

# *Avery*

A SUMMERFELD SHORT STORY

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First edition published 2016

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*For everyone who loves the world of  
Summerfeld*

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# Chapter 1

Ava's little face was beet-red, her eyes scrunched up so tightly that it made her squawking mouth seem enormous by comparison.

“Where is it!” Avery Ormonde crawled on hands and knees across the twin's bedroom, searching under crib and compactum as she went. “Yes!” The euphoria at finally locating Ava's pink Beebee had her fist-punching the air as

she stood, wielding the soft bear like a trophy.

“Here you go,” she crooned, adopting the soothing tone that only a mother or a child can appreciate. “Here’s Beebee.” She stuffed the toy bear into Ava’s pudgy hands and the child quietened instantly.

Avery heaved a sigh of relief, slumping back against the pale green wall of the children’s bedroom. She felt as though she’d run a marathon. Raising twin babies was harder than being a Guardian, she thought to herself, not that anyone would believe it. She gazed down at the children, Ava now sucking contentedly on the soft plush of Beebee’s

floppy pointed hat, Jack snuggled up beside her, oblivious of her tantrum. Watching them, Avery felt a familiar sharp pain tug at her heart. They would be six months old in just under a month. The time was approaching when she would return to the Guardianship, and they would no longer be solely under her care.

Tristan had argued that it was too soon, that both she and the twins deserved more time, but Avery could feel the blood calling to her. The blood of the ten, the wards she was sworn to protect. She loved Tristan and his devotion to their family, but she had made all of the

arrangements, and even he had to admit that, while no one could replace them as parents, they couldn't ask for a better foster couple than Kellan and Freya. The thought of abandoning her own children had crucified her at first, but Isaiah had promised that she would be helping Piper initially, which would keep her within the City's limits. She would be with Jack and Ava every day, until she felt strong enough to venture outside of the magical boundaries. Working mothers travelled all the time, she told herself, and their jobs were nowhere near as important as hers.

She hadn't told Quinn yet, that she was going back to Summerfeld. It was

only Tristan who she confided in, Tristan who listened and didn't judge when she admitted that she missed Summerfeld, missed the wards, missed fulfilling her duty. She dreaded her twin's reaction to her decision, knowing full well what Quinn's response would be. Quinn had hated growing up in the City, which was ironic given that she had grown to become one of the best Guardians Summerfeld had ever had. Avery, on the other hand, had loved the magical place in which they had spent their childhood. She had entertained Quinn's whims and pretended to want the same things, but she had always felt slightly out of place in

the realm of man – overwhelmed and vulnerable. Their enemies were out here, always hunting them. And lately, the feeling of being hunted had gotten worse. Avery constantly felt watched, as if there was something lurking just beyond her field of vision, waiting for an opportunity to strike. She had always been the type of person to listen to her gut. That, at least, she and Quinn had in common. Just a few more weeks, she told herself, shutting the door of the twins' bedroom. Just a few more weeks and we'll all be back behind Eldon's enchantments. Within the City's boundaries she knew, without a doubt, that Jack and Ava would be safe.

Avery took her coffee into the living room. She took a sip, breathing it in as well as tasting it. It was these little luxuries, she thought wryly, the quiet moments, when a mom could put her feet up and flip through a magazine before the chaos started up again. Of course, being a Guardian, flipping through a magazine wasn't something Avery did. Instead, she pulled out her mobile.

“You're using the secret number,” Quinn's voice was curt, but there was a hint of playfulness in her tone.

“It's habit,” Avery replied, setting her mug down on the table before her.

“How are my babies?” Quinn asked, and

Avery could picture all too clearly the smile on her sister's face. Quinn was besotted with the twins, even if she didn't get to spend as much time with them as she would like.

"Sleeping, thank Eldon."

"You should be napping while they do."

"If that's another direct quote from that baby book you're reading I'm going to stake you in the eye."

At this, Quinn laughed out loud. "Just keeping myself up to speed."

"Are you on assignment?"

"Yeah."

Avery felt a guilty pang of jealousy. She missed the adrenalin rush of being out

there, destroying the monsters who threatened them.

“Where?” she asked. Quinn didn’t reply.

“Oh, right.” Of course Quinn couldn’t tell her over the phone. “Have you seen Tristan?” She bit her lip, hoping Quinn couldn’t hear the unease creeping into her voice.

“Tristan?”

“He’s on assignment, too.” That’s what he had told her, anyway.

“Not with me, he’s not. Maybe he has the pleasure of Daniel’s company. Hey, wait, does that mean... are you on your own again?”

“Yes. And before you start, I’m perfectly

capable of...”

“What do you mean you’ve lost their trail?” It took Avery a second to realise that Quinn’s furious outburst wasn’t directed at her. “Find them!” Quinn’s voice had changed, losing all trace of softness. Avery recognised that tone. Her sister was in full Guardian mode. “Avery, I’m sorry but I...”

“Have to go,” Avery finished her sentence.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t be, we’ll chat later.”

“I’ll try and get to you over the weekend. You can make that amazing apple pie.”

“The exciting world of domestic life.”

“Hey, you chose it.”

“I did. And I wouldn’t trade it for the world.” Another pang of guilt that she hadn’t told Quinn of her plans.

“I can’t wait to see you,” Avery said, vowing to tell her sister this weekend.

“And Quinn?”

“Yeah?”

“Give them hell.”

“Always do. I love you.” The line went dead and Avery tossed the phone onto the sofa beside her. She flopped back onto the comfortable cushions with drooping eyes. *Quinn is right, I should be napping.*

Whether she had slept for five

minutes or two hours, she couldn't be sure, but she bolted upright with a start. The house was quiet, eerily so, but her senses were on high alert. She sat perfectly still, her head cocked to one side, listening. Listening and feeling, searching deep inside herself for the nausea that would alert her to any danger. Nothing. Still, something didn't feel right. Shaking herself, she took her cup of cold coffee through to the kitchen and poured it down the sink. The children were still sleeping, so she couldn't have been out very long.

Something outside the window caught her eye. *What the...?* No, it

couldn't be. Tristan was away, working on assignment, but she could've sworn she'd just seen him, moving around the side of the house. A quick survey of the back garden proved she had been mistaken. The swing set swayed gently in the breeze but other than that, there was no sign of movement. *I'm going mad*, Avery thought wryly to herself. *Motherhood is finally taking its toll, and I'm losing my mind.* A squawk from the twins' room distracted her and she smiled. Motherhood.

## Chapter 2

Two weeks until they returned to the City, and it couldn't come quickly enough. Avery had spent the past fortnight living in a state of perpetual edginess, jumping at the slightest sounds and sleeping little, if at all. She couldn't put her finger on the source of her fear, but her gut was screaming that danger was coming. Tristan had also been behaving strangely. He was uncharacteristically short-tempered, permanently fidgeting, and he couldn't seem to look her in the eye.

Home for the weekend, he was leaving this morning, and Avery was determined to get to the bottom of it. If she didn't know better, she would suspect another woman, but Tristan had always been so devoted, she couldn't believe he would stray.

“I'll see you in a couple of days,” he murmured, kissing her hair. Usually, their goodbyes lingered, soft kisses and whispered promises, but today, he couldn't seem to get away from her fast enough.

“I love you,” she said, and he nodded.

“I love you too.”

She shut the front door behind him and raced through to the kitchen to yank open the back door.

“Hi Lucy!” she greeted their fifteen-year-old neighbour, who sometimes watched the kids for her. Usually Lucy would be in school at this time of the morning, but it was a Sunday and she was more than happy to watch the children while Avery ran ‘errands’. Or at least, that’s what she had said when Avery asked her last night in a hurried, hushed conversation over the back wall.

“The kids are asleep,” Avery said, even as she snatched up her keys and coat. “I won’t be long.”

“No problem, Mrs O. Do you mind if I make myself some toast?”

“Help yourself,” Avery’s reply was cast over her shoulder as she raced out the front door.

She caught up with the blue Toyota three blocks away. Tristan hated his car, and Avery teased him mercilessly about it. Before becoming a Guardian, Tristan had been a very successful bachelor, who drank only expensive whiskey and drove a Porsche.

“At least you don’t have to drive the mommy wagon,” she’d say, poking fun at her own hybrid. Fortunately, in the area they lived, every second home owned a

Prius – white, bottom of the range – so if he noticed her car in his rear-view mirror, he wouldn't think much of it.

When they reached the highway, Avery cursed. She couldn't follow him all the way out of town. She actually did have errands to run. The fear in her chest eased a little. If Tristan was having an affair, she was pretty confident it would be with someone they knew – a neighbour or friend who lived nearby. Tristan, however, didn't glide onto the highway. Instead, he turned left, toward downtown.

Twenty minutes later Avery was wedged between a dumpster and a peeling

plaster wall as she spied on her husband. Her fuddled mind was still trying to come up with a logical explanation as to why he would be here, in this decrepit, out-of-the-way dump, when her stomach gave a terrifying lurch and the nausea hit her in a wave.

“Oh shit!” Avery clamped a white-knuckled hand over her mouth as Tristan entered an abandoned warehouse. Fear for his safety drove all logic from her mind. There were vampires nearby. She sprinted forward, not even stopping to look for a weapon. Quinn had always warned her to keep her stakes on her person, but she couldn't turn up to moms'

teas looking like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, so she had stopped. Besides, it was broad daylight. Protection was the last thing that would have occurred to her when leaving the house.

She entered the warehouse at a full sprint, her Guardian powers of observation missing nothing. She realised her mistake, too late. Tristan was not in any danger, because he was having a calm conversation with two vampires, neither of whom looked the least bit threatening. Until she skidded to halt before them.

“Avery?” Tristan’s face reflected her own shock, his blue eyes wide and terrified. “What are you doing here?”

Avery didn't answer, her instincts, so strong after being suppressed for so long, kicking in. She lunged at the vampire closest to her, catching him with a spectacular strike to the jaw. The vampire stumbled, his fangs extending automatically. The second vampire moved, but Tristan stayed him with a hand.

“No! She's not to be harmed. Get out of here!” Both vampires piled into an SUV parked just within the warehouse doors. The tinted windows were so dark Avery couldn't see inside, but she assumed a third vampire must have been waiting inside, as the vehicle sped off

immediately.

All of the emotion that had been building inside of her exploded outward, directed at the one person who had betrayed her.

“You son of a bitch!” Avery lashed out at Tristan, her fighting more impassioned than calculated, and raked her nails savagely down his face. She pounded at his chest, trying to hit every inch of him she could reach as her entire world crashed down around her.

“Stop, Avery, stop it!” Tristan yelled, trying to pin her arms. He was no match for her – a new Guardian and a mediocre one at that – but his desperation lent him

strength.

“Vampires, Tristan? You’re sneaking around with vampires?”

“If you’d just let me explain...”

“Explain!” she shrieked, sending a dozen pigeons roosting in the high roof into flight. “How do you possibly propose to explain any of this?” She paused for breath and he spoke quickly, deliberately.

“By telling you that what I’m doing is keeping our children safe.”

# Chapter 3

“You do understand, don’t you?” Tristan asked, his blue eyes searching her face for the truth. He had been speaking for hours, offering every justification, no matter how small, for what he had done, for what he planned to do, and for why she should go along with it. Avery channelled every inch of control she possessed and nodded, offering him the smallest of smiles. Her husband was a stark-raving lunatic, but he was a dangerous stark-raving lunatic with a

horde of vampires at his beck and call and she couldn't risk him bringing them near Jack and Ava.

"I do." The words were bitter on her tongue.

"It's the only way our family can stay together," he repeated – this, his mantra, and she was already sick to death of it. "I won't lose you or the children. Not even for Summerfeld."

"You're a good dad, Tristan." He liked that, she could tell by the smug set of his lips, the way he straightened his shoulders and adopted what she could only think of as his 'hero' pose. She placed her hand over his, fighting the urge to snap his

wrist. “What will happen to Quinn?” She had to ask – to not would only arouse his suspicion.

“I’ll speak to Charlotte,” he promised, the air of importance hovering around him in a cloud of conceit. “I think it would be best if we went into hiding immediately. There’s no point hanging around now that you know. And,” he picked up her phone and put it in his pocket, “it’s best that you aren’t tempted to contact your sister.” He pointedly pulled the cord from the phone in the kitchen and wound it slowly around his wrist. “I’ll be back soon. Pack light.” His gaze fell to the necklace around her neck and her hands

closed automatically around the crystal as she nodded meekly. So long had she trusted his judgement that he didn't question her sincerity.

“How long will you be?” The sun had set an hour ago and she could see the moon, not quite full, through the living room window. It reminded her of Rafe and the Lunar Pack. It made her physically crave the safety of Summerfeld.

“An hour, two at the most.” He pulled her up off the sofa and into his arms. The familiar feel of his lithe body against hers made her head swim with nostalgia and revulsion.

“Hurry, please.” She murmured in his ear.

Tristan kissed her then, and she opened her mouth, pliant against his lips. When he finally released her, she clamped her arms to her sides in an effort not to gouge his eyes out. He looked at her a long moment, as though weighing her up. “I trust you,” he said eventually, the words pregnant with meaning.

Avery wasn't Quinn, but she was a Harden, after all, and the second he was gone, she bolted upstairs. Ripping the necklace from her neck, she smashed it three times against the bathroom sink, which was all it took to break the casing. The aquamarine fell free, spinning across the tiled floor and she scooped it up,

already moving. Ava was beginning to stir as Avery snatched up the soft pink bear. Sending silent thanks to Freya for all those hours she spent teaching a frustrated younger version of herself how to perfect her stitching, she sewed the crystal inside her daughter's favourite toy. Whatever happened to her, Avery still believed that Tristan would ensure their children were kept safe, and Beebee would accompany Ava wherever she went. It was a reckless move, but the only place she could think of that Tristan would never think to look.

Ava was demanding to be picked up by the time Avery handed back the bear.

With a quick “Mommy will be right back,” she darted out of the room. Ava sent up a wail of disapproval, but Avery’s feet were already pounding down the stairs. She scrawled a note to Quinn, one that was as cryptic as it was obvious. Terrified, lest she be caught and the note discovered, she couldn’t risk Tristan figuring it out.

She practically tumbled through the inter-leading door that deposited her inside the garage. She started the Prius, checking the fuel gauge. She wouldn’t make it more than a hundred miles, but that was a good place to start. She’d need to refuel a few times if she wanted to

make it all the way back to Summerfeld, but she should have enough cash to make it. She threw her purse onto the passenger seat, leaving the engine running, and bolted back upstairs. No more than twenty minutes had passed since Tristan left, but she didn't waste time packing any bags. Instead, she scooped up the twins, one child in each arm, and fled.

She made it as far as the kitchen. Feeling the nausea settle in the pit of her stomach, Avery calmly deposited Jack and Ava in the play pen in the living room, kissed both of their downy heads, and wiped furiously at the traitorous tear which slid down her cheek. Then she set

her shoulders and marched through the kitchen and into the garage, to face the vampires who had come to get her. Tristan stood in their midst, his face pained.

“Why?” he croaked, gazing up at her as if she were the one who betrayed him and not the other way around. Her tanzanite eyes flashed.

“Because I’m a Guardian.” She tossed her hair haughtily and sneered down her nose at him. “And I protect the last. And you, Tristan,” she added disdainfully, “are a piece of shit.” Pride dazzled on her face, and her fierce belief steadied her as she looked down at the mob who would tear

her apart. No matter what they did to her, she would never back down. She could only hope Tristan didn't discover where she'd hidden the crystal, only pray that he would keep the children safe when she was gone. She suspected that, despite his terrible deeds, he would still die to protect them.

His wounded gaze travelled the length of her body, as if committing it to memory. A small frown pinched his eyes as he noticed the empty hollow of her neck.

“Where is your crystal?” he asked. She smiled at the undeniable trace of panic in his voice.

“Somewhere you’ll never find it.”

Tristan whipped his head around and the vampire nearest him shook his head.

“She didn’t leave the house.”

“Are you sure about that?” Avery grinned, almost beginning to enjoy herself. The vampire’s forehead creased in confusion as he tried to figure out whether she could have slipped away without being noticed.

“Where is it?” Tristan boomed.

“Do you really think I’m going to tell you that?”

“No,” Tristan sighed. “You’re not. Do you know what’s ironic, Avery? The fact that you are so much more like your sister

than I ever believed.”

The words washed over her, melting the ice in her bones. He had intended it as an insult, but there was nothing else he could've said that would've given her more joy in this moment. It fuelled her strength, her resolve, and he saw it.

Tristan gave a small, desolate nod of his head and the vampires moved toward her. Calmly, Avery closed the door, barricading herself off from her children. They wouldn't witness this. The outer garage door was still closed, the fumes of the still-running engine filling the space. It was confined in here – hardly ideal for combat – but she would do what she could. She would go down fighting.

*Quinn would be proud of me*, was her last thought as they ran toward her, and then, she thought of nothing but taking down as many of Summerfeld's enemies as she could before she died.

## Chapter 4

Avery woke in a cold, cruel place, the stench of blood heavy on the stale air. The metallic scent filled her head, which was foggy and disoriented. She groaned as she lifted herself up onto one elbow. It

took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. She lay on a grimy stone floor, in what could only be described as a cell. Rough stone walls surrounded her, save for one side, which was barricaded with a heavy set of iron bars.

Avery coughed, aggravating an unfamiliar taste in her throat - bitter and slightly chemical. She'd been drugged. *Drugged not dead*, she thought, and was both relieved and disappointed. They wanted her crystal, and dead women couldn't speak. She shuddered at the thought of what might be planned for her future. As her awareness returned, so did the memory of what had happened,

and a hysterical terror sent adrenalin coursing through her weakened body. *What had Tristan done with Jack and Ava?* She jerked to her feet, lurching toward the bars, which were trebled in her blurred vision. A gate, locked with a small but effective padlock. Grabbing hold of it with both hands, she pulled as hard as she could. *Where were her children?* Her ineffectual efforts did nothing more than weaken her even further, but Avery kept pulling and pushing at those bars for hours, screaming until her voice was hoarse. No one came to her aid. No one came to punish her. Avery didn't see a soul for three days.

She tracked time by the single bulb in the corridor beyond her cell. It flickered feebly for hours on end, and then plunged her into darkness for roughly the same length of time. She assumed that it must operate on the main system, switching on when night fell. And so, Avery's night became day, and her day became night. She was officially on a vampiric schedule.

On the third day, a voice roused her from an unwelcome slumber. Her body had given way to dehydration and lack of food. Still, the thought of her children buoyed her once more and she rose onto her knees, crawling toward the bars.

“Where are my children?” she

croaked, peering up at the tall figure. The single flickering bulb behind him offered no clue as to his features, but her stomach churned so violently that she retched, heaving up a mere mouthful of bile. As far as displaying her contempt went, it was a poor show. The faceless vampire handed her a tin cup which Avery batted away. Water sloshed over her arm, and her body screamed defiantly at her, it's primal need overwhelming her stubborn pride. Avery forced down her regret and slumped onto her knees. Her reflexes dulled, she couldn't dodge the hand that reached in and grabbed her hair, yanking her head forward and slamming her face

into the iron bar. Stars burst in Avery's already impaired vision and she fell forward like a sack of dried wheat.

When she woke again, a sense of hopelessness settled over her before she could even attempt to sit. Instead, she stayed where she was, face down on the cold floor, her cheek pressing painfully into the ridged stone. She could smell herself – the pungent odour of unwashed flesh. She hadn't been to the toilet since the first day she arrived, not that she relished the thought of the mouldy, ammonia-smelling bucket in the corner of the room, but the fact that she had no urine to pass was a reminder that her

body had no water to spare. She rolled slowly onto her side, her cramping muscles protesting even the slightest movement, and curled her body into a ball. Her skin was hot, feverish, and through her delirium she knew that she wouldn't last much longer.

*Get up.* Quinn's voice. Avery lifted her head, a smile of blessed relief cracking her lips. She squinted at the bars but there was no one there. *Avery, get up!* Avery ignored the voice, dropping her head back to the ground. *Get up, get up, GET UP!*

She didn't get up, but she did crawl. Every inch was agony, her muscle spasms

halting her progress and her cells screaming at her to stop using the last of her resources, but Avery kept moving. At long last she reached the place where the guard had stood. Where the precious tin cup had sloshed its contents. Avery bent her head and licked at the wet stone.

The next time she was offered water, she accepted it, along with the plate of beans and bread that wouldn't fit through the bars of her cell so instead, the contents were dumped unceremoniously on the filthy floor. Grateful as never before for her strong Guardian constitution, Avery picked it up with her even filthier hands and shovelled it down

her throat. The nutrition her captors supplied was hardly enough, but at least the water supply, if meagre, was constant. Within two days, she started to feel better, the dizziness subsiding. When she stopped hearing Quinn's voice, the relief that the delusions had ended was somewhat tempered by the feeling of complete isolation that settled upon her.

She had taken to marking the days on the stone wall, gouging out messy lines with the modest diamond of her wedding ring, which she kept near the foul bucket in the corner of the room, where it belonged. She was just crossing through the first six lines, marking the first full

week in captivity, when steps echoed in the corridor. Avery stiffened, listening intently. The footsteps were heavier, more widely spaced than those of the vampire who fed her daily. She peered through the lank curtain of her hair as the stranger approached, her stomach giving no sign of warning. When he stopped outside her cell, Avery felt her tattoo prickle. She scrambled to her bare feet, moving desperately, until his face was only inches from her own.

“Who are you?” she breathed, not sure if she was more terrified for her own safety, or his. She did not recognise this man, but she knew him for what he was.

A werewolf. Outside of the City. “You shouldn’t be here,” she whispered frantically, hearing footsteps overhead.

“Where is your crystal?” His words were like a physical slap to the face, his breath rancid and metallic, and Avery baulked.

“You’re a werewolf.”

“That’s a keen observation.” A dry bark.

“Now, where is your crystal?”

“What are you doing with vampires? They’re dangerous – especially to your kind.”

“*My* kind?” his lip curled.

Avery didn’t register the warning. “You should be inside the boundaries,

protected from them.”

“I must not have gotten the memo. Apparently my family wasn’t good enough for your City, or so your precious Eldon must have thought, seeing as I ended up here.”

Avery racked her brain. Over the past millennium, wards had been found outside of Summerfeld – few, admittedly – but each and every one had been brought inside the City immediately for protection.

“Please,” she implored, “help me. Get me out of here and I’ll take you to the City. It’s where you belong – where we belong.” She didn’t need to hear his answer to

know she had made a grave error in judgement. A low rumble preceded the savage snarl.

“You think I would help you, Guardian?” The word was twisted into an insult of the lowest form. “There’s only one reason I’d want to get into Summerfeld, and believe me, it’s not for protection.” Stunned into silence, Avery stood motionless, waiting. “Your crystal,” the wolf reminded. She pressed her lips tightly together. “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way.”

“I won’t tell you where it is.”

His lips twisted into a sadistic smile. “The hard way it is.”

And so began an endless journey into darkness. Excruciating pain followed by the oblivion of blessed unconsciousness, on an endless cycle. Beat, interrogate, repeat, until Avery lost track of time, and her scratchings on the wall grew haphazard and nonsensical. Still, she held on to her secret, refusing to reveal the crystal's location, thankful that she had hidden it with Ava, and in doing so ensured she would never break. She would never lead them to her daughter, no matter what they did to her.

Interspersed with her own physical assault, was torture of another kind. The cells were rarely empty as they had been

on her arrival. Instead, groups of women were her constant companion – women who came and went, their arrival yet another burden for her heart to bear. Some stayed days, others weeks, but in the end each was dragged back out of the dungeon prison and into the room beyond, where their screams could clearly be heard. At night, Avery breathed in the stench of blood and death, and wondered at the atrocities being committed behind the heavy door.

# Chapter 5

The day that Tristan came, the last of the love she felt for him shrivelled into a hateful black hole in her heart. It had been a few days without her being beaten, and she wondered if this was for his benefit, or if it was simply a happy coincidence. Still, while most of the bruises were covered by the filthy rags of her clothing, there was no hiding the after-effects of a split lip and a black eye. That was also the day she met Charlotte.

“Avery!” Tristan’s response upon

seeing her was depressingly predictable. Concern creased his brow into a worried frown and his eyes – wide and innocent – reflected shock and horror at the sight of her. “What have you done?” he roared at the wolf who had become her nemesis. “What have you done, Caleb?” She hadn’t known his name until now, but she cemented it in the stone of her mind, right below Tristan’s – a list of the people she would one day make pay. “What are you doing?” Tristan added, as Caleb pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked Avery’s cell. She tried not to flinch. They had conditioned her to associate the action with pain, and it took

all of her willpower not to let it show.

“Are you okay?” Tristan was frantic, at her side the instant the cell door creaked open. She shoved him away, the use of energy not without its toll on her weakened body, but the wounded expression it evoked on his face was worth it. “Avery,” he reached for her again, but she side-stepped, deliberately staying out of arm’s reach. Caleb chuckled softly under his breath and Tristan bristled.

“She’s all yours,” the wolf crooned, still sniggering as he made his exit.

The second he was gone, Tristan tried again.

“Don’t touch me,” Avery warned.

“You’re angry. Understandably,” he added as she cast a furious look at him. “You have to believe me, Avery, this is for the best. I’m trying to protect our family.”

“How?” The question caught him off guard. “How is my being locked in this hell-hole good for our family? Where are my children?” Unable to contain herself, she shoved at his chest, sending him reeling.

“The children are safe! They’re with Quinn.”

“Quinn?”

“Yes. She’ll protect them, Avery, you know she will.” Of course Avery knew

that. There was no one else on earth she trusted more to protect Jack and Ava, but if he thought that this excused his behaviour in any way, he was sorely mistaken. She hid her relief and instead, adopted a scornful expression.

“My sister will figure this out,” she sneered. “You’re a fool if you think you can deceive her. You’ve been a Guardian what – a few years?” she laughed derisively. “Quinn is the best of us, and she’s got almost a century on you. She’s going to make you wish you’d never been branded.” She slapped at the tattoo on his wrist – a constant reminder of his betrayal. “You’re a mediocre Guardian at

best, Tristan. You're nothing but a pathetic shadow in my sister's wake and if you think she'll let you get away with this, you're even more stupid than you look."

Tristan's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. As though he had suddenly forgotten how to speak. Avery turned her back on him, a final insult, until he seized her shoulders, yanking her around to face him. A look blazed in his eyes – one she had never seen but which she suspected had always lain hidden, shimmering beneath the surface. An ugly, dark look which represented truth. The truth in him. Because he was ugly, underneath his handsome exterior. Ugly

and selfish and egotistical. How had she not seen it before?

“Where is your crystal, Avery?” he demanded, his fingers biting into her bony shoulders. “You tell me where it is, or so help me, I will destroy Summerfeld, your father, your precious sister – everything you hold dear.”

“Our children?” Avery challenged.

“No,” he released her. “Our children will be safe. As will you. And one day, we’ll be a family again.”

“You think that I would ever take you back? That I could ever love you again after this?”

His smug look terrified her.

“Yes,” he admitted honestly. “Because you won’t remember any of it.”

And that was the crux of it, Avery thought as she was herded up into the room beyond the wooden door, pinned between Caleb and Tristan. Tristan intended for her to be compelled to forget. A Guardian couldn’t be compelled, which meant that for his plan to work, Summerfeld would have to fall, and all of the wards would have to die. For only when none within the City remained, would the enchantment lift. The horror of that thought almost brought her to her knees, but she blinked away the pain and put one foot in front

of the other, determined to meet her fate with her head held high.

The dungeon room was every bit as awful as she expected.

“You must be Avery,” a musical voice roused her from her dark thoughts and Avery lifted her head to find a youthful vampire sitting primly on a high-backed chair. Her hair formed a dark halo around her head, her smile open and kind. This was the face of a demon masquerading as an angel, the innocent façade hiding a multitude of sins. The girl rose to her feet, stepping forward to cup Avery’s face in her tiny hand.

“Oh dear,” she simpered, taking in

the dried blood and yellowing flesh of days old bruises. “You have been a naughty girl, haven’t you?”

“Charlotte,” Tristan interrupted boldly, “you swore she wouldn’t be hurt.” Charlotte didn’t so much as glance in his direction, but she did incline her head at Avery.

“She’s tough,” she announced knowingly, “she can take it. Can’t you, beautiful?” She winked, as though she and Avery shared some secret the others couldn’t fathom.

“Who the hell are you?” Avery demanded.

“Oh my, I’ve forgotten my manners. My

name is Charlotte,” she held out her small hand, “and this is my home.”

“I wouldn’t brag about it.”

Charlotte’s hand hung for a second in the space between them, before it whipped forward without warning and slapped Avery across the cheek. She stumbled, not only from the force of the blow, but because she hadn’t anticipated it.

“You will keep a civil tongue, Guardian,” Charlotte warned, “or you might find it cut from your pretty mouth.”

Avery threw Charlotte a look of such loathing it should melt the flesh from her bones, but Charlotte responded with a

delightful tinkle of laughter.

“Enough. You know what we want?”

“A decent stylist?” Avery cast a disdainful look over Charlotte’s vintage bodice, the ample flesh protruding over the low cut neckline.

“It’s only been a few weeks, Avery. How long do you think you can hold out before you crack? Surely it’s easier to give us what we want now, or don’t you want to see your children again?”

Avery’s composure cracked and she lunged, but Caleb was too quick for her. He seized her arms, pinning them behind her back.

“You stay away from my family, you evil

bitch!”

Charlotte’s lip curled like the cat who got the cream. She deliberately moved toward Tristan, linking her arm through his and laying her hand against his chest.

“You mean, this family?” she asked, running her hands evocatively downward.

“No,” Avery matched the smile with one of her own. “You can do what you like with him.”

Tristan pulled free of Charlotte’s clutches.

“It’s nothing like that!” he told no one in particular.

“More’s the pity.” Charlotte sighed, and then, facing Avery once more, “you will

tell us where that crystal is.” she stated matter-of-factly. “Sooner or later, everyone breaks.” With an airy wave of her hand, she dismissed them and Caleb forced a struggling Avery back through the wooden door and cast her inside her cell.

As the lock clicked, Avery stared up at Tristan.

“You’re a monster,” she hissed. “And one day I’m going to rip your throat out.” He turned on his heel and left without a word, Avery’s maniacal laughter following him.

# Chapter 6

“Catch!” Anna hissed, tossing the piece of bread high. Avery’s shoulder burned in protest as she shoved her arm even further through the bars of her cell. A second later, the bread bounced off her open palm and landed on the floor.

“Damn reflexes,” she grumbled, snatching it up and shoving it into her mouth.

It had been years since Tristan’s betrayal, although Avery couldn’t say for sure how many. She had seen him on a

few occasions in the time that had passed, but she refused to acknowledge him, and finally, he had stopped visiting. The dank, dusty cell almost felt like home and Avery had long lost the fear of torture. Charlotte must have tired of it too because it had been weeks, if not months since Caleb or his brother, Tane, had paid Avery a visit.

Anna, Jen and Laura had been brought into the dungeon only a few weeks ago, but so far they had survived. Many of their cell mates had not been so fortunate, but Avery found she was grateful that others had died so that they could live. The four women had struck up

a friendship, and more than that, Anna seemed to sense that in Avery they had found a powerful ally. She had convinced the others to share their rations with the strong, silent woman across from them, who faced the guards without fear.

“Thank you,” Avery nodded gratefully at the three women. The additional food had lifted her energy levels, giving her fuel to train her body. Anna had watched, fascinated, as Avery went through the motions of combat and strength training. Always during the day when the house was quiet and no one could witness it. Slowly, her body had transformed, her muscles becoming more

defined and her natural athleticism clawing through the years of deterioration.

Fortunately, no one else noticed. She was so filthy, the one bucket a week she was permitted to clean herself with barely keeping infection at bay, that they didn't look too closely.

The wooden door creaked and Anna, Jen and Laura scuttled backward, hiding in the shadowy corner of their cell. Avery remained where she was, her jaw set haughtily as Charlotte herself entered the corridor.

She paid the three women no heed, coming to stand before Avery.

“Hello Pet,” she crooned. It had become her favourite nickname for Avery – as though she were nothing more than an animal, which was ironic given that she kept wolves in the house. Avery didn’t bother to respond and Charlotte bent her knees, crouching so that their faces were level.

“I thought you’d like to know that Caleb has entered your precious City.” The words pierced Avery’s mental armour and she baulked. Charlotte’s reaction was suitably smug. “Your beloved Tristan has proved infinitely useful to me,” she continued.

“Oh really?’ Have you found that crystal

yet?” It was Avery’s turn to gloat, hanging on to the one thing they hadn’t managed to take from her.

“Tristan has new instructions,” Charlotte said. “Your sister has returned to the Guardianship and he’s going to...” she paused, dramatically. “How do I say this without hurting your feelings? Well, let’s just say he and Quinn have a history and he’s going to remind her of that fact.” She grinned spitefully. “She’s your twin, right?” and then, not waiting for an answer, “I envy him. She must be a very pretty young thing.”

Avery hurled herself forward, her hand snatching only air as Charlotte

danced away, her twinkling laughter echoing through the draughty cells as she whisked back out of the door and left Avery to contemplate her words.

# Chapter 7

Avery lay on her back, staring at the stone ceiling.

“You haven’t been practicing,” Anna murmured from across the corridor. It was a miracle that the three women were still here. Either Charlotte wasn’t spending much time at the house, or she had found an alternate food source, because it had been months since the last slaughter. On the downside, Anna, Laura and Jen were the only three women remaining in the dungeon prison, and

Avery feared their time was limited.

“Avery?” Anna whispered, and Avery rolled onto her side to face her. “Are you... okay?” it was a loaded question. Anna feared Avery was losing hope. It was true that she hadn’t been training, but it was not because she had given up hope. In fact, just the opposite. The past few weeks, she had pulled back, conserving her strength and waiting for an opportunity. The additional food had made a remarkable difference. She was finally in a position to rebel against her captors and she would do it, or die trying.

Avery put a finger to her lips, warning Anna to stay quiet. Anna heeded

her instruction immediately, shepherding the others into the back of their cell, and a moment later the sound of heavy footfalls reached them.

The door was yanked open, and Gideon's tall frame ducked inside. Gideon, one of the vampire guards who delivered the slop and bread which constituted most of their food supply, made Avery's skin crawl. He stood with his back to her, studying the three women in the cell opposite. Avery couldn't see his face, but the expression on Anna's told her all she needed to know.

"Leave them alone!" she yelled. Gideon ignored her, reaching for the keys on his

belt. Jen whimpered and Anna bravely pushed the other two women behind her.

“While the cat’s away, the mouse will play,” Gideon crooned in a breathless voice, confirming Avery’s suspicions. Charlotte wasn’t here. Avery suspected she hadn’t been home for a while, given how brazen the guards were becoming. Gideon’s arm shifted at his side and Avery realised, with alarmed disgust, that he was fondling himself.

“Hey!” she yelled, trying once more to distract him.

“Shut up,” Gideon threw the words casually over his shoulder. There was nothing for it. Steeling herself, Avery

plunged her hand into the bucket in the corner of her cell. A handful of shit spattered against his back finally got his attention. His shoulders tensed as he gazed down at the excrement on his shoulder, and then he whirled on her, his face morphed into a snarl of unadulterated fury. “I’m going to kill you, bitch!”

Avery backed up as he rammed the key into the lock and stormed into her cell. She could feel the adrenalin coursing through her, sharpening her senses and igniting her instinctive hatred of the vampire race, which had dampened with all these years being exposed to them.

Avery allowed Gideon to believe she was powerless for exactly three seconds after the metal gate clanged loudly against the stone wall of her cell. Then, she took two fleet-footed steps toward him, meeting him in the centre of her cell, and reminded him why vampires outside of this house feared the Guardians of Summerfeld. Just as she had become accustomed to them, so had they to her, and Charlotte's guards had forgotten that Eldon's warriors were a formidable enemy. Gideon remembered this fact too late, as Avery's blows rained down on him as if he were caught in the midst of a tempest. In the absence of a weapon,

Avery did the only thing she could do. She started breaking Gideon's bones. It took only a few minutes, but every second was crucial as she snapped first his arm and then, with a savage kick to his leg, his femur. Of course, this wouldn't kill him, but it would incapacitate him, which meant nothing if his cries for help were answered. So, the moment his leg buckled beneath him and brought him to his knees, Avery snapped his neck.

The silence, after such a raucous battle, was deafening. Avery's heart thudded frantically, but, keeping her wits about her, she snatched the heavy keys from the still open gate.

“Hurry!” Anna whispered, as Avery rifled through the set. The first key she tried didn’t fit, and she cursed, her fingers fumbling. She had barely shoved the second into the lock when Anna let out a cry of warning and a vice-like hand seized her by the shoulder and pulled her away from the cell. Avery ducked, instinctively, narrowly missing being knocked out by a fist the size of a grapefruit. The sound of footsteps was deafening in the small space as no less than six guards stormed through the wooden door.

Avery fought tooth and claw, but it wasn’t until she got her hands on a piece

of rusted metal pipe that she started to make headway. It must have once formed part of the piping system and whether Anna had broken it off, or if it had simply been lying on the cell floor all this time, Avery would never know, but when the woman shoved it through the bars, she snatched it up gratefully. She was doing an incredible amount of damage for one person, but, even with the rudimentary stake, Avery found herself being driven back toward her own cell. She knew that if they managed to shepherd her inside, it would be only a matter of time before one of her opponents slammed the gate on her, and

the keys were still wedged in the lock on Anna's own cell gate. Out of the corner of her eye, Avery saw Anna creeping toward the lock and was faced with an awful choice. She could keep letting the vampires drive her backward, distracting them from Anna, or she could make for the gap between bodies and make a run for it.

With her heart heavier than it had ever been, Avery surged forward, elbowing vampires out of the way, and dived through the space that had opened up toward the wooden door.

"I'll come back for you!" she vowed as she tucked and rolled. She was up

again in an instant, running for her life as the vampires chased after her.

As her feet pounded up a flight of cold stone steps, she heard Anna's wail of dismay, heard her own name being called out in desperation, but, drawing every ounce of determination she had, Avery kept running. She knew that she wouldn't have been able to beat the vampires in that dungeon. Anna, Laura and Jen would never have made it out and, if she had stayed, she would have been slowly beaten back and locked back in the cell. She had no choice, but it didn't lift the guilt from her shoulders.

She could smell freedom – the smell

of fresh air and plants in bloom pulling her forward. She knew a second of blessed relief as she spied a patch of sunlight through a distant window and she hurtled toward it, knowing that where she was going, they couldn't follow. Avery hit the window at full speed, tucking her body in at the last moment and exploding onto the lawn in a wave of glass and euphoria.

“I’ll come back for you,” she whispered again, vowing that she would return and save the lives of her friends. But first, she had to find Quinn. If it was vengeance she was after, Avery needed her sister.



# Author's Notes

The world of Summerfeld is a vast and complex place, one that I could explore forever. I hope that you, my readers, enjoy these short stories, which are glimpses into the lives of the characters who brought Summerfeld to life.

These stories are for inclusion in my newsletter only at this stage, and, as such, have not been professionally edited, so please forgive any errors!

#GoS

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