

## Rose and Dimitir

I hadn't expected to be back in Russia so soon. I certainly didn't want to be.

It wasn't that I had anything against the place. It was a nice enough country, with rainbow-colored architecture and vodka that could double as rocket fuel. I was fine with those things. My problem was that the last time I'd been here, I'd nearly gotten killed (on multiple occasions) and had ended up being drugged and kidnapped by vampires. That's enough to turn you off to any place.

And yet, as my plane began circling for its landing in Moscow, I knew coming back here was definitely the right thing to do.

"Do you see that, Rose?" Dimitri tapped the window's glass, and although I couldn't see his face, the note of wonder in his voice told me plenty. "St. Basil's."

I leaned over him, just barely catching a glimpse of the famous multicolored cathedral that looked more like something you'd find in Candy Land, not the Kremlin. To me, it was another tourist attraction, but to him, I knew it meant so much more. This was his homecoming, the return to a land he had believed he'd never see again in the sun, let alone through the eyes of the living. That building, the cities here ... they weren't just pretty postcard shots for him. They represented more than that. They represented his second chance at life.

Smiling, I settled back in my seat. I had the middle one, but there was no way it could be more uncomfortable than his. Putting a six-foot-seven-inch man by the window in coach was just cruel. He hadn't complained this entire time, though. He never did.

"Too bad we won't have time to hang out here," I said. Moscow was just a layover for us. "We'll have to save all our sightseeing for Siberia. You know, tundra. Polar bears."

Dimitri turned from the window, and I expected to be chastised for furthering stereotypes. Instead, I could tell from his expression that he hadn't heard anything after "Siberia." Morning light illuminated the sculpted features of his face and shone off his sleek brown hair. None of it could compare to the radiance within him.

"It's been so long since I've seen Baia," he murmured, his dark eyes filled with memories. "So long since I've seen them. Do you think ..." He glanced at me, betraying the first glimpse of nervousness I'd observed since beginning this trip. "Do you think they'll be glad to see me?"

I squeezed his hand and felt a small pang in my chest. It was so unusual to see Dimitri uncertain about anything. I could count on my hand the number of times I'd ever witnessed him truly vulnerable. From the moment we'd met, he'd always stood out as one of the most decisive, confident people I'd known. He was always in motion, never afraid to take on any threat, even if it meant risking his own life. Even now, if some bloodthirsty monster sprang out of the cockpit, Dimitri would calmly jump up and battle it while armed only with the safety card in his seat pocket. Impossible, dire fights were of no concern to him. But seeing his family after he'd spent time as an evil, undead vampire? Yeah, that scared him.

"Of course they'll be glad," I assured him, marveling at the change in our relationship. I'd started off as his student, in need of his reassurance. I'd graduated to become his lover and equal. "They know we're coming. Hell, you should've seen the party they threw when they thought you were dead, comrade. Imagine what they'll do when they find out you're actually alive."

He gave me one of those small, rare smiles of his, the kind that made me feel warm all over. "Let's hope so," he said, turning to gaze back out the window. "Let's hope so."

The only sights we saw in Moscow were inside its airport while we waited to catch our next flight. That one took us to Omsk, a middle-sized city in Siberia. From there, we rented a car and made the rest of our journey on land-no planes went where we were going. It was a beautiful drive, the land full of life and greenery that proved all my tundra jokes wrong. Dimitri's mood fluctuated between nostalgia and anxiety as we traveled, and I found myself restless to reach our destination. The sooner we got there, the sooner he'd see he had nothing to worry about.

Baia was a little less than a day's drive from Omsk and looked pretty much the same as it had on my last visit. It was out of the way enough that people rarely stumbled across it by accident. If you found yourself in Baia, there was a reason. And more often than not, that reason had to do with the large number of dhampirs living there. Like Dimitri and me, these dhampirs were half-human, half-vampire. Unlike Dimitri and me, most of these dhampirs had chosen to live apart from the Moroi-living, magic-wielding vampires-and instead mingled with human society. Dimitri and I were both guardians, pledged to guard the Moroi from Strigoi: the evil, undead vampires who killed to sustain their immortal existence.

Days were longer during this part of summer, and darkness had only just begun to fall when we reached Dimitri's family's house. Strigoi rarely ventured into Baia itself, but they liked to stalk the roads leading into town. The fleeting rays of sunlight ensured our safety and gave Dimitri a good view of the house. Even once he'd turned off the car, he sat for a long time, gazing out at the old, two-story structure. Red and gold light bathed it, giving it the appearance of something otherworldly. I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"Showtime, comrade. They're waiting for you."

He sat for a few moments in silence, then gave a resolute nod and put on the kind of expression I'd seen him wear into battle. We left the car and had barely made it halfway through the yard when the front door burst open. Bright light spilled into the dusky shadows, and a young female silhouette appeared.

"Dimka!"

If a Strigoi had sprung out and attacked, Dimitri would have had to respond instantly. But seeing his youngest sister stunned his lightning-fast reflexes, and he could only stand there as Viktoria flung her arms around him and began uttering a torrent of Russian words too fast for me to follow.

It took Dimitri a few more shocked moments to come to life, but then he returned her fierce embrace, answering her back in Russian. I stood there awkwardly until Viktoria noticed me. With a cry of joy, she hurried over and gave me a hug as tight as the one she'd bestowed upon her brother. I admit, I was almost as shocked as him. When we'd last parted, Viktoria and I hadn't been on good terms. I'd made it clear I didn't approve of her relationship with a certain Moroi guy. She'd made it equally clear she didn't appreciate my input. It seemed now that was all forgotten, and although I couldn't translate the words she spoke, I got the impression she was thanking me for restoring Dimitri to her.

Viktoria's exuberant arrival was followed by the rest of the Belikov family. Dimitri's other two sisters, Karolina and Sonya, joined Viktoria in embracing both him and me. Their mother was right behind them. Russian flew fast and furious. Normally, a haphazard doorstep reunion like this would've made me roll my eyes, but I found myself tearing up instead. Dimitri had been through too much. We'd all been through too much, and honestly, I don't think any of us had ever expected to be sharing this moment.

At last, Dimitri's mother, Olena, recovered herself and laughed while wiping tears from her eyes. "Come in, come in," she said, remembering that I didn't know much Russian. "Let's sit down and talk."

Through more tears and laughter, we made our way into the house and cozy living room. It too was the same as my last visit, surrounded in warm wood paneling and shelves of leather-bound books with Cyrillic titles. There, we found more of the family. Karolina's son, Paul, regarded his uncle with fascination. Paul had barely known Dimitri before he struck out into the world, and most of what the boy knew came from fantastic-sounding stories. Sitting on a blanket nearby was Paul's baby sister, and another, much tinier baby lay sleeping in a bassinet. Sonya's baby, I realized. She'd been pregnant when I'd visited earlier that summer.

I was used to always being near Dimitri's side, but this was a moment when I knew I had to yield him. He sat on the sofa, and Karolina and Sonya immediately flanked him, wearing expressions that said they were afraid to let him out of their sight. Viktoria, irked at having lost a prime seat, settled down on the floor and leaned her head against his knee. She was seventeen, only a year younger than me, but as she gazed up at him adoringly, she looked much younger. All of the siblings had brown hair and eyes, making a pretty portrait as they sat together.

Olena scurried about, certain we must be famished, and finally settled down when we assured her we were fine. She sat in a chair opposite Dimitri, her hands clasped in her lap as she leaned forward eagerly.

"This is a miracle," she said in accented English. "I didn't believe it. When I received the message, I thought it was a mistake. Or a lie." She sighed happily. "But here you are. Alive. The same."

"The same," Dimitri confirmed.

"Was the first story ..." Karolina paused, a small frown crossing her pretty features as she carefully chose her words. "Was the first story a mistake, then? You weren't truly ... truly a Strigoi?"

The word hung in the air for a moment, casting a chill over the warm summer evening. For the space of a heartbeat, I couldn't breathe. I was suddenly far away from here, trapped in a different house with a very different Dimitri. He'd been one of the undead, with chalk-white skin and red-ringed pupils. His strength and speed had far surpassed what he had now, and he'd used those skills to hunt for victims and drink their blood. He'd been terrifying-and had nearly killed me.

A few seconds later, I began to breathe again. That Dimitri was gone. This one-warm, loving, and alive-was here now. Yet, before he answered, Dimitri's dark eyes met mine, and I knew he was thinking of the same things I was. That past was a horrible, difficult thing to shake.

"No," he said. "I was Strigoi. I was one of them. I did ... terrible things." The words were mild, but the tone of his voice spoke legions. The radiant faces of his family turned sober. "I was lost. Beyond hope. Except ... Rose believed in me. Rose never gave up."

"As I predicted."

A new voice rang through the living room, and we all looked up at the woman who had suddenly appeared in the doorway. She was considerably shorter than me but carried the kind of personality that could fill up a room. She was Yeva, Dimitri's grandmother. Small and frail with wispy white hair, she was believed by many around here to be a kind of wisewoman or witch. A different word usually came to my mind when I thought of Yeva, though it did sound a lot like "witch."

"You did not," I said, unable to stop myself. "All you did was tell me to get out of here so that I could 'do something else.' "

"Exactly," she said, a smug smile on her wrinkled face. "You needed to go restore my Dimka." She made her way across the living room, but Dimitri met her in the middle. He carefully wrapped her in his arms and murmured what I think was Russian for "grandmother." The insane difference in their heights made it kind of a comical scene.

"But you never said that's what I was going to do," I argued, once she was seated in a rocking chair. I knew I should just drop this subject, but something about Yeva always rubbed me the wrong way. "You can't take credit for that."

"I knew," she said adamantly. Her dark eyes seemed to bore right through me.

"Then why didn't you tell me that's what I had to do?" I demanded.

Yeva considered her answer for a moment. "Too easy. You needed to work for it."

I felt my jaw start to drop. Across the room, Dimitri caught my eye. Don't do it, Rose, his look seemed to say. Let it go. There was a glint of amusement on his face, as well as something that reminded me of our old teacher-student days. He knew me too well. He knew if given half a chance, I would totally battle this out with his ancient grandmother. Likely I would lose. With a quick nod, I clamped my mouth shut. Okay, witch, I thought. You win this one. Yeva shot me a gap-toothed grin.

"But how did it happen?" asked Sonya, tactfully shifting us into less dangerous waters. "The change back to a dhampir, I mean."

Dimitri and I glanced at each other again, but his earlier mirth was gone. "Spirit," he said quietly. This caused a quick intake of breath from his sisters. The Moroi wielded elemental magic, but most of them used only the four physical elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Recently, however, a very rare element had been discovered: spirit. It was tied to psychic abilities and healing and was still something many Moroi and dhampirs had a hard time accepting.

"My friend Lissa used spirit while, um, stabbing him with a silver stake," I explained. While I would gladly go through it all again to save Dimitri, the image of him being staked through the heart was still a little troubling for me. Up until the last moment, none of us had really known if it would just kill him or not.

Paul's eyes widened. "Lissa? Do you mean Queen Vasilisa?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Her." It was still hard sometimes to remember that my best friend since kindergarten was now queen of the entire Moroi world. Thinking of her now caused a slight knot in my stomach. Her election to the throne a couple weeks ago had been controversial in the eyes of many. Some of her enemies weren't above violence, and leaving her for a week to come here had made me extremely nervous. It was only the guarantee that she'd be surrounded by guardians-along with the need for Dimitri's family to see he was no longer one of the undead-that had made me consent to this trip.

The Belikovs and I stayed up late, answering their many questions. Even before he'd been forcibly turned into a Strigoi, Dimitri had been away from home for a while. He kept trying to find out what his family had been up to these last few years, but they brushed him off. They didn't consider their own experiences important. He was their miracle. And they couldn't get enough of him.

I knew the feeling.

When Paul and his sister were both fast asleep on the floor, we finally realized it was time for the rest of us to go to bed too. Tomorrow was a big day. I'd teased Dimitri that his family would have to outdo the memorial party they'd thrown him before, and it turned out I was right.

"Everyone wants to see you," Olena explained as she showed us to our bedroom. I knew "everyone" meant Baia's dhampir community. "As incredible as it is for us, it's even more unbelievable for them. So ... we just told them to stop by tomorrow. All of them."

I cast a glance at Dimitri, curious as to how he'd respond. He wasn't the type who really reveled in being the center of attention-I could only guess how he felt when it involved the most terrible, traumatizing events of his life. For a second, his face wore that calm, emotionless look he excelled at. Then it relaxed into a smile.

"Of course," he told his mother. "I look forward to it."

Olena returned his smile with a relieved one and then bid us good night. Once she was gone, Dimitri sat down on the edge of the bed and rested his elbows on his knees. He set his head in his hands and muttered something in Russian. I didn't know exactly what he said, but I was guessing it was along the lines of "What have I gotten myself into?"

I walked over to him and sat on his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck so that I could face him. "Why so blue, comrade?"

"You know why," he said, playing with a lock of my hair. "I'm going to have to keep talking about ... that time."

Sympathy burned in me. I knew he felt guilty for what he'd done as a Strigoi and had only recently accepted that it wasn't his fault. He'd been turned against his will by another Strigoi and hadn't been fully in control of himself. Still, it was a hard thing to come to terms with.

"It's true," I said. "But they're only going to talk about that in order to find out the rest of the story. No one's going to focus on what you did as Strigoi. They're going to want to know about how you came back. The miracle. I saw these people earlier this year. They mourned you as dead. Now they're going to want to celebrate you being alive. That's what the focus will be." I brushed my lips against his. "That's certainly my favorite part of the story."

He pulled me closer. "My favorite part was when you slapped some sense into me and got me to stop feeling sorry for myself."

"Slapped? That's not exactly how I remember it." To be fair, Dimitri and I had hit and kicked each other plenty of times in the past. It was inevitable with the kind of strict training regimen guardians had. But getting him to overcome his Strigoi days ... well, that had required less in the way of hitting and more of me trying not to be too argumentative while he healed on his own. And yeah, there'd also been one incident involving a hotel room and clothing removal, but I don't really think it had been all that essential in the healing process.

Still, when Dimitri fell backward and took me down on the bed with him, I had a feeling it was that particular memory that was fresh in his mind too. "Maybe you just need to help remind me," he said diplomatically.

"Remind, huh?" Wrapped in his arms, I cast an anxious glance at the door. "I feel bad enough having our own room in your mom's house! It's like we're getting away with something."

He cupped my face between his hands. "They're very open-minded," he said. "Besides, after everything we've been through? I think we might as well be married, as far as most of them are concerned."

"I got that impression too," I admitted. When I'd been here for his memorial service, a lot of the other dhampirs had practically treated me like his widow. Dhampir relationships didn't stand much on ceremony.

"Not a bad idea," he teased.

I tried to elbow him, which was kind of difficult, considering how entwined we were. "Nope. Don't go there, comrade." I loved Dimitri more than anything, but despite his occasional suggestions, I'd made it clear I had no intention of getting married until there was a "2" at the beginning of my age. He was seven years older than me, so marriage was more of a reasonable idea for him. For me, even though there was no one else I wanted, eighteen was too young to be a wife just yet.

"You say that now," he said, trying to keep from laughing, "but one of these days you'll crack."

"No way," I said. His fingertips traced patterns against my neck, filling my skin with heat. "You've given some pretty convincing arguments, but you're still a long way from winning me over."

"I haven't even really tried," he said, in a rare moment of arrogance. "When I want to, I can be very persuasive."

"Yeah? Prove it."

His lips moved toward mine. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The guests began arriving early. Of course, the Belikov women had been up and awake even earlier-far earlier than Dimitri and me, who were still coping with the time change. The kitchen was a flurry of activity, filling the house with all sorts of mouth-watering scents. Admittedly, Russian food wasn't my favorite cuisine, but there were a few dishes-especially ones Olena made-that I'd grown attached to. She and her daughters baked and cooked enormous quantities of everything, which seemed excessive since almost every person who stopped by also brought a dish to share. The experience was a mirror of Dimitri's memorial service, save that the mood was understandably more upbeat.

At first, there was a little awkwardness on everyone's part. Despite his resolve to focus on the positive, Dimitri still had a little trouble getting over the fact that his Strigoi time was the central focus. Some of the guests were equally nervous, as though maybe the rest of us had made a terrible mistake and he really was still a bloodthirsty undead creature. Of course, you only had to spend about five minutes with him to know that wasn't true, and soon the tension melted away. Dimitri knew almost everyone from his childhood and grew more and more delighted to see familiar faces. They in turn were more than happy to rejoice in his being saved.

I watched a lot of this from the sidelines. I'd met many of the visitors before, and while several greeted me, it was clear Dimitri took center stage. Most of the conversation was in Russian too, but it was enough for me to simply watch his face. Once he settled into being among his old friends and family, a quiet joy spread over him. The tension that always seemed to crackle through his body eased a little, and my heart melted to see him at such a moment.

"Rose?"

I'd been watching with amusement while some children interrogated him very seriously. Turning at the sound of my name, I was surprised to find two familiar and welcome faces.

"Mark, Oksana!" I exclaimed, embracing the couple. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"How could we not?" asked Oksana. She was Moroi, nearly thirty years older than me but still very beautiful. She was also one of the few spirit users I knew about. Beside her, her husband Mark smiled down at me. He was a dhampir, which made their relationship scandalous and was why they tended to keep to themselves. Oksana had used her spirit powers to bring Mark back after he was killed in a fight, a feat of healing that rivaled Dimitri's return from the Strigoi. It was called being shadow-kissed.

"We wanted to see you again," Mark told me. He inclined his head toward Dimitri. "And of course, we wanted to see the miracle for ourselves."

"You did it," said Oksana, her gentle face filled with wonder. "You saved him after all."

"And not how I originally intended either," I remarked. When I'd last come to Russia, my goal had been to hunt and kill Dimitri, in order to save his soul from that dark state. I hadn't known then that there was an alternative.

Oksana was understandably curious about the role of spirit in Dimitri's salvation, and I gave her as much information as I was able to. Time flew by. The day gave way to early evening, and people began breaking out the lethal vodka that had been my downfall last time. Mark and Oksana were teasing me about giving it another try, when a new voice suddenly got my attention. The voice's owner wasn't speaking to me, but I was immediately able to pick him out over the hum of the now-crowded house-because he was speaking English.

"Olena? Olena? Where are you? We need to talk about the Blood King."

Following the voice, I soon spotted a guy about five years older than me trying to squeeze his way through the crowd to where Olena stood near her son. Most paid little attention to him, but a few paused and regarded him with a surprise that I shared. He was human-the only human here, from what I could tell. Humans and dhampirs looked virtually indistinguishable from each other, but it was an ability of my race to be able to tell each other apart.

"Olena." Breathless, the human guy reached Olena and gave me my first clear view of him. He had neatly trimmed black hair and wore a very prim gray suit that somehow enhanced his gangly build. When he turned his head a certain way, the light caught one of his cheeks, revealing a golden lily tattoo. And that's what explained his presence. He was an Alchemist.

Olena had been chatting with a neighbor woman and finally turned when the Alchemist said her name three more times. Dimitri's mother remained smiling and pleasant, but I caught the faintest glimpse of exasperation in her eyes.

"Henry," she said. "How nice to see you again."

He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. "We need to talk about the Blood King." The more he spoke, the more I could pick out a faint accent. He was British, not American like me.

"This is hardly the time," said Olena. She gestured to Dimitri, who was gazing at Henry with intense scrutiny. "My son is visiting. He hasn't been here in years."

Henry gave Dimitri a polite but curt nod of greeting and then turned back to Olena. "It's never the time. The longer we put this off, the more people are going to be hurt. Another human was killed last night, you know."

This brought silence to several people standing nearby. It also brought me striding over to stand beside Dimitri and Olena. "Who was killed?" I demanded. "And who's doing the killing?"

Henry gave me a once-over. It wasn't like a checking-to-see-if-I-was-hot once-over, though. It was more like he was trying to decide if I was worth responding to. Apparently not. His attention went back to Olena.

"You have to do something," he said.

Olena threw up her hands. "Why do you think I can do it?"

"Because you're ... well, you're kind of what passes for a leader around here. Who else is going to organize dhampirs to take care of this menace?"

"I don't lead anyone," said Olena, shaking her head. "And the people here ... they certainly can't be ordered into battle on a moment's notice."

"But they know how to fight," countered Henry. "You're all trained, even if you didn't become guardians."

"We're trained to defend," she corrected him. "Certainly everyone here would turn out if Strigoi invaded our town. We don't go out seeking trouble, though. Well, except for the Unmarked. But they're all away right now. Once they return in the autumn, I'm sure they'll happily do this for you."

Henry sighed in frustration. "We can't wait until autumn! Humans are dying now."

"Humans who are too stupid to stay out of trouble," said a grizzled dhampir woman.

"This so-called Blood King is just an ordinary Strigoi," added another man who'd been listening. "Nothing special. Humans need to simply stay away, and he'll leave."

I didn't exactly know what was happening here, but pieces were coming together. Alchemists were among the few humans who knew about the existence of vampires and dhampirs. Although we often lived and interacted with humans, my kind generally did an excellent job of hiding our true natures. Alchemists believed all vampires and dhampirs were dark and unnatural and that humanity was better off without contact. Likewise, the Alchemists feared that if our existence was public knowledge, certain weak-willed humans would jump at the chance to become immortal Strigoi and corrupt their souls. As a result, Alchemists helped us stay hidden and also assisted in covering up Strigoi kills and other ugly business those monsters caused. At the end of the day, though, Alchemists made it clear they were helping humans first and us second. So, if there was something out there threatening his kind, it was no wonder Henry was so worked up.

"Start from the beginning," said Dimitri, stepping forward. He'd listened patiently so far, but even he had limits when someone was trying to order his mother around. "Someone explain who this Blood King is and why he's killing humans."

Henry gave Dimitri an assessment similar to the one he'd given me. Only, Dimitri apparently passed. "The Blood King is a Strigoi who lives northwest of here. There are some foothills with several caves and twisting paths, and he's taken up residence in there. We don't know exactly which cave, but evidence suggests he's very old and very powerful."

"And so ... he's what, preying on human hikers that happen to wander nearby?" I asked.



Henry seemed surprised that I'd spoken, but at least answered this time. "No wandering involved. They seek him out. All the people in these villages are superstitious and deluded. They've built up this legendary reputation for him-gave him that Blood King name. They don't fully understand what he is, of course. Anyway, all he has to do is wait around, because every so often, someone gets it into his head that he's going to be the one to defeat the Blood King. They rush headlong into those mountain paths-and never come back."

"Stupid," said the woman who'd spoken earlier. I was inclined to agree.

"You have to do something," repeated Henry. This time, he was looking at everyone as he spoke, desperate for help wherever he could get it. "My people can't kill this Strigoi. You need to. I've talked to guardians in the larger cities, but they won't leave their Moroi. That means it's up to you locals."

"Maybe word will eventually get around and humans will stay away," said Olena reasonably.

"We keep hoping that'll happen, but it doesn't," said Henry. Something in the way he spoke made me think he'd explained this many times. If he didn't have such an arrogant demeanor, I'd almost feel sorry for him. "And before anyone suggests it: no, I don't think any human's going to get lucky and kill the Blood King either."

"Of course not."

The room had pretty much gone silent by this point, but Yeva's entrance ensured it stayed that way. How did she always make it seem like she'd appeared out of thin air? She came forward, using a gnarled cane that I suspected she kept on hand just to poke people with. She focused on Henry but seemed pleased to have gotten everyone else's attention.

"Only someone who has walked the road of death can kill the Blood King." She paused dramatically. "I have foreseen it."

From the awed expressions this elicited, it was obvious that no one else was going to question her. As usual, it was up to me. "Oh for God's sake," I said. "That could mean a hundred different things."

Henry was frowning. "I'd have to agree. Walking the road of death could be anything ... someone who has nearly died, someone who has killed, any warrior or fighter who's-

"Dimka," said Viktoria. I hadn't even noticed her standing near us. A few people had been in front of her but now moved aside as she spoke. "Grandmother means Dimka. He's walked the road of death and returned."

Murmurs filled the room as all eyes shifted to Dimitri. Many were nodding at Viktoria's declaration. I heard one man say, "Dimitri's the one. He's destined to kill the Blood King." I was pretty sure it was the same guy who'd earlier scoffed and said the Blood King wasn't anything special. Others were in agreement. "Yeva Belikova has declared it to be so," someone else said. "She's never wrong."

"That's not what she said at all!" I cried.

"I'll do it," said Dimitri resolutely. "I'll put an end to this Strigoi."

Cheers broke out, so no one heard me say, "But you don't have to! She never said you did."

Correction-one person heard me. Dimitri. "Roza," he said, his voice carrying through the growing noise. It was only one word, but as often happened, he managed to convey a thousand messages in it, most of which could be summed up as "We'll talk later."

"I'd like to come with you," said Mark. He straightened up to his full height. "If you'll have me." Despite his graying hair, Mark was still lean and muscled, with a look about him that said he was more than capable of kicking Strigoi ass.

"Of course. I'd be honored," said Dimitri gravely. "But that's it." This last part was added because suddenly half the room wanted to go with him. They'd rolled their eyes at Henry's initial request, but with Dimitri on board now, this had just hit heroic odyssey status.

"What about me?" I asked dryly.

A smile twitched at Dimitri's lips. "I figured that was a given."

I wasn't able to speak privately with him until much later. After all, people were still celebrating his return to the living, and now there was this quest to cheer on. The only one more impatient than me, I think, was Henry. He was pleased to have finally gotten help, but it was clear he wanted to start going over logistics and plans with Dimitri right now. That obviously wasn't going to happen, and at last, Henry left and said he'd be back tomorrow.

It was nearly the middle of the night when the remaining guests departed and Dimitri and I returned to our room. I was exhausted but still had enough energy left to chastise him.

"You know Yeva didn't specifically say you had to be the one to kill this Blood King guy," I said, crossing my arms to look imposing. "Viktoria-and everyone else-jumped to that conclusion."

"I know," said Dimitri, stifling a yawn. "But someone has to kill him. Even if these humans are bringing it on themselves, the threat needs to be removed. My mother's right that dhampirs around here are mostly focused on defense. You and I are the only ones who've gone through an entire guardian's training. And Mark."

I nodded slowly. "That's why you said he could come. I figured it was just because he was the first to ask and not one of those other wannabes trying to get in on your awesomeness."

Dimitri smiled and sat down on the bed. "These people can fight. They'd fight to the death if their homes were attacked. But to go into battle? Mark's the only one of them I'd take. And he's still no match for you."

"Well," I said, coming to sit beside him. "That's the smartest thing I've heard all night." Another realization hit me. "Mark can sense Strigoi too." It was a side effect of being brought back from the dead. "Huh. I guess this might be crazy enough to work."

Dimitri kissed the top of my head. "Admit it. You don't mind going after this Strigoi. It's the right thing to do. Even if they're walking into it, innocents are still dying because of him."

"Yeah, yeah, it's the right thing. I would've volunteered myself eventually." I sighed. "I just hate giving Yeva one more reason to think she controls the fate of the universe."

He chuckled. "If you plan on being a part of this family, then you'd better get used to it."

Dimitri and I had no hangover effects to deal with, fortunately, but neither of us was too thrilled when Henry showed up at the crack of dawn so that we could "get down to business." Like the other Alchemists I'd met, Henry wasn't the type to get his hands dirty. He had no intention of going with us to take on this Blood King. Also like other Alchemists, Henry was swimming in paperwork and plans.

He brought us tons of maps and diagrams of the cavernous area the Blood King inhabited, as well as every report the Alchemists had about sightings and attacks. Alchemists loved reports. Olena made us all some extremely strong coffee that tasted only slightly less toxic than the regional vodka, but the coffee's caffeine buzz went a long way to help us wake up and strategize.

"It's not that big a region," remarked Henry, tapping one of the maps. "I don't understand why no one can ever find him in daylight. This area's small enough that someone could search out every single cave within a day. Yet, they all still end up trapped there at night and get killed."

My mind spun back to another set of caves, halfway around the world. "The caves are connected," I said slowly, tracing the dots that one map used to mark the entrances. "You can search all day and never find him because he moves around underground."

"Brilliant, Roza," murmured Dimitri in approval.

Henry looked startled. "How do you know?"

I shrugged. "It's the only thing that makes sense." I flipped through the pieces of paper. "Do you have an underground map? Did anyone ever do a ... I don't know ... a geological survey or something?" It seemed like every other representation of the area was there: satellite images, topographical drawings, analyses of the minerals ... everything but a glimpse of what was happening below the surface. Henry confirmed as much.

"No," he admitted sheepishly. "I don't have anything like that." Then, as though to save face for Alchemists and their usually meticulous style, he added, "Probably because no one ever actually made one. If it existed, we'd have it."

"That's going to be a disadvantage," I mused.

"Not so much," said Dimitri, finishing off the last of his coffee. "I have an idea. I don't think we need to go underground at all. Especially with Mark."

I met his eyes and felt a jolt of electricity jump between us. Part of what drew us together was a mutual love of excitement and danger. It wasn't that we sought it out, exactly, but when there was a need to respond, we were both always ready to take on whatever was necessary. I felt that spark kindling between us now as this task loomed closer, and suddenly had a good idea of what his plan was.

"Bold move, comrade," I teased.

"Not by your standards," he returned.

Henry glanced back and forth between us, totally lost. "What are you two talking about?"

Dimitri and I just grinned.

Of course, there weren't many smiles when we set out before dawn the next day. Dimitri's family displayed a conflicting mix of confidence and nervousness. Ostensibly, Yeva's proclamation that Dimitri would triumph guaranteed

victory. Yet neither his sisters nor his mother were totally carefree about sending him off to face an old and powerful Strigoi with a long history of kills. The women showered him with hugs and well wishes, and all the while, Yeva looked on in her smug, knowing manner.

Mark was with us, looking tough and battle ready. Henry had said the Baia dhampirs were "local" to the Blood King, but that was kind of a relative term, as the caverns were still about a six-hour drive away. We were simply the closest, since the caves lay in a remote area with little surrounding civilization. In fact, part of the drive's length was a result of the roads in that region being so poorly maintained.

We reached the caverns around midday, which was all according to plan. It was a desolate place and really only a small blip as far as elevation went, hardly able to compete with much grander ranges like the Ural Mountains far to the east. Still, it was higher and steeper than most of the surrounding lowlands, with rock-faced cliffsides that were going to require some sure footing. None of the caves were visible from where we parked the car, but a small, worn footpath meandered off between some of the cliffs. From what we'd seen of Henry's map, this led into the heart of the complex.

"Nothing like a little rock climbing," I said cheerfully, hoisting my backpack over my shoulder. "This could almost be a vacation, if not for the, you know, potentially dying part."

Mark held up a hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he regarded Dimitri and me. "Something tells me you're the kind of people whose vacations always end up that way."

"True," said Dimitri, heading out toward the path. "Besides, we're safe today. We have my grandmother's guarantee, remember?"

I rolled my eyes at the teasing in his voice. Dimitri might love and revere Yeva, but I knew he wouldn't count on any vague prophecy to get this task done. His faith was in the silver stake he carried at his belt.

The path started out easy but soon became a challenge as the elevation rose and more obstacles appeared in our way. We had to climb around boulders and manage some tricky parts where the path all but disappeared, forcing us to cling to the rocky sides. When we reached what was apparently the center of the complex, I was surprised to see how level it was. Cliff faces rose up all around us, like we were in some kind of fortress, but this area provided a small measure of tranquility. I wasn't tired-dhampirs are hardy, after all-but was glad we had reached our destination.

And that was where ... we stopped.

We settled down on the ground, sorting out the contents of our backpacks, and proceeded to pretty much lounge around for the rest of the day. Despite the wind blowing up here, the temperature was still summer-warm, and this would've almost made a perfect picnic scene. True, the weathered rock and scattered vegetation were hardly idyllic, but we spread out a blanket and ate a lunch consisting of Olena's fabulous cooking. When we were finished, I lay down next to Dimitri while Mark began whittling a piece of wood.

We kept up a steady stream of small talk. This was all part of the plan too. After Henry had said adventuring humans had gone hunting and been killed, we'd realized that was the downfall: going off and getting trapped inside caves that this Blood King guy obviously knew better than us. We weren't going to do it. We would stay out in the open, making no effort to hide our presence. While Strigoi loved human blood, they loved Moroi and dhampir blood even more. There was no way this Strigoi would be able to ignore us hanging out on his turf. If the violation didn't draw him out, the lure of our blood would. He'd eventually come after us when darkness fell, and we'd fight him on our terms.

"Mark, you and Oksana should come to the U.S.," I said. "Lissa would love to meet you and talk spirit. Lots of people would."

Mark didn't look up from his carving. "That's the problem," he said good-naturedly. "We're worried too many people would, now that everyone's interested in spirit. We don't want to become science experiments."

"Lissa wouldn't let that happen," I said adamantly. "And think of all the amazing things we might learn. Spirit seems to be able to do something new every day." Before I even knew it, my hand found Dimitri's. In saving him, spirit had already done the greatest thing it ever could in my eyes.

"We'll see," said Mark. "Oksana likes her privacy, but I know she's curious about-"

Dimitri shot up from his lounging position, instantly rigid and focused in that way he had. Mark had fallen silent as soon as Dimitri twitched, and now I sat up too. My hand went to my stake, and I saw the guys' hands do the same. Even as I did, the logical part of me knew there was no need-not when we were out in broad daylight. Whatever had spooked Dimitri wasn't Strigoi, but the instinct was hard to shake. His gaze fell on a large pile of rocks and boulders sitting near a cliff face. Wordlessly, he pointed to it and then tapped his ear. Mark and I nodded in understanding.

Glancing down at one of Henry's maps that we'd left open, I immediately spotted the rock formation Dimitri had indicated. It was large and sprawling, with what looked like a small gap between it and the cliff. If there was something lurking and spying on us, it would be possible to sneak behind the formation and catch the spy unawares. I tapped my chest and pointed to the formation on the map. Dimitri shook his head and tapped his chest instead. I glared and started to protest, but then he gestured between Mark and me. In that uncanny way we had of thinking alike sometimes, I immediately knew what Dimitri was saying. Mark and I had been talking when Dimitri had heard whatever startled him. We needed to continue that in order to keep the cover and surprise this potential threat. Reluctantly, I nodded defeat to Dimitri.

He crept away, silent as a cat, and I turned to Mark and tried to remember what we'd been talking about. The U.S.-I'd been trying to convince him he should visit for some reason. Talk. I needed to talk and create a distraction. So I frantically blurted the first thing that came to mind.

"So, yeah, Mark ... if you, um, come visit ... we can go out to eat and you can try some American food. No more cabbage." I gave an uneasy laugh and tried not to stare at Dimitri as he disappeared around a rocky corner. "We could, you know, go out for hot dogs. Don't worry-they're not actually dogs. It's just a name. They're these meat things that you put on buns-that's a kind of bread-and then you top them with other things and-"

"I know what a hot dog is," interrupted Mark. His tone was light for the sake of our observer, but his stake had replaced the whittling knife.

"You do?" I asked, legitimately surprised. "How?"

"We're not that remote. We have TV and movies. Besides, I've left Siberia, you know. I've been to the U.S."

"Really?" I hadn't known that. I knew very little about his history, really. "Did you try a hot dog?"

"No," he said. His eyes were on the spot where Dimitri had vanished, but they briefly flicked to me. "I was offered one ... but it didn't look that appetizing."

"What!" I exclaimed. "Blasphemy. They're delicious."

"Aren't they compressed animal parts?" he pushed.

"Well, yeah ... I think so. But so is sausage."

Mark shook his head. "I don't know. Something's just not right about a hot dog."

"Not right? I think you mean so right. They're like the--"

My righteous indignation was interrupted by a yelp, reminding me that there'd been another purpose here besides my defense of one of the greatest foods in the universe. Mark and I moved as one, both sprinting over to the rock pile and source of the noise. There, we found Dimitri pinning down a wriggling guy in a leather jacket and worn blue jeans. I couldn't tell much else about him because Dimitri had the guy's faced pressed into the dirt. Seeing us, Dimitri eased his hold so that the guy could look up. When he did, I saw that he was my age-and human.

He glanced between me and Mark-or, more accurately, he glanced between the silver stakes we both held. Gray-blue eyes went wide, and the captive began babbling in Russian. Mark frowned and asked a question, but didn't lower his stake. The human answered, sounding near-panicked. Dimitri scoffed and released his grip altogether. The human scrambled away, only to trip and land hard on his butt. Mark made some comment in Russian, which Dimitri responded to with a laugh.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" I demanded. "In English?"

To my surprise, it wasn't either of my colleagues that answered. "You ... you're American!" exclaimed the boy, regarding me wonderingly. He spoke with a heavy accent. "I knew the Blood King's reputation had spread, but I didn't know it had gone that far! "

"Well, it hasn't. Not exactly," I said. I noticed then that both Dimitri and Mark had put their stakes away. "I just happened to be in the neighborhood."

"I told you," said Dimitri, speaking to the human. "This is no place for you. Leave now."

The boy shook his head, making his unruly blond hair seem that much messier. "No! We can work together. We're all here for the same reason. We're here to kill the Blood King."

I met Dimitri's eyes questioningly but received no help. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Ivan. Ivan Grigorovitch."

"Well, Ivan, I'm Rose, and while we appreciate the offer of help, we've got this under control. There's no need for you to stick around."

Ivan looked skeptical. "You didn't look like you had it under control. You looked like you were having a picnic."

I repressed a grimace. "We were, uh, just getting ready to go into action."

He brightened. "Then I'm in time."

Mark sighed, clearly out of patience with this. "Boy, this isn't a game. Do you have anything like this?" He pulled out his silver stake again, making sure the point caught the light. Ivan gaped. "I didn't think so. Let me guess. You have a wooden stake, right?"

Ivan flushed. "Well, yes, but I'm very good at-"

"Very good at getting yourself killed," declared Mark. "You don't have the skills or weapons for this."

"Teach me," Ivan said eagerly. "I told you, I'm willing to help! It's what I've dreamed of-being a famous vampire hunter!"

"This isn't a field trip," said Dimitri. Like Mark, he no longer found Ivan so comical. "If you don't leave this area now, we'll carry you out ourselves."

Ivan jumped to his feet. "I can go ... I can go ... but are you sure you don't want my help? I know all there is to know about vampires. Nobody in my village has read as much as I have-"

"Go," said Mark and Dimitri in unison.

Ivan went. The three of us watched as he hurried down the path, toward where it had to make its way through rocky obstacles in order to get back out to the main road.

"Idiot," muttered Mark. He put the stake away again and trudged back over to where we'd been sitting before. After a few moments, Dimitri and I followed.

"I feel kind of bad for him," I remarked. "He seemed so ... I don't know, enthusiastic. But I also start to get why Henry was freaking out so much. If all the other human 'vampire experts' that come here are like him, I can see why they're getting killed off."

"Exactly," said Dimitri. His gaze was on Ivan's retreating figure, almost impossible to see now as he walked around a stony outcropping. "Hopefully he'll go back to his village and make up some fantastic story about how he killed the Blood King himself."

"True," I said. "The fact that we'll have done it will just back him up when people come here and see no more vampire."

Still, as I settled back down in our makeshift camp, I couldn't forget the zealous look in Ivan's eyes as he'd talked about killing the Blood King. How many others had come in with that same naive attitude? It was disheartening. I'd grown up with the idea that fighting Strigoi was a duty and a responsibility. It wasn't something you treated as a game.

Mark and I eventually picked up our hot dog debate, much to Dimitri's amusement. Dimitri tended to agree with Mark, which I found shocking. I could only blame the cuisine they'd been raised with for such misguided views. Despite the easy nature of the conversation, though, I could feel the tension building within all of us as the sun began moving down toward the horizon. The silver stakes had returned, and even before darkness fell, our eyes were constantly scanning our surroundings. Shadows darkened the stone walls around us, turning them into something mysterious and ominous.

We'd brought along a couple of electric lanterns and turned them on once it grew too dark to see comfortably. As dhampirs, we didn't need as much light as humans, but we needed some. The lanterns cast just enough to help our eyes without blinding us to our periphery, like a campfire would have. Soon, the skies were completely dark, and we knew we'd entered the time when Strigoi could walk freely. None of us doubted he'd come for us. The question was whether he would wait and try to wear us down or strike suddenly. As more time passed, it appeared as though it would be the former.

"Do you sense anything?" I whispered to Mark. Those who were shadow-kissed felt nauseous when Strigoi were close.

"Not yet," he murmured back.

"We should've brought marshmallows," I joked. "Of course, then we'd have to build a fire for sure-"

An earsplitting scream ripped through the night.

I jumped to my feet, wincing. The problem with superior hearing is that loud noises are really loud. My companions were up too, stakes ready. Mark frowned.

"Some Strigoi trick?"

"No," I said, moving toward where the scream had originated. "That was Ivan."

Mark swore in Russian, something I'd gotten used to from Dimitri. "He never left," said Mark.

Dimitri grabbed my arm to slow me down. "Rose, he's in one of the caves."

"I know," I said. I'd already figured that out and turned to face Dimitri. "But what choice do we have? We can't leave him in there."

"This is exactly what we wanted to avoid," said Dimitri grimly.

"And likely a trap set by the Blood King," added Mark, just as another scream sounded. "He wants us but is too smart to come out and get us."

I grimaced, knowing Mark was right. "But that also means he's probably not going to kill Ivan right away. He's just going to mess with him to lure us in. There's a chance we can save Ivan." I threw my hands up when nobody responded. "Come on! Can you really leave that inept kid in there to die?"

No, of course they couldn't. Dimitri sighed. "This is where we could've used a map of the caves. Better to set up an ambush."

"No such luxury, comrade," I said, walking toward the cave again. "We've got to go in the front door. At least Mark can give us warning."

A debate then broke out between the three of us over who would lead and who would go last to carry a lantern. Dimitri and Mark came up with lame arguments about why they should go ahead of me. Mark's was that, as the oldest, his life was more expendable, which was ridiculous. Dimitri's reasoning was that he was safe, thanks to Yeva's prophecy. That was even more ridiculous, and I knew he was only saying so to protect me. Yet in the end, I was overruled and ended up behind them.

Darkness far deeper than the night engulfed us as we stepped inside. The lantern helped a little but only illuminated a short distance in front of us as we walked further and further into the unknown. None of us spoke,



but I had a feeling we were all thinking the same thing. The screams had stopped. It could mean Ivan was dead. It almost certainly meant the Blood King wanted to lead us as far into the caves as possible.

Trouble came when we reached a fork in the tunnel. It not only meant we had to choose a path; it also meant the Blood King had the potential to double back on us. "Which way?" murmured Dimitri.

I glanced between the two options. One was narrower, but that meant nothing. Lines of thought filled Mark's face, and then he indicated the larger tunnel. "There. It's faint, but I can feel him there."

The three of us hurried forward, and the tunnel soon grew wider and wider, finally opening into a large "room" with three other tunnels feeding into it. Before any of us had a chance to question where to go next, something heavy slammed into me and knocked me to the ground. The lantern flew from my grasp and miraculously rolled away, unbroken.

Instinct made me follow suit. I had no clue where my attacker was, but I rolled away as soon as I hit the cave's floor. It was a good decision, because half a second later, I got my first glimpse of the Blood King. The stories were true. He was old. Admittedly, Strigoi didn't age once they turned, and at a glance, this guy had the appearance of someone in his midforties. Like all Strigoi, he had ghastly white skin and the look of death about him. If the light had been a little better, I knew I'd see red in his eyes too. His long mustache and shoulder-length hair were black with gray streaks, looking like something you'd see from the imperial days of Russia. But it was more than the antiquated haircut that marked his age. There was something about a Strigoi you could feel, an ancient evilness that went straight to the bone. Also, as age increased, so did their speed and strength.

And man, this guy was fast. He'd lunged at the place I'd fallen, striking out with more than enough force to break my neck. Seeing he'd missed me, he didn't waste a moment in coming after me in my new spot, and I hurried to get away. I was fast, but not as fast as him, and he caught hold of my sleeve. Before he could pull me to him, Dimitri and Mark were on his back, forcing the Blood King to release me. My companions were good-among the best-but it took every ounce of their skill to keep pace with him. He dodged every swipe of their stakes with the effortless ease of a dancer.

I sprang to my feet, ready to join in and assist, when I heard a moan coming from one of the tunnels. Ivan. I wanted to join the fray, but Dimitri and Mark had just parried some of the Blood King's attacks, forcing the whole group to move to the far side and put my friends between me and the Strigoi. With no obvious opening for me, I made the decision to rescue the innocent and trust Dimitri's and Mark's skills. Yet, as I moved toward the branching tunnel, I cast an uneasy glance back at Dimitri. Again, I was reminded of that time long ago, in other tunnels. It was there that Dimitri had been bitten and forcibly turned into a Strigoi. Panic seized me, along with an intense, irrational need to go throw myself in front of Dimitri.

No, I told myself. Dimitri and Mark can handle this. There's two of them and only one Strigoi. It's not like it was last time. Another moan from Ivan spurred me to action. For all I knew, he could be bleeding to death somewhere. The sooner I got to him and helped, the more likely he'd survive. Going after him meant abandoning the lantern, since Dimitri and Mark needed it more than me. Besides, this tunnel was narrow enough that I could reach out and touch both sides with my hands, giving me some measure of guidance as I entered the darkness.

"Ivan?" I called, half afraid I'd trip over him.

"Here," came an answering voice. It was astonishingly close, and I slowed my pace, reaching out in front of me in the hopes I'd feel him. Moments later, I touched hair and a forehead. I stopped and knelt.

"Ivan, are you okay? Can you stand?" I asked.

"I ... I think so ..."

I hoped so. Unable to see him, I had no idea if his blood was gushing out right in front of me. I found his hand and helped him up. He leaned heavily against me but seemed to have control of his legs, which I took as a good sign. Slowly, we made our way back toward the fight, our maneuvers awkward in the tight tunnel. When we emerged into the light, I was dismayed to see the Blood King still alive.

"Rest here," I told Ivan, moving him toward a wall. He wasn't in as critical a condition as I'd feared. He looked as though the Blood King had literally thrown him around a few times, but none of the cuts and bruises looked dire. I expected him to sit so that I could lend my strength to the fight, but instead, Ivan's eyes went wide as he took in the battle. With an energy I hadn't believed possible, he sprang forward with his ridiculous wooden stake and aimed it for the Blood King's back.

"No!" I yelled, hurrying after him.

His stake didn't pierce flesh, of course. It didn't even hurt the Blood King. What it did do, however, was cause the Strigoi to pause for a split second and swat away Ivan. He flew across the cave, landing hard against a wall. In the space of that heartbeat, Dimitri and Mark acted with flawless, wordless efficiency. Dimitri's foot snaked out and knocked the Blood King's legs from under him. Mark surged forward, plunging his stake into the ancient Strigoi's heart. The Blood King froze, and we all held a collective breath as a look of total shock crossed his features. Then death seized him, and his body slumped forward.

I exhaled in relief and immediately looked at Dimitri first, needing to make sure he was okay. But of course he was. He was my badass battle god. It'd take more than some super tough Strigoi—even one with a dramatic name—to take him down. Mark seemed equally fine. Across the cave, Ivan looked stunned but otherwise uninjured. He was watching us with wonder, and his eyes lit up when he met my gaze. He held his wooden stake in the air in kind of a mock salute and grinned.

"You're welcome," he said.

It turned out part of the reason Ivan hadn't left when we told him—aside from his idiotic sense of heroism—was that he had no means to leave. Some friends from his village had dropped him off, with the intent of coming back in two days to see if he was dead or alive. We could hardly leave him there in such a beaten-up state, so we made the two-hour drive to take him home. The entire time, Ivan kept going on and on about how he'd saved Dimitri and Mark in the nick of time and how they would've met certain death if not for him.

Pointing out that it was only sheer luck that he hadn't gotten them killed seemed useless at this point. We let him talk and were all relieved when we reached his village, a place that made Baia look like New York City.

"Sometimes I hear reports of other vampires," he told us as he got out of the car. "If you want to team up again, I'll let you come along with me next time too."

"Noted," I said.

The only person more infuriating than Ivan was Yeva. After five minutes with her, I was suddenly wishing I was back in the car with him.

"So," she said, sitting in her rocking chair in the Belikov house like it was a throne. "It seems I was right."

I collapsed onto the couch beside Dimitri, bone weary and wishing I could sleep for about twelve hours. Mark had already gone home to Oksana. Still, I had enough spunk in me to argue back.

"No, actually," I retorted, trying to keep a smug smile off my face, "you said Dimitri would kill the Blood King. He didn't. Mark did."

"I said one who had walked the road of death would succeed," she said. "Mark has faced death and survived."

I opened my mouth to deny it, but she had a point. "Okay. But when Viktoria said Dimitri would do it, you didn't deny it."

"I didn't confirm it either."

I groaned. "This is ridiculous! That 'prediction' meant nothing! Hell, it could've applied to Ivan, since he nearly died because of the Blood King."

"My prophecies see many things," responded Yeva-which was really no response at all. "My next one is particularly interesting."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Let me guess. 'A journey.' That could mean me and Dimitri going home. Or Olena going to the grocery store."

"Actually," said Yeva, "I see a wedding in the future."

Viktoria had been listening to the exchange with amusement and clapped her hands together. "Oh! Rose and Dimka!" Her sisters nodded excitedly.

I stared incredulously. "How can you even say that? That can mean anything too! Someone in town is probably getting married right now. Or maybe it'll be Karolina-didn't you say you're getting serious with your boyfriend? If it is me and Dimitri, it'll be years from now-which, of course, you'll claim you foresaw since it was 'the future.' "

No one was listening to me anymore, though. The Belikov women were already chattering excitedly about plans, speculating if the wedding would be here or in the U.S. and how nice it would be to see Dimitri "finally settle down."

I groaned again and leaned against him. "Unbelievable."

Dimitri smiled and put his arm around me. "Don't you believe in fate, Roza?"

"Sure," I said. "Just not in your grandmother's crazy vague predictions."

"Doesn't sound that crazy to me," he teased.

"You're as crazy as her."

He kissed the top of my head. "I had a feeling you'd say that."