper lip. “I don’t recall you listening to rumors in the old days, Serena. Are you so bored that now you listen to the talk of servants?”

Hands lying relaxed on the edge of the table, I let a chilled smile settle on my lips. “It appears there are things you have forgotten, my Childe. One should listen to rumors for kernels of truths hide within grains of lies. As for listening to servants...” One shoulder lifted in an abbreviated shrug. “Those who serve often know more than those who are served. Perhaps, you have forgotten this, as well?”

With a tip of his head and a rising of his silver brows, he said, “Ah yes, one of our great debates. Now I recall. You were forever giving more credit to humans than they warranted, and it sounds as if you continue to do so.”

“As always, you give less credit than they deserve.” I flipped the curtain of my wavy hair behind my shoulders then fixed my eyes upon him. “Tell me, is there truth to these rumors that I would find distressing?”

“I would need to know what rumors you’ve heard.” His smile broadened. “Let’s not speak of troublesome things. Tomorrow the first of many boring meetings commences. Isn’t that soon enough to address weighty issues? I long to bask in your companionship this day. It has been a long time since I last dined with you.”

The baritone melody of his voice ran soothing fingers along my back. I felt an answering smile curl my mouth. “Your charm smoothes a path for you. We must talk, but you are right. Let’s first dine with pleasant talk.”

A waiter arrived bearing ice water for Baskell and a glass of cold water without ice and with a slice of orange for me. After the waiter left, I said, “What do you propose we speak of that does not touch upon our responsibilities?”

Head lowered, he stared up at me from under his long lashes. “Tell me about you, Serena. I wish to know every thought and every dream that has been a part of your life. I have missed the long talks we once had.”

I wanted to believe him; wanted to return to a different time when we’d walked beneath Grandmother Moon and partook of lust upon the forest’s soft bed. Though I had never loved him, he had once been a strong general and a good companion. With peripheral vision, I spotted the waiter bearing a sterling silver tray containing a coffee carafe, delicate china cups, and a sugar bowl with a matching cream pitcher also wrought of sterling silver. As the waiter served coffee and took our orders, some of the tension eased from my shoulders. *Perhaps, the rumors are no more than vicious lies and envious imaginings.*

The black brew flowed over my tongue with a hint of chicory remaining behind. “Where shall I begin?”

By the time dessert had been eaten, we were both laughing. “...and there I was in my bikini. Alexis, poor girl, had never seen me so underdressed. I thought her eyes might pop!”

Baskell chuckled and reached across the table. With one finger, he stroked the back of my hand. “I have seen you with even less on, but I would have been every bit as captivated.”

I glanced away--the intimate moment made me uneasy--and placed my hands in my lap.

He withdrew to his side of the table. With forced cheer in his voice, he said, "Then what happened?"

Surely, he did not take offense that I do not welcome such intimacy? I have not welcomed such a touch from him long before I sent him to Europe.

Sipping coffee, I gathered my composure then replaced the cup on the rose-patterned saucer. In a light voice, I continued the story. "She was so busy looking back at me that she walked right off the edge of the swimming pool and into the water. It was her sixteenth birthday party--the first birthday celebration she'd ever had--and there she floundered in the water, barely staying afloat. Wanton Ellen leapt in and hoisted Alexis up onto the side of the pool...while placing her own hand in some..." I delicately cleared my throat and smiled, "in some, shall we say, interesting places. The poor girl turned red as a radish."

Levity faded from my face. I settled against the back of the chair. "Tell me truly, Baskell, how do you fare?"

He shrugged and glanced away. "Lonely, as always," he murmured as if he couldn't bear to have me hear his confession.

"Have you found no one who pleases you? Such a handsome man, I am sure women fling themselves at your feet." I smiled to take any sting from the comment since women often did fling themselves at Baskell. Many times I had encouraged him to pursue their interest in him, hoping to lessen his obsession with me. Sometimes, a Childe develops an unhealthy attachment to his or her mistress.

"All others are as candles next to the sunlight." He leaned forward. "You have always been my sunlight, Serena."

I pulled back, ignored his frown. "It is past time for you to find the sun on your own shores, my Childe. Let me become as the moon's older, silvery light in your life."

He flopped against his chair, arms spread wide. "Ah, Serena, these are my shores. Wherever you are, are the shores where I can find the sun. I dream of waking up with you nestled against my side."

I shook my head and reined in a building anger. "Such talk is exactly why I sent you away. I had hoped that living in Europe would help you overcome this obsession with me."

His head sagged toward his chest. A lock of white-gold blond hair fell artfully over silvery-blue eyes that gazed out of an unusual olive face with chiseled cheekbones, a strong chin, and full pouting lips. "Ah, Serena." Slowly, he raised his face, eyes locking on mine. "If love is obsession, then yes, I confess. I am obsessed with you and no time or distance can dim my love. Why can you not see how the two of us together would bring great things to our People?"

The temptation to reach across the fine linen tablecloth and shake him blazed through me. It took every ounce of self-control not to shout. *"Those years ago, you wanted to become king of the Vampires. You wanted to rule. Your ambition burned hot in your gut, and you chafed at our society's rules forbidding you autonomy from the presiding Matriarch of your region. You despised answering to a woman and chafed beneath the authority of your Mistress."*

Though I longed to scream the truth at him, I lidded my emotions. In a calm voice, I said, "For Vampire, love does not exist. If love did exist, I would choose a woman to share my life."

Red blazed in his cheeks. Pulling his dignity around himself like a tattered cloak, he sat up rigidly. "No woman could ever love you like I do. I never wanted to leave you, Serena and would rejoice at having you by my side for all eternity." He spread his hands wide, palms upward. "We could rule together, as equals." Head cocked, he watched me. "I told you then, and I tell you now, I would not mind sharing our bed with your female lovers." He leaned forward, eagerness in every tense line of his body. "I know you love me, if only you would open your mind and see it. You need a Vampire and a man in your life. No woman can give to you what I give. Was I not the general who kept our People alive during those hard times?"

How easily your true intent slipped into your speech. You would rejoice having me by your side; not you standing at my side. Yet, if I confronted you on what you said, you would laugh

and say the wording mattered not at all, that you meant we would stand together. Had I not needed your skills as a general to keep my People safe, I would surely have killed you shortly after I Changed you for back then I had not the patience I did later. You never could accept that the times I laid with you I merely fed the lust in the most expedient manner possible.

A sad smile touched my lips as I held his gaze. "Must I remind you yet again, Baskell, that you are a Created Vampire? You seem to feel such contempt for humans, yet you cling to some male human notion that you should rule *beside* me. No male Vampire may hold that position; neither Created nor Born."

Bitterness leaked into his eyes. "In most free nations what you're describing is known as discrimination; barring me from certain positions due to my gender. Why must we Males continue to suffer because of what human males did centuries ago?"

"Because the actions of those humans are the reason Artemis created our species. When Caine murdered Abella then attempted to eradicate her progeny, an imbalance occurred. Until balance can be restored, Vampires must follow the laws that govern our existence; laws set by Artemis."

"You don't have to repeat our history to me. I am not a child." Anger flared in his eyes.

"Then do not act as such," I snapped. "Male jealousy and pride; male envy of woman's ability to create in the same manner as Great Goddess and the Goddesses created, nearly destroyed the human race. It has only been during this last century that the Matriarch's Council has allowed males to be a clan leader or Appointed Representative of his region."

He sneered. "Even those positions must be approved by the Matriarch of my region." A sullen anger drew his lips into a hard line. "Nothing I do, no battle I win, will ever change that. I will always have to beg a female for permission to enlarge my Clan; permission to emancipate a Childe of mine; and this," his finger jerked downward onto the table, "is the highest position to which I can ever aspire and only at the pleasure of a female." Passion burned bright in his eyes, hands clasped so tightly that his knuckles showed white. "I am not even of the human race any longer. I am Vampire as surely as you are."

Stern lines hardened my face. "All Created Vampires--male or female--carry Caine's tainted blood. Though it is hoped that the blood of your Maker will overcome the taint, no Created Vampire is ever truly free of it." I forced myself to relax. "We must live as Artemis meant for us to live, so that we might fulfill our Purpose. Think, Baskell, someday humans and Vampires may once again become one family."

"You act as if that would be a good thing." Contempt curled his upper lip. "I have no wish to rejoin that pitiful species."

I sat back and crossed my arms over my breasts. "What then is your ambition?"

He crossed his muscled arms and his lower lip pouted. I nearly laughed at the very childlike expression, but trapped the merriment behind my teeth. A grown man, he had often displayed petulant, childish behaviors. Sometimes, it had made me smile; sometimes it had exasperated me to no end. "Well?" I prodded him.

"No, Serena, you don't get to ask that question; not anymore."

How can such a handsome, charming man throw the temper tantrum of a two-year-old human child? How can he defy me like a recalcitrant teenager? Already I tire of it. I waved a dismissive hand. "It matters not. What does matter is a rumor I have heard."

A smirk settled on his lips as he leaned against his chair and hooked an arm over its back. "Ah, so we're back to rumors, are we? Tell me what the rumors have said and perhaps I will tell you if they are true."

I fought down my rising anger. "I hear there are an unusual number of human deaths in certain areas of England."

"I am Vampire. I take care of my Clan. Do you expect me to worry about a few humans?"

Instead of answering, I said, "There also appears to be an inordinate number of bodies found by human authorities that have been mauled by animals; they say it appears to have been particularly large and vicious canines."

Nostrils flared, he gritted out between clenched teeth, "I am no longer your Childe nor do I live in your region. You have no right to question me. Matriarch finds no fault in me."

Lips pursed, I hid the flash of rage that stabbed through me. "That's Matriarch Helena, is it not?"

"You know it is. What game do you play, Serena?" He bit the words out in a low growl.

There is such promise in him, such strength he could bring to our people, especially in these troubled times. Is Matriarch Helena aware of his indiscretions? Does she truly approve? She was the only one who would accept him into her Region when I needed to send him away, and now I wonder yet again what motivated her to do so. The mere thought caused a shiver to race up my spine.

Sorrow lay heavy on me. "It is true then that you allow your People to feed recklessly?"

He gave a nonchalant shrug. "We are Vampires; not lap dogs. At least, Matriarch Helena recognizes our true natures. Why do you fight it so?"

I glared at him. "Such actions will backlash against all of us. Have you forgotten what you learned of The Great Fall and how you lived during The Time of Hunting?"

"I wasn't around for the so-called Great Fall," he said in a flippant manner. "However, Matriarch Helena survived The Great Fall and does not recall it with the same fear that your Matriarch Belora does." Forearms propped against the white linen tablecloth, he stretched his neck toward me. "It is time for Vampires to step out of the shadows of fear. We are far superior to humans. Why should we bow before their rule?"

"Goddess Artemis gave us the Purpose for our existence, Baskell. Have you forgotten that She sheltered Abella's Children, gave us enhanced senses and special powers, but there was a price for that protection? We are to aid and to guide Caine's Children, until their souls are healed and their blood runs pure once again."

He slapped a hand on the table, rattling the cups on their saucers and reaping a few discreet sideways glances from nearby patrons. "Look at them!" He said in a furious whisper. "Do you really believe they have *souls*?"

"There is no need for unseemly demonstrations, Baskell."

"Don't speak to me about unseemly demonstrations!" he snarled.

My nostrils flared as I whispered, "You *will* maintain dignity, or you will leave this place."

He blinked and shifted on his chair until he rested comfortably. "This," he gave an abbreviated wave with one hand, "is your restaurant, yet we can't even have a conversation without worrying about these...these cattle!"

I ground my teeth, determined not to rise to his bait. One part of my mind chided me--you should have destroyed him, but True Death would have been a poor reward for the service he gave my People during a time of dire need.

He had become my general during The Time of Hunting when both humans and stronger Vampire Families preyed on the weaker Families. The very existence of my small Family had dangled by a thin thread. *Have I failed my People due to my personal ethics? Have I unleashed a monster upon the humans of his region? Is he truly aided by Matriarch Helena? Why has she allowed him to grow from Head of Family to Clan Leader?*

His melodic voice coaxed, "Think about our People, about what they need. We hide all that we are."

I sighed. "I understand how you chafe at the restrictions of our long lives, but our human relatives are not ready to accept the truth of us right now. There will come a time...."

He laughed a cold laugh. "What do I care for acceptance by such as those?" He flipped a hand at the other diners. "I tire of being enslaved by lesser creatures."

For a moment, my heart stuttered. "In your voice I hear darkness. Do you not recall that it was The Time of Hunting that stole your human life?"

Hands clenched into fists upon the linen cloth. "I am glad that fragile shell was smashed. I am Vampire." Pride lit fire in his eyes then his face morphed into a belligerent mask. "If Artemis would have us aid the humans, then what better aid than to embrace our superiority and to rule over them?"

Fingers linked together and lying on the table, I leaned forward. "They must rule themselves and make their own mistakes, so they can grow beyond their heritage."

His upper lip curled in disdain. "They have shown they are incapable of ruling themselves. They are sheep who follow whatever leader makes the most extravagant promises to them; not that those promises are kept."

I shook my head. "Enthrallment would kill the Spark of Soul implanted in each living thing by Great Goddess and the Goddesses."

When he spoke only the flare of his nostrils and the hoarseness of his voice belied his anger. "You would have our People live beneath the sword of Damocles? These inferior creatures have betrayed, murdered and hunted our People for millennia. If the myths are true, then from the very beginning of their existence they have sought to destroy us."

"It was beneath such a sword that our species came to be. Artemis transformed the progeny of Abella. She enhanced our once-human senses. She begged her sister, Hecate, to come and bestow gifts of magic upon some of our People. It was all done with one goal in mind, Baskell. We must help the Children of Caine rise above their thirst for power." Bent forward, I cupped my hands around one of his fisted hands. "We must aid them in their evolution beyond the murderer in their genetics; beyond their greed and envy. We are their only hope."

Lips tight with more than a hint of fang showing, he jerked his hand away. "How can they evolve beyond something which they do not truthfully acknowledge? They persist in calling Abella, Abel."

I pinned him with my gaze. "We must lead them to the healing of their souls, Baskell, and in so doing we will save our own souls. Artemis so decreed this entwining of the destiny of our two species."

Back pressed straight against the chair, he lifted his chin defiantly. "Artemis has forgotten her People. Or perhaps, it was not a goddess who mandated the use of humans, but tired old vampires afraid of pitchfork wielding farmers."

Careful so my anger did not manifest, I folded the linen napkin lying on my lap and placed it neatly on the table next to the cup then stood. "It is wise to fear pitchfork wielding farmers. Callous disregard for human life has always brought about great upheavals."

"I do not fear such weak creatures."

Eyes locked on his, I said, "Remember this--there are millions upon millions of humans upon Mother Earth--far greater numbers than Vampire. Their current weapons of destruction are more lethal than mere pitchforks. If you choose to ignore The Purpose set by Artemis, do not choose to ignore reality." I slid the chair beneath the table. "I will see you in Conference tomorrow." I spun on my heel and strode from the restaurant.