

DARK CRAVING

A Watchers Novella

We've followed Annelise Drew's journey as she's fought to survive the Isle of Night.

Now it's time to hear Ronan's side of the story.

Tracer Ronan has cared for only one person in his life: Charlotte, his sister. With her death, a consuming desire for revenge and destruction ignited in his heart. But when new recruit Annelise Drew arrives on the island, Ronan finds he craves more than revenge. She is a threat to his mission, his sanity, and his heart. Now Ronan will need every ounce of will and strength to avenge his sister and prove where his true allegiance lies.

Tracer Ronan shares his secrets with no one. But will he survive his darkest cravings?

“The time has come.” Master Hugo De Rosas Alcántara steeples his fingers, considering me with that utter stillness borne of immortality. To him, I am merely a man. Worse, a young man.

Just let me get on with it, I think. I despise my job and would have it done.

He continues to stare at me, well past the point of comfort. I shift. Leather the color of ox’s blood creaks beneath me. His office decor, like his posturing, is meant to menace. The vampire is ancient, but more than that, he is a ruler. A creature of power among the most powerful.

But I am not so easily threatened.

For now, he believes I’m fallible, and I let him. To him, I am weak. A bit of mortal ephemera. Flesh with an expiration date—one that he controls. And yet, raised as I was amidst isolation and savagery, I feel as ancient as any vampire. My body might be nineteen but my soul is old as eons, and the day will come when Alcántara learns how greatly he’s underestimated me. One day he will pay for what he did to my family. To my sister.

Finally, he speaks again. “Tell me, Tracer Ronan, you are confident you have everything in order?”

He is treating me as though this were my first mission when in fact I’ve lost count of the children I’ve taken. But I’m a professional, so I tell him simply, “Of course.” I may be young, but I’m the best in the world at what I do. A well-trained Tracer could do a standard retrieval job in his sleep, and I’m more than just a well-trained Tracer. My unique talents—*very* unique talents—make such missions simpler than they already are. “I have all I need,” I assure him.

“And you’ve considered every angle.”

“Of course,” I repeat. He was born in fourteenth-century Spain, and yet in my lifetime, I’ve probably traveled off this island more than he has. The vampires claim to keep in touch with modernity,

but I'd wager Alcántara has no idea just how many "angles" there are when navigating the juvenile justice system in modern America.

Unfortunately, he's detected my attitude. "You do fashion yourself quite the lone wolf, don't you? A *ma-ver-ick*." He pronounces each syllable of the word slowly, disdainfully, his lips peeling back as he ends on the sharp, hard k sound, revealing a pair of long, gleaming fangs.

It's his way of reminding me whom I serve.

"No indeed, Master Alcántara," I assure him in as formal a tone as I can manage. Vampires are our "masters" here and they enjoy being reminded at every turn.

"Best to remember, rebels are not tolerated. You are merely a Tracer. *My* Tracer."

His Tracer—he believes this is all I am. His mortal. His tool, traveling the globe, gathering teenaged recruits to bring to this remote hell we call the Isle of Night. Known as *Eyja næturinnar* in the old tongue, it's a desolate rock in the middle of the North Sea, nothing but grey cliffs and bleak skies and hostile seas. Bringing unsuspecting adolescents to this place to meet their almost-certain deaths—Alcántara believes this is all I'm capable of. One day I will show him differently.

But for now I must nod my head in a gesture of respectful submission. A single thought placates me: One day this submission will end.

"You have the names?" he asks.

I grit my teeth but measure my voice when I tell him, "I have the names." Of course I have the names. I've memorized them, as I always do. There are two girls this time, and I've committed every detail of their files to memory.

"Two more Americans," he says needlessly, his placid voice meant to goad me. It's his reminder: I'm captive in his office for as long as his mood requires it.

"Yes. I'm headed back to America. Florida." This small talk is detestable. I long to check the clock over the hearth. He stares as though wishing to prolong our exchange even more, and I add, "Miami." A place where the sun is so bright it bleaches the sky to an intolerable glare and the air is so

thick with damp it lingers in my sinuses and clings to my body like a mildewed cloak. “Bloody horrible place,” I mutter under my breath before I think to stop myself.

“I assure you,” he snaps, “there is no need to be testy, young one.”

Young, he calls me. An irony, seeing as Alcántara looks no older than my nineteen years.

“Apologies, Master.” I bow my head, taking the opportunity to blank my features. I can’t let him read treasonous thoughts on my face. I burn to destroy him and his Vampire Directorate, the secret cabal of undead who rule this island, but for now, I mustn’t let the seeds of suspicion take root. For good measure, I add, “As ever, I appreciate your wise supervision.”

I steal a peek, checking if I’d laid my words on too thickly, but his self-satisfied glow tells me that all the submissive compliments in the world still wouldn’t be enough.

“Indeed,” he tells me, tilting his head with predatory consideration. “I believe it’s precisely this supervision that’s shaped you into such an able instrument.”

I feel his words like a slap. He is reminding me of my place, and I reel from a fresh wave of loathing. I have to get out of here. No longer able to stop myself, I shoot a quick glance at the clock.

“You grow impatient?” Alcántara smiles, but I don’t mistake it for friendly. Suspecting everything about everyone is what’s kept me alive this long.

“I don’t wish to miss my ferry.” I resist the urge to edge forward, to flee. “I leave for Oban at 18:30.”

“A mere instant in time to we of the Vampire blood.” He kicks back, casually crossing his black-booted ankles. He might be hundreds of years old, but Alcántara looks like he’d be more at home in a New York nightclub than Medieval Spain. “I want you to admit something to me, Tracer.”

He stares in silence again, and I try not to bristle. Does he suspect my true feelings?

“Your power,” he says. “You wish you could use it on vampires.” His eyes are black, as bottomless and expressionless as two chips of obsidian. They narrow on me. “Admit it.”

Once, I was afraid of those eyes. When I first arrived on this island at the age of twelve I studiously avoided them. But I meet his gaze now—I haven't looked away since the day he took everything.

"My power," I repeat. If I concentrate, if I peer deeply into someone's eyes, I can convince anyone of anything. But it is my touch that's the most powerful of all. With the proper intent, my hands generate heat that, when directed to another's mind, blanks it of all but my command.

Some call it hypnotism. Others, persuasion. I call it both blessing and curse. Because how can there ever be trust between me and another person when there is such a thing between us? And so, for me, there has never been another person.

Except for my dear Charlotte—my Lottie, my sister. Remembering her, a craving for revenge burns my throat, wavers my vision.

I must gather my wits. I despise the Directorate, but each day they find me useful is another day I survive. Alive is good. I won't be able to take them down if I'm dead.

I consider Alcántara's question and answer evenly, "Whether Man or Vampire, one always wishes for more power."

It works. He laughs, a low purring sound. "As you say, Tracer Ronan." He relaxes fully now, spreading his arms along the back of the sofa, nodding his agreement. Lean and striking, sleek and dark, the Spanish vampire is a deadly panther in elegant human form.

The door swings open, and Alcántara's face hardens to marble. Someone has entered his lair unannounced, and he doesn't like it.

I feel a powerful presence at my back. My skin crawls with misgiving.

And then a ragged voice speaks. "There has been a change of plans."