

TO HELL AND BACK

HELLCAT SERIES - BOOK FOUR

BY SHARON HANNAFORD



To Hell and Back

(Hellcat Series Book 4)

by

Sharon Hannaford

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DEDICATION

For Dad, who me taught that a girl's place in the world is any damn place she wants it to be.

And Mom, who desperately tried to add the feminine touches.

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Tim, Jacqui, Carley, Pauline, Erin, friends, family and readers.

You know what you did, and I love ya!

G, Rob and Ash; in the end, every word is for you.

PROLOGUE

A dusty, eight-armed candelabra made a valiant attempt to fight off the library's stygian atmosphere. This private library would be considered large by modern standards, but for a turn-of-the-century mansion it wasn't unusual. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, and books crowded every shelf, vying for space, crammed into every nook and cranny protruding from every cranny. The short flight of wooden stairs showed decades of wear from countless booted feet, and the overstuffed, leather-covered chairs boasted shiny patches where innumerable elbows and heads had rested. Small tables dotted with reading lamps and open books took up any available space on the dark, virtually threadbare carpet.

In a chair near the centre of the room sat a grey-haired man, a tobacco pipe between his lips, tendrils of blue-grey smoke drifting towards the dark wood ceiling. Another man, his hair tending more to white than grey, paced the length of the far bookshelf. The fluidity of his gait belied his apparent age.

"Can it be true, Deimos?" the pacing man asked. "Are our years of searching over?"

"Yes, old friend, all the signs are there," the seated man confirmed. "And I feel it in my bones."

"But we must tread carefully. You know it will be exceptionally well protected." The pacing man stopped and turned to his companion.

"Of course," the grey-haired man agreed, "we've always known it would be. And yet, just as we find it, we are also gifted with the key to our success. The gods are with us; it is our time."

"We have to train her as quickly as we can." The white-haired man resumed his pacing.

"But it will take years just to get her to the level of Adept. These things can't be hurried, Phobos." The seated man removed the pipe from his lips, placing it carefully in the wooden holder on the table beside him.

“They have to be, Deimos, you know it as well as I.” Phobos had turned again, his eyes fierce in his aged face. “We don’t have years left. The spells are not nearly as effective as they used to be, no matter how powerful the blood. Turning back the clock with our magic alone is no longer enough to keep the cold hand of death from our door.” Silence hung in the room.

“You’ve seen and tested her; how far can we push her?” Deimos finally asked.

“She is strong, but bursting with her own self-importance, undisciplined and completely untrained in our ways. She will take some handling, and we will have to push her hard. Gemini can provide the finesse and bolster her strength; with them we should be able to manipulate her talent to work as we need it to. With the army she can bring through the veil, nothing can stand against us. Once we have what we need, we can take all the time we need to train her to her full potential, and by then she shall be ours completely.” Both men fell to stillness as they contemplated their next move.

“Who do we send to find it, confirm it is what we seek?” the white-haired Elder finally asked. “You know my concerns about Gemini. They are far too unpredictable for my liking. It is only a matter of time before they consider usurping us.”

“They aren’t strong enough yet, and once the Source is ours to control, no one will ever be strong enough to supplant us.” The Elder’s eyes gleamed with something sinister.

“Yet another reason not to delay,” Elder Phobos pointed out.

“Yes,” the other agreed. “Then we start her training tomorrow. First she must be taught to shield against the Oracles. If they can see our endeavours, then not even the gods can guarantee our success.”

“I concur. And we send Gemini for our confirmation. There is no one else; we must trust our leash for a few more weeks.” Elder Phobos stopped at a table laid with a decanter of dark ruby liquid and poured two glasses, handing one to the other Elder. Their eyes met as the

raised the glasses in a toast and downed the contents.

CHAPTER 1

Gabi was utterly spent, her breaths coming in ragged gasps; a fine sheen of perspiration glazed her skin. In the dark above her, a large, predatory shape loomed. She simply didn't have the energy to fend him off any longer.

"Lord and Lady, Julius, enough," she panted. "You're going to kill me."

A smug chuckle vibrated through his chest. "Is my lioness begging for mercy?" he asked in a wickedly sensual voice.

"Yes," Gabi gasped, "I can't take any more."

"That doesn't sound much like begging to me," he purred. "I seem to remember the challenge being that I couldn't make you *beg* for mercy. Demanding mercy won't fulfil the challenge requirements. I think I shall have to try a little harder."

"No," Gabi wheezed, laughing and trying to squirm away from him with what little energy she could dredge up. He pinned her to the silk sheet using the weight of his body, brushed a lush auburn curl from her shoulder, and began to lick a trail from her ear down to her traitorous nipples. He ignored her feeble attempt to pound on his back with her fists. "Okay, okay, I beg for mercy," she cried. "You win." She'd known better than to challenge him, but what a pleasurable way to be forced to admit defeat. She huffed in relief as he ended his sensual assault with a lingering kiss.

"Hmm, and what will be my prize for winning, I wonder," he mused.

"I'm still alive enough to repay you for this," she retaliated, still panting. "And repay you will." She had every intention of making him beg for the same mercy she'd just been forced to plead for. She would have her revenge.

"Promises, promises," he purred, accepting the challenge with a devilish glint in his gold

rimmed, sapphire blue eyes. She laced her fingers into his tousled dark blond hair, and he finally gave in to her demands, driving into her, filling her to the core with hard, rhythmic thrusts. Her hips rose to meet his as she dragged his head down to the soft junction of his neck and shoulder. With a raggedly indrawn breath he opened his mouth and grazed her skin with the point of one unnaturally long canine. Gabi felt the sheet in her hand rip as she fought for some remnant of control, meeting his ever-quickening pace and throwing her head back to give him better access to her throat. The fleeting pain as his fangs pierced her skin was his undoing; she shattered, her orgasm obliterating every other thought in her mind.

“Shower?” he asked when he’d recovered sufficiently to pull away from her a little, enough that she could admire the muscles that sculpted his chest in the firelight. His shoulders were broad and incredibly well toned, though his build said athlete rather than bodybuilder; his length dwarfed her own five and three-quarter feet. She wasn’t sure she’d ever get over the thrill of seeing and touching his body, a body that would never change, no matter how long he survived. She was also fairly sure she wouldn’t be able to walk for a week, never mind make it to the bathroom for a much-needed shower. She eyed her quickly fading handiwork across his body; while the scratch marks down his back and arms were already healing, the bruising on her neck would take a little longer. She may be something more than human, but her healing wasn’t as good as her Vampire Consort’s was.

“In a few minutes,” she said between heavy breaths. He moved away from her to lie on his side, his head propped up on one arm. He pulled on her arm to roll her over onto his stomach. She began to protest.

“Relax, Lea.” He chuckled. “I’ll be good, I swear.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” she muttered. As she settled against the torn sheet, he began to massage her back, gently working on knots and stiffness with the confidence of

trained masseuse. Before long his fingers brushed over the jagged scar beneath her right shoulder blade. His cool lips touched the marred skin, and she shivered.

“Tell me,” he said simply. They’d been here once before, and she hadn’t been ready to share then. In truth, she’d never fully shared the details of that particular scar with anyone. Several people knew the basic facts; her best friend, Kyle, and Byron, the man she considered her second father, had been the ones to find her afterwards and stop her bleeding out. They’d rushed her to Ian, Byron’s ER doctor son, who put her back together, physically at least. Rose had been employed to take care of her and do the housekeeping while she recovered, and the SMV Council and her fellow Hunters had been informed of why she was off duty for so long, but she’d never told anyone the story in its entirety before.

Julius waited patiently, his hands still unhurriedly working on the tension in her back and neck. She wondered how he would take the gory details. He had a strong propensity for protectiveness where she was concerned, though he was learning to control it, as much as a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Master Vampire could control that sort of thing. Maybe it was time, for both of them.

“I was younger, cockier. Full of myself, overflowing with faith in my incredible capabilities,” she finally began, folding her arms under her head and resting one cheek on them, figuring it would be easier if she wasn’t looking directly at him. “There’d been a spate of vicious Vampire attacks, mostly in the red-light quarter, attacks on prostitutes and homeless or vulnerable teenage girls. It seemed like the work of a Junkie—what we call the Vamps who get hooked on adrenalin-laced blood,” she clarified for Julius’s benefit.

He stayed silent, his fingers working calmly on her lower back, but she knew he was absorbing every word.

“We had a plan worked out. As the only girl on the team, I was the bait, of course. It took a few nights for them to bite, but we’d underestimated how many were involved. We had no

idea they were working in small packs, attacking several women at the same time, stretching
any potential law enforcement thin. As soon as they struck, I should've pulled out. We
should've regrouped and taken on one pack at a time, but, at risk of repeating myself, I was
stupid and overconfident." Gabi could still picture the scene with surreal clarity.

"There were three of them," she continued. "Everyone else was busy with two other packs
so I was on my own. Now that I know a little more about Vampires, I think that one of the
three was at Master level. He was much faster, much more powerful than any other Vamp I
ever come across before. Not quite at your level or that of the Princeps, but stronger than any
of your Clan members." Her voice trailed off for a moment, reliving the fight.

Julius's hands gentled to a soothing rub, and finally he spoke. "You don't have to go back
there," he told her, turning her onto her side so he could study her face.

She didn't meet his gaze, but she captured his free hand and pressed it to her cheek. Her
proximity, the touch of his skin to hers, calmed her.

"I held my own for a few minutes, but then I realised they were just toying with me." Yes,
it was time to purge the story from her memory. "They'd lured me into a disused factory on the
lower east side, a long way from the rest of the Hunters and any kind of rescue. Once I knew
I was outgunned, prudence slapped me in the face and told me to run, but it was too late.
They cornered me on one of the upper levels of the factory, taunting me for being a hypocrite.
Having seen my not-terribly-human moves, they assumed I was hyped up on Vamp blood.
I got in a few blows and injured one of them. What happened next was both good and terrible.
Her voice had gone thoughtful. "Well, I know it's good now, but I didn't at the time."

It was the first time she'd considered the attack with the knowledge that she was
Dhampir: nine parts human, one part Vampire. Vampire Holy Grail and most closely guarded
secret outside of the actual existence of supernatural beings. Her heritage was the Vampire
version of Pandora's Box. "I went in for the kill on the injured one."

Julius had gone deathly still, not even breathing; he didn't need to breathe, but he usually

did out of habit.

“I think if I hadn't killed him, they might have toyed with me a while longer and then drugged me from me. That wouldn't have been a good thing.”

“No.” The word was a low growl. In fact, she'd been ridiculously lucky it was Julius who worked out what she actually was. The power her blood gave to Vampires was something that could easily be used to cause chaos throughout the Vampire community. If Gabi herself, with the knowledge of her creation, fell into the wrong Vampire hands, it could spell the beginning of a massive Vampire war. One that would spill over in the human world and affect every person on the planet.

“As it turned out,” Gabi continued, “they were pissed at me for dusting their friend. The most powerful one threw me through a window onto the road below. If I'd jumped myself, I probably would've been all right, but with no control over my fall, I landed badly. I didn't know it then, but I'd fractured my pelvis and damaged two vertebrae in my back. They jumped down after me and took one of my short swords. They kicked me onto my stomach and stabbed me several times in the back, in the same place I'd stabbed the dead one. I think they were being careful to keep me alive as long as possible.”

Julius hadn't moved, but anger poured off of him in waves.

“Before they could finish me off, Kyle and Byron arrived. The trade-off for letting me play bait was that I carried a GPS tracker. I'd fought with them about it too.” She sighed, smiling ruefully. “It took me nearly two months before I could walk unassisted; if not for Ian and my better-than-human healing, I may never have walked again. It was a valuable lesson, one of humility, a reminder of my human frailty. One that taught me to put my ego in a box when I need to.” She turned her head and kissed Julius's rigid hand on her shoulder. “But the rest of the time my ego is out and in plain view for all to see,” she said in a sassy tone, trying

lighten the mood.

Julius breathed deeply, regaining control of his anger. "As you say, it was a lucky thing the never tasted you," he said, his face unreadable in the dim light and their mental connection suddenly gone fuzzy. He leaned close and kissed her. "Time for that shower." He scooped her up, carrying her to his luxurious bathroom.

A knock on the door woke Gabi, Julius was already up and striding towards it, naked but for a towel slung loosely around his hips. Either Julius had called one of his staff for something, or the person on the other side was going to get blasted, she thought drowsily. To her surprise once the door opened, they spoke quietly. She knew the voice outside the door: Alexander. Julius's second in command was disturbing them in Julius's bedroom, something had to be wrong.

She concentrated on the mental bond between her and Julius. The link wasn't exactly mind-reading, mostly it was a sense of the other's feelings, and if she concentrated, she could send him a mental picture; it seemed to be growing stronger as they spent more time together. She could sense concern and a tinge of annoyance from him; nothing too serious, then. She released a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. After a few brief moments of conversation Julius shut the door, striding back to the bed less quietly than he'd left; her subtle intrusion into his psyche not as subtle as she'd thought.

"I have to go and deal with the Werewolf Alliance," he said, kissing her on the tip of her nose before stepping into his dressing room.

Gabi rose and joined him, kissing his back, and enjoyed his hissed intake of breath as she wormed past him to get to her stash of clothing on the far side. They hadn't gotten around to making any kind of formal living arrangements yet, instead taking each day as it came, and splitting their time between his place and hers. Leaving clothing and toiletries at each other's

seemed prudent.

“What kind of midge got up their nose this time?” she asked, glad he didn’t bother ordering her back to sleep. He was learning.

“A Lone Wolf has been found dead in the Inner City,” he said.

“So?” Gabi rolled her eyes. “You can’t be responsible for every stray Werewolf who enters the City, can you?”

The newly formed Werewolf Alliance had seemed like a great idea a few weeks ago when it was first formed. For too many decades the various Packs of the City had been at each other’s throats, each vying for ultimate dominance over the others, but recent threats to the City had taught them that if they unified, they were a real force to be reckoned with. This had led to the idea of a coalition, something that would benefit them all in the case of another threat to the City. The idea was an excellent one, but so far they’d all been acting like insecure teenagers, jumping at their own shadows and trying to legislate far too many rules and regulations, each Pack Leader aiming for the best deal for his own Pack. Julius and her friend Kyle, a Werewolf beholden to none of the Packs and therefore considered impartial, had had their hands full trying to calm overstimulated tempers and stroke egos while also forcing them to pull their heads in.

“This time they have some justification for calling me in.” Julius shrugged into an ivory button-up shirt and began doing up the buttons. “This wolf was found drained of blood.”

“What?” Gabi’s voice was half an inch shy of a shriek. “That’s insane. I’ve never heard of a Vamp draining a Werewolf. Can one of you even do that?” His statement had caught her so far off guard that she was standing with one leg in her panties and one in mid-air trying to find the hole. It was enough to make Julius grin despite the seriousness of their conversation. She scowled and finished pulling on the underwear.

“No, it’s highly unlikely it was a Vampire. We gain little nourishment from their blood; the

taint of the Lycanthropy virus actually weakens us,” Julius confirmed as he buckled his belt and reached for socks. “That’s why I’m not too concerned about the tantrum the Alliance is throwing. It certainly wouldn’t have been one of ours.”

Gabi got a tiny little thrill down her spine when he called his Clan ‘ours’. She wasn’t sure if it was a chill of anxiety or exhilaration. With the Consort ceremony due the following night, she was probably anxiety. They’d ‘tied the knot’ Vampire style officially a few weeks ago, giving Julius Gabi Julius’s ultimate protection when they had to face the Princep Court, the governing body of vampires, over some trumped-up charges levelled by a Dark Magus with a grudge, but that had been a hasty affair with few witnesses, and now Julius wanted to officially introduce her to the Clan and his friends.

“What I’m more concerned about is who, or what, else would’ve done it,” he continued as he slipped on shoes and grabbed a black Melton jacket off a hanger. She was still pulling on her blouse, strapping on a sword sheath took time. “The SMV has a lead on the case and has already retrieved the body. Can you head over to HQ and see what their take is on it while I join the meeting of the Alliance? We can cover more ground before daylight like that.”

“Of course,” Gabi agreed. Though she didn’t officially work for the Societas Malus Venatorum as a Hunter anymore, she still consulted for them and would be welcome to any information that concerned Werewolves and Vampires. As a co-founding council member and day-to-day operations person for the organisation, Byron would probably appreciate her input on the case. “Where’s Kyle?” she asked, knowing it was probably him who’d contacted Alexander when she didn’t answer her phone.

“He went to HQ with the body after checking the area where it was discovered,” Julius told her, already back in the bedroom. “But now he’s on his way to the meeting to fill them in on what he knows so far.”

Gabi followed him, plonking onto the bed to pull on her boots and slip her Indonesian shoes

sword, Nex, into the sheath already fastened down her back. She ran a comb through her unruly chestnut mane before grabbing her phone from the bed stand; a quick check revealed several missed calls from Kyle and Byron. She sighed. She'd known it was a bad idea to switch it to silent.

“Take Alexander with you,” Julius said as he strode from the bedroom. “He’s waiting for you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Gabi yelled after him, even though he would’ve heard a whisper. His chuckle floated back to her; he didn’t even bother making excuses for sending a Vampire with her everywhere she went lately. At least it would be more fun to have Alexander with her than her usual tail of guards in a second car. She hadn’t had enough time to torment Alexander lately anyway.

She didn’t bother to call for him as she ran lightly down the stairs and grabbed the keys for the spare Audi, but before she made it to the door, Alexander was in front of her. Even for a Vampire, Alexander moved insanely fast, and he loved making her jump in surprise; she was training herself not to flinch every time he caught her unawares. This time she was ready for him; in a lightning-fast move of her own she kicked his legs out from under him and planted her boot in his chest to prove her victory. He was dressed in dark chinos, a midnight blue pullover, and a biker-style black leather jacket. A wry grin cracked his model-perfect face; his was the kind of face that could grace the pages of *GQ* magazine or a sultry paperback romance, the kind of face that was called beautiful rather than handsome.

“You got me, Hellcat.” He laughed, putting his hands up in surrender before she pulled Nex on him. “Now be nice, or I won’t let you drive my car.” He was suddenly dangling his Ferrari trademark red and black key, complete with rearing horse, in front of her face.

Gabi chewed on her bottom lip. “You’re really gonna let me drive it?” she checked

suspicious. She hadn't had a chance to drive his new wheels yet. She'd never driven a Ferrari before, and his was the latest Ferrari 458 Spider, a hardtop, which she would never buy for herself but sounded like fun to drive. She still hadn't gotten around to replacing her car after the Lamborghini SUV Julius bought her had been totalled in an attempt on her life several weeks ago. Her insurance was due to pay out on her original car, her beloved Mustang Shelby, in a couple of weeks, and then she could look for something. In the meanwhile she'd been driving one of Julius's 'spare' cars, an Audi. Not that there was anything wrong with the Audi, but it wasn't exactly exciting by her standards. She'd never admit it out loud, but she loved cars, especially muscle and sports cars.

"If you play nice," Alexander challenged, "and don't try to give me the slip tonight."

Gabi grinned. "What's wrong, Lex Boy? Don't think you can keep up?" she taunted.

He rolled his eyes. "I have some other matters I need to sort out while we're at HQ, and I can't do that and keep track of you at the same time. And you know the boss will flay me and put me out in the midday sun if something happens to you on my watch." He groused like a reluctant big brother left in charge of a younger sibling, but Gabi got the feeling he wasn't nearly as reluctant as he was pretending to be.

"Fine," she agreed, "hand it over." She snatched the key from him. "So who is it that you're wanting to see at HQ?" she asked with feigned innocence as they walked towards the stairwell leading to the underground garage. "It wouldn't perchance be a certain lady Magus, now would it?" And so the torture began.

CHAPTER 2

“Could he have bled out somewhere else?” Gabi asked, frowning as she studied the pale body of the man on the cold, steel gurney. His torso attested to a lifetime of fighting, scars showing up purple and blue against the pale white flesh of his chest. “Maybe been dumped after the fact?”

“It certainly is a possibility,” the Shape-shifter medical examiner agreed. He was a tall, thin man who’d been the city coroner for many years until his retirement a few months ago; in his heyday he’d been a forensic pathologist. Byron counted him a friend and still called on him on the odd occasion when they needed advice from a person with his particular skill set. Gabi didn’t know him well, but she did know his favourite form was that of a bear and, though his name was Donald, everyone called him Teddy. “Kyle told me there was no blood at the scene which means the blood was either removed in an extremely efficient, clinical manner at the scene, or it was done elsewhere and he was cleaned up before being dumped.”

“And these wounds?” Gabi asked, pointing out several sets of what appeared to be deep puncture marks along the Werewolf’s vital arteries. “Are those what they look like?”

“Well, it’s hard to be sure,” Teddy said, pulling a magnifying glass with a light attachment on a retractable arm over to one of the more prominent marks so that Gabi could take a better look. Gabi didn’t tell him that she could probably see the marks better without the magnifier than he did with it; she just leaned over and peered at them obligingly. “At first glance they do look a lot like Vampire fang marks, but on closer examination it seems they’ve been made post-mortem,” he elucidated, “and by something a little too perfectly formed to be fangs. You see, fangs, like any other teeth, are shaped very individually, each with pits and grooves, and are generally unevenly formed. These,” he pointed out the rim of one particular

puncture mark, “are just a little too precise to my mind. I guess it’s not impossible for it to be a pair of fangs, but if it is, these are some of the most perfectly formed teeth I’ve ever come across.”

Gabi could see what the doctor meant. It strengthened the case that it hadn’t been a Vampire who’d done this.

“Anything else, Teddy?” she asked. “Any idea which was the fatal wound?”

The coroner pulled the magnifier down to the small, discreetly placed towel over the Werewolf’s hips. He moved the edge of the towel away from the dead man’s upper thigh and singled out one of the puncture wounds along the femoral artery.

“This is the one that looks like it may have been the fatal wound. It’s the only one that appears to have been made peri-mortem.” He glanced up at Gabi as she processed the news.

“One fatal wound, not a pair?” she checked.

The doctor nodded.

“Thanks, Teddy. You’re the bomb,” she told him, giving him a resounding kiss on the cheek before reaching for her phone and typing a quick text to Julius. They had their confirmation unless there was a single-fanged Vampire out there somewhere, this Lone Wolf’s death was not due to exsanguination by Vampire. Not that this solved the mystery of exactly how or why he died, but at least it cleared the Vampires, and that should ease tensions between Julius and the Werewolf Alliance.

Before heading back to the estate, Gabi stopped in at Byron’s office, knowing he’d still be there under the circumstances. Sunrise was just under an hour away, so Alexander needed to get back to the safety of the Estate, but she had just enough time to check in. She texted Alexander to meet her at the Ferrari.

“Hey,” she greeted the man she considered her second father, before plonking down in on

of the guest chairs in front of his large desk. He was a lean, handsome man, one of those men who just aged well. Grey touched his temples, and laugh lines creased his face, but he still turned the ladies' heads wherever he went. "Busy night," she noted.

"Hello, honey," he said, quickly finishing a scrawled note before looking up at her. A smile lit his face at the sight of her. She felt an immediate stab of guilt that she hadn't made enough time to see him lately. He must feel like they needed an emergency to see her. "You spoke to Teddy?"

"Yes," she assured him. "I let Julius know so he could bring the Alliance up to speed. Now that they can stop focusing on Vampire involvement, maybe they'll get somewhere trying to find the real culprit."

"It's still an unusual case," Byron mused.

"Very," Gabi agreed. "How did it come to your attention in the first place?"

"By sheer luck, actually," he said. "One of the new Hunters stumbled across him on patrol this evening. The scent of Lycanthropy was still fresh. If he hadn't found him when he did, we may never have known." It didn't take long for the essence of Werewolf to dissipate after death; the Lycanthropy virus was parasitic and protected its host fiercely because without a live host it died within minutes. If the Hunter hadn't found the body before the scent vanished, the body would've simply been viewed as a dead human, nothing for the SMV to get involved in. The Societus Malus Venatori only got involved in cases that concerned the supernatural community, ones the human police weren't equipped, either mentally or physically, to deal with.

"Hmm," Gabi mused, "it's possible that's exactly what the killer had planned all along."

"I don't know about that, Gabi." Byron was thoughtful. "Why then make it look like a Vampire kill? I think the killer, or killers, wanted it to come to our attention. Possibly with the intention of creating trouble between the Werewolves and the Vampires."

“You could be right,” she conceded, “when you put it like that. But it might still be worth

checking with any contacts you have in the coroner’s office if anything else similar has come through there recently. This might not be the first case.”

“It’s on my list for tomorrow morning,” Byron said with a smile, tapping the note he’d been writing when she arrived. She grinned back wryly; she should’ve known he’d be one step ahead of her in details like that.

“How are things otherwise?” she asked before realising that with so much going on, it was a broad question. “Are you getting used to the extra security measures?” She narrowed the range of her question. Since her return from the Princeps Court, it wasn’t only Gabi who had to be extra vigilant against Vampires wanting the secret of Dhampir creation; anyone who knew the details of her birth was at risk, and that list included Byron, Ian and Gabi’s mother. Though the Princeps had passed an edict sentencing anyone trying to obtain this information to an immediate death, none of them were naive enough to think that would stop all attempts against them. Security details had been placed on all of them; Byron’s and Ian’s with the knowledge, but her mother’s was being done covertly, which made things even more difficult. While Gabi agreed with the others having round-the-clock security, she didn’t feel she needed the same protection.

Byron’s smile turned rueful. “It’s taking some getting used to,” he admitted. “At least I got peace at home. Irene’s magical barrier has been an enormous help, as I’m sure you know.”

Gabi nodded knowingly. Irene’s barrier, actually a magical ward, was the only thing that had kept her sane after a crazy Vampire invaded her house with a small army of demons. Not too long ago the ward had saved her and some friends from a plot by a shape-shifting Doppelganger working for a deranged human, and it was still the only thing that allowed her to sleep peacefully at night. It was a difficult spell to cast, but the Senior Magus had been only too happy to help protect Byron, whom she considered a close personal friend.

“But honestly, I’m not complaining. Julius’s staff are utter professionals; I forget they’re
there half the time.”

In truth there was only a very slim chance that any outsider would know about Byron and Gabi’s close relationship, but both the SMV and Julius’s Clan had been betrayed by insiders in the past few months, so no one was taking any chances.

“And the new Hunters?” Gabi asked. She had more than a passing interest in the new crop of Hunters who’d been fast-tracked into their positions. With her resignation from Hunter duties and the recent increase in threats to the City, it had been imperative to bolster the numbers of those SMV members who went out and did the dirty work of eliminating and capturing supernatural threats to the City and its people. Julius had encouraged Clan members to make applications, as it made sense to have Vampires on the team when there was the possibility of rogue Vampires at large. Also, her close but emotionally unstable friend Derek was helping in the training of the new recruits.

“They’ve settled in well,” Byron said, steepling his fingers in front of his lips as he considered her question. “We’re up to eight full-duty Hunters now, an additional Werewolf and two Vampires, with several more in training. It’s been a good thing to have the Vampires on board; it’s helping bridge the gap between the races. Now that the Hunters are at ease with them, the rest should soon follow suit.”

“I’m glad,” Gabi said. “It’s good to hear that.” She’d been concerned about the personal dynamics that may develop if the other races refused to warm to the Vampires, but it seemed her fears were unfounded. “And Derek is handling the training?” A fairly recent addition to the Werewolf ranks but a highly experienced stuntman, he was well suited to the job, but the loss of part of one of his legs had knocked him hard. Gabi felt that Derek’s mental recovery hinged largely on his new role; it was his chance to redefine himself, find his new place in the world.

“He’s doing fine, Gabi,” Byron reassured her, reading into her question. “He’s throw

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