

Kat

By Kelley Armstrong

The vampire hunters came just before dawn. I was sound asleep—a total knock-out sleep, deep and dreamless, after a night spent sparring with Marguerite. I woke to her cool fingers gripping my bare shoulder.

“Kat?” she whispered. “Katiana?”

I pushed her away, muttering that I’d skip the bus and jog to school, but her fingers bit into my shoulder as she shook me.

“It’s not school, *mon chaton*,” she said in her soft French accent. “It’s the hunters. They’ve found me.”

My eyes snapped open. Marguerite was leaning over me, blue eyes wide, her heart-shaped face ringed with blond curls. When I was little, I used to think she was an angel. I knew better now, but it didn’t change anything. She was still *my* guardian angel.

I rolled out of bed and peered around the dark room. If I blinked hard enough, I could see. Cat’s-eye vision, Marguerite called it. I was a supernatural, too, though not a vampire. We had no idea *what* I was. At sixteen, I still didn’t have any powers other than this bit of night vision.

Marguerite pushed clothing into my hand. For two years, we’d slept with an outfit and packed backpack under our beds, ready to grab if the hunters came. Two years of running. Two years of staying one step ahead of them. Until now.

“Where are they?” I whispered as I tugged on my jeans.

“Outside. Watching the house.”

“Waiting for daylight, I bet.” I snorted. “Idiots. Probably think once the sun comes up, you’ll be trapped in here.”

“If so, they will be in for a surprise. But I would like to be gone by then, to be sure they are not waiting for reinforcements.”

“Going up, then?” I asked.

She nodded and we set out.

We snuck through the top-floor apartment we rented in the old house. In the living room, I hopped onto the couch, and Marguerite handed me a screwdriver. I popped off the ventilation shaft cover, handed it down to her, grabbed the edge and swung up and through.

Ever seen a TV show where the hero sneaks into the villain's lair through a ventilation shaft? Ever thought it looked easy? It's not. First, your average ventilation shaft is not action hero-sized. Second, they're lined with metal, meaning it's like crawling through a tin can, every thump of your knee echoing.

Fortunately, neither Marguerite nor I are action hero-sized either. And we know how to move without making a sound. For Marguerite, it comes naturally. Vampires are predators, and she's never sugar-coated that for me. My skill comes from training. I'm a competition-level gymnast, a brown belt in karate and a second-degree black belt in aikido.

I'd been taking lessons since I came to live with Marguerite eleven years ago. All supernaturals need to be able to defend themselves, she says. I might eventually get powers that help me, but if I turn out to be something like a necromancer, I'm shit outta luck. Not that she'd use those exact words. Marguerite doesn't swear, and doesn't like me to either. She has no problem with me kicking someone's ass—she just doesn't want me saying the word.

When my elbow bumped the metal side, I managed to swallow my curse, turning it into a soft growl.

"You're doing fine," her whisper floated to me. "Keep going."

We finally reached the attic, where we'd removed the screws from the vent right after moving in. As I pushed it up and out of the way, I mentally cursed again, this time cussing out the landlady for nailing shut the attic hatch, which would have made for a much easier escape route. That was why we'd rented the place—Marguerite had seen the hatch in our apartment and slapped down the cash . . . only to realize it was nailed closed, the wood too rotted to pry open.

Once in the attic, Marguerite took over. She can see better in the dark than I can. In the vent, she'd let me go first to cover my back, but here she led to make sure I didn't trip or step on anything nasty. That's the way it's always been. She trains me to defend myself, but when she's there, she's always the one taking the risks. When I was five, it made me feel safe and loved. Now . . . well, there's part of me that wants to say it pisses me off, but the truth is, I still like it.

Marguerite walked to the dormer window. Oak branches scraped against it like fingernails on a chalkboard, setting my already stretched nerves twanging. She wrenched off the rotted

window frame. Those branches, creepy as they were, made excellent cover, hiding us as we swung up and onto the roof. Following her lead, I slid across the old shingles, feeling them scrape a layer or two off my palms. We crept along to the shadow of the chimney, then huddled against it and peered out into the night.

Marguerite started to close her eyes, then opened them wide, her nostrils flaring.

“Yes, I’m bleeding,” I whispered. “Scraped palms. I’ll live.”

She handed me a tissue anyway. Then she closed her eyes, trying to pinpoint the vampire hunters with her special senses. A vampire can sense living beings. Marguerite doesn’t know how it works, but years ago I saw this show on sharks and how they have this sixth sense that detects electrical impulses, making them perfectly evolved predators. So I’ve decided that’s what vampires have—a shark’s electrosensory system. Perfect predators.

Tonight her shark-sense wasn’t up to snuff, and Marguerite kept shaking her head sharply, like she was trying to tune it in. She looked tired, too, her eyes dim, face drawn. I remembered how cool her skin had been when she woke me up.

“When’s the last time you ate?” I whispered.

“I had a storage pouch—”

“Not that stale blood crap. A real meal, I mean.”

Her silence answered. While she can get by on packaged stuff, it’s like humans eating at McDonald’s every day. Not very healthy. She needs real food, hot and fresh. Though she doesn’t need to kill people to feed—she just drinks some blood, like a mosquito—it’s always dangerous, and since we’ve been on the run she doesn’t do it nearly enough.

“You can’t do that. You need to feed more to keep up your energy.”

“*Oui, maman.*”

I made a face at her and hunkered down, letting her concentrate. After a moment, she pointed to the east.

“Two of them, over there. Watching and waiting. We must go.”

I nodded, and followed her back to the rear of the house and down the tree, hidden by its branches. We hop-scotched through yards as the darkness lifted, giving way to predawn gray, pink touching the sky to the east. The rising sun wasn’t a problem. Bram Stoker got one thing right with Dracula—vampires can walk around in daylight just fine.

We headed for the bus station three blocks away. These days, when we looked for a place to live, Marguerite didn't ask how many bedrooms and baths it had or even how much it cost. She picked apartments based on how easily we could escape them—and get far away, fast.

"I'm sorry, *mon chaton*," she said for the umpteenth time as we ran. "I know you liked it here, and I know you were looking forward to your date Saturday."

"I'll live."

"You liked him."

I shrugged. "Just a guy. Probably turn out to be another jock-jerk anyway."

Being on the run meant home schooling. Home schooling meant limited opportunities to meet guys. So I did most of my socializing at the gym, which had lots of really hot guys. Unfortunately, most of them knew how hot they were. Luke had seemed different, but I told myself it was just a front. That always made leaving easier.

We dashed behind a convenience store. I leapt onto the wooden fence and ran along the top of it.

"Slow down, Kat," Marguerite called behind me. "You will fall."

I shot a grin back. "Never. I'm a werecat, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "There is no such thing."

"Because I'm the first."

It was an old routine, and we knew our lines by heart. I've loved cats for as long as I can remember, and I'm convinced it has something to do with my supernatural type. Marguerite says no—there are no werecats. She says the reason I like felines so much is just because, when I was little, people always told me I looked like one, with my sleek, golden brown hair and tilted green eyes. Even from the day we met, Marguerite had called me *chaton*—kitten.

Back when I lived with my parents and was named Kathy, I'd always wanted to be called Kat, but my mother said that was silly and Kathy was a perfectly good name. When I went away with Marguerite, I had to change my name, and I'd done so happily, wanting something fancier, more exotic, like her name. So I became Katiana, but everyone called me Kat.

I darted along the top of the wooden fence, then hopped down behind the bus station. When I headed for it, Marguerite caught my arm.

"You will stay close to me when we are inside," she said. "No running off."

"I'm not five, Mags," I said.

I could also point out that she was the one the hunters were after, but she'd only say that still put me in danger. Given a chance, they'd grab me as bait for her. I'd say if they did grab me expecting a hysterical sixteen-year-old girl, they'd be in for a shock, but I wasn't dumb enough to put myself in harm's way. Rule one of martial arts: never underestimate your opponent, and I didn't know a thing about these opponents. Marguerite said they'd be supernaturals—all vampire hunters are, because humans don't know about our world—so we could be facing anything from spellcasters to half-demons to werewolves.

As we entered the trash-strewn alley, I noticed a foot poking out from a cardboard box.

“Dinner,” I said, pointing.

“We do not have time—”

“We'll make time,” I said, lowering my voice as I strode to the box. “You need your energy.”

I bent and peered into the box. The guy inside was sound asleep. I motioned Marguerite over. She took a look and hesitated, glancing over at me. She'd rather not do this with me watching, but I was right—she needed the energy boost. So, she daintily wedged her shoulders into the box, moving soundlessly. Another pause. I couldn't see her face, but I knew what she was doing—extending her fangs.

When she struck, it was with the speed and precision of a hawk. Her fangs sank in. The homeless guy jerked awake, but before he could make a sound, he slumped back into the box, out cold again. A vampire's saliva contains a sedative to knock their prey out while they feed. Like I said, perfectly evolved predators.

I didn't look away as Marguerite fed. Why would I? She didn't turn her head when I downed a burger. Humans kill animals for food. Vampires knock out humans and borrow some blood. People would donate that pint at a clinic to keep a human alive, so what's wrong with taking it fresh from the source to keep a vampire alive? Marguerite says I'm oversimplifying things. I say she overcomplicates them.

When Marguerite finished feeding, she took a moment to seal the wound and make sure the man was comfortable. Then she tucked five twenty-dollar bills into his pocket, and motioned for me to fall in behind her as she continued to the end of the alley.

Of the five people inside the bus depot, two were sprawled out asleep on the seats. They clutched tickets in their hands, as if to prove they had a reason to be there, but I bet if I checked the tickets they'd be months old. Homeless, like the guy in the alley.

Marguerite caught my elbow and whispered, "We will go home, Katiana. I promise."

"I wasn't thinking about that."

But, of course, I was. I missed home. Not the house or even the neighborhood, just the feeling of having a house and a neighborhood. Even as I walked past the posted bus schedule, I couldn't help looking down the list of names, finding my city. Montreal. Not the city where I was born, but my real home with Marguerite, the one we'd been forced to leave when the hunters tracked her down two years ago.

We walked to the counter.

"Kathy," a woman called.

I didn't turn. Marguerite had drilled that instinct out of me years ago. But I still tensed and looked up. Reflected in the glass of the ticket booth, I saw a woman approaching me, smiling.

"Kathy."

Marguerite caught my hand, squeezing tight. I glanced over, slowly, saw the woman and my gut went cold—a sudden, mindless reaction, something deep in me that said I knew her, and I should run, run as fast as I could.

Still gripping my hand, Marguerite started for the door. The woman only watched us as we hurried outside.

"She knew my name," I said.

"Yes, they know about you. That is why—"

"She knew my *real* name."

Marguerite looked away. I stopped walking. When she tugged my hand, I locked my knees.

"What's going—?"

"Not now. We must leave."

I didn't move.

She met my gaze. "Do you trust me, Kat?"

I answered by letting her lead me to the sidewalk.

"We will call a taxi," she said, fumbling with her cell phone.

Two figures stepped from behind the bus depot and started bearing down on us.

“Marguerite?”

She looked up. “*Merde!*” She grabbed my hand again. “Run, Kat.”

“But we’re in a public place. Shouldn’t we just go back inside—?”

“They will not care. Run!”

I raced back down the alley, past the homeless guy in his cardboard box, and vaulted the fence, Marguerite at my heels. As I tore down the next alley, two more figures stepped across the end of it. I wheeled. The other two men were coming over the fence.

Trapped.

The men in front of us didn’t say a word, just started walking slowly our way. I squared my shoulders and flexed my hands, then broke into a sprint, running straight for them, hoping that would catch them off-guard. If not, I’d rather start the fight before the other two joined in.

One of the men reached into his pocket. He pulled out something. It was still barely dawn, the alley dark with shadows, and I saw only a silver object. A cell phone maybe. Or a radio.

Or—

He lifted a gun. Pointed at me.

“Kat!” Marguerite shrieked.

She grabbed my shirt and wrenched me back. I flew off my feet. She dashed in front of me. The gun fired—a quiet *pfft*. The bullet hit her in the chest. She toppled beside me, hands clutching her heart, gasping. Her face, though, was perfectly calm. No blood flowed between her fingers.

“On my count,” she whispered. “Three, two, one . . .”

We leapt up. Marguerite went for the guy with the gun. He fell back in surprise. She grabbed the gun as I caught the second guy by the wrist and threw him down. Behind us, the other two were running, feet pounding the pavement, getting louder by the second.

Marguerite kicked her opponent to the ground, and we ran. As we did, I glanced over. The hole in her chest was closing fast, leaving only a rip in her shirt.

“—vampire?” one of the men behind us was saying. “Why the hell didn’t someone know she was a vampire?”

I looked at Marguerite. She met my gaze, then tore hers away, and we kept going.

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On the next street, we saw a city bus and flagged it down. The driver was nice enough to stop. We climbed on. I looked out the window as we pulled away from the curb, but there was no sign of our pursuers.

“They aren’t vampire hunters, are they?” I murmured.

“No.”

I looked over at her. “Were there ever vampire hunters?”

She shook her head, gaze down. “No. Only them.”

“Coming for me, not you. They’re from that place, aren’t they? Part of that group that experimented on me.”

“The Edison Group. Yes. At first, I thought they might be vampire hunters. There is such a thing, though rare, so I should have known . . .” She shook her head. “I wanted them to be vampire hunters. When I realized otherwise . . . I should have told you.”

“Yeah.” I met her gaze. “You should have.”

“I’m sorry.”

I nodded. She put her arm around my shoulders and I rested my head on hers and closed my eyes.

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I don’t remember much about my mother and father. They’d always seemed more like paid guardians than parents. They’d treated me well and given me everything I needed. *Almost* everything. There was no cuddling at my house. No curling up on Daddy’s lap with a book. No bedtime tuck-in with hugs, kisses and tickles from Mommy. I hadn’t known I was missing anything, only that I wasn’t a happy child.

The hospital visits didn’t help. Once a month, late at night, my father would wake me up and we’d drive to this place that he said was a hospital, but looking back, I know was a laboratory. We always had to go in through the back door, where we’d be met by a tall man named Dr. Davidoff. He’d whisk us into a room and run all kinds of tests on me. Painful tests that left me weak and sore for days. My parents said I was sick and needed these visits. I’d say I felt fine, and they’d say, “Yes, that’s why you need to keep going.”

When I was in kindergarten, a new library assistant came to our school. Her name was Marguerite and she was the prettiest lady I’d ever seen. The nicest, too. All the kids wanted to help her put away books and listen to her talk with that exotic accent. But I was her special pet.

Her kitten. Whenever I was alone at recess, she'd come over and talk to me. And she'd keep me company after school, while I waited for my father to pick me up.

One day, Marguerite said she had to leave, and asked me to come with her. I said yes. Simple as that. I was five and I loved Marguerite, and I didn't particularly love my parents, so it seemed like a good trade-up. I went to live with her in Montreal, where I was Katiana and she was my Aunt Marguerite, and the story of how I came to live with her was a delicious secret between us.

When I'd been with her a few years, Marguerite told me the truth. I was a supernatural, and a subject in a genetic modification experiment, supposedly to reduce the negative side-effects of supernatural powers. Marguerite had been part of a network of supernaturals concerned about the experiments. She'd been assigned to monitor me, so she'd taken the job at my school.

When she saw how miserable I was, she told the group, but they wouldn't let her do anything—her job was to watch and report only. Marguerite couldn't do that. So she'd asked me to come away with her, and no matter what has happened since, I've never regretted saying yes.

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The bus went downtown, so that's where we got off.

"There is a car rental place on the other side of the river," Marguerite said. "We will go there."

I nodded and said nothing. It was barely seven, and the downtown streets were almost empty. A vehicle rolled by now and then, most of them cube vans making early deliveries. A few police cars crawled along the streets, looking for trouble left over from the night before.

Sleepy-eyed businessman dragged themselves into office buildings, coffee clutched in their hands, the smell making my stomach perk up. If we'd been back at the apartment, I'd be just rolling out of bed, a steaming mug of hazelnut coffee on my nightstand, Marguerite knowing that woke me better than any alarm clock.

As we reached the end of the block, the smell of coffee was overwhelmed by a far less enticing odor: the river. I could hear it, too, the crash of the dam not yet swallowed by the roar of downtown traffic. As we turned the corner, a blast of wind hit and I swore I could feel the spray of water.

I shivered. Marguerite reached for my backpack. "Let me get your sweater."

"I'm okay."

“A coffee then.” She gave a wan smile. “I know you like your morning coffee. It will not be your fancy flavored sort, but—”

“I’m okay.”

She turned another corner, getting us out of the wind. “You’re not okay, Kat. I know that. I . . .”

“You thought it was for the best. I get that.” I cleared my throat, anxious to change the subject. “I recognized the woman in the bus station. I think she was one of the nurses from the lab. I guess they finally tracked me down, and now they want to kill me.”

“No. They would not do that. You are too valuable.”

I snorted. “Yeah, as a trophy. If you didn’t think he meant to shoot me, you wouldn’t have jumped in the way.”

She walked a few more steps before answering. “I am certain they would not kill you. But certain enough to risk your life on it? No.” She looked over at me. “You *are* valuable, Kat. Even in their experiment, you were special. That is why you had to go to the laboratory at night, away from the other children, hidden from most of those who worked there.”

“So I was a top-secret part of a top-secret experiment?”

A tiny smile. “Something like that.”

“A werecat. Gotta be.”

I expected her to roll her eyes, shoot back her usual line, but she only hunched her shoulders against the cold morning air, and stared off down the empty street.

“The bullet,” I said. “Is it still . . . in you?”

She nodded. When I tried to press her on that, worried that it might be dangerous, she brushed off my concern with uncharacteristic impatience, her gaze fixed on the next corner. Then she caught my arm.

“Someone is there. He stopped at the corner.”

I could come up with a dozen logical explanations for someone to pause at a corner, but Marguerite held me still as she strained to look, listen and sense.

“Someone else is approaching,” she whispered. “He stops beside the first . . .”

Vampires don’t have super-sonic hearing, but it was so quiet that even I could pick up the murmur of conversation. Marguerite pushed me into an alcove as footsteps sounded. Then a man cursed. Marguerite pushed me farther into the alcove and we huddled there, listening.

“Are you sure your spell picked them up?” the man asked.

“It detected the girl,” a woman said. “It only works on the living. And only intermittently with her.”

The man said something I didn’t catch.

“I suppose so,” his companion replied. “Let me cast again.”

She murmured words in a foreign language. A spell. I shivered. Marguerite rubbed my arm, but it wasn’t the cold that made me tremble now. I might be a supernatural, and I might live with one, but their world was still foreign to me, mysterious. I don’t like mysteries. I like what I can see, feel, touch and understand. I like what I can fight. Spells? I had no idea how to defend myself against those.

We pressed deeper into the shadows as the voices approached.

“Nothing,” the woman said.

“We—”

“Shhh,” she said. “I heard something.”

We’d barely breathed, so it wasn’t us. A door creaked open. Footsteps again, but it was another pair, coming from the opposite direction, like someone had stepped out of a shop down the road. The footsteps headed our way.

Marguerite’s slender hands flew in familiar code, outlining a plan. I barely needed to watch—I knew what she’d be thinking. With a bystander approaching, our pursuers would be focused on getting past him, any weapons hidden. So when they reached the alcove—

Marguerite sprang first, grabbing the man as he stepped into view, then yanking him into the darkened alcove. I leapt out behind her. The woman backpedaled, hands sailing up, lips parting. An invisible blow hit me in the chest. I tottered backward. That was it—just thrown off balance. I smiled. Now *that* I could handle.

I charged. Her hands flew up again. I chopped them down, disrupting her spell. She started to cast again, this time not using her hands. A witch spell. A roundhouse kick knocked her off her feet and cut that one short.

Marguerite leapt between us. She grabbed the woman and dragged her into the alcove. Inside, the man lay on his back, out cold from her bite.

As Marguerite took the woman into the shadows for the same treatment, I looked down the street. A chubby guy in a business suit stood twenty feet away. Just stood there, travel mug raised halfway to his lips, like he'd been frozen there the whole time, watching the fight.

"Morning," I said.

He skittered across the road and took off the other way.

"Looks like he didn't want to play Good Samaritan today," I said as Marguerite joined me on the sidewalk. "But he probably has a cell, so he might call . . ." I stopped, seeing her holding what looked like a phone. "Did *they* manage to call someone?"

"A radio with a GPS." She lifted the box. "They sent our coordinates."

She dropped it over the side of a trash bin and we took off. As we turned the corner, we saw the woman from the bus station rounding the next one down the block. I wheeled. Two unfamiliar men were approaching from the rear. I hesitated, telling myself they were just humans, bystanders, heading off to work. Then one reached into his coat and pulled out a gun.

Marguerite grabbed my shoulder, steering me to the nearest exit: a service lane just ahead. At the mouth, she caught my arm and peered down the lane, making sure it wasn't a dead end. There was a wall thirty feet down, but the lane continued, turning left.

We raced to the end, veered around the corner . . . and found a single parking space, enclosed on all other sides by soaring walls.

"No, no, no," Marguerite whispered.

I pointed. "A door."

As we ran to it, Marguerite pulled out her lock picks. I tried the handle, just in case, but of course it was locked. She pushed a pick into the keyhole.

Footfalls pounded down the service lane. She stopped and turned.

"Just open—" I began.

"No time."

She looked around, then her chin shot up. I followed her gaze to a fire escape. I ran for it. She boosted me and I grabbed the bottom rung. I scrambled up, hand over hand, as fast as I could. At a shout, I looked down to see the woman skidding to a halt at the end of the alley . . . and Marguerite, still on the ground.

"Marguerite!"

"Go!" When I didn't budge, she glowered up at me, fangs extended as she snarled, "Go!"

She ran at the woman. I climbed, slower now, fingers trembling, forcing myself to take each step, my gut screaming for me to stop, to go back for her. But I knew she was right. I had no defenses against a gun. She did. I had to get away and trust she'd follow.

When I reached the top, I turned. The first thing I saw was the woman, unconscious on the ground. Then the two men, one holding Marguerite in a head-lock, the other with his gun trained on me. I hesitated. He fired.

The bullet hit the brick below my foot. He lifted the barrel higher. I lunged onto the rooftop, heart thudding. The metal fire escape groaned as someone began to climb it. I scrambled to my feet and took off across the roof.

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I got away. As soon as I did, I realized I had to go back.

They'd already tried to kill Marguerite. She was just an obstacle to getting me and, now, a way to get to me, to lure me in. She'd survived being shot, but now that they knew what she was, they'd know how to kill her. I shivered just thinking about what they might do to try to convince her to give me up. And when they couldn't, they'd kill her. No question.

I shivered, gulping icy air as I stood pressed against a wall, catching my breath. Then I closed my eyes and listened. No one was coming. I kept listening, trying to hear the roar of the dam to orient myself. It was close by, just to my right. I turned the other way and started walking.

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I found them in the same service lane we'd run into. They'd backed a van in and had the rear doors open as one of the men dragged Marguerite, hands behind her back, gagged and struggling, toward it.

As I strode into the alley, the driver leapt out, raising his gun.

"I come in peace," I said, lifting my fingers in a V.

He paused, half out of the van, his broad face screwing up in confusion.

I raised my hands. "See? No pistol. No switchblade. Not even a ray gun."

The witch I'd taken out earlier came around the other side of the van, approaching slowly. I watched her lips, ready for the first sign of a spellcast.

"I want to make a deal," I said.

She didn't answer, just stopped, her gaze traveling over me like she was looking for a hidden weapon. The driver eased back into the van, door still open, radio going to his lips.

"You can stop looking for her," he said. "She's right here." Pause. "Yeah, it's the O'Sullivan kid. Says she wants to make a deal." His voice dropped. "Better hurry."

The other man resumed dragging Marguerite to the van.

"Uh-uh," I said. "Put her in there and I'm gone. This deal is a trade. You take me and you let her go."

Marguerite shook her head wildly, her eyes blazing. I looked away and focused on the witch.

"You do want me, right?" I said.

"We do."

"And you aren't interested in her."

Her lips twisted with undisguised distaste. Marguerite told me that's how other supernaturals see vampires—unnatural and inhuman, worthy only of fear and disgust. They would kill her as soon as they could. I was sure of it now.

I continued, "So you take the prodigal science experiment home to the lab, and the vampire goes free. Fair enough?"

The witch hesitated, then nodded. "Come along then, Kathy."

"It's Kat."

A flicker of annoyance, quickly hidden. "All right then. Kat. Come—"

"I'm not coming anywhere until you release her. She'll walk this way. I'll walk that way. Criss-cross. Everyone's happy." *Except me, going back to that horrible place, those awful experiments.* I pushed the thought away. I was valuable, so I'd survive, which was more than I could say for Marguerite if I didn't do this. She'd given up her freedom to look after me. Now it was time for me to do the same for her.

When the witch didn't move, I said, "I'm not going anywhere. You guys have guns, spells, demonic powers, whatever. I have zip. Just let her go, so I'm sure you're holding up your end of the bargain."

Another brief pause, then the witch signaled to the man holding Marguerite. He released her. As she walked toward me, I headed for the witch, my gaze still fixed on her. Out of the corner of

my eye, I could see Marguerite pull down the gag, mouthing to me, trying to get my attention, trying to tell me to wait for her signal, then run. I ignored her. I had to go through with this.

I was about five feet from Marguerite when a truck backfired behind me, the sound cracking like gunfire. I jumped and spun. That's *all* I did. I didn't lunge. I didn't run. I didn't even back up. It didn't matter. I'd moved, and when I did, I heard the *pfft* of a silenced shot.

Marguerite screamed. I felt her hit me in the back, the blow so hard it knocked me off my feet, and as I fell, I twisted, and saw her running toward me, still three feet away, too far to have hit me. A spell, it had to be a—

I hit the pavement, flat on my back, blood spraying up from my chest.

Blood. Spraying up. From me. From my chest.

I lifted my head, looking down at myself, and saw—and saw—and saw—

“You shot her!” the witch screeched.

“She was trying to—”

“You were *waiting* for an excuse. You . . .”

She kept shouting as Marguerite dropped beside me, tears plopping onto my face as I lay on the pavement and all I could think was, *I didn't know vampires could cry.*

“. . . like Davidoff's going to complain,” the man was saying. “I gave him the excuse to test his secret experiment . . .”

The voices drifted away again. Or maybe I drifted. I wasn't sure. The next thing I knew, I was sitting up with Marguerite's arm around me, her face buried in my hair, tears wet against my scalp as she whispered, “I'm sorry, *mon chaton*. I'm so sorry.”

“. . . just get the body in the van . . .” the woman was saying.

Body? I jerked up at that, looking around wildly, reassuring myself I was alive. I could still see them, could still hear Marguerite telling me it would be okay, everything would be okay.

Marguerite had me on my feet now, her arm still around me as she whispered, “We're going to run, Kat. *We must* run. Do you understand?”

Run? Was she crazy? I'd been shot. I couldn't—

Everything went black. Then, suddenly, I was on the sidewalk, running as she supported me. The pain in my chest was indescribable. Every breath felt like a knife stabbing through me. Marguerite had one hand pressed to the hole in my chest, trying to keep it closed, but it didn't

matter. The blood ran over her fingers, over my shirt, dripping onto the pavement. Yet somehow we ran.

As we stumbled onto the road, a truck horn blasted. We kept going. The truck tried to stop, brakes and tires squealing. We raced past it, cutting so close that the draft as it passed nearly toppled us. The truck screeched to a halt. The driver shouted. Our pursuers shouted back, but they were stuck on the other side of the vehicle, out of sight.

We ducked into the first alley and kept going.

As we ran, the ground tilted under my feet. I tried to focus, but could see only a haze of dull shapes. Then I heard something. Water. The thunder of the dam, growing closer with each step. I heard Marguerite too, on her cell phone. Emergency. Shooting. The dam. Ambulance. Police. Please hurry.

What was she doing? I couldn't go to a regular doctor. I'd been told that all my life, even before I went away with Marguerite. *In an emergency, call home. Don't let them take you to a hospital.* My parents said it was because they wouldn't understand my condition. True. They just hadn't mentioned that the condition was being a genetically-modified supernatural whose blood tests would make the doctors call the guys in the Hazmat suits.

I guess that didn't matter now. I needed immediate medical attention. We'd deal with the fallout later.

The roar of rushing water grew steadily louder. Then another sound cut through it. The wail of sirens. I remembered seeing the police cars downtown. That's why Marguerite had asked for the police—they'd get here quickly, and that would scare off our pursuers. In an emergency, she always said, cause a scene and get the humans involved. No supernatural would risk doing anything with them around.

Marguerite lowered me to the ground, my back brushing against a metal railing. A cold mist of water sprayed my neck. When I blinked, I could focus enough to see we were at the dam. Police lights strobed against the buildings, the sirens deafening now.

There was no sign of our pursuers. This trapped them worse than the truck. They couldn't approach. We were safe.

"Mags," I whispered. I tried to say more, but could only cough, pain ripping through me, bloody spit splattering my clothes.

“Shhh, shhh.” She kissed the top of my head, tears raining down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, *mon chaton*. So sorry. I should have told you, should have warned you. You are so young. So young.”

Told me what? Young? Too young for what? To die? No. She couldn’t mean that. I was fine. The ambulance was coming. I could hear the siren.

Doors slammed, and a police officer shouted for Marguerite to step back. Her trembling fingers fumbled around my neck, finding my necklace. A Star of David. I wasn’t Jewish, but we always said I was. Just part of the cover.

When she found it, she breathed a sigh of relief, murmuring, “*Bien, bien.*”

Why good?

“Step away from the girl,” another officer shouted.

“I love you, Kat. You know that, don’t you?” She kissed my forehead again. “I love you and I’ll never leave you.”

She stood then. I tried to call out to her, but couldn’t. The fog was descending again and it took everything I had just to focus, just to see her, a faint shape in the grayness as the mist from the dam and the fog from my brain swirled together.

“I’ll see you on the other side,” she whispered. Her fingers grazed my chin as she stepped back.

I twisted my head to watch her as she climbed onto the railing. The police shouted. I shouted, too, but only in my head, shouting her name over and over, telling her to stop, to come back, not to leave me . . .

She blew me a kiss and mouthed, “I’ll see you soon,” then back-flipped off the railing. The last thing I saw was Marguerite plummeting down, out of sight, into the river a hundred feet below.

And then . . .

Nothing.

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I woke up cold, a chilled-to-the-bone kind of cold, with only a thin sheet pulled up to my chin. Under me, my bed was rock hard. I stretched and my muscles screamed in protest.

Damn, I really needed a workout.

I laughed at the thought. I’d been shot in the chest. Something told me it’d be a while before I was training again.

I inhaled, and resisted the urge to gag as my nostrils filled with the stink of antiseptic and chemicals. The smell of a hospital, bringing back old memories. I shivered. At least I wouldn't be going back to *that* hospital again. Almost worth being shot.

I wiggled my fingers and toes. God, everything ached and I was freezing. Did they have the air conditioning on? My bed was so cold it was like lying on a marble slab.

I rubbed the bed . . . and my fingertips squeaked across the surface. I stopped. Mattresses didn't squeak. Was it covered in plastic? Did it need to be? Had I pissed myself?

I lifted my head. It took some effort—my head was flat on the bed. No pillow? I looked down and caught the flash of my reflection. I was lying on a metal table.

I jumped up so fast I nearly tumbled to the floor. I looked around. Metal. All I saw was metal. Metal table. Metal equipment. Metal trays covered with metal surgical instruments.

Had I woken up in surgery? Oh, God. Had they *finished*? My fingers flew to my chest, finding the spot under my left breast where the bullet had—

There was no bullet hole. No stitches. No bandages.

And no heartbeat.

I shook my head sharply, and pressed my fingers to the spot and closed my eyes, trying to feel . . .

There was nothing to feel. My chest didn't move at all. No heartbeat and no breathing.

As I turned, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the bank of metal berths behind me. I saw me—just me, same as always, tanned skin, brown hair, green eyes, gold pendant gleaming on my chest.

I caught the pendant and ran my fingers over the points of the star. The Star of David. Now I knew why Marguerite had been so happy to see me wearing my pendant. So they wouldn't embalm me.

I heard the words of the man who'd shot me. *Like Davidoff's going to complain. I gave him the excuse to test his secret experiment.*

An excuse to test whether their genetic modification had any effect on my supernatural blood-right, my destiny. To die . . . and rise again.

“Katiana.”

I glanced over to see Marguerite in the doorway. She stepped inside and pulled the doors closed.

I couldn't have been asleep long, but she looked like she hadn't fed in weeks. She was pale and unsteady, her eyes sunken and red.

"Guess you were right," I said. "I'm not a werecat."

Her face crumpled. I didn't ask if she'd known I was a vampire. Of course she had. That's why she'd been assigned to me. Why she'd taken me away. I'd always felt like Marguerite was more my family than my parents had ever been. Now I knew why.

I didn't ask why she hadn't told me the truth. I knew. Of every supernatural creature I could have been, this one would be the biggest blow, and she'd wanted to spare me the truth until I was older. I suppose she figured she had plenty of time before I needed to know. Time to let me grow up. Time to let me be normal.

A thought struck. "So, I'm going to be sixteen forever?"

"No, no," she said quickly. "That was one of the modifications, with the experiment. You are supposed to live a normal life, with only the other powers of a vampire."

Supposed to. That was only a theory, of course. No one could know for sure. I'd age or I wouldn't.

"Someone's coming." The words slipped out before I realized I was saying them. I turned toward the closed hall door, but didn't hear anything. Still, I knew someone was out there. I could feel him.

A shark's sixth sense.

The perfect predator.

I shivered. Marguerite started to hug me, then lifted her head, catching the same weird sense, and quickly handed me new clothing. I took it and we hurried to the corner. Whoever was coming down the hall passed the room without stopping.

"So what happens now?" I whispered as I dressed. "The Edison Group must know I'm here. They'll be waiting for me to . . . rise."

"They are."

"And when I disappear? They'll know. They'll come—"

"I have made arrangements. Money can buy many things. The records will show you were cremated by accident. You cannot be reborn from that. They will think they have lost you. We are safe." She helped me into my shirt and caught my gaze. "I know you have questions, Katiana. There is so much you must be wondering."

There was. So much. So many questions. So many worries and fears. *Too* many. I pushed them aside and focused on the easiest question, the only one I could deal with.

“Can we go home?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Then, right now, that’s all I want.”

She nodded, put her arm around me, and led me from the room.