

"New kid. Check it out," Shaunee said as she slid into the big boothlike bench we always claim as ours for every school meal served in the dining hall (translation: high-class school cafeteria).

"Tragic, Twin, just tragic." Erin's voice totally echoed Shaunee's. She and Shaunee had some kind of psychic link that made them bizarrely similar, which is why we'd nicknamed them "the Twins," even though Shaunee is a café latte-colored Jamaican American from Connecticut and Erin is a blond-haired, blue-eyed white girl from Oklahoma.

"Thankfully, she's Sarah Freebird's roommate." Damien nodded toward the petite girl with seriously black hair who was showing the lost-looking new kid around the dining hall, his sharp, fashion-wise gaze checking out the two girls and their outfits—from shoes to earrings—in one fast glance. "Clearly her fashion sense is better than Sarah's, despite the stress of being Marked and changing schools. Maybe she'll be able to help Sarah out with her unfortunate ugly shoe propensity."

"Damien," Shaunee said. "Again you are getting on my damn—"

"—last nerve with your unending vocab bullshit," Erin finished for her.

Damien sniffed, looking offended and superior and gayer than he usually looked (even though he is definitely gay). "If your vocabulary wasn't so abysmal you wouldn't have to carry a dictionary around with you to keep up with me."

The Twins narrowed their eyes at him and sucked air to begin a new assault, which, thankfully, my roommate interrupted. In her thick Oklahoma accent, Stevie Rae twanged the two definitions as if she was giving clues for a spelling bee. "Propensity—an often intense natural preference. Abysmal—absolutely horrible. There. Now would y'all quit bickering and be nice? You know it's almost time for parent visitation, and we shouldn't be acting like retards when our folks show up."

"Ah, crap," I said. "I'd totally forgotten about parent visitation."

Damien groaned and dropped his head down on the table, banging it not-so-gently. "I'd totally forgotten, too." The four of us gave him sympathetic looks. Damien's parents -were cool with him being Marked, moving to the House of Night, and beginning the Change that would either turn him into a vampyre or, if his body rejected the transformation, kill him. They were not okay with him being gay.

At least Damien's parents were okay with something about him. My mom and her current husband—my step-loser, John Heffer—on the other hand, hated absolutely everything about me.

"My 'rentals aren't coming. They came last month. This month they're too busy."

"Twin, once again we prove our twin-ness," Erin said. "My 'rentals sent me an e-mail. They aren't coming either 'cause of some Thanksgiving cruise they decided to take to Alaska with my Aunt Alane and Uncle Liar Lloyd. Whatever." She shrugged—apparently as unbothered as Shaunee by her parents' absence.

"Hey, Damien, maybe your mama and daddy won't show either," Stevie Rae said with a quick smile.

He sighed. "They'll be here. It's my birthday month. They'll bring presents."

"That doesn't sound so bad," I said. "You were talking about needing a new sketch pad."

"They won't get me a sketch pad," he said. "Last year I asked for an easel. They got me camping supplies and a subscription to Sports Illustrated."

"Eeesh!" said Shaunee and Erin together while Stevie Rae and I wrinkled our noses and made sympathetic noises.

Clearly wanting to change the subject, Damien turned to me. "This'll be your parents' first visit. What're you expecting?"

"Nightmare," I sighed. "Total, absolute, and complete nightmare."

"Zoey? I thought I'd bring my new roommate over to meet you. Diana, this is Zoey Redbird—the leader of the Dark Daughters."

Glad to be diverted from having to talk about my own horrid parental issues, I looked up, smiling, at the sound of Sarah's tentative, nervous voice.

"Wow, it's really true!" the new girl blurted before I could even say hi. As per usual she was staring at my forehead and blushing bright red. "I mean, uh...sorry. I didn't mean to be rude or anything..." she trailed off, looking miserable.

"That's okay. Yeah, it is true. My Mark is filled in and added to." I kept my smile in place, trying to make her feel better, even though I truly hated that it seemed like I was the main attraction at a freak show. Again.

Thankfully, Stevie Rae chimed in before Diana's staring and my silence could get any more uncomfortable.

"Yeah, Z got that cool lacy spiral tattoo thing on her face and down along her shoulders when she saved her ex-boyfriend from some scary-assed vampyre ghosts," Stevie Rae said cheerily.

"That's what Sarah told me," Diana said tentatively. "It just sounded so unbelievable that, well, I uh..."

"You didn't believe it?" Damien said helpfully.

"Yeah. Sorry," she repeated, fidgeting and picking at her fingernails.

"Hey, don't worry about it." I worked up a fairly authentic smile. "It seems pretty bizarre to me sometimes, and I was there."

"And kicking butt," Stevie Rae said.

I gave her my you-are-so-not-helping-me look, which she ignored. Yes, I might someday become their High Priestess, but I'm not exactly the boss of my friends.

"Anyway, this whole place can seem pretty strange at first. It gets better," I told the new kid.

"Thanks," she said with genuine warmth.

"Well, we better go so I can show Diana to where her fifth hour class will be," Sarah said, and then she totally embarrassed me by getting all serious and formal and saluting me with the traditional vampyre sign of respect, closed fist over her heart and bowed head, before she left.

"I really hate it when they do that," I muttered, picking at my salad.

"I think it's nice," Stevie Rae said.

"You deserve to be shown respect," Damien said in his schoolteacher voice. "You're the only third former ever to have been made leader of the Dark Daughters and the only fledgling or vampyre in history who has shown an affinity for all five of the elements."

"Face it, Z," Shaunee said around a bite of salad while she gestured at me with her fork. "You're special." Erin finished for her (as usual).

A third former is what the House of Night called freshmen—so a fourth former is a sophomore, et cetera. And, yes, I am the only third former to be made leader of the Dark Daughters. Lucky me.

"Speaking of the Dark Daughters," Shaunee said. "Have you decided what you want the new requirements for membership to be?"

I stifled the urge to shriek, Hell no, I still can't believe I'm in charge of this thing! Instead I just shook my head, and decided—with what I hoped was a stroke of brilliance—to put some of the pressure back on them.

"No, I don't know what the new requirements should be. Actually, I was hoping you guys would help me. So, do you have any ideas?"

As I suspected, all four of them got quiet. I opened my mouth to thank them very much for their muteness, but our High Priestess's commanding voice came over the school intercom. For a second I was happy about the interruption, and then I realized what she was saying and my stomach started to clench.

"Students and professors, please make your way to the reception hall. It is now time for this month's parent visits."

Well, hell.

"Stevie Rae! Stevie Rae! Ohmygosh I have missed you!"

"Mama!" Stevie Rae cried and flew into the arms of a woman who looked just like her, only fifty pounds heavier and twenty-some years older.

Damien and I stood awkwardly just inside the reception hall, which was starting to fill up with uncomfortable-looking human parents, a few human siblings, a bunch of fledgling students, and several of our vampire professors.

"Well, there're my parents," Damien said with a sigh. "Might as well get this over with. See ya."

"See ya," I mumbled and watched him join two totally ordinary people who were carrying a wrapped present. His mom gave him a quick hug and his dad shook his hand with exuberant masculinity. Damien looked pale and stressed.

I made my way over to the long, linen-draped table that ran the length of one wall. It was filled with expensive cheese and meat platters, desserts, coffee, tea, and wine. I'd been at the House of Night for a month, and it still was a little shocking to me that wine is served so readily here. Part of the reason they do is simple—the school is modeled after the European Houses of Night. Apparently, in Europe wine with meals is like tea or Coke with meals here—so no big deal. The other part is a genetic fact—vampyres don't get drunk—fledglings can barely get buzzed (at least on alcohol—blood, unfortunately, is a whole other issue). So wine literally is no big deal here, although I thought it would be interesting to check out how Oklahoma parents reacted to booze at school.

"Mama! You have to meet my roommate. Remember I told you about her? This is Zoey Redbird. Zoey this is my mama."

"Hi, Mrs. Johnson. It's good to meet you," I said politely.

"Oh, Zoey! It is just so nice to meet you! And, oh my! Your Mark is as pretty as Stevie Rae said it was." She surprised me with a soft mom hug and whispered, "I'm glad you're taking care of my Stevie Rae. I worry about her."

I squeezed her back and whispered, "No problem, Mrs. Johnson. Stevie Rae's my best friend." And even though it was totally unrealistic, I suddenly wished my mom would hug me and worry about me like Mrs. Johnson worried about her daughter.

"Mama, did you bring me any chocolate chip cookies?" Stevie Rae asked.

"Yes, baby, I did, but I just realized that I left them in the car." Stevie Rae's mom twanged in an Okie accent that was identical to her daughter's. "Why don't you come out with me

and help me carry them inside. I made a little extra for your friends this time.” She smiled kindly at me. “You’re more than welcome to come on out with us, too, Zoey.”

“Zoey.”

I heard my voice spoken like a frozen echo of Mrs. Johnson’s warm kindness, and looked over her shoulder to see my mom and John coming into the hall. My heart fell into my stomach. She’d brought him. Why the hell couldn’t she have come alone and let it be just her and me for a change? But I knew the answer to that. He would never allow it. And his not allowing it meant that she wouldn’t do it. Period. End of subject. Since she’d married John Heffer my mom didn’t have to worry about money. She lived in a gihugic house in a quiet suburban neighborhood. She volunteered for the PTA. She was majorly active in church. But during the past three years of her “perfect” marriage she’d completely and utterly lost herself.

“Sorry, Mrs. Johnson. I see my parents now, so I better go.”

“Oh, honey, I’d love to meet your mama and daddy.” And, like we were at any normal high school function, Mrs. Johnson turned, smiling, to meet my parents.

Stevie Rae looked at me, and I looked at her. Sorry, I mouthed to her. I mean, I wasn’t absolutely sure anything bad would happen, but with my step-loser closing the distance between us as if he were some testosterone-filled general leading a death march, I figured the odds were probably good for a nightmare scene.

Then my heart lifted way out of my stomach and everything suddenly got much, much better when my favorite person in the world stepped around John and held her arms out to me.

“Grandma!”

She enfolded me in her arms and the sweet scent of lavender that always moved with her, as if she carried a piece of her beautiful lavender farm everywhere she went.

“Oh, Zoeybird!” She held tight to me. “I have missed you, u-we-tsi -a-ge-hu-tsa.”

I smiled through my tears, loving the sound of the familiar Cherokee word for daughter—it meant security and love and unconditional acceptance. Things I hadn’t felt in my home for the past three years—things that before I’d come to the House of Night I’d only found at my grandma’s farm.

“I’ve missed you, too, Grandma. I’m so glad you came!”

“You must be Zoey’s grandmamma,” Mrs. Johnson said when we’d quit clinging to each other. “It’s so good to meet you. You have a fine girl, here.”

Grandma smiled warmly and started to reply, but John interrupted in his usual I’m-so-superior voice.

“Well, actually, that would be our fine girl you would be complimenting.”

As if on a Stepford Wives cue, my mother finally managed to speak. “Yes, we’re Zoey’s parents. I’m Linda Heffer. This is my husband, John, and my mother, Sylvia Red—” Then, in the middle of her oh-so-polite introductions, she bothered to actually look at me and her voice came to a breath-gulping halt midword.

I made my face smile, but it felt hot and hard, like it was poured plaster and had been sitting in the summer sun and would crack all to pieces if I wasn’t careful.

“Hi, Mom.”

“For the love of God what have you done to that Mark?” Mom said the word Mark like she’d say the word cancer or pedophile.

"She saved the life of a young man and tapped into a Goddess-given affinity for the elements. In return Nyx has touched her with several unusual Marks for a fledgling," Neferet said in her smooth musical voice as she walked into the middle of our awkward little group, hand extended directly to my step-loser. Neferet was what most adult vampires are, stunningly perfect. She was tall, with long waves of dark auburn hair and brilliant, almond-shaped eyes an unusual shade of moss green. She moved with a grace and confidence that was clearly not human, and her skin was so spectacular that it looked like someone had turned a light on inside her. Today she was wearing a sleek, royal blue silk suit with silver spiral earrings (representing the path of the Goddess, but it's not like most parents knew that). A silver form of the Goddess with upraised hands was embroidered over her left breast, as it was over all the other professors' breasts. Her smile was dazzling. "Mr. Heffer, I am Neferet, High Priestess of the House of Night, although it might be easier if you would just think of me as you would any ordinary high school's principal. Thank you for coming to parent visitation night."

I could tell that he took her hand automatically. I was sure he would have refused it if she hadn't caught him by surprise. She shook his hand quickly and then turned to my mom.

"Mrs. Heffer, it is a pleasure to meet Zoey's mother. We are so pleased that she has joined the House of Night."

"Well, uh, thank you!" my mom said, clearly disarmed by Neferet's beauty and charm. When Neferet greeted my grandma, her smile widened and became more than just polite. I noticed that they shook hands in the traditional vampire greeting style, grasping each other's forearms.

"Sylvia Redbird, it is always a pleasure to see you."

"Neferet, it makes my heart glad to see you, too, and I thank you for honoring your oath to look after my granddaughter."

"It is an oath that is not a burden to fulfill. Zoey is such a special girl." Now Neferet's smile included me in its warmth. Then she turned to Stevie Rae and her mother. "And this is Zoey's roommate, Stevie Rae Johnson, and her mother. I hear that the two of them are practically inseparable, and that even Zoey's cat has taken to Stevie Rae."

"Yeah, it's true. She actually sat on my lap while we watched TV last night," Stevie Rae said laughingly. "And Nala doesn't like anyone except Zoey."

"Cat? I don't remember anyone giving permission for Zoey to get a cat," John said, making me want to retch. Like anyone except Grandma had bothered to talk to me for an entire month!

"You misunderstand, Mr. Heffer, at the House of Night cats roam free. They choose their owners, not the other way around. Zoey didn't need permission when Nala chose her," Neferet said smoothly.

John made a snorting noise, which I was relieved to see everyone ignored. Jeesh, he's such an ass.

"May I offer you some refreshment?" Neferet waved graciously at the table.

"Oh, golly! That reminds me of the cookies I left in the car. Stevie Rae and I were just on our way out there. It was really nice to meet y'all." With a quick hug for me and a wave for everyone else, Stevie Rae and her mom escaped, leaving me there, even though I wished I were anywhere else.

I stayed close to Grandma, lacing my fingers through hers as we walked over to the refreshment table, thinking how much easier this would be if it was just she who had come to visit me. I snuck a look at my mom. A permanent frown seemed to have been painted on her face. She was looking around at the other kids, and hardly even glanced in my

direction. Why come at all? I wanted to scream at her. Why seem like you might actually care—might actually miss me—and then show so obviously that you don't?

"Wine, Sylvia? Mr. and Mrs. Heffer?" Neferet offered.

"Thank you, red please," Grandma said.

John's tight lips registered his displeasure. "No. We don't drink."

With a superhuman effort I didn't roll my eyes. Since when didn't he drink? I would bet the last fifty dollars in my savings account that there was a six-pack of beer in the fridge at home right now. And my mom used to drink red wine like Grandma. I even saw her throw Grandma a narrow-eyed, envious look as she sipped the rich wine Neferet had poured for her. But no they didn't drink. At least not in public. Hypocrites.

"So, you were saying that the addition to Zoey's Mark happened because she did something special?" Grandma squeezed my hand. "She told me that she'd been made leader of the Dark Daughters, but she didn't tell me how exactly that happened."

I felt myself tense up again. I really didn't want to deal with the scene it would cause if my mom and John found out that what had actually happened was that the ex-leader of the Dark Daughters had cast a circle on Halloween night (known at the House of Night as Samhain, the night the veil between our world and the world of spirits is thinnest), conjured some very scary vampyre spirits, and then lost control of them when my human ex-boyfriend, Heath, stumbled up looking for me. And I so didn't want anyone to ever mention what only a couple of people knew—that Heath was looking for me because I'd tasted his blood and he was fast becoming fixated on me, something humans do pretty easily when they get involved with vamps—even vamp fledglings, for that matter. So the then leader of the Dark Daughters, Aphrodite, totally lost control of the ghosts and they were going to eat Heath. Literally. Worse—they were also acting like they wanted to take a chomp out of the rest of us, too, including totally hot Erik Night, the vamp kid who I can happily report is definitely not my ex-boyfriend, but who I've sorta been dating this past month so he's my almost-boyfriend. Anyway, I had to do something, so with some help from Stevie Rae, Damien, and the Twins, I cast my own circle, tapping into the power of the five elements: wind, fire, water, earth, and spirit. Using my affinity for the elements, I managed to banish the ghosts back to wherever it is they live (or unlive?). When they were gone I had these new tattoos, a delicate collection of lacelike sapphire swirls that framed my face—totally unheard of for a mere fledgling to have—and matching Marks interspersed with cool runelike-looking symbols on my shoulders, something no fledgling or vamp has ever had. Then Aphrodite was exposed as the rotten-assed leader she was, causing Neferet to fire her and put me in her place. Consequently, I'm also in training to be a High Priestess of Nyx, the vampyre Goddess, who is Night personified.

None of that would go over well with ultra-religious, ultra-judgmental Mom and John.

"Well, there was a small accident. Zoey's quick thinking and bravery made sure no one got hurt, and at the same time she connected with a special affinity she has been given to draw energy from the five elements." Neferet's smile was proud and I felt a wash of happiness at her approval. "The tattooing is simply an outward sign of the favor she's found with the Goddess."

"What you're saying is blasphemy." John spoke in a tight, strained voice that managed to sound condescending and angry at the same time. "You are putting her immortal soul in danger."

Neferet turned her moss-colored eyes on him. She didn't look angry. Actually, she looked amused.

"You must be one of the Elders of the People of Faith."

His birdlike chest swelled up. "Well, yes, yes I am."

"Then let us come to an understanding quickly, Mr. Heffer. I would not think of coming into your home, or into your church, and belittling your beliefs, though I disagree profoundly with them. Now, I do not expect you to worship as I do. In truth, I would never even think to attempt to sway you to my beliefs, even though I have a deep and abiding commitment to my Goddess. So all I insist upon is that you show me the same courtesy I have already awarded you. When you are in my 'home,' you respect my beliefs."

John's eyes had become mean little slits and I could see his jaw clenching and unclenching.

"Your way of life is sinful and wrong," he said fiercely.

"Thus says a man who admits to worshipping a God who vilifies pleasure, relegates women to roles that are little more than servants and broodmares, though they are the backbone of your church, and seeks to control his worshippers through guilt and fear." Neferet laughed softly, but the sound was humorless and the unspoken warning in it made the hair on my forearms prickle. "Have a care for how you judge others; perhaps you should look to cleaning your own house, first."

His face reddening, John sucked in a breath and opened his mouth for what I knew would be an ugly lecture on how right his beliefs are and how wrong everyone else's are, but before he could respond Neferet cut him off. She hadn't raised her voice, but it was suddenly filled with the power of a High Priestess and I shivered in fear, even though her wrath was not directed at me.

"You have two choices. You may visit the House of Night as its invited guest, which means you will respect our ways and keep your displeasure and judgment to yourself. Or you may leave and not return. Ever. Decide now." The last two words washed against my skin and I had to force myself not to cringe. I noticed that my mom was staring with wide, glassy eyes at Neferet, her face pale as milk. John's face had gone the opposite color. His eyes were narrow and his cheeks were flushed a very unattractive red.

"Linda," he said through his teeth. "Let's go." Then he looked at me with such disgust and hatred that I literally took a step back. I mean, I knew he didn't like me, but until that moment I hadn't realized how much. "This place is what you deserve. Your mother and I won't be back. You're on your own now." He spun around and started for the door. My mom hesitated, and for a second I thought she might actually say something nice—like she was sorry about him—or that she missed me—or that I shouldn't worry, she'd be back no matter what he said.

"Zoey, I can't believe what you've gotten yourself into now." She shook her head and, as usual, followed John's lead and left the room.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry." Grandma was there, instantly hugging me and whispering reassurance. "I'll be back, my little bird. I promise. And I'm so proud of you!" She held me by my shoulders and smiled through her tears. "Our Cherokee ancestors are proud of you, too. I can feel it. You have been touched by the Goddess, and you have the loyalty of good friends," she glanced up at Neferet and added, "and wise teachers. Someday you might even learn to forgive your mother. Until then remember that you are the daughter of my heart, u-we-tsi -a-ge-hu-tsa." She kissed me. "I must leave, too. I drove your little car here, and I will leave it for you, so I must ride back with them." She handed me the keys to my vintage Bug. "But remember always that I love you, Zoeybird."

"I love you, too, Grandma," I said, and kissed her back, hugging her hard and taking deep breaths of her scent like I could hold her in my lungs and exhale her slowly over the next month as I missed her.

"Bye, sweetheart. Call me when you get a chance." She kissed me again and then left. I watched her leave, and didn't realize I was crying until I felt the tears drip from my face onto my neck. I'd actually forgotten Neferet was still standing beside me, so I jumped a little in surprise when she handed me a tissue.

"I am sorry for that, Zoey," she said quietly.

"I'm not." I blew my nose and wiped my face before I looked at her. "Thanks for standing up to him."

"I did not mean to send your mother away, too."

"You didn't. She chose to follow him. Just like she's been doing for over three years now." I felt the hotness of tears threaten the back of my throat and spoke quickly, willing them away. "She used to be different. It's stupid, I know, but I keep expecting her to turn back into what she was before. It never happens, though. It's like he's killed my mom and put a stranger in her body."

Neferet put her arm around me. "I like what your grandma said—that maybe someday you can find the ability to forgive your mother."

I stared at the door the three of them had just disappeared through. "That someday is far away."

Neferet squeezed my shoulder sympathetically.

I looked up at her, so glad she was there with me, and I wished—for about the zillionth time—that she was my mom. Then I remembered what she had told me almost a month ago, that her mom had died when she was a little girl, and her dad had abused her, physically and mentally, until she had been saved by being Marked.

"Did you ever forgive your father?" I asked tentatively.

Neferet looked down at me and blinked several times, as if she were slowly coming back from a memory that had taken her far, far away. "No. No I didn't ever forgive him, but when I think of him now it is as if I'm remembering someone else's life. The things he did to me he did to a human child, not a High Priestess and vampyre. And to a High Priestess and vampyre he, like most humans, is completely inconsequential."

Her words sounded strong and sure, but as I looked into the depths of her beautiful green eyes I saw a flicker of something old and painful and definitely not forgotten, and wondered how honest she was being with herself...

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