

## Chapter 21 - The Vampire's Servant

[Echo]

Drew arrived about fifteen minutes after Victor went to bed. I grabbed the information we needed and locked up. On the way to the school, we talked about the meeting and what he thought I should make for dinner. We settled on fried boneless skinless chicken breasts with mashed potatoes, country gravy, and pan cooked broccoli.

The school was huge. I hadn't ever thought about how big a high school was. It was two floors in the center and a single floor branching out from each side. There was a big fenced field in the distance and the parking lot was the size of the one at the supermarket.

My sister and brother only talked about a handful of people, I didn't realize there were so many more they'd never mentioned. Students were milling around the campus as we parked and got out of Drew's car. My nerves were going crazy.

There were too many people! I froze in one spot. My stomach was trying to bring my breakfast back up.

"Calm down, Echo. Just take slow, deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth. You're fine." Drew said softly as he held my shoulders.

I had never realized that his eyes were so blue. I guess I'd never really looked at them. How was I going to make friends if I didn't even look at people!? I wanted to go home. I wanted to sit in the library or try to learn how video games worked. I didn't need college. I was happy to take care of Victor and play all day.

"Stop pulling away. You need to get a high school diploma. You need to have this experience." He told me.

"Did you? You're around two hundred years old. Did you go to high school?" I asked.

"Well, no. I went to a one room school and had to quit when I was twelve to help on my family's farm after my two oldest brothers died. But I would have gone if I'd had a chance. It's only a couple months, Echo. You can do this. You don't want Victor to be mad at you, right?" He pressed.

I glared. "You had to say that, didn't you?"

“There is one thing I’ve learned about you, princess. You want your master to be happy with you. Even more than I want mine to be happy with me, and I sleep with mine.” He laughed.

“Is Victor going to want something like that?” I blushed.

“Probably not. He’s very straight laced and sees you like a little sister or close friend. But, you never know where you’ll be in a couple hundred years.” He shrugged. “That got you out of your head! Let’s go, kiddo.”

“I hate you so much.” I growled and followed him to the entrance.

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I was looking intently through the paperwork once we reached the office, handing everything over that Drew asked for as he needed it. There were a lot of forms to fill out. I hadn’t realized they’d faked immunization records. I knew I’d had all of my shots, because my parents didn’t want Harmony or Val to get sick because of me, but I didn’t even know it was something I needed for school.

“Let’s get a picture for your school ID. We have a little card printer here, so we can get that to you today along with your class list.” The secretary, Ms. Diaz smiled.

“Thank you.” I replied and stood where she directed.

As I looked at the camera, the office door flew open.

“Echo!!” I heard Harmony shout.

“One more, you look like the life got frightened out of you. Miss Gale, please refrain from frightening students getting their pictures done.” Ms. Diaz scolded.

“Sorry, ma’am.” My sister replied.

I saw her pull out her phone out of the corner of my eye. If she got Val out here, I would never have a chance to leave. He was much bigger than Drew. I needed her to stop what she was doing.

“Drew. Will you talk to my friend Harmony for a moment while I get this done?” I asked.

“Sure thing, princess.” He said and crossed to my sister, distracting her from whoever she was messaging.

My picture was taken and Ms. Diaz got me the card, a print out of my class list, my locker number, and the combination. She gave me a basic list of supplies and told me when I would have to be at school for my first class along with information for the bus. I thanked her and went to deal with my sister.

“Hey, Harmony. How have you and Val been?” I asked with a smile.

“You ran away.” She hissed. “We didn’t even know until Monday. Mom and Dad said you snuck out sometime Sunday night. Why would you leave us?”

“Can we talk outside?” I asked.

“Come on. I have first period free.” She said and pulled me outside.

Drew and I led her to where we’d parked. I refused to say anything until I was sure no one would overhear it. Harmony pouted a little about having to wait, but it was for the safety of everyone. Now, I only hoped what Victor said about me being the mistress of the territory was correct.

“Drew. Keep an eye out for people getting too close.” I ordered.

“Yes, Mistress Nightshade.” He said with a bow.

“Mistress Nightshade? What the hell is that? Why are you here? Who’s that guy? Why did you leave us?” Harmony wept.

“I love you, Harmony.” I said in a normal tone of voice.

“I love you, too, Echo.” She whispered out of habit.

“Never whisper that again. They can’t hurt me anymore. This is Drew Golden. He’s my friend. He’s helping me get signed up for school because my master wants me to have a degree. My name is Echo Nightshade, now. Mom and Dad sold me, Harmony. They sold me to a man for two million dollars.” I explained.

“They what? That’s illegal! Let’s go to the police. They can arrest them and the man that bought you!” Harmony insisted. “He didn’t... he’s had you for a week. You aren’t a sex slave, right?”

“No, Harmony. I’m not going to the police either. If I do that, then the three of us will be separated and there will be no money for you to go to school. My master is a good man. He just needs someone to take care of him. I have a ton of freedom, all the food I can eat, he gave me his credit card which has yet to hit its limit and I’ve spent over twenty thousand dollars already.

Don’t let mom and dad cheat you and Val out of your part of the money they got for me. They said five hundred thousand each. You can let them know I told you and they better make good on their promise or my master will not be happy with them.” I smiled, remembering the frightened look on their faces.

“You don’t want them to pay for what they did?” She asked.

“No. I want to be done with them and never think of them again. They’ll pay when they blow through their money and have no way to get more.” I laughed.

“What do you mean?”

“Dad lost his job over ten years ago. He never got another one aside from a little part time office work. Certainly not enough money in that to afford the big vacations, expensive clothes, remodeling, extravagant toys, and luxury cars. My master told me about what they’d bought, since I was locked in the basement and never really understood what was going on with the money I earned.” I scoffed.

“You earned?” She squeaked.

“I need to go. I have to get things together for a dinner party my master is hosting tonight. Ask Mom and Dad. See what story they spin. Then talk to me on Monday. I’ll tell you the truth.”

“You’re different than you were before, Echo.” Harmony whispered.

“Yes. I’m learning more about myself every day, and I’m protected in a way I never was before. I know my worth more than they ever did or ever let me believe. I still love knowing you and Val are safe and happy, though. Let’s be friends for the rest of school. Okay?” I offered.

“Let’s be friends. I can’t wait to hear what they have to say. How could they sell their own daughter?” She wept.

I put my hand on her shoulder and she slipped in for a hug. I’d been able to put my sister and brother aside in my mind for nearly a week. I hadn’t realized exactly how much I missed them until that moment.

Holding my sister tight, I nearly started crying. Maybe they would meet up with me sometimes and we could spend time together. I loved Victor, but he wasn’t as close to me as they were. We’d rarely ever been apart this long.

“Echo!!” I heard another voice yell.

It was male, but not Val. It took a moment and another yell before I registered who it was. I needed to go before he cornered me.

“Oh my god. I have to go! Sorry, Harmony. I’ll see you Monday.” I pushed her off. “Drew! We’re leaving!”

I got in the car and locked the door. Drew started to say something.

“Drive, old man, or I’m telling Silence and Victor you tried to put your hand up my skirt.” I ordered.

“It was a joke!” He insisted as he sped out of the parking lot.

“When I say we’re going, we’re going. Now. Time for grocery shopping. And remember your manners.” I told him, looking in the side view mirror as Gray finally stopped chasing us.

That was one persistent wolf boy. How did he figure out where I was? With my luck, he was a student at the school and I had all my classes with him.... I probably just jinxed myself with that thought....

Chasing Leads

## Chapter 22 - The Vampire's Servant

[Gray]

I texted my brother with the license plate number of the car Echo got into. She rushed to get away from me fast, I was a little offended. The man she was with must be working for the vampires, so I got over it.

The most important thing was that I knew she was safe. With this information, I’d have her soon. Why was she at my school though?

I smiled at the idea of her attending and maybe being in some classes with me. That would be wonderful. I could definitely win her if she were with me all day.

Heading back to the school parking lot, I knew I had to find the girl she was hugging. If she had some information, her phone number, address, something, I could save my angel from the vampires.

She was already near the front doors by the time I got back to where the car had been parked. I pushed a little harder to get to her before she reached the doors. I needed to talk to her. She had to help me.

“Wait!” I called out to her and she turned, putting her phone away.

She looked like a warmer version of Echo. Her skin was tan, her hair dark brown instead of black, and her eyes were less green. It was shocking and I froze for a moment before shaking it off and moving forward. This must be why she looked so familiar, there was an almost Echo in my school.

Normally, we’d go to school on the pack lands, but there’d been an accident and the school needed major remodeling, so we’d started two years ago at the human school in town. Most of us elected to stay at the human school through the end of school. It was good practice for hiding ourselves.

“You’re Gray, right? Cam’s friend.” She smiled.

“Yeah. I don’t think I know your name, though.” I winced.

“We’ve had a couple classes together, but haven’t officially met, yet. I’m Harmony.”

Cam’s mate. This was good luck. The goddess must be smiling on me.

“It’s nice to officially meet you.” I grinned. “How do you know Echo?”

She looked nervous and a little upset. Harmony bit her lips together and I wondered if she’d say anything. I needed help.

‘Cam. Where are you?’ I linked him.

‘Changing. I have gym in the morning. You know that.’

‘I’m talking to your mate and I need help.’

‘What kind of help?’

‘She knows my mate and I don’t think she’s going to tell me how. Can you get out here? We’re in front of the school.’

‘I need a minute. I’ll be there soon.’ He replied.

“It’s cool if you don’t want to answer right now. How are your classes going?” I asked.

She took the change of subject with a breath of relief. I’d have that information before school got out, though. I would find my mate and free her. Then she could be mine forever.

We made small talk for a while as I tried to keep her there so Cam could help me get the information about Echo. He finally came trotting up and put his arm around her.

“Hey there, beautiful.” He said kissing her on the cheek. “I see you met Gray.”

“We’ve had classes together before, I just never really had a reason to talk to him.” She giggled.

She sounded so much like Echo. It made me wish she were there, being as sweet and loving as Harmony was with Cam. I’d save her and we would be together like they were. She wouldn’t run away from me anymore.

“So, did he tell you about the girl he likes then? He’s been going on about her ever since he met her.” Cam laughed.

“No, we were just chatting about school stuff.” Harmony replied.

“Well, I asked how you knew her...” I trailed off.

“Echo? You have a crush on Echo?” She asked wide eyed.

“Yeah. She’s been on my mind. You look a lot like her. Are you related? Cousins, maybe?” I asked.

Harmony looked like she was debating how to answer.

“No. We’re just friends.” She lied.

I glanced at Cam to see if he caught it and he did. He looked disappointed. Suddenly, Val came bursting out of the door and ran down to us.

“Where is she? Is she still here? Did she tell you what happened?” He questioned Harmony, pulling her from Cam.

I shot Cam a look. I knew Val from the track team. We were friendly rivals in most of the sports teams we joined.

‘Harmony is Val’s twin sister.’ Cam explained.

“She left. Something spooked her. Let’s find a place to talk, alone.” Harmony whispered.

“Babe, I’m your boyfriend. I’m here for you. Tell me what’s going on. I can send Gray away, but he wants to help, too. Please. Let me help.” Cam begged.

“I’m sorry, Cam. I can’t.” She said softly.

“Is it a twin secret then?” He scoffed.

A lot of werewolves were jealous of close sibling relationships with their mates. I could imagine her having an opposite gender twin would cause Cam’s hackles to rise. Twins were just a lot closer than other siblings.

Val looked between them and locked eyes with me. I got the feeling he wanted to say more. I raised my eyebrows at him and tried to put all the concern I had for Echo into my eyes so he would see we were sincere.

“They can’t hurt her anymore, Harmony. We can tell people now.” Val told her in a low voice.

“What about when she comes home? I won’t risk it.” She hissed.

“She’s not coming home, Harmony! If she ran away, then she’s not coming back. Even if we get her there, she won’t stay. I just want to make sure she’s safe. Do you really want her back in that house?!” Val growled.

“She didn’t run away, Val. She said they sold her. I think he forced them to sell her! I don’t know any other reason why they would do that!” Harmony sobbed.

Val covered his mouth. It didn’t seem like shock, though. He was considering something. I didn’t know him particularly well, but I’d always liked him. He even beat me in a few challenges.

I worked to control my anger at the idea of that leech forcing someone to sell my mate to him. Her parents were forced to sell her. They were related to Echo. Siblings, most likely. I focused on Harmony and all the ways she looked like Echo.

“Did she say if it was a vampire?” He asked quietly.

That drew my attention directly to him. Val had a strained look in his face. Like he was praying we would say no. He knew more about her connection to the vampires.

I pulled out my phone. “Just one second. School isn’t safe for this conversation.”

“Who are you calling?” Cam asked.

“Trent. We need to go home for this.” I told him.

I had my brother arrange for emergency calls to the school to get us all released. Cam went in to let the office know we’d gotten calls on our cells about the emergency and we were leaving. It wouldn’t be questioned.

There were a few members of staff who were werewolves. They would ensure that we wouldn’t have trouble.

We went to our cars. Val and Harmony followed me and Cam out to the pack lands and over to the pack house. Cam glared at me the whole way home.

“You know this means I have to tell her I’m a werewolf before I was ready to.” Cam grumbled.

“I know, I’m sorry. Harmony looks almost exactly like Echo. I think she’s their sister. Saving her is important. I think Harmony will forgive you if you save her sister from the vampires.” I said.

“She better or I’m kicking your ass.”

“And I’ll take it, as long as Echo’s safe.” I replied.

Trent met us out front of the pack house. He seemed upset about us bringing humans, but I’d explain it. If nothing else, I’d take the blame.



We got out of the cars. Val helped Harmony along. She was sobbing. Cam ran over and took her from her brother, picking her up to carry into the house. We watched them go. Val didn't even try to stop him.

"She needs to rest and calm down." Val informed me. "I got all the information from her. I just need to verify something. I've been thinking it for a couple months now. You guys are werewolves, right?"

Trent raised his brow in surprise. "Yes. How'd you guess?"

"Once you stop trying to ignore things like werewolves and vampires, you begin to see it. I couldn't ignore vampires when I found out what they were doing to my little sister. I started to see more. I started to learn more." He sighed.

"Come in. I'm Trent Padua, Alpha of the Hallowed Moon Pack." Trent stuck out his hand.

"Valor Gale, you can call me Val." He replied, taking my brother's hand.

"My office is this way." Trent guided Val and I followed.

## Val's Story

# Chapter 23 - The Vampire's Servant

We were met in Trent's office by his Beta and Gamma. I sat next to Val on the couch. I wouldn't let them exclude me if they tried, but I didn't think they would.

"Tell us about Echo." I insisted.

"Harmony and I aren't twins, we're triplets. Echo is our little sister. Mom and Dad said she's evil. They never let her out of the house, made her cook and clean, punished her harshly, and barely let her eat. We tried to stop them when we were little, but she got punished worse when we did. We weren't even allowed to tell her that we loved her."

His voice shook and I saw tears in his eyes. I couldn't imagine having to see that and not be able to fight back. My poor mate had lived a terrible life because of those people. I wanted to go to their house and kick their asses on her behalf, but I'd reign myself in so I could find out what was happening to her and save her from whatever they sold her into.

"Every Saturday since we were about seven, our dad would take me and Harmony to a movie. When we got older, we were sent on our own. A couple months ago, I wanted to take my

girlfriend out instead. Harmony got a friend to meet up with her for the movie and I took my girlfriend to dinner. She dumped me.” Val laughed dryly.

“I thought it was the worst thing that would happen that night. I went home. Mom and Dad were always in bed by the time we got home from the theater. I figured I would sneak in the study until I heard them turn in and would go to my room. I got on the hose box and looked in the window. The light was on and Echo was on the couch. She was all dressed up and a vampire was sucking on her neck. He had his hand under her dress and she was crying.”

Val stopped to calm himself. My hands were balled into fists. I wanted to kill the fucking leech who made my mate cry, who touched her like he had a right.

Trent caught my eye and shook his head. I worked to calm myself down. This was one of the most emotionally trying conversations I’d ever had.

“What happened next, Val?” He said softly.

“I went to the front door. I wasn’t going to let him keep hurting my little sister and climbing through the window was dangerous. I couldn’t defend or attack while crawling through. I figured my parents couldn’t have known. When I walked in the house, they jumped up and tried to stop me from going in the study. It took me longer than it should’ve to realize they knew what was going on.

The door started to open and they shoved me into the coat closet. The vampire said she was better than normal. He asked how much to bite her thigh. I heard Echo gasp. She was right there. She was standing right there while my parents negotiated with a vampire for how much he would pay to bite my little sister between her legs.

When he left, they sent her to bed and told me Echo was feeding vampires to keep the evil in her blood low enough she wouldn’t hurt anyone. They said she made them pay so she could help with bills. It sounded like crap and I told them so. Suddenly, it was like they changed. They told me they’d sell her to the nastiest vampire client she had if I said anything. They told me we’d leave one night and when we came back, she’d be gone. That was the night I realized our parents were the evil ones and Echo needed to be saved.

Then, last Saturday, we left and didn’t find out until Monday she was gone. They said she ran away, but I knew they sold her. They refused to tell me anything about who bought her. I tried all week to get anything out of them. I decided I’d go out this weekend and try talking to vampires to see if I could find out who had her and make sure she was okay. I wanted to figure out a safe place to hide her and try to save her.

Harmony saw her enrolling for school this morning. Echo told Harmony she was sold for two million dollars and her master isn’t using her as a sex slave. That he needs someone to take care of him. She said she has a lot of freedom, all the food she can eat, and her master’s credit card. She said her master helped her see her real value and it was making her different.

The man with her was called Drew Golden. She calls herself Echo Nightshade. The man called her 'Mistress Nightshade'. I don't know what it all means." Val shook his head.

I tried to process it. Echo Nightshade. The vampire saved her? That couldn't be right. Vampires were using her. He just bought her to use for a different reason.

"When a vampire takes a servant, they change the servant's last name to their own. It shows who owns them. His name is Victor Nightshade. We have the name of the master of the territory now. She is his representative in the daytime. So she's called 'mistress' when the sun is up." Trent explained.

"We need to find out where he sleeps and burn it to the ground." I growled.

"She told her sister she's fine. If we do that we bring, not only, the Vampire Council down on us, but the Werewolf Association as well. Taking out a master who hasn't done anything wrong is an act of war." Trent said.

"Hasn't done anything wrong!? He bought a girl and made her his slave! He stole the mate of a werewolf! She's mine and I want her back!" I jumped up and shouted.

"Calm down, now! You didn't find her until after he had her! He didn't steal anything!" Trent ordered. "Sit your ass down!"

I sat and grumbled. "Yes, Alpha."

"What the hell was that?" Val asked.

"Your sister is my brother's mate. The moon goddess picks our perfect match for us to be our spouse and care for, forever. In our pack, we don't know who they are until we turn eighteen. That's why Cam didn't look at Harmony until just a few weeks ago. When he turned eighteen, he saw that she was his mate and pursued her." Trent sighed. "When Gray saw Echo last night, he saw the same thing."

"What do you mean, he didn't do anything wrong, Trent?" I asked.

"We've been researching, calling contacts and anyone who might be able to tell us more about dhampyrs. They're property. From the moment they're born. He rightfully bought her from at least one of her biological parents. She belongs to him by supernatural law. We need to get an audience with him and see if he would sell her. If he will, she has to keep his name or she's free game for any other vampire to claim. I'll work on it. For now, she's safe enough. He's not breeding her. She's free to leave the property. And they put her in school. He's treating her like a normal human servant. Not a slave." He explained.

"Why did they sell her and not the other two?" Ben asked.

"Do you have a picture of her?" Trent asked Val.

He shook his head. “We weren’t allowed to take pictures of her.”

“I have one.” I pulled out my phone and handed it to Trent.

He looked at it and back up at Val. Trent handed him the phone.

“Is that your sister?”

Val examined the picture. “Yeah. That’s Echo.”

“She’s paler than Valor and Harmony. I bet she’d be pale even if she got outside more. Her hair is darker, her teeth are sharper, anything we’re missing?”

“Her eyes are more green than ours.” Val offered.

“But you’re triplets.... I think she has more vampire blood than they do.”

“Our parents are human. What do you mean?” Val asked.

“One of your parents isn’t entirely human. The more vampire blood a dhampyr has, the more valuable they are. At more than half, they’re guaranteed to return as vampires after death. There may not be a price we can manage, but we’ll see what we can do. Why don’t you guys go get some lunch? We need to figure out what our options are. We’ll do everything to get her back, but you both have to be prepared for the possibility that we can’t.” Trent said solemnly.

I took Val to the dining room. We saw Cam and Harmony eating and sat with them. An omega brought us food soon after.

“How are you doing, Harmony?” Val asked.

“My boyfriend is a werewolf. My parents sold my sister and let vampires feed off her. My entire world is just.... How could they do that? She looks just like us. Does that mean they’d sell us, too? Dad was taking us to Saturday night movies every week for ten years, Val. She was just a little girl. She should’ve been in second grade, but she was locked away and only brought out to be violated by the undead and to be treated like a servant for us. We’re as bad as them. We should’ve told someone. We failed Echo.” She sniffled.

“We did everything we could, Harmony. They messed us up, too. Maybe we can fix it, though. Trent says he’s going to see if he can buy her from the vampire. I’m going to see what I can figure out, too. There has to be some sort of loophole. I’ll find it.” Val promised.

“I’ll do everything I can to save Echo. She’s my mate. I want to keep her safe and take care of her. Let me know how I can help.” I told him.

Val nodded and we ate our food. The rest of the afternoon was full of talking things over, making plans, and trading information. We planned to message each other often while we were working on things and I promised I wouldn't keep them out of the loop.

When they were packing up to leave at three, Trent told them they were welcome on pack lands if they needed a safe place to stay. He didn't want them in a dangerous situation, but told them to confront their parents and see what they could get from them. If nothing else, they might know where the vampire was holding Echo.

Called in to Work

## Chapter 24 - The Vampire's Servant

[Echo]

Victor spun me around in a giant hug as I squealed and held on to him. I knew he would drop me, but I was a little afraid I would fly out of his arms. None of that marble looked like it would create a soft landing.

“You did amazing, little one! They accepted right away and we were able to get something done instead of posturing all night! Great work, Echo!” He grinned.

“It's my job, Victor! Calm down!” I squeaked as he tossed me a little.

“You deserve another reward. Anything you want, princess.” Victor kissed my cheek.

I didn't know what I wanted. After the experience with the wolf boy, I certainly didn't want to go out and eat again. When Victor got up in the afternoon, he told me I would have Saturdays off. I had pretty much everything I could want.

“Can I save it for later?” I asked. “I can't think right now.”

“Of course, sweetheart. It's getting late. You should head to bed so you can enjoy the whole day tomorrow. Don't worry about any cleaning up, I'll do it when I wake. Just have fun and relax, okay?”

“Are you sure? I can have fun and take care of the house at the same time, you know?” I giggled.

“Absolutely certain. If you want, I can ask Drew to take you to a movie or a museum or the zoo.” He offered.

I laughed. "I think I've dealt with enough animals lately. Maybe next weekend. I think this Saturday, I'm going to be a slug and read or play video games." I told him as he set me back on my feet.

"Then go rest so you can be the best slug ever." Victor patted me on the head and pushed me off toward the stairs.

I went up to get ready for bed. When he woke up, Victor was a little mad about the wolf incident, but he got over it. He talked about changing me to the other public high school in town, but I didn't know how to drive and the bus wouldn't have picked me up. I told him that I would avoid the wolf and keep turning him down.

It was really the only option. I didn't want to lose the chance to see my sister and brother every weekday. Maybe the wolf would take the hint if I did that often enough.

Not that he wasn't cute. He was a little taller than Victor and had some nice muscles and a sweet smile. His eyes were a dark chocolate brown and his hair was as black as mine. I just didn't want anything more than what I had.

One day, I might look for a relationship or something, but I just wanted to normalize for a bit. Help Victor with his territory and other needs. Figure out who I really am and how to use whatever abilities I had from being a dhampyr. I needed to be able to protect myself. For now, I was just going to enjoy my time off.

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Most of Saturday was spent playing games and snacking. I really liked racing games, but was really bad at anything with guns or one on one fighting. I really loved the games with good stories where I could choose what my character would do. It was a type of game that really hit on my desire for freedom.

I was hanging upside down on the couch, playing Dragon Age when my phone alarm went off. I paused the game and went upstairs to turn on the blankets for Rosalynn and Victor. He said it was my day off, but that was no reason they shouldn't wake up warm.

When I made it back to the family room, I curled up on the couch and resumed my game. I'd gotten pretty far when I decided to go find something for dinner. Looking at the clock, I saw it was about eight at night. Later than I normally had dinner. I walked past the office and Victor called me in.

"Have a seat, Echo." He said with a fairly serious tone.

I sat in the seat next to Rosalynn. She looked pretty serious, too. It made me nervous. I hated being nervous.

“I was contacted just a little while ago by the Alpha of the local wolf pack. He’s like their master. He wants to meet with us.”

“You, Talon, and Silence?” I asked hopefully.

“No. You and me. I’m pretty sure it has to do with the wolf from the restaurant. I know it’s your day off, but I need you for this meeting. They’re on their way.”

“Why now? Couldn’t they do it tomorrow night?” I whined.

“No. You have school Monday. I want you in bed early tomorrow night. Go get dressed. We’ll put together something to feed them.” Victor ordered.

“Don’t do that! You’ll kill them. If they’re supposed to leave this meeting alive, just set out the cookies in the cookie jar and make some coffee. The instructions are written on the can. I’ll be down shortly, boil some water for tea and I can make that.” I replied and jogged out of the room.

Just for this crap, I’m siding with the elves in the game. Freaking werewolves, ruining my day off. I hated them so much. Maybe I should let Victor try and cook them something....

An hour later, I had the tea and coffee services set out with a plate of cookies and the house was cleaned up a little. I’d saved and turned off my game, hoping to play for a little while tomorrow. The house wasn’t hard to care for, I should have a little time.

The wolves arrived and I opened the gate. Victor and Rosalynn were seated in the living room. He’d moved the ottoman to sit between their chairs and told me I’d sit there after showing the wolves in.

There was a knock at the door and I pulled it open. A tall man with dark hair stood in front of me. On one side of him was Gray and on the other was my brother Val. If I weren’t in work mode, I would have gaped in surprised. Instead, I put on my working smile and greeted them.

“May I please have your names?” I asked.

“Trent Padua, Alpha of the Hallowed Moon Pack, my brother Grayson Padua, and a friend of our pack, Valor Gale.” The tall man responded.

“Please come in, I will announce your arrival to my master.” I bowed and waved them in.

Val walked past slowly and I reached out to grasp his hand. How had they caught my brother? Did they have Harmony, too? I needed Victor to help me save them. I was playing video games while werewolves were capturing my sister and brother. My heart sank.

He squeezed my hand reassuringly.

“I love you, Valley.” I whispered.

“I love you, too, Echo.” He replied quietly.

I headed into the living room and stood by the entry. Victor could see that I was upset, but he only looked concerned for a moment. He wouldn’t let this get in the way of whatever had to happen here.

“Master, Alpha Trent Padua, his brother Grayson, and their friend, Valor Gale, have arrived.” I stated.

Victor stiffened at my brother’s name and stood as they all entered. He shook hands with the Alpha and waved him to the couch.

“Gentlemen, please have some coffee and snacks. Our Echo is a wonderful cook. I can’t eat, but they always smell delightful.” Victor smiled graciously.

I moved to the coffee table to pour coffee and tea for everyone. Val and Gray both tried to catch my eye, but I wasn’t in any mood to deal with this. I just needed to know what the werewolves were threatening by bringing my brother here. When I was done, I sat on the ottoman and folded my hands in my lap.

“You were vague on the phone, Alpha. What can I do for you and your pack?” Victor asked.

“It’s been a long time since the area had a proper master vampire. I was hoping to secure an alliance between our peoples. You’ve been cleaning up your brood. We want to help keep the peace in the area.” The Alpha smiled.

“What exactly do you have to offer? Even with my territory in its current disarray, we are more powerful than your pack. Is this the reason you’ve brought my servant’s brother with you? Are you planning to bargain with the life of her family?” Victor questioned coldly.

I saw Val look at me, but I kept my face cold as well. I wouldn’t let the wolves know how worried I was. Victor would save my sister and brother if he could. He saved me. If nothing else, I’d call Marius and ask him to help.

“Of course not. He wanted to see his sister and asked to come along. Their other sister is still dealing with some... emotional... things. When they talked to their parents, as your servant instructed, they were kicked out of their home and disowned. They don’t blame her, but it upset Harmony a great deal.” Trent said.

“We really don’t, Echo. They were evil, terrible people.” Val insisted.

“Did they give you the money they promised?” I asked.

“No. We don’t need their money. Cam is a werewolf. The pack promised to take care of me and Harmony since she’s his mate.” Val said.



“I will give you the money they were supposed to give you. Echo allowed herself to be sold to secure that financial future for you. I will not let her intentions be thwarted by selfish creatures.” Victor promised.

If I could have smiled at him, I would have, but I was in work mode and couldn't be anything but his servant. Later, I planned to give him the biggest hug.

“We don't want any money from you, either. You bought our sister. If you want to give us something, give us Echo.” Val replied with a growl.

“No.” I said.

He looked shocked at my dismissal of his request. If they were safe, then I wanted to stay with Victor. I didn't have anything else, and I was sure Gray had influenced this request with his 'mate' talk.

“Echo, you don't have to stay here. We can take you somewhere safe. Just come with us. Please.” Val pled.

“No.” I repeated.

“Stop using mind control on her, Nightshade! Let her go!” Gray growled.

“I don't need a dog. I am not unsafe. I am where I belong. This meeting is about an alliance, not about my address. Please stick to the task at hand. I'm giving up my night off for this.” I sneered.

Victor snickered as Gray's face fell. I didn't want to be there, and I wanted to be there even less when they started trying to 'save' me. If the wolf pack was taking care of Val and Harmony, I was fine with that. As long as it was their choice and not because the wolves thought it would buy them leeway with my master.

“What we offer is assistance in whatever capacity you require.” Trent told Victor, getting back to the task at hand.

Gray got a look on his face. It was distant for a moment. Then Trent got the same look. It was pretty weird.

“I'm not pretending anything, Gray. If you can't behave, I'll send you out to the car. When I heard there was a new master vampire in the territory, I knew an alliance would be beneficial to everyone involved. The fact that your mate is his servant only served to help me gain the information we needed to contact him without letting less savory vampires know what we were doing.” Trent scoffed.

Be My Friend Too

## Chapter 25 - The Vampire's Servant

Trent was a good leader. I liked that he put all of his people ahead of his own brother. It showed a lot of responsibility and dedication.

Victor was the same sort of leader. I knew he wouldn't accept terms that had anything to do with my siblings. He needed to do what was best for his people, not what would make me happy.

"Echo, why don't you take the boys to see your video games. I think this is a conversation for leaders. Rosalynn is a member of the Vampire Council, Alpha, I'd like her to stay so she can make record of whatever agreement we come to. Is that acceptable?" Victor asked.

"More than acceptable, Master Nightshade. Gray, behave yourself and go with Echo." Trent ordered.

I stood then led Gray and Val down the hall to the family room. At least I'd straightened up a little before the meeting. Val's eyes went wide when he saw the big TV and all the systems hooked up to it. He walked over and started looking through the games, which I had organized by name and system on the shelves below the individual consoles.

"Nice set up, Echo. Have you had a chance to play much?" Val asked.

"I played all day. I would've still been playing, but I had to work." I sighed heavily.

"Maybe I could come over some time and we could play together." He suggested.

"That would be great! I have Saturdays off and my work load is pretty light during the day. The house is easy to care for. Vampires don't make many big messes and only eat a couple times a week when they're as old as Victor and Rosalynn. Master Marius eats even less when he comes. He told me the tea I make for them has enough blood for him." I smiled.

"So you feed them a couple times a week?" He asked softly.

There was a pained look on his face, like he understood what that meant. I didn't want him to worry. He needed to know I was safe.

I laughed. "No. Victor said I never have to feed anyone ever again. As long as I have his name, I'm safe."

I sat on the couch and laid my head back. I didn't realize that relaxing could be so exhausting, but I just wanted to sleep. Maybe it was the adrenaline spike and drop from seeing Val with the werewolves. It made sense.

Someone sat beside me, I opened my eyes tentatively when they took my hand. It was Val. That was reassuring. If it were Gray, I would've hit him.

"You're really safe? You aren't saying that because he told you to or because of mind control or something?" Val asked.

"I'm immune to mind control and hypnosis, Val. Even from very, very old and powerful vampires. I wouldn't lie to you or to Harmony unless it was to save you from something." I admitted.

"What were you saving us from on Saturday? You sent us away, knowing you wouldn't be there when we got back. You left us with only that note on the door and no explanation. We didn't even get to hug you that day." He said sadly and put an arm over my shoulders.

"I was saving you from whatever Mom and Dad had planned if you guys didn't leave. I didn't know what they'd do, I didn't want to find out. I wasn't even aware I was for sale until they told Victor someone offered one and a half million dollars for me. I was sold, yes, but it was like when an undercover officer buys drugs... except Victor kept me after. I was relocated to his care until I turn eighteen. The council gave Mom and Dad a warning not to try and sell you or Harmony or they'd die. Vampires don't like repeat offenders." I chuckled.

"You think that's funny?" Val sounded disgusted.

"Yes. I think it's very funny. They thought they were so clever because of what they did, but they weren't clever enough and I was saved from a truly horrible future. Mom and Dad didn't love me because of something I couldn't control. I can't forgive what they did because of it.

You don't know how painful it is to feed vampires when they're only interested in their meals and not in making it easier on their donor. Mom was standing right there, holding me down until I finally learned how to keep myself from running away or fighting them. She watched me with disgust while vampires did whatever they wanted. All the way until I was fourteen. Then I was sent into the study with them.

That's when the vampires started doing other things to me. Kissing, pinching, groping, one would grab me really rough and jerk my head to the side so hard, it felt like my neck would break, another would rub himself between my legs and tell me he was going to take my virginity as soon as he got the money together. I don't know how much they wanted for that, but I hoped it was a lot, because it wouldn't have been pleasant. Not for me, at least." I'd started crying at some point.

"Echo. I didn't realize. I'm sorry. Don't be sad. You're safe now, right?" Val whispered.

"Victor killed all the vampires who hurt me, Val. He's my friend. Why does everyone want me to leave my friend?" I sobbed.

“I want you to be happy. We didn’t know if you were. I didn’t think you really could be without me and Harmony. I thought, maybe they’d made you think you were.” Val confided.

“I am happy, Val. I get you see you and Harmony at school. I can do what I want. I love taking care of Victor. Please, trust me.” I asked, sniffing.

“Then you stay here. I love you and I want you to have whatever makes you happy.” He said.

“No. Come to the pack lands with us. You aren’t safe here. My brother told me what they do with female dhampyrs. He’s just trying to get your loyalty so you’ll let him breed you with whoever he wants. Or even just for himself. I bet he’s planning to make you fall in love with him and start having babies with you as soon as he can.” Gray asserted.

I thought about what it would mean to have Victor’s babies. We definitely couldn’t be friends after that. The things Mr. Caine used to whisper before he bit me, flooded into my mind. I had to push it away. Victor was my friend. I couldn’t do any of the things that were racing through my mind. Even if they made me feel tingly.

Gray sneered. “Did you just get aroused from me saying he was planning to breed you? Your parents really did mess you up.” He knelt in front of me. “Why do you want a vampire, but not me? What did I do wrong? Is it because I’m a werewolf? Can I change your mind? I can fix you. I want to make you whole. Please, Echo. Come home with me.”

“You were disgusted by something I couldn’t control. Then you insulted me. When I do something that confuses or upsets Victor, he talks to me. He doesn’t call me ‘messed up’. You get too close too fast. You expect me to jump on board with this matchmaker goddess business without any thought to my life. And you seem to think I don’t understand what does and doesn’t make me safe. Victor told me he doesn’t want to have babies with me. He told Rosalynn, he doesn’t want to marry me. I know a lot better than you what happens to female dhampyrs. I was already saved. I don’t need you.” I glared.

“Give me a chance, Echo. You’re always running away from me. I thought it was because you were afraid of them getting mad. I messed up. I got upset. Just, be my friend, too. Please?” He pled softly.

I looked into his eyes. They were so sincere. Dang it. I wanted to tell him no and be mean, but he was asking for friendship, not marriage. I wanted friends. I wanted friends more than anything.

“I can agree to be your friend. You try to make it more and I’m done. You try to hurt my master or my family, and I’ll get my sire then we’ll come after you in a way you really don’t want.” I warned.

“If your master hurts you, I’m going to hurt him. It’s my nature to protect my friends. Like Val and Harmony. I’ll keep them safe, too.” He promised.

“Okay, then. Can you back up? You’re too close.” I muttered.

Gray smiled and moved to the couch on the other side of Val. We all sat quietly. I didn't know what to talk about. I just wanted to go to bed or eat something.

My stomach growled, giving away my secret.

"I thought you said you had a lot to eat." Val said sternly.

"I got wrapped up in my game and forgot about dinner until eight. Then I had to change and get things ready for the werewolf issue, so I didn't have a chance. I don't eat in work mode or in front of guests of my master. I'll have something once you all leave." I assured him. "Don't be mad. I'm already going to have a lecture from Victor about this."

"Come on. We're getting you some food. I'll let your master know and we'll take you to get some burgers or something." Val said, pulling me from the couch.

I followed them down the hall. Would Victor be mad if I let them interrupt? I needed to take control of the situation.

"You guys wait here, I'll let Victor know. It's better if I do this." I told them.

Peeking into the living room, I saw everyone deep in discussion. There was a map pulled out and a pile of papers stacked on the table. I really didn't want to bother them.

"Echo. What's going on? Are you alright?" Victor asked, turning to me.

I forgot that he could smell me. It was embarrassing to be caught sneaking around, even though I was planning to talk to him. I stepped into the room.

"Val and Gray would like to take me to get dinner, since my meal was delayed, master. May I go, or will you be needing me?" I asked.

"Is this a trick to get my servant out of my house, Alpha?" Victor said coolly.

"I haven't authorized anything like that. As I said, she's safe here, there's no reason to try and remove her from your care." He shrugged.

"Go ahead, Echo. Make sure you have your phone on you and call if there's a problem." Victor ordered.

"Yes, master. We'll return as soon as possible." I said and bowed before leaving.

I Would Never

## Chapter 26 - The Vampire's Servant

[Victor]

I'd been impressed by the Alpha's decision to put aside his brother's desire for my Echo in lieu of forming an alliance. He said he'd decided to use his brother's stubbornness to gain the information he needed. If he'd asked him to try and find out, Grayson wouldn't have done anything. The boy didn't like vampires and wouldn't have supported an alliance to the rest of the pack.

By saying they were forming an alliance to get in to see me about Echo, Grayson would be inclined to help convince the majority of the pack. Apparently, they all liked the pup a little more than they liked his brother. He won them over easily and there was no pushback from the pack. It was brilliant.

"He better not try and kidnap her." I told Trent quietly.

"If he does, I'll kick his ass and bring her back. I dug into dhampyrs, I know she was property from the moment she was born. Created to serve a vampire in any way they desire." He replied. "Much like an omega, she's unable to care for herself in the world. She needs to be owned by a more powerful being. You treat her well. She doesn't hunch or shy away from people. She isn't intimidated by werewolves. She knows she's safe."

I didn't like that he said she was born to be property, but he wasn't wrong. It's what we'd turned them into. She was so different from any dhampyr I'd ever met. I think the difference was in being raised by humans. Never knowing what the future actually held for her. Having the chance to realistically dream of freedom.

"Echo is my trusted servant. I don't view her as property. I would like her returned if the boy does get any ideas. She told me she felt nothing when he touched her. She is not his mate. Make sure he understands that." I stated.

"That makes things difficult. She needs to properly reject him, if that's the case. Whatever it was he was attached to, isn't there anymore. Maybe that connection died the first time her mother let a vampire feed on her, maybe it died when you saved her instead of him. He came to me the night he met her insisting we had to save her from you. He thinks you're planning to use her to make babies for profit, or something." He shrugged.

"That's disgusting. I would never. Let's just get back to work. I want the whole thing wrapped up before morning. This alliance will benefit us both in the long run. We can deal with your brother later." I sighed.

We focused again on where our territories overlapped and what issues he'd had with vampires. He had a lot of information on what other supernatural beings resided in the territory, and the wolf packs that fell in my borders. He promised to email me their contact information. I believed in peaceful co-existence whenever possible.

Echo and the boys returned and went straight back to the television room. I smiled a little. She told me how much she wanted friends. These ones were her age, at least. Maybe tomorrow I'd have her show me how the games worked. She'd probably like that.

By four in the morning, we'd finally gotten an agreement we both found acceptable hammered out. It contained dispute procedure, rules of conduct between individuals and businesses, guidelines for alliance in battle, and cooperative planning for territory expansion.

It was one of the most comprehensive and progressive agreements I'd seen between a master and an alpha. Rosalynn was thrilled to send it into the council. It would make my territory a test site for future relations between species.

"I think that covers everything, Master Nightshade." Trent smiled.

"It seems so, Alpha Padua. I look forward to working with you in the future." I held out my hand and he shook it heartily.

"Our territory will benefit greatly from this. I can feel it. I'll go get the boys and head home." He yawned.

"We have several guest rooms. If they're as tired as you are, then none of you are in any condition to drive. Your pack lands are outside of town. I would rather not have our newly formed alliance dissolve because you died in a car accident. Rosy, I'll go with Alpha Padua to get the kids. Will you take everything to the office?"

"Yes, Master Nightshade. I need to get my report in before bed anyway." She smiled.

I led him down the hall to the television room. When I opened the door, I found Echo and her brother playing a racing game and Gray stretched out on the couch, sleeping. She looked so happy, I felt badly about disturbing them.

"Echo. It's four in the morning. Would you show our guests to some rooms, please?" I asked.

Echo stopped the game and turned it off, helping her brother up. Trent woke his brother and explained that they would stay the rest of the night. The boy looked happy about it and I made the decision to lock my bedroom door. I still didn't trust him.

"I'll show you to your rooms. Since it's so late, I'll make a brunch at eleven so you won't have to leave on an empty stomach." Echo stated and led them out of the room.

I was pleased she was doing well. I'd thought she would have been more upset about her brother being with the wolves, but she handled the situation very professionally. No one would be able to use her family to affect my choices. She refused to let it be a weakness for us.

Heading back to my office, I worked on the information Silence and Talon were able to get me last night about the population of the area. We estimated that there were seventy-five vampires

living in this city. There were more throughout the entire territory. It would be important to get them tied to me as soon as possible.

This was a much larger territory than the council initially thought and my taking over could have dire consequences. I knew from Trent that it housed a growing pack that was becoming more powerful by the day, far more powerful than his pack. There was also an extremely large rogue collective that had its seat in the powerful pack's lands.

Normally rogues and pack wolves wouldn't form more than a superficial alliance. These two leaders were trying to do what I was. Make an unprecedented union. I would need to get in contact with them. Maybe securing an alliance with the two leaders would strengthen my hold.

Silence suggested sending the vampires a survey online. I hadn't realized how adept at technology other vampires had become in the last fifteen years. Single minded focus tends to make one less observant about general situations.

The room lightened as dawn approached. I headed to bed as soon as I'd gotten my files and computer locked up. As I had the night before, I set the blanket to warm up my bed while I showered and changed. Before I climbed into bed, I threw the locks so no one could get in.

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[Gray]

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I woke up late Sunday morning to the smell of bacon, sausage, and some sort of pastry. My mouth watered. It took a moment to realize I wasn't at the pack house or my parents' house. I remembered that I'd stayed at the vampire's place overnight.

Now would be the best time to find out where he slept. I'd honor my agreement with Echo. I wouldn't harm him if he didn't hurt her. But, I would be prepared.

The hallways were well lit and I could see that most of the rooms had numbers. One room had an 'E' on it and I could smell Echo's scent. It must be her room. The smell of vampire was coming from the room across from it. It wasn't marked by any number.

I tried the handle, but it was locked. That was definitely his room. I didn't like that it was right across from my mate's. Rex growled. There was nothing we could do right now. She wouldn't take kindly to us insisting she move rooms.

Heading downstairs, I bumped into Trent. He was watching the kitchen from the archway. I looked in and saw Echo putting things on platters and Val setting the table. She was still perfect. I loved watching her move around the kitchen.

"Gray. I needed to tell you something Victor told me last night." Trent said in a low voice.



“What?” I asked.

“When you touched Echo, she didn’t feel anything. It’s likely that she was your mate at one point, but isn’t anymore. Do you understand what that means?” He asked.

“I didn’t think that was possible. How do I get her back? How could that even happen? Are you sure she wasn’t lying so he wouldn’t be mad?” I questioned.

“I don’t know. We can ask her, but I don’t know how much she’ll feel comfortable telling. We may have to have her reject you so you can find your second chance mate. It could be your only choice.” He replied.

“But, I want Echo. Look at her. She’s so sweet and innocent. She made a big meal for us without being told to by her master because she wanted us to be healthy. Echo agreed to be my friend. I was going to work on making her love me. Did her parents mess her up so much that our connection was lost or something? Was it becoming his servant that did it?” I was confused. She was supposed to be mine.

“Let’s see what we can find out and consult with the Association. Maybe they know how to get her back, but you might not get what you’re looking for, Gray.” He sighed.

“I won’t stop until she’s mine, Trent. I’m never giving her up. She needed me and I didn’t even know. I’m not going to leave because this relationship isn’t easy.” I vowed.

“You’ll have to learn the hard way then. This is selfish, Gray. I think you need to let her go. Let her be happy without you. Find a new mate.”

“Alpha? Gray? Are you going to join us or keep whispering in the doorway?” Echo asked.

I pushed past my brother and took a seat opposite Val. That way she had to sit next to me. Echo brought a pitcher of juice and sat between me and Val.

It was exciting to have her so close. Rex was happy to be near her. All I had to do was be a friend to her until she was ready to make it more. And I would.

Sunday Plans

## Chapter 27 - The Vampire's Servant

After breakfast, Val asked Echo if he could stay for a few hours. She looked a little nervous at the idea. I can imagine she didn’t like the idea of people being here while her master slept.

The more time I spent with her, the more I could feel our bond grow. I was understanding her a little more. She liked things a certain way and when things upset her plans, they upset her as well.

I convinced him to make a plan for staying over next weekend. It gained me a grateful smile from Echo. Just one of the ways I was planning to convince her to love me. I would make sure she was always comfortable and in control.

She'd spent most of her life under someone else's control. I should have seen it earlier. She wouldn't see the goddess choosing her for me as a gift. She would see it as yet another being who had more power controlling her life.

The goddess had chosen me for a reason. I needed to figure out all the ways I could give Echo the life she deserved. I would start small and work my way into her life as gently as I could.

"Do you have your class list?" I asked Echo as I helped gather up dirty dishes.

"Yes. It's in my room." She replied, not looking at me.

"I can wash these, why don't you go grab it. Val and I can tell you what classes you have with us, Harmony, or Cam." I smiled.

"Are you sure? It's kinda my job."

"I work in a restaurant. I can wash a load of dishes, Echo. I'm not completely useless." I groaned.

She laughed and left the room. Making her laugh was definitely one of the highlights of my whole week. I would cherish the sound until I could make it happen again.

Val came over and helped with cleaning up. He had a slight smile as we worked to load the dishwasher and put away the juice and stuff. It reminded me of Echo's smile a little.

"I always wanted to take over her work and let her rest when we were kids. I was hoping to help her clean the house today so she could have more time to play." He said.

"Echo has things the way she likes them. I bet she was thinking you might be a distraction. Making a plan ahead of time will give her a chance to figure things out, then you can offer to help while you're here."

"When did you become so patient and wise?" Trent snorted.

"When I fell in love with someone who needed more understanding than I had in me up to that point. I'll grow and change like Echo needs me to. I'm not going to lose." I grinned.

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Echo came down, roughly, when we'd finished cleaning and putting everything away. She looked around and checked our work before smiling, then took us to the living room. It was a bit of a mess from the night before, but she told us to leave it and she would take care of it after we were gone.

Val and I reluctantly agreed. Neither of us wanted to upset her by stepping out of line. The place was under her rule now that Victor was sleeping. Instead, I'd work on a way to win her during the days we'd have together.

Looking at her class schedule, I saw that she had English and Science with me. She had Math with only Val, History with Val and Harmony, Creative Writing with Harmony and Cam, and Gym with Harmony in the afternoon. She had Home Room alone, though. It was too late in the year to try and change any of our schedules. So, she would just have to be alone.

"I guess the positive is that I'll know someone in most of my classes." She said softly.

"You'll have a chance to make friends in Home Room. It's only a thirty-minute class for announcements and stuff at the beginning of the day. You have first period free like me and Harmony." I told her. "We can show you around the school."

"Thank you, Gray." Echo smiled. "I really appreciate it. Unfortunately, I have to ask you all to leave now. My master is sleeping and I have cleaning to do."

"Okay, Echo. We'll head out and see you tomorrow at school. Have a good day." I replied.

"See you tomorrow, Echo. I love you." Val said, pulling her into a hug.

I tried not to be jealous of him getting a hug. He was her brother, after all, and I was just her friend. One day it would be me getting hugs, I knew I'd get there. I had the drive and the desire. I wouldn't lose to Victor.

"I love you, too, Valley. Tell Harmony I'll see her tomorrow and that I love her as well. Oh! Before I forget, Rosalynn wants to test you and Harmony. Maybe we can do that when you come over next weekend."

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"I have a lot of vampire blood in me. They want to see if you're a low level dhampyr or a higher level, like me. Marius says we'll be protected as descendants of his sire. We'd get you vampire last names. Probably Marius', actually." She told him.

"What's his last name?" Val asked.

"Aconitum." Echo smiled.

I looked at my brother with wide eyes. He bit his lips together to stop himself from laughing. That was the weirdest coincidence.

“So... Harmony would be Harmony Aconitum?” I asked.

“Yes.” She responded curiously. “Why?”

“Do you know what plants are in the genus Aconitum?” Trent snickered.

“No.”

“Wolf’s Bane. It’s severely toxic and one of the few poisons that can kill a werewolf. It would definitely be an interesting name to add to our rolls.” Trent chuckled.

“Wow. That is pretty funny. Anyway, I have work to do. You guys should go. We can plan for next weekend at lunch tomorrow. I just need to run it by Victor.” Echo said, ushering us out to the entryway.

We said our goodbyes and headed to the car. Val quickly decided to give Echo his cell number and made her promise to text him. I would get her number from her at some point. It would be a sign that she was accepting me.

The drive back home was quiet. Trent was pleased with himself. I was a little mad that he’d lied to me, but I understood. He was trying to do something good for the pack. That was his priority, not my heart.

“Do you think she’s really happy?” Val asked softly.

“She seemed happy. I talked to Victor and he said she smiles and laughs often. She has a lot of freedom; a lot more than she would have had if anyone else had bought her. His home is the best place for her. Your sister would be in a lot of danger anywhere else.” Trent assured him.

“I’m glad someone saved her. I just wish it wasn’t a vampire. Can we even trust him?” Val wondered.

“Trusting vampires isn’t something that comes easily to werewolves. He seemed sincere when we talked. He might just be the most trustworthy vampire I’ve ever met. If it seems like she’s in danger, we’ll contact the Werewolf Association. One of them has connections in the Vampire High Council. Until then, let’s see where it goes.” Trent said.

I thought about it. Vampires would be after her all the time if she weren’t claimed by Victor. Once I won her, I’d let her keep his name so she’d be safe. I could live with that. Nothing would make me give her up.

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[Echo]

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I was relieved when they left. It felt like they were looking for reasons to stick around, and I had work to do. Even though it was nice to see Val safe, I couldn't let my work fall by the wayside. Taking care of Victor was important to me.

It was nice that Gray was trying so hard to be my friend. Maybe he realized that was all I was able to give. Whatever it was, it was exactly what I needed. Having Victor at home and Gray at school, would make me safer in general.

The cleaning in the living room, game room, and all three bedrooms took most of my morning. I didn't mind it too much, though. The idea of being able to have Val, and maybe Harmony, stay the night next weekend was exciting. I missed them terribly.

Once I finished my lunch, I moved the laundry to the dryer and put together snack trays for whoever would be coming to feed Victor and Rosalynn. I hoped it was someone other than Ms. Helen. I really didn't like her. I'd rather feed him myself than let her anywhere near my master.

.... Where did that thought come from?

Ever since Drew talked about having a very intimate relationship with his master, little things like that had been creeping into my head. Like last night, when I thought of what it would be like to have his babies. I didn't want any of that.

I didn't want Victor to bite me, I didn't want him to breed me, and I didn't want our relationship to grow any further than a friendship. He was my master. Not my boyfriend, mate, or whatever it was vampires had. My teeth itched just thinking about it.

Before I realized it, I was in front of his room, unlocking his door. I shook my head and decided it was because I needed to wash his clothes and get him fresh towels. Once I had everything, I locked his door again and went to gather clothing items from Rosalynn's room.

After the laundry was started, I focused on making sure I had everything for school. My backpack was packed up, I made a lunch and put it in the fridge to take with me, and I pulled out the clothes I would wear. I was finally going to go to a real school for the first time ever, and I was more excited than I could even explain.

The Night Before

## Chapter 28 - The Vampire's Servant

After everything was done, I had a few hours to myself and decided to play some more games. I'd never really gotten to just play before, and it was a lot of fun. When my alarm went off, I turned off the game and headed up to turn on the blankets for Victor and Rosalynn.

I went back down to the kitchen to pull out the prepared snack trays for the donors. I wondered if I could ask Victor not to request Ms. Helen anymore. I didn't want to make him mad, but I didn't like her at all. There had to be other options.

While I was wrapped up in my work, I didn't hear Victor come down, until he was standing right beside me. I nearly jumped out of my skin. I hadn't realized I was that focused.

"What's wrong, princess? Did they bother you this morning?" He asked.

"No. I just got really distracted by my thoughts."

"What were you thinking?"

I didn't know how to answer him. I really wanted to ask him not to feed on Ms. Helen. He looked concerned at my pause.

"Echo, you can tell me anything that's bothering you. I'm your friend, not just your master. I want to be able to help." Victor insisted.

"I don't really know if I can say it, Victor." I blushed.

"Please, tell me."

"It's just.... I don't like Ms. Helen. She keeps trying to get me to go out with her and something about her rubs me the wrong way. I don't know what to do about it." I admitted.

"I'll request someone else, then. This is your home too, Echo. You shouldn't be uncomfortable here." He said.

"Thank you, Victor. I just didn't know if I could ask that of you. If she's the type you like, I don't want you to have to go with a second choice."

"I prefer negative types. There are enough to find another. I won't starve for it. Plus, I have bags of blood until another donor can be arranged." He smiled.

"I'm a negative type." I murmured.

"I don't feed off of children, Echo. You are under age and were traumatized by feeding vampires. I'll never ask you to do that." Victor replied, taking my hand in his.

I looked up into his violet eyes and smiled. He was taking care of me in the best way he knew how. I wanted to take better care of him, though.

“It’s not the same as if I were someone who’d never fed them. I understand what I’m offering, Victor. If Silence can’t find you a donor for your next live feeding, then I can feed you.” I said.

“Sorry, Echo. Marius has forbidden anyone to feed on you until your full abilities can be measured. You’re rare. There are older vampires who can’t resist his mind control, but you managed it as a living being. He’s concerned that you are a lot more powerful than we could have guessed. He thinks that power will be too hard for any vampire to resist once you’re healthy.” He explained.

The thought of being powerful appealed to me a little. Being strong was just a mindset until recently. My heart raced at the memory of Marius telling me that he was afraid he might drain me and make a more powerful vampire than himself.

My thoughts were broken through by Rosalynn entering the room with a frustrated groan. Victor and I turned to her. He released my hand.

“What’s going on, Rosy?” Victor asked.

“I just got a call from Giselle. There’s some fuckery going on in my territory. I need to head home.”

“We still need to test Valor and Harmony.” I said.

“Right. Do you think they can come tomorrow instead of later in the week? I need to get back as soon as I can.” She asked.

“I can ask. Val gave me his cellphone number.” I offered.

“We can call Trent and ask him to talk to them. Your brother gave you that number for you, not to be shared with me. I’ll let you know what happens, Echo. Why don’t you get your dinner situated? The sooner you’re healthy, the sooner we know what you can do.” Victor told me, walking over to Rosalynn and taking her arm.

“Thank you. I’ll have your donors wait in the living room once they get here.” I replied with a small bow.

They left without another word and I started preparing my dinner. I was excited. He’d stop seeing Ms. Helen and Rosalynn would be leaving. I missed the time when it was just me and him.

I shook my head. That wasn’t right. I shouldn’t be selfish with Victor’s time. He was in charge of a whole territory. I didn’t own him.

The buzzer rang and I went to let the donors in. A man answered at the gate. That was certainly different. I was relieved to see two men getting out of the car that approached. No Ms. Helen tonight. The other wasn’t Mr. Glen either.

“May I have your names?” I asked when they approached the door.

“I’m Malik.” The first man said.

“I’m John.” The second one answered.

There was something wrong. They had the code words at the gate, but I didn’t like something about them. I could feel my heart in my throat, but couldn’t put my finger on why.

They were both about six feet tall, Malik was dark skinned with black hair and eyes. John had reddish brown hair with blue eyes and a tan. When they came a little closer, I could see there weren’t any bite marks on their necks.

“Would you please have a seat on the bench until my master and his guest are ready to see you?” I asked politely.

“No problem.” John said with a nod.

I closed and locked the door, then went to Victor’s office. Knocking on the door, it felt like I waited forever for him to answer. Once he did, I rushed into the room.

“Victor. The donors are here, but they don’t seem right. I don’t like them at all. I didn’t let them in. It didn’t feel safe.” I explained hastily.

“Calm down. Is this the same bad feeling you get from Ms. Helen?” Victor asked.

“Yes, and no. I get a bad feeling from her, but I get a danger feeling from them. I can’t let them in. I’m afraid. They’re bad men, Victor.” I pressed.

“One of Marius’ children used to have a talent for seeing the true heart in a man. Maybe Echo inherited it as well. It would be a good idea to trust her if she says she doesn’t like them.” Rosalynn told Victor.

I had never been so grateful for anything in my life. Even if he didn’t believe me, he had to believe her. I looked at him expectantly.

“They’re inside the fences. It’s still thirty minutes until the sun will be gone enough for us to go outside. If they don’t know our age, they won’t be expecting us to be up. Echo, I want you to go get your dinner quickly, then head to your room with it. Lock your door, don’t come out until morning, or I come get you. Do you understand?” Victor replied urgently.

“You’ll come tell me you’re okay when they’re gone, right?” I asked.

“Of course. I’m not going to let you worry. Go fast. I don’t know how patient they’ll be.” He told me.



Quickly, I rushed out of the office and to the kitchen. I was just about to grab my plate when I heard the door opening. I ducked down and scuttled to the pantry, opening and closing the door as quietly as I could.

“Victor. They’re in the house. I’m hiding in the pantry.” I whispered. “I hope you can hear me.”

There was no response I could hear, but the careful footsteps of the men seemed to get louder. I sat on the floor of the pantry, clutching my knees, trying to be as silent and small as I could. They must be getting closer.

“Where’s the girl gone?” One of them asked quietly.

“She couldn’t have guessed we were hunters. She must be waking her master up. I thought they didn’t wake until full dark, though.” The other said.

“They wake up on their own. She can’t be waking him. She must be around here somewhere. The last thing we need is a servant getting in our way. Imagine the credibility we’ll get for taking out the master of the territory.” The first man replied with a dreamy tone. “We need to find the basement.”

My teeth started itching again. That was happening more today than it had in the past. It usually happened if I got angry, which didn’t happen often. It was why I was surprised by it earlier in the day. I wasn’t mad about anything, but I certainly was angry now.

“What are you doing in my house?” I heard Victor growl.

“Shit! He’s awake! Stay back, we have silver bullets.” One of the men commanded.

“Then you’re idiots as well as trespassers. Silver bullets only kill werewolves. That handgun isn’t powerful enough to take off my head or take out my heart. The most you’ll do is make me angry. I’m certain that wasn’t your intent.” Victor laughed derisively.

“How about this?” The other said forcefully.

Victor laughed again. “Are you here to pedal your religion? Thank you, but I must decline. Do you have anything that didn’t come from storybooks? Or is that all the knowledge you have of vampires?”

“Oh, fuck! Where did she come from?!”

There was some scuffling and screams. I covered my ears and waited for it to be over. Tears fell from my eyes. I just wanted it to be over.

It didn’t take too long before the pantry door opened and I saw Victor drop down to his knees in front of me. There was blood on his clothes, on his face, and on his hands. I wasn’t scared of him. I knew what he was and what he could do.

“Everything is alright, Echo. We took care of them. They won’t hurt anyone again.” He said soothingly.

“Wh...what’s a h-hunter, Victor?” I whimpered.

“They’re humans who don’t like supernaturals, sweetheart. I’m sorry you had to witness that. Are you unharmed?” Victor asked gently.

“I’m scared. Why did they want to kill you? You didn’t do anything, right?”

“Nothing other than not being human. Come out of the pantry, Echo. I want you to try and eat your dinner while Rosy and I clean up and call Silence. Come talk to me if you’re still scared, but I want you to know that I will never let anyone harm you. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I trust you.” I replied.

He helped me up and I went to wash my hands before sitting at the table for my, now cold, dinner. I really didn’t want to go to school tomorrow. What if more hunters came for Victor while he was sleeping?

#### Further Study

## Chapter 29 - The Vampire's Servant

I was eating my dinner when I heard Marius in the entryway where Victor and Rosalynn were working. I tried to focus on my food, but it was hard with the noise of their talking. I ended up listening in on their conversation.

“I’ll return shortly with some of my staff to help with this mess. Where is Echo?” Marius asked.

“She’s having her dinner in the kitchen. I checked on her, she’s uninjured.” Victor answered.

“Good. Go get cleaned up. I’ll bring my staff to clean this mess and we can dispose of their vehicle once she’s in bed.”

He must have left because I could hear Victor and Rosalynn heading up the stairs. Their footsteps were heavier than normal. That must have made them tired.

I got up and started a kettle with water. I would make them some tea to help calm them down and make them feel better. Then I wouldn’t be useless Echo anymore.

Once the water was started, I went to get the blood out of the fridge. I thought again. They'd been protecting me. They deserved something more.

I went to the doorway by the entryway and made sure not to look. Soon, Marius' voice was resonating in the area as he gave directions to his people. I called out to him softly and he seemed to appear in front of me.

"Echo. Don't go in there. Are you alright?" He asked.

"I'm fine. Just shaken." I took a moment to explain what had happened. "I wanted to ask for your help."

"You want to live somewhere safer? I can take you home with me. You'll have everything you could want or need. I find myself worrying about you rather more than I thought I would." Marius admitted.

"No. I want to stay with Victor. Could you get me a cotton ball with your saliva again? I want to use my blood for the tea." I told him.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because they fought to protect me and my blood is stronger than the blood we have in the fridge. I want to give them an extra boost since they fought so hard." I replied with a blush.

"You really are too sweet, Echo. Victor doesn't realize how lucky he is to have you for his servant... or maybe he does. I'll help you, but I want you to agree to be trained in fighting. You need to be able to protect yourself during the day and to protect Victor as well."

"Yes, please. I hate being a burden on him. I'll learn to fight." I smiled.

It was true. I was berating myself the whole time I was in the pantry. I wanted to have some sort of future with Victor, but I couldn't do it if I was this useless. I needed to learn how to protect myself.

Marius went to the bathroom and returned with the cotton ball right as the kettle was starting to whistle. I pulled out a glass and a knife in preparation. I was far more confident in it than I had been the last time I cut my finger.

The blood poured into the cup and I cleaned the cut. It was smoother than the last time as well. I finished mixing the tea with the blood and rinsed the cup so Victor wouldn't refuse it.

"I'll go get them and bring them to have tea while you finish your dinner. I don't want you to see the mess they made. My people are thorough and won't leave a single spot behind. No one will ever have to know what happened." Marius assured me.

"Thank you, Marius. I really appreciate everything you're doing to help me and Victor."

“No. Not you and Victor. I am doing this solely for you. You are my family. I have none left and will care for you as much as I can.” He said firmly.

“Thank you either way. I am happy to be your family.”

“Don’t go telling people I’m actually this soft. There would be others who would try to use you to get favor with me. Not Victor, but others. The world of vampires tends to be fairly cutthroat.” Marius told me.

I finished the tea and put the tea service in the middle of the kitchen table. I sat at my seat and started to eat again. My food wasn’t as tasty as it should have been and I didn’t know if it was my nerves or the temperature, but I ate it anyway.

Victor and Rosalynn came into the kitchen and sat down, pouring tea for themselves and for Marius. He settled in with them and sipped his tea with a reverent look on his face. They all seemed to visibly relax as they drank.

Once I finished my food, I worked on cleaning up the kitchen while they quietly had another cup. I hoped that it would help them feel better. I really wanted Victor to be healthy and happy.

“I didn’t think we had AB- in the fridge.” He said with a tone that made me worry.

“This tea does taste very familiar.” Rosalynn murmured.

“I don’t think this counts as breaking the rules. You didn’t drink it from her. Just like the test didn’t break the rules.” Marius replied.

I stared at him. How could he out me like that? Although, maybe they were starting to pick up on it. Still, it was rude.

“Echo. I told you no.” Victor chided. “Don’t do this again.”

“She wanted you to feel better. The blood of a dhampyr of her level can help you to heal, regain energy, and feel better in general. Don’t be harsh with her over this. She was being a good servant.” Marius told him.

“I don’t want her giving up her blood because of some misguided idea that it’s better. She gave up enough already. I won’t be like those vampires who fed on her before.”

“You’re not like them! I wanted to do this. I wasn’t forced to. I want you to be healthy. You take care of me and want me to be healthy. The way you two were walking so heavily made me worry you’d worn yourselves out fighting. Please, don’t be mad at me. I was so worried.” I insisted.

Victor moved quickly from the table to where I stood and pulled me into his arms. He held me and rocked me gently. I loved the feeling. It was safe and comforting.

“I’m not mad. You shouldn’t worry. I’m old enough to take care of myself. I was worried about you the whole time. Hunters can do very bad things to human servants. They’re no real match for us unless they can find our daytime resting place. The location of my home was a secret only shared with my lieutenants, the Alpha, and the donors. That means someone talked. Trust that I will find out who and they will be silenced.”

“You don’t think it was Gray, do you?” I asked.

“No. Hunters hate werewolves as much as they hate vampires. Hunters almost never work with werewolves and would just as soon have another wolf dead than accept his money and go after a harder target. You were very smart to hide. They might have hurt you or used you as a shield.”

“Marius wants me to learn how to fight. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes. I was thinking the same thing. We need to find someone to teach you though. You need to learn to fight with the abilities you have as a dhampyr as well. I am at a bit of a loss.” Victor said after he released me.

“I know precisely who we need to train her. I’ll make the appropriate calls. You will house the trainers when they come and make sure they are fed.” Marius stated in a commanding tone.

“Yes, Master Marius. I appreciate your help. We will take care of whomever you send to help my Echo.” Victor replied with a bow.

I loved it when he called me his Echo. It actually made me feel like I was wanted. I was actually wanted by someone who didn’t only think of what I could do for them. My being his servant was one thing, sure, but it wasn’t the only reason he kept me. Victor wanted to give me a better life.

“You’re healing well, Echo. This is the first of your gifts to manifest, aside from being immune to mind control.” Marius smiled. “I wonder what other talents you have. So far, these are great defensive abilities. I can’t wait to see how you grow.”

“She will start a very powerful line when she begins her second life.” Rosalynn said with a nod. “Both of those are rare abilities.”

I blushed. It was difficult to think of my second life. The one that would happen after I died. Hopefully, it was a long time off. Victor said I could end up living for a very long time naturally. Drew told me that you stop aging when you accept your master’s servant mark. Either way, I was in for a long life before that one ever started.

“You need to go get some rest, Echo. Take a bath, calm your mind. There is nothing that you need to be concerned with now; only getting enough rest for school in the morning.” Victor said.

“Who will take care of you during the day? What if more hunters come?” I asked.

“Echo, you’re no match for hunters. I’d rather you were at school, safely with your sister and brother. I will contact Trent about having some warriors assigned to walk the perimeter. It would make good use of my agreement with him.” He replied.

“Alright. I’ll go. Will I see you in the morning?” I asked.

“Of course you will. I want to see you off to school. Go on, sweetheart. Everything will be alright now.” He kissed me on the forehead and gave me another hug before letting me go again.

“I’ll take the back stairs, so I don’t interrupt Marius’ people. Good night.” I said with a slight bow and left.

It was only just nine o’clock. I knew a bath would help calm me down. Just knowing Victor wasn’t mad was helping a lot. I needed to rest before school. I hoped my first day wouldn’t be difficult. I really didn’t need that after tonight.

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[Victor]

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After Echo left, I went to sit at the table again. I stared at the teapot. The power in her blood was stronger than it had been when we’d tested it. Eating regularly and properly had strengthened her.

Rosalynn picked up the pot and refilled everyone’s cups. Master Marius watched me as if he was waiting to see what I’d do. I didn’t know myself.

“The blood will be wasted if we don’t drink it, Victor. You know you still want it. Her blood is hard to resist.” Rosy said.

“I didn’t want to be like them. I didn’t want to use her.” I repeated.

The draw of having her blood again made it hard to resist. Echo wasn’t food. She was my friend, my servant, my.... No. Not my heart. I loved her, but not like that. I wouldn’t give in to the pull of the blood.

“She’s impressive. She could tell you were tired from the sound of your footsteps and that her blood would be better for you than normal human blood. Victor, she’s more intuitive than any human or dhampyr I’ve ever met. She knew instinctively when and how to lie to Silence’s servant and to those hunters. She’s already shown a lot of qualities of a successful vampire.” Master Marius told me as he sipped his tea.

“There’s another ability she has that she doesn’t realize.” I replied.

“What is it?” He asked.

“When she was hiding in the pantry. I heard her telling me in my head. I tried to answer back in the same way, but she didn’t respond.”

“We’ll have to test it when she’s not as upset. It might just be the way she’s bonded with you trying to create the servant connection or it might be something completely new. Maybe the ability to communicate mentally with other vampires. That’s an unheard of talent.” He said.

“Master Marius, would you be willing to take me home tomorrow evening? I have urgent business in my territory, but I have to complete the test on the other two children.” Rosy requested.

“Of course, but you better not tell anyone about this or my ability. It’s a secret for a reason. My servant is waving to me. They’re done. Get rid of the car. We’ll take the body parts with us to be disposed of in my territory. Find out who told and make sure they never speak again. If I find out Echo is in danger, I’m taking her home with me. That child’s life is important. She cannot begin her second life until she’s healed. With the memory loss, she might end up only remembering vampires hurt her and get herself killed trying to kill everyone who might have done anything to her.” Master Marius warned.

“I’ll have a wolf guard starting as soon as possible. She’ll be trained and I’ll get her healed, Master Marius. I promise, you’ll never have to worry.” I vowed.

“Do not make promises you have no way of keeping, Victor. Especially not to me.” He replied darkly as he rose to leave. “You will not like the result of my disappointment.”

Master Marius headed to the entry and soon I felt his power leave the house. I drank the tea in front of me without thinking. The threat in his warning was clear. I would work even harder not to be on the wrong side of him.

The Boy on the Bus

## Chapter 30 - The Vampire's Servant

[Echo]

I worried all night about more hunters coming. It invaded my dreams and woke me from a dead sleep several times. I hated the idea of strangers coming into our home trying to hurt my Victor.

He did nothing but exist and these men thought they had the right to come and try to kill him. Victor said that they hunted werewolves too. I wondered if anyone was safe from people like this.

Tiredly, I dressed in jeans and a button up t-shirt. When Val messaged me last night, he said Harmony wanted me to know that I should wear something casual, but a little nice. She said it would look bad if I dressed up.

I would have to trust that she knew better than I did. Harmony wouldn't tell me wrong. She loved me as much as I loved her.

As I opened my door, I could smell food cooking. I wondered why someone was cooking. It was strange.

When I reached the kitchen, I saw Victor putting some food onto a plate. He took it to the table and turned to smile at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It's your first day of school. I made you a breakfast. Sit, I'll get you some milk.” He said.

I sat at the table. It was sausage, bacon, and toast. There was a bowl of sliced fruit sitting next to the plate. All things he wouldn't have to need to taste or know the taste of in order to prepare.

Victor put the glass of milk on the table and motioned for me to start eating. He did a wonderful job. I was really happy as I munched on some perfectly cooked bacon.

“I wanted you to have a strong start to the morning. You may have a difficult day, I wanted it to begin well. Remember, you are very important to me. I'll always make sure that you have everything you need. The master/servant relationship doesn't work if it's only one sided. We take care of each other.”

With a smile, I finished eating my breakfast. Victor really was sweet and kind. I hoped he forgave me for the blood tea incident, but I didn't want a scolding first thing in the morning, so I didn't bring it up.

“I'll clean everything up when I get home.” I told him.

“No, I have plenty of time before I have to go to bed. I'll take care of this. Go get your lunch and get to the bus stop. You can't be late for your first day.” He replied, shooing me out of the seat.

I grabbed my lunch from the fridge and picked up my backpack. Victor stopped me and pulled me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around his waist.



For some reason, I didn't mind when Victor was close to me. I had no idea why I had the aversion to Grayson's being nearby. I never had an issue with someone being close to me, who wasn't a vampire, before.

Pulling away, Victor gave me a kiss on the top of my head and let me go. He stroked my hair and caressed my cheek, looking at me like he was trying to memorize everything about me. I really didn't want to go to school, but he wouldn't hear any arguments.

I put on my backpack and headed out the front door. As I hurried to the front gate, I saw someone walking along the perimeter. I remembered the guards he said he would have Trent send. I waved to the man and he waved back.

Before long, I would make sure I knew their names. I wouldn't have people fighting for me who I didn't know. They were part of our household now, at least a little.

I got to the street just before the bus arrived. I'd seen Harmony and Val get on the bus and go off to school for most of my life. I always wondered what it would be like to climb aboard the cheerful yellow bus.

Carefully, I got on. The driver looked at me briefly. I felt nervous as I realized I didn't know what to do.

"Hello, I'm Echo." I said to him.

"Hi, Echo, I'm Harry. Find a seat so we can get moving." He replied.

"It's nice to meet you. Thank you." I smiled and headed to the first empty seat I saw.

There weren't a lot of people on the bus when it picked me up, but we stopped a lot and other people got on. Most ignored me, but a few stared. No one talked to me until one of the last two stops.

I was staring out the window when I saw the reflection of someone pausing next to the seat I was in. Turning, I looked up at the boy who was standing there with a worried look on his face.

He was tall, like Val, but thin. He seemed almost fragile. His hair was messy and dark blond. He had tanned skin with some freckles and wore big glasses.

"Umm.... There's nowhere else for me to sit." He murmured.

I moved my bag into my lap so he could sit next to me. The boy looked around nervously and decided to sit. He seemed on edge. I decided to try and relax him.

"My name is Echo Nightshade." I said, introducing myself.

"I'm Sean. Sean Flowers. Are you new?" He asked.

“I am. Today’s my first day.”

“That’s why you’re fine with sitting next to me, then.” Sean chuckled.

“I don’t understand.”

“Pretty girls don’t sit with me. I thought it was some sort of a trick when you moved your bag over.” He replied.

“I’m sorry I worried you.” I smiled.

He shrugged and pulled a book out of his bag, focusing on it. I wasn’t sure, but it felt like I was being dismissed. I didn’t like that. I needed to learn how to make friends.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

Sean looked at me in an assessing way. He was considering something for a moment and shrugged. Closing the book, he showed me the cover.

“It’s the rule book for a table top roleplaying game. I make up adventures for my friends to play out. They have characters who are adventurers with all sorts of different creatures in their party.” He said.

“That sounds like fun. Like a video game sort of thing. What sorts of creatures, like elves and dwarves and stuff?”

“Yeah. We have one who is a half-orc and a couple humans too.” He smiled. “I didn’t think girls like you would be into that sort of stuff.”

“I play a game with characters like that, too. It’s a lot of fun. I love the story in the game.” I smiled back.

“You know, you shouldn’t tell people things like that, and you shouldn’t try to be friends with me. You’re pretty. You could easily be popular. I’d just ruin it for you.” Sean whispered.

“I don’t need to be popular. I just want to have friends who are interested in fun and fascinating things. I really don’t need friends who only like me because of how I look. Those aren’t real friends. Real friends are the ones who you can talk to and have fun with. Will you be my friend, Sean? Will you teach me how to play your game?” I asked, putting my hand on his arm.

He blushed a dark red and nodded. “I… I guess, if you really want to, I can teach you.”

I grinned at him and scooted a little closer so I could see his book. Sean showed me a character sheet and a few different types of characters. As he talked, his confidence grew. He was really proud of his game. He pulled out another book and showed me some monsters they fought.

“Do you fight werewolves and vampires too?” I questioned softly.

“There have been a few in the game. My players took out a vampire king a couple months ago.”

“Was he a very bad vampire king?”

“There’s no such thing as a good vampire, Echo. They feed on human blood. They’re monsters.” Sean chuckled.

“I disagree. They may feed on blood, but not all of them are mean or violent. There can be good and bad in every species. Look at humans. We know there are very good ones, but we also know there are very bad ones. Just because some are really bad, it doesn’t mean all of them are.” I told him.

“That could make for a good story. Maybe I can work something up where the bad guy is actually the human who hired my players and the good guy is the vampire. It could be just the twist to add life into my story. Good idea, Echo.”

It made me feel better that he was willing to think of things from a different perspective. I wanted everyone to know not all vampires were bad. I wanted to stop more hunters from existing and trying to hurt Victor. The best way was to make people understand. Until I could defend him and protect him properly, I would just work on changing minds.

Soon we arrived at the school. Sean put his books back in his bag. I stood and put my backpack on.

“Maybe I’ll see you in a class or two, Echo. Have a good first day.” Sean smiled and pushed into the tide of students streaming down the center of the bus.

I wasn’t nearly as confident as he was in the safety of just stepping into the path of other students. I waited until the others had all gotten past me, then exited the bus, making sure to thank Harry for the ride on the way out. It was only polite.