

A MONDAY MOODY NOVEL

# UNPARALLELED AFFAIRS



MORGAN W. SILVER

**Unparalleled Affairs**

**by**

**Morgan W. Silver**

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

## UNPARALLELED AFFAIRS

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# Chapter 1

*“Each world may differ wildly from the other,  
but they all have one thing in common: they  
are dangerous.” ~ Monday*



PU-10388 IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE parallel world. Not that I expected that being part of a Retrieval Unit for Travellers would be comfy, but it's been three days and we still haven't found our Traveller. It means we're stuck wearing tights and tunics made of stiff fabric with puffy sleeves and ruffs around our necks.

The worst part is that we have to wear intricate masks of various bright colours that can read our facial expressions and even our pulse in order to relay our feelings. They mimic and alter their patterns and colours to reflect the correct expression. They don't show actual facial features like eyes and a mouth, but mine, for instance, has a floral pattern. Since we're new to this world, I could do with a manual, but so far I've been able to decipher when my teammates are annoyed, which, so far, has been constantly.

I don't blame them. I know George is eager to return to his daughter Celeste, and Chester—I'm sure he misses his club and the lovely drinks he serves there. In order to lie low, we've only been drinking the water here and it's terrible.

As for me, I really want to return to Lovelace. And Oliver. He's been on a lot of assignments with us in the past few weeks, but he's a mayor first. And a vampire. Last I heard, he has vampire business on his mind. I just hope he's been doing fine in our absence. Not that he can't handle himself.

Lovelace is being home-schooled, just like Celeste, and has been doing really well socially speaking. My mother has seen to her training, since she is also a Traveller, like me. And nobody outside those of us who already know can be aware that she is.

Perhaps that's also why I'm so anxious to return. Right before I left, I had checked the file about her aunt who was raising her before I took her in. Although, in this case, 'raising' is a loose term. The aunt has been extracted from the parallel world she was sent to. Which means she knows Lovelace is missing by now. I have serious doubts as to whether or not she cares about her enough to go look for her, and I am certain that if she does, she won't find her. Still, it makes me feel uneasy.

Hopefully, we'll find this Traveller soon. Not just so I can return home, but also so I can finally take this mask off. We cannot, under any circumstances, reveal our faces in public. It is against the law here.

We've tried to avoid public places; it's safer for us, but now we are forced to attend a Courting Festival. Partnerships are important in this world, and each month there is a Courting Festival. Such wonderful timing. However, the Courting Festival is a big deal, and that's why I'm certain Sinclair—the Traveller we're hunting—will show up.

Though I was hoping, since Chester owns the club Phantasm, he'd be looking forward to being in his element, but he still does nothing but sulk. That is, until we reach the square.

The square is decorated with pink and white lanterns, rose petals are scattered across the ground, and everywhere we look, there are stalls with colourful food I've never seen before. Chester and George's expressions are that of awe, of that I'm sure. I can't get used to those masks; they're too unsettling, and I look forward to seeing their actual faces. Not to mention getting out of these tights.

"Okay, I'll be over at those yellow muffin-looking things," Chester says in his Scottish accent. "Alongside those lovely ladies."

How he can tell they're lovely is beyond me. Everyone looks the same, except for the colours on their clothes and masks.

I grab him by his arm before he darts off. "Hang on. It's likely Sinclair will be here to enjoy all the food and...company, so keep your eyes open and your reactions in check. The masks pick up on our expressions, so if he realises we recognise him, he might do something stupid."

"I can't promise I'll be able to pick him out. If he's been here too long, it will mask his scent," George. I'm sure that under his mask, his eyes flash yellow.

"This entire event is normal to everyone who is from here, so look for someone who will be as in awe as us. Someone who seems like he's doing this for the first time," I say.

"There might be other people who experience this for the first time. I mean, new single people or people who have come of age," Chester says.

"True. But they'll still know about this Festival from family members, and I imagine the food isn't foreign to them. Look, just trust your instincts. I think we'll know him when we see him."

George and Chester's masks stare back at me with neutral expressions. George's mask is green with white swirls while Chester's is purple with yellow dots. The colours are in various shades and look quite intricate. Mine is different shades of red—not quite matching my ginger hair—and white.

"W—what happens if someone likes us?" George asks. The marks on his mask swirl slowly while turning a light blue.

Chester's mask transforms from purple to blue. Oh, boy.

"You see," he starts, "when two people like each other—"

George's low growl cuts him off, and Chester chuckles.

“It’s better if we split up. The crowd is too big.” I glance at the colourful people with the eerie masks. “Let’s just get through this and ensure we capture Sinclair. Then we can finally go home.”

Their expressions change and I’m guessing it means they’re feeling hopeful. They are just as eager to return as I am.

“Got it,” Chester says before he disappears into the crowd.

“How will we find each other again?” I say, realising the flaw in that.

“I can smell you guys. I’ll find a spot where I can keep an eye on both of you. If one of us catches Sinclair, I’ll make sure we all get together.”

Thank goodness for George’s werewolf nose.

“Great. Do you think they have scones in this world?”

Silence.

I look up and George has already vanished.

Great. I’ll just go on the hunt for some nice snacks and a dangerous Traveller.



THE PLEASANT BUZZ OF conversation surrounds me as people are chatting. The overall vibe is jaunty. The stalls with foods and drinks are placed around the square. This Traveller has shown up to worlds where there were special events with lots of food and interesting activities.

We missed him each time until I figured out that particular pattern. My mother made me explore many different worlds, even those that aren’t registered. Luckily, this Traveller only visits worlds that are registered. That means there is additional information on file with updates on what is going

on on a global level in those worlds. Things can change, and I certainly don't visit parallel worlds as much as I used to.

Info equals survival.

In this world, this particular festival matters because procreation is seen as a very serious task that everyone should execute. The more fertile you are here, the higher your status. It is disgusting to me, but here it is normal.

Conversation is the first stage, where introductions are made, and topics touch on the most important views on child-rearing so people can see if they are compatible. Next, dancing. Any conversations are continued on the dance floor if both parties are pleased with each other so far. It is also perfectly acceptable—even encouraged—to chat and dance with multiple people. The snacks are so that you can speak with your friends or family about any potential matches so far. Near the food stalls, romancing is off the table. It is a safe space to discuss your options.

The worst part is that everyone carries a watch with a pin in it. The pin can be taken out, though it's attached to the watch, and is used to prick the potential partner's finger and measure their virility.

This is also the place where newcomers discover whether or not they are virile. They are not allowed to measure it beforehand because if someone isn't virile, they are publicly shunned. It is very important to the people in this world to do it that way. That way nobody can trick others into marriage.

It is also the main reason why this world isn't on my Love-to-Visit list.

It seems Sinclair has been playing tourist as he's been exploring interesting cultural events, but I doubt he'll actually want to mingle with the people here. It's too risky.

As I head towards the area with the food stalls, someone intercepts me. His dotted mask hides his face, and his clothes appear to be from here.

"Care to dance?" the man asks.

I check out his wrists. No watch. That, and the fact that he's asking me to dance without having talked indicates it's someone who isn't from here. I'd have recognised George or Chester's voice so that leaves Sinclair.

I focus on his core, his energy. I should be able to sense what he is as I can feel the amount of energy he has and because of the sensation it will evoke. Travellers have more life force than humans and feel different from vampires and werewolves. Someone's core energy also evokes one of the senses and is different for each person.

With him, I sense nothing. He must have found a way to shield himself, the way that I can. That means he's quite skilled.

Does he realise I don't belong here either? He must. I'm also not wearing a watch.

I don't reply, instead I place my hand in his. Plenty of couples are dancing on the square while airy sounds travel through the air. It's music, but it's not like anything I've ever heard before. It's difficult to find a rhythm.

Still, Sinclair moves with ease and I follow his lead.

We dance the way we are supposed to in this parallel universe: our right hands on each other's waists, the left over each other's hearts. It means his hand is a bit closer to my breast than I'd like, but we can't have it all, I suppose. We slowly whirl around each other. I keep a gentle smile on my face, making sure my mask doesn't portray the tension I feel.

"You are a good dancer," I say.

"Thank you." The dots on his mask stay the same and show pastel-like colours.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" This time there's more of an edge to my words.

"Quite. There are so many wonderful places out there. So many wonderful foods to discover, as well as inventions and creatures."

He skips any attempt at equivocating and basically admits it's him. I glance around to see if George and Chester are close-by.

"Looking for someone? I'm not boring you already, am I?" His voice is laced with a playfulness. He's enjoying this. It makes me wonder what kind of tricks he has up his puffy sleeves.

"Not at all. In fact, you seem quite interesting." I turn my attention back to him. They should spot me soon and realise I wouldn't dance with anyone from here.

"I do?"

"Yes. Mainly because you imply you're simply visiting these places, but from what I understand, you're quite dangerous." I decide to just get it out there.

"I'm as harmless as a fish on dry land. It is just that they want me because of what I can do."

"Which is what?"

"You'll never find out because I'm not letting you take me to them."

I narrow my eyes at him. "And who is that?"

"I know who you are, Monday Moody. And I know you work for Oliver Marquis. He's the head of the House of Fall and a very powerful vampire. How much do you know about him?"

I feel pins and needles across my skin. "Why?"

He tilts his head. "Because he's dangerous. All vampires are. And whatever you think you know about him, you don't."

Sinclair is beginning to sound like my mother. Although, it seems she and Oliver are now buddies. Each time my parents visit while Oliver happens to have time off, he joins us. Regardless, if Oliver were to ever pose a threat to me, she would annihilate him.

“Then why don’t you enlighten me?”

“I’d love to, but that’s not my job. I just want to be left alone, that’s all. Even though it’s very flattering that you have been following me around like a puppy. I do wish I could get to know you better. I’ve heard great things about you, but I really must dash.” He bows his head, then looks up at me. “Oops.” He moves too fast and before I can react, my mask falls to the stone ground.

“You’re very pretty. Good luck.” He slips past a couple, and as I bend down to retrieve my mask, someone shrieks bloody murder. Before I know it, people have taken several steps away from me as they stare and point. Their masks are swirling and rapidly changing colours and patterns.

“Chester,” I shout as I secure the mask. I don’t know where George is.

In a flash he’s by my side and the next moment the crowd lets out surprised cries and then their gazes follow an Illusion of me that leads away from us.

“There she goes!” someone says.

“Get her!” other voices cry out.

“Good work,” I say. Illusions like these are so useful. Unlike the Illusions my dad does, which are usually just very pretty or cool. Or terrifying, when he has nightmares. Some rare Travellers can also do Illusions, but it has never been something I was good at. My dad had tried to teach me when I was a kid, but it always failed. It doesn’t bother me now, but when I was younger I actually resented the fact that I was a Traveller and not an Illusionist. I think it had more to do with the way my mother trained me than anything else.

“You lead the way and I’ll keep up an Illusion until we’re out of sight. George is on Sinclair, though. I saw them go that way.” He points towards one of the streets that leads away from the square.

I make my way through the crowd. They part without seeming suspicious, so whatever Chester is doing, it’s working. I catch a glimpse of George in

one of the alleys. He looks like everyone else here, but I can tell by the way he runs. Also, the fact that he's running is a giveaway, as I don't imagine anyone else having a reason to do that right now.

We bolt after them and weave our way through streets that keep getting more narrow and quiet. The houses here are small but tall and made of grey stones. They are several floors high and each floor is stacked sloppily, which makes these houses look different and cute. Most have lots of flowers next to the front door. The colours are intense.

We catch up to George and Sinclair when George tackles him to the ground. They wrestle as we get closer. I'm panting and my legs are on fire, but finally it's over. After being away from comfort, family, and friends for three days, we can finally go home.

Just then George is propelled backwards and slams into the front of one of the houses. Sinclair is holding a device that resembles a small gun, but the end of the nuzzle is ball-shaped. It must be some kind of weapon and before I can come to a stop, he runs off again.

George groans and is already struggling to his feet. Chester grabs him by the shoulder and helps him up. I go after Sinclair and know they'll catch up to me.

We run into an area where the streets are even more narrow and the houses are smaller, colourless—all of them are grey or beige—and there are no flowers. It reeks of fish; the farther I run, the more I smell it.

The fact that Sinclair has a weapon makes this whole thing more tricky. He clearly has no qualms about hurting us and came prepared. We have to change tactics, but first we have to get close to him again. What I don't understand is why he won't teleport away. Of course, he has been Travelling to a parallel universe every day in the past few days; he must be exhausted.

I turn a sharp corner and enter a dead-end alley. I realise it too late, though, and Sinclair already has his weapon aimed at me.

He pulls the trigger.



## Chapter 2

*“First and foremost, a vampire should always be in control. In control of their desires and in control of their emotions. An amount of six years is given to allow training in this area. After this specific time period, failure to succeed, if proven, will result in the sacrifice of the vampire’s most prized possession, whatever or whomever that may be.” ~ The Vampire Code of Conduct*



I CAN'T GET OUT OF the way fast enough and am shot backwards by an invisible force that also knocks off my mask. My arms flail as I soar through the air, but before I can slam into the ground, I focus all my energy and pop up right behind Sinclair and next to a bunch of empty barrels that are placed against the wall.

Now that I've joined the Retrieval Unit, I am finally allowed to carry a real weapon, even if it's a stun weapon. It doesn't look like a weapon, though. It looks more like a cross between a needle gun and a screwdriver. My parents are friends with an inventor—Mr Powell—and Oliver hired him based on my recommendation.

It made his day and actually helped him land a position with this new up-and-coming company called HomeTech. Unfortunately, Mr Powell also had the honour of naming our weapon and though his first suggestion—

Stunning High-Impact Targeter—was not approved, his latest suggestion was.

And so I yank out my SG-3, which stands for Stun Gun (prototype) 3, from under my uncomfortable attire, which takes two seconds too long, but by now Chester and George have caught up with us. Their presence distracts Sinclair just long enough to prevent him from turning around.

Except that in the next instant, he has switched places with George and when I pull the trigger, I stun George instead.

His body convulses, and he flops to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Okay, he's definitely going to hold that against me. No more braiding each other's hair, I guess.

Chester's body is tense and his eyes dark. He is getting ready to cast an Illusion, but Sinclair aims the gun again, and Chester is slung against the wall after he fires.

George groans, but I don't get the chance to help him as Sinclair's attention is back on me.

Oh, goody.

"My dance card is getting full, so let's end this," I say, ready to strike. He has the blast weapon in one hand and something else that resembles a remote in his other. What is he going to use that for? Or did he use that to switch places with George? Either way, he's got a lot of gadgets, it seems.

The scent of fish gets stronger. I really want to go home and put an end to this. I'm done with this world and this particular Traveller.

I teleport next to him and grab his wrist, twisting it, but he anticipates that move and shifts his weight, pushing back so that we twist around each other. I push, he pushes. I stumble backwards just as George is on his hands and knees, and I fall over him, taking Sinclair with me.

I lose my balance and tumble into a barrel head first, losing my grip on the rogue Traveller.

Something cold and slippery is dumped into the barrel as the smell of fish overwhelms. A sense of panic claws its way to my chest as the barrel fills up, and I wiggle my legs.

My mum always taught me that panic gets you killed, but my breathing technique is of no use since I'll end up snorting a fish.

I simply focus on the spot I was at earlier and zone in on the feeling of wanting out of this barrel, and then I am. There is always a small flutter in my stomach as I teleport, but I barely register it anymore.

I stagger backwards and gag as it seems like the fish smell has seeped through my skin and into my bones. I rub my face and temporarily forget my dismay when I see George has handcuffed Sinclair and is now Collaring him. It is a quick injection that will block his Travelling abilities. He is lucky to get away with that since we also have a license to kill. Though we haven't needed it so far.

Chester's mask is off and he's rubbing the back of his head, grinning at me.

"Don't say a word," I grunt. "Are you okay?" It takes me a lot of effort to not gag again.

"Are you kidding, Red?"

It was his old nickname for me which, for some reason, he has started using again. At least he hasn't dusted off any of the other nicknames like 'babe' or 'sexy.'

"We finally get to go home. These have been the longest three days of my life. I could really use a stiff drink." He grins at the thought.

"I don't much like alcohol," George chimes in, "but even I could use a drink." He pulls Sinclair to his feet, and I saunter over.

George takes off his mask now as well and uses one hand to cover his nose. I can only imagine the torture he's going through with his good sense of smell. It doesn't help that Sinclair also reeks of fish.

I tip Sinclair's mask over his head and let gravity do the rest.

It is definitely the Traveller we've been looking for. The sharp blue eyes, the blond wavy hair and the freckles on his nose. "You're under arrest for illegal Travelling," I say.

The corner of his lips quirks up. "I'm not who you think I am, though I'm sure Oliver knows. If you arrest me, it will be the end of the world as we know it."

"That's what they all say, Cupcake," Chester says from behind me.

I narrow my eyes at Sinclair and check his pockets. I fish out—pun not intended—several small devices I don't recognise. "What are these?"

Sinclair swallows and fear flashes in his eyes.

"Interesting. What are you afraid of?" I ask.

"The vampires," he says.



IT TAKES ME ABOUT FIFTEEN seconds to create the portal back home. Swirls of yellow and orange make the portal look like one of those big flat lolly-pops. Parallel portals always have those colours, while time portals are black and red.

Despite having been covered in fish, I am so happy to finally be able to leave this world and go home. Never in a million years would I have

thought that my home would mean Oliver Marquis's mansion, but here we are.

I squelch a pleasant zing that travels through me at the thought of seeing Oliver again.

"After you, gentlemen."

George practically runs through the portal with Sinclair while Chester simply strides through it with a spring in his step.

Just as I'm about to go through, I feel a tingle travel up my spine. Someone is watching me. I glance around with an unease feeling in the pit of my stomach. There is just the factory where the fish were coming from with small square windows that are so dusty I doubt anyone can see through them. The alley is abandoned, and I can't imagine where someone could be watching me from.

I shake off the feeling and make my way through the portal. There is a tugging on all sides of me and a pressure on all my organs. It dissipates when I step through.

George, Chester, and even Sinclair are all gagging.

Portals aren't easy on the body, but Travellers are usually less affected. However, since Sinclair has been Travelling too much too soon, his body is responding to it.

I turn around and squint my eyes at the portal. I hold out my hands and bring them closer together as the portal grows smaller until it's gone.

Summer is standing behind it. Her hair is pinned up and she's wearing the same dark suit as always.

"Oh, good, you're back," she says with the enthusiasm level of a rock. "I'll inform Oliver," she adds before she walks off in heels so high they would give me vertigo.

She's an efficient assistant to Oliver, but she's not my biggest fan. Especially since my turtle, Mr Turtleneck, is always following her around. She's convinced he's spying on her.

Summer is here pretty much all the time, but so is Dee. She's a doctor that works for Oliver and lives here during the weekdays. Vampires can get hurt as much as anyone can, so I guess she's handy to have around. Especially since Oliver is so powerful. I'm sure there are plenty of vampires who want to take him out, though they'd probably not be violent about it. Vampires are far more cunning than combatant.

I check my watch. It's Saturday, 4 P.M. Oliver works a lot, but he has been spending more quality time with us on weekends.

On Saturdays, my parents usually do something fun with Lovelace and Celeste. I can't remember what plans they had for today, but I hope they'll be home soon.

We are in the private wing of Oliver's mansion, but it is also where we have our soundproof room on the ground floor. The entrance is hidden behind a bookcase, though that's more for fun than that it needs to be hidden. In the back of the meeting room are two cells. That's where we keep the apprehended Travellers before they are transported for trial and probably prison—Big Ben is where Travellers go.

If a vampire or a werewolf breaks the law then it is usually handled by vampires and werewolves themselves.

Still holding his nose, George goes downstairs to put Sinclair away. He seems to have temporarily given up struggling and just glares at me in passing.

"I'm getting out of these wretched clothes and I'm going to enjoy the weekend," Chester says, his Scottish accent rolling off his tongue. When we dated, he'd sometimes read books to me. I could listen to him for hours.

"I'm taking a three-hour shower." I sniff my clothes and make a face.

“Do you need help?” Chester grins.

The flirty banter has also been back since about a few weeks. Even more so when Oliver is in the vicinity, which usually sparks banter between the two.

“I’m sure I can manage, though I am of course extremely feeble and inane.” I bat my eyelids at him, and he chuckles.

“See you around, Red,” he says with a wave.

I give George all of Sinclair’s gadgets, and am actually eager to find out what all of them can do and how they were made. First I need a shower and change of clothes. And decent food. And to hug my loved ones.



I MAKE MY WAY DOWN to Oliver’s office on the first floor with my hair still damp and one of my favourite blue dresses on. It has long sleeves and a white collar. The skirt flares out at the bottom and I do a little twirl. It feels incredibly good to be wearing my own clothes again.

Summer informed me that my parents and the girls have been at the zoo and are currently having dinner at a pancake restaurant, which leaves me wanting to see only one person.

The door to his office swings open as I reach it. Nerves shoot through me like fireworks, but I take a breath and smile.

It is wiped clean off my face when a woman exits his office. She has short blonde hair that curls below her ears. Definitely due to rollers. Her lips are full and red and her lashes long and dark.

I recognise her instantly, and not just because she once shoved a microphone in my face after I had stopped a werewolf.

She is on TV all the time. She even has her own show now. Her latest episodes centre around equality for men—especially when it comes to employment opportunities and salaries. It is nice to see her in colour for a change.

“Paige Pageant,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

She turns to me, followed by Oliver.

“Ah, you’re back,” he says, as if I’ve only been to the supermarket. He barely glances at me before he steps closer to her and puts his hand on her back. She glances up at him and gives him a wicked smile.

Damn, she really is beautiful. But even more so is Oliver.

His hair is so light it’s pretty much white. It reaches just below his shoulders and he usually has it up or half up and half down, like now. His eyes are also light, but the look in them is usually dark and sharp.

He is powerful, and even if I couldn’t feel that power, I would know just by looking at him.

It has only been three days, but I’ve imagined us seeing each other again several times. I just hadn’t pictured it like this.

“Paige is here to help us with some exposure,” he says, his eyes sparkling.

The way he said exposure makes me tingle, and judging by Paige’s grin, it did the same to her. I narrow my eyes at them.

Though Oliver had mentioned he wanted more attention for the task force now that we were up and running and doing quite well so far, I didn’t think he’d move that fast.

“Is this the Traveller you were telling me about?” She still isn’t looking at me, and neither is he.

I curl my hands into fists. What am I? A doily?

My mum has given me a lot of advice about a lot of things, including about men. Now, this isn't exactly what she had in mind when she told me, but she once said that if I wanted attention from someone, the best thing I could do was something unexpected.



## Chapter 3

*“Getting exposure for this task force is a good thing. If only so that people will realise how dangerous Travellers can be.” ~ Oliver*



A GRIN FORMS ON MY face. I pop up behind Paige and loop my arm around her small waist. I would be jealous if I didn't care so much about scones.

I teleport without taking Oliver with us. He had been touching Paige, so I could have easily brought him along, though it is always safer to touch the Traveller directly when being teleported.

We pop up on top of a roof overlooking a hologram of the Eiffel Tower. Below us is a stream of cars and people, but we don't have the chance to survey them as I teleport away again.

This time we emerge on a desolate street in the darkness, looking at a Japanese temple.

“Wow,” Paige breathes.

In a flash we are in the middle of a desert with nothing but sand around us. And next, we are back in the corridor. I position myself in a way that I'm sort of between Paige and Oliver. No more touching.

“That was amazing!” She clutches her manicured hand to her chest.

I glance at Oliver, who simply smirks at her.

“I can’t wait to interview you, Monday. Also, the camera will love you. You’re very pretty.”

“Y—you—what now?”

“No camera, remember?” Oliver says smoothly and flashes her a smile.

“Oh, right.” She smiles back. “Too bad, but I understand. It is safer that way.”

I really hope Oliver hasn’t told her about how during my Chrono Unit days nobody was allowed to know I was really a Traveller. And they still aren’t.

I narrow my eyes at him, but realise he wouldn’t just out me like that to a former reporter and TV host. Still, my heart is beating a lot faster.

Oliver steps closer to me. “Paige will interview all of the members of the Retrieval Unit, but since you catch Travellers and are one, she’s especially interested in you.” This time his eyes bore into mine.

*Be nice, he says in my head.*

*No, thank you, I say in his.*

Despite the fact that Oliver consumed my life force a long while ago, we can still communicate with each other this way.

“We will do it in Oliver’s office,” Paige starts and continues to excitedly rattle about all her wild plans for me.

She gets to call him Oliver, huh? Of course.

I glare at him.

*What?*

*You really think me being interviewed is a good idea? She knows my name.*

*She signed a confidentially agreement. Don't worry. I've got you covered. Besides, this will be good for us.*

I have the feeling he really means 'me' with that statement. This Retrieval Unit is important to him. It is the first one that exists for Travellers, and if we are a success, which we are proving to be, then it means more Retrieval Units for Travellers.

Being able to Travel can be a dangerous ability, and so far I've enjoyed the challenge of capturing Travellers that have done bad things and would have kept on doing them, but at the same time I want things to be different for us.

There are plenty of rules for werewolves and vampires as well, even for someone as powerful as Oliver, so it's not like we are being singled out, but still. It doesn't always feel right. Perhaps because I have dealt with so many lost kids when I was at the CU.

That, however, is not the only reason for my reluctance.

Oliver and I had promised there would be no more secrets between us, not after I had kept being a Traveller from him. But I still have one.

And I am beginning to think I should share it with him. If only so I'll stop having nightmares.

It's just that—well, how do you tell someone that the leader of a bunch of violent, rogue Travellers is actually your adopted daughter from the future?

Yeah. Exactly.

But the more time I spend with Oliver, the more I trust him. Maybe I shouldn't since he's still a vampire and with vampires, their interests always come first. But he's been bonding with Lovelace as well. Perhaps he can help since I'm not sure I can trust Wynter either.

Lovelace I trust. Wynter not so much. And even if they are the same person, they are also not.

I sigh, gathering the attention of both Oliver and Paige, who stop chatting.

“It’s been a long three days,” I say with a smile.

“Of course. I’ll get out of your hair. Thank you for meeting with me, Oliver. It was a delight to meet you. And you as well, Monday. We’ll be in touch.” She shakes both our hands and Summer appears just in time to escort Paige downstairs and out of the building.

“I see you’ve been keeping busy,” I say with a hint of bitterness. It doesn’t help that these past three days have made me crankier than a captured mole rat.

Oliver places his hands behind his back. He’s wearing his signature handmade baroque gilet along with his usual dark shirt and trousers.

His handsome face improves as the corners of his mouth turn upwards. I used to dislike how beautiful he is, but now I’m used to it.

“Hi,” he says softly, instantly warming my cheeks.

“Hi,” I say back and fail to fight back a smile.

“Missed me?” He leans forward so that his face is closer to mine. He smells divine, as always.

“As much as a splinter in my finger,” I say dryly.

He chuckles softly. It sounds like ruffling feathers. “It was definitely boring without you. I tried playing chess with your dad, but he actually doesn’t mind losing.”

“Neither do I.” I go for an air of nonchalance.

Almost every night after dinner, we play a game of chess while nursing a glass of wine. Oliver always wins, and the moment I see it coming, I end up changing the rules completely. I make my knights able to fly, my pawns can suddenly jump over other pieces, and I’ve given my queen a plastic sword that Celeste had in her toy box and use it to strike down Oliver’s pieces.

Oliver's eyes always twinkle when I ungracefully slaughter every one of his pieces. He's also made it a habit to walk me up to my room afterwards and kiss the inside of my wrist.

"I need to speak with you in my office, but before we do, I have one important question." He leans forward even more, forcing me to take a step back, but he wraps his arm around me and pulls me back to him.

I blink rapidly.

His voice is a soft rumble. "Why do you smell like fish?"

"Don't remind me," I say through gritted teeth and grab his arms, teleporting us both into his office even if it is only three steps away.

"Now, what is it?" I cross my arms and move to one of the chairs in front of his large mahogany desk.

"Wow, you really are cranky, my dear. Last three days not fun?" He takes his seat behind his desk, switching off the holo-screen on his typewriter.

"No, they were not fun. And it ended with me getting fish dumped on me."

He doesn't move for two seconds, then throws his head back and laughs. Actually laughs.

Smirking and grinning he does often, but not laugh. Not that I am happy about it since he is essentially laughing at me.

"I will teleport you into an ice cave," I say.

He transforms his laugh into a polite cough and then straightens. "I'm glad things went well and that you apprehended Sinclair, but that was not what I wanted to discuss."

His tone is so serious that I can't help but frown.

"For the next few days, we'll have visitors," he says. His expression is unreadable. So far his face can be switched to flirty, which is the most

common one, unreadable, and thoughtful. I've only caught him being pensive a few times, and they were rare unguarded moments.

"What kind of visitors?"

He taps a finger on his wrist. A sign that signals discomfort. Most people would shift in their seats, but he is a lot more subtle. Except for when he flirts. Then he's as unsubtle as a drunk whale.

"Vampires."

I inhale slowly. "Members of the House of Fall?"

He presses his lips together. "No."

Visitors from that House wouldn't be a big deal; they'd be below him in rank. But if they're from a different House, that makes me wary.

Vampires are known for being back-stabbing psychopaths who only enjoy one thing: power. And maybe life essence, since that is what they feed on.

"It will be Aura DuVeil, leader of the house of Spring, and her right-hand man Harlan LaCoste."

"Why are they visiting?" I already don't like the sound of those two.

"Vampire business," he says coldly.

I blink.

"It is best if you avoid them as much as possible, but don't go out of your way to do it or it will be noticeable. We may both be the leaders of our own House, but vampires like discovering possible weaknesses. They will always want something they can use against the other person." He opens his mouth to say more, but I am quicker.

"Are you saying I'm a weakness?"

His mouth closes and he grins instead. "Nothing about you is weak."

No, no. Flirting won't get him out of this.

"Tell me what you mean," I say firmly.

He gets up and walks over to the window. It overlooks the green field that stretches out next to the mansion until it hits a high brick wall. With his back turned to me I can see the subtle tension in his shoulders; he is stressed.

I get up as well but stand behind him instead of next to him.

"Vampires can switch off their emotions. When you live long enough, you accumulate enough negative feelings that become too much of a burden. It is a way for the body to protect itself, I think, but it can be controlled. We can ensure we feel nothing. Feelings are seen as a weakness, caring as well. If you care about something or someone, it can be used against you, right?"

I nod, even though he can't see me.

"She can't know I care about anyone." He turns to me. "So, it is important you act like you're simply my employee. Nothing more. In fact, if you can act a little bit disgusted like you did the first time we met, that would be great." His grin is back.

I smirk. "That shouldn't be hard." I take a small step forward, standing closer to him. "You care about me, huh? Is there a way I can use that against you? More scones maybe?"

"You believe one of the most powerful vampires can be manipulated into giving you something and you choose scones?" His left eyebrow twitches.

"I'm easy to please."

"I'll keep that in mind." The look in his eyes is intense.

He usually has that look in his eyes around me, but I am not certain at all if it means anything. There have been moments where our gazes lingered, or when I'd entered the library and shortly after Oliver would be there as well, browsing a bunch of books before settling opposite me, staring at the letters

but never turning a single page. Moments where I believed he feels a sprinkle of what I feel for him, despite having tried to suppress those feelings. But, to my surprise, he never did anything to really cross that line. Even though he is the type of man who goes for what he wants without hesitation. Which has led me to believe he is simply putting on an act.

Except that now he's admitted to caring about me and a spark of hope has ignited.

"What about George then? Is he to pretend you're not friends either?" I ask.

"No, she already knows we're friends, but she won't dare touch a werewolf. Well, she would, but not one that was the former alpha."

"Right. And what about Celeste and Lovelace? Should we get them out of here for a few days?"

"No. She would never hurt a child. Never," he says it with such conviction that I'm sure there's a story behind that, but I don't want to know. Not now.

"So it's just me who has a huge target on her back? Lovely. Just what I've always wanted."

"You'll be fine. She doesn't know how strong you are yet. But she'll see soon enough and respect you for it. Anything that can be considered a weakness, don't show it. She'll want to play mind games. So will Harlan, but in a different way. With Aura, be vague so that she doesn't know she's gotten to you. She'll ask you questions to bait you. Don't lie, though. She'll know. With Harlan, use force."

I smile at the thought. "Really? I can kick a vamp's butt?"

"Indeed. As long as it's Harlan, you can go all out." There's a small line between his eyebrows that disappears quickly. "Just try not to be alone with him. Just in case."

"Right. So no emotions, use violence, and avoid them?" I frown as I contemplate achieving all those things.

“They also have good hearing, so if you do need me for whatever reason, use our inside voices.” He taps his temple.

“Gotcha.”

“But only for emergencies. They are also here because they are interested in the Retrieval Unit, so it is unavoidable that they’ll have an interest in you, but hopefully it won’t last long.”

All of this sounds like he isn’t able to protect me. I realise he doesn’t want them to know he cares for me, but vampires have ancient—and ridiculous—rules to follow. Rules that could easily come between me and him. Would he protect his status over me?

I’m not sure I want to know.

“And when are they arriving?”

His smile is charming, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Tonight.”



## Chapter 4

*“Feedings should always be in a controlled environment  
and with written consent from the food itself unless in  
self-defence or defence of others. Failure to comply  
will result in death. From both parties.” ~ Vampire Protocol*

### Handbook



“THAT SOON?” I ASK, as I feel my mood plummeting to new depths.

He leans back in his chair. “You’ve been away, remember? They informed me two days ago. This visit has been on the agenda for a while, so I couldn’t decline.”

“But you still won’t tell me what it’s about,” I say, not phrasing it as a question.

He simply gives me a blank stare.

Oh, how very vampire.

“And any word from the Red Roses?” I still don’t like that collective name for the rebel Travellers that are making Oliver’s life a misery—and mine, since Wynter is their leader. The name makes it sound like they are a gardening club.

“No new threats. It’s been very quiet, actually. Unfortunately, we’re still no closer to finding out where they are and who all of their members are. It could be a group of five Travellers or fifty.”

The last time I saw Wynter she told me about a Traveller who—My eyes widen and I lean forward. “Sinclair.”

“What about him?” Oliver raises one of his perfectly shaped eyebrows.

“I don’t think he’s a Traveller.”

Oliver’s limited range of expressions suddenly becomes wider as he looks at me as if I’m batshit crazy. “He’s Travelled several parallel universes in the last week. How do you suppose he did that? Wishful thinking?”

I smirk at him. “No. He’s got gadgets.”

“How do you mean gadgets?”

Sinclair’s words about the vampires flash in my mind like a neon sign. The visit from the vampires, could it be related? Is that why Wynter is interested?

I swallow. There’s no point lying anyway. George registered the gadgets as soon as he brought Sinclair downstairs.

“He has something he used as a weapon, and he switched places with George during the arrest. I think he used a device for that. And I also think he used a device to create portals.”

Oliver’s mouth twitches. “Is this possible? No, it can’t be,” he says, as if more to himself than to me.

We get up at the same time.

“I’m faster.” I hold out my hand.

“Let’s find out.” He grins at me. The next instant he’s no longer in front of me. The door opens and only a blur registers in the corner of my eyes.

“Damn,” I mutter and teleport in front of the hidden door to our mutual office. It is really just a room with a large TV screen linked to a typewriter, and a conference table with chairs. There are also two cells in the back where we hold any arrested rogue Travellers—in this case Sinclair.

Oliver crashes into me as soon as I appear, and I would have fallen to the floor if not for him. He holds me like he’s dipping me.

I glare at him as a smile tugs on his lips.

“Fallen for me?” he asks.

Normally, I would fling a snide remark into his face, partly as a way of protecting myself and partly because it’s fun. But I don’t think I can do that now. Especially since I’ll have to hide my feelings completely in the next few days.

“Completely and utterly,” I whisper as I closely observe his reaction.

There is a flicker of emotion behind his eyes, and the emerging smile on his face disappears as he presses his lips together. Without saying anything, he brings me to an upright position and steps back, his arms slowly moving across my back as he pulls away. Then he breaks out into a grin and touches my chin.

“Thought so. Nobody can resist me, you know?” He doesn’t await a reply and turns to the bookcase. He pulls out the golden book in the middle, and the door opens.

My heart drops to the floor.

Damn. Unrequited love is the worst. It’s probably a good thing those vamps are visiting. It will allow me to get over him. Hopefully. Maybe.

We enter the meeting room where we always discuss our cases. George is at the table with the file forms in front of him and the gadgets next to them. They are already tagged.

George's dark hair is tousled and damp, and he's obviously just showered. A heavy perfume wafts in our direction; clearly his attempt to annihilate the fish smell.

He also hasn't wasted any time filling in the forms. Luckily for me, he actually likes the paperwork. I always procrastinate until Oliver bribes me with cheesecake.

Right now, though, I'm not so sure I appreciate George's due diligence. I'm still concerned about Sinclair's words as well as his connection to Wynter. Or more accurately, Wynter's connection to him.

George looks up and nods at Oliver. "Good to see you again."

"Good job on the arrest," Oliver says. "I hope it wasn't complete torture being stuck with Chester and Monday."

"Hey!" I say.

George shrugs. "Only a little bit."

I cross my arms. "As if you're such a walk in the park."

George grunts something incoherent, but there is the hint of a small smile on his face.

"How's the prisoner?" Oliver asks.

"Quiet."

"Monday seems to think he's not a Traveller." Oliver pulls out one of the chairs opposite George and sits down. I choose to lean against the desk.

"That's not possible." George narrows his eyes at me. "How else did he Travel to all those parallel universes?"

I nod at the devices next to the typewriter.

George pushes back his chair as if they're contagious. "That's not—there are no devices that can create portals. Trust me, we would know about it."

"Unless Sinclair is the first to create them." It would explain why Wynter instructed me to keep him alive. Such an ability is world-changing. It would also explain why any vampires would take an interest. They care about power, and being able to visit other worlds and alter time is powerful.

Not that it makes sense. Oliver seemed genuinely surprised about the gadgets, and it's not like the visiting vamps can know about Sinclair. Not unless they'd had a run-in with him before. Perhaps that's why he is scared of them.

"How, though?" George asks.

"He already has a device that made him switch places with you. That shouldn't exist either. Maybe he didn't create them, maybe he got them from another world, I don't know." I turn to Oliver. "What do you know about Sinclair other than what was in his file?"

"Nothing. I know what you know. He got on the radar of the UA ever since he attempted several Alterations involving notorious serial killers. The Chrono Unit undid the Alterations that caused the deaths of some of those serial killers, and he eventually gave up. After that, he started stealing famous artefacts from history. That is all the info in the file and all that is known about him."

Oliver has been working closely with Unparalleled Affairs for a long time, and though he's been involved with all its branches, it's the Chrono Unit he's had his eye on for a while now. He wants to make changes, and I get that because so do I. I'm just not sure if the ideas we have align.

I also can't help but wonder if he's a member of the Board or if he simply really wants to be on it. The Board are the top leaders of the Unparalleled Affairs. Rumours are they consist of a vampire, werewolf, human, and Traveller. Nobody knows who the members are, especially since they change every few years and it's all very hush-hush. They make big decisions.

One day, I hope to be part of that Board. But I know that won't happen anytime soon. If at all. If I can change Oliver's mind about what's best for Travellers, then I won't need the Board. I can't underestimate how influential he is.

"He seemed afraid of vampires. Of you," I say.

Oliver's handsome face lights up. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

I chuckle. "Of course you'd take that as a compliment."

"Of course."

"We could find out," George mutters as he leans forward to look at the devices.

We turn to him. "You want to try out one of the devices, George?" I quirk my eyebrow at him. "And if you get your head blown off?"

"Good point." He looks up at me. "Why don't you do it?"

"Oh, sorry. Being headless is so out of season."

"How about we ask the one person who can actually tell us?" Oliver gets up. "I'm curious to learn why he mentioned vampires to you."

I nod.

"I'll finish the paperwork. Three's a crowd." George continues scribbling on the form.

"Just admit it, you love the paperwork too much."

He raises both his eyebrows, which is pretty much the equivalent of sticking out his tongue. I guess we are becoming buddies.

Behind the wall with the TV are two cells. It has a bed, a toilet and even a small table with a newspaper. Sinclair is on the bed, leaning against the wall

while humming a random tune. He doesn't look up when we take place in front of the glass, but he does stop humming.

"Welcome to your future, Sinclair. I hope you like being imprisoned," Oliver says in a low voice that is intimidating enough to scare a bear out of hibernation.

Sinclair scoffs. "I won't be in prison for long."

"Do you have plans?" Oliver raises an eyebrow, a faint smile on his lips. I have very rarely seen him fazed. Not even when we encountered a dragon.

"Not really, but I'm pretty sure I'll be dead soon." This time he looks up at Oliver, hatred in his eyes.

"And who will kill you? The vampires?" Oliver has changed his intonation so that he sounds amused.

Sinclair looks away again. "As if you don't know."

"I really don't. Also, why would we want you dead? Is it because of your devices?"

Sinclair's eyes are narrowed as he studies Oliver's face. He gets up and saunters over to the glass that separates us, his eyes still on Oliver.

It's like he's checking to see if Oliver is telling the truth. I know he is. If he's aware of some sort of issues with vampires, he would have told me.

"He's not lying," I say, drawing Sinclair's attention. "But I'm interested to know why you think the mayor is involved in this. Is it because he's simply the mayor?"

"No. I am aware that there's been contact with your office," he says to Oliver.

At this, Oliver's eyebrows come together. It is his way of gasping in surprise, which is pretty much what I'm doing.

The mole. There's still a mole here and it's someone who works with Oliver.

My mind immediately goes to Summer. But would Oliver's? They have some sort of affection for each other. And why would Summer go behind his back?

"What do the vampires want from you exactly? How have you crossed paths with them? You have to give us more if you want our aid," I say.

Both men turn to me momentarily.

I ignore Oliver's steely gaze and focus on Sinclair. "Now."

Sinclair's expression changes to less hostile and he relaxes his shoulders. "I used to be a Tinkerer for the UA," he says.

This time it's my turn to frown. "Really? Why is that not in the file?"

"Because Sinclair isn't my real name and no, I'm not telling you what is. Anyway, I came across loads of devices from all kinds of parallel universes. There are so many interesting ones." His voice becomes lighter and a spark ignites in his eyes. "Like, we use typewriters and holo-screens, but PU-39613 has these amazing devices called computers and—"

"Get to the point," Oliver says with a dose of menace.

Sinclair glares at him, then focusses on me. "I've been working on a device that can create time portals. I suggested to my superior that I thought I could make one and I got the unofficial request to work on it from higher up."

Oliver's jaw tenses. So does mine. If Travellers are dangerous because they can create portals, then why would they suggest making devices that can do the same? Granted, it's not really the portals that are dangerous, but rather what people's intentions are once they enter the portals.

"The idea was that it meant that the UA no longer had need for Travellers working for the Chrono Unit. Instead, they could simply use a device."

My stomach makes an unpleasant flip. “Did they intend to...get rid of Travellers completely?”

Sinclair shakes his head. “I didn’t think that at first, but then my office was ransacked. Luckily, I had carried my research home. I’m a bit of a workaholic,” he added with a blush. “And not long after that, I got attacked by two vampires. It’s hardly a coincidence. I only escaped because I used one of my devices. I’ve been on the run ever since, trying to...well, Tinker. It’s what I do.” He shrugs.

“These are serious allegations,” Oliver says after a pause. “Why did you never go to the authorities?”

Sinclair scoffs. “Are you mad? I’m fairly sure my superiors arranged it. How else would vampires know what I’m doing at my little desk in the Parallel Division of the UA? It’s rumoured that the head of the UA is on the Board. And if so, there will also be a vampire on that Board. I’m guessing that’s how he or she knew. And I figured that vampire was you.”

“It’s not,” Oliver says, surprising me with that information.

*Do you know who is? I ask him.*

*No, but I might be able to find out.*

So much for being a secret organisation.



## Chapter 5

*“There are so many treasures in the world. Let alone  
in any of the other worlds. I want to uncover them  
all.” ~ Sinclair*



I REALLY NEED WYNTER to contact me so I can find out how this connects to her. It may also be time for me to tell Oliver who Wynter really is. Surely, we could work together and find out how to solve this mess. Also, I really hate keeping this from him. We promised no more secrets.

Then again, it's not like he's sharing with me when it comes to the vamps.

When we get back to the desk, there are two Georges. I blink at them. They are both dressed in the same brown trousers and white shirt.

“You see that too, right?” Oliver asks me.

“Yeah. George?”

They both turn to us. The one closest to us holds up a device.

“I may have accidentally pushed a button,” he says while the other George waves at us.

“You know, I think I like the other one better. Can we keep that one?” I ask Oliver with an innocent smile.

“Very funny,” George grumbles and presses the button again. Nothing happens. He frowns. “Uh-oh.”

“I’m sure it’s only temporary,” I say as I approach the other George.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hello. Would you like a cup of tea?” I ask him.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one,” he says.

I purse my lips.

“Interesting,” Oliver says as he comes up behind me.

“I think he’s like a blank slate, a simple copy of you,” I say to George, who has now also ventured to the other side of the table as he studies the man who looks identical to him.

“I’m way more handsome than he is,” he says.

Oliver holds out his hand for the device. George gives it to him without even looking; he’s too transfixed on his copy.

The device looks like a remote with several buttons on it. Oliver bravely presses a few until suddenly the copy vanishes into thin air.

“Now, that’s just rude. I was about to offer him biscuits as well.” I shake my head.

“Which button did you press?” George asks as he takes the device out of Oliver’s hand.

“This one, I think,” Oliver replies.

“He does have some really interesting gadgets,” I say, tapping my finger against my lips.

“And if he truly knows how to create something that can do what you can do, he’s quite dangerous,” Oliver says. He turns to George. “Put these in that locked cabinet over there. We need to keep these safe.”

“What’s the plan, exactly?” George asks, as he does what he’s told. He has good hearing, so he no doubt heard our conversation with Sinclair.

“I don’t trust Aura,” Oliver says. “And the fact that vampires are involved with him and I didn’t know about it, doesn’t sit well with me.”

“But it would sit well with you if you did know about it?” I ask, keeping my voice level.

Oliver stares at me. “If these gadgets fall in the wrong hands—”

“Exactly. But what do you consider wrong hands here?”

George sidles away from us as he makes it back to the other side of the desk.

“I just want Sheffield to be safe. Anyone who goes against that is considered the bad guy. Regardless of what they are.”

“You’d really value humans over vampires?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “I value the people of my city. I’m not the mayor because I enjoy a power trip; I do actually care about this city and those who reside here.” There is a little wave of power that emanates from him. Immediately, I feel the softness I always feel when I focus on his energy. It feels like velvet against my skin. I guess I’ve pissed him off with that question.

“Okay. Good. Then tell me what the plan is here because I don’t think Aura DuVeil’s visit is a coincidence.”

“It’s not. She’s shown interest in Travellers before. She says she would like to know more about this new task force, and she wants to strengthen both our positions.” He eyes me.

“In what way?”

George coughs and then leaves the room as if it's on fire. That's not odd at all. I turn my attention back to Oliver. He seems unperturbed. He always seems unperturbed.

“In what way?” I repeat.

“She wants us to get married,” he says.

For a very naive moment I think he's talking about us, but then I realise he means him and her. Right. Of course.

“Great. Great. Great.”

The corner of his mouth turns upwards as he flashes me that grin of his. “You just said great three times, so I'm guessing it's not.”

“That depends. Are you happy about it?” Just because Oliver flirts like a baboon in heat doesn't mean he fancies me. I have no idea what he really wants and if that includes a partner. All I know is that he had a family once. A family he outlived.

“I do not wish to marry her, no.” He leans forward. “Even if I do come across as a power-hungry vampire who only cares about other vampires.”

Ah, there it is again.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you.” I offer him a small smile.

He blinks a few times, then the hard gaze in his eyes softens as he presses his lips together. “Hmm. Guess I can't stay mad at you for long. That is definitely a weakness.”

I chuckle. “I promise I won't use it against you.”

“Perhaps not on purpose,” he says softly. “I'll go talk to Summer and find out if Sinclair's claims are true. We still only have his word for it.”

“I know.” I still can’t help but wonder about this mole. Could it really be Summer? “How long has Summer worked for you?”

He raises his eyebrow. “Since she was twenty-one. Why?”

“Just curious. She seems very devoted. Does she ever take a day off?”

He chuckles. “No, even when I tell her to. I’m relieved about that, because she knows what she’s doing. She’s been with me for a while. I saved her when she was in trouble.”

“With a vampire?”

“Yes. I won’t say more than that, though. It’s not my story to tell.”

“I understand.” She does seem incredibly loyal to him, and why wouldn’t she be? Unless she thinks she’s helping him by setting certain things in motion behind his back. But what exactly? And why go about it that way?

“You have been working hard the past three days. You should relax,” Oliver says.

It was going to be hard to do that with the vampires arriving tonight. “We won’t be able to play chess, will we?”

The warmth in his eyes turns cold. “No.”

“Then, allow me to do this,” I say and lean forward until I can rest my chin on his shoulder and wrap my arms around him.

After a brief moment of hesitation, he hugs me back.

He smells like cinnamon.

“It will be okay. It’s only for a few days,” he says.

“I know.” I give him a smile when I pull back. “Be careful.”

He nods, his light-coloured eyes scanning my face. “You too.”

I go back downstairs and reach the bottom of the open staircase just as one of the front doors opens.

Lovelace is the first to enter. When I first met her, she had adorable braids, but now her hair is cut short and auburn coloured. I don't want her to be easily recognisable, just in case. She's wearing a lime green backpack and a purple dress. She's also wearing an eyepatch over her right eye. Her face lights up when she sees me.

"Mum!" she shouts when she sees me and practically jumps in my arms.

It still makes me happy each time I hear her voice. It wasn't too long ago that she wouldn't speak at all. She's also signing less now that she's getting quite good at lip reading.

My parents are less enthusiastic but that's because I see them once a week, so my absence these past three days means nothing to them. Celeste, however, gives me an enthusiastic hug as well. She's a few years older than Lovelace, and as a twelve-year-old, she has been suffering from mood swings, so I'm glad she shows me affection.

"Poof, poof." It comes from her backpack and when Lovelace turns around, Poofie sticks out his fluffy head. He resembles an owl, except that he doesn't have wings and has long ears and a tail. He makes purring noises when I pet him and closes his big eyes. Clearly, he's missed me too.

We sit down in the living room where there's a fireplace, though there's currently no fire burning. There is another seating area all the way in the back where Oliver usually has his morning coffee.

It took me a while to find this place cosy, because it's so capacious. But since me and Lovelace moved in, as well as Chester, it has been lively in this part of Oliver's mansion. We have Mr Turtleneck and Poofie, and Celeste and Lovelace are always playing.

Summer brings us some tea. It's not really in her job description, but she seems to enjoy making tea when there's company, even when it's my

parents. She still hasn't warmed up to me, so I hope it's not because she spits in the tea or something.

However, despite the way she is with me, she clearly cares for Oliver. Perhaps I'm barking up the wrong tree by suspecting her. It's just that I can't think of who else is close enough to Oliver to be the mole.

I wonder how she feels about the vampires coming. Especially when Aura DuVeil wants to marry Oliver. I know Summer doesn't have those kinds of feelings for him, but I imagine she'll not be thrilled.

Lovelace tells me about visiting PU-13029 where they have these really big plants with quick vines that can shoot out at someone. She went there to practise rapid teleportation.

I know that world and I also know those plants are carnivorous and shoot out to grab you and eat you.

"But the people there are in trouble," she adds. "Maybe you can help them."

"Why? What do they need?" I ask, sipping on some Earl Grey with a hint of milk.

My mother waves her manicured hand. "It really was nothing," she starts, but because Lovelace isn't facing her, she can't hear her and goes on.

"There was this man with a monster and he wanted all their food, I think, and otherwise he would kill them." Her eyes were wide as she said this.

I glared at my mother.

When I was younger, she'd let me create the portals and then go with me. When I was capable enough she would not interfere and I was on my own with whatever 'mission' she'd given me. At some point, I was even sent alone. Lovelace was still at the stage where my mother would join her, but I had the uncomfortable suspicion that this was the first non-interfering mission of many more to come.

“I didn’t know he was going to show up. And that’s not the point. It was not our business, so we left them and focussed on the assignment, which Lovelace passed with flying colours.”

In most worlds, the inhabitants don’t know what Travellers are and in a lot of them our appearance is too strange. We look like aliens compared to them. It means that in most worlds we have to stay out of sight.

My mother was the best teacher but I wasn’t—and still am not—a fan of some of the ways she taught me. I knew there’d come a point where I wouldn’t feel comfortable leaving Lovelace to train with her.

Now I just have to find a way to break it to her gently.

Just not today.

“I’m very fast now when I teleport. I’m going to create portals just as fast and maybe even try Illusions too.”

“Now, now. Don’t put too many irons in one basket,” my mother says.

Lovelace misses that too because she’s still focussed on me. It’s probably a good thing that she doesn’t pick up on my mother’s wrong sayings.

Poofie has hopped out of Lovelace’s backpack and edges closer to one of the antique cabinets. He eyes the legs hungrily.

“Some Travellers can do both. Can you do both?” Lovelace asks.

I chuckle. “No, I can’t. I’m terrible at them. Dad tried to teach me, but I’m hopeless.”

My dad smiles. “I still enjoyed teaching you.” He’s deaf as well, but speaks as easily as he signs.

Poofie opens his wide mouth. Despite his small stature, he can take large chunks out of furniture. Which he usually does.

“No!” I use my stern voice and Poofie stares at me, his mouth still wide open. His gaze returns to the legs of the cabinet.

“Noooo,” I say more slowly.

Earlier, George brought a bag of logs for the fireplace inside. I point to it and Poofie hops over excitedly and jumps in. All we see is a small heap moving around in the bag with the occasional chomping sound. Last week he was a fan of anything metal, now it’s wood.

“Anyway,” my mother says. “We should probably go. Is Oliver around?”

And to think she hates vampires. I can’t help but smile.

“He’s busy working. Sorry.”

“For what?” she asks as if insulted. “I’m not saying I want to see him, I was just curious.”

“Right.” I chuckle.

“Come, Pip, darling. We’ve got to get home. I want to catch that new programme about gardening in the nude. It’s hilarious.”

My father makes a face. “It’s really not.”

Nope, I wouldn’t be interested in other people’s hoes and hand trowels either.

I walk my parents to the door and wave them off. The driveway in front of Oliver’s mansion is large enough for ten parked cars. It has black iron gates separating it from the road.

My mother is usually the one that drives and I watch them get in their Ford Thunderbird. I wave as they drive off and pause in the doorway when I catch a glint of something. Across the street is a parked Pontiac Star Chief with the driver holding something. He quickly rolls up his window, starts the car and drives away.

Was he taking pictures? Of me? Of my parents?

Paparazzi interested in Oliver, probably.

Hopefully.



## Chapter 6

*Favours are not to be requested without  
a fitting payment. This can be in any form.  
Agreements should be honoured or result in  
hostility of any kind. Including to family or loved  
ones. ~ Vampire Protocol Handbook*



THERE IS A WORLD THAT even The Chrono Unit doesn't know exists. I mean, there are probably more, but this is a special one. The world itself decides who to allow in. I've visited it once. I'm fairly sure even my mother isn't aware it exists since it picks and chooses who can sense it. This time, when I close my eyes and focus, I sense it once again and know I'm doing the right thing by visiting.

Sinclair and the vampires have made me nervous. Even though Oliver's advised me to relax, I can't. Visiting this world, The Archive, is the only thing I can think of to gather some information. Talking to Wynter will clarify things as well, but only she can contact me, not the other way around.

Swirls of yellow and orange change the air as I hold out my hands. They grow bigger and bigger until the circle in front of me is big enough to step through. And I do.

There is pressure on every part of my body, and pain hits me like arrows. My brain feels like it's filled with cotton. All those sensations disappear

completely when I've gone through the portal, and instead I'm only dizzy and nauseous. I bend forward and gag a few times, but nothing comes up.

There is nothing but an eerie silence. It's like no sounds exist in The Archive. Usually when I create a portal, I can decide where it will appear. It's a feeling, but I feel it in my mind instead of my body. With The Archive, I feel nothing and always end up in the same spot: a narrow corridor where the walls are lined with black bookcases that are filled with tomes. I can't help but wonder if they contain more than just words.

I adjust my dress and start heading towards the bright door opening at the end of this corridor. The only sound I hear are my own footsteps.

The last time I was here was when I was nineteen, but I still remember this part, especially how I was feeling then. The walls lined with tomes are something I could still picture before coming here, even the room I'm about to enter.

The only thing I can't remember at all is the face of The Archiver. I can't even remember if it was a humanoid. Hell, it could have been a talking squirrel. I just know it's a man.

My heartbeat speeds up as I approach the doorway. As soon as I step into the room, there's noise. It highlights the contrast between the corridor and this room. It's as if the hallway is a vacuum. Here, I can hear the crackling of the fire, the ticking of the old clock on the wall. My own breathing no longer stands out to me and my body picks up on the warmth from the fire. I can feel as well. Something I also couldn't do on my way over. No temperature, no sounds, no life.

The Archiver stands by one of the bookcases in this room. It looks like a cluttered, cosy library with a red rug in the middle and paintings that evoke some sense of cosiness but for the life of me, I can't explain what I am seeing. They remind me of Illusions. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if The Archiver is an Illusion himself.

He's...well, I wasn't sure. I see him, but I don't really see him.

“Good day, Traveller,” he says in a low voice. It is warm and smooth, like whisky.

“Hello, Archiver,” I say. My voice sounds strange compared to his.

“It is nice to see you again. Thank you for visiting.” He is handling one of the tomes. A dim light shines from the pages.

“Thank you for having me, Archiver.”

“I collect all the information about the worlds that exist in every universe.”

“Yes, I know,” I say.

“Then you understand there is a vast amount of information here.”

Understatement of the century.

“Yes, I do.”

“And you have questions.”

Plenty.

“Yes, Archiver.”

“Once upon a time, Travellers would gather here. And I would send them to worlds that needed help. There were many corridors that led to this room, and they were all used frequently. It was actually quite busy here once. There were always sounds, always company.”

I say nothing.

“Now, there is an aching silence ringing louder than anything.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He pauses. “I may not be able to tell you everything, but you may ask your questions.”

I bite my lip, unsure where to start. “I want to help the Travellers in my world. Can my world become a welcome place for them too?”

“It can,” he says.

I wait for him to explain, but he doesn’t say anything else. Technically, he has answered my question.

“I’m worried about the vampires,” I say. It’s not a question, but I’m afraid I’ll have to choose my words carefully or he’ll answer in a way that’s not helpful. “Are they a threat to Travellers?”

He flips another page in the tome and slowly strolls to the closest table. It is filled with more tomes and a green lamp.

“The vampires are drawn to power. If they had to destroy everything in the world in order to get more powerful, they would,” he says.

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’m afraid Sinclair is right.” I take a deep breath. “If the vampires are going to cause serious problems for Travellers, can I stop them?”

“Some things are fixed, others are not.”

Not cryptic at all. Super helpful.

“The vampires don’t just use force. They are cunning. One must be cunning as well, in order to foil their plans,” he continues.

Be cunning. Okay, I can do that. I think.

“Also know that you needn’t save the world on your own. There are many players on the board. Some disguised enemies, some disguised allies.”

I swallow.

“You need to remember to stay true to yourself, Monday Moody.” He looks at me for a second and I realise I still can’t see him. He’s looking at me and I know he is, but there’s nothing about his appearance that registers. Yet,

while we're locked in eye contact, I feel a warmth travel through my body and seep into my soul. It feels odd and dissipates when he looks away again.

"That is all," he says, signalling the end of my visit.

I bow my head. "Thank you so much for your time, Archiver." Before leaving the room, though, I have to ask one more question.

"Will The Archive one day be what it was?"

He stands very still. "I hope so."



AFTER I'M BACK IN MY bedroom again, I am forced to run to the bathroom and throw up. Some portals are worse than others, especially when I travel through them in a short time span. I brush my teeth and touch up my makeup before stepping into my bedroom again.

I move to open the window and let in some fresh air as I'm still feeling queasy. The moment I open the window a white origami butterfly flutters through the window. I hold up the palm of my hand where it settles and then completely flattens.

The only connection I have to origami are my playing cards, which are basically powerful Illusions, courtesy of Chester. But this is the first time someone has actually sent an Illusion like this to me.

It is written in calligraphy and only has the word 'church' in it. I recognise the handwriting as belonging to Wynter, and I know exactly what church she means.

The invitation couldn't have come at a better time. It's time to get some answers.

Very few churches are left in England, as religion is something of the past. But a couple of abandoned churches are still scattered throughout the country. The church where I met both Oliver and Wynter, though on separate occasions, is not far from my parents' semi-detached home.

It's a relatively warm day so I'm wearing a jacket over my dress. I always carry my playing cards with me and a dagger, but am otherwise not armed. Not that I need a lot; I have my skills.

The church is empty except for Wynter. She's sitting where I first met her. On the front row bench, her back to me.

She's always dressed in white and her black hair is bluntly cut around her shoulders. Just like the first time, I sit behind her. She smells sweet, like flowers.

"I liked your calling card," I say.

She turns around. Her red lips are pulled into a smile. Her eyepatch was black the previous times, but this time it's white.

"Nice to see you again, Mum," she says.

Just like the young Lovelace, she has started calling me that. I'm not sure how to feel about it. I can't help but wonder if she says it to manipulate me. After all, she's not the same person as the young Lovelace and though she's told me that she came back in time to save me, I still can't be sure that that's the truth.

I know she's holding back information, and I don't like it.

"I want to know everything you know about Sinclair," I say.

"Ah, yes. Sinclair and his gadgets."

"Can they really create portals? Allow ordinary people to Travel?"

She smirks. "Yes."

“And the vampires know this?”

“Right again. Keep it up and you win a dishwasher.”

I sigh. “This is bad. What will they do with Sinclair?”

“What do you think?”

“I doubt they’ll braid his hair and swap recipes but they won’t kill him, will they? He created those devices. Wouldn’t they want to use his brilliant mind?”

“Vampires aren’t stupid either. All they need is one device, and before you know it, they’ll have copied it. Trust me. Sinclair is nothing but a threat. They want to be the only ones with those kinds of devices. All they care about is—”

“Power. Yeah, I know.” I purse my lips. “I still need to know more. I’ve saved his life, but now what? What do you want with him? What is your plan exactly?”

“You did well by finding him. Keep him safe,” she says and then she’s gone, smoke lingering for a few seconds in the exact spot she was before.



## Chapter 7

*“The taste of blood is more thrilling than anything else  
I’ve ever experienced. It tastes like violence and lust.” ~ Harlan*



I RETURN TO THE MANSION with a head full of thorns. These vampires are turning out to be a real pain and I haven’t even met them yet. Oliver mentioned Aura is interested in Travellers, so it makes sense she’d show up now. I may not be entirely sure of how much I can trust Wynter, but I believe these vamps are up to no good, especially when it comes to Sinclair.

The question is, how can I protect him?

It’s the weekend, so Sinclair won’t be transported until Monday. The vamps arrive tonight. In fact, they might already be here. This means they have two days to kill Sinclair and make it look like they had nothing to do with it.

My throat feels dry.

Would Oliver even suspect them? Would he let them get away with it? He probably won’t even care about someone like Sinclair dying. Or would he?

The Archiver told me to stay true to myself. I’ve always wanted to protect the innocent, whether they were Travellers or not. There may have been times where I’ve failed, but I can’t let this be one of them. In this case, Sinclair is the innocent. I have to protect him.

Before going through the gates, I glance over my shoulder and spot the same Pontiac Star Chief I saw earlier. This time I clearly see the camera

he's holding in his hands. He lowers the camera as he realises I'm looking at him and we stare at each other for a few seconds.

The moment I dash towards his car, he starts his engine and drives off. I nearly reach his door and touch it, but he's accelerating too fast. I memorise his number plate, though, and if he really is a reporter, it will be easy to find out.

My to-do list is getting quite full.

I go inside and saunter into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich. My stomach is rumbling and I'm starving. Since Sinclair's arrest I've been nothing but distracted. But being distracted from food, that's just blasphemy.

Just as I am about to take a bite of my simple cheese sandwich, Summer strides into the kitchen.

"Ah, there you are," she says with a sigh.

"Here I am," I say and take a big bite. I refrain from moaning, but come pretty close to doing so.

"The vampires are here. You should go to Oliver's library and join them. They want to meet you."

I stop chewing for a second, then continue.

"Aw gogga binda da dandih," I mumble with a full mouth.

She shoots daggers at me through her eyes. "What did you say?"

I point at my sandwich.

"No, leave it. This is important to Oliver. Come with me now."

Summer is a very pretty woman, but when she's angry, she resembles a disappointed chipmunk.

I finish chewing and swallow my bite. “Listen, do you really want me to go up there and impress those vampires while my stomach is rumbling? They have good hearing, it will be like hearing a rumbling lorry in between conversation. No, thanks.”

She smooths out her hair, something she does when she’s annoyed. She mostly does it around me.

“Fine. Could you at least put your stupid turtle in a cage or something? He’s still following me wherever I go.” She points behind her.

Mr Turtleneck is on the kitchen table, staring at us.

“How is he so fast anyway? I swear I see him everywhere.” She shivers.

“He’s a special turtle,” I say.

“Well, maybe you should stop bringing animals from other worlds. The other day Poofie took a bite out of my makeup table. It was not appreciated.”

“I’m sorry. He’s got a big appetite.”

“A good reason to send him back where he came from,” she says while blinking rapidly with her false eyelashes. Also something she does when she’s upset.

“I will take that under advisement,” I say with a smile.

She grunts and storms out of the kitchen.

I wink at Mr Turtleneck. “Don’t worry, mate. You keep doing your thing.”

If only Poofie ate organic material. Then I could feed the vamps to him. Then again, he’d probably regurgitate them.

I finish my sandwich, drink a glass of lemonade and go up to my room first to freshen up and make sure I look okay. I don’t want to give these visitors any reason to think less of me or find a way to put me down.

Oliver's library is filled with bookcases and a cosy nook at the far end of the room where there are a fireplace, a chess set, two sofas and an armchair. He also has a cart with all kinds of liquor and there is even a knitting basket in the corner.

It is my favourite room in this wing of the mansion. I don't visit the other wing, since that's where he does all his business.

I focus on my breathing the entire way there, keeping my heart rate normal. They might want to ask me questions and find out what my weaknesses are, but I want to do the same with them.

If they think they can just take out Sinclair, they don't know who they are messing with.

There is chatter coming from the room and the double doors are open.

The sitting area is obscured by bookcases so I can't see them yet. I've taken a few steps when I catch movement to my right. A man with strawberry blond hair and piercing eyes stares back at me. His stubble suits him and the predatory grin on his face is the only thing I dislike about his appearance. This must be Harlan.

Within a few strides he's at my side.

"Hi, there," I say.

"You must be Monday, the Traveller," he says in a rough voice.

"Indeed. And you are?" I want him to believe Oliver has told me very little about him. Either that, or that I've already forgotten. Message: you're not important.

His grin grows into a smile that reveals his teeth. He holds out his hand and I shake it. His thumb has a ring with a claw on it. If he bends his thumb, the claw extends past the joint. Is it used to make cuts? Vampires used to drink blood in order to feed on people's life force, but it's seriously taboo. Is this

his way of saying he drinks blood and feeds on life essence this way? That he can do whatever he wants?

Oliver was right. He is dangerous.

“Harlan,” he says. “But you can call me whatever you like, Sugar.”

“Well, you can’t, so it’s Monday for you.” I add a cheeky grin.

He’s still holding my hand and uses his other one to grab my elbow and bring my palm closer to his face. He smells my hand and moves down to my wrist. He bends his thumb and he traces the sharp point of his ring over one of the visible veins.

He looks up to gauge my reaction, probably hoping to see panic, but instead I smile at him. It’s quicker to use my hands when creating portals, but I can do so without as well. The portal under him grows and grows until one foot slides through, causing him to let me go and fall to the floor at an odd angle. I use my hands this time to enlarge the portal and make him fall through it.

He grunts and sends me one look of pure anger before he disappears into the swirls of yellow and orange.

“What’s going on?” Oliver rounds one of the bookcases and observes me and the portal in front of me. Next to him stands a woman in a red pants suit and an elaborate hairdo. Her hair is dark and her eyes light. She has a scar on her neck.

Her eyes drink in every bit of me.

“Is everything alright?” Her voice is feminine and pleasant.

“I’m afraid Harlan was a bit rude. I had to give him a time out.”

I catch the quiver at the corner of Oliver’s mouth as he is trying not to smile.

Aura glances from me to the portal to Oliver. “My, my. Your descriptions of Monday have not done her justice. She is quite formidable.”

“I appreciate that,” I say.

“I’m Aura DuVeil. I’m from the House of Spring. And I see you’re already getting on with Harlan.” She produces a playful smile, adding to her beauty. She looks like the model of all models.

“Monday Moody, pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’ll go fetch Harlan. The world I sent him to doesn’t have the highest survival rate.”

Aura lets out a delicate chuckle. “He could do with a challenge.”

Without looking at Oliver, I jump through the portal. Going through another one so soon after visiting The Archive is going to be problematic, but I have no choice. Perhaps I shouldn’t have sent him to PU-88763 but I had to make a statement. Harlan needs to know he should not mess with me.



## Chapter 8

*Status and appearances will determine the strength of  
a position and benefits for the vampire and  
loved ones. Therefore status and appearances must be  
seen as most vital. Even more vital than relationships  
themselves. ~ Vampire Protocol Handbook*



AFTER STEPPING THROUGH this portal, I don't throw up or even become nauseous. Instead, there is a loud ringing in my ears and spots dance in front of my eyes.

I don't want to be vulnerable with a pissed off vampire nearby, but I have no choice if I am to retrieve him.

I don't think Aura will take it well if I end up killing her precious right-hand man.

Or maybe she will. I don't really get vampires.

Grains of sand hit my face as the wind picks up and my small-heeled shoes do not fare well in sand. Alright, I admit it. I've definitely made a mistake by sending Harlan here. But it's the first thing that popped into my mind.

I'm definitely at a disadvantage right now, unless he's been eaten by a giant sand worm.

The spots are slowly diminishing and so is the ringing in my ears. I can't hear or see very well, but it's better than not seeing or hearing anything. I close the portal above me without moving my hands. It's not like we can jump up into the portal.

I turn to search for Harlan when something hard hits me in my side. The air is knocked out of my lungs and I fall into the sand.

I can make out enough to know that Harlan is on top of me, his eyes completely black. "I'm going to enjoy drinking every last drop of your blood," he says, but it sounds distorted and it takes me a lot of effort to process his words.

Since I'm struggling to get back my breath, I can't react as composed and cool as I want.

"That's not smart," I wheeze. "How will you go back without me?"

He freezes and his eyes return to normal.

"Also," I say, this time without sounding like I'm having an asthma attack, "I didn't mean to kill you, just to teach you a little lesson. You were being awfully rude."

He gets up, his body still tense. When he yanks me to my feet, he makes sure I fall against him and snakes his arm around my waist.

"I think," he breathes heavily as he runs the sharp ring along my neck, "I'll just have a little taste."

"See. You're doing it again." I teleport behind him and kick him in the back of his knees and he falls into the sand.

Nothing is seen for miles except for hills of sand and perfectly round boulders that aren't really boulders. Hidden deep below us are the giant earthworms that eat much bigger prey than us.

We are not in direct danger and if Harlan wants to play, we can play. Anything that delays me going through a portal again is a good thing. I am

worried that if I open up a portal to Aura and Oliver, I'll fall to their feet temporarily blind and deaf. Talk about showing weakness.

The next moment, Harlan is a blur. He tackles me so quickly that I don't respond in time. Normally, I would be able to see it coming, but my eyesight is still compromised.

He grabs me before I can hit the ground and grins at me while he holds me in his arms. It reminds me of the first time I met Oliver, except that Harlan is far more of an ass than Oliver was then. I think. I didn't really like Oliver much at first.

"All this playing makes me peckish," he says, eyeing my neck again.

"And here I thought drinking blood is the biggest sin a vampire can commit."

He raises an eyebrow. "Only if other vampires find out. The ones that want to take you down can use it against you, but otherwise, all's fair." His lips brush my neck.

That's it.

I draw on the power in my core and slow down time. It takes me a lot of effort, and I always imagine pulling on the strings of time. The pain is sharp and it feels like cuts all over my body. It becomes more intense the longer I do this. But it's the only way I can counter his speed. My body may still be as slow as the time I've manipulated, but my mind isn't. I can process his moves at regular speed and react accordingly. He's still faster, but he won't anticipate my reactions.

I reach behind me and twist his hand while I push out from under him. My body moves agonisingly slow so I let go of time, returning to normal speed only for a second or two before slowing down again. It's more painful for me, but I need to do this right. This Harlan is dangerous, and I need to show him he's crossing a line.

I drop to my hands and knees and swing my leg forward towards his. He manages to lift one foot up in time, but not the other and falls flat on his bum.

Time resumes as normal and I get up. “Are you done now?”

He smirks as he gets up. “Only just beginning, Sugar.”

I slow down time as soon as he lunges for me. Instead of standing still, which he’s expecting, I let myself fall in the sand and roll backwards. The unfortunate thing about sand is that it goes everywhere and that isn’t any less true here. I’ll be able to create my own beach if I keep this up.

Still, he catches up quickly and is in front of me in no time. He grabs me by the throat and lifts me to my feet. I gasp in pain as I release time back to its normal self. He smirks at that, probably because he thinks he caused me to gasp.

This took the last bit out of me and everything is dark. The ringing in my ears has seized, but there is a high-pitched tone that makes it hard to focus on any other sounds.

All my skirts and dresses have pockets. This one does too. I reach into the right one and feel for the needle gun with the blue vial. I stick it through the fabric of my skirt and into my leg and squeeze the trigger.

A burning sensation starts in my core and spreads through my chest. My breathing turns shallow and for a moment I hear nothing at all, not even the beating of my own heart.

Then, it all trickles back to me and my senses are fully operational.

“... not passing out, are you? That would be boring?” Harlan says.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I gasp. His grip on my throat is still firm.

“Your energy is sweet,” he says. “Like sugar.”

I focus on the energy in his core and my body gets cold. “Yours is cold,” I utter with difficulty.

“That sounds about right,” he says.

Everyone’s perception of life energy is different, which means that Aura could have an entirely different sensory reaction to Harlan’s, for example. The fact that his is cold to me doesn’t surprise me in the slightest, nor that I’m sweet to him.

I have a vast amount of life force, all non-humans do, so even if that means I can keep him on his toes for a while, he can do the same to me. We could be here for hours trying to upstage each other.

And like The Archiver said, I have to use my mind more than anything.

I teleport us to the closest boulder and take out the dagger from under my skirt. I nick his side and as he lets go in surprise, I kick him in the gut, right against the boulder.

He laughs as he straightens himself and touches his small wound. He licks the blood off his finger.

Gross.

“You know, I’m beginning to—” his words are cut off as the boulder behind him begins to move. He whirls around and takes a few steps backward, as do I.

There are many parallel worlds I’ve visited, and they contain countless creatures. Some of which I’ve given names because it’s easier. I was seventeen when I first visited this world and my mission was to sit on one of the boulders. I thought it was the easiest thing in the worlds and was my mum’s way of saying I’d earned a break. Man, was I wrong.

I did succeed in my mission, but it cost me a broken rib and a week-long fight with my mother.

I creatively called these creatures Rock Monsters. They stand up on four muscular paws with claws and in shape somewhat resemble a turtle. Except that they have no eyes, have big nostrils, and when they open their mouth, there are nothing but sharp teeth in a circle.

They attack based on smell and have a good nose. Right now this creature is probably honing in on Harlan's stinky manners and his blood.

I grin and push him behind me. "Allow me."

"I don't need your protection," he growls, and pushes me aside. Just as he comes closer to the Rock Monster, it produces its tail with the round rock attached to it. He smashes it and Harlan has to use his super speed in order to avoid getting his head smashed in.

I giggle. "You were saying?"

"I can defeat it, just you watch." He swings his arms as if he's warming up for a boxing match.

I roll my eyes. I teleport in front of the creature and it hurls its tail at me several times while I dodge it with my teleports. This is really just for show, because I already know this creature's weakness.

I do this a few times, repositioning myself in such a way that the creature has to turn away from Harlan. And then I do it, I blink close to its face and duck, punching a spot under the creature's leathery neck.

It makes a high-pitched sound and rolls up again, this time sinking away into the sand where it will travel a short distance farther away from me.

I march up to Harlan who has his arms crossed in front of him and a look of reluctant admiration on his face. "Can we go now? All this sand is making me moody."

"I think I rather like you," he says smoothly and takes a step closer to me. "Which means I will taste your blood before this weekend is over."

I click my tongue. "How old are you?"

“Old.”

“Good. Then I won’t have to feel too bad when I end your life.”

He smirks. “Only time will tell.”

“Indeed.”

I create the portal home to appear in the corridor outside the library. This way, Aura and Oliver don’t immediately see me and I can gather myself before going inside. I just hope that Harlan doesn’t hang around me, but joins them.

Luckily, he runs away—presumably to a bathroom—as soon as he steps into Oliver’s corridor. I hope he pukes for hours on end.

I close the portal, feeling quite good because of the vial. It will wear off soon, so if I hang out with Aura and Oliver right now, I can pass out in my bedroom after. I guess I’ll have to shower later.

Working for the Chrono Unit meant I didn’t Travel much. It made me feel like a hypocrite if I did. So now that I finally get to Travel again—a lot—it’s wreaking a little bit of havoc on my body.

Footsteps sound behind me, causing me to startle.

“It’s okay, it’s me,” George says.

I’ve never been so pleased to see him.

“Are you okay?” he whispers.

I nod. “Just had to show Harlan who’s boss.”

“Where is he?”

“He ran to the bathroom. I got him back safe and sound,” I say, failing to hide my disappointment.

George gives me a small smile, but there's tension in his shoulders. He doesn't like our visitors either. I imagine nobody is happy they're here.

"Well, we're in the library when you're ready. Take your time." His eyes take in the sand on my dress.

He walks away and I hurriedly shake my skirt and try to appear as presentable as possible. I just don't have the time to get changed. Every second counts.

I hurry into the library, relieved that Harlan hasn't made it back yet. Oliver is in the armchair in which he usually sits while Aura is sitting on the sofa, one leg placed under her. She's on the side closest to Oliver and so is George, but he's on the sofa opposite her.

They all look up when I enter the room.

"I may be covered in sand, but I managed to retrieve your friend," I say to Aura. "I believe he's currently puking."

George chuckles.

If it is true that they hate showing weakness, I'm glad I just made Harlan look weak.

Aura smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Vampires don't have friends," she says. "Just allies."

"I see." I sit down next to George.

"What about you, Monday? You just moved here. Have you made any friends?" She eyes me over the edge of her drink.

"Who needs friends? Besides, Oliver has been keeping me busy." Technically, I'm not answering her question. Score one for me.

"Ah, yes. The first Retrieval Unit for Travellers. How does it feel to do that job while being a Traveller yourself?"

Probably a question I can expect from Paige Pageant.

“It’s important to keep this world safe. No matter from whom.” I give her a smile.

“Well said.” She returns my smile. “I heard you arrested a Traveller today.”

No point denying it. “Indeed.”

“Was it difficult to bring him in?”

I am tempted to ask her how she knows it’s a man, but it could be that Oliver told her that much, and even if he didn’t, I don’t want her to think I’m suspicious.

“I don’t mind a challenge.”

She nods as if to say she agrees with me. “And what’s it like to work for the handsome mayor of Sheffield?”

Oh, great.

“The coffee is pretty good.”

She laughs. It’s a delicate and fragile sound that belies her true nature. There’s a ruthless killer hiding behind those perfectly made-up eyes. And she’s got her sights set on me.



## Chapter 9

*“I don’t think Monday knows how difficult it is to sit in the same room as her and not be able to make her smile.” ~ Oliver*



I FEEL DRAINED AFTER my evening with the vampires and not because they fed on my life force—which they didn’t. I had to analyse everything that Aura said and formulate my words carefully. I hope I never have to speak to them again, but that’s unlikely. Maybe I can have Chester create an Illusion of me while I stay in bed the rest of the weekend.

Something I may have to do since I took the vial that replenished my life force. What goes up must come down. At least the vampires weren’t suspicious when I told them I wanted to shower and get the sand from my dress.

I know it will happen soon and swift, so I hurry to my bedroom and lock the door behind me. My hands are trembling. Any second now. I really want to take a shower, but I won’t make that. Instead I take a blanket from the end of my bed and lie on top of the covers in my dress. I don’t want the bed itself to get dirty from all that sand. As soon as I lie down and pull the blanket over me, I feel fatigue sweep over me so fast that my vision blurs and my head feels like it’s pricked by needles.

I close my eyes and drift away.



WHEN I WAKE UP, IT'S around midnight. It means the vampires are still up, including Oliver. I feel better now, though my mouth feels dry. Sometimes that happens after taking one of those vials. At least I get to shower now. I take off my dress and throw it in the hamper in my bedroom. Then I go into the adjacent bathroom and turn on the shower. I scrub my body and wash my hair and feel like a new woman when I get out. I change into my nightgown and put on my robe.

Before going back to bed, I check in on Lovelace who's sleeping in Celeste's bed. They have regular sleepovers while Poofie is settled in between them, making gurgling noises. I suspect it's him snoring, but I'm not entirely sure.

With all that is going on, I didn't get a chance to talk to Lovelace about her training with my mum. Nor did I get to help the people from PU-13029. At the thought of going through another portal, I feel a headache come up. But if they are really in trouble, I suppose I should help. I like the idea of using my skills to do that. Perhaps one day The Archiver will give me missions, much like my mum used to give me, except that these are to help others.

I come across Mr Turtleneck and stroke his head. "Wait here," I say and teleport to the kitchen to grab him a piece of lettuce. When I return, I hold it out to him and he takes it into his mouth.

"Don't eat too fast now. You'll get indigestion."

He glares at me as he slowly chews.

When I return to my room, I again lock my door and get into bed. Despite having slept a few hours just before, I fall asleep as soon as I hit my pillow.

It is a restless sleep this time. Disturbing images flicker across the screen of my mind. Harlan. Me on my bed. His sharp ring. My neck. Blood. I try to move but I can't. He bends over and licks the blood off my neck with his warm tongue. I want to fight, to scream. My body won't cooperate, it's like it's made of concrete.

*Help. Help.*

I toss and turn and gasp when I feel arms around me.

*Sh. Calm down. It was just a nightmare, Oliver's voice says in my head.*

“But wh—” I try to get up, but Oliver squeezes me closer to him.

*Use your inside voice. Our guests have good hearing. It's unlikely they are eavesdropping 24/7, but not impossible.*

The room is dark, but it smells different from mine. I groan and relax my muscles. I teleported in here, didn't I?

*Yep. In your sleep. It's better than you creating a portal in your sleep.*

Oliver still has his arms around me. I'm just glad I ended up here and not in Harlan's bed.

His grip tightens. He didn't hurt you, did he?

*Are you joking? I hurt him. Don't worry for one second about him. I'll feed him to a T-Rex if I have to.*

Oliver chuckles in my ear. That's my girl.

My heart beats faster at those words. I swallow. I should go. I'm sorry I disturbed you.

*Don't be. You didn't disturb me at all. His thumb strokes my arm and his face is close to my ear. His breath tickles me.*

I can't possibly fall asleep like this. Still, this is the only time I can be close to him. Having to pretend he's just my employer is not fun.

Maybe it helps if I change the topic. I do want to know more about Aura. Know thy enemy, right?

*You said Aura would never hurt a child. Why?*

Oliver sighs, his breath tickling even more. I have to bite my lip to keep from giggling.

*She had a child. It's exceedingly rare for female vampires to get pregnant. It was basically a miracle. But there was something wrong with the girl. She acted quite...feral. She had to be killed when she was only fourteen.*

Had to be? Because of vampire rules?

*In a way. Yes. Aura was responsible for her and she was killing people, feeding on their blood. It made her mother look weak and tainted her reputation. Not to mention, we didn't want attention drawn to us in that way.*

So Oliver and Aura had both lost children. Did that bring them closer?

*Do you like Aura? I ask.*

Oliver props himself up on his elbow. My eyes have adjusted to the dark well enough for me to make him out when I turn to him.

His other arm is draped over my stomach.

*I respect her. I don't like her. I don't trust her, but I respect her.*

Did he really have to say it twice? What's so great about her? I doubt she has faced cannibals, dinosaurs, or a perm gone wrong.

*What's the scar from? On her neck.*

*Someone tried to decapitate her.*

My eyes widen. Who would want to...Was it her daughter?

*Yes.*

Damn. I actually feel a sprinkle of sympathy for her. I rub my face. I don't think I'll be able to sleep anymore.

*I've got a trick.*

I feel my cheeks warm and am very relieved he can't see that.

*What kind of trick?*

*The same one I used to calm you when we were about to face a dragon.  
Remember?*

I scoff. How can I forget?

He pulls me closer and brushes imaginary strands of hair from my face before he rests his forehead against mine.

It means I'll have to lower my mental guard and let him in, but part of me is worried he'll be able to know things I don't want him to know.

*Let me in, he says.*

My mouth feels dry. I put my hands on his cheeks and gently push his face back. It's okay. I should go back. I kiss his forehead and teleport on top of my own bed.

My palms feel sweaty. What was I thinking? I should have teleported back to my own bed straight away. This will only lead to heartache.

I splash some water on my face in my bathroom and stare into the mirror for a while.

The sooner this mess with the vampires is sorted, the sooner I know where I stand with Oliver.

I'm just not sure if that's a good thing or not.



SUNDAY MORNING I'M up early. It helps to know the vampires, including Oliver, are still sleeping. On this day all of us usually have breakfast together and even Oliver joins us most of the time, if only to return to sleep afterwards. I don't expect him to join this time, but I'm looking forward to eating George's pancakes with the girls. Chester rarely joins.

Halfway down the stairs, the doorbell rings. I hurry down the steps and answer the door. It's a man in a grey hat with a large moustache. He's carrying a briefcase and a smooth smile.

Salesman.

"Good day, madam. My name is John Johnson. That is not a joke, my parents really did name me that." He chuckles. "I'm from HomeTech."

"Ah, a family friend is an inventor at HomeTech," I say.

"Excellent." He pops open his briefcase.

I hold out my hand. "But I'm actually not interested in buying. This isn't even my home. I mean, I live here, but I don't own this place."

"That's alright. Just because the homeowner is at work, doesn't mean we can't tell her about all the interesting stuff I've shown you later."

"It's a he." How does he not know the mayor lives here?

"Oh." He raises an eyebrow. "Yes, of course. How wonderful. What does he do?"

"He's the mayor."

A pause.

"He is? Wait, the vampire?" He takes out a handkerchief and dabs his forehead as if it's on fire.

"Yep. That's the one."

He clears his throat. “I see. I’ve just moved here, you know? Anyway, vampires love technology, don’t they?”

I open my mouth to respond.

“Are you a vampire?”

“No.”

“Oh, okay.” He lets out a relieved breath.

“I’m a Traveller.”

His jaw tenses. “Great,” he squeaks. “Well, I would like to tell you about our new televisions. Did you know we sell TVs that show colours?” He sounds wooden as if all his charisma has flowed out of him and is now a puddle on the ground.

“Yes. Only primary colours, right?” Mr Powell loves to inform my parents of the latest, and they love to tell me.

“That’s right.” He smiles, but it comes out as a grimace.

“We’ve also got a Hoover that does not require to be plugged in and has a display with a face. It makes Hoovering for your husband a lot more fun.” He remembers who he’s talking to. “I mean, it makes Hoovering fun for the eh...maids?”

I nod. “Yep, maids.” Their names are Bill and Jordan and they show up three times a week. They clean all day and then George makes them dinner to take home with them.

John smiles triumphantly. “Yes, maids. Good. Okay, well, next we have—”

The door is opened further and Summer shows up next to me. “Ah, HomeTech?”

“Yes,” he says, carefully. As if it’s a trap.

“Come in. Mr Marquis has been wanting to upgrade some of his appliances.”

John swallows. “Inside?”

Summer frowns at him, then me. “Yes, come inside, please.”

“Don’t worry. She’s human.”

He chuckles nervously. “I don’t—I don’t mind either way,” he says and dabs his forehead again.

“Excellent, sir. Then please step inside.” Summer holds open the door for him.

“Have a nice day, Mr Johnson,” I say and give him a little wave.

“Yes. Thank you. You too,” he manages to squeeze out before he enters the hallway. He glances around as if something will attack him from every nook and cranny.

“Poof poof,” Poofie says as he pops up next to him. He can be stealthy if he wants to be.

The man takes a step back, then tilts his head. “Oh, you are actually quite...adorable.” He bends forward to pet him. I don’t know if Poofie can sense his general unease, but as his hand approaches, he opens his mouth at three times the size of its body.

John yells and stumbles backwards.

“Don’t worry. He doesn’t eat people,” I say as I pick up Poofie. “He’s just feeling a little mischievous.” I scratch him under his chin as he makes contented gurgling noises.

John has gone pale and whimpers something incoherent.

“Anyway, have a nice day!” I say cheerfully as I leave for the kitchen.

“You have a good sense of humour, Poofie,” I whisper, even though we’re out of earshot.

“Poof poof.”

Celeste and Lovelace are chatting at the breakfast table about the TV programme in the background. There is a small TV in the corner of the kitchen. On Sunday morning there are plenty of kids programmes they can choose from. Today they are watching a cartoon about the dangers of rogue werewolves.

I join George at the cooking island. He’s saved me a plate of pancakes with butter.

“Thanks.”

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“Because of the amount of portals I’ve gone through this week or because of our present company?”

He smiles. “Both.”

“Hey, I’m still alive. How’s our prisoner doing?”

“He’s fine. I decided to bring him some of my pancakes half an hour ago.”

My mouth practically falls open. “You’re joking? You’re actually being nice to a Traveller? Well... almost Traveller.”

“Which proves to be quite a problem. Oliver has invited a Tinkerer from the UA to check out the gadgets and to check out Sinclair’s identity. If he is human, he’ll have to be processed by a different department.”

The moment Sinclair’s identity is confirmed, the vampires will know for sure as well. I have no doubt they’re here to take him out, but it means he’ll be in more danger after it’s confirmed he’s who he says he is.

“When is this Tinkerer coming?”

“Tomorrow.”

Good. That buys me some time to form a plan.



## Chapter 10

*“Lower-level vampires shall not urinate near higher-level vampires. If one does and is caught, the lower-level vampire has to clean all toilets in the residence of the higher-level vampire.” ~ The Vampire Handbook*



I ENTER THE MEETING room through the secret entrance and make my way to the back where Sinclair is still in his cell.

He's lying down on the bed, one arm over his head while he's staring at the ceiling.

“Hello,” I say.

He sits up straight away. “You. The Traveller.”

“I prefer Monday.”

“And I prefer getting out of here. I don't suppose that'll happen.” He gets up and saunters over to the glass that separates us. His hair is tousled, but it suits him. It makes him look even more cheeky.

“The vampires are here,” I say.

Sinclair pales slightly and curses under his breath. “They don't waste any time, do they?”

“They arrived last night, but they arranged it a few days ago. While we were in PU-10388.”

“Right. Of course. They must have used someone from the Chrono Unit to track me. Maybe. I don’t know.” He runs a hand through his hair, bringing some sort of order to the chaos that is his hair.

I think of Wynter and whatever her plans are with Sinclair. “There is a lot going on that you don’t know about. So we have to be very careful.”

“What does that mean?”

“Are you a good judge of character?” I ask.

He blows out his breath. “When I was nine, this classmate brought his puppy and everyone loved it, right? It was cute as a button and very soft, but I swear, when I looked into its eyes, there was evil. And then after break time, it had pissed all over our backpacks. Like, all our backpacks. The dog must have had a tiny bladder and yet it somehow had saved up enough wee to piss all over our backpacks.” He pauses. “Evil.”

“Right. So a good judge of character then.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m fairly certain that right now I’m the only person you can trust, so if I ask you to do as I say, will you?”

He stares at me for a long moment.

I notice there are spots of brown in his blue eyes.

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

He shrugs. “You’re the only who’s offered to help, so I guess I’ll have to take my chances. Plus, you’re a Traveller. So I suppose that’s good. Even if your job involves betraying your own kind.”

“My own kind are my loved ones, not people who happen to be able to do what I can do. And there’s plenty of people who abuse the skills that Travellers have.”

He holds up his hands. “Sorry, didn’t meant to touch a nerve.” Despite his words, there’s a small smile on his lips.

“You didn’t. Just wanted to clarify.” I fold my arms across my chest.  
“Oliver has invited a Tinkerer to check out your gadgets and scan your identity to see if you’re telling the truth. That means your real name will pop up and the vampires will be a hundred percent sure that it’s you and not some random bloke who got a hold of your gadgets. Do you get what that means?”

Sinclair swallows. “Yeah. It means I’m dead.”

“Exactly. Now I’ve been thinking of a plan that has a high chance of succeeding, but it is quite risky and I don’t think you’ll like it.”

He narrows his eyes at me.

“There’s a plant from PU-22038. When digested, it completely simulates death and you lose consciousness. You will actually die if I don’t give the antidote in a certain amount of time. Twenty-seven minutes, to be exact.”

“Is this because I shot you? This is because I shot you, isn’t it?”

I shake my head. “The only way to prevent Aura or Harlan from killing you is by killing you first. Sort of.”

“Who are Aura and Harlan?”

“The vampires.”

“Right. Okay. They don’t sound too bad. Maybe we can take them in a fight.”

I sigh. “Within seconds of meeting Harlan, he wanted to cut me and drink my blood.”

Sinclair makes a face. “Gross.”

“Yeah.”

He turns his back to me and it’s quiet for a few seconds. When he faces me again, his expression is serious. “I’m in.”

“Okay. I’ll make the arrangements. I’ve got to find a way to get you out of here within twenty-seven minutes without making anyone suspicious.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Gee, thanks.” I fish a pen out of the pocket of my dress. “In the meantime, take this.” I hand it through the small opening at the side of the cell.

He walks over and takes it. “This is great. I can use this to write my memoir before I die.”

“If you click it while aiming it at someone, it shocks them, much like a taser does.”

“Where did you get this?” He stares at the pen, assessing it. The way he’s studying it makes me see the Tinkerer in him. It’s really too bad he got involved in this mess. I understand it’s tempting for someone to want to Travel parallel universes. Even if he ended up creating more messes, his intentions were good.

“A friend of the family invented it for me.”

He looks up from the pen, his gaze softening. “And you’re giving it to me?”

“Yeah, well, just in case anything happens between now and tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

I nod at him, then turn to leave.

“Hey, Monday.”

I turn back.

“I’m sorry I shot you.”

“I’m sorry I have to kill you tomorrow.”



ON SUNDAYS MY MOTHER usually visits so she can train Lovelace, but as luck would have it, I don’t have to have the talk with her just yet. Today is a gardening show in the south of Sheffield where she and my dad are going to gather inspiration for their garden. Since my dad is an Illusionist, she won’t even have to buy the plants. All my dad has to do is remember what they look like.

Which means that this will be my first official training session with Lovelace. We’ve had plenty of time together where I talked about my own childhood and experiences, trying to get her to open up about her own life so far, which has worked. She’s started talking to me and calling me ‘mum’. Not that she has to call me that, but the fact that she wants to shows she trusts me.

There is one thing we don’t discuss too much. And that’s her aunt and what happened on the day we met. I’m hoping we can finally discuss that today while I train her on her time skills.

We go to the huge back garden which is surrounded by tall hedges. The mansion is surrounded by woods and nobody ever walks there except maybe me.

Sometimes Oliver and I watch my mother train Lovelace from the conservatory. We chat with a cup of tea and afterwards, both my mum and Lovelace join us. I can’t help but glance at the conservatory. No Oliver. But thankfully also no other vampires.

“Alright, now,” I start. “Breathe in slowly.”

Lovelace does as she’s told.

At first, she was very afraid of using her skills. Her aunt had not responded kindly any time she accidentally used them. Every day I reward her for doing something Traveller related to get her to gain confidence. It helps that she’s recently discovered manga books—apparently, Celeste is into them—and I get to buy her new ones whenever she reaches a goal I’ve set for her.

Lovelace picks things up quickly, though. And I can tell she’s enjoying using her abilities. She saved me from Blayze, even if it meant that she got outed to Oliver. Yet, doing so made me realise how quickly she can create portals. Something that she should only be able to do because of practice. Which is another reason why I want to discuss what happened to her aunt. She left a rip when she had sent her aunt through that portal where we met. That signifies inexperience.

Yet, only the second time she created a portal, she didn’t leave behind a rip. Nor when she brought me home. Even if my mother coached her when she created that last one.

“Now imagine that the energy in your core is a closed flower and slowly open it up. Now, feel for Time. Feel it flowing and feel how strong it is. It’s anchored in this world.”

I give her a few moments.

“I’ve got it,” she says.

“Now focus on a point within that flowing stream. You can also imagine strings attached to it, or a lever, or something else. The point is that you focus on a point that you can control. Like a leash on a dog.”

She giggles, but then frowns as she focusses. She always looks angry when she concentrates.

I’m pretty sure I look constipated when I focus.

“Now, pull on it to slow it down. Focus only on slowing it down.”

She presses her lips in a straight line and her frown deepens.

Even if I’m a Traveller, when another Traveller slows down time or Rewinds it, it will still affect me. The only benefit is that I might notice it more quickly than someone who isn’t a Traveller. In this case, I can’t be sure if she succeeds, I can only teach her how to do it and be by her side in case she does it wrong.

She scrunches up her face for two seconds, every muscle in her body tense, then she lets go. She yelps in pain and bends forward, catching her breath. It is all I need to see to know she managed to do it.

I put my arm around her. There’s no point talking to her since she can’t hear me.

Her face is red from the strain and she’s sweating. “That hurt,” she says when she stands up straight.

“I know. I’m sorry. It will always hurt, but you’ll learn to live with the pain as you do it. We won’t practise this too long, though. These few seconds were enough.”

She nods, obviously grateful.

“Shall we take a little break?” I ask.

“Yes.”

I’ve brought a blanket and place it on the grass for us to sit down on. The sun shines in a cloudless sky, and it’s quite warm.

I tap Lovelace’s shoulder to get her to read my lips. “Do you remember the day we met?”

She smiles and nods. “You were very nice to me.”

“Can you tell me what happened to your aunt?” I ask.

Her smile disappears. She looks away and back at me. “She went away.”

“I know. She went through a portal. Can you tell me what happened?”

“She told me not to say anything.”

I sit up straighter as an alarm goes off in my head. “That’s okay. You can tell me.”

She shakes her head. “She told me you’d get hurt.”

“She lied. I’m going to be just fine. In fact, it’s important that you tell me. Who is this woman? Did she give you a name?”

Lovelace shakes her head. “She has the same eye as me.” She points at her eyepatch. “And she’s the one who took my aunt away.”



## Chapter 11

*“Monday is a force to be reckoned with. I have  
always known she didn’t belong with me, but  
it won’t stop me from caring.” ~ Chester*



I MANAGE NOT TO GASP, but my heart is racing. Wynter sent her aunt through a portal, left behind a rip so that I would show up and find Lovelace. But how could she be sure I would take her in? Unless she knew more than she let on. She was, after all, from the future.

“Had you seen that woman before?” I ask her.

Lovelace nods. “She had been teaching me a few things. Said I would need to do them.”

“Like portals?”

She nods again. “I was afraid to because of my aunt, she’s mean about it.”

“I know. But don’t worry, you won’t ever have to see your aunt again. Or that woman with the eyepatch.”

“Did I do something wrong?” she asks.

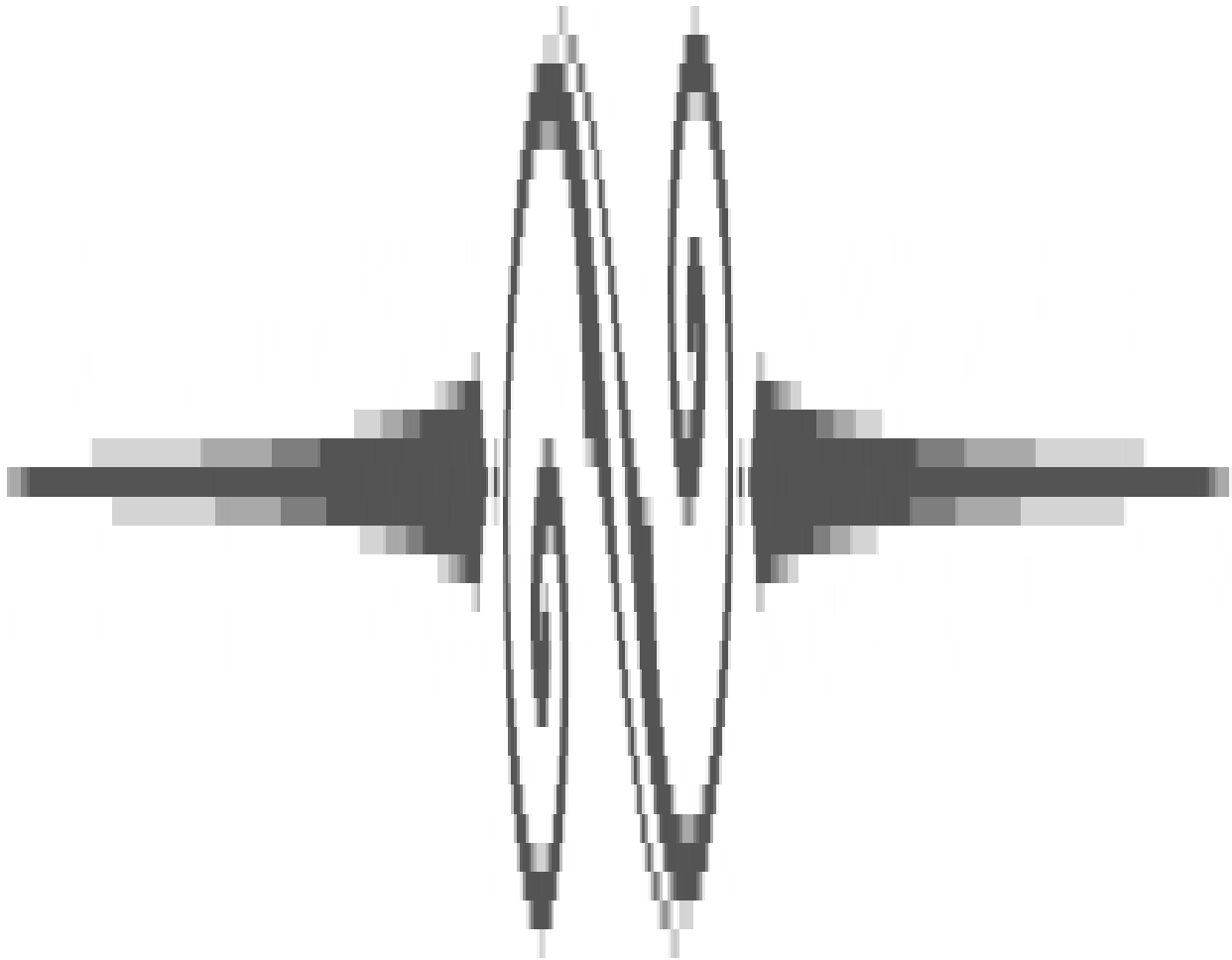
“No. Just know that you can’t trust anyone. Especially not that woman. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“You did very well with your training, though. Do you want to practise teleportation?”

She smiles. “Yes, I like it. It makes me tired, but it’s fun.”

“I agree.”



LOVELACE RETURNS TO her room afterwards. She’s been reading a lot, lately. I’m looking forward to some downtime as well, but my nerves won’t let me relax. There is too much to do.

I start by going to my room and creating a portal to PU-22882. This is a world where I need my red wellies instead of my heels. At least doing this will take my mind off what Lovelace just told me. I’m still boiling about

how manipulative Wynter has been from the start. I have been suspicious, yes, but I still feel duped.

Maybe because I allowed a part of myself to hope for the best instead of the worst.

As soon as I step through the portal, I step into muck. The air is warm and above the muddy ground swarm small insects that buzz annoyingly. They are like mosquitoes but feed on something in the mud instead of blood. It means I'm safe from them.

I close the portal, because I don't want anything to make it into my bedroom, then take out my dagger as I make my way towards the swamp-like area ahead of me. I haven't visited this world in a while and there's a reason for that. It's hot, annoying and dangerous. The only thing this place is good for is the flora.

When this world was first catalogued by the Chrono Unit, it was a green world, highly desirable and often visited by officers in order to retrieve certain plants. Some of them have seriously helped with cures and medicine in our world. It wasn't long before they discovered the more deadly plants and ever since then, it's a red world and forbidden to visit, unless it is to save someone who has either accidentally entered a portal or was shoved into it. It is usually hard to find people who have entered such worlds unless the Traveller left behind a rip. That is why it's so hard to catch experienced Travellers.

I keep on going until I reach a bunch of trees on harder soil. This is where I'll find it, but this is also where it's most dangerous. I'll have to be quick. I scan the trees and go through my pathing in my head. The riskiest moment will be when I bend down to pick the flower. It will leave me vulnerable enough to get attacked.

I inhale and then I go. I pop up behind the closest tree, and there's a flower, but it's the wrong colour. Quick. The next tree. And the next. I teleport through the area as quickly as my eyes allow me to observe the flowers. I freeze when I spot the purple flower with the golden rim. Its petals reach upward towards the sky and are shaped like diamonds.

I grip my dagger tighter, my hands sweaty and bend forward to pick the flower. One is enough. I've barely touched it when I feel the vines snake around my right ankle. There are multiple worlds with dangerous vines, and these are my least favourite.

They yank me backwards and I take the flower with me as I fly through the air and towards one of the trees. I move my dagger without thinking, making myself as small as possible so that I can reach my own ankle. Instead of cutting through the vine, which will take time, I simply stab it.

An inhumane wail comes from the tree and the vines uncoil, dropping me to the moss-covered ground. I teleport to the edge of the tree line before I hit the ground and then once more into the muddy ground where I started. I'm safe here.

I may not have been a fan of my mother's training, but it is certainly effective.

The flower in my hand is still as beautiful as when it was in the ground. Its petals are still turned towards the sun. Now I just need Chester.



I DON'T THINK I'VE ever visited Phantasm in the daytime. It is located underneath the Sheffield Winter Garden and can be accessed by sliding down a pole that is hidden in the silver orb that decorates the entrance. The only way to leave the club is by going through the doors to the right of the bar and climbing the concrete staircase that leads to a small park behind the Sheffield Winter Garden.

I walk through the hallway with terrible lighting and enter the double doors to the club. The lights are off, there is no booming music and the platforms where Chester usually has dancers performing are empty. Phantasm is known for using Illusions to entertain the crowd and the only way people know of it is through word of mouth.

I know he'll be here because he has been avoiding the vamps more than I have.

His office is behind the bar. There is a scanner next to the door and I place my palm on it. If he's in, all he has to do is press a button to open the door for me.

There is a moment of silence and then a click. I open the door and enter his office. It smells like his aftershave. Musky. I remember that aftershave very well. It hasn't changed since we dated years ago.

His office has stuffed animals on the wall and a big stuffed bear in the corner. I hate them all. There's a bathroom to the left and to the right a room where he makes and keeps all his special vials.

His desk is placed in the nook next to the bathroom and can't be seen from the entrance. He has a very new typewriter on top of it and a fancy desk chair. Two armchairs are opposite his desk and there's a blanket on the sofa in the corner.

Chester appears from behind his desk and runs a hand through his messy hair. His shirt is unbuttoned and he blinks lazily. Just as I thought, he's been sleeping here.

"What are you doing here, Red?"

I hold up the flower. "I need your help."

A moment later we are in the room where all his vials glow on the shelves. Blue, red, orange, and yellow. This is where I get mine. They've saved my life a few times.

Chester has placed the plant on the table in the middle of the room. He has on gloves. "You sure the vines didn't touch your skin?"

"Would I be standing here calmly and alive if they had?" I fold my arms across my chest and pace around, studying the vials.

"Just checking." A moment of silence. "Hm."

“Hm?” I turn around. “What does that mean?”

“It means this flower doesn’t have a lot of seeds. It will take me longer to make the potion.”

I sigh. “There weren’t a lot to be found. A lot less than years ago. Maybe they started growing somewhere else? It will take me too much time if I try to find more.”

“Is there a rush?” His eyes scan my face.

I bite my lip. “No, no. I guess not. I’ll make it work. Thank you. How much do I owe you?”

“A lot. You can start by telling me why you want to use this.”

I tell him about Sinclair and my plan to protect him from Aura and Harlan.

“And you really think they’ll kill him?”

“I do.”

He continues to remain focussed on the plant. “And you think it’s wise to help him?”

I frown at that. “Yes, I do.”

“Okay, then. I’ll work as fast as I can.”

That’s the Chester I know. I smile at him. “Thank you. I will pay you with money, though. None of this tit for tat.”

“What tit?” he asks.

I laugh. “Seriously, though. Thank you.” While he’s still bent over the flower, I lean forward and give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“That just earned you a discount,” he mumbles, making me laugh again. Just as I’m about to leave, I stop. “Actually, there’s one more thing I need from

you.”

“And what is that?”

I rattle off the license plate of the stalker outside the mansion. “Can you check who that belongs to?”

“Were you nearly run over or something?” He straightens and pulls off his gloves. I follow him back to his desk as he sits down behind it and activates his holo-screen.

“No. It’s someone who’s spying on the mansion. I think he might be gathering info on Oliver. It could just be a reporter or something.”

I lean against the desk as his fingers fly over the keyboard.

“Hmm.” Chester stops typing. “It belongs to a private eye.”

My stomach drops. “What?”

“A private eye. But he’s from York.”

My mouth feels dry and I’m pretty sure my stomach has dropped all the way to the centre of the earth. “York?”

“Yep.” He glances at me. “Made any enemies before coming over here?” His tone is playful but the look in his eyes anything but.

“It must be about Lovelace,” I say. “Her aunt must be looking for her. To be honest, I didn’t think she cared enough to pay someone to find her.” I wonder how she managed to link me to her niece.

“You don’t know if it’s that for sure. But if it is, what are you gonna do?”

I swallow, but my mouth still feels like a desert. “I’ll handle it.”

“Sounds like you have a lot to handle.” His warm eyes observe me carefully.

“You have no idea.” I chuckle to make it sound less severe.

“Are those leeches that bad?” he asks, not taking his eyes off me.

I shrug. “They are. Harlan tried to cut me the first time I met him.”

“What?” He gets up.

“Relax. Sit back down.”

“No.” He steps from behind his desk and in front of me. “What did he try to do?”

I tell him about what happened yesterday, including how it ended. I mean, not the part about me teleporting into Oliver’s bed.

“And Oliver did nothing?”

“I don’t need Oliver to do anything,” I say. “I can handle myself. Weren’t you listening?”

“If something like that had happened in my club, that vampire would have been sorry he ever even stepped in here.”

“They’re vampires. Everything is different. They can’t show weakness.”

“To me it’s not a weakness to protect those you care for.” He walks back to his work room where the flower is. “But that’s just my humble opinion.”

I rub my own arms and can’t help but bounce around Chester’s words. When Oliver told me about the plan for this weekend, it all made sense. But now...I suppose it can’t really ever make sense to someone who is not a vampire and doesn’t understand what it’s like to be surrounded by them. The biggest threat to vampires are other vampires, that much I do know.

It must be lonely to be one.

Okay, enough thinking. Time to leave. I say goodbye to Chester in the doorway to his work room and then leave the club. When I emerge above ground, I sigh and look up at the sky. Just a few more days and things will be over.

The hairs in the back of my neck stand on end and I get the distinct feeling that someone is watching me.

I turn and scan the area.

The Pontiac Star Chief is parked at the edge of the woods. The PI is still in his car, this time he's simply watching me without his camera.

I grin at him. At least I get to fix one problem.



## Chapter 12

*“Upon meeting a higher vampire, one should always bow.*

*Upon the second meeting and beyond, a kiss on the wrist*

*is appropriate to signal trust and loyalty.” ~ Vampire Protocol Handbook*



I TELEPORT HIM TO THE top of a small mountain in Italy. I’ve been here many times before when I trained my stamina. My mother knew all the good spots in this world before she got Collared.

I hold him by his arms as I nudge him forward, forcing him to lean over the edge.

He is a short, balding man with spectacles. His cologne is quite overwhelming. I’m pretty sure he’s managed to scare off all wildlife within a 5km radius.

“Okay, okay. Calm down. I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you,” he says in a panicked tone.

“Good. Go ahead.”

“Her name’s Crystal Thomson. She thinks you kidnapped her niece,” he rambles. “Don’t let go. That’s murder. It’s illegal.”

So Lovelace’s aunt really did hire a PI. And he’s been watching me and Lovelace. I’m so relieved I decided to homeschool her. He could have easily intercepted her at school and asked her questions, or worse, kidnapped her.

“What did you tell Crystal?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“I told her nothing yet. Just that I was following a lead in Sheffield.”

“What makes you think I have her niece?”

“I don’t know. The client gave me your name.”

I pull him away from the edge and towards me, making him face me. “What did you say?”

“S—she gave me your name.”

Wynter. It’s the only option. She must have told her my name. It’s the only possible explanation.

She’s up to something. But what?

“Okay.” I let him go and take a step back. “The nearest town is that way,” I say and point. Then I teleport to my room in the mansion and exhale slowly.

First, Wynter brings Lovelace in my life, then she ensures her aunt knows where to find her. Why?

There’s only one person who can answer that and that’s Wynter. But I don’t think she’ll tell me the truth so easily. Which means I need to tell Oliver the whole truth. Right now, despite the vampires, he’s the only one I can trust with this. I know Wynter tried to have him killed once and she is obviously up to something with her rebel Travellers.

Before, I saw Wynter and Lovelace as the same person, but I now know that that’s not true. The future isn’t set in stone. I can protect Lovelace and make sure she doesn’t turn into Wynter.

The fact that there’s a mole here can only benefit me. I can use that to trap Wynter, force her to show her hand. I need to know what she’s up to. The whole truth.

I'm not entirely sure where Oliver is, but I start by looking in his office. He's not there. When I turn around, Summer is in the doorway.

"He's in the library. He's playing chess."

The words are like an arrow in my chest.

"With Aura?" I ask.

"Yes."

I swallow and blink away unexpected tears. I'd better say something before she notices. "What do you think of them?"

She shrugs. "A union would be good for both Houses."

I frown at her. "Do you really think that?"

"I know that. Everybody knows that. Oliver knows it."

"Why is he waiting then?"

"Exactly," she says and glares at me.

I raise an eyebrow. Is she implying he's not interested in a marriage with Aura because of me?

"What do you know about vampire rules?" I ask her, leaning against the desk.

She steps into the room and closes the door behind her.

"I know they're odd. There's a book for vampires that contains all the rules that exist. There are many, and many of them are extremely strange. But all you need to know about vampires is that they do what benefits them. Nobody else."

"Oliver isn't like that."

She crosses her arms and gets closer. “Oliver has come a long way to be where he is now. Do you really want to stand in the way of that?”

“I didn’t realise I was.”

“Well, you are. You’re distracting him from his goals.”

“And those are?” I ask.

“Important. And you shouldn’t stand in the way of that just because you think he’s cute.”

“Hey, you have no idea what I think of him, and honestly, it’s none of your concern.”

“It is. I’m here to help him reach his goals.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Meaning? If I’m in the way, you’ll just remove me?”

“Just don’t get in the way.”

“You seem awfully protective of him,” I say. Maybe enough to do things behind his back?

“Why wouldn’t I be? I care about his well-being. He’s had to go through a lot to get where he is. I want him to keep on succeeding. It’s my job.”

Hmm. “I want only good things for him as well. Do you think I don’t?”

She sighs. “Look, I just—I know how hard it was for him when he lost his family. I never knew them because it was before my time, but he’s told me.”

I can’t help but feel jealous at that.

“When he fell in love and had his family he was truly happy and she had brought him to life—as he said. He no longer went on automatic pilot, being cruel, cold and calculated. He could actually enjoy things and experience love. But when he lost her and his kids, he came close to

shutting off his emotions again. He's come a long way and I would hate for him to lose himself again."

She thinks that if we got together, him losing me would be his downfall. Is that why she's not been a fan? She's being overprotective, but it makes sense.

She quietly leaves the office, closing the door behind her. Perhaps this is also why she wants Oliver to form a union with Aura. Other than putting Oliver in a stronger position, she might hope it will steer him away from me.

Still, that can't be the only reason. If Summer says it will be beneficial for him to get with Aura, then Oliver may have downplayed the importance of her visit. Though I still suspect that the main reason is Sinclair.

Oliver has been interested in working with the Chrono Unit in the past few months, but he seemed more disturbed by what Sinclair had said about the devices and the vampires than anything else. Other than inviting a Tinkerer over, he hasn't kept Sinclair's devices to himself, something a sneaky vampire would do. He isn't acting as someone who wants to exploit the ability to Travel.

So, assuming his intentions are good and he simply wants to keep his city safe, he's not a real threat. He wants stricter rules for rogue Travellers, but that's it. He knows there are plenty of good Travellers who don't try to change the course of history for their own benefit—or even the greater good—and disrupt Time.

The vampires want to get rid of Travellers and own the ability to Travel and Wynter probably wants the opposite.

Either way, if I tell Oliver about Wynter and we make a play against her and her rogue Travellers, it can tip her off balance.

Which means I have to go to the library now and walk in on Oliver playing chess with Aura. It shouldn't bother me at all, but it does. Even if it's just

chess, it's still something we've been doing most nights. I see it as our thing, even if it may be stupid.

Thankfully, I don't come across anyone on my way to the library, and by 'anyone' I really mean Harlan. I don't know what I'll do if I see his face again. Unfortunately, I have the feeling he'll stay close to Aura.

The chess table is by the window. I like that because it allows me to stare out over the grass while Oliver contemplates his next move. He never has to think too long, though. Unlike me. And yet, he always wins.

I pause in the doorway.

Aura and Oliver are both deep in thought as they stare at the chess board. There's a glass of red wine on her side of the table and a whisky on Oliver's.

There's a twinge of pain in my chest.

Still, I can fake it if I have to.

I've only set a few steps in the library when I feel movement behind me and someone's breath tickles my ear.

"Hello, Sugar," Harlan says. "I've been—"

I stomp on his toes.

He grunts and hops on his other foot.

"Excuse me," I say as I move closer to Aura and Oliver as they sit across from each other at the chess table. Oliver is white and Aura black. I can't tell who's winning.

"Sorry to disturb, Mr Mayor, I just need to discuss something with you. I'll be in your office."

Aura and Oliver both look up at me.

“My, my. How formal. It doesn’t suit you,” Aura says.

“I have my moments,” I tell her.

She just grins.

“Alright. I guess we’ll continue when I get back,” Oliver says to Aura, barely sparing me a glance.

“It won’t be long,” I add.

Oliver gets up and takes Aura’s hand. He turns her palm upwards and kisses her wrist.

I gasp but transform it into a cough.

“Are you alright, dear?” Aura asks. Her eyes twinkle as if she’s amused.

“I’ve just been talking a lot and not drinking enough,” I say, touching my throat. “Excuse me.” I grab her glass of wine and tilt it back, drinking every last drop. I let out my breath audibly. “That’s much better.”

Aura’s nostrils flare, but she keeps a modest smile on her face.

Oliver has stiffened next to me and I still feel Harlan’s presence somewhere behind me.

“I’ll get you a refill,” I say.

“No. That’s quite alright.” She smiles.

I smile back.

“Alright, let’s go to my office.” Oliver motions for us to go.

Harlan moves out of the way to let us pass, but doesn’t give me too much room, resulting in our shoulders brushing against each other.

I don't want to move away from him, though, because I don't want him to think I'm scared of him. So instead, I focus on leaving this room. I'm right behind Oliver's broad shoulders. As soon as we've left the library, I grab him and teleport us to his office.

He hurries over to his desk and turns on his record players, except that it produces no sound.

"Is it broken?" I ask.

"No. It prevents our esteemed guests from eavesdropping. Now, what were you thinking?"

"When exactly?" I sit down in the armchair in front of his desk.

"You downed Aura's wine. That is a provocation."

"Good," I say, still pissed off about the kiss on the wrist. I can't believe I thought I was special, but apparently he goes around kissing people on the insides of their wrists.

He narrows his eyes and sits down on his desk, stretching out his legs. They almost touch my left knee.

"Any particular reason you did that?"

I shrug.

"She asked me to play chess. I had no reason to say no," he says, his tone softer.

"I don't care. I hope you had fun." I try to sound breezy, but I doubt I'm actually succeeding. Why does Oliver have this effect on me?

"Not nearly as much fun as I have with you." He grins.

I've missed that grin.

"I should think so. My play style is quite unique."

He chuckles. "It is that."

I don't want to ask him why he kissed her wrist and if he's really planning on marrying her. I mean, what if she's making him all these offers that he can't refuse? How tempted is he?

"Anyway, I need to talk to you about something." I tug on the sleeve of my cardigan. "I believe this whole thing with Sinclair is bigger than we think."

Oliver sits down next to me. "Go on."

"Wynter approached me again."

Oliver opens his mouth to respond, but I hold up my hand and continue before I lose my nerve. It's time to face the music. If I truly want to know how much I can trust Oliver, I'm going to have to take a leap of faith.

I tell him what she told me about Sinclair at the church and add that I believe Aura and Harlan are after him for their own gain, just as Wynter probably wants Sinclair alive for her own little plan, whatever that may be.

"I may know what she wants," Oliver says. "In the past year I've made proposals to the Chrono Unit about stricter rules for Travellers. She's somehow known about them and threatened me repeatedly. She claims to be responsible for a rise in unsanctioned Alterations and the Chrono Unit here in Sheffield has had to expand from six to twenty employees. She says she'll continue if I don't back down."

I sigh. "When I first heard about her and her group of rogue Travellers, I figured they wanted what they believed was right for Travellers, but I don't think that at all now. I think it's about the same as with the vampires. Power. And I think it has to do with whatever happened in her OT."

"Her Original Timeline? She's from the future?" He frowns. "She said that?"

"Yes. I know you've never seen her, but I have. That's how I found out that she's really Lovelace from the future."

Oliver exhales slowly. “What did you just say?”



## Chapter 13

*“I know she is strong because she was forced to hide  
what she is for a long time. But it is also  
what has made her so afraid to trust.” ~ Oliver*



OLIVER SITS VERY STILL, and the atmosphere is so tense I can cut it with my dagger.

I blurt out everything that happened about six weeks ago. I tell him about when I realised Wynter was Lovelace from the future, and how I felt about that bit of information. How I struggled with trusting him, and also with trusting Wynter. I share how she said she wanted to save me because something bad will happen to me in the future and how she told me to find and protect Sinclair.

Since I promised him no more lies after I had hidden from him that I was a Traveller, and that Lovelace was one, I don't think he'll take this well, but I still tell him all. Even if it is too late. I have to tell him if we want any chance of getting through the shitstorm that is brewing on the horizon.

He regards me with a steely gaze, then gets up and takes a seat behind his desk.

I swallow, hoping my mouth will feel less like the Sahara desert. Instead, it only feels drier.

When Oliver is angry, he doesn't shout or fight, he just becomes very distant. I hate that.

“She’s already Altered things by making sure Lovelace and I met. She knew I’d take care of her.”

“How?” he asks. “How could she have been that sure?”

I fidget with my skirt. A heavy feeling settles over me. “There was this girl, a bit older than Lovelace—about ten years old—who was a Traveller. I was supposed to Collar her, and I think Wynter knows about her. It didn’t end well.”

Oliver’s steely gaze doesn’t change. He sits still as a statue, not revealing any kind of emotion behind those beautiful eyes.

“It’s unfortunately not unheard of to Collar kids that young, because even though they get Warnings first, they don’t really have any control over their abilities. We offer courses that kids can attend to get it under control, but most people don’t want to be labelled as a Traveller and are ashamed. Also, I found out later in my career that those courses are really not helpful at all. It looks good on paper, but in reality it’s worthless.” I shake my head and look down at my hands. I haven’t thought about Lexie in such a long time. Mostly because I didn’t let myself.

I’m beginning to sweat.

“Anyway, it was my first time Collaring a child. I think it was actually my first time Collaring anyone. My partner was talking to the parents, and I just—I couldn’t do it. I told her I’d come and visit. To help her. And I did. Her parents let me work with her almost every night for a week. I focussed on her controlling her emotions and therefore her skills. I didn’t actually teach her how to use them. More like how to keep them bottled. At most, I taught her how to reverse things if she did end up using them.

“I hadn’t seen her in about a month before I found out that she’d caused a massive rip where everyone who came near it slowed down in Time. It took the level-3 Travellers a lot of time and effort to fix it. She’d attempted to go back in time and stop the fire that killed her parents. When it hadn’t worked, she begged the level-3 officers but they refused, of course. And so she tried again, in front of them. But the strain of the first attempt had taken

its toll. It had made her nose bleed and she'd been blind for hours." My hands tremble.

"I had gone over as soon as I found out, but I was too late. She died. I arrived just when the paramedics tried to save her. I still feel guilty that I didn't train her properly. That I followed the rules and treated her like she was a criminal just for existing. She didn't ask to be born a Traveller. My mother helped me, and I should have helped her."

I pause because I feel tears coming to the surface. I rapidly blink them away. "Wynter is from the future, so I guess that's how she knows the story. She predicted I couldn't leave Lovelace to her fate."

"It means she has a plan. There's a reason she wants Lovelace to grow up with you," Oliver says.

It stings that he doesn't respond to the biggest hurt in my life.

"Look, it's not like I didn't trust you," I start.

"It is. You were worried I'd do something to Lovelace because of who she'd grow up to be. You thought that the calculated vampire in me would take out Lovelace so that Wynter would be taken out. After all, you kill the younger version, the older version is killed as well. At least, when returned to the Original Timeline."

I look away. Part of me was afraid of that, yes. Though not anymore, not since a while.

"It's alright. I know your mother has taught you to distrust vampires and you didn't know me that well."

"You're not angry?" I ask, feeling hope bloom in my chest.

"No. I'm just extremely disappointed. And hurt."

The hope is crushed.

"I really am sorry," I say.

He nods. “Noted. Now, let’s come up with a plan. Because ever since my esteemed guests showed up, there have been rips all over the city, and I suspect it’s Wynter’s doing.”

“Really? Space or Time rips?”

“Both. Twenty minutes ago a group of Neanderthals tried to hunt a car with spears.”

I make a face. “Yikes.”

“Nobody was hurt and it was dealt with, but I’m fairly sure Wynter is trying to keep Sheffield’s Chrono Unit preoccupied. Do you think it’s related to Sinclair?”

“I do. But I don’t know what exactly she wants with him other than keep him away from the vampires.”

“I still have serious doubts that Sinclair is telling the truth about that. He could be working with Wynter, trying to create a divide between you and me.”

I nod. “I’ve considered that, yes. But I don’t think we can take the chance. We know they both want Sinclair, so I think we should make sure that neither of them gets him. Sort of like a witness protection thing for Sinclair until we figure out who is responsible for what and how to stop them.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I still would like to know if he’s indeed human before we do that.”

“Are you sure we can trust this Tinkerer that is coming over?”

“Well enough to do what I asked him to do.” Oliver folds his hands in front of him. “If he has been telling the truth, then the vampires will want confirmation that he is who he says he is. Aura and Harlan won’t strike until after the Traveller has done his tests. In fact, they’ll probably do it after they go back home, to avert suspicion. And they’ll make sure they get their hands on the devices.”

“I have a plan regarding that, but you can’t tell anyone. Not a soul. Only you and I can know about this, to be sure that nothing goes wrong.”

He nods. “I know.”

I tell him about the near-death experience I’ve got planned for Sinclair.

“And Chester can create an Illusion powerful enough for all of us to believe that he’s being taken away to the morgue?”

“Yes.”

“So you asked him for help,” Oliver says quietly as he stares at me.

I feel my cheeks get warm. “I’m sorry,” I say again. I don’t know what else to say.

“I can make sure you have enough time to provide the antidote. Where will you take him?”

“I know a parallel universe where he’s safe. It is not a well-known one and I don’t think anyone will suspect I take him there. That includes Wynter.”

“Good. That leaves us with the exposure of the vampires, if they are indeed involved, and the mole we have in this office, as well as Wynter.”

I bite my lip. Sinclair is one thing, but taking on Wynter and the vampires...that won’t be easy at all.

“We know Wynter is from the future and she says she wants to Alter things to protect me, but we don’t know for sure if that’s true. The only thing I can think of doing is Collaring her and then questioning her here until we get the truth. But of course, we don’t know how many Travellers are working with her. It could be three, it could be fifty.”

“Once Sinclair is gone, she’ll contact you again. We can use that to set up a trap and Collar her. We’ll just have to take the risk of being attacked once we have her,” Oliver says.

“Hopefully she’ll tell us what we need to figure out who the mole is and what her ultimate plan is.”

I know Oliver works with Summer, but he also has a bunch of vampires he works with closely, though I never see them because it’s always late at night and in the other wing of this mansion. The office we’re in now is where he works, but the one where he receives visitors is on the other side of the building.

“That leaves our guests.”

He sighs. “If Aura is involved, it will be difficult to prove it was her. Vampires cover their tracks, especially someone who’s as powerful as she is. It would put me in a more powerful position if I manage to take her down, but I don’t think it will be possible.”

“Maybe you can use the fact that she wants an alliance against her. You can pretend you want the same as her, bait her. She could probably use a powerful ally such as yourself, so she’ll be interested. Especially if she wants you two to marry.”

He stares at me for a moment. “Right. Maybe I should even accept her proposal.”

I stop myself from squirming in my seat and stare right back. “If you want.”

A slow grin forms on his face, and I’m not sure what it means.

“Alright then. I should return to my chess game. We’ll have dinner in half an hour. Don’t be late.” He gets up and leaves the room.

The tension in my body leaves with him.

I sigh and sag in my seat. A holiday to a parallel universe sure sounds good right now.



I NEED TO DO SOMETHING relaxing, so I decide to look up Celeste and Lovelace. On Sundays they usually play together, though sometimes they also retreat to their own rooms and do whatever. Lately, Celeste has shown an interest in makeup and they've been doing makeovers with my dresses.

They'll be joining us for dinner, so it's probably good if I can speak to them beforehand. Though I know George has already warned them about the vamps. He's as much of a fan of them as I am. Honestly, I'd rather have those Rock Monsters over.

I find them in one of the playing rooms that Oliver made for Celeste when she and her dad first moved here. It is filled with a few tables where they draw, glue stuff, play with clay, as well as bookcases with lots of different books for kids and teens. Lovelace has been begging Oliver to fill it with manga, but so far he's ignored those pleas. Still, I found him looking up manga the other day.

I hear Lovelace and Celeste laugh before I enter the room and smile to myself. I'm beyond relieved that they've found each other and I won't let Lovelace's aunt get in the way of that. Finally, she's happy and she deserves to be. It won't bring back Lexie, but at least I'll have made a difference for one person.

I stop as soon as I enter the room, my blood freezing.

Harlan is sitting opposite the girls while they're colouring. He's thrown a bunch of pencils in the air and is holding out his hand while the pencils float in the air.

Celeste and Lovelace are looking at it with glee, unaware of what a giant ass is entertaining them. Mr Turtleneck is standing guard on another table next to them, his gaze on Harlan.

He turns around, the pencils still floating, and he grins at me. “Ah, Monday. I was hoping you’d show up.”



## Chapter 14

*“There are a few things vampires must not be associated with. Work-out videos, smoothies, and an abundance of cats.” ~ Vampire Protocol Handbook*



“I’VE MISSED YOU,” HE says with a predatory grin.

“I’ve missed you too. As much as a kick to the head,” I mutter as I approach them, my thoughts going to my dagger and how swiftly I can pull it. It would look really good in his chest.

“Did you see that, Monday?” Celeste asks. “Oliver never shows us those tricks, even when I ask him to.”

“Doesn’t he? What a spoil sport,” Harlan says.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him.

“I was bored and then I came across these lovely ladies and just had to show them some of my tricks. You know,” he says as he gets up, “I’ve got a couple reserved just for you as well. Do you want me to show you? You’ll like them.”

“I think I’d rather show you another parallel world. Maybe one with more predators.”

“That will be significantly less fun, I assure you.”

“Not for me.”

He laughs.

This is, however, a chance for me to find out more about what Aura and Harlan want. I fold my arms across my chest. “You know what? I think I will take you up on that offer.”

There is a salacious glint in his eyes.

“Kids, have fun. We’ll see you later.” I grab Harlan’s arm and teleport us to a spot in the woods behind the mansion.

Birds are chattering nearby and occasionally a breeze rustles the leaves of the oak trees.

Harlan turns to me with a grin. “Couldn’t wait to be alone with me, huh?” He grabs me before I can answer and pins me against the nearest tree.

He surely doesn’t waste any time.

His mouth zeroes in on my neck but before his lips touch my skin, I appear behind him.

“I’m interested in knowing more about vampires,” I say.

He grunts with displeasure and rests his head against the trunk of the tree for a second before turning to me. “You are?”

“Yes. The mayor never tells me anything.”

Harlan inches forward, getting into my personal space before reaching up and touching a strand of my hair. I let him play with it. “I’m sure you can get it out of him. He’s known as a flirt.”

“I haven’t noticed.” I manage to say it with a straight face.

“That surprises me since you look so...delicious.”

I pretend to gag. “Do you really want to drink my blood that badly?”

“Yes, and if you want me to tell you about vampires, then you’re going to have to reward me.”

“With blood?”

“Just a little nibble.” His eyes turn dark.

He really is obsessed with blood. I mean, he can feed on my life energy at any second, yet he doesn’t. He’s too focussed on what he likes to do to my arteries.

I could agree to exchange my blood for some information, but I have the feeling he won’t just take ‘a nibble’.

“No,” I say and slap his hand away. “You’re as obsessed with blood as the mayor is with controlling Travellers.” Please, take the bait. The sooner we have this conversation over and done with, the sooner I can leave.

“I imagine he was over the moon when you came to work for him,” he says.

I shrug. “I’m fairly sure he doesn’t like Travellers that much. Am I the first Traveller you’ve met?”

“Oh, no. Travellers’ energies taste delicious.”

“So you do feed on life energy?”

“Of course. It’s just that blood is so much more satisfying.”

I bet he just likes the violence attached to it.

“And Aura is okay with this?”

His eyes darken. “She’s not my boss.”

“Right. And what will happen if she and the mayor join in marriage?”

“It will strengthen both their positions, and it will mean I get to see you a lot more.”

I am getting nowhere with this guy.

“The mayor mentioned that the House of Spring is also interested in Travellers.” I move over to a thick branch that bends all the way to the ground. I sit on it. I want him to think I’m letting my guard down around him.

He puts his hands behind his back and starts pacing in front of me, his eyes never leaving mine. “We are. We think what you can do is interesting.”

Aha.

“Why?” I ask.

“Are you kidding? You have such power.” He grins. “We like power.”

“I’ve noticed,” I say dryly.

“Doesn’t your work bother you? You are restricting your own kind. You’re limiting their power, even your own.”

I could tell him that not everyone is cut out to have that kind of power. I could mention Travellers like Blayze or Phoebe, but I doubt he would care. He is that kind of person himself.

“Well,” I say, “maybe I get to use my powers just fine. I do what I want, just like you do, whereas other Travellers cannot. That way I am the one with the most power.”

He stops pacing and the corners of his mouth turn upwards. “Look at you, being cunning.”

I grin at him, knowing he’d like that answer, and hop off the branch. He immediately moves closer to me and places his hands on the branch on either side of me, pinning me in place.

“I’ve answered your questions, how about my reward? A kiss,” he says as his head moves closer to mine.

“No, thanks,” I say cheerfully and teleport back to the playing room.

I take a deep breath and steady my nerves. That got me nothing. At least, nothing I didn’t already know. I also have to start becoming serious about avoiding Harlan. He’s coiled up and ready to strike any second.

The girls are still at the table. They’ve used paper to fold roses. They are white, but they’re using red paint to colour them.

“Look,” Lovelace says. “We’re painting the roses red. Just like in that story you always read me.”

My eyes widen. That’s where Wynter has got the name from. The Red Roses. Of course. I swallow. “Yes, that’s very nice, sweetie.”

George shows up. “Hey, guys. It’s dinner time. Don’t forget to wash up before you sit down,” he says to the girls.

“Will you talk about boring stuff?” Celeste asks as she gets up from her seat. She’s frowning at the thought of having grown-up conversations forced upon her.

“Probably,” George says. “But as soon as dinner is over, you can go and play or do whatever you want.”

“Good. I want to watch a film with Lovelace tonight. There is one about vampires and werewolves.”

“Is it a scary film?” George asks.

“Not too scary.” She sticks out her bottom lip and uses puppy-dog eyes.

George chuckles. “Alright, then.”

“Yes.” She beams at Lovelace who holds up her thumb. Then Lovelace grabs her hand and they teleport away, presumably downstairs.

“She’s getting good at that,” he says to me.

“She is. She’s a fast learner.”

“Everything okay with you?” We leave the room and start heading downstairs.

I nod. “Yeah. It’s just—I have to keep my guard up and I don’t want to. It’s been a busy couple of weeks. Ever since I’ve moved here I feel like I have to work hard. Which is fine, I don’t mind it. But yeah, I think I just need a bit of a break.”

“I understand. You’ll get to do that soon. I’m sure.” George pats me on the back.

I smile at him. “Thanks.”

We pass the downstairs library on our way to the dining room. Aura is there, next to the chessboard, with Oliver.

They are standing really close together, giggling and whispering. Oliver has his hands on her arms and she is touching his chest. It looks incredibly intimate.

I stop in my tracks as my heart feels like someone is squeezing it.

George notices I’ve stopped and follows my gaze. He grabs my arm and forces me to move on quickly. He touches my shoulder reassuringly, but doesn’t say anything.

We never know who might be listening.

I feel my throat burning. I just need to keep calm and realise this is all part of the act. Right?

The dining room table is set beautifully. The porcelain plates have red and golden decorations and match the burgundy tablecloth. Beautiful, silver candlesticks adorn the table, casting a dim light on everything. There are several large pots on the table with different dishes. It looks like we can just

grab what we want. There seems to be plenty. I've already spotted jacket potatoes with cheese and gravy.

It would probably be rude if I stick my face into the dish.

George and I sit down opposite each other. Oliver will sit at the head of the table, probably on the other side so that the vamps can be closest to him. That's good, because I don't like the idea of Harlan sitting next to either Celeste or Lovelace.

The girls show up first, then Aura and Oliver, and Harlan saunters in last. Unfortunately, Harlan decides to sit next to me. I avoid eye contact with either Oliver and Aura and smile at Lovelace. She's also already eyeing the potatoes.

"We are honoured to have the representatives of the House of Spring present. We hope you enjoy the meal and the company. To our guests," Oliver says as he raises his glass of wine.

We all raise our glasses, even the girls, though they have soft drinks. I have water.

"Thank you so much, dear," Aura says to him.

Dear? Where can I vomit?

"I'm sure I speak for Harlan as well, when I say that we are enjoying our visit. I look forward to getting to know your team more," she says as she eyes me and George. "Where is the Illusionist?"

"He was detained. Club business," Oliver says. His jaw is tense.

I'm so envious of Chester right now. I want to be anywhere but here.

"Ah, Phantasm, isn't it?" Aura asks.

I'm sure she knows everything there is to find out about us already. Knowledge is power.

“That’s right,” Oliver replies and takes another sip of his drink.

“I’d love to check it out sometime. Do you guys ever go?” she directs the question to all of us.

Harlan, in the meantime, has already downed his glass of wine and has poured himself a new one. He keeps leering at me in-between sips.

“Sometimes,” George says.

“Do you go as a group, then?” She eyes Oliver. “Do you bond with your team?”

Is she trying to find out how much he cares about Chester and me? She already knows he cares for George and Celeste.

“My duties as a mayor keep me busy,” Oliver says smoothly.

“I can imagine. Especially now that you’re running a Retrieval Unit. We’ve been so busy catching up. Tell me, how does that work exactly? I have difficulty picturing it,” she says with a giggle. It sounds so innocent.

And fake.

“Well, I coordinate with the Chrono Unit and request the files of Travellers who are known to have caused Alterations, but haven’t been caught. I pass all the info on to the team and they start tracking them.”

“Where to start if someone can literally be in any world?” Aura asks.

Next to me, the kids have started munching on their food. I follow suit before I’m asked a question and can’t chew. I fill my plate with the delicious jacket potatoes and cheese. The warm gravy smells delicious, and my mouth begins to water.

“It starts with George’s nose,” Oliver says. “He can smell if the person frequents their original residence. If that is true, then a simple stakeout will follow. If not, then it’s good old-fashioned detective work, as well as where Monday’s abilities come in.”

Everyone turns to me as I've just stuffed my mouth full of cheesy potato. I look like a hamster who's just stuffed her cheeks.

Great. She's just discovered my biggest weakness.

Food.



## Chapter 15

*“I always get what I want, and I don’t care who I have to crush in order to get it. In fact, that’s my favourite part.” ~ Aura*



“IT MUST BE INTERESTING to be a Traveller,” Aura says. “Can you explain how your...talents work?”

I hold up my finger and finish chewing.

Celeste giggles as she studies my stuffed cheeks.

Aura sips her drink. She appears relaxed and comfortable, but her eyes reveal something sharp and coiled, as if she’s holding back something very lethal. I suppose in a way she is.

“What would you like to know?” I ask when I finish chewing.

“Can you create an infinite amount of portals in a row?”

I’m not sure if I want to give her any kind of information about anything, but I suppose if I act squirmy about this, it will only amuse her.

“No. I have a certain amount of energy and it gets drained whenever I create portals or teleport. Though portals take up a lot more energy.”

“I see,” she says. “And how do you know where to go when you create a portal?”

“I sense it.”

Harlan, in the meantime, plays with his food while observing me, and Oliver takes a few bites every now and then. George has pretty much already finished his plate. If anyone walked in, it would probably look like a civilised, calm dinner party, but there's thunder below the surface.

"That's interesting," she says. "Do you sense them all the time? Like ants crawling inside your head?"

I manage to not make a face. Leave it to her to make a creepy analogy.

"No. It's more like I just know. Though not as a thought, but a feeling."

She nods. "I suppose it is the same for me. I can sense the life energy of everyone in this room, and I also know exactly how much to take before someone loses consciousness, or even their life."

"Lovely," I say and take another bite of my food.

She smiles another of her cold smiles. "Does that make you anxious?"

"Not at all."

"So you feel comfortable with vampires?" she asks.

I shrug. "I feel comfortable anywhere."

"Oliver doesn't make you nervous then?"

"Only if he decides not to give me my paycheck."

She chuckles. It sounds alluring. Everything about her is alluring, just like with Oliver. Alluring and dangerous.

Hopefully she'll move on to someone else now. I want to minimise my conversations with her.

"You seem quite young to be the mother of an eight-year-old."

I take a big bite on purpose. This comment definitely makes me squirm.

Oliver said he would never harm a child, but can I really be that sure?

Still, she probably already knows Lovelace's adopted. I'd be delusional if I didn't think she hasn't researched the crap out of me already.

Let's just hope Oliver covered my tracks well enough for her not to uncover I hid my identity as a Traveller while working at the CU.

"She's adopted," I finally say after swallowing my food.

"Is she?"

"Do you have any kids?" I ask.

She actually flinches.

From the corner of my eye I see both Oliver and Harlan stiffen.

I didn't plan on asking that question but it's the only thing I can think of to tip her off balance.

Her smile is even colder than before and can probably freeze a polar bear.  
"Not anymore."

"I'm sorry," I say, and mean it.

She inclines her head at me, but her eyes are as cold as the smile she showed earlier.

At least my plan works and she stops asking me questions. Instead, we resume our dinner quietly while Aura occasionally talks to Oliver. They discuss music and memories from a while ago that mean absolutely nothing to the rest of us.

I feel shut out and jealous. It is stupid of me, but I can't help it.

The only highlight is when Poofie takes a bite out of Harlan's chair and he nearly falls to the floor. Summer rushes to get the little fluffball out of there,

which she does by holding his tail between her thumb and index finger, as if he's diseased.

"Poof poof," he says as he's carried out of the room.

After dinner, everyone goes into the seating area by the fireplace. I don't join them under the guise of helping out Chester with something at his club. I do plan to visit Phantasm and drown my sorrows, but first I go up with the girls. In the evening they usually watch TV in the same room where they were drawing.

"I need to talk to you about something," I sign to Lovelace.

She nods and follows me into her bedroom. I sit down on her double bed. These kids will never want to live anywhere else. They have so much space.

"I am pretty sure that your aunt hired a private investigator and though I think I scared him off, I want you to know. I know you're homeschooled, but if anyone ever approaches you that you don't know—or it's your aunt, you come find me straight away."

Lovelace has gone pale. She nods. "Will she take me back?"

"Not if you don't want to."

She shakes her head. "I don't want to. I like it here with you. I feel at home."

I smile at her and touch her cheek. "You're safe here. I won't let her take you back. I know she was awful to you. You didn't deserve that and you never have to go through it again."

She reaches out and hugs me. I hug her back.

Not that the only threat to Lovelace's safety lies outside of this mansion, despite what Oliver claims.

"What do you think of the vampires?" I sign.

“They’re pretty, like Oliver.”

I smile. “Yes, they are. But unlike Oliver they are not pretty on the inside.”

“I know. Their eyes are different. Bad.”

“Exactly.”

“Aura talked to me,” she signs.

I feel my heart rate speed up. “About what?”

“About me. And you. And Oliver. I showed her my teleportation skills.”  
She looks up at me. “That’s okay, right?”

“Yeah. That’s okay. Just, if you can, try to avoid them.” Of course she was trying to find out about our relationships. She probably wanted to know if the three of us make a nice family. To see if we are a threat to their potential union.

“Okay,” Lovelace says.

I kiss the top of her head. “Are you going to watch TV with Celeste?”

“Yes.”

“Have fun. Don’t go to bed too late.”

I go downstairs and plan on driving over to Phantasm. Then again, if I drink too much, I may have to teleport. I pass the spacious living room where the fireplace is burning. Harlan is nowhere to be found. But Aura and Oliver are there.

Kissing.

I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me. I stare at them for a few seconds, unable to move. Aura has her hands on his face and he’s got his arms wrapped around her. He’s definitely kissing her back.

In the next second, I'm gone.



PHANTASM IS BUBBLING with energy. It is never too crowded, but somehow it's always full. People are jumping up and down on the dance floor, there are people at the bar and some of the soundproof booths are occupied as well.

The Illusions on the platforms this time are dancers with large peacock feathers. They strut around, the feathers popping up behind them as they move. It's both unsettling and mesmerising to watch.

I make a beeline for the bar and order a vodka. I want something strong to wash away the image of Aura and Oliver's embrace. It's most likely part of the plan, but it still hurts. Perhaps I'm most upset about how much it hurts. I don't like it when someone has that kind of power over how I feel.

I'm on my third drink when someone leans on the bar next to me. An arm clad in red velvet. Chester.

"What do you want?" I say. I have to raise my voice to be audible over the music.

Chester leans forward, his aftershave reaching my nose. "Bad day?" he says in my ear.

I down the rest of my drink and get up from the barstool. Even on my best day I'm not that graceful, but my head feels woozy and I topple over without warning.

He catches me and chuckles. "You've really had a bad day. Come on." He puts his arm around me and takes me to his office. As soon as the door shuts behind us, the thudding of the music is no more. The sudden silence is loud.

Chester lets me go and walks all the way to his desk. He pulls out a bottle of something. Probably whisky. “You need the best of the best, I’m guessing.” He pours for himself and me.

I’m swaying on my feet, but the wooziness is nice. It distracts me from my feelings. I take the drink. “Thanks. This is very nice of you.”

He nods and takes a swig. “Wanna tell me what happened, love?”

“Nope.” I down the drink as well. It burns my throat and gives me a head rush.

Chester takes the glass from me. “You’re a barbarian. This drink is supposed to be savoured. Do you know how expensive that one glass is?” He shakes his head.

When we had been going out, he always liked to impress me with expensive whisky, but I never cared much. I just liked hearing him talk about it. He’d have the same spark in his eyes as now.

I lean forward and press my lips against his. It feels familiar yet strange.

He pulls back and blinks at me. “What are you doing?”

“Kissing you.”

“Why?” He puts down his glass.

I’m too drunk to be nuanced. “To feel better.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Ah, you want to use me. Why didn’t you say so? I love being used.” He grins and pulls me into his arms, kissing me back.

It has been so long since I’ve kissed him, but it feels natural and we both pick up a comfortable rhythm. He grabs my hair and tilts my head back so he can kiss and bite my neck. Clearly, he remembers what I like.

I hold on to him tightly and bite my lip. He moves on to my earlobe and it tickles, making me giggle.

“Sofa,” I whisper.

He lifts me up and moves me over to the sofa in the corner. It isn’t very wide and the moment he pushes me down on it, we both slide off and fall to the floor.

His arms break my fall and I can’t help it, I start laughing.

Chester laughs as well and helps me sit up.

We stare at each other for a moment.

“This isn’t going to work, is it?” he asks.

My smile fades. “No, I don’t think so.”

He kisses me briefly one last time. “I thought so.”

We lean against the sofa, still sitting on the floor.

“It’s Oliver, isn’t it? The reason you’re upset.”

I nod.

“You’re in love with him,” he says.

“Is it that obvious?”

Chester grins. “Yes.”

“Do you think he knows?”

“Yes, I do.”

I sigh. That somehow hurts even more.

“Do you want my advice?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t fight for him until you know for sure he’s willing to fight for you.”

“When did you get so wise?” I ask, feeling way more sober than I want to.

“Time makes anyone wise.”



## Chapter 16

*“Lower level vampires can become higher  
level vampires but only through cunning and skill.  
Discovery of betrayal without proof can only be handled  
with more cunning. With proof, one can make a  
plea to the Board.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



WHEN I RETURN TO THE mansion, Summer is pacing up and down the hallway.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Sinclair,” she says. Her shoulders are tensed.

“What about him?” I ask, feeling a sense of dread.

“He’s dead.”

The words swirl around in my head as I process them, then sink to the pit of my stomach. “Are you—are you serious?” My mouth feels dry and I break out into a sweat.

She nods. Her face doesn’t betray any emotions, but she’s wringing her hands nervously. “I’m just waiting for the Tinkerer to arrive. Oliver wants his identity confirmed before he’s taken to the...well, morgue.”

I swallow. “Right, the morgue.” Because he’s dead. Sinclair is dead. I’ve failed to protect him. I’m too late. Even that lousy pen I gave him...what was I thinking? Aura and Harlan are too powerful.

And it had to be them, right?

My legs are shaking as I make my way through the corridor and to the library with the hidden door to our team’s meeting room. That is where he will be, in his cell. Dead.

My breath is as shaky as my legs. This is all my fault.

Harlan’s the first person I see. He’s leaning against one of the bookcases with Aura not too far from him. George is standing by the window while Oliver is in the door opening. He looks up when he sees me.

“Did Summer inform you about what transpired?” he asks.

I clench my jaw. My back is to the vamps and George is looking out the window, which is a good thing, because a tear spills over my cheek. It is from pure anger.

“I’ll show you.” He turns around and leads the way into the room, past the large table. I follow him without drying my eyes. I don’t want Harlan or Aura guessing I’m wiping away a tear.

We disappear behind the wall that hides the cells and there he is. His hair still mussed but his eyes lifeless as they stare up at the ceiling. His neck is broken, the glass door still closed.

My hand flies up to my mouth, but Oliver immediately grasps it and spins me towards him. He presses his forehead against mine.

*Do you trust me?*

*Yes.*

*Then let me in.*

This time I do as he says and lower my mental barrier. I can feel part of him reach into me. Vampires can do some interesting things with people's minds, though I don't know all they are capable of. I can't be sure what he sees now that I've let him in, but it's worth it. My guilt and anxiety wash away and are replaced with calm. It's like my emotions have been turned down from level ten to one.

*Good, he says. Now, don't worry. I'll explain later. Just act professional and it will all be alright. I promise.*

I pull back and look into his cool eyes. Okay.

"I've called in the Tinkerer to establish his identity," he says out loud.

"How soon can he come?"

"He's on his way and will be here any second."

I look at his body, this time feeling very little emotion. "What about his... well, murder?"

"After the Tinkerer takes a scan of his face, Dee will take him down to the basement. There is a small room in the back of her work space which functions as a morgue. She can do an autopsy and since this happened under my roof, I will personally investigate the matter. We all will."

"Understood." I follow him back out into the small library where nobody else has moved since we went in.

Aura flocks to Oliver's side. "This is an outrage. Someone has killed that man right under your nose. It is a direct threat to your status."

"It is. Which is why I will find out who is responsible and make them pay," he replies coolly.

Now that my emotions have been pushed aside, I can think a lot more clearly. It is actually quite refreshing. No wonder Oliver keeps beating me at chess.

“Who was the last to see Sinclair?” I ask. “Apart from the person who killed him.”

“Summer brought him food over an hour ago. He was definitely alive then,” George says. He has turned away from the window and has his arms crossed. He eyes the vampires warily.

The cell has a special door handle on the outside, so the person inside can’t get out but it’s easy to enter the cell and to lock it after again. It could have been anyone. Everyone in this room knows which book opens the door to the room, so that also means nothing.

The visit from John Johnson, could that be...?

Aura pipes up again. “Could it be another vampire? You said you’ve been negotiating with Samuel from the House of Summer.”

“I would have smelt him if he had entered this part of the mansion,” George says. “I haven’t smelt anyone who doesn’t belong.”

Proving it had to be Aura or Harlan. Or perhaps even Summer. Good thing Oliver has dampened my emotions. Otherwise I’d probably feel like punching someone.

“What about security cameras? Do you have any?” I ask Oliver.

“Glad you asked. I do. That is why I’m certain I will catch whoever did this,” he says. “We’ll just wait for the Tinkerer and Dee to show up.”

It doesn’t escape my notice that Aura and Harlan exchange a glance.

“Aura, Harlan, you should go relax. I’ve got everything under control and it would make me feel better knowing you are entertaining yourselves.” Oliver says it so sincerely that I believe him.

“Right. If you need help, do let me know. It would be a wonderful opportunity for me to show you how great our union would be.” She touches his cheek.

How nice that I don't feel anything except for a little stir somewhere deep inside of me. I can get used to this.

They leave the room.

As soon as they do, Oliver nods at George, some sort of unspoken communication passing between them, and then he grabs my hand.

*Teleport us to your parents' attic.*

I frown, but do as he says. The next instant we are in my parents' attic. The light in the room is on and Sinclair is snoring on the double bed.

"What?" I whisper and approach him to make sure it really is him.

Sinclair rolls over on his side. "Make us some tea, love," he mumbles. "Not those biscuits."

Yep, definitely him.

I return to Oliver's side. "You copied him, didn't you?"

"Yes. After our conversation, I wanted a back-up plan. I switched them out. Your parents were only happy to help." His lips curl up.

"And you didn't tell me," I say. "Because you wanted to pay me back for not telling you about Wynter sooner?"

"Hmm. I do suppose you now know how unpleasant it is to be kept out of the loop, but I would never be as petty as to hurt you because you hurt me. I thought of it after we had our conversation and decided to react straight away. Good thing, too."

"I agree. You did the right thing." He did save Sinclair's life, and as soon as he noticed how upset I was, he calmed me.

We stare at Sinclair for a moment as if we are his proud parents and he our child. "I like striped socks," he mumbles.

“I’m glad he’s alive, but I don’t feel it. Does that make sense? I know it, but I don’t feel it.”

Oliver nods. “Yes, that does make sense.”

“Is this what you feel all the time?”

“I can if I want to.” His eyes search my face.

“And do you want to?”

“Sometimes.”

“When?” I want to understand.

“When I get scared.”

My eyes widen. “You get scared?”

“Oh, yes,” he says.

“Of what?”

He smiles sadly. “There are worse things than death and even a vampire isn’t safe from them.”

I nod, thinking of the family he has lost. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“No matter. We should return in case the Tinkerer has arrived.”

“Do you really have equipment that allows you to see who killed him?” If he does, then it will be easy enough to prove that it was Harlan or Aura. My guess is that Harlan did the dirty work. I mean, it could have been Summer, but would she really kill someone? And what would she gain by killing Sinclair?

“Yes.”

“What will you do then if it shows Aura or Harlan committed the crime?”

“I have the perfect excuse to get rid of them. It will also affect their power. Mine too, but in a good way. They will have to go before the High Council.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun.”

“It’s not. It consists of old, boring vampires who care more about ancient rules than about the vampires themselves. It’s a sham.”

“In this case I’m glad that they will decide over Aura and Harlan’s fate. We should hurry back. I’m worried that they might try to get their hands on the footage.”

“Don’t worry. They won’t get to it.” He puts his hand on my arm. “Let’s return. Take us to the entrance hall.”

“Woollen socks are itchy,” Sinclair mutters before we pop up in the entrance hall.

Summer visibly startles as we do. “Oh, where did you—”

“Is the Tinkerer here yet?” Oliver interrupts her.

She narrows her eyes at him but doesn’t say anything. “No, he’s—”

The doorbell rings.



## Chapter 17

*“There is something magical about Tinkering. You have something whole and mysterious, and you have to take it apart in order to create something new and valuable for this world.” ~ Sinclair*



THE TINKERER INTRODUCES himself as Fitz Schnauzerbaum. He has the habit of touching his glasses, as if to confirm they're still there.

Despite the fact that Oliver told our guests to relax and basically stay out of our way, Aura is in the reception room next to the entrance. Through the doorway I can see her doing some sort of needlework in front of the fireplace. She is clearly hanging around so she can eavesdrop. Harlan is conspicuously absent.

*Are you sure the security footage is safe? I ask Oliver in his head.*

*Absolutely.*

At least that puts me somewhat at ease. Oliver is far from stupid and he knows how these vampires work. If he says it's okay, it's okay.

I decide to stick close to Oliver and Schnauzerbaum and follow them back to the room. Oliver explains everything to him in the same tone one would discuss a fishing trip. Despite the fact that Schnauzerbaum is about to see a dead body, he remains surprisingly composed.

He places his brown briefcase on the table we use when Oliver assigns us a new Traveller to track down. From it, he takes what looks like a Polaroid camera. Perhaps it is one, but since I know what Tinkerers are like, I highly doubt it is as simple as that. Most devices they own are customised and linked with technology from parallel universes.

He shuffles over to the wall that separates this room from where the cells are and disappears behind it. Oliver and I follow him in time to watch him snap a picture of Sinclair's face. He also uses his watch to take a fingerprint, but his hand trembles when he lifts a finger to the screen of his watch. Tinkerer's watches are similar to the one I wore when I worked at the Chrono Unit.

When he gets back up, his face is pale and his eyes have a haunted look. Clearly his first body. Oliver and I exchange a look and then follow him back out into the meeting room.

Schauzerbaum dabs his forehead with a blue handkerchief and clears his throat nervously before checking his watch.

With interest I peer over his shoulder as he works.

"Nothing on the fingerprints," he mumbles.

His fingerprints probably don't register because he's a clone, though the Tinkerer doesn't know that. He probably assumes Sinclair has fudged with his records or something.

He waits until the picture of Sinclair has appeared on the Polaroid photo and then, to my surprise, sticks it back in. It makes gurgling noises, much like my car usually makes and after a few moments, a list comes out of the same slot.

I can't read it; the letters are tiny.

Schauzerbaum reaffirms his glasses again and mutters incoherently as he reads the list. "Yes, the real facts are all here," he says. "His real name is Victor Burrows and he has worked as a Tinkerer for about seven years. He

is also known for stealing gadgets and then vanishing into thin air.” He glances at us. His face is no longer pale but now there are two red stains on his cheeks from excitement. “He’s the one that used gadgets to make Alterations, right?”

Oliver ignores the question. “Thank you for your time. Good job.” He looks over my shoulder towards the doorway and nods.

I turn around as Dee enters the room with a gurney. When Schauzerbaum follows my gaze, he instantly pales again.

“We’ve got cake and tea. How about I get you some?” I ask and direct him out of the room and towards the kitchen.

I get him a slice of cake with whipped cream and make him a cup of tea. Of course I make the same for me. Even if I’m here to get information out of him, it doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy myself while I question him.

“So, how’s the cake?”

Schnauzerbaum has regained some colour again and nods. There’s a bit of whipped cream on his nose. “Delicious.”

“Excellent.” I take a bite myself and refrain from wolfing it down. It will make it difficult to speak. “What do you know about Sin—Victor?” I ask him. He’ll always be Sinclair in my head.

“Oh, they let me read his file. He was a skilled Tinkerer, you know? It made me sad to learn that he’d gone over to the bad side. A Tinkerer trying to be a Traveller.” He shakes his head as if it’s the greatest sin.

“That’s all you know about him? That he was a great Tinkerer and that he tried to make Alterations.”

“Is that not enough? I mean, there were redacted bits in his file, but it was mentioned that he tried to create a Portal Pad and succeeded.”

“A Portal Pad?”

“That’s what Victor had called the device he used to create portals. It was shaped like a lily pad. One side to create time portals, one to create a portal to parallel universes. It was quite nifty, but unfortunately they redacted the parts that explained how he created them. I don’t blame them. We don’t want a repeat of the situation. To be honest, Victor was quite the legend. Us Tinkerers have heard rumours of him. We didn’t know his name or the specifics, just that there was a Tinkerer who had created what none of us ever could achieve. Not that we would,” he says quickly. “We know it’s forbidden, but we are interested in creating something like that for the CU, for example.”

“And to prove to yourself that you could,” I say softly.

He blushes. “Well, yes. It would be impressive.”

The Portal Pad is definitely part of the devices that Sinclair had on him. It is vital it stays out of the hands of the vampires. The problem is that Sinclair will always know how to make it. What to do about that? Is that knowledge something to be shared? The Chrono Unit officer in me says no, but the Traveller in me sees possibilities of a world that would embrace time travel.

“Have you ever had anyone brief you about Victor who wasn’t human?” I ask.

He frowns. “How do you mean? A Traveller?”

“Or a vampire.”

“What would a—no, of course not. My boss was the one who told me to come here because the mayor had requested it. I don’t take orders from anyone else. My boss is definitely human. As far as I know,” he adds with a chuckle.

I smile at him. “Right.”

He stops chewing and narrows his eyes.

“What is it?”

“Well, there were rumours, and I am no gossip.” He takes another bite of his cake as my impatience rises.

“It’s not gossip, Mr Schnauzerbaum. Any information you provide is in aid of this special task force. In fact, any useful information would make you a hero. It would be quite impressive if a Tinkerer helps us out.”

His eyes light up. He takes a sip of his tea with hurried movements, causing the warm liquid to spill on his ironed shirt. He either doesn’t realise it or ignores it. “Like I said, it’s just rumours. But I heard that Victor was working with a Traveller. You know, to create the devices. That it wasn’t merely him fiddling about with devices retrieved from parallel universes, but that it was a Traveller who actually sought out these devices with the goal of him creating whatever he created.”

“Do you think it’s true?” I ask.

“I can’t see why. Why would a Traveller share his abilities with the world?”

If Travelling becomes normal, it would mean that Travellers are safer than they are. Isn’t that what Wynter wants? Isn’t that why she came back? Because I’m in the middle of it all? Because I want more for Travellers too.

“Do you know what other devices Victor made?” I know I can ask him, but he could lie to me, despite our current alliance.

“I’m not entirely sure, of course. But there is the Portal Pad. I believe there was a duplication device, a shrinking device, and a device that could create a static image that wasn’t real, but looked real. Basically, an Illusion, but not one quite as extensive as when an Illusionist creates it.”

My, my. Sinclair certainly has been busy. Or Victor. Whatever.

“Mind you, these are just rumours,” Schnauzerbaum quickly adds.

I nod, but I happen to know that Tinkerers are some of the most reliable gossips there are. When I was still working at the Chrono Unit, we were the

first to find out about pregnancies, affairs, and illnesses, all because we shared a water cooler with the Tinkerers.

There's a crunch and Schnauzerbaum's eyes widen. The next instant he's on the floor and one leg of the chair is missing.

I lean over and glance at Poofie, who chews twice and then proudly exclaims: "Poof poof."

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"



SINCE OLIVER AND GEORGE are going to check out the security footage and Dee is going to perform the autopsy on a fake Sinclair, it's time I talk to the real one.

I pop up in my parent's attic and stare at the guest bed. Sinclair is still draped across it. This time he's not snoring.

I kick his leg and he jolts up. "What? What? Is there tea?"

"It's time we talk."

I take Sinclair downstairs and make him a cup of tea. My mother always goes to bed late, and it's now nearing midnight. When she notices me and Sinclair come down, she turns off the TV and heads upstairs, pausing to kiss me goodnight.

"I'm watching even more TV than usual," she says as I put the kettle on the stove. "Your father has his mind set on buying a TV with colour, as is apparently now all the rage. I don't much care for it. It will be too ... real." She eyes Sinclair.

He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up even further. “I—I agree. The TVs are fine as they are.”

She nods as if that settles the matter, then wishes us goodnight before leaving.

“Your parents seem nice. They warned me not to try anything funny, or a dinosaur would eat me. I had no idea that your father was Pip. He used to be a formidable Illusionist.”

I glare at him.

“H—he still is, of course. I’m just saying, he is retired now.”

“I wasn’t aware you knew of him,” I say.

“As a Tinkerer, I heard a lot. I mean, we all sat at our tables, fiddling about with devices all day long. One has to get through the day, you know? Talking to yourself gets boring at a certain point.”

I pour him tea with a dash of milk, and do the same for me. I don’t know if he takes his tea that way, but I’m not in a very hospitable mood.

“So, what happened? Do the vampires know?”

“They don’t suspect anything just yet. They think you’re dead.” I take a sip of my tea. It is still too hot.

His eyes widen. “So they did try to kill me?” He exhales slowly. “I’m glad Oliver did what he did.”

Despite the way he was sleeping just now, his eyes are a bit red and he has circles under his eyes. His cockiness also seems to have vanished, now that he knows how close he was to escaping death.

“He saved your life. I would have been too late. Which is why you need to tell me everything about what is going on. There is too much speculation, too many unconnected dots. There is more going on and you’re going to tell me everything, or I’ll personally deliver you to Aura DuVeil.”

He scoffs. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” I say without blinking.

He swallows. “Alright. What do you want to know, exactly? I’ve already told you everything.”

“No. You haven’t.”

He inhales deeply. “How do you know that?”

“I have good instincts. Also, it helps that you’ve just confirmed it.” I grin at him.

He takes a sip of his tea to attempt to hide his displeasure.

“Start at the beginning. I don’t buy that you just suddenly decide to make gadgets for your own benefit. Tinkerers are supposed to use technology from other worlds to create something that can be used in this one, but not devices that create portals or Illusions. What made you go there?”

He takes another sip, and I can see him thinking.

I slam my fist on the kitchen counter, causing him to flinch and spill the hot tea over his hands. “Don’t lie.”

“Ouch, woman. You made me burn my hands.”

“Then don’t lie to me.”

“I haven’t.”

“You were about to. Or maybe not lie, but at least calculate what you could afford to leave out. Don’t.” I hand him a tea towel.

He sighs. “Alright, alright. Wow, you are a force to be reckoned with. Calm down. I’m still half asleep.”

“You’re not asleep enough to think your way out of this. So spill.”

We both look at his hands, which he's still dabbing at.

"I'd rather not," he says with a smile.

I can't help but smile as well. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. And I suppose I do owe you the truth."

I say nothing and let him talk.

"It is always Level-3 CU officers that bring us our gadgets. Makes sense, since they're the ones that actually bring them over from the other worlds. However, the devices that they take with them are not random. This is something not many people know, but they receive a list of devices that do certain things, and if they happen to find them, they bring them back. And when they come to us, we attempt to figure out how they work and how we can recreate something similar or incorporate it with something we already have.

"Anyway, everything went the way it always went, until I got two devices, one of which looked like it would play music, but it was small and round and had buttons. One of the devices was one that could play music, but was smaller. Not quite like an MP3-player from PU-39613, but similar."

I nod, being familiar with a range of devices from different worlds.

"And I found out that this device was actually used to create portals, but it was broken. Do you know what that means? It means that there's already a world where people can Travel without being Travellers. It just—it blew my mind. I decided to fix it, but it's hard to fix something you don't understand. So I went to my bosses to ask for more help, possibly more funding. They seemed very interested in this idea and the world it came from, but the thing is, even though it landed on my desk, none of the Level-3 officers claimed it as something they'd brought with them."

I sip on my tea while I think about this.

“Then, my boss ordered me to work on this alone. I’m pretty sure he asked me because if anyone was going to figure it out, it was me. Not being arrogant, it’s just the truth. I’ve created over 47 gadgets in my six years as a Tinkerer.”

That is impressive, but I simply nod.

“That is a lot,” he adds, not satisfied with my lustreless response.

I simply take a sip of my tea.

He grunts. “You’re becoming very vexing, you know?”

I hide my grin behind my mug.

“As soon as I started making significant progress, which I reported to my boss, Miss Tuttle, my home was ransacked. Later, she told me to stop working on it and that the project was deemed a failure, but wouldn’t explain why. Of course, she couldn’t. It was working perfectly well. Alright, at that time, it needed minor tweaking. Opening a portal with the device caused one’s groin to itch terribly.”

I laugh, I can’t help it.

“It’s not funny. It was a serious problem that I managed to fix.”

“I’m glad you did.”

He gives me a haughty look. “I realised the vampires were after me when two of them showed up and asked questions about my work. They acted as if they came to check out the departments, since they were guests of my boss. They didn’t say what House they were from, but they were very clearly vampires. I answered their questions truthfully, then a few days later, my office was ransacked as well.”

“And then you went on the run, acting like a rogue Traveller?”

“No. That was after my flat exploded.”

My eyes widen. “Your flat exploded?”

“Most definitely. I knew then that they wanted me dead.”

Blayze had attempted a similar thing, even if Perrin, a CU officer from another world, managed to stop him. He had an affinity for explosives, but that didn’t mean anything. Unless...

Perhaps that is why I have the feeling that there are connections that I should be making. If I’m at the centre of this, then so are the people close to me.

“I wonder if you know my childhood friend turned nemesis,” I say.

“You have a nemesis?” He chuckles. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Blayze.”

He nearly chokes on his tea and the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach grows to a mountain.



## Chapter 18

*Direct insults should be recorded for posterity and grudges  
should be maintained in the interest of fairness and  
honesty. ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



I WAIT FOR HIM TO FINISH coughing while the anger in me rises.

“H—how do you—he’s your nemesis?”

“He is. But he was once a friend.”

“That’s what I thought he was to me. He’s the one who sort of rescued me.”

“Explain.” I have to use both hands to hold up my mug, because my hands are shaking.

“When my flat exploded, he was the one who stalled me when I wanted to enter my building. I watched my flat go boom and then he offered his help. He took me to PU-88875 and let me Tinker. He said I could change the world. Well, this world.”

“In what way?”

I have to remember that this was when Phoebe was in prison. Perhaps he wanted to use the devices to save her? Perhaps, in some way, he wanted Travelling to be legal and work towards a world that supported that.

“He wanted to create a world where Travelling is part of it. He said it could one day be a booming business.”

“Booming business? That’s what he called it?”

Sinclair nods.

“And then what happened?”

“He helped me sort of map out different parallel worlds in the Portal Pad. It was a really cool idea that took me many sleepless nights. Not all worlds are programmed, but it’s nifty. I then started trying to make Alterations. I suppose I shouldn’t have, but it was too tempting not to. That’s how I got on the radar as a rogue Traveller.”

“I see.” I stare him down. “And where is he now?”

Sinclair swallows. “I haven’t heard from him in a while.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“But, er, I do know where he was last.”

“Go on.”



PU-45568 IS A WORLD with luscious forests, similar animals to what I know, and zero technology. It is virtually impossible to find someone in another world, except in this one. Because even though it has luscious forests, it also has patches of frozen land. They are covered in snow and ice, and nothing grows there. You wouldn’t think it, because as I’m walking through the woods with the sun shining and birds making strange high-pitched noises, it is warm and lively. But there is nothing but ice and dangerous monsters at the outskirts of the forest.

There are no humanoids and if Sinclair has been living here, he has to have built something and he needs to live close to running water. As far as I know, there are two lakes in this world and from one of them I can see puffs of smoke in the distance.

I trace it to a wooden cabin.

My palms feel sweaty and my heart starts racing. It's not like we knew about this possibility; ever since Phoebe and Blayze died, the Chrono Unit has been investigating where the Original Blayze could be. But I, and even the Chrono Unit, figured Future Blayze used the loophole. The loophole is when the Original person gets sent to the future. If an Original person dies in the future, it doesn't affect the Future person if they are in the past.

Yep. Time is tricky.

The cabin has purple and blue flowers that add a splash of colour in all the green. I hear the sound of wood being chopped so I go around the back. It is still light out. This world only has nights that last three hours.

Is it really him? Is he really alive?

I stop and watch a male figure chop wood. His brown hair is half long and looks tangled, as if he hasn't brushed it in a while. His upper body seems more muscular and overall he doesn't look that scrawny or pale anymore. His chest is bare, his trousers are rolled up and he's not wearing any footwear.

He turns around after chopping two more logs. His dark eyes are less intense than the last time I saw him, but of course that was the Future Blayze. This is...well, he still did all those awful things with Phoebe. He is still definitely dangerous.

I focus on his life force, but don't sense anything. Ah, he's Collared. That must have been Future Blayze's doing.

"What brings you to my humble abode, Monday Moody?" he says as he stares at me, sweat glistening on his forehead.

“Hi, Blayze,” I say, unsure of what I’m feeling. Relieved? Worried?

Since the weather is nice, we sit out in the garden. It doesn’t feel like a garden, it’s pretty much part of the woods. Birds are chirping, and occasionally horse-like deer trot in the distance. I also spot a few furry creatures climbing up the trees. They have one eye and three tails.

It is odd sitting here across from Blayze, especially while he’s playing host. After all that has happened, it’s just a scene beyond my imagination.

And yet, Blayze hardly seems fazed.

“I’m guessing you have been talking to Sinclair?” Blayze asks, his eyebrow raised as he pours me tea.

“How did you get that tea pot?” I ask. “Or that tea?”

“Before Sinclair went Travelling, he brought me a few things here. He doesn’t know I was Collared and dumped here by my future self. He made a device that allowed us to keep in touch even though we were worlds apart. He has been grateful, because I’ve helped him.”

“He mentioned you brought him devices and brought him to a parallel world to protect him from the threats on his life. Why did you do those things?” I also take a mental note about that device. It sounds handy.

“Because Phoebe asked me to. When I told her about our world and how Travellers are treated, she wanted to create chaos.”

He must know she’s dead, right? Do I tell him? He seems to be able to talk about her without a hint of emotion. Or perhaps he’s simply gotten good at hiding it.

“Do you know—I mean, you are aware that...” I shift in my seat.

“That Phoebe is dead? Along with my future self? Yes. I am aware.”

“How do you know? If you’ve been stuck here this whole time?”

“I know because otherwise he would have told me. I asked him, when he put me here, to tell me if he managed to save her. I didn’t even care if he got to spend the rest of his time with her and not me, just as long as she was free.” He looks away, but not fast enough for me to spot the pain in his eyes.

“When did he switch places with you?” I ask.

Blayze clears his throat. “I don’t know how long I’ve been here, but I do know it was not long after Phoebe got imprisoned. Before I even had the chance to come up with a plan, he was there. I figured he would take me to the future, but instead he Collared me and put me here.”

Probably because he felt sorry for himself.

At least it is reassuring to know he hasn’t tried to kill me, nor that he was the one who killed the Monday Moody from the parallel world Phoebe was from.

It doesn’t change that he has done bad things while being with Phoebe. However, he is in a prison of sorts. He can’t use his abilities and he’s all alone.

“You seem surprisingly calm even though your future self basically imprisoned you,” I say.

He exhales slowly. “Some things are meant to be. I’ve had to learn that the hard way. I’ve made my peace with it.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Believe what you will. Even if I wasn’t telling the truth, what can I do?” He regards the trees in front of us and stares up at the blue sky. “This place isn’t so bad.” He looks back at me. “Unless you’re planning to take me in?”

That is the big question. This world doesn’t contain the antidote for Collars. Also, I’m worried that Blayze isn’t done and that by returning him to our world, I’ll help him more than not. Perhaps I can’t decide this on my own.

“I’ll let you know,” I say.

He inclines his head. “I’m sure you will. Anything else I can help you with?”

“No.” If there is more going on, then I won’t get it out of him. Not now, anyway. For now it’s enough that I know where he is and that he can’t leave.

“The device you had in order to communicate with Sinclair, where is it?”

“One moment.” He gets up and disappears into his cabin. I shift in my seat so that I don’t have my back to him when he returns.

He’s holding two walkie-talkies and puts them on the table between us. “I asked Sinclair to return his during our last visit. You can have both. I don’t need them.”

“Hm. Alright.” I pick them both up. There are more buttons than a normal walkie-talkie and it has a screen. Sinclair will know how this works. It can be very useful to the Chrono Units.

“Take care, Monday Moody.”

“I’ll see you soon, Blayze.”

He just smiles.



WHEN I RETURN TO THE mansion it is nearly two A.M. and my head is spinning from Travelling again. I recognise the feeling and know that it will transform into a headache. I hate Travelling headaches, it feels like spikes are being pushed through my skull.

I need to find Oliver and tell him about Blayze. Hopefully, Aura and Harlan are not near him. It's likely they haven't gone to bed yet.

*Where are you? I ask him in my head.*

*My bedroom, he responds immediately.*

In the next second I'm there, swirls of smoke dissipating around me. Oliver's room has a balcony and both doors are open. The night air sweeps through the room and rustles the curtains while he's standing outside, staring at the dark sky. The moon is nearly full.

I join him and we both stand there in silence. It's nice. I would be quite content to stand beside him all night, not saying a word. But words need to be spoken and plans need to be made.

I take his hand and in the next instant, we are by the beach in Kent. Me and my parents went here on holiday when I was ten and sometimes I still visit this exact spot whenever I can't sleep or need to hear the sea.

It is dark, deserted and chilly. The perfect place to have a private chat.

"Wow, I wish you would warn me before doing that." He sways on his feet.

I grin. "Now where's the fun in that?"

He squeezes my hand. "Cheeky, aren't we?"

"I've learned from the best."

"Is that supposed to mean me?"

"No. My mother."

He chuckles. "I see."

I inhale and the humour in his eyes disappears.

"Did you check the camera yet?" I ask him.

“I did. Ever since I told Aura and Harlan to relax, Harlan is nowhere to be found. Aura tells me he left and his things aren’t in his room. As you can guess, it was him on the security footage and it seems he’s fled. She’s saying he acted on his own and ran away.”

“How cowardly.”

“No, she kind of has to. In a way, she’s responsible for him and even though she claims it was solely him, they’ll both be in trouble, unless he completely takes the blame, which I doubt. She’s come close to begging me not to mention it to the High Council and still wants to get married.”

Let’s hope he does report her to the High Council and that those ancient farts do their worst. They are known for valuing rules more than their own vampires.

I scoff. “That’s pretty desperate. I mean, you are not that stupid that you would do something like that. Nor do you care about her enough to protect her.” I meet his eyes. “Right?”

Oliver scans my face without replying.

“Are you jealous?” he asks after a moment of silence.

“I saw you two kissing,” I say softly. Afraid that if I speak any louder, my voice will crack and betray my emotions.

He looks towards the sea, his jaw clenched.

Is he upset that I saw? Or that I’m bringing it up? He is so bloody hard to read.

“Aura and I will never be an item,” he says, turning back to me. “But I had to make her think that it’s a possibility. Do you understand?”

“You say ‘had’, so this means you officially turned her down?”

“That’s right,” he answers.

“You really don’t want to be with her?”

“No.”

“But won’t it be good for you?” I ask.

“Depends on your point of view.”

The wind picks up and I shiver.

“Do you want to go somewhere else?” He moves closer.

“No, this is safer.”

He pulls me into his arms. “At least stay close to me, so you don’t freeze to death.”

“It’s not that cold,” I say.

Thankfully, he doesn’t let go. “Is there more you wish to discuss?” His lips are close to my ear.

I imagine if anyone saw us right now, we’d appear to be lovers meeting for a romantic kiss by the sea.

“Actually, yes.” I shiver again as a gust of wind seems to go right through me. I hug him and rest my chin on his shoulder.

“Let’s say I go back in time, right? There would be two Mondays in the time I visit. The Original Monday and me, from the future.”

“Right,” Oliver says patiently.

“Let’s say I get killed.” At this, Oliver holds me a bit tighter. “Then there would still be the Original Monday.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“If the Original Monday died and I went back to my time, then I’d die too. But nothing affects the Original Monday if anything happens to me, since I’m from the future.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Well, do you remember Blayze dying? The Blayze from the future?”

Oliver lets me go. “Are you serious? He’s alive? The Original Blayze? You found him?” He looks at me as if to truly ask me how we hadn’t been able to sooner.

“Sinclair told me.”

He takes a step back. “Sinclair? What is going on?”

I tell him what Sinclair told me and my visit to Blayze.

“So Blayze told you that Phoebe instructed him to contact Sinclair,” he says out loud, more to himself than me.

“I think that more is going on, but I’m not sure what, nor how to find out.”

He regards me with a raised eyebrow. “Did you leave him there?”

“Yeah. I just—I figured I’d talk to you first before we decide what to do. For now, it might be a good idea to leave him there. If he is up to something, perhaps he’s counting on being brought back to our world.”

Oliver turns his full attention on me. It always unsettles me because it feels like he can read me like a book. “Are you sure that’s the only reason?”

“Excuse me?”

“You still think of him as that little boy that you wanted to protect. You care about underdogs. That’s why you want to fight for the Travellers, even if they are dangerous. You think they can all be like you. That’s also why you didn’t tell me about Wynter until you absolutely had to. You want to be the

one that does the saving, you want to take the responsibility. That's your weakness, Monday."

I swallow, feeling an uncomfortable twisting in my stomach. I open my mouth to say something, but don't know what. Is that true?

"Blayze can easily use that against you. So can Wynter. You think the vampires are the biggest threat, Monday, but have you ever considered that it might be you?"

His words are a blow to the gut.

Is he saying this because I didn't tell him about Wynter sooner? Didn't I come to him this time? Didn't I turn to him to talk about our next step? Why does it feel like he's punishing me? Or maybe it's just that the truth hurts.

"For now, we'll leave Blayze where he is. We'll come up with a plan tomorrow. Let's return," Oliver says and he touches my arm. Not to comfort me, but so I can teleport him back.

I avoid eye contact and take us back to one of the corridors in the mansion. Before he can say anything, I teleport away again, back to the beach. Tears are pricking behind my eyes, but since I'm alone, I let them out.

Why am I this upset? He's right, I did care about Blayze. But when I realised he was trying to kill me, all kind feelings went out of the window. Now I know that wasn't him, so maybe I do feel some kind of urge to 'save' him. I shake my head. No, as soon as he fell in love with Phoebe, it was hopeless.

Right?

I feel someone move behind me and turn around. It's an older woman in a dusty coat and a knitted hat. She's holding a plastic bag and when she smiles, she reveals a gap in her teeth. "I saw. You are one of them Travellers, no?"

I wipe away the tears and nod. There is no point lying and because of my work and not having to hide it, the response is automatic.

“It’s illegal, though. So how about you go back a few hours and talk me out of buying this lottery ticket which turned out to be a waste of a few quid.” She waves a ticket in my face.

I sigh. “I need a drink.”



## Chapter 19

*“Sometimes the best remedy for having the blues is simply kicking butt.” ~ Monday*



PHANTASM IS PACKED despite the fact that it's almost 2 AM. I can't believe I'm here again and for the same reason. Bloody vampires. Why do they have to mess with me like this?

Unlike what the recent past might indicate, I don't drink much. I don't see the point of getting drunk, nor do I like the idea of not being fully in control of what I say or do. But the more time I spend at the mansion, the more I want to get drunk.

The bar is too full and so I head up to one of the employees by the VIP booths and tell him my name. I'm not entirely sure if it will do anything, but if I know Chester, then it will.

Sure enough, the man chases away a couple who give me the once-over, probably because I don't look like I should take precedence over anyone in this area.

I sit down in the soundproof booth and order tequila. I'm not taking any prisoners. A waitress brings two shot glasses. As soon as she's gone, I down them both. It's not my favourite drink, but it will do the job.

Is Oliver right? And if so, does it matter? Why am I this upset?

No, no. I came here to get drunk. The whole point of that is so I don't have to think. Not thinking is good right now.

I order two more shots and then, even though I don't consider myself a good dancer at all, I venture out onto the dance floor. The music isn't too bad and I find it easy to move to the heavy beat. The alcohol is making my head feel woozy and I like it. I don't worry about what I might look like and if I'm making a fool of myself.

The music is nice. Chester really does have a very awesome club. It has been a long while since I've danced here. I used to hit the dance floor when I was dating Chester. But I was younger then, and definitely a better dancer.

A hand grips my shoulder. I turn around. It's Chester. He mouths something to me, but I can't make out what it is. He grabs my arm and we make our way to his office where the sudden silence makes my ears ring.

"What's going on? I was busy," I say, though secretly I appreciate the interruption. Perhaps coming here wasn't the best idea. I'm not one to run from problems. I usually do the opposite.

He hands me a glass of water. "I saw. You rarely dance. Is it because of everything that's been going on?" When he saw the question marks in my eyes, he added: "George rang me."

"I'm sorry I made you work on a poison for nothing." I take a swig of water. All that dancing has made me parched.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure it will come in handy sometime. If you don't mind me keeping it." He grins at me.

"Do you have wild plans?" I ask.

"Always. Now, I didn't pull you away because I don't like your dance moves. I could actually use your skills for a little adventure. If you're up for it." He raises his eyebrow.

This is Chester's way of asking for help. He would never literally ask for it because he's too proud. Of course I'm happy to help him with anything—as long as it's not too illegal. Not only do I owe him, but what better way to

distract myself with a bit of action? At least it won't give me a hangover in the morning.

"Whatever you need," I say.

He nods and slips behind his desk to turn on his typewriter. He motions for me to join him and I take place next to him, my curiosity piqued as I check out the holo-screen.

He plays footage from inside his own club. The dancers on the platforms are spitting fire—it's an Illusion, and it means it's not live, but footage from an earlier day. His club is incredibly safe and I wonder what he's about to show me.

Chester points at a small group of men at the bar. They order drinks while laughing and talking. Everything seems normal. Another friend group also joins the bar to order drinks. It isn't long before they start talking to each other and one of them starts handing out something small. It must be a pill because they put it in their mouths and take a swig of whatever drink they have.

"Drugs, huh? They don't know about your zero tolerance policy?" I ask.

"It gets worse," he says.

I can't pinpoint exactly where it starts, it's as if someone has flipped a switch. The men start fighting and it's not a fight between the two groups, they even fight their own friends. One moment they are laughing, the next they are biting, scratching, punching and kicking each other.

"Did the drugs do this?" I have never seen anything like it.

"It appears so." He pauses his holo-screen and turns to me. "Security has gotten some serious bruises. It took an Illusion to subdue them and some of them were foaming and then passed out. Two of them are in hospital, not due to the fight, but the drugs. Whatever it is, it makes people incredibly violent."

“Did you share it with the K-9 unit?” It is a branch of the UA that consists of werewolves and they mainly go after drug dealers. There are some spooky creations out there. When I was a teenager there was a drug that made people invisible for over 24 hours, but when it wore off, large parts of them would remain invisible. The suicide rate that year was high.

“No. I told George and he’ll inform Oliver. He has a similar zero-tolerance approach. The K-9 Unit will add this drug to their list, but it doesn’t mean they’ll immediately investigate. Oliver and George are preoccupied with the whole Sinclair and vampires thing, so that leaves me and you. What do you say? Looking forward to a distraction from your troubles?”

Oh, boy, do I ever need a distraction? “I’m in. What’s our first lead?”

“That’s the thing, when I questioned the men, their memories were woozy. They don’t even remember the fight. What I did find was a calling card.”

He produces an actual playing card of the joker.

I frown at it. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Phantasm was originally the idea of my mentor. He wanted to create an elite club with Illusions that was only known through word of mouth. He had ideas for the potions that I’ve created—like the ones you have—as well as for certain weapons. It was important to him to have power in this city and he had big plans. I learned most of what I know from him, but he disappeared when I was nineteen and I figured he was dead. Even though I searched for him for years, I never found a clue as to what happened to him. Eventually, I created Phantasm and stepped in his footsteps.”

“Let me guess, he has something to do with that playing card?”

“He had printed his business cards on the back of these.” He flips the joker card around. There is nothing on the back other than what one would expect.

“Do you really think it’s him? And why would he sell those drugs to a few men that would visit your club?”

“Let’s find out.”

“Okay, but where could this guy be?”

“His name is Jimmy. And I have an idea,” Chester says.



“WHAT IS THIS PLACE?” We stare up at an abandoned warehouse and I am beginning to regret my decision. It is late and I’ve yawned non-stop on the drive over. Chester has parked his red Cadillac at the side of the road. It is a quiet, industrial area and the warehouse looks like nobody has been there in years.

“This is where he originally wanted to have his club. He called it something else back then, but I can’t remember the name. I just remember I didn’t like it as much as Phantasm.”

“Phantasm is a good name,” I say.

“Thank you.”

“What’s the plan?” I ask, stifling another yawn.

“Whoever he is, we ask him what the hell he wants. If it’s not Jimmy, we tell him he can take his drugs and piss off.”

“And if he won’t?”

“I can always create the Illusion that the warehouse is on fire.”

“A barbecue. Lovely,” I say.

“I just need you in case anything goes wrong. Bending time might come in handy.”

I am tired, so I hope it's not necessary. Still, I nod. It sounds like a good plan, but even good plans can easily be disrupted.

When I was nineteen, my mother gave me this mission to steal a golden egg from a fire-breathing bird in PU-88973. I was familiar with the parallel universe so I had handled it like I was planning the heist of the century. It all went swimmingly until a duck uprooted the whole thing. It only takes one domino to fall the wrong way.

"Do we need like a code word?" I ask.

"You mean, in case shit hits the fan and we need to go all out?"

I shrug. "I mean, yeah, something like that."

"Sure. Let's go with 'oh, shit'. Does that work?"

"No need to mock me." I get out of the car.

"I'm not mocking you," Chester says as he gets out as well. We make our way to the other side of the alley. "I'm just saying, as far as code words go, that would be a good one."

"It's not a code word if it's that obvious, isn't it?"

"As long as it's not 'we're going to kill you now', I think we're good. We could have the code word be 'pineapple' but I think that will be more suspicious."

"What about 'my bra is pinching me?'" I flash him a cheeky grin.

He maintains a serious expression. "I think that would be perfect, actually. Let's go with that one."

I chuckle. This reminds me of the type of banter we had when we were together. Sometimes I miss those days. He was the only serious relationship I've ever had. Ever since then I've focussed purely on my job. I mean, I had a couple of dates, but nothing that turned into more than that. I can't help

but wonder if it's been the same for Chester, but I can't get myself to ask him that question. I'm not sure why.

“And, err, what if it is this Jimmy?”

He turns to me. “If it is Jimmy, just follow my lead. I'm not sure what he wants. It could be that he simply wanted me to find him.”

“Hell of a way to do that. He could have killed those people.”

“Agreed. I just can't figure out why he would have left and why he would come back in this way.”

“Maybe it's not him, then.” I shrug. “It could be that someone is using that card to mess with you.”

“True.” He starts making his way to a grey door at the side of the large building. He points to the ground and I spot the cigarette stubs.

Okay, someone has clearly been here. Unless local wildlife has decided to pick up a certain disgusting habit.

The door opens and Chester steps through first. I follow, feeling the prickle of nerves. I don't like this at all.

It seems that these drugs and the card were a way to draw his attention and they have succeeded in doing so. But whatever happened to a good old phone call? This seems to be proving a point. I can get to you. And I don't like that message.

Chester takes the lead. The warehouse is filled with several tables with small boxes and in them bottles with pills. There are about ten men scattered throughout the area, their eyes on us. They all have their hands under their jackets or behind their backs, signalling they have weapons. A man—clearly the boss—wearing a white suit and predatory grin is at the end of the warehouse.

His heels click on the concrete floor as he approaches us.

He has a cane, but I don't notice any other potential weapons. It doesn't mean there are none. I reach out to his life force, which evokes the smell of charcoal, and notice he's an Illusionist as well. It must be this Jimmy then, right? I glance at Chester, who is frowning. His right cheek twitches.

Yep, it's his old mentor.

"The owner of Phantasm. To what do I owe this honour?" the man says with a barely discernible cockney accent.

"Jimmy? What are you doing here?" Chester's voice sounds uncertain. His voice never sounds uncertain.

"Good to see you again, mate," the man says. He's in his early forties if I had to guess.

"Why are you trying to mess with my club?" Chester looks pale.

"Just testing out the merchandise," the man says with a grin.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, not one to bite my tongue.

"Ah, you must be Monday Moody. You're not supposed to be here, but I guess I can hit two birds with one hammer. What's it like to work with your ex?" His eyes twinkle as he studies me from head to toe.

He knows an awful lot.

I glance at Chester as he clenches his fists.

"I'd prefer it if you stayed away from my club."

"Do you, now?" Jimmy takes a few steps closer to us. "And what do I get if I do?"

There is silence.

"We prefer to keep this city as drug free as possible," I say. "Especially when the drugs make people violent."

“Extremely violent,” Jimmy says. “They make people want to rip whoever crosses their path apart.”

I narrow my eyes. “Yeah, see, that’s not good.”

“It is for me. The drugs are highly addictive and the results are just... fun.”  
He laughs. It sounds maniacal.

I suppress a shiver.

“If you don’t stop, we will make you,” Chester says quietly.



## Chapter 20

*“Cheesecake will only be eaten once a month  
at most. The risk of flatulence is too  
great.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



JIMMY SIMPLY SHRUGS. “See, that would mean something to me if it weren’t the case that I taught you everything you know. I will know all of your moves. You can’t beat your mentor. But you can certainly try. I look forward to taking you down, as well as the pretty lady.”

Chester growls, much like George does when he’s annoyed. “You don’t touch her.”

I glance at Chester, feeling a flicker of something towards him.

“I will kill you both,” he says. “You shouldn’t have taken my club from me.”

I frown. So he’s upset that Chester realised this guy’s dream?

“You disappeared,” Chester says loudly. “What is this insanity? I thought you were dead and now you’re here, distributing drugs that make people kill each other?” He’s yelling by now.

Jimmy laughs again. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that I will kill you. And your girlfriend.”

All of his men take out firearms, but before they can even properly aim their guns, I grab Chester's arm and teleport us behind them. It gives us enough time to attack. I use my playing cards and flick the entire stack in the air. The cards transform into origami birds and start attacking the men. I leave Jimmy alone, because I'm certain that Chester wants to deal with him.

Instead, I teleport from guy to guy, twisting their arms to make the weapons fall. I only get to attack five before the others see it coming, so I change tactics and teleport them in different positions so that instead of shooting me or Chester, they shoot each other, which also takes five guys out of the running. But only for a short while, because even without guns they can attack me.

I hold out my hand and collect my playing cards that are playing cards once again. They have done their damage and distracted the men long enough, even caused enough cuts to put them in serious pain.

I grab my dagger and stop teleporting. If they want to dance, then we'll dance.

One of them swings their fist and I duck, slicing his arm with my dagger, then kicking him backwards while the next guy pounces. I roll out of the way and then advance on him, punching him hard in the throat. And this time I teleport behind another man and stab him in the leg.

I glance at Chester, who is fighting with Jimmy. Jimmy has his cane but Chester has a short knife. He also has the power of Illusion and uses that to create shadow-like wolves. It isn't long before most of the men run off. There's a lot of blood as the men get bitten in their legs or arms. The blood is definitely real.

Chester will never forgive me if I interfere, so I run towards one of the tables that seem to hold all the guys' personal stuff. There's booze, a couple of phones, and cigarettes. Where is ... ah, there it is. I pick up a lighter.

Jimmy's movements are fast and slightly erratic as he tries to hit him. Chester has several opportunities, but doesn't take them.

I frown as I look on. Despite the fact that Jimmy seems like a lunatic, Chester still cares for him. Otherwise he wouldn't go easy on him.

Damn. He'll get himself hurt. Or worse.

Chester cuts his knee, causing Jimmy to falter. He staggers, but regains his balance. Again, Chester could have easily followed up with a finishing blow, but he hasn't.

Maybe I should step in. Chester may be reluctant to kill Jimmy, but it doesn't seem like Jimmy is.

Jimmy laughs again. "You were always a thinker, weren't you? Cool and calculated," he says. "Illusions won't work on us, right?" He leans on his cane, grimacing as if he's in pain and clutching his chest. "But..." he says with a groan.

Chester lowers his knife. "We don't have to do this. If you just agree to stop this, then this can all be over. We can run Phantasm together."

"But...I still have some tricks up my sleeve." He holds out his hand and blows a pink powder in Chester's face. He coughs and staggers backwards.

Jimmy responds immediately and dashes forward, his cane ready to strike.

But I'm quick. I pop up between them, facing Jimmy, whose cane swings towards me. I grab it as it slams into my hands, then turn and twist out of the way. We both move off to the side, away from Chester. I elbow Jimmy in the face, making him drop his cane as he cries in pain.

"Monday," Chester coughs. I'm not sure if it's a warning or if he needs help.

Either way, I won't back down from Jimmy. Chester can be upset all he wants.

"If you want to hurt my friend," I say to Jimmy, "you have to get through me first."

Jimmy holds up his hands and takes two steps back. "I see, I see. You still love him, huh?"

I frown and realise he's trying to goad me. It's not going to work. "I've killed worse monsters than you."

At this, his expression goes cold. "I'm glad you recognise me for what I am. Chester never realised, but maybe that's because he was the only person I've ever cared about. As far as I can care."

"It's not very far," I say.

He takes out something from behind his back. It looks like a baton, but when he presses a button there's an electrical charge. It reminds me of a cattle prod from the time we slaughtered cattle for meat. It was a lot more savage than the way meat is produced these days and I'm not looking forward to experiencing one of those things myself.

Jimmy, on the other hand, looks extremely eager to try it out on me.

"Don't hurt her," Chester shouts in a hoarse voice. He's bent over and coughs, his hands in front of his eyes.

Jimmy advances and I pop up behind him. I kick him in the back of the knees and he falls forward. He lets out a grunt and turns around.

He grins.

There's panting right behind me and I freeze. I turn around. A large werewolf is right behind me. I know it can't be real, but in a split second of surprise I believe it's real and that's all it needs. It launches forward and I have just enough time to hold up my arm.

It sinks its sharp teeth in my arm, piercing the skin. I cry out.

"Monday!" Chester sounds desperate.

I don't know where he is, nor where Jimmy is. Is he going back to kill Chester? Something hard hits me in the back and a jolt of electricity shoots

through me.

Nope, he's not.

I cry out again as searing pain shoots through every nerve in my body, but it only lasts a brief second.

"Stop it!" Chester shouts.

Jimmy lets out another laugh, but is suddenly interrupted. Something clangs to the floor and there's a scuffle behind me.

That means it's just the fake werewolf and me. It raises a claw and I teleport a few feet away. I ignore the sharp pain in my arm and...well, my whole body, and focus on the edges of the werewolf. They go blurry and just like that, the Illusion loses its power. I can still see it, but it can no longer hurt me. The Illusion advances and swipes at me, but I don't flinch and his claws go right through me.

I wink at it, then turn to look for Chester and Jimmy. They are rolling on the floor and aren't holding back. I look down at the weapon he dropped and pick it up. Would Jimmy like a little jolt to freshen him up? Probably not, right?

I walk up the men who are rolling over each other, trying to get a few punches in. Right now, Jimmy has the upper hand as he's not partly blinded and coughing. He climbs on top of Chester and raises his fist.

I stick him with the prod and press the button.

This time, he cries out and it's like music to my ears. I do it several times, until he falls off Chester and twitches a few times before losing consciousness.

"Monday?" Chester blinks up at me rapidly, his eyes all red. He can't open them for longer than a second.

"You've looked better," I say as I pull him to his feet.

“Are you okay?” he asks, not rising to the bait.

“Peachy fine.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s on the floor. Passed out. Or dead. But I think he’s passed out.”

Chester blinks a few times, so he can see him. Then he walks over to him and kicks him in his side a few times.

I let him have his moment. “Let’s go,” I say as I eventually pull him away. His kicking has nothing to do with what he did to Chester and everything to do with what he did to me. Chester is the kind of person who will always love someone, whatever the reason for the breakup. He is honourable that way and not many people would guess that about him.

“Did the Illusion hurt you?” He has his hand over his eyes, still unable to see unless he blinks rapidly.

I grab his arm and move him toward the exit of the warehouse. “No, it’s fine.” It is sore as hell and I am bleeding all over the place, but the last thing I need is a more panicked Chester. “Wait here.” I leave him by the door and hurry back to grab the booze and pour it over some of the boxes. There’s not that much. Then I throw the lighter on top of it. There’s a whooshing sound and a small flame starts to spread. At least nobody will suffer because of these drugs anymore. We can phone in an anonymous tip when we get out of here.

I cradle my arm to my chest as it’s starting to throb and my head starts to feel woozy. Perhaps I am losing a bit more blood than I’d like to admit.

“All set?” Chester asks. Still unable to see.

“All set.”

I called Dee and asked her permission to teleport to Phantasm, not wanting to be in the same place as the vampires, especially with my bleeding.

Chester didn't realise how bad it was until Dee's reaction gave it away. I was worried Chester might end up blind if he wasn't helped first, but neither of them wanted me to end up bleeding out, even if the wound probably wasn't that bad.

Guess who won?

So now I'm lying on the table as Dee finishes bandaging my arm. After most of the bleeding stopped, she handed Chester a cloth which she had sprayed something on. I don't know what it was, but Chester had gently rubbed it on his eyes and they had turned less red. Her doctor's bag seems to contain lots of medical goodies.

"How are your eyes?" I ask Chester.

"Not so sore anymore." His Scottish accent is thicker than usual, indicating he's angry.

"And your lungs?"

"Fine," he says. His jaw clenches.

"There, you're all done," Dee says and gently pats my other arm. "Now, I assume you will brief Oliver about whatever happened." She doesn't phrase it as a question.

"Yeah, we'll fill him in. Let me first teleport you back." I lift my head and shoulders from the table.

"No, no." She gently places a hand on my shoulder and pushes me down. "I'll get a taxi." She turns to Chester and fishes a spray out of her bag. "Use this on a damp cloth and rub your eyes a few more times in the next few hours. You can also use this to spray in your mouth. It will help with your lungs."

He takes the bottle and studies the label.

"Thank you, Dee," I say.

She turns around and smiles. “Stay out of trouble.”

Easier said than done.

She leaves and quiet returns to the room. “I don’t know how she can sound so cheerful considering the fact that I woke her up in the middle of the night. Or morning, by now.” It was still dark out when we left the warehouse, but it has to be close to sunrise.

The painkillers start to kick in and I finally feel myself relax.

Chester smacks the bottle on the counter behind him. This is the room that holds all the potions. Their colours are kind of mesmerising and the vials draw my attention. They are placed on planks fastened to the walls. They are everywhere. I bet this room is impressive when the lights are off.

“What were you thinking?” Chester takes two steps closer to me.

“The vials are pretty,” I say softly.

He follows my line of sight and then blocks it. I look up at him.

“Hey,” I say slowly and smile widely at him.

He sighs. “You didn’t say anything about bleeding. I asked you if you were okay.”

“Didn’t want to worry you. No point.” I am beginning to feel drowsy.

“I saved you, didn’t I?” He starts pacing up and down and runs a hand through his hair. “Then again, I also got you into this mess in the first place.”

“Would you like a tent for your guilt trip?” I ask.

He glares at me.

“It doesn’t suit you. You know I’m capable and we both survived, didn’t we?” It is getting harder to fight the fatigue, but I am trying.

He shakes his head. "I don't get it. Why show up and try to kill me now?"

"He did seem to really want to do that," I mutter.

"He looked exactly the same as I remember him." He sighs.

"Maybe he is." Through the fog of fatigue, a thought pops up. "What if he was taken from that timeline, when you were nineteen, and then brought here, which to him is the future?"

Chester frowns. "Why? And by whom?"

"To kill you," I say. My eyelids get heavy. "Do you think I have a hero complex?"

He completely ignores my question. "Why be so elaborate about it? And what Traveller wants me dead?"

Only Wynter fits the bill, but I fall asleep before I can reply.



## Chapter 21

“The good thing about coming from the future, is  
*that you already know what’s going to happen.*” ~ Wynter



THE NEXT THING I KNOW, I wake up to voices. I don’t know how much time has passed, but the light in the room is off. The vials glow in the darkness, giving off different colours. The door to Chester’s office is ajar and only a sliver of light reaches into the room.

“You’re really trying to blame what happened on me?” Chester asks. His voice shakes with anger. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Oliver’s voice is calm.

Hearing him sends flutters through my stomach. Dee must have told him and he must have come over.

I feel much better, especially since I’ve slept. I can do with a few more hours, but I don’t want Chester and Oliver to fight. Then again, they don’t know that I’m listening and maybe that’s a good thing. Perhaps I can find out what Oliver truly thinks of me.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Chester replies, “maybe what the hell you are doing with those leeches. You let one of them nearly cut Monday. And you do shit all about it!”

There are two seconds of silence. “Monday can handle herself,” Oliver says.

“That’s not the point, is it? What if he had fed on her blood? What if he had killed her? Would you have just moved on, looked for a different Traveller to fill the spot in your task force?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why w—”

“I’m trying to protect her,” Oliver says a little louder. He doesn’t exactly raise his voice, yet he manages to sound menacing.

“How?”

“They can’t know I care for her, or they’ll go after her. I’ve explained this to her.”

“Then why are they in your home? Why accept that kind of threat?”

“Those threats are part of our existence. We have to live with it. I don’t expect you to understand because you’re not a vampire, but this is how our world works. It may not make sense to you, and it may not be ideal, but it is simply how things are.”

I realise I’m holding my breath and force myself to exhale slowly.

“Now, if you don’t mind,” Oliver continues, “I’d like to sit with her.”

“Knock yourself out. I’m getting a drink.”

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe slowly. The light in the room gets brighter, then the door shuts. Oliver’s footsteps are slow as he approaches the table.

I feel his hand on my head and the scent of sandalwood reaches my nose. I want to inhale deeply but can’t. His lips press against my forehead and I have to remember to keep breathing.

*I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you. His voice sounds gentle in my head.*

There is no need for him to feel guilty and I want to tell him that. I stir and make a little noise.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” he whispers.

I open my eyes. The room is still dark, though it is filled with green, red, yellow and orange glows from the vials on the walls.

“Hey,” I say.

He smiles. “Hey.”

“Are you okay?”

He raises an eyebrow. “I’m supposed to ask you that. You’re the one who got attacked by a mere Illusion. And here I thought you were better than that.”

I chuckle. “Well, I really wanted to have a nice scar on my arm. It felt so bare.”

He grabs my injured arm and runs a hand over the bandages. “I see. Yes, that would look really cool on your arm.” He bends forward and kisses my wrapped arm.

Here he is being warm again. It will be incredibly difficult to get over him.

“Could you help me up?”

“Of course.” He puts his hand under my head and grabs my other arm. With ease, he helps me in an upright position.

“Thanks.” I swing my legs over the table. “That table is not comfortable,” I say as I adjust my hair. It must look a right mess.

“I can imagine. You should have come to the mansion. Why didn’t you?”

“Harlan,” I say softly and watch him flinch. “I just didn’t trust him while I was bleeding. I didn’t want him to try and bite me again.”

“I wouldn’t have let him hurt you.” Oliver puts his hands on the table on either side of me.

“I know that. Trust me, I know that. Whatever Harlan tries, you’re not responsible for it.” I really want to put my palm against his cheek but resist the urge to do so.

There’s a shift in his expression, but I can’t decipher it. I slide off the table, but he doesn’t move his arms, so my body presses up against his. I wrap my arms around him and hug him.

“It’s all going to be okay,” I whisper in his ear.

He squeezes me and smells my hair as he strokes my back. The moment seems to last a lifetime. Then he steps back. “Chester told me what happened and that you suggested it was a Traveller who set this up.” His tone is business-like.

Okay, hug time over. “Yeah. I’m thinking Wynter.”

Oliver nods thoughtfully. “Why would she want Chester out of the way?”

“Possibly because she knows something we don’t. Maybe he does something later on that she wants to prevent? Maybe it’s simply because he’s an ally?”

“She’s setting up dominoes,” Oliver says.

“And knocking ‘em down,” I complete.



## Chapter 22

*“Plants shall not be kept in the residence of a lower level vampire. They will wither and die within a day and it is unbecoming.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



CHESTER HAS POURED us both a glass of whisky even though it's nearly six AM. At the thought of drinking alcohol, my stomach heaves, but at least I have something to keep me from nervously tugging on my sleeves.

Chester is pacing up and down behind his desk while Oliver and I are sitting in the armchairs in front of it. Oliver does sip the whisky, but I suppose for him it's very late, not early.

“So, you're telling me that adorable, little Lovelace—who you've adopted—is actually Wynter, the leader from the Red Roses, who just tried to kill me.”

I exchange a glance with Oliver. “We can't know for sure, but that's what I'm guessing. He talked as if you took over his business. He wouldn't have let that happen if he was truly fine. Why disappear? It would have been easy for Wynter to take him from his timeline and feed him lies.”

He tilts back his head and downs his glass. “Great.”

“She's somehow related to Sinclair. I'm guessing he's a pawn in whatever game she's playing, he just doesn't know it yet. We need to start being more proactive and bait her. If we can Collar her, we have much less to worry about,” Oliver says.

“Not necessarily true,” I say. “She could have set things in motion long before now. But yeah, she needs to be stopped.”

“How do you propose to stop someone who already knows what’s going to happen?” Chester asks as he pours himself another drink.

“That’s the thing,” I say. “She’s already Altered things. If she were to go back to her Original Timeline, she’ll go back to a different reality. She can’t know how we’ll react to certain changes she’s making.”

“And yet some things are fixed,” Chester says as he raises his eyebrows at me.

“True.”

“But it also means there could be some events from her future that will still happen,” he adds.

“I know, but we can’t know what those are, and to be honest, neither can she. We may not know what she knows, but she doesn’t know what ... we know. Wait, that sounded different in my head.” I press my finger to my temple. I definitely need more sleep.

“Sinclair is the key here. If she has someone on the inside, she’ll think he’s dead.” Oliver takes a sip from his drink. His movements are elegant. “We can use that.”

“We also can’t forget the vampires’ roles this,” I say.

Oliver glances at me. “Yes, I agree. But now that Harlan is gone, I’m not sure what will happen. I am leaning towards not reporting it to the High Council and letting Aura deal with it herself.”

“What? Why?” I cry out. If anybody can put her in place, it will be the High Council.

“Because she is a good ally to have and by having her owe me I’m in an even better position. She’ll have to throw Harlan under the bus if she wants

to save herself, so it's not like she'll let him get away with anything. His reputation will be ruined."

"Oooh," I say mockingly.

Oliver grins. "That is actually a severe issue for vampires. Our reputation is everything. Death would be kinder."

"Good, let's arrange that," Chester mutters.

"What about Aura then? Is she staying? Is she going to play the victim and suck up to you?"

"Given everything that's going on, I'll let her stay for one more day and then she can go deal with Harlan."

It still feels like Aura is getting away with too much, but perhaps I simply think that because I dislike her so much. I do know Harlan will not be happy. He already seemed envious of Aura. Losing everything because of her plans will infuriate him. What will she do to him as punishment when she finds him? And will he put up a fight? I wish I had a front row seat to that.

"But how can we be sure that she'll not pose a threat anymore? Even if she also believes Sinclair is dead and gone, won't she still try to obtain the devices?" I ask.

"She may want to have them, but that doesn't mean she will. We have the devices and we have Sinclair."

"Meaning you won't hand him over to the UA? Because that will be his death sentence," I say.

Oliver nods. "I know. I will have Chester set up a new identity for him that will make him have a record. That means he can never get a job with the UA ever again—even if he was inclined to risk a job there. I don't want him to ever be near devices from any world again. That way he can live a normal life and not pose a threat to anyone. We will destroy the devices."

I'm mildly disappointed because I can see the potential in those devices and in Sinclair, but at least he doesn't want to keep them for himself or hurt Sinclair. It shows that Oliver really does want what's best for this city.

"Okay," I say. "Thank you."

His expression is serious. "I'm not the bad guy, Monday. I've told you that."

"I know." I hold up my hands. "I didn't say anything."

"However, we still have the matter of the mole and Wynter," Oliver says. "I'm going to throw a party and invite the vampires I do business with. I want to rule them out."

"And you throw a party for that?" Chester raises an eyebrow.

"It's the way we do things. We don't come right out and accuse someone. It's like a chess game. You make moves."

See, I knew that's why he's good at chess.

"So, what's the plan then?" I ask.

"Well, I'm going to throw a party and work the room. At the same time, it would be wonderful if you could contact Wynter and let her know he's actually alive."

My eyes widen. "What? You want me to tell her?"

"Yes. She still wants the device and Sinclair. I want to lure her out of whatever hole she's hiding in."

"What about the vampires? I mean, what if they find out?" I ask.

"That's why I want you to contact her today. With the house filled with vampires, we can handle her and her Travellers. They will help me defend myself from them in order to impress me. And that is also why I want Aura around. I'll pretend to confide her and explain we'll set a trap for Wynter,

but that Sinclair isn't really alive. She'll think I trust her and she'll owe me even more."

Wow, he really can be manipulative.

"So you don't want Sinclair at the mansion?" I manage to keep the hope from my voice.

"No, I do. I want him in our meeting room. Not in a cell, but just in the room itself. We know it's safe from Travelling and you can tell Wynter he's there. As well as the gadgets."

"You actually want me to tell her he's there? Why can't we lie?"

"Because there is a chance she'll guess it's a trap and send the mole to help. Once she realises you're telling the truth, she might show up with her Travellers. Or she'll try something else, but at least we'll be prepared. It's risky, yes, but it's our turn to make a move."

It's quiet for a moment as we process this. There is still the possibility that Summer is the mole, but that just means it might be time for me to have a chat with her.

Chester takes another sip of his drink and Oliver just stares at me. I think he's actually waiting for my consent. Does that mean he won't go through with it if I'm not comfortable with it?

He's right that it's our turn to make a move. And I want this to be over for once and for all. Besides, I trust him.

I nod. "Okay, I'm in."

He smiles. "Good."

"But I don't know how to contact Wynter."

"How did she contact you?" Oliver asks.

"An origami bird."

Chester puts down his drink. “That’s an Illusion. An easy one. I can teach you how to do that.” He opens a drawer in his desk.

“Err, I’m rubbish at Illusions. Trust me, my dad tried to teach me and it didn’t end well.”

“With my help you can do it,” Chester says as he grabs a few pieces of paper. They’re small. He touches them one by one and then hands them to me.

“And now what?” I glance at Oliver but he takes a swig from his drink and studies his nails. Clearly he’s enjoying the show.

“These can be used to send a message to someone. You don’t even have to write the message down.”

I frown. “How do you mean?”

“You can whisper the message in the paper, then scrunch it up and when you open your palm, a bird flies out to the person you want it to go to. They can then hear your message when they touch the paper. Here, I’ll show you.” He grabs a piece of paper, turns his back to us as he whispers into it. When he faces us again, he scrunches up the paper in his fist. When he opens his hand, the paper rearranges itself into the shape of an origami bird.

It flutters off his palm and goes right to me. I hold out my hand and the paper instantly flattens as I hear: “Oliver is a biscuitbag.”

I giggle as I eye Oliver. He raises an eyebrow at me.

Chester leans forward. “Only you can hear my message.” He adds a wink to those words.

I laugh out loud now.

“What’s so funny?” Oliver asks, narrowing his eyes at Chester.

But I know he must have heard him whisper into the paper in the first place.

“Okay, I want to try,” I say, getting excited about this. I grab a piece of paper and simply say hello to it, then scrunch up the paper in my hand. I close my eyes and think of Oliver and then open my palm. The paper twitches a few times, but then nothing happens.

My face scrunches up. “I told you I can’t do it.”

“Don’t pout, love,” Chester says as he smirks. “Try again. Feel it, like you do when you Travel. I’ve already boosted the paper. Go on, you can do it.”

I know he can easily make it so that it works without much effort on my part. Just like he did with my playing cards. But I guess he’s trying to prove that I can do a tiny bit of an Illusion.

Oliver’s eyes dart between me and Chester.

I flatten out the piece of paper, sticking out my tongue in concentration. I say the word again, then close my eyes and even before I scrunch up the paper, I focus. Feel it. Feel it. In my mind’s eye I see the origami bird reach Oliver and my lame message with it. I scrunch up the paper when I feel a jolt of energy zip through me. My eyes are still closed when I open my palm. When I glance down, the origami bird is already on its way to Oliver. Since he’s sitting next to me, it’s not a long journey.

The paper unfolds on Oliver’s hand. He glances at me. “Hi, back.”

I feel myself blush.

“Excellent,” Chester says. “Now we can get to work.”



## Chapter 23

*“I’m not sure I trust that Monday is good for him. And I swore I’d protect him from anything.” ~ Summer*



IT IS NOON WHEN I MAKE it to the church that seems to be our regular meeting spot. At least I’ve been able to catch up on sleep. My arm also doesn’t bother me and whatever Dee has given me is working.

Wynter is in the front row seat with her back towards me. Instead of sitting down behind her like usual, I sit down next to her.

“Hey,” I say.

She casts her eye at my bandaged arm. “Oh, no. Did you get hurt?”

It sounds sincere, but that sincerity does not translate in her eye. I only have her word for it that I am important to her, but what can her end goal be? Is she just using me or do the future me and Wynter actually have some sort of love for each other?

“I did. An Illusion did this. I guess I was caught off guard,” I say.

“An Illusion, you say?”

“Yeah. I was helping Chester with something, it doesn’t matter, though. We have more pressing matters. I’m sorry I couldn’t contact you sooner, but I need to tell you something really important.”

“What do you mean?” Her tone is calm. There is no indication that she already knows.

“You told me to keep Sinclair alive—” I start, but she interrupts me.

“He’s dead. Yes, I know.” She smiles, but it’s hollow. “I’m well informed.” She makes it sound patronising.

“Except he’s not dead.” I have to refrain from grinning when I knock the smile off her face.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s alive. It was a clever ploy from Oliver.” I don’t know how much she knows about Sinclair’s devices, but since she’s from the future I imagine she knows plenty. “He used one of Sinclair’s gadgets to make it seem like he died.”

She raises her eyebrow. “Interesting. Sounds like something he would do.”

“Indeed. I don’t think I trust him anymore. He’s getting close to that Aura.”

“That does not surprise me. Vampires need each other. They use each other. And they certainly don’t care for humans. Even if Oliver once did.”

“So you know that about him too, huh? What exactly will he do in the future? What was the reason you tried to have your people take him out when I first met him?”

Her smile is more enigmatic than hollow now. “He has it out for Travellers. Isn’t that enough reason? I know he’s charming, but he only cares about himself and his own desires.” She adjusts her white gloves. “He has a hatred for Travellers and their abilities.”

I know it’s not as simple as that. “What happens to me in your future?”

She cocks her head. “You’ll know soon enough, trust me. But first we must protect Sinclair. Do you know where his inventions are?”

“Yes, they are in the same room as Sinclair. It’s the meeting room for the task force. It has cells in the back and a sort of evidence locker. Anyway, it’s going to be difficult to enter because you can’t Travel in it or teleport,” I say.

“That’s alright. You can help us. Assuming you want to save Sinclair.” The look in her eye is questioning.

“I do. I’m just—do you really think Oliver would hurt him?” I have to make sure I appear hesitant or she might not believe me.

She sighs as if I’ve disappointed her with that question. “This is a battle, Monday,” she says. “It is about the truly powerful ones in this world. The vampires versus the Travellers. Those devices are important to the vampires so they must not fall in their hands. You have to bring them to me.”

“Isn’t it better if I destroy them?”

“No, no.” She shifts in her seat, clearly uncomfortable by my suggestion. “They now know that devices like this can be made. If we destroy them, it’s only a matter of time before they are created. Vampires have a lot of time on their hands. We have to beat them to it. We have to tip the scale of power.” Her eye twinkles as she explains this to me.

The troublesome thing is that I actually understand her thinking. Yet, at the same time, I don’t feel entirely comfortable giving her what she wants. She seems to believe that Travellers should be untouchable. Something I don’t agree with. Travellers are people. And just like humans, vampires and werewolves, some are bad, some good. And they can do bad and good things with their skills.

Will this plan really be enough to capture Wynter? I really hope so.

“What can I do?” I ask.

She grins at this. “Excellent. You won’t regret this.”

I really hope so, but I just smile at her.

“It’s not much that I need you to do. I just need you to make sure that the evidence locker is unlocked and the same for where Sinclair is being held. Can you do that?”

“Yes, but someone might check on him and notice. Here’s the thing. Oliver is only keeping Sinclair at the mansion one more night. There’s a party tonight where Oliver and Aura do some networking or something,” I say. “It might be too risky. We’ve proved his identity and that he’s human. I’m sure he won’t go to the same prison that Travellers go to when they make unauthorised Alterations. Can we not focus on the gadgets instead?”

“No. He’s valuable. He knows how those devices work and most importantly, he knows how to make them. We need him.”

“To make more of his devices?” I ask.

She regards me with a cool expression. “Yes. If we want a world where Travelling is normal, then we need those devices.”

Finally a straightforward answer to a question. “Even if you can replicate more of his gadgets, do you really think that the UA will allow their use?” I ask.

She smiles. “Let me worry about that. Vampires stay up late, don’t they? Make sure you do what I asked you after the party dies down.

“Alright.” Excitement starts to bubble up. I can’t help it. Despite all the things my mother put me through in the name of training, I do like it when things get hairy. Perhaps I am more like my mother than I’d like to think.

“You’re right not to trust Oliver.”

“I know. I wish I could trust him, but, like you said, I know where his loyalties truly lie.” Inwardly I wince as I’ve just spoken my biggest fear. I know he cares for me, but a part of me is still afraid that it’s part of his mask. That he’ll choose the vampires over me if needed.

Wynter nods, clearly satisfied with my response. She grabs my hand and squeezes it. “It will be alright. Just do as I say and it will all be alright.”



AS SOON AS I RETURN to the mansion, I feel uncomfortable. Vampires are bustling all over the place, setting things in order for the party tomorrow. I’ve never seen them because they never come to the private part of the mansion and Oliver usually conducts any business after I’ve gone to bed.

The party will take place in the opposite wing, but this is where everything is set up.

I don’t like it. Not because they are vampires, but simply because it’s so crowded. And all of them are strangers. Their speed comes in handy though as blurs regularly rush past me with strings of decorations that I don’t even have the time to trip over. They’re there, then they are gone.

Poofie sees it as a game and chases them around in rapid hops, though he could never catch up.

“Poof poof,” he says in frustration, as he hops furiously after a vampire with several decorative strings trailing behind her. They are barely visible as she’s so fast.

“Just don’t eat the decorations,” I shout after Poofie.

He definitely will eat the decorations.

Oliver has probably gone to bed after he checked on me and Chester, and Aura is probably sleeping as well. I hate that she’s still here, even if it is beneficial to Oliver that she thinks he still likes and trusts her.

I spot Summer with a clipboard. Aha. The perfect time to ask her some pertinent questions.

“You look busy,” I say as I approach her.

She scowls at me. “Your powers of observation amaze me.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve got time for a cup of tea.”

She stops scribbling on her clipboard and regards me with a cool gaze.

“With you? Why?”

I shrug. “Why not? We’ve never properly talked. Isn’t it time?”

The expression on her face tells me it is not time. Not time for that all, but I keep smiling at her politely.

I expect a mean retort any second now, but instead she pulls out an ornate pocket watch—very old—and studies it. “Alright. I suppose I have time for one cup.”

My jaw nearly hits the floor. She actually wants to hang out with me? Okay, I know I wanted her to say yes, but I can’t help but be suspicious. She’s never been nice to me. I figured this question was a long shot.

I follow her into the kitchen where I make us tea, but we drink it in the conservatory, because too many people are preparing dishes for tomorrow. It’s a practice run, Summer tells me. I don’t understand why you need to practise meals, but I’ve never been a big cook.

Eater, yes. Cook, no.

We sit in silence for a moment as we sip on our Earl Grey’s. We both take it with a dash of milk.

I’m running several questions through my head, trying to think of the appropriate one to ask her in order to break the ice. Or perhaps I should just ask her outright. Would she appreciate that?

She pulls out her pocket watch again. “You know, Oliver gave me this,” she says.

I blink at her. She’s actually opening up to me. Interesting. “Did he?”

“When I was a teenager, a vampire killed my family.” She’s still staring at the pocket watch.

My insides freeze. “I—I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

“He was a real problem to the vampire community because he gave them all a bad name and made them look weak because they couldn’t catch him for a while. He broke into homes and would kill family members one by one. First by feeding on their life force, until they were too weak to struggle, and then he’d feed on their blood.” Her voice sounds shaky.

I have to put my cup down so that I don’t squeeze it too hard. This makes the fact that she’s around vampires even more impressive. I’m not sure I could do that.

“I was the last one left and he wanted to take his time with me. Chase me around the house. Chase me around their... bodies.” She swallows.

“You don’t have to continue,” I say softly.

She shakes her head. “Oliver was the one that saved me and put a stop to him. He had called the authorities after he killed him. Not the human authorities, but vampires. Even though I knew what he was, I clung to him for dear life. I wouldn’t let go. Not even when the paramedics showed up. But he had to deal with the aftermath and he gave me his pocket watch. He said it was very precious to him and that he’d come back for it. So it meant that as long as I had it, I would see him again.”

That sounds like something Oliver would do.

“It made me feel better because I had just lost my entire world, you know?”

I nod, understanding her dedication to Oliver. She would never betray him because he is now her entire world.

“I saw him again a few years later. Things were a bit better, but it had always felt like I had been waiting for him. Life felt empty and I wanted to be part of something bigger. That’s when Oliver returned and offered me a job.” She opens the pocket watch and then closes it again. “He never asked for it back and I never go anywhere without it. It’s my good luck charm, I suppose.”

I smile at that. “It’s very beautiful.”

She looks up at me. “I just want to protect him. Like he protected me.”

“Yeah.”

“And I’m worried because the Red Roses have been threatening him. At first I thought maybe you were involved with them, but I know you care for him too. I can see it when you look at him.”

I look down at my hands as I feel my cheeks burn.

“That’s why I’ve been investigating who they might have on the inside, because they know things they’re not supposed to. I’ve been looking into it since the beginning.”

“Really? Do you have any idea who it might be?”

“No. I have some vague ideas, but no proof yet. I can share all my findings with you tomorrow. Perhaps if we join forces, we can finally get somewhere.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Yes, I think that’s wise.”

“I wasted time looking into you and mistrusting you, but it’s not like I had my arrows aimed at you.” She smiles slyly. It looks good on her.

I return the smile. “Good. We’ll go over everything you have after the party is over.” It might not be necessary if we can get our hands on Wynter, but despite the fact that I trust her more than before, I still don’t want to tell her. I don’t know what Oliver has said to her and I don’t want to risk it.

“Do you love him?” she asks. “Like, really love him?”

“I do,” I reply without hesitation.

She puts her cup to her lips. “I just needed to hear that,” she says before taking a sip.

I stare at her as she does. “You’re a very strong person, Summer. And Oliver is lucky to have you on his team.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” she says, but I can see her eyes moisten. She blinks rapidly and takes another sip.

I smile. “I look forward to having tea with you again.”



## Chapter 24

*“Higher level vampires will keep the driving of a vehicle to a minimum of twice a year and should ensure they have a driver that is a lower level vampire or food.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



WITH EVERYTHING THAT’S been going on, I want to check on Sinclair, but more than anything I want to take a relaxing bath.

I decide to go up to my room and ring my mother, who picks up straight away.

“Moody residence,” she says.

“Hi, Mum. Is, uhm, everything okay with the stray cat you took in?” I doubt anyone is listening, but I want to be on the safe side. Not that I’m very good at talking in code.

“Yes, it’s all right as rainbows,” she says. “If you need any other help, let us know.”

“No, just keep an eye on ... the cat. And keep him safe.”

“We will. Love you.”

“Love you.”

I sigh as I place the phone down and excitedly clap my hands, suddenly aware of how badly I need some me time.

Just to be safe, I lock the bedroom door and the bathroom door and take a good, long soak being careful with my arm. I don't leave until my fingers are wrinkly and muscles completely relaxed.

I hum a random tune as I get dressed in a yellow polka dot dress with a white cardigan and cute heels. Wait, the dress for tonight. I check my wardrobe but don't see anything new. My gaze travels to my bed and there it is.

A beautiful red dress with a low v-neck and a split on the left side. I hold it up and study it. It looks almost too beautiful for me. Can I really pull this off? If Oliver seems to think so ...

But I'll have to wait for tonight. As I put down the dress, the door handle rattles and there's a thump as someone hits the locked door.

I've taken two steps closer when Lovelace pops up on the other side.

"Lovelace, a locked door means no entry," I say in my stern voice. I sound too much like my mother, but I just ignore that fact.

"Sorry," she says. "I know the party is tonight, but you said you'd help me out with PU-13029 and I'm bored." There is a slight whine to her tone and it casts a glimpse into her teenage years. Oh, joy.

"Yeah, true, I did say that."

"Please, can we do it now, before dinner? I'm sure it won't take long." She clasps her hands in front her.

She becomes more normal with each passing day. No longer timid and quiet. I can't help but smile at her.

"Yeah, alright. Have you eaten?"

"I had soup," she says.

"We'll get you a power bar before you open the portal, just in case."

“And a juice box?” Her grin widens.

“Sure.”

“And a cookie?”

I sigh. “Don’t push it, young lady.”

Oh, dear. Now I really do sound like my mother.

Lovelace bounds down the stairs ahead of me, just as the doorbell rings. She glances at it and then back at me. She knows not to answer the door. We made that deal even before I knew her aunt was back in this world.

It is probably someone related to the party tonight. Summer even ordered a contortionist who had already showed up to set up her area. Whatever that means.

And here I thought vampire parties would be stuffy and boring.

I open the door and study the woman in front of me. She has on a pink cardigan, grey leggings and a handbag so small it would barely fit a handful of walnuts. Her eyeshadow is blue and her lips a glossy pink.

She narrows her eyes at me. “I’m here to pick up my niece Lovelace Thomson.”

The blood in my body freezes. All my muscles tense up and any effects of my bath are completely undone.

I grip the door handle hard to keep from punching her in the face, which is what I really want to do. I’ve been fantasising about it for a long time.

She can take Lovelace away from me. If she proves I have her. I’ll send her to another world before I let that happen.

Before I can even think of an appropriate response, she looks behind me and gasps dramatically. “There you are. Why is your hair different and what

happened to your eye?" She looks back at me. "What have you done to her?"

The PI must have told her about my threat and about what I am, yet here she is, seemingly unafraid.

I put my hand on Lovelace's back and fight the urge to shove her behind me and slam the door in her aunt's face.

"Hi, Crystal," Lovelace says, sounding surprisingly steady and confident. She glances at me and almost imperceptibly shakes her head.

Okay, she wants to do this herself. I get it. It's her fight, but I'm still not sure if it's a fair fight.

Also, I really want to punch that woman.

"See, she just admitted she's Lovelace and I'm her aunt, ha!" She points a pink talon at me.

A low growl escapes my throat, and I'm proud to say it resembles one of George's growls.

She doesn't flinch, though. "I'm not afraid of you, Traveller. I've been sent to another world and I survived. I'm taking back my niece." She reaches out for Lovelace and my muscles tense.

Lovelace moves backwards and as a response I step partly in front of her. Her aunt straightens. "I will take her with me."

I open my mouth to say something, but Lovelace beats me to it.

"I want to show you something," she says to her. "After that, if you still want me to go with you, I'll come with you."

"What?" I turn to her. Can my muscles be any tenser? Any second now and I'll be solid as a rock.

Lovelace doesn't respond, instead, a portal grows behind her aunt.

She takes us to PU-88964, one of mother's training worlds. I'm still not sure what Lovelace is up to and standing this close to her aunt without being able to clutch a door handle, is seriously messing with my self control.

One tiny hit? That should be okay, right?

"If you think of leaving me—" her aunt starts, but then turns green and throws up all over her pink heels.

I feel nauseous myself, but I still grin as I cross my arms. Never has the sound of puking been such music to my ears.

I glance at Lovelace, and now that her aunt is not focussing on her, I see her calm facade slip. She looks pale and her hands are trembling. There's fear in her eyes.

Okay, that does it. I slip the dagger from under my skirt and approach her aunt, but Lovelace darts forward and places her hand on my arm. Again, she shakes her head.

Reluctantly, I slip my dagger back in the strap attached to my right thigh. Just in time for beloved Crystal to come up for air.

"I can see why Travelling is forbidden. You may live with the mayor now, and I know what he is, but that still doesn't mean I can't report both of you."

"You could try." My grin turns into a cold smile.

She visibly shivers. "You can't scare me."

I already have.

"You two stay there. I want to show you something," Lovelace says to her aunt. "Make sure you watch."

Her aunt clutches her stomach. "Just hurry up. I don't want to stay here longer than necessary."

She clearly hasn't looked around yet. We are surrounded by green grass and luscious trees that are taller than any trees we have. Beautiful songs are sung by colourful birds and the temperature is perfect. Each time there is a breeze, there is a pleasant scent that accompanies it. Sweet, like pineapple juice.

Despite its beauty, like any world, there is danger. Danger that Lovelace is going to conquer in front of her aunt. I don't know why, though. To show she's capable and potentially dangerous? Or to show off?

Lovelace walks up to one of the tall trees. We are standing in a small clearing, enough room for her to maneuver. Enough control for her to be able to handle herself. I remember this world well. She'll be fine.

She pulls on one of the green, fuzzy vines that are coiled around the crooked trunk of the tree. None of these are straight. It's as if they had growth spurts in opposite directions each time. I think it adds to their beauty.

There is a low rattling sound. When I first heard it I thought it was metal being scraped over metal, but it is definitely a creature.

It lowers itself from the tree on one of the vines, much like a spider would descend its web. It resembles one in the sense that it has six spiderlike legs, sharp as needles, but it has an upper body that resembles a monkey covered in moss. Everything about it is green, and even if it has a face, it doesn't have eyes. It has two tiny holes that function as its nose and though its mouth is not visible, it is there. It is round and wide and filled with a circle of sharp teeth. Its arms are similar to its legs, sharp and without fingers, used to pierce its prey.

And the worst part; where there is one, there are more.

"Just stand still," I say. "If we move, they'll come for us."

Her aunt's eyes have gone wide. "They?"

"There will be more. To help it."

She whips her head in my direction. “Well, do something to help her.”

It is nice to know she cares at least enough to say that. “She can handle it.”

Its blade-like arms shoot forward in quick succession, attempting to strike her in her torso. She blinks to various spots in front of him, making sure she is still within striking range.

I almost miss the small smile on her face. She’s enjoying this. I resist the urge to sigh. There was a time I enjoyed it. But it gets old fast. Especially when your mum sends you on a mission two hours before prom.

This creature I dubbed Mantiss Monkey, Mamon for short. It circles around the teleporting Lovelace, growing more frustrated with each missed attack. Its shrieking becomes higher and its movements more erratic.

Good. That’s when it will make mistakes that can cost it its life.

And this is when a second and third Mamon zip down from the same tree. They surround Lovelace, and despite my faith in her capabilities, I still feel a nervous flutter in my chest. Is this what my mother felt when she was watching me those times?

Crystal gasps as Lovelace deftly avoids the attacks and starts to position herself in a way that I can see what comes next.

She delays her teleport as one of the Mamons lunges at her and swings its blade-like arm towards her. At the last possible second, she teleports out of the way and instead of hitting her, it hits its friend.

The shriek is shrill and painful to the ears, and it collapses to the ground with spluttering sounds as if it takes a while to die painfully.

This causes two more to rapidly descend from the tree. There are about five or six per tree and the Mamons from neighbouring trees never interfere.

She leans down over the body of the one that just died and with a sickening crunch takes off one of its legs and holds it like a sword.

I blink a few times. I've definitely never done something like that. Granted, I've always had my trusted dagger. But still.

She teleports on top of one of them and stabs it through its head. The same shrieking sound almost shatters our eardrums, but she's already after the next one. She baits them, forces them out of position and then either strikes herself or lets the other ones kill each other without meaning to.

She's smart, fearless, and reminds me all too much of myself.



## Chapter 25

“I’ve always wanted a place to call home. It was never  
*with my aunt. Monday is like my gift from the Universe.*” ~ Lovelace



CRYSTAL HAS HER HAND over her heart and I’m pretty sure she’s stopped breathing. She seems to exhale when the last of them is dead, writhing on the floor as if its both drunk and breakdancing.

Lovelace approaches us, the severed leg still in her hand, covered in green gunk. She’s smiling. “Did you see that?” she asks her aunt in a triumphant tone.

“I—I did,” she says.

“That’s what I can do, because I’m a Traveller,” she says. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Monday and her mother taught me that. She’s also nice to me and she lets me call her mum even though she isn’t my mum.”

I smile.

“We sometimes bake muffins and she reads stories to me and she lets me play with her turtle and Poofie.”

Crystal frowns at that. “Who?”

“And more importantly, she’s teaching me to be dangerous, just like her. It’s not her you should be afraid of. It’s me. You’ll take me back, but not as the same Lovelace. I’ll be different. And I won’t listen to you, or let you be mean to me anymore. I’ll keep training, and the neighbours will know.

They'll know I'm a Traveller and they might report me, and we'll have to go on the run, together. And we'll have to keep on doing that, because I won't ever stop Travelling."

I see a bit of Wynter coming through. Even if she's already different from the child Wynter originally was, I still recognise that Travelling is important to her. Same as it is to me.

Crystal pales as Lovelace shows them what their life could be together.

"Is that what you want? Or do you want to live your life as you want and be free? You never wanted to take care of me anyway."

"But I love you," she says. "You're my niece." To my surprise there is some emotion in her voice.

"Love her from afar," I say coldly.

"If you love me, then go. I will be so grateful. You'll be like my hero."

"Your hero? Really?" She contemplates this. "You'll not forget me?"

"I couldn't," Lovelace says and I see that sadness in her eyes again.

"Great, it's settled," I say, before she says any more nonsense that pisses me off. She cares about nobody but herself.

"Alright, then. You take good care of her now," she says to me, in an attempt to appear the caring aunt.

"Take us back, now." I glance at Lovelace and grip my dagger through the fabric of my skirt. "To the gate," I whisper.

Lovelace creates a portal faster than I could at her age. We step through. While her aunt dry heaves, I tell Lovelace to teleport herself inside the mansion. We are right at the gate at the end of the spacious driveway.

One half of the gate is open. It usually is so that there is still enough room for cars to come through. Oliver usually has visitors related to his work.

Like right now, there are several cars parked around the fountain out front. The fountain doesn't work, but it is a nice decoration still. A sign of wealth.

I grab Crystal's arm and escort her outside the gate. She's still coughing so I wait until she's upright and no longer trying to throw up.

"As I was saying, you take good care of her now," she continues in a rough voice.

"Crystal, have a nice life, and if I ever see you again, I'll kill you." And then I punch her in the face so hard that I knock her back onto the pavement.

I turn and walk back to the mansion, feeling very relaxed. See, baths do wonders.



LOVELACE IS SITTING on her bed when I join her.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I am. I was pretty cool, wasn't I?"

"You were extremely cool. I'm very proud of you. And you don't have to worry about ever having to see her again." I hesitate. "Unless you want to."

She shakes her head. "No, I like it here with you. Do you think we can visit more parallel universes? Help people? Fight monsters?"

Oh, boy. She really is like me.

"We can—we can help people, yes. And we will still help those people in PU-13029, I promise. However, the monster slaying we should save for when we actually have to defend ourselves or others." I add a stern look, but she either misses it or ignores it.

“Yes, okay. As long as we can Travel more. I like it.”

I smile at her. “I know. Me too.”

“Thanks for everything.”

I swallow the emotions that swell up. “You’re very welcome. It’s an honour to have you by my side.” I mess up her hair and then plant a kiss on her head.

She giggles. “Is it okay if I stay in Celeste’s bed while you have the vampire party?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Just make sure you lock your door, to be safe. And only open for us, not strangers. Okay?”

She nods.

Even if the party is in the other wing, and it’s extremely unlikely anyone would hurt them, Summer’s story has gotten to me. Especially considering Harlan’s behaviour. I should have left him in that parallel world the first time I met him.

“Alright. I just have to do go somewhere before the party. But again, I’m very proud of you.”

She beams at me.

Lovelace is stronger than I gave her credit for, despite her trauma, she faced her bully and not only that, she manipulated her into leaving her alone. She is finally free, and I share her relief. I hope I can enjoy my time with her now, instead of having to fear for all the stuff going on with Wynter, and now the vamps. Soon, this will be over. I’m sure.



I KNOW I PHONED NOT too long ago, but I want to see for myself that Sinclair is okay and talk to him. Instead of taking my car, I teleport so nobody can follow me. Not that I expect anyone to do that, but I want to be safe.

My mother immediately showers me with scones, much to my delight and Sinclair is sitting by the pool with my dad. The sun is slowly setting, but they are still lounging in deck chairs with beers in their hands.

Are they becoming friends?

“What’s new?” Mum asks.

My parents still don’t know about Wynter’s identity, and it’s about time I fill them in, though I’ll leave Dad to relax with his new buddy.

Say what you will about my mum, she’s not one to be overly dramatic. She takes the news with a few sharp nods of the head. “And how did Oliver take it?” she asks.

“He was very disappointed I had kept it from him. We had agreed no more secrets between us after he found out I am a Traveller.”

She nods again. “I understand.”

I blink at her. “Hey, you’re supposed to take my side.”

“Where does it state that? Besides, I merely said that I understand why he’s upset, you would be too if the roles were reversed. I also understand why you kept this information to yourself. Sometimes you have to keep the cards close to your pants.”

“Vest. Never mind. Thank you for understanding. That is not all, though.” I tell her about Harlan and Aura, and Blayze.

“This Harlan sounds like a piece of work,” she says, her eyes blazing. “I’m glad he ran away. Now I don’t have to sic your father on him.”

I chuckle. “Don’t worry, I could handle him just fine. All he did was bark so he could feel strong.”

“Perhaps. But some barks can easily turn into bites.”

“I know.”

“And the original Blayze is really alive, huh? I figured he had been sent to the future since the Chrono Unit hadn’t located him.”

“Same.”

“Was it strange seeing him again?”

I can’t tell her about the guilt I felt when Blayze and Phoebe died, even if it was the Blayze from the future. It’s probably related to what Oliver said about me, how I always want to save everyone. “It was strange, yes.”

“Once you’ve dealt with Wynter and the mole, you need to let the UA decide what to do with him. He might be counting on you showing him mercy. I don’t trust anything he says.”

“That’s the thing,” I say, “I’m worried he’s counting on me handing him over to the UA.”

She frowns. “I suppose that is possible too. He’s still very dangerous, but you don’t know for sure if he has a way to contact others, or if he will in the future. It’s just too risky to leave him there on his own.”

“I suppose so.” I feel uneasy about it, but—I don’t know.

My mother clears her throat. “And this kiss between Aura and Oliver ... he said it didn’t mean anything?”

I poke at my scone, suddenly not hungry anymore. I can still see that kiss so clearly. “Yeah.”

“Then you should believe him. What Summer told you makes sense.”

“I know. But I don’t know what to do about it. I can fight for him, but if he won’t do the same ...” my voice trails off.

“Agreed. But at least you’ll have tried. You’ll never forgive yourself if you don’t.” She stares at the plate of scones, not having taken any herself.

“Are you not having any?”

“No. I’m on a diet.”

“A what? You’re extremely slim,” I say.

“It doesn’t matter what other people see,” my mother says haughtily, “it matters how I feel. And I don’t feel comfortable with the few pounds I’ve gained.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “You always say appearance matters, and now all of a sudden you don’t?”

“Appearance matters when it comes to having people underestimate you, yes. People treat you differently based on what you look like, but in this case, no, it doesn’t matter.”

“Good to know,” I say dryly, not believing a word she says.

“Anyway, I wouldn’t worry too much about Wynter. Some things cannot be Altered, as Blayze from the future proved.”

“Yet, you made one big Alteration yourself,” I say and point at me.

She raises an eyebrow. “That just means it wasn’t meant to be that you died.”

“How do we know whatever Wynter wants isn’t meant to be?”

“We don’t,” my mother concedes. “Only time will tell.”

I sigh with frustration. “I thought you were supposed to cheer me up.”

She waves a hand. “No, I’m just delirious because I’m sugar deprived.”

I grab one of the scones and practically shove it in her face.

“Well, if you’re going to force me,” she says and grins before taking a bite.



## Chapter 26

*“Social events are the perfect occasion to suss out potential enemies and allies. Giving and accepting business cards signal the desire to be an ally. Backhanded comments desire the opposite.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



“MONDAY,” SINCLAIR GREETs me as soon as I step into the garden.

My dad follows his gaze and smiles. “What brings you here? Everything okidoki?” he asks.

“Everything is fine. I’m just checking on my favourite non-Traveller.” I eye Sinclair.

He bows his head. “I’m honoured. Hey, your dad is amazing.”

I exchange a glance with my dad, who blushes.

“Go on, show her the thing,” he says and grins proudly at my dad.

It is so strange to see Sinclair like this with my father. Or my father with him, for that matter. He grins like an excited school boy as he gets up from the lounge chair.

“I’ve seen most of his Illusions,” I say to Sinclair, knowing there’s very little my dad can do to truly surprise me.

Even so, I'm smiling at their excitement. If they had tails, they'd be twitching.

A line appears between my father's eyebrows as he focusses. I can feel his energy, it brushes against me like a feather. Soft.

Someone taps me on my shoulder and I turn around. It's Sinclair, except he's ten times more muscular. He looks like a Greek god.

Behind me, Sinclair's giggles turn into laughter.

"Is this so funny?" I ask him.

"Yes, look at me!" He points. "It's like I eat steroids for breakfast and dumbbells for lunch."

I chuckle at that. "I'm surprised you haven't asked my father to cast you a beautiful model."

His eyes light up and he excitedly turns to my dad.

My dad shakes his head, laughing.

"Come on," Sinclair says, his eyes wide as saucers.

"I see you are keeping entertained, either way," I say to Sinclair.

His expression turns normal. "Yes, I am. Your parents are wonderful."

"Thanks. I agree."

"Did you just come to check on me or are there developments?"

"I'll go get some more beers," my dad says as he grabs Sinclair's and his own bottle and retreats inside.

I sit down in the lounge chair next to Sinclair.

"Uh, oh. You have your serious face on."

I raise an eyebrow. “My serious face?”

“Yes, your face sort of goes like this.” He frowns while pulling his lips down. “You remind me of my school teacher, Mrs Burns. She always put whisky in her coffee.”

“I do not look like that,” I say, taking the bait.

“You do. You totally do. It’s a very unattractive look.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

“Don’t make me tell my dad you weren’t nice to me.” I stare him down.

He opens his mouth to retort, then shuts it. “Okay, I’m sorry. I take it back.”

“Good. Anyway, I do have to fill you in on some things,” I say. “And you might not like them.”

He sighs. “Alright, lay it on me.”

A moment later Sinclair is pacing up and down by the pool. His voice has reached shrieking levels. “And you want me to be in that mansion while the place is crowded with vampires? Have you hit your head?”

“There won’t be that many, and you’ll be safe.”

“Right. I’m literally bait for the Travellers. What do they want with me anyway? You say they’re bad Travellers, but what does that even mean?”

“They’re rogue Travellers and they’re from the future. I don’t know for sure what they want, but I know it’s not good. They have their own agenda and they want to use you and your devices. We can’t trust them.”

“And yet I am bait for them. I think you need to look up the word ‘safe’ in the dictionary.”

I get up and grab him by his shoulders. “You’ll be in a room that nobody can teleport or Travel in. It’s basically a trap for Wynter and her people. And if they show up at the party, the vampires will fight them if it means getting on Oliver’s good side. Listen, I know you’re scared. I would be too. But there is a war brewing between vampires and Travellers and I think we can put a stop to it tonight.” If I am to believe Wynter, then that is what this is about. And I want to end it. “Please, be brave for a little while longer. I promise someone will be by your side at all times.”

He sighs. “I have always admired Travellers and wished I could do what they can do. Maybe it is better if we take a stand right now. Fine, I’m in. And afterwards you can do whatever you want with those devices. Perhaps in exchange for my freedom?”

“Yeah, that can be arranged. If you help us, we’ll help you.” I don’t yet explain how Oliver can give him a new identity; we can do that later.

Sinclair smiles with relief. “Good. I do understand the problems people have with Travelling. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, but a lot of people still associate Travelling with Alterations like the Cold War fiasco.”

I wince. “Yeah, that ripple effect was bad.”

“And unpredictable. My uncle still speaks Russian every now and then. Very strange.”

I nod. “I know someone who still sees English letters as Russian.” It was the most powerful Alteration that actually succeeded, and cost a lot to reverse. There are still people who swear up and down that the Russians landed on the moon instead of the Americans, and that the reversal was actually an Alteration.

“In any case,” I add. “We’ll make sure the vampires and the rogue Travellers won’t get their hands on you or your gadgets.” And finally we can figure out what the hell happened to me in the future and why she’s here.

He nods. “Okay.”

“Thanks. You’re being very brave.”

“Since I am, I think we should revise your dad creating a super hot model for me.”

I chuckle.



THE DRESS THAT OLIVER picked out for me fits me better than I could have hoped for. I was afraid that it would show my tummy too much since it is such a tight dress, but it accentuates all the right areas and I can’t help but feel like a bomb shell.

The neckline is a bit low, but at the same time it’s very sexy. I decide that I feel comfortable enough to venture outside my bedroom. I think.

At the thought of Oliver seeing me in this, I feel myself blush. Stupid.

Either way, there will be snacks to comfort me, and I’ve already decided that if it’s too much, I’ll take over George’s shift with Sinclair. He’s already in our meeting room—not in the cell, because that would be rude.

I’ve strapped my dagger to my thigh.

This party will at least be interesting because it will allow me to learn more about vampires. This will be the first time I’ll be around so many. And they’re incredibly influential vampires as well. I’ll be spending time with the crème de la crème of vampires. Or in this case, the creep the la creep.

There is a knock on my door.

Oh, boy.

I open the door to an even more dashing than usual Oliver. He is dressed entirely in burgundy, including his shoes, and his hair is tied back. His

perfume drifts my way. It is a different scent from what he usually wears, but pleasant all the same.

His eyes linger on my face, then scan my body. May I come in?

I'm getting used to hearing his voice in my head.

*Of course. I step aside.*

*You look stunning. He stands in the middle of the room, his eyes still on me.*

I close the door. I appreciate that. Thank you for the dress.

*I was looking for a suit and saw the dress. I immediately thought of you.*

I don't know what else to say, so decide to do the professional thing. What's the plan tonight?

*The plan is to have a good time. Me and Aura will talk to the vampires.*

I narrow my eyes at him. So basically stand there and look pretty?

He moves closer. You can take over the shift for George around midnight, if you want. But try to at least enjoy yourself a little. I know most of those coming tonight are dangerous. I will make sure they know you work for me and they won't hurt you, but they might talk to you.

*Right. To find out if I'm your weakness.*

*Or to find out if you know of any. Yes. He reaches out and touches my arm. Just one night.*

And then it will be over. Hopefully. Then we'll go back to working cases and things will be nice and quiet. Happy. Maybe?

*Any word on Harlan? Has Aura mentioned him?*

*She said she's got her people closing in on him, Oliver says. Don't worry. He's gone.*

*I'm not worried. Right now, Harlan is the least of my worries.*

Oliver clears his throat. A very human gesture. Is he nervous?

*Listen, he starts. I know I said earlier that you wanting to save everyone was your weakness. But I didn't mention it's also your strength. We're a good team, and we will work together to do what's right. Sinclair will be safe and Wynter will be stopped. This is our collective responsibility. Not yours alone.*

I swallow and smile at him. We stare at each other for a long moment, my heart rate increasing by the second.

*I miss playing chess with you, I say.*

The unreadable expression in his eyes turns soft. Me too.

I lean forward, on a whim, and kiss his cheek. It is warm and soft.

He inhales sharply, but by the time I pull away from him, he regards me with a casual expression on his face. Again, he's so damn unreadable.

"When you're ready, I'll see you downstairs." He gives one nod and then leaves my room quiet as a ghost.

I feel deflated, but at the same time I also feel a rush because of the kiss. He showed no indication of liking it, though. Was he trying to not hurt my feelings? Or did he push his own down? If Summer is right, then I just made things even more difficult for him. And it would also mean he has a lot of determination.

I don't think I could fight my own feelings for long.

When I get downstairs, Summer is standing in front of the open front door, waiting to greet new guests. She's wearing a long, navy dress and smiles politely.

It's not showtime yet, so Oliver's right. I might as well enjoy myself.



## Chapter 27

*“Ever since Aura has shown up I feel like I’m  
walking on egg shells. One wrong move and I  
might lose her.” ~ Oliver*



ACCORDING TO WHAT OLIVER told me earlier, there will be about thirty guests since every powerful vampire will bring their right-hand man or an assistant, or, in some rare cases, an equally powerful spouse.

The right wing of Oliver’s mansion mirrors the left, but I’ve never been there before. This is where he does his vampire business and he does that late at night.

The first room has been cleared of most furniture and there is a table with drinks, as well as a champagne fountain. My eyes nearly bulge out of my head. I’ve never seen anything like it before. The lights in the room are dimmed and it is decorated with strings and banners in the colours of the House of Fall crest, which are orange, black and white.

I expect the few vampires that linger in the room to stare at me, but they don’t. Perhaps because they already know I’m working for Oliver.

The next room is a large room with a band playing gentle tunes at the far end and the ceiling is littered with twinkling lights, resembling stars. An Illusion. Did Chester do this? I highly doubt he’d be involved in any of this.

A hand touches my lower back and I feel myself stiffen. I turn to Chester’s amused face.

“Chester? You’re here. Colour me surprised,” I say.

He shrugs. “I figured I might as well be here and make myself useful. Do you like my stars?”

“I do.” But I don’t look up at the ceiling again. Instead I study Chester’s face. Not only did he join this ‘party’, he actually helped Oliver. Perhaps they are closer than I thought. Perhaps that’s why they can speak so honestly with each other. “I always like your Illusions,” I add.

He nods and a rare, genuine smile appears.

I glance around. Nobody is dancing despite the fact that this is where the party is at. I frown as I study the guests. “There are humans here. I don’t mean the staff, I mean the guests. Why?”

Chester sighs. “That’s leeches for ya. They have to eat, right?”

I gape at him. “Th—they’re food?”

“Of course. That’s how it works. These people put themselves on the waiting lists and consider it an honour to give their life energy to them while attending parties like these. They get paid a shite load of money.”

“There are waiting lists? I had no idea this was a thing.”

“It has happened in Phantasm as well.”

“You allow it?”

He chuckles dryly. “There’s nothing to ‘allow’. Each of the parties involved want this.”

I glance around. The humans look like they’re enjoying themselves. They’re drinking, laughing and the vampires aren’t ignoring them or anything. They’re treating them amicably.

“It works,” Chester says in my ear. “Why mess with something that works?”

“You really approve of this? Even though you refer to vamps as...you know what,” I say, just in case any are eavesdropping with their superior hearing.

“Leeches?” he says loud enough to make me cringe. “Yeah, I would never do it, love. But to each their own.”

He eyes me up and down. “You look lovely, by the way.”

“So do you.” Chester is wearing a deep purple suit that complements his eyes.

“Why is nobody dancing?” We make our way over to one of the snack tables and I study the odd-looking appetisers. What is wrong with Brie on toast? I pick up something round that looks green and gooey.

“Why does this look like something Poofie sneezed out?” I make a face and put it back.

“They’re not dancing because this is pretty much a work party, and dancing would imply they like each other enough to touch each other,” Chester says as he picks up an orange ball with a toothpick in it.

“It smells like carrot,” I say after I pick one up myself.

“On three?” He raises an eyebrow as if to challenge me.

I nod.

“One,” he says.

“Two,” I say.

“Three,” we say simultaneously. We put the orange snack in our mouths and chew only once before looking at each other and scrambling for a napkin to spit it out in.

“What was Oliver thinking? I wouldn’t even feed this to a cat.” I try very hard not to gag.

“I guess he doesn’t care as long as it’s not someone’s life force.”

I don’t think that’s true, but I say nothing. Aura is here somewhere and I can’t be certain if she is watching me. Or more accurately, listening.

“So, wanna dance, love?” Chester asks with a grin. It’s not quite as sexy as when Oliver does it. With Chester it makes him look more cheeky.

“You really want to dance when nobody else is?”

“Oh, yeah.”

I glance around the large room. All these stuffy, back-stabbing vamps that are just chatting and waiting to feed on the humans they invited. Ugh.

“Okay, let’s bring some life to the party,” I say and loop my arm through his.

We make our way to the back of the room where the band is playing. They consist of four people, three guys, one woman. The woman sings a ballad about heartache while the men play a slow tune with their instruments. They’re human and the singer smiles when she realises we’re going to dance.

Chester puts one hand on my lower back and takes my other hand in his. “Much better than eating something that tastes like concrete.”

I laugh. “How do you know what concrete tastes like?”

“It’s an estimated guess.”

I chuckle.

We sway to the music, going in a slow circle. When his face is to the crowd, he looks at someone over my shoulder. He then presses himself closely against me, brushing my cheek with his.

Why the sudden change?

I have to wait until I'm facing the crowd and Chester the band. When I scan the crowd, my gaze lands on Oliver. He's chatting with Aura and two other vampires I don't know. He isn't looking at us, but he has to be the reason Chester pulled me closer.

Maybe Chester is here to keep an eye on me, considering Aura is still here. The bonus will be that he can mess with Oliver.

We continue shuffling, slowly turning back around again. I cast one final glance in Oliver's direction and catch him looking at me.

It lasts two long seconds before he looks away.

Why did Summer have to give me hope? It would be so much easier to get over him if I could believe he didn't have any feelings for me.

The song ends, and Chester catches me off guard with a swift kiss on the lips. I blink at him but he's already turning away. He takes my hand in his and marches straight towards Oliver, Aura and the other two vampires.

Oh, boy. Chester, what are you doing?

I scan Aura and Oliver's expressions before we enter their line of sight. Aura is nodding at whatever one of the other vampires is saying, but the look in her eyes is dull and she's tapping her foot impatiently. If I had to guess, I'd say she's bored. Oliver, on the other hand, is the picture perfect example of a gracious host. There is a tension in his shoulders that is barely noticeable, but I still see it. Is it because of everything that is going on, or did Chester manage to rile him up?

The two vampires have their backs towards us. One is male, the other female and scrawny. She's definitely a vampire, I can tell by the energy in her core. When I focus on it, I smell cinnamon. However, her energy feels restless and not as expansive as Aura or Oliver. She's young, then.

They all turn to us as we approach them. Aura's eyes immediately go to Chester's hand in mine.

“My, my,” she says. “Are you two an item?”

I try to pull my hand away, but Chester clasps it firmly. He is intent on putting on a show. And he’s beginning to piss me off.

“Well, I have to say,” Chester starts, “it started off as friends with benefits. Many, many, many benefits.” He eyes Oliver. “But then it blossomed into something real. I realised it when we were on missions, you know? I just get extremely lethal whenever someone hurts Monday. Not just with my Illusions. I guess people underestimate how much power I have in this city.”

Oh, hang on. He’s actually doing this for Aura, not Oliver. He’s basically saying he’ll protect me.

I glance at Oliver, who takes a nonchalant sip of his champagne.

“Well, isn’t that darling? Right, Oliver?” She looks up at him. “Or are your employees not allowed to date each other?”

“For me to dictate who my employees date would be quite unnecessary,” Oliver says without any emotion. “Reginald Addington, you’ve met Chester before. And this is Monday Moody, the Traveller on my task force.”

Reginald smiles at me and holds out his hand. He’s got brown hair in a small ponytail and sideburns that nearly reach his jaw.

The woman next to him smiles as well. She has blond hair in a neat bun and wears a pantsuit instead of a dress.

I give him my hand to shake, but instead he lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses my knuckles. It’s not as intimate as a kiss on the wrist, but I still feel my cheeks glow.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he says in a pleasant voice.

“Likewise, Mr Addington.”

“Call me Reginald, please. If I may be as bold as to call you Monday?” He smiles in a friendly way, something I have yet to see any vampire do, including Oliver.

“Of course.”

“This is Rachel. She works with me.”

I nod at the woman and she nods back.

“Reginald is a member of the House of Winter,” Oliver says.

I ignore the fact that Aura has sidled up to him and blinks at him adoringly, probably in an attempt to mark her territory in front of me. Or maybe I just think that because I want to think that. In all likelihood she doesn't see me as a threat. After all, they kissed. All Oliver and I have done is flirt like baboons in heat.

“I see,” I say, not sure how to respond to that. “You must work a lot with the mayor.”

“More as of late. I am very interested in Oliver's task force. I know you haven't been part of it for long, but what are your experiences so far?” Reginald peers down at me, being significantly taller than me, and I feel all eyes on me.

What is he asking, exactly? Have I been enjoying it? Do I think task forces like this are necessary for Travellers? Should I share anecdotes?

“Positive,” I say.

Silence.

“We've only had a few cases so far. We've always succeeded. I enjoy the challenge. Does that answer your question?” I add.

He nods. “Do you believe that this task force is a good thing for this city? For the world?”

Big question.

“I believe there are Travellers who will use their skills in ways that are detrimental to others.” I think of Blayze and how I basically imprisoned him in a different world. Perhaps Oliver was right. Perhaps I did that because I wanted to both protect this world from him, as well as him from this world.

Or perhaps I felt like I had failed him. As if it was my responsibility to steer him on the right path. I know it wasn't. Maybe I do have a saviour complex.

“And the task force is a good way to stop them?” Reginald asks. “Or does it take too much time? Cost too much?”

“No. We've succeeded in catching notoriously elusive Travellers who had attempted plenty of Alterations. Granted, we've only just begun, but so far it didn't cost us much time. Not more than when K-9 officers track down a drug den.”

Reginald seems to contemplate this as he swirls his champagne. He then takes a sip.

“Impressive,” his companion says.

“We're a good team,” I say and glance at Chester, who winks at me.

Reginald reaches inside his breast pocket and pulls out a card that he hands to me. “I'd like to talk more about this, if you don't mind. Call me sometime and we'll set up a meeting.”

A meeting? That sounds formal?

I hesitate.

*Take it, Oliver says in my head.*

I do as he says. “I appreciate that, Reginald.”

Both Reginald and Rachel move on quickly after that, which leaves Oliver and Aura alone with us.

“How is it going so far?” I ask, meaning their hunt for whoever supposedly killed Sinclair.

“The night is young,” Aura says. “Besides, it pays to be patient. I mean, look at us,” she turns to Oliver, “I never would have thought we’d be here.” Oliver gives her a charming smile as she places her pale hand on his chest.

I want to slap it off. “Aura, have you tried those orange carrot-y snacks? They are to die for.”

She produces a playful smile. “No, dear. I’ve already got my eyes set on my sustenance for the evening.”

Eww.

“Lovely,” I say dryly.

“We should continue mingling,” Oliver says to Aura.

“Of course.” She takes his arm. “Have fun, Monday. Chester.”

“We will.” Chester winks at me.

I glare at Chester after Aura and Oliver have gone. “I think I need some air.”

“That sounds like a good plan. Follow me.”



## Chapter 28

*“Taking out ones opponents is just as vital as forging alliances.*

*Though one must never admit to doing any such  
thing.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



WE MAKE OUR WAY OUT of the room and back to the entrance hall where things are now quiet. I don't see Summer and there are no new guests trickling in.

There is a gentle breeze in the night's air and I inhale deeply. There are lanterns in the garden to provide a romantic light and some of the guests are here as well. I don't like that. I was hoping for some privacy.

“Guests are allowed here as well?” I ask.

“Yeah, but only through the side entrance.” Chester points and a few people stroll into the garden from the stone path that goes past the mansion and ends at a smaller gate at the side of it.

There are blankets on the grass and several of the guests are sitting down, laughing and chatting.

“This is probably where they go to feed,” Chester whispers as he leans in to me.

I whip my head around at him in shock. He's right. This is the perfect place since there's at least more privacy than inside.

I look around and spot a male vampire and a woman in a golden dress off to the side. His eyes are glowing as they're talking and I can feel the trickle of energy flowing from her to him. It is subtle and small, though something like this is noticeable to the, in this case, willing victim.

"I don't like this." My voice is quiet. I don't want to seem disrespectful, but it's not really something I can get on board with. I know it's not the vampires' fault that this is how their bodies work, but still.

"Maybe I should just slip into my bedroom where all things are nice," I mutter.

"I don't think Reginald is the only one who wants to speak with you. There are a lot of vampires interested in you since Oliver has been boasting about his new task force. Since he's so interested in the UA, others are too, if only because they're trying to look good in front of Oliver."

"That makes sense. Oliver is powerful, and even though these vampires are powerful too, they still need allies."

"Exactly."

I sigh. "Vampire politics do my head in. I'm going to use the restroom."

It's quiet in the private wing, and I decide to teleport to my own bathroom, especially since lifting up this dress isn't easy. Why is it so tight?

It takes longer than I wanted to get out of there and instead of teleporting, I walk back so that I can enjoy the fact that I'm alone and not surrounded by energy-sucking, arrogant—

"Monday." Aura's voice pierces the comfortable silence in the corridor. She's come up the staircase just as I'm about to go down. "Where did you run off to?"

There was no running involved. In fact, I hardly run. Unless there's food involved. But I don't say those things, instead I smile at her. "Just checking on Lovelace. Where are you going?"

“Actually, I wanted to ask you something.” There is only the slightest tug at the corner of her red lips and the look in her eyes is downright hostile. A strange contrast, since her mouth indicates she’s amused.

“Really?” This is not good. She followed me just to talk to me. It will either be about Sinclair or Oliver.

She takes the final steps up the staircase and faces me so that her back isn’t towards the steps. Luckily, neither is mine. I bet my mortality makes murder very tempting for her.

Her perfume smells sweet and itches my nose. I refrain from twitching it like a bunny.

“I was surprised to learn of you and Chester’s attachment,” she says.

Oliver it is.

“I see.” Since it’s not a question, I don’t say more than that.

“Are you not in love with Oliver?”

I blink at her. “What makes you think that?”

She cocks her head. “Call it intuition.”

All the advice Oliver has given me about Aura has gone through the exit hatch in my brain. I take a slow breath, steadying my heart rate. “I love Chester,” I say, which is not a lie. “I respect the mayor.” Also not a lie.

There is a flash of impatience in her eyes, though her face remains neutral. “Good. Because Oliver and I will form a union, in more ways than one.”

I feel a bit nauseous.

“Oliver and I can speak telepathically,” she says in a grave tone, as if it’s a big deal.

How is that possible? Did Oliver feed on her? Oliver said it happens when feeding on someone, which is why we can do it.

“I’m certain you don’t know much about the way we live and the rules we govern, but allow me to explain.” She inches closer, but I refuse to back away. “Very rarely do vampires form a connection with someone so intense that they can communicate that way. When they reach a certain level of trust and loyalty, they can use this form of communication. And Oliver and I can do this.”

Two realisations hit me at once.

One: She’s lying, which means she feels immensely threatened by me.

Two: Oliver and I are ... soulmates.

She must perceive the shock on my face as having succeeded at making me jealous me and chuckles softly. “Don’t worry, dear. I’m sure you can be put on the waiting list. He might warm up to you more if you become a snack.”

Her insult wafts right past me. Oliver lied to me. He has never lied to me. He told me it was because he had fed on me. Which means he has felt this connection from the start. So what Summer said is true. He’s holding back because he lost his loved ones before and doesn’t want to go through it again.

Does that mean we’ll never be together? Should I really stop making things ‘difficult’ for him? Should I give up on us?

By the time my focus returns, Aura is already halfway down the stairs. What do I do with this?

I feel like crying. Both from joy and sadness.

No, no. I’m Monday Moody. Moodies don’t cry over men. Still, at the thought of returning to the party, my heart sinks.

Only one thing will do. I hurry down the stairs, as fast as my dress allows me and then stride to the kitchen, which is blissfully silent. There is still the

faint smell of food in the air, but all the cooking was done earlier and transported to the other wing.

I make myself a cup of tea. It is really the only thing that can save me now. And a scone, but we don't have those right now.

Tea will have to do.

My hand is shaking and just as I'm about to take my first sip, a scream cuts through the air.



AFTER I'VE FOLLOWED the scream to the bottom of the stairs, it feels like everything goes in slow motion, even though I haven't activated that power. There is movement around me, people talking, but time feels like quicksand until suddenly it snaps back to normal. I am still staring at the scene.

The shock dissipates and is replaced with anger and worry. I crouch down by Summer's body and check her pulse, even though it's obvious that she's dead. Her lifeless eyes stare up at the ceiling while her oddly bent legs are partly draped over the bottom steps of the stairs. One of her heels has come off.

The anger is for her death. The worry for Oliver, because I know he cares for her.

One of the waitresses is being comforted by another one. She is sobbing, trying to explain how she wanted to have a smoke outside when she spotted Summer lying there. Her scream has attracted a few guests. Oliver isn't here yet.

I was just at the top of the stairs moments ago. The time it took me to make a cup of tea was the time it took for Summer to die. Why was she there?

How did it happen? Was it really an accident? Her shoes do look like death traps, but she's always been able to walk in them just fine.

My stomach turns.

There are a few guests behind me that whisper fiercely as they continue ogling Summer. This is nothing but interesting gossip to them, I'm sure. I turn and usher them out of the room when Oliver's voice rises above that of the few guests that have gathered in the door opening to the corridor.

"What is going on? Allow me to pass," he says in a commanding tone.

They part immediately and become silent as they watch him move forward.

I step aside as well to let him through as my heart aches for him. I want to protect him from this moment, though I know I can't. Yes, yes, maybe I do have a saviour complex.

Aura is on his heels. As soon as he steps into the corridor, I walk past him and usher the others back. There is a sliding door that I pull out and shut in their curious faces. It drowns out their whispering voices. This will be known by all the guests within a matter of minutes.

My eyes are on Oliver as I step back. I struggle to focus on my breathing so that my heart rate doesn't shoot up. I don't want to give Aura any more information about my emotions.

Oliver kneels by Summer and closes her eyes. His back is towards Aura, but I can see his fingers tremble.

My heart constricts and I squeeze my hands. It is ridiculous that I can't attempt to comfort him.

"Is it clear how she died?" Aura asks, then eyes me.

Why is she looking at me? Does she think I did it because she last saw me at the top of the stairs?

“It looks like she broke her neck,” I say as I feel the blood drain from my face.

Oliver rises. “I’ll get Dee.” His voice is level and his face blank.

“I will ring her,” I say and go into the corridor where there’s a phone. Dee picks up immediately.

“No,” she whispers, when I tell her what happened. “I’ll be right up.”

I hang up and return to the bottom of the stairs.

Oliver is staring at Summer’s body.

“Just in case,” I say, “we shouldn’t touch her. And maybe call the police. Just to be sure.”

“No need,” Oliver says. “Dee can perform the autopsy. We will handle this internally.” He clenches his fists and a wave of power emanates from him.

“We need to nip this in the bud, dear,” Aura says. “If people believe your assistant has been murdered while you threw a party here, people will think you’ve gotten weak. We need to make sure if she was indeed murdered and if she was, we must find and punish the culprit immediately and severely.” Again, she glances at me.

I want to sigh but don’t.

“Aura, I’d like you to go back to the party and spread the rumour that my assistant had an accident and fell down the stairs. Nip it in the bud, as you said. In the meantime, I will check the cameras.”

Right, the HomeTech security cameras. Of course he has them here as well. Good. At least we will find out who did this quickly. “What can we do to help?” I ask.

He turns to Aura. “I need you to mingle with the guests and reassure them that there was an accident that is being handled.”

“But can’t I do more? Like—”

“It’s important,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Of course.” She squeezes herself through the door and I hear her being bombarded with quiet questions from the guests on the other side.

*Check on Sinclair, he tells me, instantly reminding me of what Aura told me. Not that I can feel anything romantic; I’m still too shocked.*

*You really think Wynter did this? To create a diversion? I ask him.*

*Find out.*

George is still with Sinclair, at least. I doubt they’re in danger, but still I hurry into the small library and open the secret door.

George and Sinclair glance up and then return to their chess match. They look so focussed. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Sinclair this serious.

I close the door behind me. “Everything okay?”

“Sh. I’m trying to win,” Sinclair says.

“George, may I have a word with you?” I nod at him and move to the corner of the room.

They both look up at me.

Sinclair scoffs. “Sure, I’ll just pretend that’s not mysterious at all.” He turns his attention to the chess board while George gets up and joins me.

“What is it?”

I feel unexpected tears coming up and have to swallow. “Summer is dead.”



## Chapter 29

“What do you call a group of vampires? Trouble.” ~ Chester



GEORGE INSTANTLY PALES. “What? How? When?”

“She was found just now at the bottom of the stairs,” I say softly. “It looks like she’s broken her neck. We don’t know if it’s an accident or not. Dee will perform the, err, autopsy.”

George’s eyes flash yellow and he growls.

“Aha! I got your knight,” Sinclair exclaims proudly as he holds up the piece.

George turns to him, his eyes still yellow.

Sinclair gulps. “Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll put it back.”

“What’s next?” George asks me.

“I’m not sure. Oliver has security footage he can check. Why don’t you go and help and I’ll stay here with Sinclair.”

He’s already halfway to the door before I can finish the sentence.

I don’t know if he considered Summer a friend, but either way, this is sad for him too. It will probably make him feel slightly better to do something productive.

“What happened?” Sinclair asks as he rubs his bottom lip.

I don't want to scare him, but it's not like he won't find out. "Summer, Oliver's assistant, she's fallen down the stairs."

"Yikes." He makes a face. "My aunt fell down the stairs once. Mind you, she has a lot of poodles. Really tiny ones. She tripped over one of them and rolled down the stairs. The dogs all thought of it as playing and started jumping on her and licking her. When the paramedics showed up, my aunt was actually giggling. She did have a broken ankle, but she swears she never noticed the pain."

"She's dead," I blurt out.

He frowns. "I'm pretty sure she's not and she's my aunt. I would know."

"Summer is dead," I say louder. This time it hits me harder and I have to press my fingers against my lips to keep them from trembling.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Sinclair runs a hand through his hair. "I'm really sorry." He gets up and makes his way around the meeting table in order to plop down next to me. He awkwardly pats my shoulder.

"You've never comforted anyone, have you?" At least his manner is distracting me from my feelings.

He shrugs. "No. Not really. But I am truly sorry."

"I appreciate that. I'll just stay with you while George helps out." Let's just hope it's an accident. Though that will still be tragic. She survived so much only to tumble down the stairs and break her neck.

"Okay. We should talk about...something, then," Sinclair says as his eyes dart across the room as he's looking for a suitable topic.

"How about you tell me what made you go back in time to kill notorious serial killers?"

"Ah. See, I didn't kill them exactly." He taps his fingers on the table. "I just caused certain accidents."

“Homicidal oopsies, huh?”

He grins. “Kind of. It didn’t start out that way. I just wanted to see things with my own eyes. I went to see a Shakespeare play, like in her time. I didn’t actually get to see her, but it is just cool to see one of her plays in that time. Then I really wanted to find out Jane the Ripper’s identity so I went to the 1880s. I didn’t actually find out, but I did see one of the bodies right after the murder. It was intense. Anyway, that gave me the idea to go after notorious serial killers and save some lives. Of course, the Chrono Unit undid all my Alterations. I know the rules, I was expecting it. I just had to try.”

“I see.” With all the training my mother did, I had never really seen Travelling as sight-seeing. I can understand that point of view, though.

“Didn’t you ever do stuff like that? You must have been tempted,” he says.

“No. My mother always warned me that certain things cannot be changed and some things just need to happen.”

His eyebrows cross his forehead. “Really? You weren’t tempted to change even a tiny little thing? Not even in your own life?”

“I was tempted, sure. But I never dared mess with time that way. Especially in my own life. I really just used my skills in missions.”

“Missions?”

“Well, training. My mum trained me.”

“Oh, right. You’re very good, though. I mean, you caught me.”

I chuckle. “Yes, I remember the part where you shot at me.”

“Aha. Still holding a grudge. I knew it.” He snaps his finger.

“I’ve forgiven you, it’s just a little hard to forget, that’s all.” I point at the chess board. “How about we play a match?”

“Ooh. A challenge. I do accept, milady. Prepare to be annihilated.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” I knew I could never beat Oliver, but with Sinclair I was sure I stood a chance.



I WON THE FIRST TWO matches and Sinclair the third. By that time I’m tapping my fingers on the table, occasionally sneaking a glance at the door. Oliver must have reviewed the footage. Doesn’t he know I’m just as anxious to find out what happened? Why hasn’t he shown up? Has he gone back to the party and left me here to wonder?

“Hmm. I think if I do this—aha! I got your rook.” Sinclair triumphantly holds it up.

“Good,” I mumble and try to focus on the chess board for my next move.

“Are you okay? You look like my father when he’s about to tell my mum he’s gambled and lost some of her hard-earned cash,” he says.

I’m about to answer when the door opens. I jump to my feet automatically as Oliver and George walk in. They close the door behind them. George refuses eye contact and Oliver’s jaw is tensed. This is not good.

“What happened? Did you check the footage? Was it—I mean, what happened?” My voice sounds higher than usual.

“We did check the footage,” Oliver says. “The quality isn’t the best but we could make out that Summer was pushed and by whom.”

“So she really was pushed?” I put my hand to my heart and approach them. “Was it Wynter?” Please say no.

“No,” Oliver says.

I feel a sense of relief that she's at least not that much of a monster. "Was it...Aura?"

"No," he says again.

"Tell me then. We have to stop this person. They might be long gone by now," I say. "Who is it?"

"The person in the footage...was you," Oliver says.

I'm so surprised that I actually look behind me as he says it. He can't mean me, can he? "I'm sorry, I may have misheard you."

Oliver shifts his weight. "I'm sorry to say this but the woman on the footage is you. The same dress, same hair. Same face."

"What?" I gape at him, then at George, who still refuses eye contact. "You guys know it's not me, right?"

"The duplicator," Sinclair says. "She must have been copied. I mean, Monday is not a murderer. Even I know that much."

Oliver glares at him.

"I'm just gonna focus on all the chess over here." He clears his throat and stares at the board.

George walks over to the locked cabinet in which he put the devices when we got back. He opens it and peers inside. "Nope, they're all accounted for. And someone would have had to aim the device at Monday."

Since the cabinet is locked, I doubt anyone has borrowed the device. And I imagine I would have noticed if someone scanned me with it.

"I don't know what to say other than it wasn't me. I would never harm Summer. I liked her." Especially since our last conversation.

"I know," Oliver says. "But until we get to the bottom of this, I need you here."

“Here? As in, locked up for my own safety? Or locked up because of yours?” I curl my hands into fists.

“For yours. And for the benefit of whoever did this. I’d like them to think their plan worked. You don’t have to stay in one of the cells.”

“Oh, goody,” I say dryly. “Let me help. Let me do something other than sit here.”

“Oliver is right,” George says. “This is the perfect chance for you to keep an eye on Sinclair. If Summer was...killed in order to create a diversion and frame you, it’s better that you stay here and continue to protect Sinclair.”

“We don’t know that this is because of Sinclair. It could be Harlan or Aura trying to get me out of the way.” I look at Oliver.

“Even so, it’s important we make them think we believe them.”

I swallow.

Oliver walks up to me and touches my arms. “I know it wasn’t you. Just trust me and stay here.”

I search his eyes and don’t see any indication that he’s lying. Good. It would break my heart if he thought I had hurt Summer.

*I’m really sorry about Summer. I know how much you cared for her. We will find out who did this.*

He gives me a sad smile. I know.

“What are you going to do now?” I ask when he lets me go.

“We go back to the party and pretend that everything’s fine,” Oliver says.

George grumbles at this.

“We’ll return when the party is over. Dee is still performing the autopsy, but I doubt she’ll find any new information. We’ve seen the footage, so we

know what happened.”

I chew my bottom lip. Not really, since the footage is clearly lying.

“What if it’s an Illusion?” I ask, just as the door opens. It’s Chester.

“We’ve considered that,” George says. “But currently, the only Illusionist on the premise is Chester.”

“Right,” Chester says as he closes the door behind him. “And it wasn’t me.” He stands next to Oliver. “I’ve run around the whole party, and even checked outside, but I can’t detect any party-crashing Illusionist,” he says to him.

Oliver nods.

“If it’s not an Illusion, then what?” I put my hands on my head and start pacing up and down.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find out. Just make sure you stay here. I’ll pretend to confide in Aura and tell her it was you so I can see her reaction. And if she is behind it, then she’ll think it worked.”

“Woah, you’re leaving Monday in here?” Chester asks.

“Yes. Problem?”

Chester conjures up his cocky grin and saunters over to me. “Not at all. I’ll just stay here and make sure Monday’s relaxed. She seems a bit upset.” He turns to me and puts his arm over my shoulders. “I can think of one thing to relax you, just like the other day. On my sofa.”

My eyes widen. No, no, no. I look at Oliver, but he’s got his poker face on as he stares down Chester.

I’m not sure what that look means, but I hide my face in my hands to bury my red cheeks.

“Like I said, we will be back when the party is over, unless something happens. There’s a button under the table that you can press if you need to summon me,” Oliver says without any hint of emotion.

I hear both him and George leave and then elbow Chester in the stomach.

“Worth it,” he grunts.

I shrug his arm off and sit down opposite Sinclair. It’s going to be a long night.

“You’re the Illusionist, right?” Sinclair asks Chester with a wide smile on his face. “Do you know any cool Illusions?”



## Chapter 30

*“Love between a vampire and human are not allowed, regardless of level. If both parties are intend on spending a significant amount of time and devotion to one another, both will have to pass tests that the council will create based on the couple.” ~ Vampire Code of Conduct*



HOURS PASS BY AS CHESTER entertains Sinclair with various Illusions, most of which involve pretty women or dinosaurs. Sinclair apparently is easily amused. Or maybe that's Chester. Either way, I retreat to one of the cells and lie down on one of the beds. My dress and heels are starting to feel uncomfortable and I'm getting tired.

It is nice to hear the men chat and laugh and it's probably a good thing to refuel in case Wynter makes her move.

I don't know how Mr Turtleneck has gotten in, but he shuffles into the cell. I reach down and pick him up so I can put him on my stomach. Soon, I drift off.



A SOUND WAKES ME. MR Turtleneck is no longer on my stomach. According to my watch it's nearly 4 AM. The party must be long over. Did Oliver and George show up? I stretch and yawn. It's a good sign that they chose not to wake me. It means nothing happened.

Wait. Did Wynter really not make her move? I get up and walk out of the cell and into the meeting room.

Sinclair is slumped forward in his chair, snoring heavily as Chester is typing on the typewriter.

"Still awake?" I ask, rubbing my eyes.

"These are pretty much my business hours." He stops typing. "Oliver came to check on you. Apparently, Aura is leaving in the morning and they've not found any vampire moles. Still, they consider the party a success, I think. Because they did some good networking, or so Oliver said. I could not be a vampire. I care too little about what others think of me and I'm too honest to be smooching up to people."

"Oliver doesn't smooch up to people. They smooch up to him. But yeah, I wish he would have kicked Aura as soon as he realised Harlan would have killed Sinclair."

"Soup's too hot," Sinclair mumbles in his sleep.

"Even in his sleep he doesn't shut up," Chester says with a smile.

"Come on, help me get him in the cell. This will kill his back." I move over to him and nudge him backwards.

Chester sighs. "You're too nice to people." He grabs his left arm and I grab Sinclair's right.

"Can we take that train?" he mumbles as we pretty much drag him to the nearest cell and put him on the bed.

"Okay, one bit of chocolate." Then he turns around and continues snoring.

“He’s like a big child, isn’t he?” Chester crosses his arms as we stare at him.

“I kind of like that about him.”

We walk back into the meeting room. “Why do you think Wynter hasn’t showed up yet?”

Chester turns to me and raises one eyebrow. “What if she has?”

“You think she is responsible for Summer’s death?”

“Yes, I do. Perhaps she’s trying to get you out of the picture.”

“But why?”

He shrugs. “How should I know what goes on in her head.”

The door behind Chester opens and he turns around. If it’s Oliver, perhaps I can tempt him in a game of chess. It’s not like I’ll sleep anytime soon.

Still, this should be bedtime for him. Perhaps he can’t sleep either.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Chester says and I have to step around him to see who he’s talking to.

“Harlan,” I whisper. What the hell? How did he get in? Aura. Of course. What are they up to?

*Oliver. You better get down here.*

“I promised you I would feed on you and I will,” Harlan says to me.

“The hell you will, you sick bastard,” Chester says and gets ready to cast an Illusion.

Like the strike of a cobra, I feel Harlan’s power slam into him. Chester staggers backwards, and my first reaction is to hold on to him, but that won’t do anything.

*Oliver!*

I run at him full speed, going for a tackle. If I can push us both outside of this room, I can use my powers.

The next moment, Harlan is a blur and grabs me from behind. He holds me firmly and bites my ear so hard it bleeds.

I scream with frustration as I can't teleport or do anything.

He feeds on me next. Not with blood, but with my life force. I know why. He doesn't want me to be able to use my powers even outside of this room. He doesn't want to risk me getting away. Which means he'll let me go. He wants me to run from him, fight him. He likes that.

I feel the power in my core drain away and there's nothing I can do. I scream again, even if we are in a soundproof room. At least the door is open.

Please wake up.

When he's drained my powers, he pushes me back into the table. Pain shoots against my back as I hit the edge. I glance at Chester who's lying on the floor.

Is he dead? Panic seizes my throat and I start to breathe rapidly. "Did you kill him?"

Harlan laughs. "Worry about yourself, beautiful. I like that dress, by the way. Did you put it on just for me?"

"You wish."

He advances and I throw my fist at him. He dodges it with ease and shoves me onto the table, holding my wrist and using his other hand to wrap my leg around him. I scratch his face with my other hand, drawing blood. He grabs me firmly and licks his own blood off my fingers.

I bite my lip to keep from crying. How am I going to get out of this?

He uses his ring to cut my neck, fast as a lightning strike. It stings and I cry out.

His eyes glisten at the sound.

I'm giving him exactly what he wants. I need to make this less enjoyable. He might kill me, but I can at least mess with him. I force myself to slow down my breathing and relax my muscles. It's not easy, but I do it.

"What's the matter? Giving up already? I wouldn't have thought that." He leans forward, his hips pressing into mine.

Gross, gross, gross.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he whispers before he licks my neck.

I tense up, but immediately force myself to relax again. "That's nice," I say softly.

He immediately pulls back to look me in my eyes. "You like this?"

I nod. "I've wanted you to do this ever since I first saw you. I just wanted you to work for it, you know? I could tell you like that."

His eyes turn dark as he grins at me. My one hand is still free and I stretch it out to touch his chin. I hope he doesn't notice it's trembling.

He lowers it so he can playfully bite my index finger.

I'm afraid that if I smile it will look too forced so instead I lick my lips. It draws his attention to them and before I can react, he kisses me hard. All my muscles tense up and I focus on my expression. I don't want him to see repulsion when he pulls back again.

I put my hand on the back of his neck and when he pulls away, I wiggle the wrist he's still pinned down. He lets go of it and I push myself up, still touching his neck, our faces close. At least my face looks relaxed, even though the rest of my body isn't.

“I’ve been wanting to do something else ever since I first saw you. May I do it?”

“Yes,” he pants.

“Good.” I lean back so I can poke my fingers in his eyes.

“Argh.” He stumbles backwards and I follow it up with a swift kick in the groin. That should cool him down.

I run for the door and make it into the library only to slam into someone.

“Oli—” I start, but instead it’s Aura’s cold eyes that I stare into.

“Sorry to disappoint you.” She’s wearing a nightgown. She must have let Harlan in so that he could kill me. Of course, she wants me out of the way so she has Oliver to herself.

Her pale hand grips my throat as she lifts me up into the air and against the bookcase. I can’t breathe and clutch at her hand, kicking my legs.

Harlan darts out of the room, panting, but stops when he sees Aura and me.

“She’s all yours,” Aura says lazily. “Take your time and make sure it hurts.” She drops me and I fall to the floor, wheezing as tears spring to my eyes. Air, I need air.

Harlan wastes no time as he pulls me into his arms and pins me against the back of the sofa. “Don’t worry, I will.”

He presses my body firmly against his and grabs my hair so he can tilt my head back and expose my neck.

I am still gasping for air when his lips get closer to my skin. All I can think of is calling Oliver again, but just as I’m about to, Aura says his name.

Harlan stills and looks up. I follow his gaze.

Oliver stands in the doorway, he's changed into a more casual outfit, though he doesn't appear as if he's been sleeping. His eyes are completely black.

"Ah, you're here," Aura says. "Good. I have a proposition for you."

George shows up behind him. When he surveys the scene, his eyes blaze yellow and his hands transform into claws.

"This does not concern you, werewolf." She glances at Oliver, but he simply takes a few paces forward, closer to me.

When George doesn't move, Aura rolls her eyes.

The closer Oliver gets, the more relaxed Harlan's grip becomes on me. He's afraid of him. Good.

"You see, even though Harlan acted completely on his own and killed that Sinclair, I think we can come to an understanding that will benefit all of us," Aura starts.

Harlan narrows his eyes at her, but then turns his attention to Oliver as he takes a few more steps in our direction.

"Let her go," he says softly.

Harlan does as he's told.

"Now step away."

He also does that. With his body no longer pressing me against the sofa, I fall to the floor. Oliver gently helps me to my feet as Aura continues.

"Together we can put those Travellers in place. With those devices—" she goes on. In the meantime, Oliver's eyes—still as black as the deepest abyss—scan my face and neck. The blood that has trickled down it. The bruise from Aura's hand as she choked me. The dried tears. The panic in my eyes.

He doesn't say anything, not even in my head.

The more he stares at me, the more I want to bury my head in his shoulder and cry. “Chester,” I whisper, but his name turns into a sob.

“George,” Oliver says coolly. “Take her to Dee.”

“Are you listening to me?” Aura says loudly. “We can enter a new era. We can be the most powerful vampires in the world. Let Harlan have her. It can be his reward. After all, him getting Sinclair out of the way is a good thing.”

“Are you sure?” George asks.

Aura stomps her foot as her power brushes against me. Against all of us. “I will not be ignored!”

“Yes,” Oliver says.

George’s claws turn to hands but his eyes are still yellow as he walks over and puts his arm around me.

“You will seriously choose to protect a Traveller over becoming even more powerful? You will choose her over your own kind?” Aura’s voice has become shrill but she hasn’t moved from her spot. George keeps his eyes on her as we move away.

“She is my kind. And you, you will both die for what you did to her. And Chester.”

“He’s alive. So is she,” Harlan says, making me stumble with relief. George keeps me from actually falling over and leads me out of the room.

“You hurt them. And you will pay,” I hear Oliver say, his voice becoming softer until we’re out of earshot.

But then there’s a loud crash and a powerful force shakes the entire building. Is that Oliver? Or is that what happens when three powerful vampires unleash their powers?

“Let’s go,” George says as he lifts me into his arms and hurries towards the basement where Dee is.

“You’ll get Chester too, right?” I ask him.

“I will. Right after it’s safe.”

“And Sinclair is in there too. He sleeps steadier than a comatose cow.”

George grunts. “That’s a good thing in this case. If Harlan realised he was still alive...”

“He still would have killed me first, I think.” And then I burst into tears.

“There, there.” George can’t do much to comfort me since he’s still holding me. The room is empty and he places me on one of the beds. “Dee, we need you.”

Her voice comes from the adjacent room. “I figured, judging from all the noises upstairs.” She puts on her white coat as she emerges from the room. She’s dressed, at least. Maybe she has insomnia.

I’m still crying and this time George is rubbing my back. It does actually help.

“I’m okay, I’m totally okay,” I sob. “It’s just all the tension coming out.”

George squeezes my shoulder. “It’s okay to cry. I’m sorry we didn’t come sooner. I should have stayed with you in that room.”

“No. Then he would have hurt you too.”

“Alright, now,” Dee says. “Let’s not talk about this. We need to focus on healing.”

There’s another shake of the building. “Do you think he’ll be okay?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah. He’ll be fine.”

“Good.”

Dee shows up by my side with a needle. “This will help you heal.” She sticks it in my arm.

“Okay.” I blink a few times as she starts working on the cut in my neck. Drowsiness settles over me and I even yawn a few times.

“It’s okay. The medicine can make you sleepy,” Dee says. “Just lie back down.”

As soon as my head hits the pillow, I’m out.



## Chapter 31

“The time has come to make our move. There have been too  
*many setbacks and losses. Finally we’ll get our chance.*” ~ Monday



I CAN'T TELL WHAT TIME it is when I wake up since the basement doesn't have any windows. I do know where I am and how I got there. It takes me a total of three seconds before I remember, and the memories are accompanied by a headache.

I glance to my right where Chester is sleeping. The rise and fall of his chest is the most reassuring thing I've ever seen.

“How are you feeling?” Oliver asks, startling me.

I look to my left. He's pulled up a chair and is fully dressed. I would think that fighting two powerful vampires would have made him look worse for wear, but he is practically radiating.

“W—what time is it? What day is it?”

“It's been only two hours. It's barely morning. You should get back to sleep. I'll continue to watch over you.” He has a book in his lap.

“Are you okay? Did Aura and Harlan hurt you?”

He smiles. “Hardly. They're dead.”

I sigh with relief. “Thank goodness.” It may sound awful, but I really am glad they're dead. I don't feel bad about it at all.

“And Chester is really okay?” I glance back at him.

“Yes.”

“And Sinclair?”

Oliver points at the third bed in the room on which Sinclair is sleeping.

“He’s still asleep?”

“The ruckus woke him, but at least he was smart enough not to leave his cell.”

I sigh and feel myself relax. “What a night,” I mutter.

Oliver gets up and places the book on his chair. He puts his hand on my forehead. “I’m really sorry. I had no idea Aura had this planned. I let him hurt you.”

“You didn’t let him. You were asleep.”

“I wasn’t. I was trying come up with the next plan for Wynter, since she hasn’t shown up. But I failed in anticipating this move from Aura and that was my mistake.”

“Look who has a saviour complex now, eh?” I grin at him.

He doesn’t grin back. “I really am sorry. They only hurt you because of me. Can you forgive me? I understand if you can’t.”

I gape at him. “Are you mad? There’s nothing to forgive. You’re not responsible for their actions. They are. And you handled it.” I remember his words and blink at him. “You said that I’m your people. Did you mean that?”

“I did.”

Tears well up in my eyes. This time they are happy tears.

“No, no. Don’t cry. Chester is going to be fine and you’re going to be fine. All is well, okay? Don’t cry. It breaks my heart.”

There he goes again, making my heart beat faster. I got my proof. He chose me over the vampires. He protected me when it mattered. He loves me.

I love him.

I grab his collar with both my hands and pull him close. I kiss him softly on his lips. It takes me a moment to realise he isn’t kissing me back. When I pull away, his face is unreadable. If eyes are the windows to the soul, he’s drawn the curtains.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, matter-of-factly. “You should rest now.”

I summon all my willpower to smile as casually as possible and lie back down. In reality I want to run away and also maybe throw something at him, like a refrigerator, but apparently this isn’t my lucky day.

I don’t understand. Was he really messing with me all this time? Does the soulmate telepathy thing not mean anything to him? Does he flirt with me as part of our thing? Or is it a game for him? Seeing how long it would take for me to take the bait? Or does he think I like Chester? Then of course there is the worst option, that he’s gotten to know me and has found something he dislikes.

Footsteps sound before the double doors open. George enters. He’s got a frown on his face, and unlike Oliver, he does have bags under his eyes. Even though he’s also dressed, he’s missed one of his buttons. He looks from me to Oliver.

“Spit it out,” Oliver says. “I don’t think I can take any more unpleasant surprises.”

“Then you won’t like this one. I just got a call from Monday’s mother. Apparently, they’re under attack from Travellers. Wynter.”

“What?” I push myself into a sitting position. No, no, no. This is bad. I have a headache and I’m still sore, but I don’t care.

Oliver holds out his hand. “Monday, you stay and rest. George and I will take care of it.”

“No, this is my parents we’re talking about.” I’ve already thrown the covers back. I’m wearing a long, white shirt that’s not flattering at all, but I don’t care. I’d protect my parents in a clown’s costume if I had to.

Oliver places a hand on my shoulder. It feels warm. “Monday, please. You have to trust that I will fight for them. I need you here. I need you safe.” The look in his light eyes is pleading. I’m not sure if I’ve ever heard him say ‘please’ before.

How can he speak to me like this but then react so coldly when I kiss him?

I nod. “Please, protect them.”

“I promise I will.”

“You need to wake up Lovelace and ask her to teleport you outside their home, then tell her to teleport straight back here. To the basement. To me. If she doesn’t show up within a few minutes, I will drive over in my car, I swear.”

Oliver nods. “Alright.” He walks over to George and holds out his arms.

George grunts. “Oh, no.”

“Come on. Every second counts,” Oliver says.

“Fine, but nobody tells anyone about this.” He jumps into Oliver’s arms and then they’re a blur. The double doors are kicked open, and then fall closed long after they’ve gone. They are probably talking to Lovelace already. She’ll do as they ask. She’ll know it’s important.

I nervously bite my lip as the seconds pass by. Chester continues breathing. So does Sinclair. Silence.

Then, there she is. She's standing in the middle of the room, in her Hello Doggie pyjamas. Her hair is messy and she looks around until she spots me. She also eyes Chester.

"What is going on? Are you okay? And why did I have to teleport George and Oliver to your parents' place?" she asks as she walks over. I prop myself up against my pillow and lean back, scooting to make room for her.

"I'll explain later. For now, just stay with me, okay?"

"Are you hurt?" She awaits my response before climbing on top of the bed because otherwise she can't read my lips.

"I was, but now I'm fine. Just a bit tired." I glance at Chester. "He's fine too."

She climbs on the bed and settles in beside me. I put the cover over her and my arm around her. When I glance back at Chester again, I spot Mr Turtleneck at the end of his bed.

I smile at him.

Silence returns to the room. Even though I'm still tired, I can't even think about sleeping. I mean, I know my parents are very capable and even Collared, my mum is still a force to be reckoned with, and so is my dad. But still ... they waited until I was vulnerable. Until Oliver was distracted.

What if Wynter has the devices? Or what if she somehow gets her hands on Sinclair and simply forces him to make new ones?

I blink. One second it's just me, Lovelace, Sinclair and Chester. The next, Wynter is by my bed. She's dressed in a black and white outfit and smiles as she grabs my wrist.

There's another woman that pops up next to Sinclair and grabs him by his shoulder. I've never seen her before, but she's clearly one of Wynter's people. This is bad. This is really bad.

Another blink. And this time, it is me and her. In a church. Not the one where we always meet. A different one. This one is filled with other Travellers. About twenty-five. They've clearly been expecting us. The church is lit up with candles, and there are sleeping beds and camping equipment.

I check to see if she's taken Lovelace too. She hasn't. The other woman pops up by her side, with Sinclair. He flops to the ground and jerks awake.

"Ouch, what the fiddlesticks is going on?" He struggles to get up and when he looks around and sees Wynter staring at him, he gulps. "Uh, oh." He glances around. "We're in trouble, aren't we?"

Wynter chuckles. "Only Monday is."

"Great. I feel so special," I say. "The Red Roses headquarters looks pretty crappy." I know there's not much I can do against her right now. Without my skills it's impossible to fight her and win. And even if I wanted to try, I'm too fatigued and very outnumbered.

This really isn't my lucky day.



WYNTER IS KIND ENOUGH to lend me a navy skirt with a white blouse that actually fits perfectly. When I emerge from the restroom at the back of the church, with one of the Travellers as an escort—I don't see why, they can sense I can't teleport out of here—Sinclair is talking to Wynter. He is pale and shaking, I can tell even from here. He's flanked by one other Traveller who is panting heavily.

When I focus on her core, I don't sense nearly enough energy as she should have. Enough to teleport, yes, but it means she's been fed on. It has to be Oliver. Which means she's one of the Travellers that fought my parents.

“You!” I shout and dash forward. “What did you do to my parents?”

Wynter intercepts me. “Calm down and I’ll tell you,” she growls at me as she grips my arms tightly. She’s surprisingly strong, or maybe I’m still weak from being fed on.

I stop struggling and she lets me go. I shoot daggers at the other Traveller but she slinks off.

“Your poor daddy didn’t make it,” she says. “So sorry.” She sounds as insincere as can be and has clearly dropped her mask.

I gasp. “No, tell me that’s not true!”

“It’s not,” Sinclair says. “I just heard them say that your parents put up a good fight and then the mayor showed up and that brute of a werewolf—” his voice trails off as he notices Wynter’s cold stare.

“You’d lie about something like that? You said you loved me,” I say through clenched teeth.

“I do love Monday, just not the one from this timeline,” she says with a shrug.

“And you’re trying to save her?”

“I’m trying to make things right,” she replies. “Although, to be fair, I’m just a helper. Maybe it’s time you meet my boss.”

Sinclair gasps, looking at something behind me then glancing back at me. He repeats this several times as if he can’t believe it and realisation hits me. I should have known sooner. I turn around slowly.

She’s no longer wearing the same dress I had worn tonight, but instead is dressed entirely in black. It’s weird to see myself wearing something that’s not a dress or a skirt. It’s also weird to see myself as being somewhere in my late forties. And it’s weird to see myself outside of a mirror.

“Hello, Monday,” the Other Monday says.

“Hello, Other Monday.”

“That’s funny. To me you are the Other Monday.”

“Not in this timeline,” I say.

“True. We should rectify that.” She approaches us and I take that time to focus on her core energy. I don’t sense anything. It’s not surprising since I shielded mine when I was working at the Chrono Unit. However, she doesn’t need to do that here.

Is that why Wynter is interested in the devices? Because Other Monday doesn’t have her abilities? But, I saw her teleport on the footage. After she...

“You killed Summer. You’re a murderer.”

“Oh, yes. I am. If you think saying so wounds me, you’re mistaken. I know what I am and I’m not sorry about the things I’ve done. Our experiences shape us, and since you haven’t lived mine, I know you can’t understand until you do.”

“You have a plan, right?”

“I do.”

“Will it mean people are going to die?” I ask even though I’m afraid for the answer.

“Probably. Anyone who stands in my way, for example. Vampires are on the list as well.”

I inhale. “Don’t. Please reconsider. There must be another way.”

“There isn’t.”

“Excuse me,” Sinclair’s voice sounds puffed up as if he’s trying to sound brave. “At the risk of being murdered, what exactly are you planning on doing with me?”

“Congratulations,” Other Monday says. “You’ve become my employee. You only get paid by not being killed. Understood?”

He nods slowly and exchanges a panicked look with me.

“And me?”

“Is she Collared?” Monday asks Wynter.

“She is.”

Ha. No, I’m not. It’s because of Harlan that they can’t sense my energy, but they don’t need to know that.

“Good.” Monday pulls out the Portal Pad and steps aside.

“How did you get that?” Sinclair asks.

“Yeah, how did you get that?” They were in the locked cabinet. George checked not too long ago. How did she get in unnoticed? The mole. Of course.

“I have my ways. Don’t you know that by now?”

“You don’t have your powers. That’s why you need these. And why you need Sinclair,” I say.

“Bravo. You’re not as stupid as you look.”

“I look like you!”

“Good point. I should work on my insults.” She peers at something as she presses a few final buttons on the Portal Pad. I follow her gaze. There is a rip in the corner of the church. With the help of her device, it opens and restores the portal. It takes a mere five seconds to get established and the swirls are black and red. A time portal.

The only smart thing for her to do is send me to the future. In the past I can attempt to make Alterations. In the future, one where I don’t know who my

enemies and allies are, I'm powerless. I can also die there without any repercussions to her, as long as she stays in this timeline.

She purposely left this rip open, because it means she can send me back to her timeline. The original one. Not the one that's already been Altered by her and Wynter coming here.

She smirks at me when I look at her.

“That's right. I'm glad you understand. You'll be stuck in a world where you're the bad guy. And if you die, it means nothing to my existence.”

With that, she shoves me through the portal as it swallows me up. Into the unknown.

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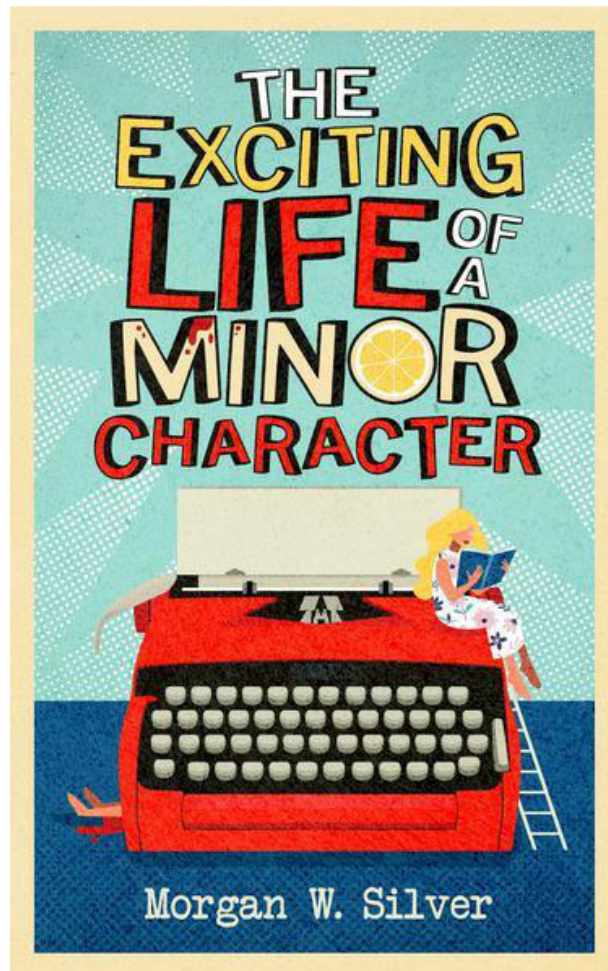
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## About the Author

I considered writing this bio in the third person, but my other voices wouldn't let me. My name is Morgan W. Silver. I have a BA in English Language and Culture and a Master's degree in Creative Writing. Which means I have a licence to write, and it will be extra awkward if I make spelling eroiers. Oops.

All my novels contain mysteries, but the subgenres may differ. There are, however, always shenanigans and quirky characters, as well as a dash of romance.

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