

Nada's Tale

Chapter 1: Vampires and Huntsmen

I got so sick of hearing about vampires. I glared down at the red splash of bolognaise sauce decorating my paper plate, ignoring the vampire conspiracy theorists at my table.

"They'll put us in easy access camps so they can drink our blood," exclaimed one excitable thirteen-year old. I eased my plate from the tray, careful not to let the runny tomato sauce drip over the edges. I stepped onto my foldable bench seat and up to the dubiously constructed table. I wince at the feeling of spilled orange juice sticking to my feet, which are bare and not too clean.

My plate landed face down at my feet, spraying red sauce dramatically across the off-white table top. That got the table's three inhabitants staring wide eyed at me.

"I've got one word for you. Realism," I said and jumped from the table, completing a one hundred and eighty degree spin to land on the floor facing the rest of the hall. The other tables still chatted happily, except for the one under the broken light, but then they never talked. Wardens shifted around the edges, warily watching the lunchtime proceedings. I sighed, bored, hot and grumpy. It was time to try a new table.

I sauntered up to the closest and rested my forearms on the end, studying the three girls. Plain second-hand clothing fitted strangely on their young bodies as they clustered wide eyed around a thin paperback.

"Did you get to the bit when he drinks her blood?" asked the smallest girl with eyes brightened in delight. I grimaced, thinking *great, conspiracy theorists and now vamp lovers: this place is insane*. I snatched the dark cover from beneath their noses and held it up, pretending to read the back.

I leaned forward into their romanced faces and whisper, "And don't forget to scream when he rips her arm off and leaves her bleeding at the top of the waterfall." I stared sincerely at their very different faces. The smallest one is looking at me like she's thinking: you just made that up to screw with us.

The one to her right snatched the book back from me and voiced her opinion, "Thanks for ruining the book for us." While the third girl's brown eyes were

horrified and she held her hands to her cheeks in a way that said clearly: that's awful!

I shrugged and walked away. I had actually read the book, a long time ago, and the main character did have her arm ripped off because she grabbed her vampire lover's hand as a rival vampire threw him over the waterfall. But of course the rival vampire caught the girl, the love of his life, even though she would have preferred to fall to her death with her lover. Tragic and heartbreaking though it was, it seemed so stupid now that I was in Seven. Falling for someone who killed and kidnapped to survive was plain stupidity.

The table under the broken light, strangely enough was looking pretty lively for once. The two girls were crying hysterically. I approached warily and stopped just short of the first whose hair was so black it shone blue.

"Hey, you okay?" I didn't know what else I could do. Truthfully their crying made me nervous. The black haired girl simply pulled her knees up and hugged them, her crying slowing to the steady drip of tears. Her mismatched clothes that bunched up around her hips and shoulders didn't hide her fragile smallness. Thankfully Amy ran into me from the side, distracting me from my uneasiness. She flashed me the quick ordinary smile that was so rare a find from the others in Seven.

"Hey, darling. What's up?" she said, sitting down next to the girl and patting her shoulder. The girl looked up with wide, haunted eyes.

"I had a- a- ... a dream. They had white faces full of fangs with blood dripping down. They gonna get me-" the girl's head ducked again as sobs overtook her body. The other girl cried out and her body shook in sympathy with the black-haired girl. I shook my head regretfully. When I said this place was insane earlier, I was only half joking. Some of the girls were. They weren't really the vampire victims they thought they were. Or I hoped they hadn't been attacked by vampires. If it was true then we would all be screwed.

Amy wrapped her arms around the girl and waved over her shoulder for me to go. She knew I didn't want to deal with this. There was another girl who was more desperate for my attention. So I sighed and eyed the final table. The table that had started this stupid vampire craze. Macie's table.

And by the look of it she was reciting more stories of how her dear Percival was a vampire slayer. Her two BFF's, her personal clique, were listening attentively to stories of her sponsor. Macie could be so annoying, and I was about to tell her

so. I strode back across the sterile main hall to stand, arms folded, between the backs of the two BFF's and glare straight into Macie's pretty blue eyes. At first she ignored me and continued her tale.

"He stepped in front of the wilting maiden and thrust forward his stake to skewer the beastly vampire," Macie exaggerated. I couldn't help myself and burst out laughing, bending at the waist over the table. The two *ladies* on either of side of me looked shocked to find me so close and flinched away with angry eyes.

Macie smiled sweetly, "Something funny, Nada?" I controlled my mirth all at once and looked her in the eye.

"No, actually. All four tables here are talking about vampires, even though everyone knows they're not real. You started this addiction so hooray, you've really annoyed me. Now go find a new craze and stop belittling our situation. I know you don't seem to care but we've been kidnapped. These Huntsmen you defend all the time? They're kidnappers and murderers. You need to realise that." I nodded my head at my own conviction. Huntsmen were bad, bad news, not the heroes she liked to portray them as.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Noline, is it?" The cold voice glided through the room lazily and I tensed. I turned slowly away from Macie and towards the mysterious voice. Amid the familiar setting of the hall he was easy to find.

He was young, with dirty blonde hair falling across his dark eyes and an easy manner that made him stand out among the rest of us. I don't know why but he seemed familiar.

"Huntsmen scum," I spat out towards the form walking closer between the tables, "What would you know about me?" There were no wardens flanking him for protection but as I glared into those deep eyes he didn't look anxious at all. He threw his head back to laugh but there was not a shred of humour in those icy tones.

"I'm guessing your name's not Noline then. No, it's not quite right. Not feminine enough." He stepped closer until only a few scant metres separated us. For some reason his conversational tone awakened my slumbering anger. *Stupid Huntsman. If he thinks he can stroll in here and do whatever he wants I'll just have to show this kid that he's dead wrong.* "Natalie? Natasha?" His frown of concentration would have appeared sincere if I forgot his freezing blue eyes.

“Just in case you’re wondering, I’m not the one you’re looking for.” I said, straightening my shoulders to face him head-on. I took a half a step towards him in a challenge. He was taller than I originally gave him credit for. His dark eyes were just an inch below my own but I was glad of every millimetre. My eyes stayed firmly on the spot between his eyes, so that I wasn’t looking him in the eye and straying into brain washing territory but I could still see whatever threatening movements he might make.

He tilted his head to the side to give me a searching look before glancing over both shoulders as if to check that no one was listening in on our conversation. As usual, the tension had everyone in the entire room eavesdropping.

“Well I was looking for a fighter. And now I’ve found one.” His words oozed around us and my hands balled into fists by my sides. His words could have been related to him walking into a shop to buy a plastic figurine. It was damn disgusting.

He pushes into the bubble that surrounds everyone. The bubble that is just my space; personal space.

I put my arm up in the air and saw behind him fighters moving into positions closer, readying to pounce. Amy was a blur of blue and two of the girls from the conspiracy table snarled like they were facing a bloodsucker. Then with satisfaction I dropped my arm in the arranged signal. The three fighters only took a second to be on top of him, Amy in the lead.

"Let us go!" I screamed as a battle cry as the room descended into chaos. The wardens were faster than last time, trying to jump the tables to reach the scuffle.

A chair scraped behind me and I whirled to find Macie shaking her head at me.

"How about you stop picking fights?" she asked, disdainfully. "It doesn't show decorum."

"I don't hurt anyone who doesn't deserve it. You know that the Huntsmen do."

"How do you know that anyone deserves anything? You're not ultimate judgement. You don't know any Huntsmen and you don't know me." It was such a typical comment from her, defending the Huntsmen and acting self-righteous. I knew she hadn't been in Seven as long as I had but she seemed blind to how awful the Huntsmen were. Well, I suppose so was I at first.

At first I was just scared. I'd been staring down, avoiding everyone, trying to pull my thoughts together. *It doesn't matter...* I looked up from the floorboards under me slowly. Underneath my lashes I was startled to find him so close and I flinched compulsively. Then my scared eyes met his flecked hazel ones and I wasn't so afraid anymore.

Although we were in the middle of the big hall, with most of Seven's residents staring at us unabashed I couldn't look away. I was caught in a warm bubble with him; so close that our noses were almost touching. His eyes were kind, but young and had a spark that most adults seemed to lack. His eyes contained so many colours in little flecks; green, blue, grey, brown, yellow.

Sitting there I felt like we were connected by a stream of warm light. I was sure we were having an entire conversation without needing to speak a word. I was most likely babbling on about how awful it had all been and all my uncertainties of this weird new place. And he listened with his eyes seeming to understand every thought that passed me by. I felt the comfort of being embraced by strong arms without a touch from him.

I have heard people talk about being kindred spirits yet never knew what it meant. But just then, in that tiny, beautiful moment, I did know. We were entirely and exactly in synch; kindred spirits. My soul was weeping, had been for a while now, and somehow he knew how to share his with mine so I could heal.

We stayed there like that for a while, I don't know how long. There in the middle of the hall. But I didn't notice the noise or the heavy stares. It was just me and him in our bubble. Untouchable.

He smiled a bit seeming to say *there, that's better*. All I managed was a funny twitch of my lips; but at least that was something. And I felt, at long last, something reawaken from under the cold.

After a beautiful eternity, he spoke, whisper-soft, "I'm Finley." I barely heard the sound of the words but they inexplicably warmed me right to the core.

"Nada," I mouthed back, my eyes still locked unerringly to his. He smiled a bit brighter.

A dirty hand followed by a screen of dull brown hair broke that wondrous connection with a hurtful snap. It was like stretching a rubber band and feeling all of that potential energy when one end slips and hits your hand with a harsh slap. And it stung so that a little gasp escaped my lips.

"And the freaky trance is broken!" said the owner of the hand in a way that sounded remarkably like a ringmaster at the circus. Her large, almost black eyes were right before my own, invading that special bubble of warmth. She continued in a tone that suggested she thought herself a grand hero, "He was brain washing you, you know. But don't worry," She gave me a double pat on the cheek and turned to face her rather large audience. "Jayne is here to save you from *them*." With a flick of her head she made it quite clear that Finley and the other newcomers were *them* who sounded so ghastly.

Movement filled the room as the fighters started an all-out brawl to get at Finley. A chant started up, "Save you, save you, save you!" I was more terrified than before.

"We'll talk later." he said at my ear and but I was too afraid of the ruckus in front of me to risk taking my eyes from it. I know he left then, though. When he came back I wasn't so happy to see him anymore. Jayne had been harsh but she taught me a few things. Like the fact that Finley was part of the group that took me and was imprisoning me. A shudder rips through me at that thought, even now. We'll all just have to hope that one day we'll escape. We have to.

"Forget about escaping Nada. Surviving is the only thing that will get us through, no matter what it takes." Macie said. Suddenly I couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't say things like that. Giving up the fight was not going to be an option until we escaped. Heat flushed my checks.

"Just go with Finley." She added and my temper rose further. That was even worse. Finley just wanted to control me. If I gave up I'd become a dumb slave and that was unacceptable. And so was Macie. Rage like red liquid spread through my limbs and my hands clenched around her collarbones. Macie's eyes widened into blue pools and she leaned away from me, stretching my arms out over the table.

Her mouth opened and a scream of one single piercing pitch escaped like a poltergeist. My teeth clenched and my fist drew back. She was going to shut up, one way or another.

My fist satisfyingly hit her eye socket. I knew that this would be trouble later but I'd stopped all her noise-making. White-noise filled my head instead while wardens pulled away across the room. I watched the wardens escort the boy with the blue eyes out, looking roughened and annoyed.

He saw my gaze and grinned. I thought I was trouble, but that kid was worse.

