



The Other World (Werewolf High #10)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: A lost friend. A forgotten relic. When the only way to save the world is to leave it.

It's senior year, and things are off to a cracking start for Lucy and the pack. Sam is gone, Tennyson is alpha, and Lucy's powers are evolving even more. Sam's mother is back and full of ideas about how Lucy should use her powers, but can she be trusted?

At least one thing hasn't changed. Lucy's dad is still evil and wants to destroy the pack. When Nikolai's shadowy cousin calls in a favor, Lucy has no choice but to travel to a parallel world to help him, and hopefully save Sam while she's there. But that world has dangers of its own, and once she's there, will she be able to return? Will she want to? And will the secret to defeating her father be hidden there all along?

Total Pages (Source): 20

CHAPTER ONE

The dungeons at Wilde Manor were cold and dark, in contrast to the bright summer day outside. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust as I walked down the long corridor. My footsteps echoed ominously. In the back of my mind, I sensed Tennyson, busy being alpha, just like he'd been the entire summer. We'd barely had a moment alone, and when we had, he'd been exhausted. Not the most fun summer ever. It was the day before school went back and it felt as if the entire summer had been spent on pack business.

We hadn't heard a peep from my evil dad all summer. I supposed being the head of the High Council, the "master of all" as he called himself now, kept him busy. I entertained myself a lot picturing him being kept from his evil overlordship because of admin tasks. Filing papers from the Fey Council. Faxing the spirit realm. Taking Zoom calls from vampires. I had no doubt that when he attacked us, he'd attack at full force, and that was why Tennyson was working so hard to get the pack in order. But until he attacked, that left me twiddling my thumbs.

In the meantime, I'd found myself a hobby.

Ruby Spencer was in the cell at the very end. She had all the basic comforts, if you didn't include fresh air or a view. The wall into the corridor was thick glass, like Hannibal Lecter's cell in *Silence of the Lambs*. But I doubted Sam's mother had ever eaten anyone, and the high security level seemed unnecessary. She broke into a sunny smile when she saw me.

"I was hoping I'd see you today," she said. She said that every day.

Even though Tennyson disapproved, I hadn't missed a day visiting her. I didn't know if she was evil or was playing me, but I couldn't help it, I liked her. With her rosy cheeks and crazy hair, she just seemed so wholesome, and it made my heart ache for more innocent times every time I looked at her. It made my heart ache for Sam too.

"I go back to school tomorrow," I told her, sitting on the seat opposite her cell.

She nodded. "Yes, and we still have so much to talk about."

I didn't say anything in response. Even though I liked her, and even though Tennyson thought I was an idiot, I didn't trust her one bit. I was careful not to give her any information. Even questioning her would give too much away, so I bit my tongue on all the things I wanted to know. She had so many answers, things I was dying to know, but I didn't want anyone else to die for those answers, so I played it cool.

It didn't seem to bother her. She'd always been kind of chatty, and now I was the only person she had to chat to, so she barely noticed my silence.

"I actually made a list," she said, pointing in the air with one hand as an exclamation, while rummaging through the papers on her desk with the other. "I didn't want to forget anything important." She gave me a small smile, as if we were sharing a funny secret. It was just her way, but I couldn't help but smile back. "Huzzah!" she said finally, flourishing a crumpled piece of paper at me. She chewed her lip as she read the paper over, nodding to herself. I tried not to squirm in my seat, or tap my fingers or do anything else to give away my impatience.

Finally, she looked up at me and broke into a grin. "Have you ever had dreams?" she asked. "Of a temple?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. She was meant to be making with the answers, not the questions. "I dream of a lot of things."

She nodded again. “You’d remember these dreams, they’re different. Anyhoo, I bet you have, I just bet you. As far as I can tell, you’re more than halfway along your path.” She looked me over, head to toe, then toe to head, nodding all the while. “Yep, at least halfway. You’re the one, I’m sure of it. I knew it from the start, knew it would be either you or my Sam, but Dan wouldn’t have a bar of it.” She snorted and mumbled something under her breath. She grabbed a pencil from the desk and pressed the paper up against the glass wall to make a note on it.

I leaned forward slightly, trying to read the notes on the back of the paper. Her handwriting was crazy and most of it looked like some sort of mathematical equation but there were some words here and there, circled or underlined, that I could make out. A list of names, including mine and Sam’s, though Sam’s and a few others were crossed out. Part of an address, and the words “sword” and “ascension” and something that looked like a periodic table, only none of the elements were anything I recognized. A messy drawing of an open book with lightning bolts coming out of it. I tried to memorize as much of it as I could before she stopped writing and moved the paper away from the glass.

“Your father and I didn’t agree on a lot of things. He was always stubborn and set in his ways. He wasn’t a true believer.”

She looked and sounded completely sincere. Whatever she was talking about, she was definitely a true believer. I wasn’t sure if that made me trust her more or less. I didn’t say anything in response, just let her keep talking.

“It became obvious fairly early in my research. All living things are constantly trying to evolve. And it is my belief, that all beings with supernatural power are trying to evolve into the perfect being. There are many writings to back up my belief. As far back as ancient Rome, in every mythology I’ve ever encountered. The beings referred to as The Others are all stepping stones along that evolutionary path. You have experienced it yourself. You began as a human, then werewolf, witch, slowly making

your way down that path. I believe that you, Lucy, are the first destined to become complete. A united being!" She grinned at me, such a warm reassuring grin and it seemed at odds with the chilling things she was saying. "You probably don't believe me. Your father has no doubt filled your head with all sorts of ideas that he presented as fact when they are no more than theory. I can give you a list of reading material that may change your mind. But I know you're an intelligent girl and at least some of what I'm saying must make sense to you. When your father took my Sam –"

Couldn't help the exclamation escaping from my lips. "My father!"

Her face softened. "Did my Sam not remember?"

I shook my head. "He thought my father rescued him." When I thought about it, it seemed obvious that my father had been the one to take Sam. When had my father ever done anything not evil.

"My people, the 'Others', are not in the habit of kidnapping children." She sighed. "I can't even imagine what those people put him through."

I could but I didn't really want to think about it. I'd only been with them briefly but the things they'd done to me had been horrible enough. Once again, I felt guilty for not giving Sam the support and attention he deserved. I pinched the bridge of my nose. I couldn't keep on playing it cool, not when Sam was out there somewhere, alone and scared. I had so many questions for her, about her theories, about what I'd become and how to become it, but for now, they had to take a backseat. The main thing was to find Sam. If there was even the slightest chance he was still alive, I had to try to help him.

"What makes you think Sam is alive now?"

"As you may know, The Others are defined as beings outside the scope of the five

councils. Sometimes they are a combination of these five types of being, sometimes something completely different. One of the councils is the Spirit Council, beings that exist not only on this plane but on all planes.”

I nodded slowly, starting to see where she was going but not sure I was going to buy into it.

“A friend of mine who is allied with the Spirit Council has come to me with information. They have shown evidence beyond any doubt that Sam is alive and well, in a world much like ours, only existing alongside it.”

“A parallel world?” I snorted. Werewolves, spells, potions, crazy science experiments, all those things I could deal with but parallel worlds... Nope.

“You saw it didn’t you, the portal, vortex, gateway? The one he vanished into. Where do you think you went, if not another world.”

I stared at her blankly for a moment, a thousand sarcastic responses running through my mind, but none of those would help me out here. “You said there was evidence,” I said finally.

She nodded. “There is, and I can show you, but you’ll need to trust me.”

I snorted. “Right,” I said. “Let me guess, I just need to let you out of here for five minutes and you’ll go get the evidence.”

She laughed. “I have far more regard for your intelligence than that,” she said. “I just need you to touch my hand, just for a moment. You know that human brains are similar to a powerful, organic computer, think of it like a file transfer, from my brain to yours. That is the way of the spirit realm, a connection merely needs to be established for energy to be transferred. For those of us with physical form, the fastest

and most efficient way to do that is through physical touch.”

I looked at her skeptically. Nothing I knew of could harm me just from a simple touch, but the things I didn't know would fill volumes and the thought of facing Tennyson and telling him Sam's mother had escaped because she'd duped me... that made me hesitate to agree.

She sighed. “It's not right that this world has made you so wary at such a tender age, but I understand your distrust. There are other ways, of course, but I will need time to prepare them.”

I took a deep, fortifying breath and stood up. “No, it's fine. Let's do it now.” There were wards on her cell, dozens of wards, not to mention other security all through the manor and grounds. Plus, I was super powerful myself. Even if she had nefarious intentions, I could probably take her. Even if I didn't trust her, I had to trust myself, and it seemed worth the risk.

There was a small slot by the door of her cell where the guards put her meals. Warily, I poked the tip of my index finger through.

She laughed and touched her fingertip to mine.

It was like a bolt of lightning right into my brain, only not lightning but information.

I saw Sam, like a series of snapshots. He looked dirty and scared but otherwise fine, uninjured, and definitely alive. He seemed to be hiding from something, running. In some images, he was in a wooded area, in others an abandoned building. Nowhere looked familiar but that didn't mean it was necessarily another world.

It wasn't only Sam I saw, and the knowledge wasn't only in snapshots, some of it was in just a sort of knowing, though I could tell it was all tinted with Mrs Spencer's

perspective, in the same way that when I'd been able to feel the werewolf pack bond, I'd known when I was feeling something from Althea, or Nikolai. It was hard to separate the facts from her beliefs so I just tried to remember everything I could to sift through later. She had so much knowledge, magic and science and just general life stuff. It was a lot.

And there was something else. The power inside me began to stir, and I knew that whatever her touch had done to me, wasn't just a file transfer. Already I could feel that power begin to change. She'd set something in motion, something that pushed me further along that path. The path to the spirit realm.

Whatever the heck that meant.

CHAPTER TWO

The rest of the day and the next morning was so busy with getting ready to go back to school, that I barely had time to think about what had happened with Mrs Spencer Spencer. I didn't have a chance to talk to Tennyson about it. It wasn't as if I was hiding it from him, there just wasn't a right time. By the time I'd packed, argued with my brothers about being homeschooled again , broken up an argument between Althea and Harper about a leather jacket I'd never seen either of them wear, and repacked because Nikolai had swapped all my regular clothes with his fashion "improvements", I barely remembered what had happened myself. I was back at school before I knew it, in my little corner room with Hannah, only this time on the top floor of the Red House.

"This year is going to be amazing," Hannah said, stretching out on her bed like a starfish. "We're seniors, I have my magic back. I have a hot boyfriend?—"

I snorted. Nikolai was not hot. He was a bug. Not even a cute bug but a creepy bug, with poisonous antennae. I pulled open another drawer to unpack more of my stuff.

"Tennyson is alpha, so we don't have to worry about stupid Henry. Everything's coming up Hannah!" She shot some silvery sparks toward the ceiling with her fingertips.

I didn't want to ruin her good mood, so I didn't remind her that my evil father was still out there with his evil plans brewing. Or that Sam was still missing. Nobody else even believed he was still alive anyway, or seemed to miss him that much.

“Are we still doing Wicca club this year?” she asked me.

I took a deep breath, thinking I had to tell someone, and Hannah would be the last person to judge me. “About that,” I said. “If the goal is still to help me with my powers, it might be less of the magic and more of the...” I waved a shoe around vaguely in the air. “Spirit... something.”

Hannah sat up and stared at me. “You’re changing again ? Geez Louise, girl, pick a lane!”

I told her what had happened with Mrs Spencer as I finished unpacking.

“I don’t even know what it would mean, to change into spirit form, or whatever,” I said, sitting down on my bed with a sigh. “Will I lose my body completely or just be able to astral travel around or something?”

Hannah shrugged. “Nobody knows much about them, as far as I know. But I can ask my –” She broke off. Out of habit, she’d been about to say she’d ask her aunt, but her aunt was gone now, like so many others my father had murdered. Hannah forced a smile. “You should talk to Nikolai; his family has all sorts of connections. You had access to the library at Wilde Manor all summer, you didn’t look it up there?”

“I’ve been trying to get a handle on the powers I do have, not ones I might have someday in the future. It’s not as if I’ve been slacking.”

“Sure,” said Hannah in a sing-song voice. “And I’m sure that having that big old manor with all those empty bedrooms and the alpha curse broken didn’t distract you at all.”

I shoved the last of my clothes into the bottom drawer and forced it shut with a slam.

“... or not,” said Hannah.

To her credit, when I looked over at her, she was doing her best not to smile. I smiled back, at least she wasn't thinking about her dead aunt, so I could take some teasing.

“Now that Tennyson is alpha, we barely had five minutes alone all summer.” I flopped down onto my bed and buried my face in the pillow.

“Well, I'm sure he wants to... you know. I mean, you do, right?”

I lifted my head a little to glare at her. I'd been so busy worrying about whether he wanted to, whether he was avoiding me on purpose so that it wouldn't be an issue, that I hadn't given a lot of thought to my own feelings on the subject.

“I guess I want to,” I said. “I mean, that's just what people do when they're... you know...”

“Young and in love?” suggested Hannah, clasping her hands together and gazing up at the ceiling. “A fated couple whose bond has grown unbreakable through danger and suffering? A classic enemies-to-lovers Cinderella story worthy of a K-drama?”

I rolled onto my side and propped my head on my hand. “I was going to say ‘together’.”

Hannah shrugged. “That too. I mean you're right, it's what people do.” She looked so smug and self-satisfied that it gave me no doubt as to how she'd spent her time with Nikolai over the summer. Which wasn't something I ever wanted to think about. “Well, maybe he isn't sure you want to, since you're not sure yourself. You should talk to him.”

“It's fine.” I couldn't even imagine how that conversation would go. We barely had

time to discuss the weather these days, let alone that . And if it was too awkward to talk about it, then the actual doing was probably a ways off.

“Sure,” said Hannah. “It’s probably way better to just stew about it for months and get all resentful, then blurt out all your feelings while having an argument about something totally irrelevant.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

The only time I saw Tennyson over the next few days was in classes, and even then, he seemed distracted. He was always messaging someone, or making notes about something. He barely even looked at me. I knew he was busy and it was an insane amount of responsibility for a teenager who wasn’t even out of high school. And I wanted to be supportive, I really did. But I also wanted the old Tennyson back.

But of course, if he’d shirked his responsibilities, skived off his alpha duties to hang out with me, he wouldn’t have been Tennyson. I knew that. Logically, I knew that. I just also wanted to know I was still important to him. That all this pack business hadn’t totally pushed me out of the way on his list of priorities.

Finally, Thursday rolled around, which was the day we’d scheduled the room for not-wicca club, which meant I’d get him almost all to myself for an hour, at least. Hannah, Nikolai and I left our bags by the door and sat in a circle on the floor, waiting for Tennyson to show up.

“So,” Nikolai said, after we’d waited in silence for almost ten minutes. “Hannah tells me you’re about to change again. You might want to slow down there, or by the end of college you’ll be unrecognizable.”

I faked a laugh but couldn’t stop staring at the door.

“I just thought it was interesting because just after Hannah told me that, I got a message from Vucari. He wants to meet with you.”

That was enough to make me look away from the door. Vucari was a shady guy connected to Nikolai’s family, who’d helped me out one time in the past. I owed him a favor, which he’d reminded me of the last time I’d seen him, when we were trying to get the five councils to help us out with Henry and my evil dad.

“He’s ready to cash in his favor?” I asked.

Nikolai shrugged. “Seems like it.” He leaned in toward the center of our circle, as if he was about to share a secret. “Might want to keep it from Tennyson though. He doesn’t trust Vucari and wouldn’t want you meeting up with him.”

I looked back to the door, then over to the clock. Quarter past. “I don’t think that’s going to be an issue,” I told him.

I would meet with Vucari, whether Tennyson liked it or not.

CHAPTER THREE

Although I was curious about what Vucari wanted, I was also a little worried. I didn't know much about him but if he needed a favor from me, I was fairly sure it wouldn't be anything good.

Not that it was much of an issue. I was suddenly, overwhelmingly, busy. SATs were less than a month away and I was not prepared. I wasn't prepared to think about the future at all, let alone college applications, which were looming. But whether I wanted to think about it or not, I had to study, and study hard. Luckily, I was surrounded by bossy people, like Althea and Hannah, who had strict study schedules and expected me to join in with them, and who didn't tolerate any kind of slacking off.

That didn't leave much time to sneak off and meet with shady magical folks, or even to plan how to do it. As busy as I was, Tennyson was a zillion times more so, which made it so much easier to keep the whole Vucari thing a secret from him, not to mention that I might be entering my spirit era. And if I felt a little bad about hiding things from him, I told myself that it would only add to his list of ever-growing worries, so really I was doing him a favor by keeping him in the dark.

The SATs were in the first week of October, so I crammed like crazy in the weeks leading up to it. The days passed in a blur of flash cards and sugar crashes, until finally, the test came. And then it was gone. All that preparation and it was over in just a few hours. I had no idea if I'd done okay or totally bombed, and I knew that if I had bombed, I'd be able to re-sit it, but I definitely didn't want to go through all that again.

After the test, I went straight back to my room and passed out on my bed. It seemed like so long since I'd slept peacefully, without test questions chasing me through my dreams. But before I could settle nicely into a nap, Hannah and Nikolai burst into the room.

"Come on, let's go!" said Nikolai, in an urgent whisper.

"What's wrong?" I sat up, still sleepy but worried there'd been an emergency.

"Vucari," he said, waving his phone at me. "He's ready to talk to you."

I grabbed my hoodie off the back of my chair and followed the two of them out, grumbling about bossy weirdos who interrupted naps.

"How will we get off the island?" I asked, after we left the house and I was a bit more awake.

"Magic!" said Hannah.

I thought she was joking until Nikolai explained. "We don't need to meet him physically; we just need to get past the magical barriers around the island. We just need to follow the train tunnel until we're far enough away for Hannah to conjure a portal."

I didn't like the idea of a portal, not after seeing Sam vanish through one, but it was probably a lot safer than a helicopter. I couldn't exactly look up the statistics on that though, I supposed. It was funny how even after being a witch for a while and a werewolf, I didn't know much about being either of those things. I mean, I hadn't been either of those things for very long, so it was probably like the difference between reading the wiki on something versus studying it for a PhD. I'd only ever learned enough about anything to control my power, but I'd never be able to use it as

a reference on an academic paper. It was enough, I figured. In the grand scheme of things, a wiki was probably a lot more useful than super specific knowledge. Unless you were a surgeon, which I wasn't, so it was fine.

I'd been down the train tunnel a few times, when my old roomie Katie and I had snuck out of school, and then a few times for pack meetings the year before. It was dark and cold, and the sound of dripping water echoed around us.

"What do you think he wants?" I asked Nikolai, my words bouncing back from the tunnel walls.

Nikolai shrugged. "Probably just your Netflix password or something, who knows with that guy."

I felt briefly reassured, until he continued talking.

"Either that or a human sacrifice. He's got a lot of varied interests."

It hadn't really occurred to me before; how incredibly risky it was to promise a favor to someone I barely knew. A morally dubious, supernatural someone. I didn't know what kind of magic bound me to keep my promise to him, but it seemed like more than just a matter of honor. There would be no take-backsies when it came to Vucari.

I didn't even really know what the guy was. I knew he was down with the Dark Council, and Nikolai's family had some dodgy connections, but apart from that and an unhelpful google search, I was going in blind.

"This should be far enough," said Hannah.

We stopped walking and she started the ritual to open a portal. I watched as she sprinkled some silvery-black powder in a circle beside the tracks and chanted under

her breath. She placed a round mirror in the center of the circle and poured a few drops of liquid onto it. The surface of the mirror turned black and a cloud of smoke puffed up into the air. When the smoke had cleared, Vucari stood there. I stared at him for a moment, wondering what exactly it was about him that looked kind of wrong, then realized he was slightly transparent.

“It’s a projection,” Hannah explained.

“We couldn’t have just set up a Zoom meeting?” It seemed unnecessarily complicated to do this whole magic ritual instead of just using a laptop.

“This is the most secure method of communication,” Vucari said, unsmiling. “You trust far too easily.”

I shrugged. He wasn’t wrong.

“So, you’re ready to cash in your favor?” I asked him.

“I am,” he said. He stared at me as if he could look straight through me, which he probably could, since I could see through him.

I really hoped he wasn’t weighing up whether or not I’d make a good child bride for his demon overlord or something. Because I definitely wouldn’t.

“It is a favor that will also benefit you.” He paused. I wasn’t sure if he was waiting for me to say something or just letting his words sink in.

I waited. Eventually, he continued.

“You have begun the next phase of your transition.” He wasn’t asking. “This is good. It will make my task much easier for you. There is a relic. An ancient relic of my

family. It has been stolen and taken from this physical realm. I need to you retrieve it.”

“Right,” I said. There was a lot to unpack there and I didn’t even know where to start.

Vucari stared at me. After a few minutes of him staring, I realized he expected me to say something else.

“So...” I said. “I don’t really have any idea what you expect me to do.”

He gave a small smile, like I’d said something funny. “There is a ritual. It is complicated and you will need to progress along the path to Spirit before you will be successful in breaking through to the other world, but once you are there, I believe the plan will be straightforward.”

“Other world?” I repeated. I didn’t know what I’d thought he meant by “taken from this physical realm”, maybe like stuck in the spirit world or a dream or something, but this sounded like something entirely different. “Do you mean like an alternate reality?”

He shrugged. “More or less.”

I filed that away to think about later, because I didn’t want my brain to explode. That was what Mrs Spencer had said as well. That was a heck of a coincidence.

It took me a moment to come back to the here-and-now.

“Right,” I said. “Okay. Alternate universe. Cool. So, I have a few questions...”

“The relic is a stone,” he said, either pre-empting my questions or cutting them off, I wasn’t sure. “A type of magical lodestone. You will be magnetically drawn to it. It

will call to your power, so your power will guide you to it.”

I nodded, that sounded simple enough. “So, now I just have to become a spirit and get to the parallel world? Sounds easy.”

“Yes,” he said, obviously not getting the sarcasm. “You have people in your life who can help you with that, while I prepare things for the ritual.”

“You said that this would benefit me somehow,” I said. “Is becoming a spirit really that great?”

He stared at me blankly for a moment. “You do not seem to yet understand what this phase of your transition will mean. I advise you strongly to speak to the elders of your people, try to share in their wisdom. However, that is not what I meant. You have lost someone precious to you. They too have been taken to this other world. If you agree to my favor, you may be able to bring him back.”

My knees buckled. “Sam?” I asked faintly, hardly registering Hannah grabbing me by the arm to hold me up. Unless Vucari and Mrs Spencer were in some unlikely sort of cahoots, two entirely different people saying the exact same thing about Sam in a parallel universe couldn’t just be coincidence, could it?

Vucari nodded, then started to fade away as the smoke cloud began reforming in the magic circle.

“He’s alive?” I asked, before he could vanish completely.

“He was alive yesterday, when my informant contacted me, but precognition is not one of my abilities.” He had faded so much that I could barely hear his last words. I could barely hear anything over the thumping of my heartbeat.

“He’s alive,” I whispered.

It was the only thing I could say as Hannah led me back down the tunnel. I repeated it over and over, trying to convince myself of its truth. It was the only thing I could think of until we climbed the steps out of the tunnel and back into daylight. Where Tennyson stood waiting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tennyson stared down at me, the halo of light around him almost blinding me after the darkness of the tunnel.

Hannah and Nikolai tiptoed their way up the last few steps of the tunnel exit and made their way around him with exaggerated care, as if scared to startle an angry beast. Which, in a way, he was, so their caution was probably smart.

Hannah mouthed “good luck” to me, and Nikolai gave me the double thumbs up, then they both took off out of sight.

Tennyson’s nostrils flared and he took a deep breath before speaking. “I thought we were in this together.”

Now it was my turn to take a breath. I couldn’t tell if Tennyson was angry, or hurt, or just annoyed, and I couldn’t try to figure it out. Not at that moment. Not after what I’d just learned.

“Sam’s alive,” I said. It was the only thought in my head. “He’s alive and he needs our help.”

“You know this? How?”

I shook my head. If I explained about Vucari, he wouldn’t believe it, just like he hadn’t believed when Mrs Spencer had said it. I didn’t want to say it out loud and have him take this feeling away from me, this tiny spark of hope.

I was standing so close to him that he felt magnetized, as if I'd just snap into him and no force could pry us apart, but I couldn't let that happen. There was too much at stake. I couldn't relax for one second or I'd fall into him and everything else would drop away. Sam, my father, everything we'd been fighting for. I had to be stronger than that.

"You still don't trust me," he said.

I'm sorry , I whispered into his mind.

Then I turned and walked away.

It seemed obvious to me I needed to talk to Mrs Spencer about my meeting with Vucari, but that was easier said than done. I couldn't exactly commandeer the Wilde's helicopter and go flying off to talk to her. Especially not on a school night. So, I did the next best thing and filled Althea in on everything. Which, of course, led to research.

We'd read through most of the library in the Golden House in previous years when trying to fend off various evils, but this was a whole other branch of inquiry, and she seemed weirdly excited about it. Within an hour of hearing my story, she'd gathered us all – Hannah, Nikolai, and Harper York, but not Tennyson – together and assigned us different areas of research.

"It will be good practice for writing your doctorate," she said, dumping another pile of books in front of me.

"If I live that long," I muttered, half-hopefully. If I had the choice, being banished to the spirit realm seemed way less torturous.

"According to this, you will," said Harper, waving a thin paperback around. "This

says you'll live forever and be some sort of messiah."

"Muad'dib," Nikolai muttered to Hannah and she giggled into his shoulder.

Harper rolled her eyes. "Nerds."

I reached out to snatch the book from her but she held it away. Then she rolled her eyes and handed it to me.

I shouldn't have been surprised when I read the name on the cover. Ruby Spencer. With foreword by Daniel O'Connor. The title was "The Fated Child: the oncoming apocalypse and how to avert it".

"That was not in your pile," said Althea, plucking the book from my hand and setting it back on Harper's pile. "Your pile is string theory."

"Can't my pile be... anything else?" I asked, opening "String Theory for Dummies", and sinking my head down onto it. Maybe if I used it as a napping pillow, the contents would soak into my brain. It was the only way they'd get in there. I couldn't even understand the Wikipedia article on string theory. I needed "String Theory for Dummies for Dummies", and even then, I probably wouldn't understand it. Honestly, the whole topic seemed more like Althea's type of thing but she was looking into portals. Portals sounded way more fun.

"You'll be happy you know this stuff when you're stranded in a parallel world with no library or internet."

I briefly paused in banging my head against the table. "No internet?"

She shrugged, turning a page in a massive leather-bound book. "It's possible."

Maybe I could back out. Surely if Vucari heard about the no internet planet, he wouldn't expect me to go there. I mean, there's harsh and then there's harsh .

But then I thought about Sam. Sam didn't even care much about the internet, but he did care about his friends. He was stranded in some other world all alone, and anything could be possible in that other world. He could be the only human. Well, humanoid. He might be surrounded by dinosaurs, or snakes, or really stinky cheese. He could be in danger. And he'd feel like he deserved it. If I knew Sam at all, I knew that he'd think it was a fitting punishment for everything he'd done. But it wasn't. I had to save him.

I turned to the intro of the book and started reading.

I stayed there reading until everyone else had drifted off, to dinner or to bed, I wasn't sure. I was too focused on memorizing everything I read. And once I applied myself, it was actually much easier than I expected, as if the knowledge behind the words became my knowledge, rather than me taking in the words and deciphering them myself. I didn't know how but I knew somehow that it was a perk of my new transformation.

It was past midnight when I looked up and realized I was alone.

No, not alone. Someone was sitting in the far corner, in the comfiest armchair, reading. Tennyson.

"You didn't have dinner," he said, without looking up. "I brought you a sandwich."

I glanced over to the table beside me, and sure enough, there was a plate set on a pile of books, with a ham, cheese and pineapple sandwich on sourdough rye, cut neatly into triangles on it. My favorite. He must've made it himself, because it wasn't something the school ever had.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, suddenly realizing how hungry I was.

“I’ve done some research on what we might come to expect, during your spirit phase.” He still didn’t look up from his book but I knew it was just for the effect. “There isn’t a lot on it, obviously, but most sources agree that you’ll begin to neglect your physical needs. It’s something we’ll need to be mindful of, so that your health doesn’t suffer.”

He was using “we”, I noticed. That seemed like a good sign.

I shouldn’t have been surprised he’d learned about my oncoming transition, since we’d all been talking about it that evening, but I hadn’t realized he was home. His attention wasn’t often on our stupid teen conversation lately, even when he was at the house.

I thought about what he’d said as I chewed on my sandwich. I was about to make some crack about how it wouldn’t really be me if I wasn’t hungry, when he spoke again.

“You need to speak with Ruby Spencer,” he said. “I don’t like it, but I can’t see any other option. I’ve got the helicopter pilot on alert. We can either go tonight or in the morning.”

We ? I asked telepathically, as I was still eating my sandwich.

We , he repeated.

He looked so tired that I couldn’t bear keeping him awake for the time it would take to get back to the manor. And by the time I finished eating, I realized he was already asleep where he sat.

He was gone when I woke up the next morning but he was waiting for me by the fountain as soon as classes were over.

“Are you sure you have time for this?” I asked him as we hurried toward the helicopter.

He nodded but didn’t say anything else until we were in the air.

This is important , he said. We need to save Sam. And...

Even through our bond, I could sense his hesitation.

And I need you to know that you can trust me. With anything.

I reached out and took his hand. In the washed-out light of the late afternoon, he looked exhausted. I decided then and there that we wouldn’t go back to school that night. He needed a night off, away from school and the pack and everything else.

Sam’s mother did not look surprised to see us, but she did seem pleased.

“I know why you’re here,” she said, before we could even say hello. “You’re going to rescue my Sam, aren’t you.” It wasn’t a question. “But you’re a bit fuzzy on some of the details. Well, lucky for you, I’m the leading expert in interdimensional travel in the state, if not the country.” She shot me double finger guns.

Tennyson and I glanced at each other from the corners of our eyes. She could at least try to seem trustworthy, I thought. But at least she had the nutty part of nutty professor down, at any rate.

“Do you have the sword?” she asked.

“Sword?” I asked.

Tennyson didn’t look nearly as confused as I felt.

“The sword you manifested. During one of your ascensions.”

I hadn’t told her anything about that, I barely remembered it myself, and I didn’t need to see the look of surprise on Tennyson’s face to know he hadn’t mentioned it to her either. He wouldn’t.

“You’ll need it,” she said. “To open the portal. There are other ways, of course, but they take either a comprehensive knowledge of metaphysics, or an exceptionally centered mind, preferably both. No offense, sweet girl, but you don’t have either, so the sword will come in handy.”

I nodded. Tennyson’s mother had been having the sword tested, hopefully someone in the pack would know where she’d sent it, and the tests hadn’t done anything weird to its power.

“During the next phase of your Becoming, the metaphysical stuff will all come to you naturally anyway. You should hurry that along if you can.”

I wrinkled up my nose. “I would if I had the first clue how.”

Which was a bit of a lie. The whole spirit thing was a step I wasn’t sure I wanted to take. I liked my physical self. I liked eating and sleeping and the way that sometimes when Tennyson held my hand, he’d run his thumb slowly over the back of my knuckles.

She tapped her finger against the tip of her nose a few times, thinking. “You had dreams, correct? Dreams of a temple?”

Tennyson drew in a sharp breath. He'd shared dreams like that with me before.

Mrs Spencer didn't stop to hear my response. "That temple is real but it exists in a dimension beyond this three-dimensional reality, you follow?"

I wasn't sure I did follow, but I nodded anyway.

"We all visit that dimension whenever we dream, but what you need to do is to travel there while you're still awake." She gave a little shrug. "Like an out-of-body experience, if you like, or astral projection."

That all sounded a little woo-woo to me, but then, we were working on the theory that Sam was in another dimension, or reality or whatever. And I was part of a werewolf pack, so woo-woo was probably a few miles back at this point.

"Assuming what you say is correct," said Tennyson, "Lucy can't even focus her mind to meditate for more than a few minutes at a time."

"Oi!" I said, though it was a fair point.

"I've been in your mind, I know what a mess it is," he said.

Mrs Spencer waved her hand in the air as if batting the thought away. "Then you will be part of the ritual, to help her focus her mind. It will be easier that way."

I wasn't so sure that was a good idea. "I don't want Tennyson in any danger."

"He'll be in more danger if you try to shut him out," she said. "The two of you are tangled up so tight together that anything that tries to pull you apart will rip either you or itself apart. Better to be on the safe side, stay tangled."

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at Tennyson. The more I tried to take her seriously, the harder she made it. But Tennyson looked as if, after rejecting her for so long, he was now buying the whole package.

“So, what do we need to do?” he asked, leaning toward her.

I elbowed him but he ignored me. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to hear her out.

“Firstly, you need to get into the right meditative state, close to sleep but still aware. A hypnagogic state, it’s called. Binaural beats in the four to seven hertz range should help, you can find that online easy enough. I have a special tea that will put you right in the zone, and we’ll ask some friends in the spirit realm to guide you, that should be just the ticket.”

As she spoke, she rummaged around in her things, looking for something. She turned back to us with a guilty look on her face.

“Forgive me for a moment, but I don’t have the tea with me.”

I blinked my eyes and was no longer looking at her. I looked around the small cell but she wasn’t there. Tennyson seemed just as baffled.

“What the...”

Before I could finish the thought, she was standing right in front of me, no longer in the cell.

“Here it is,” she said, pressing a small paper sachet into my hand. “Now, it needs to brew for at least 20 minutes, and make sure to both drink it at the same time. Only one bag each, or you’ll go too far.”

With another blink, she was back in the cell. If I wasn't holding the packet of tea, I might think I'd imagined it.

"Could you do that this whole time?" Tennyson asked, his brow furrowed.

She shrugged. "Yes, but I wanted you to trust me and you wouldn't exactly do that if I was popping out every five minutes, would you."

She walked over to her desk and flipped open a notebook, then tore out a page. "So, tea, then the four hertz... you'll need headphones but they don't need to be great quality but do make sure you have the right side on your right ear and left on your left, that's very important. By the time the tea kicks in, the guides should be with you, but if not, here's what you do." She poked the paper out through the hole in her door.

I took the paper and glanced at it. It didn't make a heap of sense but maybe it would after I was tripping on shrooms, or whatever was in that tea.

"Okay, and then what?" I asked her.

"And then you'll be ready to bring my Sam back to me."

I nodded. That was exactly what I intended to do, no matter what.

CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't hard to convince Tennyson to stay at the house for the night, but it was on the condition that we tried out the tea and whatnot. He thought it was safer than trying it at school, which made sense.

We had a light dinner, unsure if wandering the spirit realm would purge our physical bodies or something, which had the added benefit of not letting anyone know we were there. It was much easier to steal a ham sandwich from the kitchen than order up a four-course meal, if you wanted to stay low profile.

"Nervous?" Tennyson asked me, as we waited for the tea to steep.

"Of course not," I said, even though I knew he'd know I was lying. I was petrified. Of turning into a spirit, of drinking weirdo psychedelic tea, of everything. "You?"

He shrugged. "If she's managed to poison this tea somehow, we have lycanthropic constitutions on our side." He lifted the lid of the teapot and sniffed at it, screwing up his nose in a way that I knew he didn't mean to be half as cute as it was. "It smells too disgusting to be poison."

It was so nice to just have that moment, just the two of us together without anyone or anything else encroaching on it. I mean, sure, we were about to drink magic tea that would send our spirits to the astral plane or something, but we were doing it together .

The timer went off to tell us the tea had finished steeping. We sat on the floor facing each other and I adjusted my headphones while Tennyson poured the tea.

“Ready?” I asked him, as he slid my cup toward me.

He took off his headphones and double-checked them, then put them back on and gave me the thumbs up. I pressed play on the app we’d found, and my ears were flooded with a dull sort of hum. Tennyson lifted his cup, so I mirrored him and we both sipped the tea at the same time. I coughed and almost dropped the cup. It was disgusting . Like, if someone had distilled the sweat from the socks of the entire polo team, it would taste better than this tea. Still, we’d made it this far, so I took another sip. Maybe my taste buds had given up and died, because it didn’t seem so bad on the second taste.

By the end of the cup, I was definitely already feeling it.

The distance between me and Tennyson seemed too far, like a hundred miles, so I started to crawl toward him. His face suddenly came into focus and he was grinning goofily at me. I slumped onto my side and he did the same, but up the other way, so we were curled into each other, staring into our upside-down faces. The headphones poked the top of my ear uncomfortably but I didn’t care enough to move.

“Ready?” I asked him again.

He nodded, then reached out and took my hand.

The change happened immediately. One second, we were on Tennyson’s floor, the next we were standing on a pathway on the side of a hill. On one side was a sheer drop, and the other was a smooth rock face. There were no spirit guides or whatever, but it was pretty obvious that we had to go up.

Up, up, and up, we seemed to be walking forever. I could still hear that humming sound, though we weren’t wearing headphones anymore. Even though the landscape didn’t change, somehow, I knew we were making progress. It was as if I could feel

myself rising, not physically but within myself. I knew that Tennyson felt it too. In this place, we didn't need to speak silently, there was just a knowing. There were no barriers between us at all in this place.

Finally, or perhaps quickly, we came to the end of the pathway. And just as Mrs Spencer had said, there was the temple that we'd seen in our dreams.

Tennyson squeezed my hand, and we walked forward, toward it.

We approached the threshold but although we didn't cross it, we were suddenly right in the heart of the temple, in the room we had been in before, with the pictures on the walls of the girl and her wolf. It all seemed so familiar, as if we had never really left it.

And in that place, it didn't seem as if Tennyson and I were two separate people, but instead, different parts of the same whole. Any distance between us didn't matter, because we occupied the same space. It wasn't the bond, or anything external, it was just how it was, how it had always been. Rather than being connected because of the bond, the bond existed because we were connected.

His attention strayed to something in the center of the temple, and because his did, so did mine. A pillar, with various glyphs inscribed on it. One of the glyphs seemed to glow, to flicker on and off with a strange light from within. I knew without any doubt that this glyph held everything I needed to ascend to my next form, and that any fear I had about this ascension was unnecessary.

As one, Tennyson and I reached out and touched the glyph.

It happened immediately, but not in a way that was shocking or jarring. It was more like waking up from a refreshing sleep. I just suddenly knew, was aware of myself in a way that I only had been in sleep. Like someone had pulled back the curtain of a

giant window, and everything was flooded in light.

Mrs Spencer had been right. I did know what I had to do. It was so simple. I didn't need to lose my physical form, no more than you lost it when you were dreaming. Maybe it was more complicated than falling asleep, but no more difficult.

"I knew you could do it," said a voice from behind us.

We turned, still touching the pillar, and found Mrs Spencer standing behind us, smiling proudly. She seemed completely solid, though at the same time, I knew she was still in the cell at the manor. Just as we were both at the manor but also truly here.

"It really is you," she continued. "You will be the one."

I wasn't sure that was necessarily true, but it also didn't seem important, not when I was standing in that place. Whether I would ascend further or not, things would happen as they should. It may be me or it may not, but either way, my journey would happen as it was supposed to. I just had to trust.

"It is time," she said, and stepped forward. She also touched a glyph on the pillar, but not the same one that Tennyson and I were touching.

The temple faded around us, and merged into a forest. The pillar became a tree, and under my hand I could feel the cool stone become rough bark. The spiced scent of the temple turned woodsy.

"It is time," said another voice.

I should have been surprised, I suppose, to find Vucari there, but it made sense somehow.

“But we don’t have the sword,” I said. I didn’t even know where the sword was, or how we’d get it.

Tennyson looked into my eyes and smiled. “It is time,” he whispered.

I nodded. It was time. The sword wasn’t essential, we could do the ritual without it. All I needed was here.

I turned to face the tree trunk. It was my tree, my magical tree that I’d grown with Tennyson, when our bond had become true. And that seemed perfect, far better than having the sword for the ritual.

Tennyson stood at my right and Mrs Spencer at my left, with Vucari opposite me on the other side of the trunk. We were at the four points of the compass. I knew it somehow, even though I had no sense of where we were. It was as if we had slotted into a place that had been designed for us.

It happened the moment all four of us touched the tree. It didn’t fade away like the temple had, but the atmosphere around us changed. No, not changed. It vanished. In that moment, there was nothing but the tree. Not even me, or Tennyson, or any of us, only the tree. We were all part of it, and it was part of everything. And for a brief moment, I understood everything. Every question about the universe, or existence, or anything, the answers seemed so simple.

But as soon as I became aware of it, it slipped away, and I once again came to be. The world formed around me again, and I stood with my hand on the tree trunk. The world around me was different. It looked almost the same, but the air wasn’t quite right, as if everything was covered in a blue-toned filter.

This was it. Somehow, without even really trying, I’d made it to that other world.

And I was completely alone.

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CHAPTER SIX

I said a very bad swear.

I stepped back from the tree and looked around. I seemed to be behind the Golden House, in the clearing where my magical tree stood in my world. Only, it wasn't my tree or my world, and the Golden House wasn't golden. It was a dark, dull grey, like some haunted Victorian mansion.

"There you are," said a familiar voice.

I started guiltily and spun around to come face to face with Nikolai.

"What are you doing out here, you silly old thing? And wearing that ."

I looked down at what I was wearing. A pair of Tennyson's old sweats and a t-shirt, nothing too out of the ordinary, though maybe not something I'd wear out to the opera. If I were to ever go to the opera.

Nikolai reached out and took my hand, pulling me away from the tree and toward the house.

I'd have blamed it on the trippy tea, only that seemed to have worn off the moment I arrived in this world. Or maybe it hadn't, and this was all a very realistic hallucination. I could hope. Because Nikolai was swinging our arms together and grinning at me like a loon, and I did not like what that implied.

“You’re not really Marie Antoinette, you know,” he went on. “You don’t have to cosplay as a peasant, no matter how fabulously wealthy we are. But if you’re bored, we can go and throw peanuts at the scholarship kids. I know how much you love that.”

There were so many things wrong with what he was saying. He was wearing bright purple corduroy pants, a yellow shirt with roses embroidered on the back, and a floppy purple fedora, so at least his terrible fashion was consistent across all universes. I tried to focus on that.

“Where are the others?” I asked, hoping to get a read on whether the rest of the pack was here or if it was just Nikolai.

He wagged his eyebrows at me suggestively.

“Oh, don’t worry, we have the place to ourselves. Is that why you wore that hideous outfit, so I could take it off you?”

I tried not to gag, unsuccessfully, so I turned it into a cough.

He dropped my hand and took a step back. Nice. If he was a germophobe, I could get him to keep his distance without raising suspicion. I had no idea how this other Lucy might act. A Lucy who would date Nikolai and thought she was some sort of aristocrat.

“Sorry, I’m not feeling great,” I said. I decided to take a gamble. “I actually missed class and was hoping to get the notes off Althea.”

I crossed my fingers behind my back, hoping this would pay off. From the look on his face, it didn’t.

“Althea Wilde?” he said, as if I’d said pooppy boogers or something.

I stared at him impassively, not wanting to dig myself any deeper. Then he started laughing.

“Oh, that’s nasty,” he said, slapping my shoulder. Then he walked on, still chuckling. “Althea Wilde,” he muttered.

Well, that really cleared things up.

“Come on,” he called back to me when he reached the gate through to the not-Golden House. “You know your father hates it when we’re late.”

It was lucky that Nikolai had already passed through the gate and didn’t see the expression on my face because that would’ve been a total giveaway. It was bad enough that I had to be all cozy with Nikolai, but making nice with my evil dad was a step too far. I couldn’t fake that, not when the thought of him made my blood boil.

As I followed him through into the house, I faked a coughing fit.

Nikolai stopped, turned and stared at me. I gave another little cough. Had I gone too far? Was he onto me? Werewolves didn’t get sick, but maybe I didn’t have any powers in this world. I was working blind here. I needed to fall back, gather some intel. Scope the lay of the land, and all that.

“You’re really not well?” he asked, taking a small step toward me. He raised a hand as if he was going to touch me, maybe test my forehead for a temperature. I wasn’t sure, and instinctively, I stepped back. He gave me a strange look, almost a smile but not, as if he’d been expecting me to do exactly that but he wished I hadn’t. He was definitely onto me, right? I was cooked. I almost turned around and fled but he’d catch me before I got to the door.

It was a long, narrow hallway, as dark and gloomy as the outside of the house had been. There were dusty chandelabras hanging from the ceiling but they gave off only a dim, grey light, that flickered over the glowering portraits that lined the walls. It felt like I'd stumbled into Resident Evil 7 or something. I half expected something to jump out at me from a shadowy doorway. But the only sign of movement was from Nikolai. Which was scary enough, to be fair.

I had to be smart about this. In a way, I was lucky that I'd run into him straight away. He was a valuable source of information about this world, if I didn't mess it up. I just had to play it smart. I knew a few things already, about this version of him and this version of me, I just had to take the next logical step from there.

"I'm fine," I said. "My father... he's waiting."

"It will be worse if he thinks you're ill," Nikolai said. Which was interesting. "I can make the report. I'll just tell him you got caught up researching for the project, at least that's something he'll understand. You go on upstairs and get some rest." He gave me another strange look. This one seemed worried, though that didn't seem a natural expression on his face. "Just let me know if anything else changes. We can't be too careful."

I shrugged. What would Other-me say to that? "You just want to take credit for my work."

The worry slipped from his face, replaced with a much more familiar smirk. "Of course."

It was tempting to follow him and eavesdrop on his meeting with my not-father, but if Other-me was meant to meet them there, it was too dangerous. Better to snoop around the house a bit with them distracted.

Without thinking, I headed straight up to Tennyson's room. The layout of the house was the same, even if the vibe was more Addams Family. At least there were no severed hands creeping around. At least, that I could see. Though, that wouldn't be nearly as bad as my creepy father creeping around.

Tennyson's room was not actually Tennyson's room in this world. It was very obviously Other-me's room. There were selfies pinned up of me all over one wall, of me with Nikolai, me with one or other of the Stephanies, and a bunch of other people that looked familiar but I couldn't place. That jerk Astor was in more than a few though, gross. And in them all, I was making an insufferable duck face. It made me want to punch myself.

The room itself was very frilly. Not so much of the goth princess vibe as actual princess. This me really thought a lot of herself. There was a rack of dresses where Tennyson's bookshelf should be. A giant vanity instead of our favorite loveseat. A stack of fashion magazines beside the bed and ew I was on the cover of at least the top one, looking all pouty and pretentious, and about thirty years older than I actually was. I couldn't imagine a version of myself that was into all this stuff.

Though, I could imagine a version of myself that was into that bed. And that version was me. That bed looked so soft, with giant pillows and silk sheets. I flopped down on it and within seconds, I was out.

And I was back at the tree.

I said another bad swear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For a moment I thought it was another Groundhog Day situation like when I'd been stuck in that time loop, but this definitely wasn't that other world, it was my own. It was my magic tree, and I was surrounded by Tennyson, Althea, Nikolai, and Hannah.

"She's awake," said Hannah.

I wasn't sure who she was telling, as everyone was already huddled around where I was slumped against the tree trunk, but after a moment, Mrs Spencer pushed Nikolai and Althea aside and took my arm, feeling for my pulse.

"Tell us everything before you forget," she said, dropping my arm and placing the back of her hand against my forehead.

So, I told them everything, ignoring Nikolai's sniggers at the parts about him.

When I'd finished, I had a few questions of my own. "What was that?" I asked. "A dream? A hallucination? And how did I get here, we were back at the Manor. How did you even get back so fast?" I looked at Tennyson. It took a few hours to travel back to school from his house and I surely hadn't been out that long.

"It's been a day and a half," he said, and now that I looked, I could see the strain on his face, the shadows under his eyes and tension in his jaw. "You were unconscious the whole time. I thought maybe the tea really had been poisoned."

He shot a look at Mrs Spencer and I wondered why he hadn't locked her back up if he

thought that.

“ You were fine,” she told him, more snappishly than I’d ever heard her speak to anyone. “If I was serving up poisoned tea, I’d make sure it took you out first.”

From her tone, it seemed like she and Tennyson had not been on the best terms while I was out.

She turned back to me and smiled. “Your physical body was here but your astral body went to that other world. We didn’t have the sword, so I guess that’s why the rest of us got left behind. If we’d had it, we could’ve made a bigger door for us all to fit through, but only you could travel through the spirit realm, so you had to go alone.”

Nothing that she said lined up with what I’d read about quantum physics, but it did seem much easier to understand, so there was that.

“When you return to that world, we’ll keep someone here guarding your body to make sure you stay safe. Although in that world, you’re really only a spirit, you’ll seem just as real as you are here. And since you look real, your body will react as if it’s real while you’re there. If you get hurt, you’ll feel it, and it could even cause your real body back here to get injured, so don’t go acting crazy while you’re there, or you’ll pay for it back here.”

I nodded. “Like Nightmare on Elm Street ,” I said.

“You were right to stick close to that version of Nikolai,” she continued. “There will be parallels between the two worlds, they’ll be the biggest clues to finding what you need.”

“Sam?” I asked. “Or the relic?” I hadn’t found any clues that might lead me to either, though I’d barely been there five minutes.

She gave me a sad smile. “Or a way to defeat your father.”

“Okay now,” said Tennyson, moving to help me up. “That’s enough. She doesn’t need to go back there unless she wants to, and I’m still not convinced Sam is even there.”

“She’ll have to go back. When she falls asleep here, she’ll wake there, and the same there to here. That is, until we find that sword and can fix what went wrong.”

Tennyson stopped moving and turned to look at her. “You knew this would happen?”

She shrugged. “I knew it was a possibility.”

Tennyson looked as if he was about to strangle her. Nikolai and Althea glanced at each other, clearly unsure what to do. But Hannah knew what she was about.

“Look you... Temu-Stevie Nicks,” she said, her curls bouncing in anger. “You’ve put my best friend in danger without her knowledge or consent, you better figure out a way to fix this or I’ll turn you into a newt! Come on, Lucy, we have stuff to do.”

She grabbed my other arm and her and Tennyson helped me inside. I honestly didn’t need them to, but I did need the reassurance of them being there, and being real.

When I glanced back, Mrs Spencer was gone.

I was scared to fall asleep again. What if I woke up in that place and the other me was there, calling me out for being an imposter? It was never good when you crossed your own double, not in Harry Potter or Doctor Who , or anything else I could think of. Though, both of those were time travel scenarios, which fortunately this was not. I had enough to think about without worrying about accidentally killing my own grandfather. Or purposely killing my own father.

I sat in the Golden common room, in the most uncomfortable chair I could find, in the coldest part of the room, but honestly even that was quite cozy. I leafed through one of the books in the stack that Althea had bought me about wormholes and astral projection, and chugged one of the Monster energy drinks from the crate that Nikolai had brought me.

I don't want to go back , I told Tennyson, in his head so the others couldn't hear how afraid I was.

We'll watch over you , he said. You'll be fine.

But I couldn't explain to him how alien it felt there, how everything just felt slightly off. It wasn't my world, and it knew I didn't belong there. It wanted me out.

Eventually, I had to sleep. I kept nodding off over the book I was reading and then startling awake.

"Come on," Tennyson said finally, after I spilled some foul-smelling energy drink on him. "Come sleep in my room. I can wake you if you start to seem distressed."

I wasn't sure it worked that way, but I was too tired to object. He nearly had to carry me up the stairs, I was so sluggish. I wondered if the sleep I had here actually counted, since my mind or whatever was still awake. Maybe I'd die from sleep deprivation or something and then none of this would matter. I really hoped not, it seemed like the worst possible way to go. I tried to remember if I'd ever read anything about the effects of sleep deprivation. Hadn't the CIA done experiments on people in the 70s or something? Or was that just an episode of The X-Files ?

Before I could even think to ask Tennyson, I was asleep and waking up again in that other world.

The good news was: I felt refreshed, as if I'd had a proper night's sleep. The bad news was that I was in Other-me's room and I could hear my voice from just outside the door. Still half-asleep, I did a commando roll backwards off the bed and landed in a heap, then scooted as far as I could get under the bed. I only just made it in time.

Other-me came into the room and flopped down on the bed, which was sturdy enough not to sag too much and squish me into the floor. There was a second flop, which I soon realized was Nikolai, both because he started talking and because in every universe he wears way too much cologne.

"I just don't see why we need to talk about this right now," he said. "We hardly ever get the house to ourselves..."

Oh no. This could be bad. Very bad. Like that scene in Parasite only like a bazillion times worse on account of it was Nikolai and Other-me. I frantically tried to think of ways I could distract them without giving myself away.

Luckily, Other-me didn't seem very interested in getting it on with Nikolai either.

"I know, babe, but listen. This is important."

Ew. Babe? Nikolai? Ew. Something about her voice sounded wrong and not like me at all. It was deeper, kind of smoother, and almost a little British. Maybe she'd been binging Downton Abbey or something. Either that or she was trying to sound fancy. Something about it gave me the ick.

"Daddy wants to do the hunt tonight," she said.

The way she said "Daddy" was icky too, but I filed that away to be grossed out about later. I didn't want to miss anything that might be helpful.

“Tonight?” Nikolai sounded alarmed and the bed shifted. “You think he’s onto us?”

She gave a throaty little laugh. “Of course not, silly. Now sit back down, we’ll have to change our plan a bit.”

They moved around on the bed again, then I could hear one of them typing. It was a super clacky keyboard, which made it hard to hear their mumbling. I could make out bits of “no, this would be better” and “uh-huh, but what if...” but nothing concrete. I needed to know more. What was this hunt? If my father was involved, it had to be something ominous. Even if he was from a whole other dimension, if he was planning a hunt, it wouldn’t be for Easter eggs, it’d be something messed up. And what was their plan? Were they trying to take down his evil empire as well? If they were, maybe we could team up. It would be a relief not to have to hide out the whole time I was here, that was for sure.

For a moment, the typing stopped and Other-me said, “it might actually work in our favor that it’s not the full moon.”

She resumed typing, which gave me a moment to think. I hadn’t been certain that our doppelgangers would have supernatural powers in this world, but I couldn’t think of any other reason why the full moon would factor into things. But were the supernatural people the ones doing the hunting, or were they the hunted? With my father involved, the latter seemed more likely.

After a while, Nikolai flopped back on the bed, so dramatically that his hand nearly hit me in the face.

“The problem isn’t getting him there,” he said, much more audible now that he was closer. “The problem is getting him into the right position. Your father isn’t stupid. If he senses even the slightest thing off, we’ll be the schmucks left out as werewolf bait.”

Well, that answered one question.

“I’m not even convinced this new guy is a werewolf. He couldn’t transform properly, and he’s not on the list. Where did he even come from, it’s like he fell from the sky.”

I let out a small gasp, and then froze. I could see Nikolai’s hand, still hanging over the edge of the bed, and it gave a little twitch, but after a moment where he didn’t jump down and pull me from my hiding place, I relaxed. He hadn’t heard me.

When my heart started beating again, I thought about what I’d just heard. He was talking about Sam, right? It definitely had to be Sam. Sam had always struggled with his transformations when he was in mental distress, and landing in a strange dimension was definitely distressing. And he was someone unaccounted for. Who fell out of the sky. How often did that happen?

Did that mean they were going to hunt Sam? They couldn’t do that, right? Surely they couldn’t.

Suddenly, my plan of action was clear. I had to go on that hunt. I had to save Sam, and whatever other poor souls were being hunted by my insane father.

And to do that, Other-me had to be out of the picture.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Obviously, I didn't want to take Other-me out on a permanent basis. I wasn't a killer, and plus it would be annoying to have to dispose of her body and all that. It was far easier to just put her to sleep for a while. Though, easier was relative.

To drug her, I'd need access to her food or water, and the school was notoriously careful about that kind of thing. At least, in my world it was, and it was safer to assume things would be as difficult as possible. I could bonk her over the head, but that might raise questions, and it was hard to judge how long she'd be unconscious. But lucky for me, I hadn't just been sitting around all summer and mooning over Tennyson. I'd been practicing with my powers. To be fair, I still wasn't very good, but Hannah had taught me a few things with a view to pranking some of the annoying Tennyson fangirls from Green House, and among those things was a fairly reliable sleep spell.

I could do it from a distance but I had to have eyes on her. The safest bet would be to wait until after class. She'd definitely come back to her room to change out of her uniform, so I'd do it then. Hopefully she'd be alone, but if I had to give Nikolai a good old magical slap between the eyes, I was okay with that. He had all the details of the hunt and how to get wherever we needed to be for it, but I could wing it if I really needed to.

I spent the day nosing around Other-me's room. I doubted she'd have details of the plot against her father just sitting around, but if I was lucky, she might have a handy bullet-pointed list hidden somewhere. I wasted the better part of the morning going through all her drawers and closets. I checked for loose floorboards, under the

mattress. I even attempted a summoning spell, though all that did was singe a pair of expensive-looking boots. I put the fire out before the damage became too obvious. I hoped.

I went through every book on her bookshelf, looking for hidden notes or messages, and her many thousands of fashion magazines, but there was nothing. It was super suspicious how there wasn't the slightest hint that she was anything more than a typical Amaris High student. She was good, this Other-me. Good at subterfuge, anyway, even if morally she was a bit gray. This was definitely not her first rodeo. Whatever she was plotting against her father, it had been a long time coming and she was well prepared for it.

It almost made me feel bad that I was going to mess it all up for her. Almost.

As I ran out of things to do, I began to worry about Sam. How long had he been here? I wasn't sure if time moved at the same pace here as at home. It had seemed like I was only here for five minutes last time, and it had been almost two days. Was that because time was different here, or just because I'd been tripping on weird tea? Would I get back home only to find a hundred years had passed and everyone I loved was dead and gone, like in some old fairy story? I really hoped not. Apart from everything else, it would be super awkward to explain.

I didn't dare venture out into the rest of the house. I had no clue what time she'd finish classes and couldn't risk her seeing me. Even if I could explain everything and win her to my side, there was no guarantee she'd be on board with me rescuing Sam. She was obviously a super cautious person, but I needed to be even more so if I wanted to outfox her. I decided to settle in to wait.

Under the bed was no good this time, as I needed her in my line of sight for the spell to work. I had to be hidden though. She might not be alone, which would raise some uncomfortable questions. And even if she was, it was better if she didn't see me. My

main advantage right now was being able to pose as her, and if I was discovered – especially by her – that would be over. The best place was the closet in the far corner. Most of the room was visible if I left the door open a crack, though it still smelled pretty badly of burnt shoe.

The only problem was, the closet was boring. There was nothing to do but wait, and before I knew it, I'd dozed off.

I sat bolt upright and looked around. Hannah. Tennyson's room. A delicious-smelling grilled cheese.

"I have to go back," I said. "Hannah, can you put me back to sleep."

"Jeepers, girl, take a breath," she said, standing up from where she sat near the door.

"I can't," I said quickly. "Sam, he's there. I have a plan to help him but I have to go right now."

I was in a panic. What if I missed it. What if they went on this hunt and I got back there and they had Sam's head mounted on the wall like some grotesque hunting trophy.

"Okay," said Hannah. "Just give me a second to get ready."

While she was getting her stuff together, I looked around the room. Someone, Hannah, I assumed, had been camped out in the comfy chair by the window. There was a stack of dishes and empty mugs piled up on the side table, next to a stack of books. I wondered where Tennyson had been sleeping, or even if he'd been sleeping. I wondered if he'd been to see me at all.

Then Hannah cleared her throat. "Are you ready?"

I nodded.

“Right,” she said, then blew a handful of glitter right into my face.

I spluttered and brushed it out of my face, and when I looked back up, I was in the closet again. There was no glitter, no grilled cheese, no Hannah. There was only a sliver of light from where the door stood ajar. It didn't look as if Other-me had been in the room at all, and the smell from the scorched boots still lingered. I wasn't sure how long that kind of smell would hang around. It might be the next day. It might be the next week, even, but nothing in the room looked different from how I'd left it before I nodded off.

I let out a sigh of relief. I hadn't missed it. But she'd definitely be back soon. Even if she was the type to hang out for a bit after classes, she wouldn't be more than another hour or so.

It didn't seem like all that much longer when I heard someone approaching. The door swung open and she came in.

It was surreal. She looked so much like me, exactly like me, and yet, so not.

It was just the little things. Her hair was shorter and stylishly cut, in a way that framed her face to the best advantage. She didn't wear glasses, and it didn't look as if she wore any make-up, though maybe she was just super skillful at applying it, in that way pretty girls seemed to be.

Because she was pretty. I wasn't. I was average, on a good day. But this girl, with the same genetic makeup as me, she was a hottie. She even wore the school uniform well.

It was weirdly hypnotic watching her, trying to find the differences, but I had to snap out of it.

I didn't have magic powder like Hannah, I didn't need it. What I did need was to tap into that power inside me and I couldn't do that if I was ogling my doppelganger like some creeper. I didn't know how long I'd have, so I needed to work quickly.

I closed my eyes and felt for the power.

It seemed empty in there, without Tennyson, which made it both easier and harder to tap into my own power. It was easier to find, but harder to reach, somehow. I could feel it, but it took all of my concentration to draw on it.

Which is why I didn't notice Other-me approaching the closet.

She opened the door and the light flooded in. For a moment, we just stared at each other.

"What the he—" she said, but in my panic, my power surged and cut her off as it blasted out of me, throwing her back toward the bed.

Luckily, she landed softly, and apart from being knocked out, seemed otherwise unharmed. I'd meant to keep her unconscious overnight, so that she woke up the next morning thinking she'd just been really tired and fallen asleep after class, but who knew how long she'd be out after the blast I'd hit her with.

And worse than that, she'd seen me. I didn't know how to mess with people's memories. I'd told Hannah I didn't want to know that type of magic because I had a problem with the ethics of it. Which she'd said was hypocritical, seeing as how I was learning magic to use as a weapon, but that kind of thing just seemed super sketchy and I didn't want any part of it. Now, though, I could kind of see how it might be useful.

Maybe I'd hit her so hard, her brain would be fuzzy when she woke up, or she'd think

she'd just caught her reflection at an odd angle. At any rate, that was a tomorrow problem. What I had to do now was hide her, then go find Nikolai.

Until you've tried to move an unconscious person, you can't understand how tough it is. They're floppy and heavy, and super annoying. I tried to lift Other-me up off the bed in a bridal carry but I couldn't even raise her off the mattress. I tried sitting her up so I could get her under the armpits, but she kept flopping back down. She was like a puddle of fish. In the end, I grabbed her by the foot and dragged her toward the closet. Sure, she thudded a bit coming off the bed, but she was tough, she could handle it.

Getting her up into the closet was another matter entirely, and I'm not ashamed to say I gave up pretty fast and just draped a blanket over her. She looked kind of awkward, so I put a pillow under her head.

With Other-me sorted, I had to try to look more like her. Nikolai had noticed something weird the last time, so this time I needed to make an effort. Luckily, Other-me had already laid out part of her outfit on the bed. Unluckily, it was just a black t-shirt, so I had to make up the rest myself. What would I wear to go hunt people if I was stylish? That wasn't a question I ever thought I'd need to answer. I settled on some black tights, boots and a black cap. She was a size or two smaller than me, so the clothes were a little tight, which made me sad for her. She obviously had to hold back her love of food, which just proved we were two very different people.

I grabbed her phone but couldn't see anything else she might take with her, so I took a deep breath and headed out the door.

Hanging out in Other-me's room for so long, I'd forgotten the goth vibe that the house had in this world. At least I didn't have to worry about how to navigate it – Nikolai was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

“What took you so long?” he said, then looked me up and down. “You’re wearing that ?”

I rolled my eyes. “ You’re saying that to me ?”

He was dressed head to toe in camo. Purple camo. He did a little twirl, that ended in a flourish. “What? This is my color.” Then he leaned in close to me and said in an exaggerated whisper, “did you get the... you know?”

I froze. The “you know” what ? Something to take down my evil not-dad? Something to do with their plan? I had no clue. The only things on the bed had been her clothes and her phone. Maybe there’d been some secret weapon in the closet where I’d been hiding and that was what she’d been about to get when I zapped her. To think that I might have been holed up with the one thing I needed to take down my dad and hadn’t realized was too much, but I kept my face straight.

“Of course,” I said, striding past him. “Let’s get out of here.”

I thought we’d be heading to the helipad, or at least the train tunnel, but instead, I followed him to the path behind the house that led to the lighthouse. We didn’t chat on the way there, which meant I was left with my thoughts, and just then, that wasn’t fun. I should have been pumping him for information, about the plan, about this world, about Sam, anything. Instead, I couldn’t think of a thing to say. I was panicking. I felt like the moment I’d stepped into this world; I’d been thrown off kilter and it had been impossible to find my footing. I was terrified every time I opened my mouth that I’d put my foot in it.

When we reached the steps of the lighthouse, Nikolai reached out and took my hand.

“I hate this part,” he said.

I had no clue what he meant, until he opened the lighthouse door and pulled me through.

The entire world dropped away. For a moment, I thought we'd fallen into a pit, like some cheesy villain had in their lair, and we'd land in some kind of dungeon full of alligators, but it wasn't a pit. It was just nothing .

CHAPTER NINE

Before I could wrap my mind around being sucked into a vacuum, the world came rushing up, and we slammed back to reality. We came through the doorway and emerged into a room that was definitely not the lighthouse on the school grounds. Or anywhere on the school grounds. I'd been right about the cheesy villain's lair, at least.

The room had a large marble fireplace to our right, with a screened-off seating area on a fancy-looking Turkish rug. There was a massive desk at the far end, made of heavy, dark wood, clearly meant to seem imposing. All along our left side was floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out from a height, down to a forest. My not-dad stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking down over a forest, his hands clasped behind his back. He waited until we were almost to him before he turned to greet us.

He was both like my father and not. He seemed bigger, somehow, rougher. More savage. Like if my father had been born a pirate, instead of a scientist. I'd thought my own father was heartless but there was nothing at all behind this man's eyes. It made me shiver.

He stared at me for a moment, and I tried not to shrivel under his gaze. He seemed to stare right through me. Nikolai, he completely ignored.

"I take it you're prepared," he said.

"Yes sir," I replied. It seemed the thing to say, and it obviously satisfied him. He turned away, motioning for us to follow him.

He walked over to his desk and picked up a folder, handing it to me without looking at me at all. I glanced over to his computer. The screen was unlocked. If I knocked the guy out now, could I find Sam on that computer and get him free? Could it really be that easy?

“This is the brief,” he said. “Your role is observation only. Do not approach the creatures, do not leave your designated area. We need to monitor them, not interact with them.” His glance flickered to Nikolai, who lowered his eyes. Well, that was interesting. “You have until midnight but you shouldn’t need that long,” he said. “Do at least try to follow protocols this time. I can’t keep making excuses for the two of you.”

Nikolai and I exchanged a glance but it didn’t give me any hint as to what he might be talking about. I assumed that in the past, Nikolai and Other-me had gone off-task putting their plans in place. I really wished that Other-me had kept that handy bullet-point list around, so I knew what I was supposed to be doing. How hard is it to jot down a few notes, I wasn’t expecting a whole manifesto, just something like “knock evil dad over the head with a brick at 9PM” or something.

“Well then,” not-dad said, finally looking at us. “What are you waiting for?”

I looked at Nikolai again, not sure what I was supposed to do, but he was looking expectantly at me. Was this the point we were meant to stage our coup? We were there alone with him, so it might be our best chance, but even so, I had no idea what I was supposed to do.

After a moment, Nikolai turned, and I followed him to the far door.

“You said you brought it,” he whispered out the side of his mouth.

I didn’t know what to say in reply, so I shushed him.

Once we were on the other side of the door, out of sight of my not-father, he turned to me.

“You’re backing out?” he asked.

“No,” I whispered, frantically trying to think how to buy some time. “Of course not. I just...”

He narrowed his eyes at me suspiciously. If I was in his position, I’d be worrying about being double-crossed. I didn’t know much about Other-me or her relationship with Nikolai, but when it came to siding against family, it must always be in the back of your mind, all that blood being thicker than water stuff. He might be thinking I was actually on my not-dad’s side. I had to reassure him.

“I don’t want to go ahead unless we’re absolutely sure it will work,” I said.

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” he said sharply, all sign of the usual Nikolai flippancy gone. “After you saw what happened last time.”

That piqued my curiosity but I couldn’t exactly ask him about it then and there. The last thing I needed was to make him even more suspicious. I had to reassure him, and as much as it gave me the ick, the fastest way to do that was through physical touch. I reached out and took his hand.

“Come on,” I told him. “We need more information before we do it, and this is the best way to get it.” I wasn’t sure if that was true but I hoped it sounded feasible. I squeezed his hand. His skin was oddly smooth and dry, but apart from that it wasn’t as unpleasant as I’d expected. So long as I tried not to think about it being Nikolai.

He gave me an odd look but didn’t argue. He dropped my hand and walked toward the elevator.

We traveled to the ground floor in silence. He seemed deep in thought. There was a security camera above us, and I didn't want to risk my not-dad hearing me asking weird questions, so I flipped through the folder he'd given me.

There wasn't much in there but what I saw made me feel sick. The first page was a table, clearly meant for me to fill out. In the left column was a list of names, such as "test subject 322: M. approx. 18yo. possible lycanthrope" and "test subject 179: F. approx. 68yo. Control." There were around fifteen names. The fields I was to fill in were what really turned my stomach. Speed. Speed while pursued. Accelerated healing rate. Accelerated healing rate (wounded with silver weapon).

When I turned the page, it just went on. Different ways I was to observe these people being tortured. I wish I'd seen this before telling Nikolai we'd wait to overthrow not-dad, I'd have attempted it even with no idea of the plan.

The worst part was on the third page. That was a list of tests to see which powers could be drained, to what extent, and whether they might be transferable.

So that was his plan. He was draining off these powers to use as his own. As disgusted as I was, I wasn't surprised. Whichever world I was in, my father just wanted to use everyone around him to his own advantage. He didn't care what lengths he had to go to, as long as he kept all the power for himself. I wondered if that was my actual father's endgame as well. I'd assumed he just wanted to exterminate all the various types of supernatural beings, but this seemed much more his style. I wondered if that was what he'd done to Nikolai, drained all his power and then forced him to work under his evil regime. If so, I could understand why he was so annoyed that I'd thwarted him.

I glanced up at him from over the folder and saw that he was watching me. He shook his head a little and looked up at the camera. I nodded and looked back down at the papers. Maybe I should've stayed out of it and let Other-me come. I'd wanted to

rescue Sam but in the bigger picture, wouldn't everyone have been saved, if not-dad was taken down completely. For a moment, I was consumed with guilt.

Then the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

It was too late to change things now. I had to just do what I could now that I was there.

The lift opened out into a concreted area, and beyond that was a dense forest. Even with my enhanced senses, it was hard to see more than a few feet into, and I wondered how I was supposed to observe anything.

"This way," said Nikolai, heading toward a path to the left that I hadn't noticed. I jogged to catch up with him.

"I'm sorry," I said. There was nothing else I could say to him, now that I suspected what had happened to him.

He shook his head. "Not here," he said. "Later."

I glanced around and noticed even more cameras. I wouldn't have the chance to get any more information from him at least until we got back to school.

I followed him until we came to a rope ladder hung from a giant tree. I tucked the folder into the back of my pants and climbed up. Halfway up the tree, we came to a platform. I climbed up onto it and gasped. I wasn't sure why not-dad had given me a paper printout in that folder when this was a super high-tech setup. There were screens all around the platform, showing the parts of the forest that they looked out toward, not video but topological data. Each screen showed the heat signatures of several creatures at the edge of the forest, as well as other information that didn't make sense to me. When I stepped closer to get a better look, I noticed that several of

the heat signatures had a number assigned to them, which was obviously the test subject numbers. I quickly glanced through them to see which test subjects were possibly Sam, so that I could track him down. There were five that seemed possible, male and in the right age group. It was my Sam that I was looking for, not other-Sam, if such a person existed, so that ruled out the two human subjects as well. So that left one to the north and another two quite close together to the south-west.

Nikolai was watching me carefully, but didn't say anything as we took our seats.

"It's almost time," he said, leaning forward to take the folder from me. As he did, he dropped a note into my lap.

I opened the note as secretively as I could, and as I read the note, a siren sounded deafeningly loud.

The note read: WHO ARE YOU?

CHAPTER TEN

Even after the siren ended, I couldn't hear anything. My heart was beating so fast that all the blood rushed in my ears. Nikolai knew. He knew I was an imposter. I didn't know what he suspected, probably not the truth, as it was such a weird and unlikely thing, but he knew something was up. And that meant I was in danger.

When I looked up at him, he was watching me with his eyes narrowed, obviously trying to gauge my reaction. I wondered how much I'd given away.

The siren was obviously meant to signal the start of whatever was about to happen. The dots on the screens, the test subjects, started to move. I watched as they entered the forest, running in different directions. I wondered if they knew what was happening or if they just thought it was a chance to escape. Silently, I urged them on, wanting them to move faster, beyond the borders of the screens I was watching, beyond the borders of this forest. I wanted them to break free before those tests could begin.

I had no clue what would happen next, or how not-dad would test all the awful things in that folder. But it didn't take me long to find out.

First a blanket of water dropped from the sky. Not like rain, but more like a giant bucket being tipped out, so big that it covered the entire area. Luckily for us, the little platform was covered, because after a moment I heard screams, and a few of the heat signatures blinked out. Nikolai made some notes in the folder.

Without thinking, I jumped up from my seat and scanned the screens to make sure

that the possible Sams were still there. I remembered the test subject numbers, 322 to the north, 592 and 721 to the southwest. I breathed out a sigh of relief and sank back into my seat when I noticed they were still there. But that was just the first test, there were still hours to go. How long had Sam even been out here? How often did they do these tests? How did any of them ever survive? I couldn't think about that or I'd start to panic and then I'd be good for nothing.

It went on like that for the next ten minutes. There would be a few minutes break, then something was released, a few of the subjects would blink out and Nikolai would make notes. After the third time, I couldn't stand it any more. I couldn't keep sitting there. They were people, not just lights on a screen, I had to do something to help.

I stood, but Nikolai caught me by the wrist.

"What do you think you can do?" he said quietly, still looking down at the paper he was making notes on. He scribbled something furiously and I looked at what he was writing.

"DON'T LET HIM KNOW WHAT YOU ARE"

"What?" I said, stupidly.

He kept writing. "WHATEVER YOU ARE. HE WILL HURT YOU."

"I know," I said. "I don't care."

But as the siren sounded again for another test, I slumped back into my chair. I couldn't help Sam if my own light blinked out. I needed to be smart about this.

"Okay," I said, when the next test was over and the possible Sams were still okay. I

had to think. There was one advantage I had over this not-dad. He didn't know me. He didn't know what I was good at. And I was good at tech. Maybe I hadn't been so focused on it recently, on account of all the crazy magic stuff, but I'd done some tinkering over the summer, out of boredom, some light hacking. I still knew my way around, enough to get those cameras offline at least, and then I could have a conversation with Nikolai and find out what he knew. Since my cover was blown anyway, all bets were off.

I pushed my chair over to the closest keyboard and started typing.

"What are you doing?" Nikolai hissed at me, but I ignored him. I needed to concentrate. I was reasonably sure the systems would work the same in this universe but I had to be super focused in case they didn't. I only had one chance at this, as soon as not-dad realized what I was doing, he'd be all over us.

It took me longer than I'd have liked, but before the next test started, I had all the cameras offline and was halfway to disabling the rest of the tests. I was almost done when Nikolai started pulling me away from the keyboard.

"We have to get out of here," he said.

With my attention pulled away from the screen, I could hear something, a high whining. Engines, I realized. I swore.

"I just need a second," I said, shrugging him off.

By the time I finished typing the string of code that would corrupt not-dad's system enough to stop the testing, Nikolai was halfway down the ladder.

"Come on," I said, jumping down the last few rungs. "This way."

I figured our best bet was the south-west potential-Sams. Since there were two of them, there was twice as much chance that one was the Sam I was looking for.

The forest floor was muddy from all the toxic acid that had been dumped during the tests, and the air was hard to breathe. The engines whined even louder but I doubted they could track us through the thick trees, not now that I'd disabled more of their scanning equipment.

"You're going to get us killed." Nikolai was right behind me. I thought maybe he'd struggle to keep up but he was fine so far.

It was impossible to know if I was keeping to the right direction, or even if the potential-Sams were in the same place, but either way, I had to keep going until I found them. There were only eight of the test subjects left, and I'd get them all out if I could, but my main priority was Sam.

It became impossible to run. The forest was so thick and the ground so uneven that it was too dangerous, and actually faster to go at a slower but steadier pace. The sound of the engines grew more distant, and as we thrashed our way through, Nikolai decided it was safe enough to talk.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I decided to play dumb. "You know who I am," I said.

He snorted. "I knew from the start something was off but at first I thought maybe Lucy was just..." He trailed off.

"Just what?" I asked.

He shook his head. "But you're not her." It wasn't a question. "You're nothing like

her. So, what are you? A spy? One of her father's creations?"

I sighed. "If I tell you, will you answer some of my questions?"

He rolled his eyes. "Obviously that depends on who you are."

That seemed fair. Maybe I shouldn't have trusted him. He was Nikolai. But he was Nikolai. Even if he wasn't the Nikolai from my world, he was so alike that I couldn't help but think of him as pack. So, I told him the truth.

"I'm Lucy from a parallel world."

I didn't expect him to believe me, but he just shrugged. "Seems legit," he said. "Explains a lot, actually."

"So now it's your turn," I said. "What were you planning to do to take down evil Dad?"

"Taser," he said simply.

I snorted. "You're kidding."

"What?" he said. "You were going to taser him. He electrocuted himself a few weeks ago and was out for a few minutes, that's what gave us the idea. He's so heavily protected, it was the first weakness we could find. We were going to tase him then tie him up, change all the access codes and then lock him in his own dungeons."

I raised my eyebrows. "You really think that would have worked? Hasn't he been siphoning off the power from all the people he's been torturing? You really think you can just shock him and take over his evil empire? That is literally the worst plan I've ever heard and I have heard some terrible plans in my time."

“ Please tell me I’m not dating you in this other universe,” he said.

I snorted.

“Good,” he said. “So, what are you even trying to do here?”

I hesitated. There was no way he’d told me the whole story about their lame plan, so I wasn’t going to give away everything either. I told him about Sam, about how he’d fallen into this world and I was here trying to save him. Nikolai nodded thoughtfully, then tripped over a tree root.

“Yeah, I remember them talking about that guy. But he’d not out here today, he’s still in the cells.”

My heart sank. “The cells?” I asked. “They’re back in there?” I hooked a thumb back over my shoulder, though I had no idea what direction not-dad’s evil compound was in.

Nikolai nodded. “Yeah. There’s probably some other places too, but the main dungeons are here.”

Before I could even swear again, something came at me from the side and knocked me into a tree. I jumped back to my feet to see Nikolai using a fallen branch to fend off a feral, snarling werewolf.

I grabbed the werewolf and pulled it away from Nikolai and it spun to face me.

I froze. Even half-transformed and crazed, I knew that face.

Tennyson.

He pounced at me. I fell backward and my head slammed against a rock. The last thing I saw before I blacked out was Tennyson's face, launching toward me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I opened my eyes, it was Tennyson's face I saw again, but not feral and attacking. It was my Tennyson. I wasn't lying on a forest floor; I was on a soft bed.

I grabbed him and buried my face in his neck, just breathing him in until my heart stopped hammering. In that moment, I didn't care about the weird distance that had grown between us, the coldness. I didn't care about anything except that he was there and he was safe.

Sorry , I said finally, but didn't pull away.

You met the other me?

I loosened my grip on him so I could look into his eyes.

The only other times I've seen you so afraid is when you've thought you've lost someone .

I nodded. You were so...

I didn't have the words. The way he'd looked at me, with no recognition. It wasn't even that he'd attacked me. Tennyson, my Tennyson, was always so controlled, so composed, that to see him so broken was incomprehensible to me.

"You're bleeding," he said aloud, pulling his hand away from the back of my head and staring at it.

“I hit my head,” I told him, not wanting him to feel guilty for something his counterpart had done.

I let him fuss around me, dressing the wound on my head, making me a cup of tea and a little tray of cakes. For the moment, things seemed back to normal with us, the weirdness between us, if not forgotten, at least ignored. It was so nice to be there, to be with him, in my own world. I didn’t want to go back. But I had to.

“I think I found Sam,” I said, once I’d finished my cakes and everyone had gathered to hear my news. I told them everything that had happened since the last time I’d been back. Nikolai was disgustingly proud of his other-self, catching on to the fact that I wasn’t who I said I was. He also seemed to like the idea of purple camo.

“Okay,” said Althea. “While you were gone, I’ve tracked down the sword. My mother apparently had a lot of security around it but I don’t know why. We can’t get to it for a few days, there’s some magic protecting it that needs to be dispelled and it can’t be done until the new moon. After that things should be easier.”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I told her.

I wished I could take them all with me to the other world. Things would be so much easier if I weren’t all on my own. Even if other-Nikolai would work with me from here on, which I couldn’t bank on, it wasn’t the same. It seemed such a cold, barren world, compared to this.

I spent a bit of time looking up ways to hack into security systems similar to my not-dad’s, since I’d need it to get into the dungeons, but mainly I just wanted to hang out with my friends for as long as I could before I had to go back, but eventually, I couldn’t stay awake any longer. I fell asleep with Tennyson’s hand in my own, and I wished I could wake up the same way.

When I woke, Tennyson was right beside me, but his hand wasn't in mine and he wasn't my Tennyson. At least his fangs weren't out though.

I blinked and looked around, though there wasn't much to see. We were in a small cave, or maybe just under the overhang of a big rock. It wasn't just Tennyson and Nikolai, there were a few others huddled together too. I assumed they were the surviving test subjects. They were so ragged and filthy, that it was hard to tell their ages or genders, let alone species, and I'd been so focused on trying to find Sam, I hadn't memorized the details of the other test subjects to give me any idea.

"You're finally awake then," said Nikolai. "I've been explaining how we saved their lives."

I raised my eyebrows but didn't correct him. He'd been very little help but there wasn't much point saying so. At least he hadn't stopped me, I supposed.

"I need to get to the dungeons," I told Tennyson. "I want to free everyone there. Can you help me?"

He stared at me for a moment, then sniffed at me, before nodding.

"Thank you," I said.

"His sister's there," said one of the others, an older man. "He can't speak but she seems to know what he wants to say."

"Althea?" I asked.

Tennyson's eyes widened and he nodded.

"Take me to her," I said, trying to stand up. I didn't see any point wasting time, but as

soon as I sat up, I felt dizzy and had to lie back down.

“You hit your head,” Nikolai told me. “Maybe you should take it easy for a minute.”

“Really?” I said. “You think we should just hang out here and wait for him to find us?” I gestured vaguely to the outside world and not-dad.

“Good point,” said Nikolai. “Someone help her up.”

Tennyson took me by the arm and helped me up, careful not to stab me with his claws. I wondered if he was half-transformed because of something not-dad had done, or if it was because he was in hyper-alert mode. It seemed kind of rude to ask though.

I thought Tennyson and I would go alone on the rescue mission, maybe Nikolai too, but all of the test subjects came with us. I wasn't sure I could keep them safe, but I supposed they couldn't be in any more danger staging a badly planned rescue than out there having inhumane tests run on them, so I didn't protest. They deserved a chance to fight, if it came down to it. Something told me the tests I'd witnessed were only the tip of the iceberg of what not-dad had going on in this world.

My head throbbed as we crept through the forest, staying as low as we could. Every so often, drones flew over us, and when they did, we froze in place until they were gone. He obviously still had control over some of his systems, I wondered if that meant they were on a completely different server, and what that meant in terms of the dungeons.

Eventually, we came to a clearing in front of a sheer rock face. Tennyson led us around the rock face to the north, then motioned toward a concrete slab built into it.

“That's the door to the dungeon?” I asked in dismay. There was a small sensor pad to

the side of it, but nothing that was hackable. In terms of security, I knew it made sense, but it left me out of ideas. I pressed my thumb to the sensor, hoping maybe that would activate it somehow, but nothing.

“Great,” said Nikolai. “What now? If we wait around long enough, we won’t need to break in, we’ll be given an escort right through those doors and into some disgusting little cell.”

Even though Nikolai was annoying, something he said sparked my brain. Mrs Spencer. She’d been in that cell back at Wilde Manor, and had just blipped out of it as easy as anything. Surely, I could do that too. She’d implied it was something to do with having spirit powers, so theoretically, it should be possible for me.

I shushed Nikolai and rested my hands against the concrete door. Technically, I wasn’t even in this place at all, I was back in my own world. That meant that I wasn’t physically standing there at all, it was just my consciousness, and my consciousness wasn’t bound by the laws of physics. The door existed in physical space, but physical space wasn’t a barrier to something with no physical form. I just had to project my consciousness through that door, and my body should go with it.

Deciding it was better not to overthink it, I closed my eyes, and mentally took a step through the door.

I didn’t expect it to work, not really, but when I opened my eyes, I was looking down a dark, concrete corridor. I blinked. That was actually insane. I’d just brain-walked through a door.

There was a panel on the left side of the door, with a big green button below it, so I pressed it and the massive door began to rise. Some of the others seemed hesitant to come inside, which was understandable, if this was where they’d been locked up. Nikolai wasn’t one bit worried though, he marched inside, glaring at me the whole

time.

“What exactly are you?” he demanded.

I shrugged. “I don’t even know.”

“You just walked through the door,” he continued. “The giant, very solid door.”

“Did it look awesome?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Of course it did. You walked through a door.”

I turned back toward the others. “You don’t have to come in, if you’re not comfortable with it.” I mostly addressed Tennyson, because he was Tennyson and I could read him best, but I made sure they knew I included them all. Some of them seemed traumatized, but aside from their own wellbeing, I didn’t want any of them to freak out at the wrong moment either. It could be the reason we got caught.

But when I headed further into the building, they all followed me. It was better than staying out there and being hunted through the forest, I guessed.

The corridor was dim, and everyone else seemed to have trouble seeing where we were going as well, which I took to mean that the light there was somehow anti-paranormal vision, though I couldn’t even begin to fathom how that would work, or what other technology my evil not-dad might have developed.

I put it to the back of my mind and tried to focus on navigating the maze of tunnels. At the first T-junction, I started to turn left, thinking that would take us deeper into the mountain, so deeper into the structure, but other-Tennyson tugged on my elbow and gestured toward the other direction.

“You’re sure?” I asked him. “That’s where the other prisoners are kept?”

I wasn’t sure if lycanthropy worked the same way in this world, but if so, he’d be able to sense where Althea was, at least. I followed Tennyson, who led us along the corridor and down several flights of stairs. The light in the stairwell was a sickly green and it smelled like decomposing meat, so we hurried down the stairs as fast as we could.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, there was another of those big doors with only a sensor to open it, so I brain-walked through it again. I wanted to keep my eyes open this time, but chickened out at the last minute, thinking I’d probably just hit the solid door if I could see it. That was definitely something I’d have to work up to.

The next floor down was even darker and more labyrinthine than the upper floor had been, to the point we were blindly following Tennyson. It crossed my mind that he might double-cross us somehow, but I just couldn’t believe it, not of him.

I had a vague sense of the doorways we passed having people behind them, without really thinking about who it might be, but as we turned yet another corner, down another hallway, something stopped me in my tracks. It wasn’t anything to do with my powers, but somehow, I just knew.

“He’s in here,” I said, and without waiting to see if I was right, I closed my eyes and walked through the door and into the cell.

Even though I’d known Sam was in there, I was still shocked to see him. Not as shocked as he was to see me though. He scrambled back into the corner and started yelling hoarsely.

“Sam, it’s me,” I said softly, trying to approach him without spooking him any more than he already was. “It’s Lucy, your Lucy.”

He stopped yelling, but he looked terrified. In the darkness, he was all big, frightened eyes. I reached out and tried to touch his hand but he pulled it out of reach.

“I’m here to help you,” I told him. “I’m here to take you home.”

At that, he seemed to calm a little.

“No,” he said firmly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand, Sam—”

“No, you don’t understand, Lucy,” he said, more coldly than I’d ever heard him speak. “Get out! Leave me alone!”

I had so many questions for him, arguments to make to him, but before I could speak again, an alarm started blaring all around him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I wasn't able to open Sam's cell from the inside, so I had to brain-walk back through the door, leaving him behind. Back in the corridor, the others had all fled, except for Nikolai and Tennyson, and even they were cowering. The alarms were so loud, they seemed to incapacitate us. I supposed they were designed specifically to work against supernatural creatures, like the lights in the corridor had been. The lights of the alarm were something else as well, flashing red and blue at a seizure-inducing rate. I knew I was probably less susceptible than the others, due to not being particularly one thing or the other, and even I wanted to curl up into a little ball at the assault on my senses.

"His sister," Nikolai croaked, tugging my arm to follow Tennyson.

Tennyson loped along, hunched over and almost walking on all fours. It was so strange to see him act in such an animalistic way, nothing like my Tennyson at all, really. And yet, at the core he was the same, still valuing the people he cared about over anything else.

We hadn't gotten far before we heard footsteps behind us. It was impossible to tell if it was guards or the other prisoners who had fled when the alarm sounded, and we couldn't risk stopping to find out. At the sound of them, we ran faster, racing through the corridors so fast I thought my lungs would burst. Finally, Tennyson stopped, resting his clawed hand against a door.

I didn't hesitate before closing my eyes and walking through the solid door and into Althea's cell.

“You!” she said, shrinking back into the corner of the room when she saw me. She was so unlike my Althea that if I hadn’t known it was her, I wouldn’t have guessed. Her hair was chopped short, close to her scalp and patchy. My Althea was willowy, this one was gaunt, her cheeks so hollow she almost looked like a skeleton. She was wearing oversized sweatpants and a t-shirt, both so dirty I couldn’t tell the color, and she had clearly not washed in a long, long time. Even more than seeing Tennyson in the state he was in, this made my heart ache. She looked absolutely defeated.

“Nope,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “Different me. I don’t have time to explain but I’m here with Tennyson.”

She gasped. “He’s alive?” A tiny spark seemed to return to her eyes.

I nodded. “Do you know how I can get this door open?”

She got up and walked over to the sensor by the door, smashing it with one swift punch. She pulled the cover off and took out a bunch of different colored wires and started stripping them and twisting different ones together.

“You could do that this whole time?” I asked, wondering why she hadn’t already escaped.

She shrugged. “What would be the point?”

The door beeped and slid open before I could even think of a suitable comment to that.

Tennyson pounced on Althea as soon as the door opened enough for him to get at her.

“Come on, you big idiot,” she said, pulling away from him with a tiny smile. “We have to get out of here.”

“I want to open all the cells,” I told her, figuring if she knew how to disable her cell door, she might be able to disable all the other doors too. “Can you help me?”

I wasn’t sure we were heading the right way down the hall. I was completely turned around, and had no clue where I was aiming to go anyway. Tennyson was non-verbal and Nikolai hadn’t been to this part of my not-dad’s evil lair before, so I was banking on Althea having some clue. She gave me a long, inscrutable stare.

“We need to get to the main building,” she said. “There’s a tunnel that connects to there but we’ll never make it through, it’s under heavy surveillance.”

“Um, we’ve kind of already taken care of that,” said Nikolai.

I glared at his use of “we” when he’d done diddly squat, but my glare was nothing to the look Althea turned on him.

“Don’t speak to me, traitor,” she said, and then took off running.

It was all I could do to keep up with her. Tennyson kept to her side but Nikolai and I soon began to lag behind. I was too out of breath to question him about what Althea had said but I could guess enough anyway. They were pack in my world, so it wasn’t a stretch to assume they had been here too, before whatever my not-dad had done to him. For him to be walking around freely while she and Tennyson had been locked up like lab rats, that in itself would seem like a betrayal, let alone anything else that might have happened.

I was worried we’d lose sight of the two of them when they finally stopped at a doorway. It looked the same as any of the others to me.

“This is the tunnel,” said Althea. “If you can get through this door, you should be able to open it from the other side.”

I had no reason to question it, so I did as she suggested and opened the door. The tunnel led us steeply downward, and it was even darker than inside the building had been, but at least the alarms weren't so loud as we got farther along. Parts of the tunnel were unfinished, packed dirt rather than concrete, with exposed pipes and wires running alongside and overhead. Pretty soon the siren faded out completely and all we could hear over our own footsteps was a loud dripping sound.

Althea stopped running super abruptly, so we all piled into each other. I thought we'd come to a dead end but she turned to our right. There was a rusty ladder that looked like it would give you tetanus if you even thought about climbing it, but that was exactly what Althea started to do.

"Come on," she called down over her shoulder to us. "If you're serious about getting everyone out, start moving before they find us."

It wasn't as if there were other options, so we followed her up the ladder. Tennyson after Althea. I went last, because I didn't want Nikolai staring up at my butt like a creeper, and because I figured I'd have the best chance to fight off anyone who came after us. The bad part about that though, was that I couldn't see how far we had left to climb. If I looked up, all I could see was Nikolai's butt, and that wasn't exactly an appealing view. More like appalling.

We climbed so long, it started to feel like meditation – so boring that eventually your brain shut down. I didn't think of Sam or how things were in this other world, or even in my own. I didn't think of anything, only the dripping.

The dripping seemed insanely loud. How could some dripping water even be heard over all the noise we made while we'd been running, and now climbing? I was pretty puffed out, so my breathing sounded super loud, and yet the dripping was even louder. And the more I concentrated on it, the more it seemed like a pattern. It wasn't just a steady drip, drip, drip. It was almost like it was trying to make a tune, but it

wasn't one I recognized. Maybe it was Morse code? I only knew SOS, and it wasn't that. It almost felt as if the drips were trying to speak but that was impossible.

It was impossible, right?

I might have actually lost it completely and tried to talk back to it, only at that moment, I headbutted Nikolai. Literally. My head smacked into his butt. We'd stopped climbing and I hadn't realized, and so my cheek had smooshed all up against his cheek. And that was when I knew I was in a parallel universe, because Nikolai didn't say a single thing about that.

We climbed up and out of some sort of hatch and emerged in a room that looked all too familiar to me. It looked just like the room where my father, my real father, had looked down on me from an identical viewing platform to the one above us now, and where he had severed my connection with my pack members. Involuntarily, I let out a little sob. I don't think he even realized what he was doing, but Tennyson pushed himself in front of me, as if to shield me.

"Quick, this way," Althea hissed.

We kept to the shadows and crept around the edge of the room until we got to a stairwell that took us out of sight.

"The main control panel is up there," Althea whispered, once we were all huddled in the stairwell, pointing up the stairs. "Tennyson and I can take care of the guards. From the control panel, you can disable the locking mechanisms on all the doors, as well as all the traps hidden around the forest. There's some sort of speaker system into the cells, so if you have time, try to let them know they need to get out while they can."

She completely ignored Nikolai.

It wasn't the best plan ever but it was better than what I had. I figured after that was done, we could deal with getting to Sam and then our own escape.

As we climbed the stairs, I half expected the stairwell to get flooded with guards, trapping us halfway up, but we made it to the top without seeing anyone. To my surprise, when we did enter the viewing room, my not-father stood there, alone.

It was definitely a trap. I didn't know how, but I was sure we were playing right into his hands.

"I'm surprised," he said, not looking up from the control panel he stood at. "I knew you were working up to a power play but this is not quite what I expected." He glanced up at me. "Bravo."

I had no idea what to say in response to that, but luckily, I didn't need to say anything. Althea and Tennyson flew at him. As soon as they moved, I rushed to the control panel. I had no idea what any of it meant, there was no big button that said "prisoner release", so I figured I was safer to go directly through the computer system.

It was easy enough to access the security system. First, I turned off all the lights in the dungeons and the alarms. It would be easier for anyone escaping to see with no light at all than the light from either the alarms or the normal hallways. Then I clicked the little speaker icon in the security program and crossed my fingers.

"I'm about to unlock your doors," I said. "Get as far away from here as you can, as quickly as you can. I don't know how long I can keep them open for." It wasn't much help. Because I'd corrupted a lot of the security settings already, I couldn't see any of them on the monitors to help guide them outside, and once they were out, I didn't know how to get them out of that forest. "Sam, if you can hear me..." I took a deep breath. "Please. Please get out of here. I came all this way to find you, I need for you

to be safe.”

There was a lot of smashing and yelling on the other side of the room, but I couldn't look up to see what was happening, I had no time to get distracted. I poked around in the security program until I figured out how to unlock the doors.

Then I opened a browser window, thinking that if I could see where we were on a map, at the very least I could tell them which direction to head to find civilization. I had no clue where we were, and it was the only other thing I could do to help, but I didn't even finish typing into the search bar, when something slammed into me, knocking me off the chair.

I hit my head on the side of the desk. There was a blinding flash of pain, then nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I woke up swearing.

“I need to get back,” I said, before even opening my eyes.

“Hold on there, pumpkin pie,” said Mrs Spencer, helping me sit up and plumping the pillows behind me. I’d know her voice anywhere, and the pain in my head was still too sharp to open my eyes. “You’ve got a nasty bump on that old noggin of yours. The last thing you need is a concussion.”

I knew she was right, but it was still frustrating. I had no idea what was going on back there, if everyone would get out safely, if Sam would listen to me and escape. What if my not-father overpowered Tennyson and Althea and captured all four of us for his creepy experiments? I didn’t want him getting his greasy mitts on my other world form. Who knew what he’d cook up if he knew about parallel worlds, he’d probably just grow his ambitions to fit the bigger universe. The last thing I needed was a second evil faction to deal with, I had plenty to be going on with as it was.

“Here, drink this. It’ll help.”

She pushed a cup of hot tea into my hands. I sniffed it but couldn’t smell anything suspicious, mostly just sage and ginger. I took a wary sip but nothing tasted out of place either.

I couldn’t sense anyone else in the room, but I attempted cracking my eyes a bit to double-check. The light was like a dagger into my brain but I could see enough to

know we were alone. I set the tea cup aside and grasped her by the hand.

“I saw him,” I whispered. “Sam.”

For a moment, she seemed frozen, but then she squeezed my hand. “How is he?”

I shook my head, unsure how to answer. “He’s... confused, I think. He seems okay physically but...” I shrugged, then winced at the movement. “I was helping him escape when I got knocked out, that’s why I need to get back there. I don’t know if he got out.”

“He’s a prisoner?” she asked me softly.

“My father,” I said. “Other father. Her father. There.”

She was quiet for so long that I risked opening my eyes again. It was less painful this time. She looked very tired but she smiled when she noticed me staring.

“I want to come with you,” she said. “To that world. We’re working on a way but we need that sword, and that awful woman hid it too well.”

I assumed the awful woman was Tennyson’s mother, and I couldn’t disagree with her assessment, even if it did seem mean to say about her now she was dead.

She took a deep breath, then stood up. “I should tell Tennyson you’re awake. That Vucari has been buzzing around like a darn mosquito as well, wanting to know how you’re doing with his business. Anything I should tell him?”

I shook my head. I’d all but forgotten about his relic but once Sam was safe, I could look into that more. To do either though, I needed to get back. Even though Mrs Spencer warned me to stay awake as she slipped out the door, as soon as she was

gone, I closed my eyes and snuggled down into the bed.

It didn't take long for me to drift off, but this time, I didn't immediately wake up in the other world. Maybe because of my concussion, but when I came to, I was in that temple, the same one from my dream, from the ritual. Even though I couldn't see anyone else there, I could tell I wasn't alone.

And that noise. The dripping I'd heard when we were in my not-father's dungeon. It was even louder here, and when I listened closely, I could make out what it was saying.

"Come and take your seat with us," it said, and once I heard it, I understood that it wasn't dripping at all, it was a blend of voices. The voices spoke at so many different frequencies that they couldn't be heard by the human ear, so I'd just heard dripping, but here, in this place, I could understand.

"You are like us, and yet unlike. We could learn much from each other."

And even without them saying, I knew who they were. It was the Spirit Council. Those useless jerks who had refused to help us when we were trying to fight against my evil dad and his jerkface sidekick, evil Henry. They'd had no interest in us learning from each other back then, they couldn't have cared less. As far as I knew, they were controlled by my father now. He was calling himself the "master of all", the leader of the High Council, which included the Spirit Council. And it hadn't just been the fey who had betrayed us the day that Sam had vanished, the day Tennyson became alpha.

"I'm good," I told them, in my drippiest voice.

"The time will come when you will think differently," they said. "Our knowledge is necessary if you hope to be successful."

I shrugged. I knew I was being stubborn, and maybe I'd regret it, but I couldn't help myself.

"We will be here when you change your mind."

As their voices faded out, so did the temple. I blinked my eyes and I was awake again, back in the other world.

I expected to be in a cell in my not-dad's compound, or maybe hiding out in the forest. I did not expect to wake up, tied to a chair, being glared at by my own face. I could recognize the library in the Golden House, even with all the changes. The layout was basically the same, just the furnishings were more of a Victorian Gothic aesthetic than the classic elegance I was used to in that house. It seemed more a grey house than golden, but that might have been because of the heavy drapes that covered the windows, blocking any light and making everything a dull monochrome. Or it could've been from the cracking pain in my skull.

Other-me poked me in the cheek, not gently.

"She's awake," she said.

Nikolai was sprawled in his usual wingback chair, affecting an air of unconcern. Tennyson and Althea were there too, but they sat huddled together on a chaise lounge, looking out of place and uncomfortable. It was a world away from my pack being all together, literally, and yet something felt right about seeing the four of them together.

"Who are you?" Other-me demanded. She scowled at me, and then pinched the end of my nose, wiggling it as if she was trying to pull it off. I shook my head to get out of her grip.

“What are you doing?” I asked her. “I’m not wearing a mask.”

She stepped back and folded her arms, staring at me. “So, what? You’re like Nicolas Cage in Face Off ?”

I don’t know why, but it was somehow reassuring to know that this world had its very own Nicolas Cage. Things couldn’t be so very different here after all.

“No,” I said. “And if I were, you’d be the Nicolas Cage.”

She scoffed, but I ignored her. Had I always been this annoying?

“I’m from a parallel world,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

“Obviously.” I rolled my eyes right back at her. “My friend fell into this world by accident, so I came here to bring him home.”

“That’s who you were trying to free, back there?” Nikolai asked, even though he knew this. I’d told him. Was he playing dumb for Other-me? Or was he playing some other game? Either way, I didn’t know the rules.

I turned to him, as much as I could while tied to the chair. “Did you see him? Did he get out?”

Althea snorted. It was such an un-Althea noise that it startled me. “As if he’d know. As soon as he had the chance, he ran away, back through the teleportation door, or whatever it was. Leaving us with that butcher like the traitor that he is.” She spat. I decided to never, ever tell my Althea that I’d seen her spit. “We followed him through and ended up back here.” She sneered as she looked around the library.

“And in the process, ruining all our carefully laid plans,” said Other-me. “It took years for my father to begin to trust Nikolai. He barely trusts me , probably not at all now.”

She turned to Nikolai. “Do you think I could turn her over to him? Tell him she’s some sort of spy and that you were working under duress?”

Nikolai shifted in his chair, hooking his legs over the arm. “You’d have to get close enough to him first, and that might be a problem.”

Other-me paced back and forth in front of me, with her arms folded across her chest. It was so surreal to watch, this mirror-pack trying to work out their problems.

“Hang on a second,” I said. Other-me spun to glare at me, but I turned toward Nikolai. “Didn’t you say that your whole big plan was to taser not-dad and lock him in his own dungeons? That’s not exactly the most foolproof plan in the universe, you know. Did it really take you years to come up with that?”

Nikolai and Other-me exchanged a glance.

“So that wasn’t the whole plan,” I said. “What was the rest of it?”

Nikolai opened his mouth to speak but Other-me held up a finger to stop him.

“We have no proof that you are who you say you are,” she said, imperiously. “We’re not about to tell you the details of our plan. If, in fact, we have a plan at all.”

I sighed. It was fair enough, but still annoying. I turned to Tennyson and Althea.

“I helped you both escape,” I said. “Do you think you could get me out of here?”

Tennyson got to his feet. Other-me raised her finger at him this time, as if trying to get a disobedient puppy to sit, but he ignored her and came over to cut the ties around my arms with a flick of his claws.

“Thank you,” I said.

He nodded, then went back to sit next to Althea.

“Okay,” I said. “Here’s what I know. I need to find Sam and get him back home.” There was also Vucari’s relic but something stopped me from mentioning that to them. They didn’t need to know all my plans. “Once I do that, I can leave here and never come back.”

“Um,” said Nikolai. “Can you not do that.”

He waved a hand at me, and when I looked around, I saw that I’d been pacing as I spoke in the exact same way Other-me had. I stopped walking and put my hands on my hips. Then I dropped them, but I didn’t know what to do with them, so I folded them over my chest again, even though that was exactly how Other-me was standing.

“How will you leave?” asked Althea. “How will you take someone back with you? You couldn’t take us through those doors you walked through.”

“Sorry, what?” asked Other-me. She turned to Nikolai. “What is she talking about?”

“She can walk through walls,” Nikolai explained. He wagged his eyebrows in a way that I’d seen my Nikolai do when he thought he was being sneaky, though it was obvious he thought they could use my power to help their plans in some way.

“Do it,” Other-me said, waving a hand toward me as if to say I had the floor.

“Uh, no,” I said. “I’m not a performing monkey, and I’m not here to get involved in whatever little power grab you’ve got going on with your evil dad.”

“You want our help,” she said. “You help us.”

“I never said I wanted your help,” I told her. The less time I spent with her the better, she was obnoxious.

“You’re currently my prisoner,” she said. “You’ll do whatever I want you to do.”

“We’ve all seen it,” said Althea. “She can pass through solid matter. What’s the big deal, we’ve all got talents.”

“I haven’t seen it,” said Other-me. “And some of us have more useful talents than others. Some of us can perform miracles, and some of us,” she motioned toward Tennyson and Althea, “can sniff butts and pee on lampposts. It’s not the same.”

“And what can you do?” I asked her. “Are you talented like your father? Can you steal other people’s power and ruin lives? Whatever. I don’t need your help. I can find Sam on my own.” I started toward the door, but as I did, the doors slammed shut.

I turned back toward Other-me and saw her hand raised in the air.

“I don’t need to move through doors,” she said. “Doors move for me.”

Which, admittedly, could be useful, but didn’t make her any less annoying. And if she could do it, surely I could too. I probably just needed to practice.

Still, maybe we could help each other, if it meant getting Sam to safety.

“Fine,” I said, and turned back toward the door, preparing to walk through it. “But

after this, I want some answers.”

But before I could walk through the door, someone else walked through it. Mrs Spencer, and she was armed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She wasn't quite solid, I could see through her to the door behind, but she wasn't exactly ghostly either, she wasn't fuzzy or out of focus. She held my sword in her hand as if she were prepared to strike down anyone in her way. There was some sort of commotion behind me, but I ignored it.

"What's wrong?" I asked her. "Is everyone okay? My father hasn't..." I knew he'd attack at some point, it was always in the back of my mind. I'd just hoped I'd have all this dealt with first. Ideally, I'd be fully ascended and invulnerable, able to squish him like a bug.

"Everyone's fine," she said, her voice sounding a little drippy. She shook the sword at me. "We think we're ready to open a secure doorway, but we need you there or the ritual won't work." She glanced behind me. "We could use their help, if you think we can trust them."

I wasn't sure but I nodded. "What do you need?"

She thought for a moment. "The portal needs to open somewhere safe. We can't have any old bozo wandering through. Is Sam there with you?" She craned her neck to look around, as if he'd be hiding behind me or something.

"Not yet," I told her. "I got knocked out during the escape and woke up back here. I don't know if Sam got out."

"That's a shame," she said. "But not a dealbreaker. It might be easier to have the

portal stabilized beforehand anyway. We don't want to throw anyone out to a different parallel world, and have to go through this whole thing again!"

That wasn't exactly reassuring. "Is that possible?"

She shrugged, which I took as a yes. "So, get your people to set up where you think is best and then haul that butt of yours home. Okey dokey?"

I nodded and she faded away.

When I turned back to the other four, they'd stopped arguing and were staring again.

"Did you get all that?" I asked them.

"You want our help to set up a portal from your world," said Other-me. "What guarantee do we have that you won't just march an army through and take over our world?"

I rolled my eyes. "We don't want your crappy world."

"We only have your word for that," she said. "No deal."

I shrugged. I didn't exactly need her permission, so I turned to Althea and Tennyson.

"We're in," Althea said. "You helped us escape, so we owe you. But if you double-cross us, we will kill you."

"Sounds fair," I said, not doubting for a second that she meant it. "Do you still have the manor in this world?" I figured that would be the safest place to open the portal, but from the look on Althea's face and the way Tennyson started growling, it seemed like a touchy subject. "Somewhere on the school grounds then? Maybe near the

lighthouse?”

If Sam wouldn't come willingly, I might need to restrain him, so being close to the magic door to my not-dad's compound would be good for that, though I didn't want to be too close and tip off anyone we wanted to keep from entering our world.

“If it's too close to the lighthouse, there will be interference from the doorway to my father's compound,” said Other-me, as if we were stupid for not knowing this already.

“I thought you weren't helping,” I told her.

She waved a hand at me dismissively. “I just don't need you causing any more trouble than you already have.”

I turned back to Althea. “The clearing behind the house here?” I asked her.

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “I don't see any reason why not, except...” She glanced over at Other-me.

Other-me huffed. “I'm not going to interfere in your silly little plans,” she said. “I'm too busy trying to fix the mess you made of my own plans. But at the first sign of funny business, I will shut this whole thing down so fast your head will spin.”

“Okay,” I said to Althea. “Let's do this.”

As we turned to leave the library, Nikolai started to get up from his chair, but with a look from Other-me sat back down. This Nikolai was much more well-trained than the one we had at home, though I doubted I'd want to use her training methods.

“This is where I came through,” I told Althea and Tennyson, once we were outside.

“Around here somewhere.”

We all stared at the spot, but there was no sign of anything magical.

Now that we were out of the house, away from Other-me and Nikolai, I took the chance to pump Althea for information. Out of everyone I’d met in this world, she was the one I trusted the most. Well, and Tennyson, but he couldn’t talk.

“So,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Things are pretty bad here? For lycanthropes, I mean. And magic users.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. The shrewdness of her look was so like my Althea that I almost felt like I was home.

“You’re really not from here?” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t care who you are or where you’re from, if you’re planning to take down that establishment, count me in.”

“Establishment,” I repeated. Something about the word triggered a memory, but I couldn’t quite place it. It gave me a bad feeling though.

Althea nodded. “The Establishment. Your father... that man’s organization. The ones who rounded us all up like cattle when we were children and stuck us in those places to be their lab rats.” Her voice failed for a moment and I felt bad for bringing the subject up, just to satisfy my own curiosity. Tennyson moved closer to her, so that he was squished right up beside her. “There’s none of us left. Only what you saw at that place. My family, we hid. We were some of the last. Us, the Yorks, the Volkovs...”

“I’m sorry,” I said, knowing how little that helped. I reached out and took her hand. “I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to stop them. In this world and my own.”

She cleared her throat, then squared her shoulders. “What do you need us to do?”

I thought for a moment. I needed to get back home, and there was only one way for that. I only hoped this whole thing wasn’t going to end with permanent damage.

“Knock me out,” I told her.

She blinked at me.

“I need to be unconscious,” I explained. “So that I wake up in my world.”

She was still turning the idea over when there was a flash of movement to my left and Tennyson launched himself at me. I only had a moment to mumble, “thanks” before I hit the ground, my head bounced once and I was out cold.

“This is not fun,” I said, opening my eyes to Tennyson’s room, and my version of Tennyson and Althea staring at me. “Where’s Mrs Spencer?”

They glanced at each other.

“About that...” Althea said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose to stave off the oncoming headache. “Let me guess, she’s vanished, taking my magic sword with her?”

“I believe her intentions are good,” said Althea.

“I don’t,” said Tennyson.

“She literally just appeared to me and told me to come home,” I said. “Why would she do that if she planned to double-cross us?”

“I’m not sure she’s in her right mind,” said Tennyson.

I sighed. It was definitely easier to talk to other-Tennyson. He didn’t talk back.

“She’s never been in her right mind,” I said. “Not exactly. That doesn’t make her evil. She has the sword. She told me to come home so we could do the ritual to open the portal between our worlds, so if she’s betraying us, she must have said that to get me out of the way in that world, right?”

They both nodded.

“But will the ritual work without you?” Althea asked. “I thought you needed to be the one to wield it, since it came from your magic.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t exactly been in the loop about this,” I said.

“It’s mainly been Sam’s mother and Hannah working on it,” said Tennyson, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“I trust Hannah,” I said, and he raised his eyebrows. “Don’t give me that face, she wouldn’t betray us again.”

I couldn’t believe it. I wouldn’t.

“Unless...” Althea said slowly. “I mean, the reason she tried to hurt us in the first place was because her father is missing. He’s never been found, not a trace of him.”

A terrible feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. “You think he might be there? In that world?”

“It’s not impossible,” said Althea.

“In fact, it’s quite probable,” said a voice from the doorway.

All three of our heads snapped around to stare at Hannah.

“Any trace of him, magical or otherwise, vanishes from this world at the exact same time. Even if he were dead, he’d leave a spiritual residue, but there’s nothing. It tracks that he might have fallen through a portal like Sam did, and for some reason, that world, in particular, seems to be the easiest to access from ours.”

Tennyson moved to stand up, maybe to throw her out, I didn’t know, but I put a hand on his arm to stop him.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “You had enough going on and I didn’t want you to think I had a secret agenda or something.”

“Even though you did have a secret agenda,” Tennyson snapped, though he didn’t shake my hand from his arm.

“There’s something else,” she said, moving into the room to sit by my bed. “Don’t be mad that I didn’t tell you.”

“I can’t promise that,” I said. If my head hadn’t already started pounding and distracting me, I’d probably be mad already.

“The relic that Nikolai’s cousin is after, I think my father was after it too. I think that might be why he vanished.”

“Okay,” I said. It wasn’t something that I could compute at that moment. “And what exactly is this relic that makes everyone want it so badly? What does it do?”

It was probably something I should have asked Vucari before, though he was so cagey he probably would have just vanished into a cloud of smoke if I had.

“I don’t know,” said Hannah. “I know as much as you do, that it’s a lodestone.”

I tried to think back to what Vucari had said about it. He’d said I’d be drawn to it somehow, but I hadn’t felt any magical pull toward anything. Well, except for that time with the dripping, but that couldn’t have anything to do with it, could it? I sighed. If I knew anything about my evil dad, no matter what world we were in, he couldn’t resist a magical artifact.

You know where it is? Tennyson asked me silently.

I think my evil alternate dimension dad has it , I told him. But I don’t know how that helps us, with Hannah or Mrs Spencer or anything.

But it did remind me of something. When Mrs Spencer had appeared to me in the other world, her voice had sounded drippy. I’d assumed that was just how all spirits sounded but maybe not.

“I think I know where Mrs Spencer is,” I said. “But I’m going to need your help to get there. All of your help.”

I glanced at Tennyson nervously. He was so busy taking care of the pack, keeping us all safe from whatever my father might throw at us next. It felt wrong to ask him for more when he was already giving so much. He nodded, without a second of hesitation.

“Just tell us what you need,” he said, in a way that made my heart hurt from missing him. He was so present right then, so completely there with me in a way he hadn’t been since he’d become alpha.

If my suspicions were right, Mrs Spencer was in that temple, the spirit temple. I had absolutely no proof of it, but my gut said I was right. I knew she was able to get there, she'd been there with Tennyson and Vucari and I, kind of. Maybe she'd thought that, with the sword, she could get from the temple to the other world and save Sam without anyone's help. That was the least nefarious reason I could think of for her to steal my sword and get me out of the way. There were a bunch of much worse reasons I could think of, but I couldn't dwell on those. Either way, I needed to find her and get my sword back.

It took a few hours to prepare everything, but eventually we gathered in the clearing behind the house, the same place our counterparts were gathered in the other world, except here we had Hannah and Harper as well as Tennyson, Althea, and Nikolai. Hannah had been studying Mrs Spencer while I'd been world-hopping, so she was pretty sure the tea she'd brewed up was the same as the one Mrs Spencer had given Tennyson and me, only this time Althea and Nikolai were going to drink it as well. Hannah was staying behind to do the ritual on our home turf, and to stabilize the portal if we managed to open it. Harper was staying behind as a bodyguard for Hannah.

It went much more smoothly this time, with the four of us. Maybe because we were pack and trusted each other. Maybe because Mrs Spencer had been doing something to mess with us last time. Maybe just because I knew what to expect this time, but we seemed to be transported to that temple as soon as I set the teacup back in the saucer.

"Woah," said Nikolai, looking around. "This place could really do with a makeover."

Althea didn't comment, but I could tell she was taking everything in to process later.

Tennyson didn't let go of my hand as we looked around the temple. It didn't take long to find Mrs Spencer. She wasn't exactly hiding. She stood at a small dais at the far end of the temple, where a sunbeam shone directly down through a gap in the

stone.

“I knew you’d come,” she said. “You’ve always been such a good girl. Your father never appreciated you, I always said so.” She stood casually, leaning her weight on my sword as if it was a cane and she were about to launch into a tap routine. At this point, I’d have barely been surprised.

“You lied to me,” I said.

She shrugged. “You figured it out though, didn’t you.”

I was starting to lose patience with her. “Quit playing, why did you lure us here? Why did you steal my sword? Why any of it?”

Her brow furrowed and she held the sword out to me by the hilt. “You’re afraid of your power,” she said. “I knew that if you were here, in this special space, a safe space, you could embrace your powers and become what you were meant to be.”

I shook my head. “I just want to get Sam back. I don’t care about any of the rest of it.”

“I want that too,” she said. “But I want so much more for you.”

I stepped up on the dais beside her and took the sword. I wanted to tell her that I didn’t care about any of that. What was the point if I couldn’t protect the people I loved? But before I could open my mouth, the beam of light hit the sword and Mrs Spencer began chanting something in what sounded like Latin, but who even knew with her.

I looked to Tennyson in panic and saw that the three of them were surrounded by beams of light as well.

Are you... I began to ask him, but I couldn't finish the thought before the light bounced back from all four of us and converged into a central point. It was too bright to look at for a moment but it soon began to fade, and when it had faded enough to look directly into, I could see through it. On one side, I could see Hannah and Harper, staring with their mouths open through the light to us. And I knew that if I walked around the room to look into the light from the opposite direction, I'd see the other world version of Tennyson and Althea, in the same clearing.

"I knew you could do it," Mrs Spencer gushed from beside me.

I reached out to grab her, to restrain her somehow, but she was too fast for me. She darted forward and into the light, circling around so that she entered from the other direction, into the other world. From beyond the light, I could hear her calling to me.

"Come on, you miraculous girl," she said. "Let's go find my Sam."

The other three moved to follow her.

"Wait," I called out, wanting to warn them that they'd come face to face with other versions of themselves, but they were too fast for me. I followed them through the portal and into the other world.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I emerged from the portal into what looked like some sort of comedy skit, or that meme with Spiderman pointing at the other spidermen. The Tennysons and Altheas were just staring at each other in shock. Nikolai was looking around, I assumed for his doppelganger, and Mrs Spencer had run off into the night. Althea walked over to other-Althea and hugged her. It surprised me, but it shouldn't have. I was forever underestimating her. Tennyson nodded toward other-Tennyson, who nodded back.

“Okay,” I said, wishing I had somewhere to put my sword. Mrs Spencer could've stolen a handy sheathe along with it, honestly. I looked to the Altheas, figuring I could at least count on them for logic. “I guess we need to assume Sam didn't escape and work from there?”

My Althea nodded but other-Althea shook her head.

“I'm not going back to that place,” she said, which was fair.

“Do you think you could guard this side of the portal? Make sure nobody goes in or out?”

She nodded. I meant to include other-Tennyson in that, but he stepped closer to me.

“You can't...” other-Althea said to him, but he shook his head and came to stand by my side.

My Tennyson looked at the two of us and raised his eyebrows, then moved to stand

on my other side.

“Okay,” said my Althea. “What do we need to know?”

I explained about the portal at the lighthouse, or magic door, whatever it was, and gave her a vague description of the layout of not-dad’s compound.

“You won’t be able to hack his security a second time,” said a cold voice behind me.

I wrinkled my nose up in annoyance. Other-me.

“You said you wanted no part of this,” I said, not turning around to look at her, though I could see Tennyson’s and Althea’s surprise when they saw her. I wasn’t sure I liked the expression on Tennyson’s face but I didn’t have time to be jealous. “It’s a bit late to backtrack now.”

“Wrong,” she said, stepping forward to inspect the portal. She waved to Hannah and Harper on the other side. Harper waved back. Other-me spun back to face me. “You need me, if you want to get anywhere close to Daddy’s compound.”

I gagged at the way she said “daddy” but motioned for her to go on.

“He’ll be on high alert. The gateway from the lighthouse is probably closed and even if it isn’t, the other side will be heavily guarded.”

“So, we need another way in,” I said.

She shook her head. “There is no other way.”

I rolled my eyes. “How is this helpful?”

“I will contact my father, tell him that Nikolai double-crossed me and I have captured him and two of the escapees.” She motioned toward my Tennyson, Althea, and Nikolai. “He will then give me access to the compound and you can travel through and enact your little plan.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “And what’s in this for you?”

She shrugged. “I want to overthrow my father. He mismanages his empire and his ideas are antiquated, it’s time for a new leader. Your ill-conceived escape can serve as a distraction while Nikolai and I stage our coup.”

I didn’t trust her, not one bit.

We don’t have any choice , Tennyson said. We have to go along with it .

Other-me started when he spoke in my head, as if she could hear him.

Monkey farts, I said back. Spaghetti jockstrap rainbow.

Tennyson looked at me as if I’d lost my mind but Other-me didn’t flinch. Well, that was strange and unpleasant, but I’d think about it later, Tennyson was right, we had no choice but to agree to her plan.

“Fine,” I said. “But you can go ahead first with these three, and I’ll follow with this Tennyson and your Nikolai.” I patted other-Tennyson on the shoulder. “That way, I have someone I trust watching you, and if you rat us out, I can kill your Nikolai.”

“Oi!” said both Nikolais. I hadn’t even noticed the other-Nikolai there, probably because he was lurking in the shadows like a creeper. Now that he’d revealed himself, the two Nikolais eyed each other up, giving the nod of approval. Those two should not be allowed to spend time together. They’d bring down both our worlds,

with bad fashion if nothing else.

While everyone was getting organized, back inside, I pulled Tennyson aside.

“I think she can hear you,” I whispered to him. “Other-me, I mean. When you talk in my head. But she can’t hear me.”

He thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “And... other me , can he hear you?”

I hadn’t noticed him react when I’d talked to my Tennyson, but I hadn’t been paying attention.

Calling all Tennysons , I said. Come in, Tennysons .

Other-Tennyson was across the room, getting ready with Althea, but he glanced up.

It’s okay , I said. False alarm.

He smiled and went back to what he was doing.

“He definitely heard that,” I said.

Tennyson glanced between the two of us. “He likes you,” he said.

I shrugged. “He’d better,” I said flippantly. “He is you .”

He went to say something else but I waved him off. It wasn’t worth getting into, not if we pulled this off. We could be home by suppertime and never have to see other-us again, so it was pointless.

“I don’t trust Other-me,” I told him. “It’s the best way for us to communicate if we’re

separated, but we can't risk her hearing us, not unless it's an emergency."

He nodded and was about to say something else when Other-me interrupted us.

"I found this," she said, handing me a worn leather sheath. "It should fit your sword, and it's safer than you flinging that thing around everywhere. You'll take someone's eye out if you're not careful."

She glanced over at Tennyson and the look made me think about taking her eye out.

"Are you ready?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "I don't love the plan but it's the best we have."

Other-Nikolai obviously didn't like how she was staring at Tennyson like a shark at a sushi buffet either. He popped up between the two of them.

"All ready?" he asked.

In all the hubbub, I'd forgotten about Mrs Spencer but she was waiting for us on the steps of the lighthouse when we got there, like an overeager golden retriever.

"What's this?" asked Other-me.

I sighed. I hadn't factored Mrs Spencer into our plan and she was a bit of a loose cannon.

"Sam's mother," I explained. "She can come with us. She's only here to rescue Sam."

At least, I hoped that was why she was there but I couldn't be certain.

“Any other surprises?” Other-me asked haughtily. “This is becoming quite the expedition.”

I didn’t answer her, because I didn’t know.

“It’s so strange,” said Althea, as we climbed up the steps. “It’s so much like home and yet...”

“Everything is just off,” I finished. “I know.”

“Is she... I mean, the other Althea, from here. Is she okay?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “She seems pretty tough,” I said. “But she’s been through a lot.”

She nodded. “And...” She pointed to other-Tennyson.

I shrugged. “This world is a mess,” I said, suddenly terrified of what we were about to do. If they got captured while we were trying to save Sam, if not-dad did to them what he’d done to this world’s versions of them, I’d never forgive myself.

Althea grabbed my hand and squeezed it, picking up on my fear. “Get in, save Sam, get out,” she said.

I nodded. That was the plan. “Be home for supper,” I finished.

But that didn’t make it any easier to watch her and Tennyson vanish through the magical door.

We waited. Me, Mrs Spencer, other-Nikolai and other-Tennyson, who seemed less wolfish than before but still partly transformed. Not exactly an elite covert team for

hostage removal.

Other-me had said she could get not-dad out of his office within ten minutes, but couldn't guarantee the magic door would stay open that long. I waited as long as I could stand – four minutes, seven seconds – before herding our ragtag group through.

Thankfully, the office was empty.

“This way,” I whispered, motioning toward where the elevators were, but I couldn't help but take a moment and go over to the windows that looked down over the forest below.

It looked different than last time. Large patches of the forest seemed barren now. Burned out, I thought, since some areas seemed to still be on fire, and a haze covered large patches. It was the result of my actions, I realized. Not-dad had obviously been hunting down all the escapees and without his surveillance equipment, he was burning them out. I felt sick, remembering those footsteps I'd heard behind us, not stopping to see if they were guards or prisoners.

“Lucy, come on,” Nikolai hissed from the doorway, breaking me out of my thoughts.

It was good to have him with us, I realized. Not just as a hostage, but he was more familiar with the layout than the rest of us. Other-me had given directions but without a frame of reference, it was hard to follow and I didn't want to walk into my not-dad and Other-me by accident, that would be hard to explain. I followed Nikolai past where we'd taken the elevators the first time, to a stairwell. A few flights down, he led us through what looked like a large storage space, then into another stairwell. After a few more flights, he went to lead us through another door, but Tennyson put a hand out to stop him.

“It's okay, there's nobody there,” Nikolai reassured him but Tennyson just shook his

head and didn't let Nikolai pass.

After a moment, we heard voices on the other side of the door. Tennyson waited a long time after the voices had faded from my hearing before he let us through.

The place was even more of a maze than I'd thought, even after running through the prison area, but eventually we came to the room with the viewing platform, where we'd emerged from the ladder out of the prison. There was nobody around. All the lights were off; it was totally closed for business. I wouldn't put it past my not-dad or sneaky Other-me to suddenly jump out from the shadows and zap us with laser bolts or something though, so we stuck to the shadows and made our way down to the hatch where the ladder came out.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked other-Tennyson. "If you don't want to go down there, it's okay, you can stand guard for us here."

He just shook his head and motioned for me to go down the hatch first. Mrs Spencer went after me, then Nikolai, then Tennyson came last. Out of all of them, I trusted other-Tennyson the most, so it was reassuring to have him bringing up the rear. I wished I could talk to my Tennyson, ask him how it was going, but we couldn't risk it and I had to just assume that no news was good news.

Climbing down this time, I paid particular attention to the drips. They were still there, still seemed to ring with some type of resonant energy that I couldn't quite decipher.

"You hear that, don't you?" Mrs Spencer whispered down to me.

I didn't answer her. I didn't need to. But the fact that she heard it too, that meant I wasn't going crazy, right? I wasn't sure I could use her as a barometer for sanity, but I felt sure that the lodestone was close. If only I knew what it looked like. Looking for a stone, in this place, was like looking for a grain of sand at the beach.

I tried to look around as I climbed down, but there wasn't a lot of light, and looking at anything but the ladder made me feel dizzy. There was a point though, maybe about a third of the way from the bottom, where it felt as if the dripping began to fade.

"Stop for a second you guys," I called up, as loudly as I dared. "Can you see anything weird looking, maybe a rock sticking out or something?"

There was nothing. It was probably inside the compound somewhere. It could be just on the other side of the wall, and I'd have no way of knowing. It was so frustrating, why couldn't Vucari have sent me a photo of it or something, rather than this vague "sensing" malarkey.

I sighed and kept climbing. Even though I owed Vucari and I'd made a magical promise or whatever that I'd get this stone for him, my priority was Sam. If I couldn't get the lodestone, I'd just have to do him a different favor.

When we got to the bottom of the ladder, Nikolai, and Tennyson both seemed to have a clear idea of where we'd found Sam the last time. I wouldn't have trusted Nikolai on his own, but because Tennyson seemed sure too, I had no problems following them through all the twists and turns of the prison corridors.

A lot of the cells stood open, with nobody inside, I was pleased to realize. Hopefully that meant those people were free now, far from this place. There were only a few doors still locked, and I couldn't sense anyone behind them. I hoped that was a good thing.

Finally, we came to a stop. Tennyson pointed toward an open door.

"He's in there," said Nikolai.

Mrs Spencer and I exchanged a glance.

“You go first,” I told her.

I hung back, not wanting to intrude on their reunion after such a long time, but as she got to the doorway, she stopped in her tracks, looking back at me uncertainly.

“Is he there?” I asked, stepping forward.

“I’m here,” came Sam’s voice from inside the cell. It rang out hollowly.

I crept up to the doorway, hardly wanting to see whatever was going on with Sam, after seeing his mother’s reaction.

But there was nothing wrong with him. He sat on his bed in the cell, much the same as when I had been there last, except that the door was open.

“We’ve come to take you home,” I told him. “We’ve opened a doorway. To our world. It’s completely safe.”

I assumed it was completely safe, anyway. Definitely safer than staying there, at any rate.

“No,” he said.

“Why?” said Mrs Spencer, her voice full of tears. “My baby angel, why would you want to stay in such a place?”

Sam shook his head, not answering her. He didn’t even look at her. “That is not my mother,” he said.

“It is, Sam,” I said, daring to take another step into the room. “We’ve been told a lot of lies, but this is really her. She’s alive. Everyone’s fine and we want you to come

home.”

He lifted his eyes to meet mine then, and I took a step back at all the hate and rage inside them.

“No,” he said.

I glanced back at Mrs Spencer helplessly. I didn’t know what to say to that, how to combat all his pain and self-loathing.

“Come on now, sweet boy,” she said, entering the room fully and taking a seat on the bed beside him. “See here, I’m as real as anything, flesh and blood. I know you want to punish yourself for things outside your control, but you can do that just as well at home, instead of some dinky parallel universe, can’t you.”

Sam shook his head, staring at his feet.

There was a noise behind me and I turned to find not-Tennyson gesturing down the hallway.

“Someone’s coming,” Nikolai translated. “We don’t have time for his ethical crisis or whatever.”

I nodded. I’d been afraid he’d be reluctant, but I knew I couldn’t leave him here, no matter what. I took out a little pouch Hannah had given me and took out a pinch of the powder inside, then turned back into the cell.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” I told him. “I hope you’ll forgive me for this.”

I blew the powder directly into his face. He spluttered for a moment, then his eyes rolled back in his head and he sunk down onto the bed.

“That poor, sweet dear,” said his mother, as not-Tennyson pulled Sam onto his back awkwardly. We’d strapped a makeshift harness to not-Tennyson in case we couldn’t talk Sam into coming on his own, but I’d hoped he wouldn’t have to use it. Because Sam was so tall, it was hard to buckle him into it without his legs dragging along the ground behind them, especially since we were in a hurry to avoid whoever was on their way, but we got it done, more or less. Not-Tennyson was so strong in his half-transformed state that he probably could have thrown Sam over a shoulder and carried him without much effort, but that would’ve made it hard to climb back up the ladder.

As it was, it was awkward enough. Sam’s feet dragged along behind Tennyson, his arms flopping around. We were in no way stealthy, that was for sure.

Tennyson led the way up the ladder, which slowed our progress a bit, though not as much as I’d expected. We went in reverse order this time, with me climbing last, but as we got near the top, I called to them to go ahead without me.

“There’s just something I want to check,” I said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Mrs Spencer hesitated but I wanted to do this without her.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Go take care of Sam.”

Once I was alone on the ladder, I could hear the dripping more clearly than ever. Or rather, I could hear through the dripping. I didn’t need to make out its words or language, I could hear directly into the meaning of it. And it was calling to me. I knew where I had to go to find the lodestone, and I knew that once I found it, I’d know what to do next. It was just an absolute certainty, something that didn’t need to be explained, like breathing or sleeping.

I let go of the ladder and allowed myself to fall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rather than drop like a lead weight and splatter on the ground, I floated. It was as if my body realized it didn't actually exist in this world and decided to behave accordingly. I still fell, but it was more like falling through water than air. As I fell, I closed my eyes. It was the same as when I walked through the walls – there was no real reason to close my eyes, but it made it easier to suspend my disbelief if I couldn't see what was happening. I knew that when I landed, wherever that may be, would be where I could access the lodestone, but it felt as if there was an element of belief to what was happening, as if I had to somehow know I could do this in order to be able to. And it was far easier to believe something impossible if you didn't have to see it.

When I hit the ground, it was quite gentle and I was standing upright, as if I'd merely jumped from the bottom rung of the ladder. I clearly hadn't, because I was in a different room entirely. At a guess, I'd say it was a room somewhere below the dungeons, and I'd fallen directly down, through the floor to it, though really I could've been anywhere. It was a dark room, lined with shelves that were stacked with bottles and jars, almost like some old lady's pickle cellar. I couldn't tell where the light was coming from, but it was that same sickly green light that had been in the dungeons, which made the glass from the jars glow eerily.

I wasn't sure if the lodestone was in that exact room but the dripping was so loud now it wasn't a distinct sound, more like just a high-pitched humming that did no favors to my badly battered head. I knew the only way to stop the sound was to find the lodestone, so I couldn't avoid it, I had to follow the noise to wherever it was the loudest.

The shelves were stacked haphazardly, and from floor to ceiling, so trying to navigate around them was like trying to find the center of a very creepy maze.

I didn't look too closely at the jars, afraid of what I might see. The whole place had the vibe of a mad scientist lab, so the pickle jars were probably full of misshapen body parts or something, and I didn't even want to think about it. I just had to get the lodestone and get out of there.

Which was easier said than done. The storeroom seemed to go on forever. Every time I felt as though I was getting closer, I'd hit a dead end. Sure, I could probably walk through the shelves, just as easily as walking through a wall, but the thought of what might be in the jars, of what I might be walking through stopped me.

Eventually the noise got so loud, I thought I might go mad. I couldn't even cover my ears, because the sound came from inside my head. It almost seemed as if it would be worth it to knock myself out just to get away from the sound, but just as I was seriously thinking about it, I stumbled onto the lodestone.

Literally. It was sticking up out of the ground. Which, if they were trying to hide it, was kind of stupid, and if they weren't, was still a definite occupational health and safety issue.

I stared down at it. It was a fairly normal-looking stone, around the size of my fist, and it looked to be well lodged into the ground. It was almost as if the floor had been built around it, rather than the stone set into the floor, but that couldn't be possible. The stone had been stolen from Vucari's people, he'd said. Who'd go to all that trouble just to leave it wedged into the floor of some creepyass basement.

I sighed. I hadn't brought a pickaxe along, or anything useful in disembedding a rock from a floor, but when I bent down to touch the stone, it came away quite easily. I picked it up and put it in my pocket.

As I turned to leave, something moved behind me. I blinked and shook my head, thinking it was just a mirror but then I realized it was a person. A person who looked exactly like me. I hadn't heard her because the stone had been so noisy but she must have been following me through the room. I wasn't sure why she hadn't spoken up sooner and I didn't get a chance to ask, because she picked up one of the gross jars and whacked me over the head with it.

I groaned and sat up, back in the real world. The jar must have shattered because my face and arms were covered in cuts, and I could feel a painful lump forming on my head.

"Honestly," I said. "There's no way I'm getting out of this without a brain injury."

I looked around, and realized I wasn't back in my world after all. I was in one of the cells in my not-dad's dungeon. Not one of the cells like Sam had been in though, this was a room for experimenting. It wasn't big and fancy like the room with the viewing platform, it was more like where my real dad had performed his earlier experiments on me. The equipment seemed rudimentary and none too clean, with only enough room for one test subject.

And that's what I was. I wasn't exactly strapped to a table, but my ankles were shackled and chained to the bench I sat on.

"So," I said. "This is... not wholly unexpected."

Other-me glanced over from where she was filling a syringe with something green and sludgy.

"I'm not going to monologue all my plans to you, if that's what you're hoping," she said, setting the syringe aside and putting the lid back on the jar of green and sludgy stuff.

I shrugged. “Whatever. You know I can walk through walls, right? Do you really think these shackles are going to keep me here while you, what, drain me of my powers?”

Her face ticked. That was what she had planned then.

“That’s what your father’s doing, right? Draining all these people of their powers, maybe trying to transplant some of them? How many has he stolen for himself? How many lives has he stolen to power his ambitions?”

She raised her eyebrows and flicked off her rubber gloves. “Is that what your father is doing, in your world?” She stopped to consider for a moment. “Is that actually possible?”

I shrugged, not wanting to give her, or her evil father ideas.

“I realized something earlier today,” she said, resting back against the workbench. “When I intercepted your psychic communication with that werewolf. You see, I’d thought we merely looked the same, an accident of genetics that led to us having the same ancestry in a different world, but when I could hear his thoughts meant for you, and I noticed that his counterpart could hear your thoughts for him, I realized I was wrong. There’s some sort of connection between us, between each of the counterparts, I’d hazard. Which gives me an advantage that my father lacks in his work. A direct link between myself and my subject.”

She turned her back and began messing with something on the workbench. While she was distracted, I tried to spirit my way out of the shackles but it was much harder than just brain-walking through a wall. Maybe because it was a smaller target? Maybe I needed to concentrate more?

“I never believed in a soul before, or spirit, anything like that,” she said. “So, you can

imagine my ontological shock when I realized I was wrong. There was no other logical explanation for that connection, not that my work hasn't already disproven. I was completely thrown at the idea, but I think I've done well with only these few hours to plan." She glanced back over her shoulder at me. "Those shackles have wards to inhibit your powers. This isn't my first rodeo, you know."

I raised my eyebrows. Just because she said so, didn't mean I had to believe her. And I had other powers that she didn't know about. Heck, I had powers I didn't even know about. Powers that could knock her socks off, hopefully literally.

I'm in a bit of a pickle , I said to Tennyson. To both Tennysons, if they could hear me. Don't respond, but Other-me has me prisoner, and is about to start experimenting on me. We're in some sort of lab, I think under the dungeons but I'm not sure. Don't come for me unless everyone else is safe, I can handle her.

Probably. I could probably handle her.

"And so what," I said to her, figuring if I kept her distracted long enough, she wouldn't get around to injecting me with that swamp sludge. "You've discovered the human soul and now you plan to steal mine?"

She scoffed. "What would I want with that?"

She was infuriatingly hard to bait. Sure, she was talking but she wasn't saying anything useful.

"I don't get it," I said.

She snorted. "What a surprise."

I really wanted to do violence to her, but that wouldn't help me in the big picture. I

had to keep on task. All I had to do was get away from her, then get back to the portal. I had the lodestone; I'd done everything I came here to do. Assuming the others had got Sam there safely, we could just step through to the real world and close the door to this world back up and never have to deal with it again.

I kicked at the shackles, testing their strength. Rather than spiriting out of them, it might be easier to break them, or break the bench I was chained to.

"Settle down," she said. "Even if you do get free of me, you'll never escape. There's no way back to your world. That door you opened; it's gone. That was the first thing I did when I realized what our connection meant. I don't know how long it will take to complete my work, but obviously I need you here to do that. Didn't you realize after I knocked you out but you stayed right here?"

I bit back a swear. "If you hurt any of my friends, I will kill you."

She laughed. "Of course not. They're valuable assets. I don't want to risk harming the connection between us, I'll need to test the boundaries of it on them first. But I think we'll be safe enough for today's preliminary experiments." She made some notes in a folder then turned back to me. "Should we begin?"

"I'd really rather not," I told her. "Let's go back to what you were saying about my friends. Tell me more about that. Starting with where you're keeping them."

She smiled sarcastically. "Funny." She picked something up from her workbench. "Hold still. I don't want to damage you more than necessary but I will use maximum force if you make this difficult."

"Fine," I said. I fully intended to make it as difficult as possible. I waited for her to get closer, then struck out.

It was obviously what she'd been expecting me to do, and she quickly jabbed me in the ribs with the thing in her hand. Her taser. Of course. It gave me a sharp electric shock, strong enough to incapacitate me for a moment. While I was unable to move, she strapped a leather band around my head and another around my throat. There were wires coming out of them, which were connected to the laptop on her desk.

When I could move again, I began thrashing around, trying to rip the band off my head. She turned back to her workbench and typed something on her laptop. Within seconds, I began to feel weak.

She turned back to me with a clipboard and pen in hand, furiously writing notes.

I was too weak to fight anymore. I was too weak to speak. I slumped over on the bench, barely able to keep my eyes open. She wasn't just stealing my soul or my powers, she was stealing all of it. Within moments, I was just a shell, unable to think, barely able to breathe.

Then she turned back to her desk and hit a few keys, turning it off. Whatever it was.

"That's enough for the first session," she said.

I could breathe again, but that was about the extent of it. Other-me seemed to be phasing in and out, but I couldn't tell if that was because my brain wasn't working or because of something she'd done. But then she turned around and walked directly through the wall behind her.

She'd taken my powers. She'd taken everything.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I don't know how long she kept me there. I had no concept of the passage of time. I could barely even register my own existence. As soon as I started to regain a sense of self, of the world around me, she'd come back and drain it away.

At one point, I became aware of a sound, a dull thudding, though I was in no state to pay it any mind. The thudding became crashing, which then turned into voices. A woman's voice, mainly. I knew it sounded familiar but past that, everything was blank.

"She's in here," the voice said.

The noises got louder but I couldn't lift my head to see, and even if I could, I didn't have any sense of curiosity.

"Can you free her?" the voice said. "I'll..."

The woman kept speaking but it was too hard for me to concentrate on translating her words into meaning. Instead, I just let them wash over me, let everything happen around me. I felt myself being lifted, carried, but it was a remote sort of awareness, as if it was happening to someone else, someone in a grey, bleak film.

And then, suddenly, I was Lucy again. I knew who I was, where I was. I was weak, absolutely drained, but I was . A sense of warmth flooded through me, all emanating from where Tennyson was holding my hand. The only thing that existed for me, the only thing that mattered , was that Tennyson was there. He always had been, always

would be. That was everything.

“You’re safe,” I said, though my voice was thin and wavery. I couldn’t manage any more than that. I needed to know what was happening, where everyone was and if there was any way to get back home, but it was all too much right then. I could barely form the thoughts, let alone the words.

“Rest now,” Tennyson said. “I’ll be right here.”

I closed my eyes, and for the first time in what felt like forever, fell into a proper, restful sleep.

I was woken by the sound of an argument. I tried to sit up, worried it might be Other-me there to take me back to that awful little room, but it was only Tennyson and Mrs Spencer. We were in one of the platforms in the forest around not-dad’s compound, though I couldn’t tell if it was the same one where Nikolai and I had been. All the monitoring equipment was smashed up but it was a smart spot to hide out, as it was easy to spot anyone approaching from far off. It was crowded though, the platform wasn’t huge to start with and beside me, Tennyson and Mrs Spencer, there was Sam, both Nikolais and one of the escapees from the dungeons.

“She’s been through enough,” Tennyson said. He was trying to keep his voice quiet but the irritation cut through.

“We need to get her powers back,” said Mrs Spencer. “Or we’ll be stuck here forever.”

“We need to get the others and get to somewhere safe,” Tennyson argued. “We can worry about everything else once we have time to regroup.”

They continued arguing but I must have dozed off again, because the next thing I

knew, I was being carried again. I was strapped to Sam's back, the same way he'd been strapped to other-Tennyson. It was night and we were traveling through the forest. Tennyson was just ahead of us but I couldn't see who else was with us.

"You're okay," I said to Sam. I wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement, but either way, he didn't answer me.

The next time I came to, we were out of the forest. We were back in the compound, in not-dad's office, I realized. That didn't seem like a great idea but I was in no position to argue. Someone else was arguing though. Nikolai and Other-me.

"You betrayed me," she said. "You helped them escape. I should have known I couldn't trust you."

"You can trust me," he said. "I did what I did for a reason but we can't talk about it here. Just open the portal back to school, once we're there, I'll explain everything."

Other-me didn't know the rest of us were there, I realized. We were hidden by the screen that sectioned off the seating area. So other-Nikolai had helped us escape, had he? And now he was trying to get the portal opened. I wasn't sure which side he was playing, but I was grateful either way.

"You think I'm stupid," she said.

Other-Nikolai laughed. "I'd be stupid if I did," he said. "Look, maybe I betrayed you, maybe I didn't, but if we keep hanging out here and your father finds us, you'll never know the truth."

She sighed. "Fine," she said, walking over to her father's desk. Sam stepped back to keep us out of sight and I realized there were several people behind us.

“I’ll hear you out,” she told Nikolai. “But it better be good.”

Some lights flickered as the portal became active at the office door. Other-me and Nikolai were at the far end of the office, and as soon as the portal activated, our group ran toward it.

I could hear Other-me screaming in rage behind us, and I worried she’d close the portal down before we got through, but her yelling was cut short and when I turned my head, I could see from the corner of my eye that other-Nikolai was keeping her restrained.

When we entered the portal, I lost consciousness again.

I woke up to a familiar sight. I was in my bed, in my room in the Red House. I glanced around to see if Hannah was there so I could tell her about my super weird dream, but nope. It hadn’t been a dream. My room was full of all the refugees from not-dad’s compound. Tennyson, Nikolai, Mrs Spencer, and a few others. And other-Althea, who had held down the fort while we’d been gone, though we hadn’t been able to return with her brother.

“No Althea,” I whispered.

“No,” said Tennyson. “There were several of us that couldn’t be found.”

I reached out for him and he took my hand. “We’ll find her.”

He nodded but didn’t look at me.

“Did they hurt you?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “No. Nothing like what they did to you. They were still only

monitoring me when Sam and his mother found me.”

“And other you?”

He shook his head. “He got out with me but some guards found us while we were getting Nikolai and he stayed back to fight them.”

I sighed. I had no idea how we were going to get out of this one. Everything was such a mess, and I still felt so empty.

“Mrs Spencer and Nikolai managed to get a lot of her research, so we know quite a bit about what she was doing to you, what she was planning...”

“Can you reverse it?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “We’re not sure. If Althea were here, she might have a clearer understanding, but as it is, we’re relying completely on –” he glanced over to Mrs Spencer. “People we don’t necessarily trust.”

I thought for a moment. Can you still hear me? I asked him. If everything else were gone, I could live with it. It would be a relief in some ways, even. But if my connection with Tennyson were gone, I’d have nothing left.

He squeezed my hand. Always , he said.

“And we’re safe here?” I asked. “In the Red House?”

He hesitated before answering. “As safe as we are anywhere in this world, I think. Nobody knows we’re here yet. We got in without anyone seeing us, thanks to this world’s Althea. I’m not sure how much time we have, but as soon as we’re able, we’ll go back and get the others, then find a way home.”

I wasn't sure how. We couldn't get back to the compound without going through the portal and Other-me wasn't exactly going to open it for us, and even if we got there, I had no clue how we'd manage getting home. Tennyson knew that, though, without me saying it aloud.

"For now, you need to rest more," he said. "She didn't just drain your powers, she drained your life force, according to her notes. And the best way to get that back is to rest a lot and eat well."

"Well, luckily those are two areas where I excel," I said.

He smiled at me, but it didn't disguise the worry in his eyes.

The next few days weren't exactly fun, living on top of each other, terrified we'd be discovered, terrified about what was happening to our friends. Despite the dark cloud over us, I didn't hate that time. I had Tennyson all to myself for a change, and even though we barely talked, even though we were squished into a room full of people, just that quiet time with him by my side helped me heal more than any food or rest ever could. I knew we couldn't stay that way forever, in our little bubble, which only made it more precious.

Mrs Spencer would sneak out for a few hours each night and bring back food and other supplies.

One night, after she got back, I called her over.

"More lasagna?" she asked.

I shook my head, then changed my mind. "Actually, yeah that'd be great, but I want to talk to you about something."

I was feeling a little better, I could walk around the room without help and stay awake for hours without nodding off, but I was starting to get antsy. Tennyson and Mrs Spencer were constantly sniping at each other, Sam still barely spoke, and Nikolai seemed preoccupied. Other-Althea was silent and pale. The few others who had managed to escape with us kept pretty quiet, as if they were too scared to speak or they might get caught again. Even though I wasn't completely recovered, I wanted to do something, to make a plan, to read over Other-me's research again , anything.

She brought me over another slice of lasagna and all thoughts went from my mind for a few minutes. It was very delicious. But I couldn't be entirely distracted.

"When you go to get the food," I said to her quietly, "I assume you're spiriting out of here?"

She nodded. "I go into the bathroom so the new kids don't get freaked," she said. "I think they think there's a secret passage in there or something."

I ate another bite of lasagne. "When you do it, it's more like teleporting than what I was doing, right? You're not just walking through the wall."

She raised her eyebrows. "That's more or less what you were doing too," she said. "You weren't actually passing through a solid object."

That was news to me, but I had no reason to disbelieve her, it wasn't as if I'd ever kept my eyes open.

"How far do you think you could do it?" I asked.

"Could I go back to that compound, you mean?"

I nodded.

She thought for a moment. “I don’t see why not. It’s not a matter of distance, just projection. They don’t seem to have wards against that sort of thing, seeing as how we could both do it while we were in there. The only trouble would be since we went there through the portal, I don’t know where the place is on a map. I might end up somewhere wacky, thrown off-course, but that’s always a risk anyhow. I’ll just have to keep my wits about me.”

I nodded, thinking over our best course of action. “She took my sword,” I said. “We won’t be able to get home without that.”

“She didn’t have it with her research, in that room with you, or I’d have grabbed it.”

I had no way of knowing if she’d left the compound while she’d been experimenting on me, or where she’d even go if she had. “We can check her room here,” I said. “If it’s not there or at the compound, then it could be anywhere.”

“She wouldn’t have taken it anywhere her father could find it,” Nikolai butted in.

I looked at him, surprised. Then I looked more closely. “What?” I said. “How?”

It wasn’t our Nikolai at all. It was the Nikolai from this world.

He shrugged. “We thought it would be funny to switch for a bit,” he said. “I didn’t know things would get so ugly and he’d be left behind.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “So, we have to rescue Nikolai as well.”

He shot me with finger guns. “But on the plus side, you have all the insider information you could ask for!”

That was true, he could be helpful.

“Can you get into her room and look for the sword?” I asked him.

“I can, but I’ll tell you right now that it won’t be there. She’ll keep it close, probably on her person. She wasn’t sure what it could do but she knew it had some sort of power so she wouldn’t leave it sitting around somewhere.”

That made sense, though it meant I’d have to deal with her again at some point before we could leave. I wasn’t strong enough yet, though.

“Could you tell Mrs Spencer what she needs to do to activate the portal from here to the compound?” I asked him.

“I can tell her but she won’t be able to do it,” he said. “It can only be activated by Lucy or her father and even then, it needs their fingerprint.”

I wagged my fingers at him. “Well, we have that.”

“You can’t chop off your hand!” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Have you never watched TV in your life? We can do that thing where we make a silicon mold of my fingerprints.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “At least it’s not retina scanning, I guess.”

I felt much better with a plan of action. It only took a quick online search to find how to do it, and then we sent Nikolai to the art department to get what we needed. It would take a day for the mould to set and then another day for the fake finger, which gave us a chance to strategize, and me a chance to get stronger.

After two more days, we were all well and truly sick of living in such close quarters. The escapees were getting a bit more confident and had even started talking about

what they'd do next, how they'd try to contact friends and family members to find somewhere safe for them in the long run. I questioned them to see if any of them knew anything about Hannah's father, but none of them had any information.

Tennyson, Mrs Spencer, other-Nikolai and I were all solid on our plan. But Sam, Sam still wasn't talking. Not to his mother, not to Tennyson, and definitely not to me. He seemed angry that I'd come to this world, angry that I'd rescued him. He was completely closed off and I didn't know how to get through to him.

Finally, the two days passed and my fake finger was ready to go. The middle of the night seemed the safest time for it, according to Nikolai. Not-dad liked to get a solid eight hours, and Other-me thought the compound was too creepy at night, apparently. There would be guards, of course, but they hadn't posed too much of a problem before now. The main issue would be if they'd upped the security after our escape, because we were basing our whole plan on other-Nikolai's information. There was also the risk of other-Nikolai luring us into a trap. Tennyson and I had discussed the possibility and couldn't rule it out. All we could do was be as prepared as possible.

I wasn't back to full strength as we waited on the lighthouse steps for Mrs Spencer to get the portal going, but I was much better. None of my powers had returned, and it didn't feel as if they ever would, so I tried not to think about it. That was something to worry about after all this was over, once everyone was home and safe.

It seemed to take forever after Mrs Spencer vanished. Tennyson, other-Nikolai and I waited on the steps of the lighthouse, not sure if she would be caught, if she'd be able to trigger the portal, if our plan would work. We were too tense to talk, but that was okay. We'd been over the plan a hundred times.

Sam wasn't with us. I'd half-expected him to come, if only to try to get himself caught again. I knew it was for the best that he stayed behind, but I wished he'd at least talk about what was going through his head. Other-Althea had wanted to come,

to look for her brother, but it was too dangerous. I promised her I'd bring him back, but it would do nobody any good if she went only to get captured again. I hoped that was a promise I could keep.

Finally, the portal appeared and the three of us stood to face it.

“Okay,” said Tennyson. “You know the plan. Stay together, don't get caught.”

Nikolai and I nodded and the three of us moved forward, through the portal and into the unknown.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thankfully, not-dad's office was dark and empty when we emerged through the portal.

"Nice one," I told Mrs Spencer, as she shook my fake finger at me.

I moved to not-dad's computer and opened up the security system. I clicked through the different buildings, until I got to the prison. All of the cells were unlocked, which I took to mean we wouldn't find Althea and Nikolai there. I glanced over to other-Nikolai, who was looking at the screen with a furrowed brow.

"Maybe they've escaped," he said.

"Or maybe she's got them in her secret laboratory," I said.

"Or her father does," said Mrs Spencer.

"This speculation doesn't help us," said Tennyson. "I can find Althea and Nikolai through the pack bond, but that won't help us with the sword."

"So, it's plan B then," I said.

Plan B was to lure out Other-me using our telepathic connection as bait. If she knew I was there, she wouldn't be able to resist a chance to resume her experiments.

Tennyson nodded. "We'll get everyone else out first," he said. "Then you and I will

get the sword. Nikolai, can we trust you here with the portal?"

He nodded and took the fake finger from Mrs Spencer.

"If I ever find out you've done something creepy with that," I told him.

He laughed. "You won't find out."

I poked my tongue out at him and the three of us left. I really hoped he didn't double-cross us.

We followed Tennyson down the stairwell, not trusting the elevator. Even though I knew his pack bond would lead him right to Althea and Nikolai, it wouldn't take into account the maze-like layout of this place, and it wouldn't lead him to other-Tennyson either. I hoped we'd be able to get everyone out, but with every step I took, I fought down panic. It seemed like every time we came to this place, we just made things worse for ourselves.

We found Nikolai so easily that I was sure it was a trap. He was locked up, yes, but the room was quite nice and he was fast asleep in an extremely comfortable-looking bed.

Tennyson kicked the door in easily, which I had to admit, was a little bit hot.

Nikolai jumped up, startled, but relaxed when he saw it was us. "Finally," he said. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten me."

"Do you know where they're keeping Althea?" Tennyson asked, easily breaking the bed leg that Nikolai was chained to. He was really tapping into his caveman side. Even though it was hot, it wasn't like him.

Nikolai put on his shoes, tucking the end of the chain into his sock on the side that still had the manacle around it. “Nope. They still think I’m the other one, so they just shoved me into one of the guest rooms and forgot about me. They tried questioning me, but I just played dumb.”

I snorted. “You weren’t playing.”

It still reeked of a trap to me, so we moved even more cautiously as we left that room and continued the hunt for Althea. A couple of times we almost ran into some guards but managed to duck out of sight before they saw us.

Tennyson led us down more stairs, down, down, until we were even deeper underground than Other-me’s creepy lab, or that creepy storeroom. This far underground, the walls were just packed dirt, basically just tunnels carved into the earth, with some strip lights running along the ceiling. Occasionally, the tunnels would diverge but Tennyson never hesitated about which direction to turn. There were no doors or rooms off the tunnels and the further we went, the more I started to get a bad feeling.

“This doesn’t seem right,” I said to Tennyson, as we turned down another tunnel, one that veered sharply downhill.

“We’re close,” he said. He had a glassy look in his eyes, as if his mind was far away somewhere. It didn’t reassure me.

Nikolai and I exchanged a worried look, but Mrs Spencer didn’t seem bothered. Somehow, that worried me even more.

We turned another corner and came to a dead end.

“What?” Tennyson said, looking around confusedly.

“The tunnels wind all around,” I said. “Maybe we should backtrack and see if there’s another way through.”

Tennyson stared angrily at the wall of dirt in front of us, and then he began to dig at the dirt with his bare hands.

“Tennyson, stop!” I told him, trying to grab hold of his arms. There was something wrong with him. I’d known it but I’d thought he was just worried for his sister, but this was something else entirely. “Come on, let’s just go back.”

He pushed me away, so hard that I slammed into the tunnel wall. I was winded for a moment, so Nikolai tried to stop him instead but Tennyson pushed him off as well, with even more force.

STOP! I yelled into his brain, putting all my fear and anxiety into that one word.

It got through to him. He stopped digging and turned around, staring down at his hands, which were covered in dirt. He always kept his hands so neat, his nails well-trimmed, but now they were ragged and bleeding.

He blinked and looked up at me. “What happened?”

I shook my head.

“I have a theory,” said Mrs Spencer, who, I’d noticed, had been no help at all. “I think she must be experimenting on this world’s version of you. When she had Lucy, she was working on the connection between the two of them, using that as a way to tap into Lucy’s powers and life force.”

“You think she’s mind-controlling Tennyson through other-Tennyson?” I asked. “Is that possible?”

Mrs Spencer shrugged. “She might not even realize that’s happening, it might just be a side-effect of whatever she’s doing to him.”

I sighed. This was the last thing we needed.

“So, we can’t rely on the pack bond to find Althea?” Tennyson asked.

“I can help,” said Nikolai. “I’m not the alpha so I can’t sense her so clearly but I still can. The bigger problem is what to do if you go all brain-addled again.”

I shrugged. “I’ll brain-slap him if he does. Come on, let’s keep moving. I’m sick of this place, I want to go home.”

We followed Nikolai back through the tunnels. I stuck close to Tennyson, watching for any sign that he wasn’t his usual self but he seemed fine. Maybe it was because he’d been using his own powers, that had somehow made him more susceptible to outward influences. I didn’t know. All I knew was that this place was toxic and I hoped I never had to come back.

“She’s close,” Tennyson said suddenly, when we were nearly out of the tunnels and back to the main building. I grabbed him by the hand, hoping he wasn’t about to go all trancey again.

“This way,” said Nikolai, leading us to a flight of stairs that was partially hidden behind a pillar.

The stairs were long and steep, and didn’t come out on any other floors other than the one at the very top. The closer to the top we got, the more nervous I felt.

“You okay?” Tennyson asked.

I wasn't sure, but I nodded. Maybe I was just feeling bad from all the physical exertion when I hadn't quite recovered. I hoped that's all it was.

At the top of the stairs, we went through a narrow doorway. Once all four of us were through, the door slammed shut, leaving us in pitch black darkness. I reached for Tennyson's hand.

She's here , Tennyson said.

Other-me? Or Althea?

Both .

Just as he said it, the lights flooded on. For a moment, I was blinded, and then I wished I was, because the sight before me was horrible.

Althea was floating in a large glass tank full of greenish liquid. She was bound by the wrists and her feet were strapped to the bottom of the tank with iron bands. It almost looked as if she was standing upright in the water, except that she swayed side to side, her thick, dark hair billowing around her. Her eyes were closed and the only way I knew she was alive was that every few seconds, a stream of bubbles came out from her nostrils and trailed up to the top of the tank. I couldn't see how she was breathing, but thankfully she was.

Other-Tennyson was tied to a table that looked a lot like the machine that the six-fingered man tortured Westley on in The Princess Bride. Other-me stood tinkering at some dials at the end of it.

There were a couple more people chained up along the wall, but I didn't recognize any of them. Actually, that wasn't true. I recognized the girl at the end, though I hadn't seen her in a few years. Not since my father murdered her.

“Katie?” I asked, in a choked voice. I took a stumbling step forward, toward my old roomie.

Tennyson grabbed my arm. I looked back at him and he gave a little shake of his head. I knew what he meant. We had to follow the plan. We couldn’t risk it all to save just one person, we had to save as many as possible. I knew he was right. Even though I hated myself for it, I took a step back.

“You’ll forgive the theatrics,” Other-me said, finally turning to us.

“No, I won’t,” I said.

“Oh, you’re so funny ,” she said, not laughing. “As I was saying, I had to get you here at just the right moment. Too soon, and I wouldn’t have been ready. Too late and Daddy might have missed the whole thing.”

She nodded toward a smaller tank at the end of the room. The liquid in that tank was much thicker and darker than in Althea’s, so it was hard to see that there was someone inside there too. Not-dad was crammed in, not floating gracefully like Althea, but stuffed, like an overpacked suitcase, so full that some of the liquid sloshed over the sides.

His eyes blinked open and I stifled a scream.

“As it is, he’s almost finished brewing,” she said. “That liquid has a good color on it, doesn’t it. I might even be able to squeeze a second vat out of him before he’s out of juice.”

I made a face. Even for evil not-dad, this seemed harsh. “So you’re, what, boiling all the magic out of him? Cooking up him into a dad soup?”

“Something like that,” she said with an annoying smirk.

I would have to start trying to make that face in the mirror so I could be sure never to do it by accident. It was the most annoying face I’d ever seen.

“Enough,” I said. “Look, do what you want with your father, but you need to let everyone else go. You’re wildly outnumbered here. You’re not going to beat us, so just free these people and let us be on our way.”

“Funny,” she said again.

I gave Tennyson a little nudge, and nodded toward the back of the room, past the other prisoners. There was a desk with a bunch of equipment piled on it. If the sword was anywhere, I’d bet it was there. I could keep her distracted while he went to look. He nodded to show that he understood, so I started walking toward the Althea tank, so Other-me was looking the other way.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, pointing up at Althea. “You can’t make Althea into soup.”

“Of course not,” she said, in a tone that implied I was stupid for even thinking it. When she was the one making her father into magic stew. “But even if I explained, I doubt you’d understand.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re not smarter than me. Obviously more evil, but not smarter.”

“Very well,” she said, moving away from other-Tennyson and toward the tank.

I gestured to Nikolai to go free other-Tennyson while she wasn’t looking, but didn’t want to risk looking to see if he understood.

“I’m attempting a transmorphic exchange of power,” she said. “This is a special type of liquid that I’ve been working on, a type of acid comprised of various extractions I’ve made from the creatures my father keeps.”

I tried to keep my face passive but ew , she had Althea floating around in a bunch of bodily fluids.

“That’s what was in all those jars,” I said. “In the room where you knocked me out.”

She nodded. “I’ve been collecting them for years, ever since I realized what my father was doing.”

I mentally flicked through my evil guy catalog. “Creating a super solider?” I asked. “Stealing their powers to sell to the Department of Defence? Stealing their powers to become immortal?”

She rolled her eyes and started to turn away. Nikolai was halfway through unbuckling other-Tennyson.

I clapped my hands to get her attention back to me. “Stealing their powers to sell to aliens!”

“Honestly,” she said. “You are not as smart as me. No, he thinks he can cure them. Like they have some sort of disease. He planned to wipe all paranormal power from the world. And to do that, he needed to know what caused the powers in the first place. Once I realized that, I knew I had to gather as much data as possible. If he succeeded, so much valuable information would be lost. If he failed, I knew he’d decide to just wipe all non-human people from the world. He’d never suffer them to live. He thinks they’re abominations, crimes against nature. So, either way, I had to collect as many samples as I could.”

“You wouldn’t try to stop it?” I asked.

She shrugged. “If it wasn’t my father, it would have been someone else. And this way, I could continue my research.” She placed a hand on the glass and stared up at Althea. “I’m so close,” she whispered.

I wondered if this was who I’d have been, if my father had taken me with him when he’d left. Would I be all twisted and warped by his beliefs like she was? I hoped not.

“So, after you squeeze out all their powers, then what?” I said, making sure she kept her attention on me. The last thing I needed was for her to see Tennyson’s reflection in the glass of the tank or something. “You’ll make a magic power smoothie, drink it down and be the queen of the world? Because that does not sound tasty. It sounds pretty nasty, actually.”

“Your ambitions are so tiny,” she said, turning back to me. She smiled at me then, and her smile was terrifying. “There’s no point,” she said. She looked over to Tennyson, to Nikolai. “You’re not getting out of here.”

She held out a hand and my sword came flying into it. She pointed it at my throat. I put my hands up in surrender. Nikolai had other-Tennyson almost free. We could definitely overpower her, sword or not. We could win this.

But before any of us could do anything, the room exploded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

My first thought was that I was definitely not getting out of this without a brain injury. My second was that I was soaking wet. And my third was that I was soaking wet with other people's bodily fluids.

I jumped to my feet. Other-me was still knocked out but I could see her starting to stir. Nikolai was up and working on the last buckle that held other-Tennyson down. My Tennyson had hidden behind the desk. His head popped up when he heard me yell.

"Where's Mrs Spencer?" I asked, my voice sounding muffled through the ringing in my ears. I'd been so focused on keeping Other-me's attention that I had no clue what Mrs Spencer had been doing. I couldn't see her on the ground anywhere. There was only rubble and bits of dad juice. Maybe she'd escaped before the explosion. That had to be it, because she definitely wasn't there.

I grabbed my sword out of Other-me's hand. Tennyson picked up Althea, swinging her over his shoulder.

"Come on!" someone yelled from the giant hole that had been blasted into the wall. It was other-Nikolai. "The guards will be coming in droves. We have to get back to the portal."

Most of the other prisoners had been blown free of their chains but Katie was still trapped, and I couldn't leave her there. I was too weak to be of much help, though, so I was grateful when Nikolai came over to help.

“Come on,” he said, once Katie was free. “We have to get out of here.”

I didn’t need telling twice. We had everything we’d come for. I had no desire to stick around with Other-me and whatever was left of not-dad. I helped Katie over the rubble, then we ran. The ringing was starting to fade from my ears, and already I could hear the guards yelling somewhere in the distance.

Even though I was exhausted, I ran as hard as I could. I wanted to catch up to other-Nikolai, who was leading us through the building.

“Is the portal still open?” I asked him, when I was close enough.

“It was when I left,” he said. “I locked all the doors in the compound, except for the way I opened up for us. We should be home free.”

I wished he hadn’t said that. Saying that was like saying you’d be right back in a horror movie. It was just asking for trouble.

Still, we didn’t see anyone as we ran through the compound. Which was fortunate, because I quickly began to flag. The burst of speed to catch up to Nikolai had been the last of my reserves, and it was all I could do to keep going. Tennyson ran beside me, carrying Althea.

By the time we got close to the office, my leg muscles were burning. I had to use the railing to pull myself up the last few flights of stairs, and my sword as a walking stick. It felt as if my legs would go out from under me at any moment.

I was surprised when we all piled into the office to find Mrs Spencer and Sam. That must have been why she’d vanished, to go back for him, though I had no clue why she’d bring him here.

“We have to go,” Mrs Spencer said.

“Yeah, no duh,” said Nikolai. I wasn’t sure which one.

The sound of the guards running up the stairs behind us was too close for comfort. I pushed everyone inside and locked the doors, and a few people helped me pile all the office furniture we could manage in front of it.

“No, we have to leave this world,” Mrs Spencer said. “To go home.”

As she said it, I realized there was no portal. And if there had been, it was in the doorway that we’d just barricaded.

“We can’t go home,” I told her. “We don’t have a portal and I have no powers.”

The guards were at the door now. I could hear them banging around out there. I doubted it would take them long to smash through.

“You have the sword,” said Mrs Spencer. “And the lodestone.”

I had absolutely forgotten the lodestone. I felt in my pocket and realized it was still in there. I must have taken it out when I changed clothes. I must have held it a dozen times, at least, but I’d never even thought about it. It seemed that I never thought about it, unless someone mentioned it to me first. Come to think of it, it was strange that Other-me hadn’t stolen it when she’d taken my sword.

Mrs Spencer noticed my astonishment and nodded. “The stone has many powers. Nobody understands them all.”

“Okay,” I said. “But I still don’t have my powers.”

“Once you learn to use the sword and the stone, they’ll come back in a jiffy,” she said. “But right now, all they need to do is take that portal and redirect it from the school in this world, to the school back home. Easy peasy.”

“Is that possible?” I had to yell for her to hear me over the guards trying to knock down the door. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just go back to school and figure this out later?”

She shook her head. “We need this portal here to be fired up, and we can only do that from this end. This is our only chance. That’s why I left as soon as I realized, to go get my Sam.”

There was a giant crash and part of the door came down. There wasn’t time to argue.

“Fine,” I said. “Tell me what to do.”

She yelled for Nikolai and got him to start opening the portal, while she explained to me what I needed to do. It seemed pretty easy, but that didn’t mean it would be.

The portal kicked in, so we cleared a path through our barricade.

“Once the door opens, you’ll only have a minute,” said Mrs Spencer. “Make sure the stone and the sword enter at the same time, before you.”

I nodded. I was ready to go.

“Anyone who wants to go, go now,” she said. “Anyone who wants to stay in this world, I’ll reopen the portal once they’re gone. It’ll reset back to normal as soon as they’re gone, don’t you worry about a thing. We’re on the home stretch now!”

“Wait, what?” I said. I was almost at the portal, but I turned to stare back at her.

“Someone needs to stay here,” she said. “To make sure everything goes smoothly from this end. You just promise me you’ll look after my Sam. And I’ll promise to look after your friends.” She nodded to other-Tennyson.

I stepped forward and gave other-Tennyson a quick hug.

He squeezed me tightly, as if he didn’t want to let me go. “Thank you,” he said in a voice that was gruff from disuse.

I felt tears prick at my eyes. “Tell Althea goodbye for me?”

He nodded and I turned away. I’d miss him, but at least I’d kept my promise to get him home safe.

I glanced over at other-Nikolai. “You’re definitely the one from this world?” I asked.

“Hurry up and leave,” he said. “We haven’t got all day.”

With one last look at them, I turned back to the portal. Sword and stone first, I stepped into it.

I closed my eyes and pictured my own world. That hadn’t been part of the portal redirection magic or anything, but it seemed right. I pictured all the things I loved. My brothers. Hannah. My comfy bed. Delicious food. My favorite reading nook in the school library.

I took another step, and opened my eyes. It was night. We were at school, on the steps of the lighthouse, but I didn’t know if it was my school, my lighthouse.

I was shoved in the back by Nikolai, and stumbled forward. I moved out of the way to give the others space to come through. Next was Tennyson, carrying Althea, Sam,

and then a couple of the prisoners.

“Are we home?” asked Nikolai.

“We’re home,” said Tennyson. “Can’t you tell? The air is different here.”

He was right, the air was different. Nothing tangible, it just felt right . Less hostile.

I’d hoped that coming through the portal would jolt Althea back to consciousness, but she was still out to it, still covered in weird bits of green slime. As happy as I was to be back in the real world, my heart sank as I watched her long dark hair trail down over Tennyson’s back as he carried her.

We weren’t even halfway back to the Golden House, when someone came bursting through the trees and hurtling toward us. I jumped back, with my fists up in a fighting stance, but it was only Hannah and Harper.

“I thought you were dead!” Hannah yelled, launching herself at Nikolai.

“Ew,” said Harper, looking at Althea. “What’s in her hair?”

I rolled my eyes at her.

Then Hannah screamed. She let go of Nikolai and flung herself at one of the escaped prisoners. Through her tears, we managed to figure out that he was her father. Her actual father. After everything, he’d found his way home. That alone made the whole ordeal worth it.

As we walked back through the forest, we filled them in on everything that had happened while we were gone.

“Well, I’m glad we stayed here,” said Harper. “That sounds perfectly awful.”

For once, I couldn’t disagree with her.

“I might be able to help Althea,” said Hannah, still clinging to her father. “Though without knowing the details of those experiments...”

“I have some of her notes,” said Tennyson. “I took what I could after the explosion.”

“I’m sure having some proper doctors look at her will do much more good than an untrained witch,” said Harper. “She’s been tampered with enough, leave her be.”

I bit down on a smile. Normally Harper and Althea were mortal enemies but Harper was obviously worried about her.

“Well, at the very least, I’m going to do a cleaning spell on her,” said Hannah. “She’d hate for anyone to see her in such a mess.”

I let them argue and dropped back to walk beside Sam. I was surprised he’d even come through the portal. I assumed his mother must have pushed him.

“Are you okay?” I asked him. “I know you’ve been through a lot.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think it’s okay for me to be okay.”

That was the most he’d said since I’d found him. Even though his words were bleak, I took the fact that he was saying them as a positive.

“Your mother will be fine,” I told him, trying to sound upbeat. “She’s strong as a bear and wily as a fox.”

“Maybe,” he said. I thought that was an end to our conversation, but he kept talking. “You should have left me there. In that cell. You shouldn’t have come to find me.”

I sighed. I didn’t know how to make him stop punishing himself for something that wasn’t his fault. He needed to see someone, someone much more skilled than I was at helping him deal with everything that had happened to him.

“I’m glad I found you,” I said. “Even if you hate me for it.”

He shook his head. “It’s not you that I hate.”

When we got back to the house, Harper took Althea to her room to get her cleaned up and comfortable, and Hannah got her father settled. I wanted to help but as soon as I sat down, I knew I wasn’t going to move again for a very long time. I couldn’t believe that we were home, that the nightmare of the other world was over. Part of me didn’t want to fall asleep, in case I woke up back in that other world, but I couldn’t keep my eyes open. It had been a long day.

I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I was still home.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The next morning, doctors were called, both human and otherwise, but none of them had a definitive way to help Althea. Mostly they said to give her time. Her body had been through trauma and it needed to rest. Once it was healed, she'd wake up, good as new. I didn't like it. It reminded me of when Sam had been in a similar state, but I didn't have any better ideas either.

I hadn't even finished breakfast when Nikolai nudged me and showed me the screen of his phone. There was a text from Vucari. He wanted to meet.

"How did he even know we were back?" I asked.

Nikolai shrugged. "He just knows things."

So, after I was finished eating, Nikolai, Hannah, Tennyson and I made our way down the train tunnel so we could contact Vucari. We went through the same ritual as last time, with the magic powder and chanting and mirror. As far as I was concerned, after this I could quite happily never see another magic portal again.

"You got the lodestone?"

I held the stone up to show him. It was the happiest I'd ever seen him look. Which was a pretty low bar, if I was honest.

"How will I get it to you?" I asked. "I assume you can't take it from through this portal. You're just a projection, right?"

“You mistake me,” he said. “The lodestone isn’t for my benefit. You need to use it. The next phase of your transition will make you one of my people. Only then will your powers be in balance and will you be able to claim your rightful inheritance.”

I shifted on my feet awkwardly. “Well, it’s not that I don’t appreciate the thought,” I said. “But my powers got kind of zapped out of me, so I don’t think there’s going to be any more transitioning or ascending or any of that.”

“What has been foretold cannot be unwritten,” said Vucari. “The stone will help you along your path. You need to trust in its power.”

“Okey dokes,” I said. What else could I say, the guy seemed pretty sure of himself. “So... I feel like I haven’t really paid back my favor though, if I’m going to be keeping the stone. Are you sure that’s it?”

I really hoped he didn’t have some other massive quest for me to go on, because this one had not been particularly fun, but at the same time, it seemed kind of shifty to not pay back his favor.

“Only that when you take your place on the Dark Council, you look on me with kindness.”

“Sure,” I said, though the only thing I was sure of right then was that I was never going to be on the Dark Council. Or any council. But if I was, sure, I’d throw him a bone.

“Your power is not lost,” he said. “It is only misplaced.”

On that note, he faded away and the portal closed.

“Well then,” I said, looking around at the others. “That was enlightening.”

As we walked back to school, I thought over what Vucari had said. There was a way to get my powers back. But did I even want them back? In all honesty, if we'd lived in a different world, I'd be fine without them. But in this world, the world where my father was the Master of All, and had the power to act with impunity? In this world, I needed them. My powers were the only way I could protect the people I loved. I needed to get them back ASAP.

I just had no idea how. Hannah might be able to help, but I really wanted to talk to Althea. I hoped she'd wake up soon.

We'll find a way , said Tennyson, falling into step beside me. Psychic link notwithstanding, he always knew what I was thinking.

We always do , I said. And right then, with him beside me, I really believed it. We'd get my powers back, defeat my father, get into an awesome college, all of it. All of the coldness between us seemed to have thawed. I'd had to go to a whole other world to realize it, but there was nothing that could come between the two of us. We just had to stop getting in our own way.

I opened up our connection to show him everything I was thinking, everything I was feeling, and in doing that, all the walls between us came down. He felt the same. He was the same. We could get through all of this and come out even stronger.

We were nearly back to the Golden House when Harper came running out to meet us. My first thought was that Althea was awake, but I was wrong.

“Oh em gee, you guys. You have to come see this. I know you'd told us, but I didn't really believe it, not til I saw for myself...”

“What are you talking about, Harper?” Tennyson asked, clearly in no mood for her.

We followed Harper inside. She paused outside the common room door, looking far

too pleased with herself. “Ready?”

“Just let us in,” said Tennyson, pushing past her.

Whatever I’d expected to find in the room, nothing could have prepared me for the sight we found.

Sitting there, beside the fireplace, casually flipping through a magazine, was Other-me.

“Surprise!” she said flatly. “I’m here for my lodestone.”