



**The Star Kin Chronicles**

**EXTRAORDINARY PART 2**

By Evie Asterwyn

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## Acknowledgements

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For Sambuca

Thank you for being my friend, my companion and my inspiration.  
I look forward to sharing many more wonderful adventures with you.  
I love you.

\* \* \* \* \*

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## Prologue

Life is like a roller coaster.

One moment you are on top of the world; invincible. Nothing can stop you and the world is your oyster. You have dreams of a bright future and are well on the way to grabbing it with both hands. You smile, even on rainy days, and nothing gets you down. You feel like you could run forever and never tire. It seems possible to move mountains, and catching a Star is feasible.

You reach the dizzying heights of the ride, surveying everything with such amazement. But, only then can you see the bottom of the drop, with its jagged edges and frightening dark crevices. You don't think it possible that you could ever be down there, in that lonely place. After all, you are amazing, everything glitters like gold and you shine!

Then something happens that you didn't expect. Someone breaks a promise and you're suddenly plummeting, with your heart in your throat, from the ecstatic, joyous highs, into the dark, awful lows.

Everything crashes into oblivion, like a rock through glass. You find yourself alone at the bottom; broken and nursing the small shards of the happy life you once knew. That's when you realize that nothing will ever be the same.

But, perhaps being the same is no longer the best path for you. Perhaps a change is needed, in order to open up your future to the golden page it is meant to end up on.

Perhaps change is for the best.

## Events Leading To This Point

Every now and then, something extraordinary happens to someone ordinary. Something life-changing; something amazing. Something that completely alters the way they see the world.

I never imagined that person would be me.

My name is Cassandra Stone. I am a Star Kin.

I used to be just an ordinary girl. I lived with my Mom in a small town called Castle Rock, in Washington. It is known as the 'Gateway to Mount St. Helens'. We are situated on the Cowlitz River, about fifty miles from the famous Mount St. Helens. Our township is at one end of the Spirit Lake Highway, which sweeps through the forest towards that very same mountain.

Mount St. Helens, the mountain that changed my life.

Well, no, that is not exactly it.

Alexander Grayson changed my life.

Alexander Grayson, the guy with the most interesting story I had ever heard.

Alexander Grayson: vampire, guardian and protector of the Star Kin. Guardian and protector of me.

Yes, you read that right. *Alexander Grayson. Vampire.*

My story is one you would expect to see on a fact or fiction television show. I never thought I would be extraordinary. Sure, I dreamed of being extraordinary, but I was one of the most plain and ordinary people I knew. I was a straight-A student and kept out of trouble. I was not brave, or strong, or daring.

Then Alex walked into my life, took my hand and that was it. Fate, destiny – call it what you will.

We were camping with our friends, up near Mount St. Helens, when a meteor shower fell over the mountain. I was not aware that Alex and his sister, Amaia, tracked down fallen Stars. They found the Star's heartstone, one of the most important meteors that fell that night. They brought it back to me and I somehow changed it into its crystal form. That was unintentional; I cannot even remember how I did it.

The following evening, a dog mysteriously turned up at my door. She was a black Labrador. I named her Astra. It turned out that she was the Star that fell. We are bound together by the heartstone and I am her guardian and keeper, a Star Kin. Together, we are meant to protect humankind and vampirekind from the vampire's enemy, the Craevyrn.

Astra is a shape-shifter – able to change into any creature, though she chose, as many of her kind do, to take the form of a dog when she arrived on Earth. She can also change into a dragon and we can fly together. For this reason, I am also known as a Dragon Rider.

Alex and his family – his father Alistair, his mother Charlotte and his sister Amaia – are our guardians. Oh, and I am in love with Alex. A human in love with a vampire. You could imagine the problems *that* could cause!

The Craevyrn are also vampires, but of an evil kind. They do not care about humans, only power. They also have Stars, but they use their Stars for their own selfish purposes and for power, not for the purpose they are destined to fulfill.

As it turns out, the Craevyrn want Astra for themselves. They also want me – the sole human Star Kin. All the other Star Kin, in the history of the Star Kin, have been vampirekind.

Alex is determined to protect us from them. I only hope that he succeeds.

## Good vs. Evil

The sight of the enemy – so many of them, all clad in black and gray, moving as one across the sky towards us – took my breath away.

“How are there so many?” I pondered aloud.

Alex had turned his handsome face towards me, from where he sat astride Othin, his giant golden eagle.

“We’ve all been around for generations. They don’t give their new vampires the choice of this life – they just turn them. They’ve been building up their army, and I guess this is the end result.”

I gasped, realizing that I would be fighting – if it came down to it – an almost immortal enemy. Of course, I had immortals on my side; Alex and his family and friends there to protect me. But the Craevyrn would target me, as the strongest of my kind, being Star Kin; but also as the weakest, with my human side – my blood, my warmth, and my heartbeat – giving me away. I started praying that the negotiations would work out and that we would not go to war.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked, his beautiful forest-green eyes on me, looking worried.

I gulped.

“I’m fine,” I lied.

Alex eyed me up for a few seconds. Then he sighed and ran his hand through his straight dark hair, as he often did when he was thinking deeply.

“We can leave, if you want. The Elders will be talking for a while. We don’t need to stay for this.”

I frowned at him, my fear feeding into indignation. *He actually thought I would leave them now?*

“Alex, I have a duty to protect your kind, and mine. I’m not leaving just as it’s getting started!” I retorted, courage finally finding me.

Astra growled beneath me, but I could hear her laughter in my head. Her aquamarine eyes shone in response to her laughter. I grinned at Alex. He raised his eyebrows, but I could see he was trying to remain serious.

“Very well,” he grumbled. “Let’s just hope they don’t get too close, for now.”

One of the leading Craevyrn vampires – who was on a large, dark dragon like Astra, but with bright red eyes – was approaching ahead of the others. The rider was wearing a grey cloak, but his hood was back, his youthful face exposed. His hair was so blonde, it was almost white. I recognized him, from the dreams I had been having over the last few weeks, but his name escaped me.

I could dream the future. That was one of my gifts. I had been sharing my dreams with Alistair and Alex, in hopes that the dreams could protect us from whatever might happen. My dreams had been frightening, showing me a bloodthirsty army. The organized group in front of me, surprised me. They seemed calm. However, I knew it would not take much for them to become the stuff of nightmares.

I looked back to Alex.

“Who is he, again?” I asked, pointing towards the blonde vampire.

“That’s Sephtis. He is their Head Star Kin, if you can even call them that.” He sounded disgusted. I did not blame him. The term ‘Star Kin’ was designed for the protectors of the Stars, like me – not for those who used them for their power, like the Craevyrn.

I watched as Lady Jennabeth, our Head Star Kin, flew forward on the back of her large, black and white Star dragon, Sirius, to meet Sephtis. Some of her vampire clan moved up close behind her, readying themselves in case of attack.

Sephtis raised his hand, and the army behind him drew to a halt. I let my eyes travel across their gathering.

I recognized the three other Craevyrn Elders. Thanatos was there, looking rather grandfatherly in appearance, perched atop a gold and red colored dragon. His eyes were closed. He was gifted with the ability to draw out a person’s worst thoughts and feelings, just by looking at them. He would use them against the person, driving them mad with guilt.

Hadria was there, too. She was more beautiful than I had dreamed, with raven black hair and pretty eyes. However, her face looked menacing as she turned her frown on us. Her dragon was brown and white. Hadria’s gift was that she could take your greatest fantasies, or your worst fears, and make you feel like you were living them.

Ubel was also there. He was large and muscular, and was sneering at us. He was on a dragon as well, which surprised me. He was not a Star Kin. He was just violent and had a thirst for blood and death, the likes of which had never been seen before. His dragon was shifting uncomfortably, so I guessed he must have borrowed it from another of their Star Kin. His dragon was black.

The eyes of the Craevyrn were black and frightening, Star Kin and vampire alike. The creatures and Stars all had black and red eyes, which glowed eerily. It was worse than I had dreamed. I shivered.

“Sephtis.” Jennabeth’s voice, clear and musical, echoed across the sky.

“Jennabeth.” Sephtis’ voice sent shivers through me. It was cold, rough and hollow.

Alex saw me shudder and looked towards me, anxiously. I smiled briefly at him, in response to his un-worded question. I was scared, sure, but I was not going to turn tail and run. I was safest here, surrounded by my vampires.

“We have heard troubling rumors,” Sephtis said.

Jennabeth steadily gazed at Sephtis and nodded her beautiful, blonde head.

“Pray, continue,” she said.

“We heard that another Star has fallen. We were not notified.”

Jennabeth nodded again, then replied.

“A Star has fallen. But she has chosen her Kin. There is nothing here for you.”

I looked at Alex, again, and this time I was concerned. He looked worried. He obviously had not expected this kind of meeting. I had been told that the Elders met, but not one-on-one like this. *Something was wrong. Had it been a good idea for me to come here?* I had a bad feeling about this.

Amaia was up at the front of our group, trying to keep the emotions of our lead vampires under control. She had her head bowed, as she used her ability to control emotion and tension to keep the peace. The Craevyrn frightened all of us. However, her natural optimism seemed to be keeping our lead vampires calm.

“So we have heard,” Sephtis replied, with an empty, wheezing laugh. He coughed for a moment. “But, therein lies the problem. We have heard some interesting stories about this Star Kin.”

Jennabeth froze, for just a fraction of a second. Our vampire guard shifted and a few vampires casually adjusted their formation to hover in front of Astra and myself, as if guarding us.

“What kind of stories? Can you trust your sources?” Jennabeth asked.

Sephtis laughed and coughed again.

“Come now, Jennabeth.” He spoke slowly, his voice charming, yet his words hissing slightly, like a snake. “Our sources dare not lie to us. Is there anything you would like to tell me about your newest Star Kin?”

“No!” Jennabeth replied, hurriedly.

“Oh boy,” I whispered. Astra’s mind was blank; I could not hear her at all. But, judging by the fear I felt gripping my heart, I knew she was as frightened as I was.

“Jennabeth Goldenrod!” Sephtis shouted. “You *dare* to lie to me?!”

He seemed to grow then; his anger and, no doubt, his Star powering him. His eyes suddenly turned red, as did those of his Star.

“I do not lie!” Jennabeth hissed in response. “There is nothing I *wish* to tell you. There is nothing here for you. Leave now!”

She glared angrily at Sephtis, her golden eyes and sapphire heartstone flashing brightly. Sirius growled beneath her. The growl passed from him, to her vampires and their creatures, to the vampires behind them. It rippled back to where we were ensconced. I felt Astra growl. I was the only one who remained silent, struggling to keep my fear under control so my rapid heartbeat would not give me away.

Amaia entered my head then, via Astra, sending me calming thoughts.

“*Thank you,*” I thought back to her.

“*It’s okay, Cassie. Everything will be fine,*” I heard her say, again through Astra.

“Human!” Sephtis growled.

Jennabeth tensed again. Sephtis saw that and laughed, then started flying back and forth across the width of his army, riling them up and taunting them with the words he said next.

“The Star Kin is *human!*” He cackled, his form growing larger again, more muscular and more frightening.

I eyed up the group across from us. They were shifting about excitedly, their creatures reined in, but ready to attack.

“The Star Kin is human, and these Star Kin and their guardians,” he said, indicating our group with a large sweep of his arm, “allow this travesty to continue! They keep her human! They train her in the ways of the Star’s power, when she does not have the ability to control it!” He sounded furious.

I glanced at Alex, terror pounding through me. *What were they going to do?*

Alex looked back at me, his fear obvious.

*Alex, don't look at me like that! Tell me it's going to be fine!* I yelled in my head.

He remained silent.

"You know what that means, don't you, Jennabeth?" Sephtis roared, as he flew across to her and stared her down. Their Stars were also face to face and growling at each other.

Jennabeth did not reply. Her guardians moved up behind her, ready to defend her.

"It means," Sephtis shouted, his voice like thunder, "that the claim on the Star is not valid! It means that the Star has no Kin! It means that we *do* have the authority to make a claim!"

I turned to look at Alex, but he was gone. I gasped, afraid for a moment. Then Kasper Wieland, his trusted friend and another of the Grayson clan, moved up and took his place beside me.

"Where's Alex?" I whispered as quietly as I could, knowing Kaspar would still hear me.

"He's asking to plead your case," Kaspar replied, his golden-brown eyes wary.

"What?" I whispered. "What does that mean?"

"He's gone to speak to the Craevyrn. He's going to ask to state your case, like in a Court of Law. He's going to try to change their minds."

He lifted his pale hand and pointed to the front line. I looked to where he pointed. Alex was now up the front, next to Amaia. I could tell, by the way their heads were turned towards each other, that they were having one of their internal conversations.

*"Astra!"* I thought, forcefully. *"Tell Amaia to tell Alex to get back here!"*

*"No need to shout, Cassie! I already tried that. But it's too late; she's agreed to help him."*

I felt a horrible drop in my stomach, an awful falling sensation. I always knew they would defend me, but I never imagined it would be like this! My beloved Alex, and my dear friend Amaia, suddenly broke free of the line and moved up to join Jennabeth and Sephtis.

"What have we here?" Sephtis asked, almost jovially. He smiled an evil, twisted smile.

"My name is Alexander Grayson," Alex said. "My clan protects the Star Kin who has the claim to the Star. I have come to plead our case. I ask for you to hear the

reasoning of our clan and, based on that, reconsider the claim that you intend to make.”

I wanted to scream out, to tell them to stop, to come back. However, if I did, it would give away my humanity and then they would not have a chance at all. My vision started to blur in the fear I felt taking hold of me. I gripped my saddle, terrified that the spinning in my vision would cause me to fall from Astra’s back.

“Cassie,” Charlotte’s soft voice sounded next to me. I turned to face her, seeing her perched on Nadera, one of the gryphons. I was certain her eyes were reflecting mine. They looked scared and worried. However, I could also see pride in them.

“Charlotte?” I whispered, barely keeping my tears in check.

“Be still, sweetheart. This will buy you some time. You have to trust Alex and Amaia.”

“I do trust them,” I whispered. “I just don’t want to lose them.”

Sephtis cleared his throat, his eyes travelling over Alex, then Amaia.

“You want to defend your claim?” A look of disbelief crossed his face. Then he started to laugh. His vampires started to laugh, as well. For a few minutes, all we could hear was their hollow humor.

“We do.” Alex and Amaia said, together.

Sephtis stopped laughing. He grinned.

“Very well. This should be interesting. There’s nothing quite like a good argument to pass the days away.”

He spoke briefly to Jennabeth, but it was not loud enough for me to hear. After their brief discussion, Alex and Amaia nodded and flew back into formation. I was relieved that they were okay.

Then Sephtis and Jennabeth separated and flew back to address their armies.

“We do not fight today,” Jennabeth advised, “but we must prepare. We will meet at the Grayson residence to discuss this further.”

Alex was beside me again, having flown back as Jennabeth spoke. I stared at him. He said nothing, but indicated for me to turn about. I gave Astra her head. She turned and we flew with the others, heading back to the paddock outside Alex’s house.

I was shaken. *What else could possibly go wrong? How long would it take for them to have their argument and make their decision? What would happen if they forced Astra and me to separate? Wouldn’t we both die?*

By the time we landed, I was panic-stricken and sobbing silently. When Astra sat down, I could not get my legs or arms to do what was necessary to allow me to dismount. *So much for my so-called bravery!* I was terrified.

Alex and Amaia were by my side in moments.

“Cassie, my sweet,” Alex murmured, reaching up to me. I stared down at him, fear freezing me in place as sobs shuddered through me. Kaspar arrived with a step ladder. Alex climbed up to stand beside me. He slipped his arms around me. “It’s okay, my love. Everything’s going to be fine,” he comforted me as he held me.

Amaia helped release my feet from the stirrups. Alex lifted me into his arms and gently jumped from the step ladder. We landed, with barely a jolt, on the ground. Amaia quickly removed Astra’s saddle and bridle. I gave a brief mental command to Astra, telling her to morph back to her normal Labrador form. Then I just stood there, letting Alex hold me. I wanted to yell at him, and to ask him what on earth he had been thinking. I wanted to beg him to save me. I wanted to beg him to turn me. But all I could do was cry.

Alex picked me up and carried me to the house, past the vampires who had already arrived and were waiting inside, and upstairs to his room.

“Cassie?” he said, as he sat me down on his bed. “Sweetheart? Talk to me, please.”

I wanted to speak to him. But terror had rendered my mind blank.

Charlotte appeared then, with Astra close on her heels. She held a cup in her hand.

“Brandy,” she whispered, as she handed it to Alex. He grimaced, but took the cup and turned to me.

“Drink this, Cass. It will help.”

I opened my mouth as he put the cup to it. I swallowed the liquid down, its burn igniting my throat for a moment and sending waves of warmth through my chest and stomach. Astra jumped on the bed and lay across my lap, nuzzling my hand with her nose. I absent-mindedly patted her, as the brandy kicked in.

“Oh god,” I murmured, “I’m going to die, aren’t I?”

Alex dropped down onto the bed and wrapped his arms around me.

“No, sweetheart. Nothing like that will happen.”

“But they want Astra...” I started, but was unable to continue as I started crying again.

Alex rocked me in his arms and started humming an unfamiliar melody, which sounded like some sort of lullaby. Then he quietly started singing. I did not understand the words, but recognized them from a song he had used to relax me while we had been training together.

The door opened and Amaia walked in. Her face, surrounded by her perfect jet black ringlets, looked sad.

“Cassie,” she whispered, “let me help you.”

I did not reply. I just sat in Alex’s arms, listening as he sang to me. She moved across the room and sat down beside me. She placed her hands on my arm and relaxation passed through me. I raised my head to stare at her. She smiled at me, though her forest-green eyes were still concerned.

“Are you trying to put me to sleep?” I mumbled, between sobs.

Talking was difficult. My muscles did not seem to belong to me anymore. I was so tired!

Alex got to his feet, then picked me up and moved with me to the side of the bed. Amaia pulled the quilt back and Alex lay me down. They tucked the quilt back around me as Astra settled down beside me.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but the brandy, mixed with Amaia’s gift and Alex’s song, had them closing before I could fight it.

## Preparing for the Hearing

I woke up a few hours later. My eyes were gritty and my throat was raw. I looked around the room, but there was no glass of water in sight. I did not blame Alex for this oversight; he had a lot on his mind. Besides, he may never have cried in his life the way I had been earlier.

I got out of bed then let myself out of his room. I crept along the hall and down the stairs.

They heard me, of course. Their conversation stopped and several sets of colorful eyes looked up at me. Alex was already on his feet. He embraced me, once I reached the bottom of the stairs.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m okay. Though, I do need a glass of water,” I murmured.

Charlotte stood up and shot out of the room, returning a few seconds later with a glass which she handed to me. Then Alex led me over to the couches, where the Star Kin, and several of their family members, were gathered. I took a seat beside him.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Jennabeth was sitting across from us and she answered me.

“Cassie, the Craevyrn have an issue with you being both human and Star Kin. They want to claim Astra for themselves.”

I nodded. That much was clear to me from the meeting of the two sides.

“Can anything be done?” I asked. “I’m willing to be turned if that will make any difference...” I started.

“*No!*” Alex growled as he jumped to his feet. He turned to face me, his eyes flashing and darkening.

“Alex, but what if...?”

“*No!* I won’t let you do that!”

I flinched away from his anger. Despite asking him to turn me into a vampire ever since I had discovered that I was Star Kin, he had always adamantly refused. I understood that the process was likely to be painful, and that he did not want me

going through it. However, I also knew that if we were to be together long term, he might not have any choice.

“Alex, calm down!” Alistair insisted, as he stepped between us and faced down his son. “We’re not letting anything happen unless it needs to. There are other options.”

“Yes,” Jennabeth said softly. “You’ve already set one into motion, with your offer to explain yourself to them. It’s dangerous, but perhaps they will listen.”

“The Craevyrn? Listen? Bah!” Lord Maxilius, the senior Star Kin from the Darkwater clan, exclaimed. His eyes angrily flashed sea-green. “They’re evil! They might pretend to listen, but they’ll just steal the Star when we least expect it!”

“Quiet, Maxilius Darkwater!” Jennabeth cut him off. “Can’t you see she’s terrified enough, already?”

Maxilius glanced at me then back at Jennabeth.

“Hopefully they will be civil enough to lend Alex their ear,” he responded, in an almost apologetic manner. However, he did not look like he believed they would be.

“I’m going to demand that they do,” Alex replied. “After all, Lady Cassandra is more powerful than any other new Star Kin I’ve ever seen.”

“Perhaps they’ve heard that, too, in their ‘rumors,’” Alistair spoke up, spitting out the last word as if it disgusted him. “Perhaps they are worried about what she may be capable of, once she has been turned.”

I shivered. I certainly did not feel powerful. I felt sick; fear and nerves tying up my stomach.

“Maybe. But I’ll make them listen. They have to at least acknowledge that she is capable of being what we claim she is. The Stars don’t make mistakes when they choose their Kin.”

“They make mistakes choosing sides though!” Maxilius spoke up again. “At least, the ones on their side,” he added, I think mostly for Jennabeth’s and my benefit.

I looked at Jennabeth. She was smiling at me but her eyes looked sad.

“So, Alex will speak to them,” I said. “What happens if he fails? What if they refuse to face facts? What then?” I asked.

“Then we’ll fight them,” she replied.

“But you could die!” I exclaimed.

She nodded. I paused for a moment, looking around our assembled friends. They were all nodding. I suddenly realized that each of these vampires believed in me so ardently, that they would give their lives to protect me.

The only problem was that I did not believe in myself anywhere near as much. *Was I worth the sacrifice they were willing to make?*

“I don’t want you fighting, or dying, for me,” I whispered. “How sure are you that I’m even worth dying for?”

As one, they all turned to stare at me incredulously. Then Alex spoke.

“If I don’t succeed, then I’ve signed your death warrant. If that happens, no place would be safe for you. It would be better that we made our stand and fought, with a chance of winning, than to let you suffer at their hands.”

“Why don’t you just turn me...?” I started to suggest again, however Alex cut me off with a growl.

“I’m not going down that path, Cass. Not until there is no other choice.”

I stared at him. *What other choice was left, except for me to die?*

“Diplomacy,” Amaia stated. “That’s the choice we have made.”

I groaned and leaned forward, hiding my face in my hands.

“You guys had better know what you’re doing,” I murmured under my breath.

“Preparations have to be made,” Jennabeth announced, then. “You are due there in three weeks.”

Sudden discussions started amongst the gathered vampires. Everyone seemed to know exactly what they needed to plan for – everyone except me. I was confused and scared.

Astra decided to bound into the room just then, and sat down by my feet, looking up at me.

“Hey, girl,” I whispered, as I petted her. She whined and nuzzled my hand.

“Cass, come with me,” Alex murmured near my ear. He stood and offered me his hand. I took it, and then Astra and I followed him out the front door. “Are you okay?” he asked, once we were away from the others.

“As okay as I can be, given the circumstances,” I replied.

“We have to give the impression of everything being normal,” he said. “For the next few weeks, Amaia and I will be coming to school and acting how we normally do. Are you able to do that, too?”

I stared up at him. Nothing was normal about this situation but, outside the boundary of his fence, the world was still ticking on. No one else was any wiser to my situation – including my Mom.

“I guess I have no choice. I’ll act as normal as possible.”

“Good,” he responded. “That just leaves after school. I’m going to be busy here, organizing things. We have to figure out what we can do to convince them. I’ll need you here to test your gifts, and Astra’s. The more gifts we can prove, the better our chances.”

I nodded.

“I have to work some afternoons, but I’ll be here as much as I can.”

Alex pulled me into his arms, holding me close. I clung to him, terrified. *Was this it? Was my life cut down to three weeks, plus whatever time it would take for the Craevyrn to hear my case? I was not ready to die!*

Alex’s hand gently brushed my cheek, tilting my head up, so his gorgeous forest-green eyes could search mine.

“I love you, Cassie. I’m going to fight for you like no one has ever fought, before. They are going to listen and they are going to understand.” Then his lips sought mine, kissing me so tenderly I thought I would melt right into the ground.

“I love you, too, Alex,” I murmured breathlessly, once we had separated again. I just hoped this was not the end.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next couple of weeks were magic, with an undertone of fear.

At school, Alex, Amaia and I pretended everything was fine. We joked around with our friends, studied hard and tried to act normally. I wondered whether Gina or Izzy noticed the falseness of our laughter, or the lack of shine in the vampire’s eyes. It was so obvious to me, but neither Gina nor Izzy gave any indication that they were worried.

The afternoons that I was not working at the Castle Rock Food Market, which Mom managed, I was at the Graysons’ house. They tested my gifts, trying to strengthen them and to see if any others became apparent.

My archery and my foresight had both improved. The only problem was that my foresight was not attuned to any particular occurrence. I would sleep at night, noting down my varied dreams as soon as I woke. But, try as I might, I could not foresee the outcome of the hearing.

“It’s hopeless,” I muttered to Amaia, one afternoon. “How am I meant to concentrate when all I can think about is the hearing?”

“It’s okay, Cassie. Sometimes the hardest things to see are the ones that are closest to you, the ones that affect you personally. I’m glad I’m going to pass that Algebra test next week, though,” she said more cheerfully, referring to another of my dreams.

“Only if you study,” I said.

She giggled.

“Okay, fair enough.” Then I heard her mutter: “I’ve always hated Algebra!”

My Time Keeping gift had also improved. Initially, I was only able to pause time for short periods. However, I had been practicing and had slowly strengthened my hold on the world I saw turning in my head, when I used this gift. It was slippery, but I had figured out how to get a good grip and could stop time for up to ten minutes.

Alistair – who was gifted in the same way thanks to inheriting his father’s heartstone – was impressed.

“You never know what you could do with ten minutes,” he said. “Imagine the number of lives you could save, or what you could change with that sort of time!”

I could not imagine it. I just wished my gift was powerful enough to stop time completely, so that Alex and I would never have to face the Craevyrn. Now that I was aware of the Craevyrn Elders’ gifts, I was more frightened. *Would I be able to withstand facing my worst fears, or my worst moments? Would it really be as bad as I had dreamed?*

\* \* \* \* \*

The final week before we were due to leave for the hearing, I was more nervous than I had ever been. I barely spoke to my friends, my mind on other things – like how I was going to prove myself to the Craevyrn. *Did they want me to be powerful? Or would it be better to pretend that I was less powerful? Would they leave me alone, then?*

I barely slept that week. When I did sleep, my dreams were crazy; more vivid and frightening than I had ever dreamed before. I was not sure what was likely to come true, but I duly noted everything down in my notebook for Alistair and Alex’s perusal. They liked reading about my dreams. I think Alistair felt that it gave him knowledge of what would happen. Alex, I think, just wanted to know what was going on in my head. It was a pity that the previous few nights were mostly images of war

and death. I missed the fantastic, happy dreams I used to have about Alex. I could hardly remember them.

I was unsure what I should tell Mom about my pending absence. I figured Alex had a plan, but he had not told me what it was.

Alex visited my house on Wednesday night, looking very worried. We were due to leave for the hearing over the weekend, as it was starting on the following Monday. Luckily, Mom was out with her friends, for once. We had the house to ourselves, which meant we could talk undisturbed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m worried about your dreams. Are you sleeping okay?”

I shrugged. I could not help what I dreamed. Besides, anything that helped was worth it, to me. No matter how painful the dreams were, when I woke and saw Alex’s photo beside me, or Alex himself if he had woken me, I knew everything would be okay. It had to be. All I had to do was get through the next few weeks.

“I’m fine, Alex. Stop worrying so much.”

He reached out and touched my face, running his fingers across my cheeks.

“You’re so pale. There are dark circles under your eyes. Are you getting enough sleep?”

I grinned at him, amused.

“Perhaps I’m destined to be a vampire, after all,” I joked.

He did not laugh. Pain flickered across his face. I sighed.

“I’m sorry. I’m only teasing,” I said. “I just can’t wait for the hearing to be over. Maybe, once I’ve proven myself to the Craevyrn, they’ll leave us to have our happily ever after.”

“Proven yourself?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

“My gifts. I’m just not sure what they want to see me do. Do you think they’ll expect the whole lot? Or should I only show them some of my gifts and let them think I’m not so powerful?”

Alex stared at me. Then he groaned and closed his eyes.

*What had I said? Was he concerned that I would not pull this off?*

“Cass...” He said my name like it was weighed down. I had a bad feeling about this. I swallowed nervously, fear rippling through me.

“Alex?” I whispered. *Why had he said my name like that, like he was about to deliver a blow I would not be able to withstand?*

He opened his eyes. I could not read them. He was keeping his emotions in check. Mine were suddenly running rampant – fear mostly, with a hint of the awful gut feeling I got when someone told me someone had died.

“Alex?” I asked again, my eyes widening. “What is it?”

“Cass, I can’t take you with me,” he said quietly. “I thought you knew that.”

I stared at him.

“What?” I whispered.

“This is something Amaia and I have to do. It’s too dangerous for you. You have to stay here, with your Mom and Astra.”

“No... but...” I stammered. *I had to go with him, to show them what they wanted to see. How could he prove what I could do, without me being there?*

“Cassie. No. You need to stay here.” He said it with such finality that I cringed.

My heart started to ache, as frustrated tears rose to my eyes.

“I thought you wanted me to show them my gifts. What about all the training I’ve been doing? What was the point, if you were just going to leave me behind?” I exclaimed.

“Cassie, we can’t take you with us. It’s too dangerous for you. I can’t have you anywhere near the enemy.”

“So what am I supposed to do, then? Just sit here, waiting?”

Alex stared at me for a moment, then sighed.

“Unfortunately, yes, that’s all you can do.”

“What if they turn up here? If you’re all at the hearing and they send someone after me, what am I meant to do? How do I protect myself?” I was nearing hysterical; my fear, and the knowledge that I could not fight off a single vampire, starting to overwhelm me.

Alex just stood there, watching me panic. He appeared perfectly calm, his vampire mask in place, hiding any emotion from me. That, to be honest, only upset me more. *Why couldn’t he show me how he really felt? Didn’t he feel anything? Didn’t he care that I was afraid? Did he want to leave me, after all?*

I felt a familiar, icy sensation settling in the pit of my stomach. Panic would be sweeping through me shortly, if past experience was anything to go by. I steeled myself, not prepared to have a panic attack. *He had to be joking. There was no way he would leave. He couldn’t leave... could he?*

“You promised you’d never leave me,” I whispered.

He levelled his gaze me for a moment longer. His eyes were dark, whether from his own emotion or from my racing heart, I was not sure. Then, his eyes dropped from mine to stare at the floor.

“I’m sorry, Cassie,” he murmured.

“But you promised!” I said forcefully. My fear was taking over, the icy feeling passing up to my chest, causing my heart to race and my breath to catch. “You promised you wouldn’t leave me!”

Some emotion flashed across his face, but it passed so quickly I could not figure out what it was. He maintained his distance, staring silently at the floor.

“Cassie,” he finally spoke, his voice low and measured. “There are some things that are outside of my control. Leaving is one of them. It is my responsibility to sort this situation out. I can’t take you with me. I have to go alone.”

“Alone?!” I exclaimed. “But you will have Amaia and Charlotte and Alistair with you. Who will I have? Who will be here to protect *me*?”

“Astra will be with you...” he started.

“That’s not the same thing!” I interrupted. “How can you do this to me, Alex? What if you don’t come back? What if I never see you again? What if they kill you?” Putting that thought into words froze me in my tracks. I swear my heart stopped.

*What if he died? Would they come after me, then? Oh no! I was going to die and he would not be able to save me!*

“Cassie,” he whispered, his face pained. “I’m so sorry.”

I was frozen in place, unable to put my fear into words. I wanted to beg him to stay, beg him to take me away from here, to someplace safe. Only, where that would be was beyond me. I closed my eyes, but all I could see were images from my dreams of the Craevyrn getting into every part of my life. There was nowhere safe for me.

I gasped in a breath and opened my eyes, to see Alex watching me, his face emotionless, thanks to his mask. I did not know how he felt, but had the feeling he would not tell me. *Could he sense my fear? Could he hear the frightened beat of my heart?* His eyes were dark, how they often were when he was tempted by my blood – or when he was angry. He looked away again.

“Please don’t go,” I begged. One last, plaintive request, which I somehow knew he would not respond to – at least, not in the way I needed him to.

“I have no choice,” he said.

“You always say there is a choice.”

“Not when it comes to the Craevyrn. I have to go. I have to try to convince them.”

“And if they turn up here?”

“They won’t.”

“How can you know that?”

Alex did not reply. He also did not look at me. That scared me more than anything else. And it made me angry. If this was our last time seeing each other, where was the love that he had previously lavished on me? Where were the promises of his return?

I suddenly realized what this was. He wanted to leave me. I knew I did not deserve him, not by any stretch of the imagination. *Maybe it had all been lies. Maybe it did not bother him that he had to leave. I was only human, after all. Perhaps he was ashamed of me. I thought my gifts were important to him, but maybe I had misunderstood. Perhaps my humanity was unacceptable. Maybe he knew that we did not stand a chance against the Craevyrn. Maybe they would not accept my humanity, either.*

My mind was racing, irrational thought combined with fear, combined with anguish. In my panicked state, it all came down to one simple belief:

*Alex was going to leave me, alone, to die!*

I was suddenly filled with a rage so powerful, that I could barely contain it. Astra snarled behind me, reacting to my emotions, her anger reflecting mine.

Alex stood there, watching me, but still registering no emotion. I could feel the distance between us and it hurt. Frustrated tears slipped down my cheeks. I angrily wiped them away. He still said nothing.

“You’re a liar!” I growled. “You said you’d always be here, but that was just a lie!”

I shook my head, stunned that he had made no effort to comfort me, to promise me that he would be back, or to tell me that he loved me. I knew I was being unfair, but I was so furious that I no longer cared. He flinched, for a moment, at my words but his mask remained in place.

“Go, then,” I choked out, through my sobs.

His eyes flashed, for a moment, and he reached towards me. Fury driving me, I stepped away from him and turned my back on him.

“Just leave, Alex,” I growled coldly.

My heart felt like ice in my chest, and my stomach was in knots. I felt him move up behind me, the coolness in the air giving him away. Then, seeing I was not going to turn, I felt him move away again.

The door clicked shut behind him. I moved to the couch and sat down. I closed my eyes and started counting – a habit I had developed at elementary school, to survive being bullied and to calm my emotions. Astra moved up to sit beside me, by the time I reached ten.

I got to fifty, before my heart broke and I started sobbing uncontrollably.

My beloved Alex was gone. I did not know if I would ever see him again. I did not know whether I would even survive the next few weeks. I did not know when the Craevyrn would arrive to claim me.

All I knew, for certain, was that I was alone.

## Alone

*Another sleepless night.*

I sat on the end of my bed, staring at myself in the mirror. My blue-green eyes looked tired; the dark circles under them only becoming more pronounced.

I sighed and ran my fingers through my shoulder-length blonde hair. I had cut it the Monday after Alex left. I told myself it was an attempt to change my appearance, in case the Craevyrn arrived. But I knew it was really an attempt to move on from Alex. I cried myself to sleep the night I cut it, remembering how Alex had told me that he loved how long my hair was.

The tiredness around my eyes was no surprise. Since Alex had gone, I had not slept a full night. I tossed and turned, afraid to sleep, because my dreams all involved the Craevyrn appearing in my everyday life, destroying it and claiming me.

Astra stayed awake all night, too. I think she was worried. I could not hear her in her dog form, yet. She was still a month or so away from our internal dialogue becoming permanent in any of her forms. I could hear her when she was in her dragon form, but since I had not morphed her into her dragon form lately, I did not know what she thought of my situation. However, she looked sad and tired, her chocolate brown eyes losing their shine.

I stared back at the mirror. *Had it really only been a week?*

I thought back to when Alex had left, remembering the pain of our separation. It was still a raw, aching feeling in the region of my chest. The knot in my stomach was still as tight as it had been on the day he told me he was leaving.

I thought back over the last week.

\* \* \* \* \*

The days following the night Alex left, were distressing.

Alex and Amaia did not turn up at school on Thursday. My two best friends, Gina O'Halloran and Izzy Greenslade, asked if I knew where they were, but I could not give the reason for the Graysons' absence. Even if I could, I did not want them worrying about the fact that I probably would not survive past the next few weeks.

I did tell them that Alex and Amaia were going to be away for some time. They seemed concerned about my reaction to that, particularly after I tearfully told them how Alex and I had argued.

“Cass, you need to apologize to him,” Izzy said, her warm brown eyes worried, “especially if he’s going away for a while. You can’t leave things like this.”

I nodded miserably. She was right, of course.

Friday was a public holiday, so school was closed. I spent the morning in bed, sleeping between fits of crying. I spent time thinking about what I had said, and how it must have sounded to Alex. I felt awful about how I had left things. I just hoped it was not too late to apologize.

I tried to call him, but his phone was switched off. Either that, or he was screening my calls. I did not leave any messages; my apology was something that I needed to say to him, directly. But when I could not reach him by phone, I decided that I needed a back-up plan.

On Friday evening, I wrote Alex a letter. If he did not want to talk to me, then maybe he would read it and understand that I was sorry. I only hoped he would read it.

On Saturday morning, I drove to Alex’s house. Amaia must have sensed that I was there, through her mind-reading gift, because after I stared at the gate for a few moments, it opened. I drove through and up the twisting drive, through the trees, towards the tall, white-brick manor that the Graysons called home.

Alistair met me at the front door. He was dressed more casually than normal, his dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. He bowed his head to me, his forest-green eyes looking worried, before silently leading me through to the kitchen.

“Is Alex here?” I asked.

Amaia raised her eyes from the bag she had been preparing on the kitchen bench. They lit up on seeing me. Then she frowned and shook her head, her jet black ringlets bouncing with the movement.

“Sorry, Cass, he isn’t.” She looked very sad and my heart plummeted.

“When will he be back?” I whispered.

“Cassie, he’s gone ahead to Cravernos,” she murmured, naming the Romanian meeting place. “He won’t be back until it’s over.”

“Oh,” I said quietly. I was too late.

Amaia watched me for a few seconds, her beautiful face creasing into another frown.

“I’m sorry. I really am. If there’s anything I can do...” she offered.

“Actually, there is,” I said. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the envelope containing my apology. “He’s not picking up when I call, so I wrote this. Could you please give it to him, for me?”

She stared at the note in my hand, probably already aware of what it said. Then she reached out her pale hand and took it from me. She smiled and nodded.

“Sure, Cass. I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I took one last look around the room, which was now so familiar to me, before I turned and walked out. I felt like I was leaving it all behind. I would miss the magic of their house, and the safety I felt whenever I was there. I walked to the front door and was surprised to find Alistair standing there, like he was waiting for me. He watched as I walked to the door. As I touched the doorknob, he spoke.

“He still thinks the world of you, no matter what’s happened.”

I paused, then turned and looked up into his beautiful eyes.

“Maybe he’d be better thinking the worst of me. Maybe then he won’t be disappointed.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Alistair murmured, as he reached for me.

I let him hug me. His cool embrace was so familiar, reminding me of his son. My eyes filled with tears. I pulled away and rubbed my eyes, trying to keep my tears in check.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Then I walked out the door.

The next thing I saw clearly was my house. I am not sure when, on the long drive home, I started crying, but at some point my tears fell of their own accord. I let myself into the house, glad that Mom was at work. I tiredly climbed the stairs to my room and lay down on my bed.

Astra snuggled up to me, nuzzling me with her gorgeous, black, Labrador nose. I smiled sadly at her and scratched her behind her ears. She laid her head on my stomach, and I fell asleep not long after that.

The rest of that week, I felt like I was barely awake. Everything went by in a blur. The only constant was the knot of apprehension in my stomach and the unrelenting

pain in my heart. I could hardly eat and was barely sleeping, waiting for some sort of response from Alex.

To make matters worse, I felt completely exposed without my vampires there to protect me. I was terrified that the Craevyrn were sending their own vampires to claim me.

My nightmares were of the worst sort; plaguing my dreams with images of the hearing and the loss of my vampire friends. I hardly knew what was real, anymore. My dreams were more vivid than my life.

Gina and Izzy both seemed uncomfortable around me while their boyfriends, Tony and Matthew, were still present. But I did not mind. The less they spoke to me, the less likely I was to break down and cry. I was also worried about accidentally letting them in on the true nature of Alex and Amaia's absence.

I sat with them during our lunch breaks, but every lunch tray ended up untouched. I just could not eat with the giant knot I had in my stomach. I was also starting to jump at shadows and noises that had never bothered me before. Of course, that only made them worry even more.

I was frightened that I would be claimed by the Craevyrn, and that I would not see Alex or Amaia again. I was terrified that in a few short days, my life would be over. I was worried that there was a worse reason for Alex's lack of response, than him ignoring me. I was afraid that he was dead.

Mom had given me some time off work after my jumpiness had caused concern to several customers and my workmate, Marj. So, over the previous few days, I had spent my after-school hours locked in my room, trying to study, but mostly just staring at the pages in front of me, like they were made up of nonsense.

Nothing made sense to me anymore. I did not know what to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

I sighed and dragged myself to my feet. After throwing on my standard 'uniform' of jeans, a tee-shirt and sneakers, I collected my bag, called Astra to my side and plodded downstairs to the kitchen.

Mom raised her blonde head from the newspaper and watched as I walked to the back door.

"Cass, aren't you going to have breakfast?" she asked, after I let Astra out into the back yard and headed for the front door, without stopping at the kitchen table.

I shook my head.

“Not hungry,” I murmured. I left before she had time to think of an argument.

I drove to school, barely concentrating on what was going on around me. It took all my focus just to get through the day. At lunchtime, Gina and Izzy hardly spoke to me. They knew I was unlikely to reply.

I spent most of lunch in silence, picking at the food in front of me. *When would the knot in my stomach go away?* A shout of laughter, from some other students, made me gasp and almost leap from my chair in fright. I managed to maintain my seat, though I hurriedly looked around the lunchroom before relaxing. Gina and Izzy exchanged a worried glance, while Tony just frowned at my reaction. I blushed, embarrassed by my overreaction. I pulled out my books, trying to focus on my homework. Izzy sighed.

“Cass?”

I ignored her. I knew what she would say. She would beg me to eat, or to come over to her house after school. I knew she was worried.

I tried to avoid thinking about Alex. He still had not responded to the letter I had written. My best guess was that he did not want to speak to me. Not that I blamed him. I had been awful. This heartbreak was the least I deserved for how I had treated him. He was meant to be saving my life, after all.

My worst guess I did not want to think about. Had the Craevyrn even let him get to the hearing?

At the end of the second week that Alex was gone, Thanksgiving came around. I hardly noticed. Even though Mom made a lovely dinner, I could not bring myself to eat much of it.

I was stuck, unwilling to move forward and unable to go back. The pain in my chest was all I had to remind me of that magical life. The Craevyrn had never seen me, as far as I knew, so maybe I had a chance to survive. I just did not want to survive, not without Alex. But I knew I had to move on, eventually. I just kept telling myself that I would do it tomorrow.

*Tomorrow I will make plans.*

*Tomorrow it will hurt less.*

*Tomorrow I will be able to leave the magic behind and get on with my life without Alex – as long as the Craevyrn didn't turn up.*

However, tomorrow never arrived. It was never easier. I was not moving on.

\* \* \* \* \*

The third week after Alex left was even worse.

My days had become a blur, one running into the next, interspersed with horrific nightmares.

Izzy and Gina had stopped calling. There was no point, when I never picked up the phone. I think they did not know what to do with me.

The School Principal called Mom after I fell asleep in English class. I woke up crying and yelling Alex's name. My classmates thought it was funny, in a bizarre kind of way.

I had dreamed that the Craevyrn had killed him.

At that point, I knew I was falling apart.

I did not trust myself to get through the day without falling asleep at my desk. I did not know whether I could trust my dreams. I did not trust myself to talk to my friends, without blurting out the whole story about who Alex and Amaia really were, and who I really was.

Izzy and Gina had taken to watching me – much like Mom had been doing at home. They looked frightened and I did not blame them. I was a mess.

I stopped sitting with them at lunch, choosing, instead, to sit in the courtyard. It was cold, with Winter heading our way, but I did not care. I would gladly have borne the rigors of the flu. At least that would make me feel like I was still alive.

On the Friday night of the third week, I finally convinced myself to pick up my cellphone and try Alex's number again. It went straight to voicemail. I cried myself to sleep, almost certain he was dead. A few hours later, another nightmare woke me.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following Tuesday I collapsed in Gym class, after running laps on an empty stomach.

When Mom collected me from the Nurse's office, she was furious. We had barely pulled out of the school's driveway before she started yelling.

"Cassandra! How could you let it get this bad? It's bad enough that you're barely eating at home, but skipping your lunches as well?! When was the last time you actually ate a decent meal?"

I did not answer. Not because I did not want to, but because I genuinely could not remember. I knew I had been eating just enough to get me through the day but,

in the blur of nightmares and my very frightening life, I could not recall when I actually did anything.

Mom stared at me. I shrugged.

"I don't know," I whispered.

I closed my eyes and rested my head against the cool glass of the window, tears threatening.

I thought about my studies. I thought about my university applications that were sitting, unfinished, on my desk at home. I thought about Mom and how stressed she was. I thought about everything and anything that did not relate to Alex. It hurt too much to think about him.

I looked up as the car pulled to a stop.

"The doctor?" I asked Mom, confused.

She sighed, her blue eyes worried.

"Cass, you've left me with no choice. You need help."

I stared at her. *Help? Nothing any doctor could do would help fix the hole in my life that Alex had left. They could not fix the other problems I had, that no human would understand.*

"Come on, Cass. I've made an appointment. They're waiting for us."

She leaned across to open my door. I undid my seatbelt and clambered out of the car. I stared glumly at the ground as Mom led me inside.

The doctors' office was quiet. Aside from one other patient, the waiting room was empty. Mom led me to a seat, then went to speak to the receptionist. She joined me again, a bit later.

"I don't think this is going to help, Mom," I whispered.

"Just try it. Maybe they can give you something for your anxiety."

"What anxiety?" I asked, surprised.

"Cassie, you jump every time I move. You're up all hours of the night. You cry for no reason. You're not eating and not sleeping. I'm worried about you."

I sighed. *Mom would be more than worried if I told her what was really going on.*

"Cassie Stone?"

Mom and I looked up, seeing the short, brunette doctor standing in the entrance way. She smiled kindly at us when we stood to follow her into her office. We sat on the chairs she indicated to us.

“So, Cassie, what can I help you with, today?” the doctor asked, her brown eyes warm and friendly. I saw her name badge said, ‘Dr. Edith Kingsley.’

I did not know how to answer, so Mom spoke up.

“Cassie has had a rough few weeks. I’m worried because she hasn’t been eating, or sleeping.”

Dr. Kingsley looked at me.

“What’s been happening to upset you so badly?”

I thought for a few moments, wondering what it was safe to say. I sighed and then spoke.

“My boyfriend and I had a fight. He left town and I can’t get in touch with him,” I murmured, as tears welled in my eyes. “I’m really worried about him, and I can’t eat or sleep. I don’t know what to do.” I closed my eyes and started counting, to try and stop crying. It did not help. It only made me sob harder.

Mom reached over and hugged me.

“She’s like this all the time. I’m so worried. She collapsed at school today, so I thought I’d get her checked out.”

Dr. Kingsley gently smiled at me.

“Let’s see what we can do, to make you feel better,” she said.

She gave me a check-up and, after a few minutes, had sorted out some medication for me.

“This should help you sleep and bring your mood up.” She handed me a prescription. “But I recommend you take the rest of the week off school, and get some rest. And please, eat something.”

I nodded, though I knew that time off would not make me want to sleep, or make me feel any safer. But I conceded. After all, if I was stuck at home, perhaps I would be able to complete my university applications.

Mom led me from the doctors’ office and back to the car. We drove to the pharmacy and picked up my medication. On the way home, Mom spoke to me again, this time more gently.

“Cassie, seeing you like this is hard on me. I love you so much, and seeing you so upset, well, I didn’t feel I had a choice.”

“Mom, the medication can’t help me. Nothing can help me. I just need more time.” *More time, some sign that Alex and the rest of the Graysons were still alive, and knowing that the Craevyrn were not about to break down my door to claim me.*

“Hon, I know. I can’t believe Alex did what he did. But you can’t let his actions destroy your life. You need to eat, need to sleep, and need to move on.”

I sighed.

“I’m sorry I scared you, Mom. I didn’t mean to. I’ll try harder, I promise.”

It was Mom’s turn to sigh.

“I’m sorry that you’ve been hurt,” she murmured. “I know everyone goes through this, but it’s hard seeing you look so fragile. I swear that if a strong enough wind were to blow, you’d fly away. Please try to eat and sleep, for me. I love you. I don’t want to lose you.”

Mom sniffed and hurriedly wiped her eyes. I felt awful, having made her cry. However, something she said remained in my mind.

When we arrived home, I remembered that my car was still at school. Alex would have somehow managed to bring it home for me – if he was still here. The thought struck me hard and I bit back a groan.

Mom heard me.

“Cass, what is it?” she asked, sounding alarmed.

“My car,” I replied.

Mom sighed. Then she shook her head and told me not to worry. I handed my keys to her and, after she let me into the house, she headed to school to see whether one of my friends could bring my car back.

Meanwhile, I wandered through the house and let Astra in from the back yard. She followed me up to my room. I sat on the bed and she lay at the end of it, her head resting on her paws, her eyes sad. I sighed.

I had not morphed her into her dragon form since the last time we flew together, before Alex told me he was leaving. She looked like she missed it. I missed it, too. I was worried that I would forget how to morph her. Also, our crystal heartstone – which linked Astra to me and which I wore on a necklace – had not been glowing very brightly. I guessed that my heart being broken would have some sort of effect on it.

I wondered whether Amaia had given Alex my note and, if she had, whether he had believed my heartfelt apology.

I moved to my desk and looked over my unfinished university applications. I groaned, unsure where to begin. I turned my attention to my window, watching the gray sky outside. Fall was over. Winter was setting in.

For a moment, I wished I was flying through the heavy clouds and into the blue beyond them. Then I cast that thought from my mind. *What was the point?* I threw myself down onto my bed and hugged Astra to me. The thought returned to me, unbidden. *Perhaps if I went to the Graysons' house, I could find a way in and let Astra fly.* Mom's words, about me flying away in a breeze, had set the wheels turning in my head. *Perhaps it was possible...*

Astra looked up at me. Her eyes were brighter than I had seen them for weeks. I sighed again.

"I'm glad you're here, Astra," I whispered.

She nuzzled my hand. I petted her absent-mindedly, while I picked up my cellphone and scrolled through my contacts list. No one had called me in a while.

Alex's name flashed up and I paused, my finger hovering over the call button. *Would he pick up?* I groaned and glanced at Astra. She was watching me, curiously.

"I'm crazy, aren't I?" I asked her, before laughing hollowly.

I pressed the call button and held the phone to my ear. The call connected, then went straight to the voicemail system. Alex's smooth, warm voice, asking me to leave a message, had me in tears in moments. *I must be stupid,* I told myself. The message tone sounded.

"Alex, please call me. I don't know if you'll believe me, but I love you. I truly do. I'm so scared, Alex. I need to know you're okay. Please call me."

I hung up. Then I opened the pharmacy bag and looked at the tablets. *How had I come to this point, relying on medication to help me sleep?*

I sighed, and took a sleeping tablet. Then I lay back on the bed, with Astra snuggled against me, and drifted to sleep.

## Reawakening

I woke late the next morning and found a note next to my bed, in my Mom's familiar, elegant writing.

*"Cassie, there are leftovers in the fridge. Please eat something. I didn't want to wake you. See you after work. Mom xoxo."*

I smiled at the note. Astra looked up at me expectantly.

"Well, girl, you'll need energy to fly. Let's try and eat something."

I dragged myself out of bed, still feeling the effects of the sleeping tablet. We wandered downstairs and I opened the fridge. Mom had made macaroni – my favorite. I scooped some onto a plate, for me, and into a dish, for Astra.

She started eating as soon as I placed it in front of her. I took a mouthful from my plate and then another, my stomach rebelling at first. Then it got easier.

I ate a few more mouthfuls. *I could do this.*

Astra had nearly finished hers. I was starting to feel full, so I pushed the plate away. Astra had eaten everything I had given her and was staring up at me expectantly, her brown eyes shining and her tail wagging.

"Good girl," I said. She grinned, her tongue hanging out of the side of her mouth in the adorable way it did when she was happy.

I looked around and located my car keys. Then I leashed Astra and we headed out to the car. Astra happily jumped onto the back seat, her eyes brighter than I had seen them in weeks, her tail spinning in circles in her excitement. I started the car and we drove to the Graysons' estate.

The house was exactly as it had been the last few times I had driven by. The gate was shut and locked. The deciduous trees inside the gate were bare. Winter had definitely arrived.

I wondered how to get inside. The road Alex lived on was quiet; very few cars ever came this way. I looked over at Astra. She had her head out the window, panting happily as she watched me explore.

"Well, girl, there's only one way to do this," I said.

I jumped back into the car, drove it alongside the stone wall surrounding the estate, and parked it on the grass, beneath the branches of the trees that grew near the wall. I clambered out, opened the back door and undid Astra's collar. She looked at me eagerly, realizing that we were in for an adventure.

I laughed for the first time in weeks. The undisturbed sleep had done wonders for me, though I still felt weak, tired and slightly frightened. Yet, I was excited and felt alive for the first time since Alex had left. I could almost feel the magic in the air.

Astra followed me into the middle of the road. It stretched on for miles, not a car in sight, so I was sure we were safe. I closed my eyes, focusing my mind on the image of Astra the dragon. I put the thought in her head, as I had done so many times before, feeling her joy as I did – though it was more reserved than usual. I opened my eyes. Her eyes flashed at me, blue-green like mine, from her large head.

*"Well, it's about time! I'm glad I can finally speak to you!"* she grumped at me, her voice warm and melodious inside my head.

"I'm sorry," I murmured back, stroking the velveteen fur on her neck.

I looked her over. She was in good shape, considering how the last few weeks had gone. Her body appeared strong, her powerful legs holding her dragon-sized body up. Her large tail swept from side to side, dog-like, in her excitement. Her wings had spread out – the almost translucent skin stretching over the muscular skeleton that formed them – and I was sure that they spanned a greater distance than the last time I had seen her like this. She looked ready to fly.

*"Aww, that's okay. I know it's been tough for you. But can we please fly now?"* she asked, while playfully shaking her wings at me.

I nodded.

"I don't have a saddle or bridle, though."

*"Bareback, then!"* she chirped happily. She dropped to the ground and lay her head right down on the road. *"Climb on. Sit on my shoulders,"* she instructed. *"You can hold on around my neck."*

I took a deep breath and climbed up. My training kicked in and I easily managed it, even in my weaker state. I settled on her shoulders, my legs hanging forward over her chest, which felt strange when compared to sitting in the saddle that she usually wore.

She laughed as she heard my thoughts. She lifted her head and I grabbed hold of her neck, before checking the road again. It was still clear.

“Let’s go!” I said.

Astra laughed, delighted, as she ran down the road a few steps. She raised her magnificent wings and we left the ground. We were soon soaring higher, over the treetops that surrounded the estate.

*“Head for the paddock,”* I instructed.

Astra did as I asked, though she swooped left and right, making the most of our time in the air. We flew over the familiar blue roof of the Graysons’ house and, as the paddock came into view, she dropped down, landing as softly as she could.

I hoped that Alistair and Charlotte would not mind me visiting, while they were away. Alex had told me I was always welcome here. I wondered whether that invitation would still stand, if he continued to refuse to acknowledge me.

*“Of course they won’t mind! You’re safe here,”* Astra confirmed. I smiled at her as I dismounted.

“I’m really sorry that I didn’t morph you sooner. I have missed you,” I commented, as I hugged her. She nuzzled her head into my neck, returning my hug.

*“Can I stay like this, for a while?”* she asked. *“I’d like to fly a bit more.”*

“Sure, go ahead. I’m going to have a look around,” I replied.

I lay on the grass, watching as Astra flew up into the air and disappeared from sight, over the treetops. I stared at the clouds for a while, then, growing bored, I got to my feet and walked towards the stable. It was unlocked, so I popped my head around the door. I heard a horse nicker, so I stepped inside. I approached the bays and saw that Elfreda and Thor, Charlotte and Alistair’s horses, were both present. They watched as I wandered past. I doubted that the Graysons would leave them alone, so someone must have been keeping an eye on them. I wondered who it was.

I opened the door that led to the part of the stable where the exotic animals were kept. The bays belonging to Othin, Alex’s giant eagle, and Merlyn, Amaia’s giant falcon, were both empty. That made my heart sink.

I peeked into the bay where Seraphina, Charlotte’s phoenix, usually lived. The nest was still there. Seraphina’s egg was there, too, glowing gold and red at that moment. I tucked more hay around it, to keep the egg warm. I wondered how long it would be until she hatched.

I could not check on Amaia's unicorns, but knew that they would be somewhere in the forest. I thought to ask Astra whether she had spotted them, when she came back.

I went back to the main stable, found some carrots in a bucket and fed them to Thor and Elfreda. I petted them both, then left.

I wandered through the rose gardens, situated between the stable and the back patio. I stopped to admire Alex's roses. I sniffed *Cassandra Phoebe*, the rose that Alex had grown and named for me. Its sweet fragrance brought tears to my eyes. It was starting to lose its flowers, with winter coming on. I felt sad, seeing it like that. I noticed, however, that being there did not hurt as much as I thought it would. Even in their absence, the vampire's magic was still there.

I crossed the patio, looking briefly at the house. It was dark inside. The doors were probably locked, so I headed straight across the patio and into the orchard, snagging a couple of late season apples. I knew Astra would love one. I wandered past the greenhouses, to the gate in the back hedge that led back to the paddock. I passed through the gate, just as Astra landed.

*"Any sign of Amaia's unicorns?"* I asked, in my head.

*"No, but they might be roaming elsewhere."* Her eyes alighted on the apples I held in my hands. *"Is one of those for me?"* she asked.

I smiled and tossed one over. She laughed as she caught it in her mouth and chewed on it. I reached over and patted her.

"It's so quiet here," I murmured, as I sat on the ground and leaned against her.

She gazed at me, happily, then started nuzzling my hand for the other apple. I smiled and handed it to her, then gently scratched her head. She chewed for a few seconds, while enjoying the scratch. Suddenly, she raised her head, looking over my shoulder towards the orchard.

*"We're being watched,"* she commented, though I heard no fear in her voice.

I got to my feet, still facing her. Before I could turn, our observer spoke.

"Lady Cassandra?"

The greeting was so familiar, yet sent a pang through my heart. It was an acknowledgement of my position as Star Kin, though I did not think that I had been living up to my title, lately.

However, I recognized the voice. I turned to face our observer, smiling as I looked towards him.

“Kaspar!” I exclaimed.

Kaspar Wieland was one of the Graysons’ most trusted friends. He looked no older than forty-five, his pale, angular features friendly and his golden-brown eyes shining in the daylight. His graying hair lent him a rather distinguished air. He was dressed casually at the moment, though I was used to seeing him in a suit.

He, and indeed all of the vampires, were able to walk in the daylight. The direct sunlight had the effect of making them shine brightly like angels, their inner goodness – the brilliance – becoming apparent in the sunlight. In our little corner of the world, it was usually overcast, meaning they could quite safely wander about, without fear of revealing who they really were.

He bowed briefly, then straightened and strode quickly towards me, his eyes shining happily.

“I’m sorry; Astra needed to fly. I hope you don’t mind,” I explained, giving him the reason for our presence on the property.

He just laughed, the musical laugh that the vampires all seemed to share. Then he hugged me, enthusiastically.

“Cassie! It’s wonderful to see you!” He stepped back, holding me at arm’s length. His eyes travelled over me, taking in my messy ponytail, my slept-in clothes and my run-down demeanor. “Oh, Cassie! What *have* you been doing to yourself?” He looked worried.

I shrugged and blushed, embarrassed. I did not know what to say. He frowned, then shook his head.

“I told that boy you would go to pieces, if he left things how they were. But he’s so determined to save you.” He tutted and hugged me again.

“Have you...” I started. Then I stopped, wondering if I had any right to ask the question that was sitting on my lips.

Kaspar pulled back and stared at me.

“Are you okay?”

I was trembling. Fear, worry and relief were fighting for control inside me, and it was all I could do to not start crying again. I thought I had lost everything. Yet, here one of my vampires stood, welcoming me as if I had only been gone a day or two, not four weeks. I inhaled shakily, trying to control myself.

“I’m sorry, Kaspar. I’m tired. Just ignore me.” I turned away and petted Astra, trying to center myself again.

“Would you like to come inside? The house has missed your presence.” His tone was gentle, but still slightly concerned.

I looked up from where I had rested my head against Astra’s neck. She gazed down at me.

*“It’s okay, Cass. I’ll just fly about some more. Go and spend some time with Kaspar. He might be able to tell you how things are going.”*

I smiled up at her.

“Off you go, then,” I whispered, petting her once more. I turned to face Kaspar again. “How have you been?” I asked, trying to think of small talk to fill the large silences that the vampires were used to.

“Oh, you know, just keeping an eye on things,” he murmured. He watched me as we walked back to the house.

“I fed the horses some carrots,” I commented as we passed the stable. Kaspar smiled.

“Tell me something, Cassie,” he asked quietly. “How have you *really* been?”

As we walked, I mulled over his question. *How had I been? Truly awful.*

“I’ve been okay,” I replied as we crossed the patio.

He led me up the stairs and opened one of the French doors. We entered the kitchen, where I was surprised to see that the jug was boiling. I raised my eyebrows at this, and Kaspar nodded.

“I saw you wander past, before. I could hardly believe my eyes.”

Of course he had been here, even though the house had been dark. Their vision was adaptable to the dark. Vampires could see almost as well in the middle of the night, as they could in the middle of the day.

He started preparing a hot drink for me, while I leaned against the counter, saying nothing. He looked up at me, his face serious.

“I know that you’ve been far from okay. I’ve been watching you.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Oh, *really*? Was it very entertaining, watching me fall apart? Was it a good show?” I stopped suddenly, surprised at my sarcasm and bitterness. *Where had that come from?*

Kaspar did not appear surprised at all. He just smiled gently as he poured the hot water into a cup. Soon my drink was ready, and he led me to the table.

“He’ll never forgive me, you know,” he murmured quietly. “I knew things were bad. I just didn’t know *how* bad. But seeing you now...” he paused and looked me over, again. “You’ve lost weight and look like you haven’t been sleeping.”

I nodded and looked down at the cup I was nursing between my hands.

“I’m okay, Kaspar. Truly I am. I just... lost track of things, for a while there,” I said quietly, not wanting to alarm him.

Kaspar just shook his head.

“Has he been in touch with you, at all?” I asked.

Kaspar’s eyes clouded over, hiding his emotions. I stared into his eyes, my heart in my throat.

“Kaspar?” I whispered, my stomach knotting up.

“I thought he would have contacted you, before he contacted me. He hasn’t spoken to you at all, then?” he asked.

I shook my head and stared down at my cup.

“Why would he want to talk to me, after what I said to him?” I muttered. I looked up at Kaspar. “He probably hates me. I doubt he ever wants to see me again. Kaspar, I really, *really* screwed things up between us.” My sobs stopped me from saying anything more.

Kaspar reached over and patted my hand which was resting on the table.

“It’s okay, Cassie. Everything will be fine.”

“How do you know that? You haven’t spoken to him, have you?”

“Charlotte and I did speak briefly, a few nights ago,” Kaspar admitted, watching me cautiously.

“What happened? Is he okay? Did she say whether he managed to change their minds? Is he coming home?” I bumbled out the questions that had been plaguing me for weeks.

Kaspar sighed.

“She told me things were going well, but she wasn’t daring to hope. These things can change as easily as the tides.”

“Did she know when they would be back?” I asked, barely breathing.

Kaspar shook his head.

“No. Who knows how long it will take?” He patted my hand again. “I’m sorry I didn’t take better care of you. I just thought it best to leave you be, though I’ve been

keeping an eye out in case you got into danger. I suppose I should have let you know I was around. Alex is going to be so upset, when he sees you.”

“Upset? Why?”

Kaspar sighed and looked out the window, thinking. I lifted my cup to my lips. The warm chocolate was sweet and I swallowed it easily. It tasted good.

“Cassie, have you seen yourself? You’re like a shadow of your former self. You look so fragile. Like a ghost.”

I could not help giggling at his description.

“I thought I was more like a zombie,” I retorted.

A smile twitched around Kaspar’s mouth and he turned his golden-brown eyes on me again.

“Alex would hate to see you falling apart, like this. We all thought you’d be strong enough to cope.” He grimaced. “I guess we were wrong. I know you haven’t been coping, but how bad has it been?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” I mumbled. “I just wish Alex had replied to me, or called me back. Anything, really, so I’d know what he wanted from me.”

Kaspar blinked at me, surprised.

“What he wants from you? What do you mean, Cassie?”

“I called him a liar, the last time I saw him. I called him a liar and told him to leave, without saying goodbye to him properly. I made a huge mistake. Now he doesn’t love me, and I’m afraid I’ll never see him again.” I groaned and hid my head in my arms, on the table.

Kaspar chuckled. I raised my head and stared at him.

“So *that’s* what you said! No wonder he was refusing to talk about it. He seemed so determined, when he left here – determined to save your life. He told us he was going ahead to get more information, and to research. Then he up and left. I didn’t know, until the others got there, that you two had argued. But he has been so single-minded that they’ve just let him have his head. By all accounts, it seems to be working.”

I stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“My Lady, do you think he hates you?” Kaspar shook his head, answering the question before he had finished asking it. “No, my dear. He’s there fighting for your

life and for Astra's life. He's determined to win, to prove that he is worthy of your love. Alistair said he's never seen him like this, before."

"But..." I murmured. I was confused. I thought he no longer loved me.

"Cassie, if there is one thing I know about vampires – at least, the brilliant kind – it's this: If you are lucky enough to have one fall in love with you, no matter what wrong occurs, they will fight with their life to make it right. He thinks that he's done you wrong in some way. He thinks he needs to earn your love again. Cassie, he loves you. But he thinks that you no longer love him. He's fighting to save you, so he can come back and make things right. He wants to prove himself to you, in hopes that you'll love him again."

"But I *do* love him. I've never stopped loving him. I'm just so lost without him," I said, tears streaming down my cheeks. *What on earth had I done?* "How long until he knows?" I asked. I desperately wanted Alex back, now more than ever before. I needed to tell him that he had been wrong; that I had never stopped loving him.

"It could be any time now, but we won't know until..." Kaspar stopped short. He sat up; his eyes fixed on the French doors behind me.

I turned my head, at the same time as I heard Astra in my mind.

*"Cassie, come out here! Quickly!"*

## A Knight Returns

Kaspar was staring at Astra. Astra was standing on the patio, staring into the house. Her aquamarine eyes were shining brightly and she was grinning, her tongue hanging out like it did when she was truly happy. Her paws were dancing, like they used to when we first started flying together.

*"What is it, girl?"* I asked, as I got to my feet.

*"Get to the paddock!"* she exclaimed.

Kaspar was right behind me as we reached the patio. Astra started running towards the paddock, Kaspar and I close on her heels. She stopped short of the gate and let us through ahead of her. As I passed her, what I saw took my breath away.

Alistair and Charlotte were dismounting from their gryphons, their eyes shining. Other vampires were landing, with various creatures which were quickly filling the paddock. Alistair and Charlotte turned and saw Kaspar before they saw me.

*"Kaspar! Guess what! He's done it!"* they exclaimed in unison, looking ecstatic.

Then I saw Othin swoop in, and my whole world came to a halt. I stopped breathing.

Alex dismounted; his dark hair tousled by the wind and his eyes shining as they met mine. Then, he was running towards me. I gasped. *He was surely more handsome than I remembered!* The joy on his face was incredible to behold.

I do not remember moving. But, before I knew it, he had his arms around me and his lips on mine, kissing me so passionately that I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I returned his kisses, each one so sweet and so tender. I was so overwhelmed, that I honestly had no idea which way was up.

*"Cassie..."* he breathed, when he eventually pulled away from me.

*"Alex, I'm so sorry."* I spoke quickly, trying to get my apology out before he could stop me.

*"Cassie,"* he whispered, placing his finger against my lips, stopping my words in their tracks. *"Don't,"* he said, shaking his head at me.

I stared up at him. He smiled, his brilliance showing unhindered and sweeping me off my feet, as it had done so many times before.

“Cassie, I love you. I love you. *I love you,*” he stated. “It should be *me* apologizing. I never wanted to leave you. I never wanted you to think I was a liar, or that I would *ever* break a promise to you. But I’ve done it, Cass! They’re going to let you keep Astra!”

I stepped back and turned to stare at Astra, then back at Alex.

I suddenly felt light entering my world, again.

*Alex loved me.*

*Astra was safe.*

*I was safe.*

I burst into tears. A month of fear, regret, worry and sadness overwhelmed me and I felt the world tilt dangerously, causing me to stumble. Alex caught me. He looked shocked.

“Cassie! What on earth?” he exclaimed, as he looked me over. “What have I done?” he murmured, a second or two later.

I realized he was touching the skin at my waist – my shirt having lifted, slightly, as he caught me. His ability to read emotions, from a simple touch, was now in play. But the last thing I wanted, was him picking up on what I had been feeling over the last month.

“No! Alex!” I exclaimed, while trying to loosen his grip on me.

His face was paler than I had ever seen it; his eyes filled with sorrow. He looked like he might cry.

“No! No! *No!*” I exclaimed, fumbling for his hand, trying to break his connection with me.

“Cassie...” he moaned, his eyes on mine, his face horrified. “What have I done?”

So I did the only thing I could think of, to break his concentration, and to stop him looking so horrified.

“Alexander Grayson!” I demanded, addressing him as my guardian, the way I had heard the other Star Kin address their guardians, using the tone of voice he had to obey. “If you love me, take your hand *off* me!”

Then, I kissed him.

His hand dropped from my waist. Then he wrapped both his arms around me, touching only my clothing, as he crushed me to his chest and kissed me back like he had never kissed me before.

When we reluctantly broke apart, a few vampires nearby applauded. I barely heard them. I was gazing into beautiful green eyes, belonging to the most amazing guy I had ever known.

“Alex, I love you. I’m sorry for what I said,” I whispered. “Why didn’t you call me?”

He grinned, his gorgeous dimples appearing and nearly making me swoon where I stood. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cellphone. It was a mangled mess.

“What happened?” I gasped, staring at the mess of metal and wire in his hands.

“Some of the Craevyrn decided they didn’t want to be diplomatic. We fought. The phone got the worst of it,” he said, shrugging. “I wanted to call you so many times, but I’d never memorized your number. I was the only one who had it,” he admitted, “on *this* phone.”

“Oh,” I replied. Suddenly his lack of response made sense. “So, you never got my message?” I asked.

“No. Sorry.” He grinned at me. “I did get your letter, though.” His grin faded with his next sentence. “You look like you’ve been in the wars, yourself,” he murmured.

I looked away, not wanting him to feel any worse.

“It’s okay. It’s nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, sweetheart. It’s not nothing,” he whispered.

He tucked me under his arm and led me away from the gathering crowd of vampires and creatures. I could hear Amaia happily chatting to Kaspar but, before I could greet her, Alex led me to the log by the lake, near his house. It was the same place where he had told me that I was a Star Kin. He sat down, pulling me down with him.

“Cassie, what happened to you? You look like death warmed up.”

“Gee, thanks! What happened to, ‘*you look incredible, my sweet Cassie*’?”

Alex stared over the water, his jaw tense. Then he turned back to me.

“I don’t know what to say. You look like you haven’t been sleeping, or eating.”

His eyes travelled over me, but I felt no joy in his perusal. It was an examination.

"I'm fine. My doctor gave me sleeping tablets, so I *did* sleep last night," I muttered.

"I never picked you as someone who would ask a doctor for help, voluntarily."

"Mom made me go, actually," I admitted, "after I collapsed in Gym."

Alex's eyes widened in shock.

"This is all my fault," he whispered. "Cass, I'm so sorry. I promise I'll make it up to you."

"It's not your fault. It's mine," I replied. "If I had said goodbye properly, if I had been more grown up about the whole situation..." I petered off, unsure what else to say.

Alex shook his head and sighed.

"What *will* I do with you?"

"Kiss me again, I hope. Love me too, for that matter," I murmured, grinning cheekily.

"I'll always love you, Cass. Never doubt that."

"I never will again, especially after speaking to Kaspar, today. He made me see this situation from your perspective. I could only see it from mine and, well, I was wrong."

Alex hugged me again.

"I'm glad you are here," he said, "but why aren't you in school?"

"My doctor told me to get some rest."

"So, you decided to take Astra flying, bareback, from the side of our road, instead?"

I grimaced. He must have seen my car when he flew back.

"It was more for her benefit, than mine," I mumbled.

Alex laughed. The sound warmed my heart. I laughed too, the feeling bubbling up from a part of me that, I thought, had been broken beyond repair. *It felt amazing!* I wrapped my arms around Alex, desperate to be close to him, and to make up for all the time we had lost. He held me gently, then started speaking.

"Thank goodness it's over," he murmured. "I was terrified I was going to lose you, and Astra. I didn't know what the Craevyrn were going to do. All I could do was tell them about how we found the stone; about Jennabeth's vision that night; about how you transformed the stone; about how you're still discovering what you can do and about how responsible you are."

“They’re evil, but they’re not fools. They know that you and Astra are both very powerful. I don’t know if they dare to try separating you. Perhaps they had second thoughts. They decided to let you live, and to let you stay with us. But I’m still worried.”

“Why?” I murmured. “What is there to worry about, now?”

“They may still come after you, even despite our arrangements. There are rebels amongst the Craevyrn. They don’t always abide by the rulings that Sephtis makes. I want to protect you, but I’m worried they’ll come after you when I’m not around.”

“They’d be stupid to do that, surely?”

“Stupid, or insanely clever. I’m not sure which. All I know is that you are valuable. Only, I’m not sure what value they would place on your head.”

I sighed. I was too tired to think about all of that.

“Alex, I’m glad you’re back. I’m glad we won this round. But I’m tired. I need to get some sleep. Then we can have a meeting, to decide what to do.” I leaned against him, stifling a yawn.

“Okay, sweetheart. Let’s get you home.”

“Is she okay?” I heard Amaia ask, as she arrived. I looked up, to find her sitting astride Astra. Both of them were grinning at me. “Told you I could ride her!” Amaia commented cheekily. I smiled.

“Any other day, and you wouldn’t get away with that,” I retorted teasingly.

Amaia leapt from Astra’s back and dropped down beside me. She wrapped her arm around me.

“It’s great to see you, Cass! Although, you look like someone needs to feed you.”

“I know,” I replied. “I look terrible. I’ve been told several times, today. Give me a break!”

Amaia frowned.

“You are a worry, Cassie,” she said. “But Astra wants to get you home. Alistair wants to have a meeting, soon, to discuss everything.”

I stared at Alex. *We had just been discussing that!* He chuckled.

“My little Oracle,” he said, gently touching my cheek.

I handed my car keys to Amaia. She ran down the driveway to collect my car. While we waited, I changed Astra back into her dog form. A few minutes later, Amaia was back.

Alex walked me to the car, helped me into the passenger seat and let Astra into the back. I closed my eyes for a moment.

When I opened them again, I was looking up at my bedroom ceiling. The house was quiet, and it was darker. *I must have fallen asleep.* Astra stirred beside me, then looked up, her chocolate-brown eyes shining happily.

“Alex?” I murmured. There was no response.

*Had I dreamed it?* My dreams were so realistic sometimes, that I often woke up wondering what was real and what was imagined.

I pulled myself out of bed and wandered downstairs, barely daring to hope that it had been real. As I entered the living room, heading towards the kitchen, I heard my Mom speak.

“Cassie?”

I turned and found her sitting on the couch. Alex was sitting in one of the arm chairs, across from her. My heart leapt! *It had been real!*

“Mom,” I said. She looked furious.

“Cassandra. Phoebe. Stone,” she growled, between her teeth. “What the *hell* is going on?”

I glanced at Alex. He was warily watching Mom. He looked like she had just torn into him; he looked upset, and his hair was standing on end. I could see why, as he raked his fingers through it, making it stand even more awry.

“Oh no,” I muttered under my breath. *I was in big trouble.* “Mom, I can explain...” I started.

“No, I don’t want to hear it! I just can’t believe that you would be *stupid* enough to let him back into your life, after he abandoned you like that!” She turned to Alex, her blue eyes flashing angrily. “Just *look* at what you did to my daughter!” She swept her arm out toward me.

Alex glanced over at me. He looked heartbroken. I stared at the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I just needed time to sort things out.”

“Then you have the audacity to stroll back in here, and hope things would go back to how they were? How *could* you?!” she yelled, accusingly. “Haven’t you made her suffer enough? She was not eating, not sleeping, not functioning. How do you intend to fix this?!”

“Mom! Stop it!” I yelled. They both turned to stare at me, surprised at my outburst. “It wasn’t just him. It was me, too. We had a... a misunderstanding.” I

glanced at him, wondering what he had told Mom about his absence. I decided to stay away from the details. “He came back and he apologized. I was angry. But you taught me to forgive those that hurt me. I forgave him, Mom.”

Mom glared at me for a moment, then turned and stormed out of the room. She stopped by the door and turned back to Alex.

“You had better hope that you *never* do *anything* to hurt my daughter again, or so help me, you’ll live to regret it.”

Alex stared up at her and nodded.

“I won’t hurt her again. I promise,” he whispered.

Mom glared at him once more, then turned and walked away.

I stared at Alex.

“What did you tell her?” I whispered, as I moved to sit on the couch.

“As much of the truth as I dared,” he murmured, “so, not much. I told her that we argued, and that I needed time to sort out my priorities. I told her that my phone broke, and that was why I hadn’t called you. I told her that I know what I want, and that I love you.” He paused and his stunning eyes gazed into mine. Then he smiled, just slightly, as he continued: “I told her that I intend to marry you, as soon as you’ll have me.”

I stared at him, my mouth hanging open, completely gob-smacked.

“Marry?” I whispered. *That must mean he wanted to turn me.*

“I don’t want to hurt you. But they’ve left me no choice. I have to turn you as soon as possible, so you and Astra can stay together. They’ve given us until the end of June.”

“Oh.”

I did not know what else to say.

## Future Plans

That night I took another sleeping tablet. I needed to sleep, without dreams or nightmares, because I needed to be at my best for whatever was going to happen.

I had asked Alex for time to think about his proposal. He told me he would go back to watching me, as he had done before he went to the hearing. He had previously spent his nights sitting on the roof, above my bedroom, watching the stars or reading. Sometimes he needed to wake me from particularly bad nightmares. I had been through many of those before the hearing.

After Alex kissed me goodnight and left, I tried to talk to Mom. But she had locked herself in her room, obviously still angry.

I felt awful. Yet, at the same time, I was happier than I had been for weeks.

I went to the kitchen to make a hot drink. I needed to think. I knew Alex would be waiting for me to head to bed, so he could start his 'stalking' – our joke reference to his guardianship, which had been in place between us ever since he told me how he spent his nights.

However, what he said tonight had stunned me.

*He wanted to marry me!*

I had always known this was coming, but was unsure what I should do. He had told me that love and marriage for vampirekind lasted forever; that love was the only thing that could change them. In all other respects they were like statues, constant and eternal.

I sat down at the dining room table. Astra lay at my feet, watching me.

"Astra, what should I do?"

How could I marry him when Mom was against us being together?

How could I marry him while I was still hurting from our separation?

How could I *not* marry him? He had risked everything – his life, his family's lives – to save mine.

How could I *not* marry him? After all, I loved him.

I groaned and rested my head in my arms. I had seven months to make my decision. I had seven months before Alex would have to turn me. I had been

begging him to do it ever since I found out what I was. However, it was the one thing that he was adamant he did not want to do.

I let one of my hands drop down at my side, so Astra could nuzzle against it.

*So much to think about. Too much for tonight.*

I finished my drink and headed upstairs to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following day, Mom would not let me go to school. She also would not let me leave the house.

“Cassie, you’re staying home, resting, and hopefully thinking about what you want to do with your life. I’m not having you running around after Alex like some lost puppy, and letting him ruin your chances for the future!”

“Mom, I’m not going to do that. You should know me better than that!”

“I thought I did. But you’ve shown a side to yourself that I didn’t even know existed. You two could do with some distance, that’s for sure!”

“Mom! Distance is what did this, in the first place!”

She shook her head. Then she pointedly looked towards the pile of university applications sitting on my desk.

“If you don’t feel like sleeping, then get onto those. The universities won’t wait forever for your application to come through. You’re smart, Cassie. Don’t miss your chance.”

With that, she left the room. I knew she was watching me. It was her day off, so I knew I could not sneak out. At her suggestion, I turned my attention to the applications.

A few hours later I had completed the paperwork, except for the essays. How could I explain to the universities what I was, how I saw myself, and what I saw for my future? If I was honest, they would not believe me. It was all too fantastic. But if I put down what I would have, prior to meeting Alex, then I would be lying to myself.

I laid the paperwork aside and looked at my bed. Astra stretched and yawned at the end of it. She had been sleeping while I worked.

I stood up and went to my closet. I pulled out a long, rectangular box that I had hidden away in the bottom of the cupboard. I gently folded back the cardboard flaps to reveal my staff and cloak – the symbols of my status in the vampire world.

I lifted up the staff, running my hands over its white-painted, carved surface. I followed the curves of the design as it wound its way up to the ornate head at the

top, which I could fit my heartstone into. I stood it up, propping it against the closet door.

Then I lifted the cloak from the box, letting the magical fabric unfold. Amaia had arranged for the mohair fabric to have unicorn hair woven into it, from her unicorn friends. I watched, mesmerized, as light and shadow fell on it, moving of their own free will against the laws of physics. I ran my hands over the fine fabric, feeling its warmth and watching it shimmer in the light. I threw it over my shoulders, fastening the intricate clasp set at the front of it. Then I picked up my staff and turned to look in the mirror.

I hardly recognized the girl I saw looking back at me. I looked faded, compared to the magic that the staff and cloak held. I had to smile, though. The lack of sleep and food had left me pale. Add to that the dark circles under my eyes, and I looked more like Alex and Amaia than I had before.

This was the future I could see for myself. It was as obvious to me as the sun rising in the morning. *This choice. This life, with all of its fear, danger and responsibility.*

But how could I explain that to the universities – and to Mom?

I sighed, then removed my cloak and carefully folded it. I placed it, along with my staff, back in the box. I returned the box to the closet then looked around my room.

I gazed at the two photos I had on display. There was one, on my bedside table, of Alex. I had put it back in its rightful place the previous night. It had sat there, before he went away. But once he left, I had locked it away with my staff and cloak, unable to bear looking into his stunning green eyes which lost none of their impact in a photo. *Alex: the one who had stolen my heart.*

There was another photo, on my desk, of Mom and Dad. *The ordinary side to my life.* My father's eyes were so like my own. My mother's hair was a shade of blonde that matched mine. Grief made my heart ache, as I gazed at it. Dad had died of cancer several years earlier, but it still hurt when I thought of him. I missed him terribly. He and Mom had been so happy together. I wondered whether Mom's reaction was caused by her grief for the love she had lost.

I wished Dad was still around. I was unsure what he would have said about my situation, but perhaps he could have given me some advice. Maybe he could have talked Mom around. After all, he had been the biggest romantic I had ever met. Even while he was sick in hospital, he was sending Mom flowers. His last bouquet

had arrived the day after he passed away, delayed by some issue at the flower shop. He had let Mom know that he loved her, and that even death could not truly stop that show of love.

I hurriedly wiped tears from my eyes, hearing Mom walking up the stairs. She opened the door and smiled when she saw I was there.

“Dinner will be ready soon. How did you go with your applications?” she asked.

“Fine. I’m struggling with the essays, but the rest is done. I think I can finish them off in the next few days.”

“Good,” she said before she left, closing the door behind her.

I walked to my desk and picked up my cellphone. I knew Alex’s phone was damaged beyond repair, but I needed to hear his voice. I called his number, expecting it to go straight to voicemail.

“Hello?”

I paused for a moment, surprised.

“Alex?” I asked, amazed that he had been able to answer.

“Cass? Is that you?”

“Yes.” I grinned, my heart leaping. “Did you get a new phone?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, I did. Are you okay?”

“I’m good, now that I can hear your voice. Where are you?”

He laughed softly.

“I’m parked about fifty feet away from your house.”

I flew to the window. I did not recognize any of the cars I could see.

“Where?” I asked.

“The grey BMW, outside your neighbors’ house,” he murmured.

“Where is your car?” I asked. He usually drove a white Mercedes.

“I thought I’d better borrow Alistair’s,” he said. “Your Mom will be suspicious if she sees my car parked here.”

“Yeah. She’s pretty mad,” I replied sadly. “She won’t let me leave the house.”

“I figured that might happen. I didn’t go to school today.”

“Ha, me neither!” I joked softly.

Alex chuckled. I closed my eyes, imagining he was sitting with me, not just out of my reach.

“Were you serious?” I asked.

“About what?” he asked.

“What you said last night,” I replied, suddenly worried that he was going to change his mind.

He sighed.

“Cassie, when are you going to realize that I *never* say anything without meaning it? Especially about something as serious as marriage?”

“Oh,” I murmured.

“Are you okay, my love?”

“Yes.” My head was spinning and my heart was leaping all over the place. I was far from okay. I was confused, happy and scared all at the same time. Then, I heard Mom coming up the stairs. “I’ve got to go,” I whispered.

“Okay. I love you,” he said.

“You too. Bye!” I hung up and tossed my phone onto the bedside table just before Mom walked into the room.

“Dinner’s ready,” she told me. She looked around the room, like she was checking that I was alone.

I smiled to myself and followed her downstairs. Astra trailed behind us, her tail wagging happily.

## A Meeting with the Graysons

On Friday morning, having slept again without disturbance, I told Mom I was going to school.

She shook her head.

“Are you sure, Cassie?”

“What more do you want, Mom?” I asked, as I helped myself to some toast. “I’m eating. I’m sleeping. And I want to go to school.”

“Maybe you should have another day off to recover,” she suggested.

“Mom, if you’re trying to stop me seeing Alex, it’s not going to work.”

She looked at me for a moment, considering what she wanted to say. I waited.

“Cassie, you’re eighteen years old. You’ve got your whole life in front of you.

Why are you going back down this path? He’ll only hurt you again!”

“He won’t hurt me. He knows what he wants. And I know what I want.”

Mom groaned and closed her eyes, like I had just given her a headache.

“Mom, I’m going to school,” I continued. “After school, Mr. and Mrs. Grayson want to see me, so I’m going to visit them. I’ll be home in time for dinner.”

Mom just shook her head, resignedly.

“Fine, Cass! Do what you want. I’ll see you at dinner time.”

Though I got to school much earlier than usual, Alex was waiting for me in the car park. As soon as I parked he was at my door, opening it for me as he had always done. He offered me his hand to help me from the car. Then his arms were around me, his lips on mine, sweeping me off my feet. By the time he released me, I was breathless.

“Wow!” I whispered.

“I’ve been dying to do that for the last thirty-six hours,” he commented. He reached up and brushed my hair away from my cheek. “You cut your hair?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Don’t worry. I regret it.”

“It’s cute,” he said, grinning cheekily. He furtively glanced around the empty car park, like he was planning something.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Checking whether anyone’s seen us,” he murmured.

“It’s too early. We’re the only ones here.”

“Perfect,” he said. “Let’s go!”

I frowned at him, unsure of what he meant.

“Go? Where?”

He waved at his car. I saw Amaia in the driver’s seat. She grinned, waved back at us then took off. Alex stopped me climbing back into the driver’s seat of my car.

“I’ll drive,” he said, as he escorted me to the passenger side and opened the door for me.

I stared up at him, wondering what he had planned. I knew he would not tell me; he was good at keeping secrets, especially if he wanted to surprise me.

“Okay,” I sighed. “At least they weren’t expecting me today. I had to argue with Mom just to get out of the house.”

Alex grinned as he closed my door. He walked to the driver’s side and jumped into the car, his fluid movements still amazing me. He gunned the car’s engine and we pulled away.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour and a half later we arrived at the marina in Seattle, where Alistair’s super yacht, the *Princess Charlotte*, was docked. The last time I was on board was on our first date, a couple of months earlier.

“Are we going sailing?” I asked.

“We’re having a meeting. It’s private out on the bay,” Alex explained, as he led me over to the gangplank.

Charlotte and Alistair met us. They nodded their heads at me, giving the most informal greeting they could – usually they would bow – before Charlotte hugged me.

“My Lady! It’s so good to see you again!” she declared.

Alistair also hugged me, before leading us onto the ship. We must have been the last to arrive, because he raised the gangplank behind us and the engines started up shortly after that.

Alex led me up to the top deck, where we found a number of Star Kin waiting.

Lady Jennabeth called the meeting to order. I saw that Lords Maxilius Darkwater, Conrad Frankton, Maynard Seaforth and Duncan Mountford – who had become a good friend to Alex and I – were there. They were the head Star Kin of each of their vampire families. Their guardian vampires were also with them.

“My Lords and My Lady,” Jennabeth started. “Welcome. We have much to discuss and I appreciate you all taking the time to join us.” She looked over at me, her golden eyes shining. She was a stunningly beautiful blonde. Although I had become accustomed to her beauty, when she smiled at me I still felt stunned by it. “Lady Cassandra, it's good to see you here, today.”

“Thank you,” I replied softly.

Duncan smiled at me, his reddish-brown hair and deep brown eyes glimmering in the limited daylight that made it into the enclosed meeting area.

“Good to see you, My Lady,” he happily murmured.

I smiled back at him as I sat down, while Alex took his place as my guardian, standing behind me.

The meeting went on for a while. I discovered that Alex and Amaia had fought hard to prove my responsibility with my gifts. They had suffered at the hands of the four Craevyrn Elders during the hearing. Thanatos and Hadria had used their horrific gifts on the Graysons, Ubel had threatened them, and Sephtis had just let them do it.

I felt sick when I heard that. In the weeks leading up to the hearing I had dreamed that Alex and Amaia would be tortured by the Elders. I had seen how badly they would be affected. I was horrified, knowing it had happened because of me.

I heard about the terms of the agreement that Alex had come to with the Craevyrn. They had given him until the end of June to turn me. Failing that, they would be coming to take Astra and me away with them.

Alex expressed his wish for me to remain human for as long as possible, in order to experience as full a human life as I could in that time frame. Alistair spoke of plans their family were making to assist me, including further training in my gifts and Star Kin duties. They wanted to be sure that all my gifts were known about and would be as powerful as possible before I was turned, but that I would be aware enough to cope with the responsibilities required to control my gifts.

Lady Jennabeth then talked about the Graysons' bravery, and the torture they had gone through to save me from the Craevyrn. By the time she stopped speaking I was in tears, horrified that my vampire guardians had gone through so much for me.

Alex asked for a break and led me down to the main deck. We walked to the bow of the boat.

“My sweet, are you alright?” he asked softly.

I certainly was not alright. I was disturbed by what I had just been told.

“Alex... your family...” I murmured, lost for words.

“Cassie, we love you. We would do it all again in a heartbeat, for you.”

I shook my head.

“No! Never again! If they come for me, I want you to turn me. Let me be the only one in pain!” I threw myself into his arms, sobbing on his shoulder. He hugged me close, stroking my back, trying to soothe me.

“Cass, it’s okay. We’re fine.”

I was not sure I believed him. I stayed in his arms until my tears stopped, then we returned to the top deck.

The afternoon was more relaxed than the morning. The worst of the meeting was over, so we spent time chatting with the other Star Kin. Alex had arranged lunch for me, which I ate in his cabin away from the curious vampire eyes. I think it was unusual for them, having a human on board the boat when everyone else was vampirekind.

By the time we returned to the marina, there were only a couple of hours before I had to be home. I hugged Alistair, Charlotte and Amaia goodbye, then Alex and I returned to my car for the drive home.

“Have you thought about what I said the other night?” Alex asked, once we were on our way.

“I’m still thinking,” I replied. “It’s a big decision.”

Alex watched me for a few seconds, then turned back to the road, with a sigh.

“What?” I asked, wondering what he was thinking.

“I wish I had done things differently,” he murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I wish I hadn’t broken your heart, for one. I wish I’d never had to leave you. And damn it, Cassie, I wish I’d proposed in a more romantic way, than by saying you only have a few months left, so why don’t you marry me so I can turn you?”

I frowned. *He seemed quite upset.*

“I told you, I don’t mind you having to make me into a vampire.”

“That’s not what I was getting at,” he sharply stated.

I sighed.

“Alex, I’m sorry. I can’t give you an answer, yet. I need time to figure things out.”

"I know," he murmured. "I won't force you to do anything you don't want to. I just want you to be happy."

He fell silent then, so I turned the radio up. I needed time to think.

\* \* \* \* \*

We arrived home and, after saying goodbye to Alex, I let myself into the house. I found Astra at the back door, but there was no sign of Mom. I guessed she was still at work.

I started preparing dinner. I thought it was the least I could do, since I had upset Mom. She arrived home just as I was serving up.

"Hi, Mom," I quietly greeted her.

She glanced at me, but said nothing as she headed upstairs. I wondered if she was still mad at me. Astra lay by the back door, looking as miserable as I felt.

Mom came back downstairs a few minutes later and sat at the table.

"This looks good," she commented, as I put her plate down in front of her.

I returned to the kitchen to quickly wipe the counter down.

"So, what did you get up to today?" she asked.

I paused. She had asked the question so innocently, but I was unsure how to answer. I knew I was meant to have been at school.

"Oh, you know. School is school," I commented obscurely.

Her tone changed then, suddenly angrier.

"Oh, *really*? That's interesting. I had a call from the school administrator, asking whether you were going back next week."

I grimaced. *I had been caught.*

"Oh," was all I managed to say.

"I guess you were with Alex?"

I sighed. *Time to own up.*

"Yes, Mom. I'm sorry I lied about school," I apologized, as a knot formed in my stomach.

"Cassie! I don't know what to say!" Mom exclaimed, as she entered the kitchen to speak to me. "You *never* used to lie to me! You're lucky I'm not stupid. I told them you were still unwell, though I'd be well within my rights to let them punish you for skipping. I'm *really* angry about this!"

"I know," I said softly, as I turned to face her. "I just needed to talk to him."

She sighed, sounding resigned to the fate that I was subjecting her to.

“I should have known you’d find a way around me stopping you from seeing him. But I’m worried about you. You’ve not been acting like yourself, lately. I hope he made sure you ate lunch?”

I nodded.

“Yes, Mom. I ate lunch. I’m planning on eating dinner, too,” I said.

She nodded. Her mouth, which had been set into a grim line, softened into something resembling a smile.

“Okay, Cass. I know I can’t stop you seeing him. Goodness knows you’re smart enough to find ways around it, even if I tried. Just stop lying to me, okay?”

I nodded as I turned away to wash the dishcloth. I could not promise anything, not with all the secrets I was keeping. I figured that I could tell her where I was going, if not what I was doing.

“Sure, Mom,” I said.

We ate dinner in a comfortable silence. Mom even smiled at me a couple of times, relieved, I think, that I was eating. Astra seemed happy too, as she grinned at me and wagged her tail.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, I was stretched out on my bed working on my essays. I heard a noise at my window. I looked towards it and was surprised to see Alex in my room.

“*Alex!*” I whispered. I jumped to my feet and embraced him.

“I’m sorry I got you into trouble,” he murmured softly.

“Don’t apologize. I chose to go with you today,” I replied.

Alex kissed me, his cool lips gently brushing mine.

“Why are you here?” I asked, as he released me.

“Charlotte asked me to speak to you,” he explained. “We’re having a party tomorrow night and she wondered whether you wanted to come. It’s just going to be us and some of our friends. Nothing too fancy.”

I smiled.

“I’ll do anything that means I can spend time with you,” I murmured, kissing him again. “So yes, I’ll come.”

“Good,” he replied. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“I’d better stay home tomorrow, even though I do want to see you. Mom will probably get upset if I spend the whole day and then the whole evening with you. I

think she likes the fact that I'm..." I stopped, not wanting to upset him, but unsure how to explain just how bad my state of mind had been while he was gone.

"Back to normal?" he offered, taking the words out of my mouth.

I looked away from him and sighed.

"Yes," I murmured softly. "Whatever normal is," I teasingly added, trying to lift the tension that I could feel between us.

His hand brushed my cheek, then caught my chin, turning my head up to look at him. Our eyes met. His gorgeous green eyes looked awfully sad. He studied my face for a moment.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he said softly.

"Stop it!" I replied, scowling at him. "Don't apologize for doing what you had to!" I reached up around his neck and pulled him into my arms. "I love you, Alex. I wish I could show you how much I appreciate what you've done for me."

"This is payment enough," he murmured, just before he kissed me.

"You'd better go," I said, a short time later. "Mom will be in to check on me, soon."

He chuckled softly, kissed me again and then left.

\* \* \* \* \*

*End of Sample Chapters...*

*Extraordinary Part 2 will be available soon to purchase.*

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