



HER MAJESTY'S
**SECRET
VAMPIRE**
AIDY AWARD

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CONTENTS

1. [Fleming](#)
2. [Lily](#)
3. [Fleming](#)
4. [Lily](#)
5. [Fleming](#)
6. [Lily](#)
7. [Fleming](#)
8. [Lily](#)
9. [Fleming](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Aidy Award](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Cover by: Jacqueline Sweet

I would be no more than a shadow of myself if I thought that I had truly lost you. For the space of many, many years, you were enough for me. You were my bliss, and my hallelujah

— EMPRESS MATILDA

Are you a plus size girl like me who loved Twilight, but wondered if you were turned into a vampire, would it make you skinny?

It wouldn't.

Because you're already beautiful exactly the way you are.

FLEMING



I watched the mixture in the beaker bubble and change colors, and rubbed my hand down my face to suppress the small smile tugging at my lips. This was what I lived for, the creation of something that would help my fellow vampires in their mission to protect the Royal Immortals, and of course their own lives in the process. My hands expertly navigated the delicate process as if they had a mind of their own, every movement precise, every ingredient measured to perfection.

“I’ve only got one shot at this.” My hands that certainly shouldn’t tremble, yet still did slightly as I pipetted the last drop of a critical reagent into the bubbling beaker. Time was running out, and the mobile phone crackled in the background. “Fleming, do you have it? We need it now!”

The weight of the lives hanging in the balance was a crushing burden, one that not even my vampire strength could easily bear. I took a deep breath to steady myself, carefully sealing the vial. “I’m sending it over,” I announced, laying it into the hand of the waiting courier. He dashed to the supernatural Tube hidden at the back of the Dungeon. It would take him directly to Vond’s location in the field.

Silence. Then, a burst of cheers in my earpiece. “You did it, Fleming! The serum worked. You’ve just saved the Henry VIII. Again.”

The adrenaline receded and the familiar dull ache in my chest resurfaced. I had saved lives today, yes, but was this all I was? A recluse in a lab, eternally yearning for the simple pleasures of my old, very, very old humanity?

I knew I was more. And that was the problem.

George Saint, another of the Black Ops team, popped his head into my lab, his smile infectious. “Great work, Fleming. We couldn’t have done it without you. I’m headed over to the Castle to debrief. Want to come along?”

“Not today,” I replied, trying to keep my voice light despite the heaviness in my chest. The truth was, I didn’t want to join them. I didn’t want to utilize the skills my own vampiric nature allowed me. The brutality in battle was the very thing I wished I could escape.

Fate, and of course the First Vampire, had dealt me this hand. To be a vampire, powerful and immortal, was a curse and a gift. Yet I yearned for the simple pleasures of my old, very, very old, humanity. I shook my head, to dispel the thoughts and returned my focus on my work.

He left me to my devices without pushing me further, which I appreciated.

My fingers danced over the various tools and concoctions that littered the lab bench, my one true testament to my dedication to the VIA and its agents. Each gadget and serum bore my mark, my unique blend of intellect and supernatural ability. But as proud as I was of my creations, none of them brought me any closer to my deepest desire. One I would forever hide from everyone I worked with.

“Come on, Flem, old chap, live a little.” Another colleague, Silas, and his brand new Serenity, Daisy, poked their heads into the doorway. “Stretch those fangs. You’re always cooped up in here, working on projects.”

They knew how brutal I could truly be. The battle at the museum, fighting for Daisy’s existence was one of the first time in centuries I’d allowed my darker nature to surface.

While I didn’t regret that I’d helped VIA save the day and defeat the Daughters of Bathory that night, I did inwardly cringe at how careless I’d been.

“What’s got you so hooked that you can’t even spare a few minutes for your fellow team mates?” Silas sauntered into the

room in his suave, easy way. They'd only been back at HQ from their base in New Orleans for a few days working on some new lead.

“Nothing, just... busy,” I murmured. If my face could heat with embarrassment, it would be. If only they knew how much I struggled, how much I envied them for being so at ease with their immortal existence. Even Daisy, who'd only just learned of the supernatural world she'd been born in to.

She gave me a cheeky grin and a wink. “You do you, Fleming. I think what you can do is pretty badass.”

“You trying to make me jealous, love?” Silas pulled Daisy toward the portal that acted as a supernatural underground hidden in the back of the lab. She gave me a look that I couldn't quite interpret so I responded only by shrugging before turning back to my work once again. Their laughter and conversation as they moved down the hall faded and it left me to my solitude once more. I let out a sigh, part relief and part longing.

I hated it, but I couldn't bear to be around them, not when every interaction only served to remind me of what I was. And at the same time what I could never be again.

Human.

Alive.

Free from the curse of immortality and the darkness it brought with it.

I returned my attention to the beaker in front of me, focusing on the task at hand. I knew that my work was important, that it made a difference in the lives of my colleagues and our mission. I couldn't afford to wish for something different, a life where I didn't have to hide who I was or what I wanted.

“Stop being a wet flannel, Fleming,” I whispered to myself, the words barely audible even to my own ears. “Thousands of years have proven that nothing will change.”

At least V had pulled me from the darkness and given me purpose. I would continue to do what I did best, create the

extraordinary from the ordinary, using my unique abilities to give my fellow vampires the tools they needed to survive.

And perhaps, in doing so, I might find a way to reconcile the two halves of my soul—the vampire and the human—into something resembling peace.

I worked through the night and barely realized until a thin steam of sunlight filtered through the thick curtains of my workshop casting a warm glow over my cluttered workspace. Bottles of serums and half-finished gadgets lay scattered across the surface, each one an attempt to solve some problem that plagued the vampire community. I stretched and then picked up a vial, examining the swirling concoction within.

I muttered to myself about the results, not yet ready to report my findings. V and a whole host of agents were waiting to see if I could create the right concoction to stave off the mating frenzy vampires experienced when they first met their Soul's Serenity. Not because they wouldn't claim their mate. But to keep them both safe during such a perilous time. "This won't do. I'll have to try again."

"Hey, did you hear about Vond and Rose's last mission?" An excited voice drifted in from the hallway outside my workshop. I glanced toward the door, curiosity piqued. It was rare that missions were discussed in such open spaces.

"Of course, I'm privy to all since I filed the reports," another voice responded enthusiastically. "Vond had to use his super strength, mind control, even his ability to shift into a bat to thwart the dark vampire they were tracking. It was like something out of a movie."

Ah. The admin staff. Not everyone who worked for the VIA were on the Black Ops team. Every organization needed its paper pushers. Harmless. Although their loose lips ought to be reported to their supervisors. Miss Primrose would —

A sudden chill split my spine, as if icy fingers had traced their way along my vertebrae. A memory flashed before my eyes, unbidden and unwelcome. A night filled with screams, blood, and terror—a night when my vampire nature had been in control. I shook my head, trying to dispel the images, but

the sounds of my colleagues' laughter rang in my ears, reminding me of what I could never escape.

"Guys, take it elsewhere," I called out, my voice tense. "Some of us are trying to work in here."

"Sorry, Fleming," one of them replied, their tone still light. "We'll let you get back to your... whatever it is you do in there."

As their footsteps retreated down the hallway, I leaned against my workbench, willing my gut to stop churning. Ever since that encounter at the museum where I'd let the monster inside of my soul out, I'd been afflicted with these memories, this torture. I closed my eyes, hoping to regain some semblance of control.

"Focus," I whispered to myself, picking up the vial once more. "This is what you do best. This is who you are now."

Maybe I should admit what was happening to me to my own superiors. Maybe they'd understand, but really, what more could they do. They already gave me purpose and let me serve here in the lab instead of in the field.

Only V and Miss Primrose were privy to the full extent of my dark past. No, this was something I needed to battle on my own. Isolation is the price I pay for my sins. The thought both comforting and painful in its truth. It was better this way. I turned back to my work, determined to lose myself in the familiar rhythm of creating gadgets and serums for those who still had a chance to find happiness within their immortal lives. As much as it hurt, I knew this was where I belonged—forever trapped between the world of vampires and the humanity I'd lost so long ago.

I paused in my endeavors on the Serenity serum when a notification popped onto the computer. The lease on my flat was up and I needed to secure new lodging. I'd put an application into a building in a part of London I hadn't lived in before. In all these years, humanity never ceased to expand.

The new flat was mine provided I could pay first and last months' rent upfront and a hefty deposit. Which, of course, I

could. I had amassed more than a king's ransom in wealth over the centuries. I was quite surprised that the fees were significantly more than the actual building I'd be moving into was worth.

But I supposed in a lower income neighborhood such as I'd chosen had its fair share of tenants who skipped out on their rents. My new abode was quite run down, and significantly smaller than my current location. But I had noticed a sign in the window of a shop at the end of the block that a purveyor of tea would be opening soon.

Nothing like a good cup of tea.

I could imagine myself sitting by the window in the early morning sun, reading the paper and sipping a spot of Earl Grey.

My fingers traced the edges of a hidden drawer in my workspace, hesitant but compelled by an unspoken need. With a soft click, the compartment slid open, revealing its secret contents. A small box that needed a key to open. Inside a small glass vial filled with a shimmering, silver liquid—my prototype serum, designed to suppress vampiric abilities and mimic human traits.

Like the ones of a simple human scientist who reads his paper in a tea shop.

I didn't yet have the courage to try the contents swirling in the vial between my fingers. The thought of embodying humanity once more, if only for a fleeting moment was tempting, but dangerous.

"Ooh, sweet Fleming. I've found you at last." A melodic voice chimed from behind me. Startled, I quickly concealed the vial and turned to face the speaker. Princess Isabella, one of the immortal princesses who always seemed to be visiting the VIA headquarters. Her raven hair cascaded over her shoulders like a silken waterfall, and her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Hello, Princess," I greeted her as politely as I could muster, acutely aware of my disheveled appearance. She never

seemed to mind. “What brings you to my humble dungeon?”

“Is there any harm in wanting to visit a favorite inventor?” she flirted, batting her eyelashes and leaning in just a little too close for comfort. “You know I just adore hearing about your marvelous creations, and I simply couldn’t resist taking a peek at whatever fun and new gadget or serum you’re working on. Do tell.”

“I’m afraid most of my work is classified,” I stammered, trying to maintain a semblance of professionalism despite my fluster at her flirting. “I wouldn’t want to bore you with the mundane details of my experiments.”

“Darling, there’s nothing mundane about you,” she purred, tracing a finger along my jawline. “Really, you should come out of this dreary workshop more often. It does wonders for your complexion.” She grinned teasingly, her fangs glinting in the dim light.

“Thank you for the advice, Princess,” I replied, gently stepping away from her touch. “But I really must get back to work.”

“Very well,” she sighed, her disappointment evident. “But do try to enjoy yourself once in a while, Fleming. You’re far too brooding for your own good.” With that, she sauntered out of my workshop, leaving me to my own devices.

“Enjoy myself?” I murmured, my gaze drifting back to the hidden drawer. “If only it were that simple.”

LILY



The soft chime of the bell above the door signaled the start of my third day at Lily's tea shop. Stepping inside felt like being wrapped in a warm blanket, with its amber-hued walls and plush, velvety seating. Soft classical music played in the background, adding a touch of elegance to the atmosphere. The aroma of freshly brewed tea wafted through the air, mingling with the scents of cinnamon and vanilla.

"Morning," I greeted my first customer as she entered, a neighborhood local who had come to my shop every day since it first opened. "The usual?"

"Yes, love," she replied with a warm smile. "For an American, you can make a good cuppa."

I busied myself behind the counter, measuring out the perfect blend of loose-leaf tea for her cup. Creating unique tea blends was my passion, and it brought me joy to see the delight on people's faces when they took their first sip. My teas were more than just beverages. They were experiences, soothing and invigorating all at once.

It's what inspired me to move all the way to England even though I didn't know a soul. This was the land of tea drinkers if not the actual land of tea.

"Here you go," I handed her the steaming cup, and a homemade scone. "Enjoy."

"Thank you, dear," she said, taking a sip and sighing contentedly. "It's divine. Did you put citrus in it today?"

“I did. But you come back tonight after work and we’ll try the Lady Grey with lavender.”

As the morning progressed, more customers trickled in, filling the small space with cheerful chatter and laughter. I moved from table to table, offering recommendations and answering questions about my various tea blends. Each interaction felt like a small victory, knowing that my business venture just might make it, and that my creations were bringing people happiness and comfort.

As the day wore on, I found myself alone in the shop for a brief moment. The soothing sound of raindrops hitting the windowpane drew my attention outside. My reflection stared back at me, and I stared back at the woman who was still a stranger to me. Even three years after I’d been wandering along the water in the little beach town in New York, I still had no idea who was I before this new life?

A sudden flash of memory caught me off guard – a whirlwind of laughter and dancing under the moonlight. But just as quickly as it appeared, it vanished, leaving me with a sense of longing and frustration. These flashes happened more often since I’d moved to London, and that confirmed that I had a connection to this place. But none of them seemed to give me new clues. I was frustrated as all get out that I couldn’t remember more.

“Are you alright, dear?” Mrs. Patel, one of my new regulars, asked from behind me, her concern evident in her warm brown eyes.

“Ah, yes, just lost in thought,” I reassured her with a forced smile, pushing the memory aside for now.

“Let me know if you need anything,” she said kindly before ordering up a cup and a scone for herself.

“Thank you, Mrs. Patel.” I was grateful for her. That was one skill I’d learned in the hospital where I’d had to learn how to talk and eat and do normal things again. Gratitude. They say that the actual act of being grateful literally changed brain chemistry, and goodness knows, I needed all the brain change I could get.

“Lilylicious, hit me with some of the good stuff.” Eve, my way too posh for this neighborhood landlord, slid onto a barstool at the counter and flopped over like she was going to die. She wasn’t. She just needed some coffee and a sweet treat for an afternoon pick me up. But what I had to offer her was the same tea that had convinced her to let me rent this little shop and the apartment above even though I had no credit, and the last remaining bit of jewelry that had sustained me for the past few years to guarantee I could pay my rent.

“Do you have any suggestions for something calming? Work has me frazzled.”

I poured her usual, which was not calming in the least. But at least it was herbal energy instead of hot bean water. She did have an incredibly stressful job that had her working all kinds of crazy hours. She as some kind of administrator for a big shot government type and she wasn’t allowed to say who. I liked to imagine she was Ms. Money Penny and was having a passionate, but secret love affair with a super secret sneaky spy. “Perhaps it’s not work but the fact that you keep drinking loads of caffeine morning, noon, and night?”

I was allowed to tease her because she was my first, and mostly only friend in London. We’d quite literally bumped into each other when I’d taken a ghostly walking tour of the city when I’d first arrived. She’d taken one look at me and decided to adopt me as her pet American. Thank god.

Eve pulled a little compact out of her vintage Chanel designer handbag and checked her lipstick. “Psh. Doesn’t affect me in the slightest.”

My mind already raced through my collection of herbal blends so I could mix her up a concoction to help with her nerves. I could remember exactly how much of every herb I had on hand, but not the first twenty-some odd years of my life. Brains were weird. Injured ones especially. “I have just the thing for you.”

I prepared a blend with chamomile, and just a pinch of valerian root. I did find some sense of satisfaction in being able to put this one pocket of this knowledge of teas and herbs

and blends to use for others. Despite the unanswered questions about my past and the ever-present amnesia that haunted me, this information was so easily accessible in my mind. This and my fondness for historical dresses were really the only clues I had to go on.

“Here you go.” I handed a paper. “This blend has chamomile, lavender, and a touch of valerian root. It should help you relax and get a good night’s sleep.”

“Thank you, Lily,” she replied, taking a sniff and smiling appreciatively. “You truly are an empress.”

I rolled my eyes, but only to hide a slightly embarrassed smile. It was really nice to have a friend. I didn’t know if I had them in the past, but somehow I didn’t think I had anyone as cool as Eve.

“Now listen, duck.” She took a sip of her tea, raised her eyebrow as if contemplating the universe for a brief moment. Then she gave the cup a good nod and turned her attention back to me. “Right, so, I’ve got to work tonight, and I don’t want you stay up all hours of the night obsessing. I have a feeling something is going to happen soon that will change everything.”

“Okay, Madame Nostradamus.” Eve always had ‘feelings’ about things that were going to happen. Although, to be fair, she was right. A lot.

She wagged her finger at me. “I’m serious. Give yourself a night off from the medical journals and the reverse image searches. Also, Nostradamus was a hack.”

I grinned at the way she sounded as if she knew the guy. Eve chugged the rest of her tea, but somehow still in a way that looked proper and posh. Then she stood, smoothed her skirt, also vintage Chanel, and pulled out her phone. “Duty calls. See you tomorrow, duck.”

“Yes, and I expect to see pics of the outfit you’re wearing to Dress like a Dead Monarch Fest... or did we decide on Ye Olde Cosplay Day?” I’d made plans to get people into the

shop and indulge in my love of historical dress up well before I'd even opened.

“Neither. If it's not Chanel, I'm not wearing it.” She shivered and made a faux grossed out face. Even as she left, I knew she'd be here to support me.

As soon as the shop closed for the day, I retreated to the small apartment above it. After I made my own cup of tea, changed into snugly pajamas, and curled up in the comfy chair with my laptop, I dug into my ongoing research. Into myself.

Was I taking Eve's prediction and advice to take the night off to heart? No, I was not.

I wasn't too proud to admit my research became an obsession. Every spare moment I spent digging deeper, seeking any hint that might lead me to the truth. But no matter how hard I tried, the answers remained elusive, taunting me like a puzzle with pieces that refused to fit together. What few pieces of the puzzle I did have.

I pulled out my binder with printouts of countless articles, medical journals, and testimonials, searching for any clue that could help me unlock my forgotten past. Was it old school to have paper copies? Yep. But I wanted a paper trail. It was something tangible that I could touch, and see, and feel.

My visits to various specialists had yielded little so far. Everyone was always baffled by my case, and I learned early on that I was going to have to advocate for my own health and memory. No one else was going to want to help me get my old life back, like I would.

I couldn't let go of the feeling that there was something significant waiting to be discovered, here in London. As like so many nights, I fell asleep in the chair and woke up to the alarm on my phone blaring way, way too early. I bookmarked the last tab I'd been looking at.

Oops. I'd accidentally gone down the rabbit hole of historical cosplay again. Surely my guilty pleasure counted as the little break that Even wanted for me. When the frustration

of my lot in my post amnesia life was a bit too much to bear. There was lots of groups in London that did all manner of events, especially since that Regency romance series had been made into a popular TV show.

I had a particular fondness for Shakespearean cosplay, but my real love was the period following the Norman conquest. Sadly, very few other historical reenactment or cosplayers cared much for that time period. It was all Regency this, and Regency that.

I indulged myself in this little hobby partly because I thought it might be a clue to my life before. Every time I had a flash of memory I was dressed in historical costumes, so I was guessing I'd been into this for a long time.

But no one on the East coast of America, where I'd been found wandering in a haze, had ever heard of me. And I checked in with a lot of historical reenactors and even went to Comicon in full Empress Matilda regalia.

Nothing. Nobody had a clue, and a lot of people at Comicon looked at me like I was on crack.

After my move to London, I got less weird looks when dressing up. It's why I wanted to host a cosplay even at the shop.

Which, damn, I needed to open in about three minutes. I threw on my much simpler modern day clothes of a jeans and a sweater - gah - jumper. I was in England now, and wanted to integrate myself as much as an American living abroad could.

The warm glow of the tea shop was a welcome contrast to the chilly autumn air outside. I grabbed my frilly apron from behind the counter, and carefully measuring out the fragrant leaves of my latest wake-the-hell-up tea blend – a mix of Indian chai spices, heavy on the black tea, with just a hint of orange peel. I inhaled the aroma, and brewed myself a cup. My first customers would likely be in momentarily, and I looked forward to sharing it with them. Crafting unique teas had become more than just a job for me. It was a passion that brought an unexpected measure of joy to my otherwise uncertain life.

“Excuse me, do you have any recommendations for a good morning tea?” a brand new customer asked. With a smile, I suggested my new blend and once she smelled the mix in the tin, she nodded and I prepared it for her.

Before I handed the steaming cup of tea to the customer, my gaze was drawn to the window, where the golden hues of the rising sun painted the world outside in a warm, amber light. And there, standing on the other side of the glass, was the most striking, intriguing man I’d ever seen in my life.

My breath caught in my throat as I took in the sight of him. Tall and fit, but a bit nerdy with black rimmed glasses. He was giving off some mad Clark Kent vibes.

He seemed to be deep in thought, gazing at something at the sign on my door with an intensity that I found almost intimidating. He sniffed the air as if he could smell my brews from outside and he turned to look directly at me through the glass on the door.

My heart went ballistic when our eyes met, and a jolt of electricity travel through my body, causing my mind to fritz right out. If I didn’t know better, I would think his eyes were glowing red. But that was clearly crazy talk from a broken brain.

“Is everything all right?” the customer I was supposed to be heling asked, clearly concerned that I’d glitched out.

“Y-yes,” I stammered, tearing my gaze away from the man and forcing a smile. “Just a little brain fart. Thank you for asking.”

If I’d thought my body had been snatched by aliens a moment ago, the second the little bell over the door jingled and that man stepped into the stop, I was so wrong about how minds and bodies worked. I instantly found it increasingly difficult to maintain my composure.

My pulse was very confused, because it skipped a beat, and then pounded out twenty staccato style. I felt my cheeks and neck and chest get all hot, and my hands trembled ever so

slightly. Wait, was I having an actual heart attack or a stroke? What were the symptoms of a stroke?

“Excuse me, miss. I’ve just moved in down the way and —”

His voice went from my ears down my spine and settled right in between my legs. Holy crap. Were the symptoms of a heart attack similar to having an orgasm? It was known as the little death in French. Although, why I knew that all of a sudden, was about as puzzling as my insane reaction. I was going to need to fricking panties for goodness sake.

The sooner I helped him with a drink or directions or whatever it is he needed, the sooner I could run upstairs, find my underused vibrator...

The swoon worthy man cleared his throat and did he maybe chuckle? “Miss?”

I super slo-mo turned to face him, and had to grip the counter with all my might since my knees were ready to give out. “Welcome to Lily’s tea shop. What can I get you?”

He gave me a strange wide-eyed stare and took a step back. Oh, geez. I was making a fool out of myself, and going to lose a potential regular customer if I didn’t get myself under control.

“Right. Uh, I know you said it’s a tea shop, but all I can smell is your divine hot chocolate.”

Huh. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who was having a stroke. I didn’t sell hot chocolate.

FLEMING



I was flabbergasted, a condition as rare for me as sunburn. I was trained to be impassive, clinical, methodical in my operations for the Vampire Intelligence Agency. While I wasn't called upon to use my spycraft skills in the field often, I knew exactly how to be the shadows, the myths, the things that went bump in the night, not the flustered and dumbstruck beings you'd find in romantic comedies.

Which is exactly what I was right at this exact moment.

Yet, here I was, just a vampire, standing in front of a tea shop girl, wanting her to...

Nope. No. Ridiculous. First of all, despite the stories, humans rarely fell in love at first sight. And secondly, no one fell in love with a monster like me.

I pulled myself together and stopped blatantly staring at her. A glance around the quaint little shop helped. I assumed Lily's Tea shop was named for the owner, since she wore an apron imprinted with her name. Both she and the shop were enveloped by the fragrant aroma of chamomile and Earl Grey, and the absolute distinct smell of chocolate.

"I... I'm afraid we don't have hot chocolate." She swallowed and looked a bit flustered like I'd asked for cheese from the moon. "Only teas. I do have some blends with chocolatey undertones. Would you like to try that?"

"Yes, thanks, that would be lovely." I was struggling to contain a feeling I couldn't identify. It had been centuries since

I'd had to wrestle with human emotions. They weren't conducive to the lifestyle, or rather, the death style, I lived.

She bustled about behind the counter, preparing my tea and when it was ready, she handed me the cup with her tea and crown logo imprinted on it. "So, you're new in the neighborhood?"

Her eyes met mine. Those eyes. I felt like they were peering into the abyss of my soulless existence.

"Ah, yes. Just getting to know the lay of the land," I stammered, my voice sounding more squeaky than I'd have preferred. I was an agent of the immortal crown for goodness sake.

"Cool, cool," she responded, moving to arrange a set of teacups on a shelf. "I'm glad that brought you into my humble little shop."

My brain scrambled for something else to say to her. A simple 'I was thirsty' wouldn't quite cut it, given my dietary restrictions.

"It was on my way," I lied, hoping she wouldn't notice the lack of conviction in my voice.

"Great, so I'll see you back in again, then won't I?"

In that moment, I wished more than anything to be able to say yes, that I'd be here every day until the end of time, just to be near her and her delicious scent. To be able to sit down and enjoy a simple cup of tea like a regular human being, with her. But wishes have always been luxuries that people - monsters - like me couldn't afford.

"Perhaps. I actually have a meeting soon, and I shouldn't be late." Like she'd asked. I was awkward talking to humans, especially human women at the best of times. This whole interaction had been off kilter and I certainly wasn't at my best.

She smiled, and my undead heart skipped a beat, which was disconcerting since it only beat a few times per hour anyway.

“Alright, I’ll hope to see you around,” she said, her voice a melodic tune that stuck in my head.

I nodded, offering her a small smile, which I quickly quashed. When had my fangs popped out? With a duck of my head, I made my way to the door, acutely aware of the inexplicable pull that made me want to stay. When I stepped out into the London fog, and the door closed behind me, cutting off my direct access to her delicious chocolatey scent, I took several long breaths.

What was wrong with me? Why her? Why now?

Questions like these would have to wait. Duty called, and no matter how disorienting or mysterious this interaction felt, my responsibilities to the Vampire Intelligence Agency remained.

But as I blended into the crowds of people making their way to and from their mundane lives, I couldn’t shake the feeling that my life, or whatever semblance of it I had, had just taken an irrevocable turn. For the first time in centuries, I found myself not dreading, but eagerly anticipating, what lay ahead. Which was foolish indeed.

I walked through the dimmed corridors of the Vampire Intelligence Agency, the creaking of the antique wood flooring muffled by the heavy velvet drapes that shrouded the rooms in a near-perpetual darkness. Each room was methodically sanitized of anything that would hint at our true nature, this was an agency of discretion above all.

Miss Primrose, V’s incomparably efficient secretary, agent in her own right, and mystery unto herself, nodded to me from the doorway to their offices. She motioned me to follow her in and sat down at her desk, which was immaculately organized down to the last paperclip.

“Fleming,” she greeted, showing no emotion, ever the picture of discretion “Just the man I was hoping to see.”

I stopped, a bit puzzled. I was generally beneath her notice unless something was amiss. “Something you needed from me, Miss Primrose?”

“Oh, I’m just making pleasant conversation,” she said, though her eyes seemed to dig for something deeper. “Meet anyone interesting today?”

The question caught me off guard. In my decades at the agency, Miss Primrose had never inquired about my personal life, or anyone else’s for that matter. She stayed out of our personal lives, and I think mostly because she wanted us to stay out of hers. My instincts flared, warning me that this was no casual conversation.

“I might’ve,” I replied cautiously. “Why do you ask?”

Her gaze held steady, a smile forming that didn’t reach her eyes. “No reason. Just curious.”

For a moment, I considered deflecting further, but lying was against my nature. “I met a woman named Lily at a new tea shop. Quite an interesting character. She’s American but recently moved here.”

“A new tea shop, you say? How... quaint,” Eve mused, her eyes narrowing just slightly. “Well, it’s always good to meet new people, don’t you think?”

No. I did not. And I didn’t think she did either.

“Indeed,” I replied, though her question left an uneasy feeling settling at the back of my mind. “Well, if there’s nothing else, I should get to work.”

“Of course, of course. Don’t let me keep you.” She turned her attention back to her paperwork as if our conversation had never happened. Miss Primrose was many things, but nosy was not one of them.

I moved both of my strange interactions with women to the back of my mind and settled back into the grind of agency work, poring over intelligence briefs and surveillance reports. But for once, my attention and focus wasn’t there at the ready. My thoughts kept drifting back to the tea shop, to the fragrant aroma that filled the air, and to Lily.

Work could wait. I had a mystery of my own to solve, and something told me that the answers I sought couldn’t be found

in a cup of tea, which was a real shame. There was something comforting by a good strong cup of English tea.

With my focus all shot to hell, I left the dungeon lab area and made my way to the agency kitchen, my thoughts whirring with fragments of speculation and no evidence. A good bottle of blood would serve to clear my mind.

I opened the fridge, its contents neatly labeled and organized, AB positive, O negative, you name it. Being somewhat of a traditionalist, I reached for my regular, A positive, the label carefully printed in the old-fashioned but plain style I found comforting.

I twisted off the cap and was just about to take a sip when a horrid smell assaulted my senses. Pig excrement if I had to take an educated guess. I recoiled, screwing the cap back on. This had to be some kind of mistake or a bad batch. That was the logical explanation.

Unless...

Intrigued and a bit worried, I brought the bottle to my personal lab, which was filled with state-of-the-art equipment for every imaginable kind of test. A thorough analysis showed nothing wrong. The blood was perfectly normal, no contaminants, no anomalies. Yet the smell was unmistakably there.

The inexplicable results, had to be wrong. But I'd checked and checked again as any thorough modern day scientist would do. A thought sparked into formation at the back of my mind, an absurd notion that seemed as impossible as it was shocking.

Two members of the elite black ops team I supported as quartermaster had also reported foul smelling blood, and had even considered it poisonous. Both had been wrong.

They couldn't consume any other blood but their Soul's Serenity's to sustain them. All others smelled and tasted repulsive to them.

I was floored. My analytical, scientifically inclined mind wrestled with the implications, but the signs were too strong to

ignore. The immediate, unexplainable attraction, the smell of the chocolate, my new aversion to blood. It all led to one unfathomable conclusion. The girl from the tea shop, the woman who had just randomly appeared into my life, might very well be the one woman's whose soul could literally save me.

A wave of emotions surged through me, elation, confusion, and, to be honest, sheer terror. What would this mean for my work, my life, my eternal existence? All these questions buzzed around my head like flies on a summer's day.

One thing was certain. My next visit to that quaint little tea shop was going to be a hell of a lot more complicated. I'd basically convinced myself that I wouldn't be going back. I didn't need to consume anything other than blood to sustain myself. Human food and drink was simply an inefficient waste of energy, time, and money. Even if I did enjoy a good cuppa every once in a while.

But without the donated blood we kept on hand for vampire agents, I would weaken, and eventually fade into a dried, shriveled state of hibernation. I could probably stave that off with coconut water, which I had discovered on a mission to the Caribbean centuries ago, could be used as a short term replacement for blood. Even humans could use it as an emergency blood transfusion.

Guess I was about to become a vegan vampire.

Did that mean I'd turn into a fruit bat?

No. Ridiculous. I was spiraling and needed to talk this out with someone who might have a clue to what was happening to me. The other agents with Serenity's were both out on missions at the moment, and there were only two other vampires in the building older than me.

I found myself standing outside Gabriel's office, hesitating. As head of the Vampire Intelligence Agency's black ops team, Gabriel was not someone to be taken lightly. With only curiosity, fear, and a little hope in my undead heart, I knocked.

“Come in,” his deep voice reverberated from inside.

I pushed the door open and stepped into a room so inane, unorganized, I wasn't sure how he ever found anything. How Miss Primrose allowed him to even be friends with her was beyond me. “Sir, may I have a moment of your time?”

Gabriel looked up from the papers strewn across his desk. His eyes were like a hawk's, sharp, focused, and unnerving. “Fleming, of course. What brings you here?”

“I have a rather unusual request. I would like you to accompany me to a tea shop.”

His eyebrows rose in that way that could make even the bravest agents quiver, but I knew him to be a solid long-standing friend, and not just my superior. “A tea shop?”

“Yes, sir. But I can't tell you why. I need your objective observation skills for something, and I don't want to taint the test by providing context.”

Gabriel scrutinized me for a moment, as if assessing the sincerity of my request. “When do we go?”

“Is now a good time?” The sooner this could be resolved, the better.

He glanced at his watch. “Let's go.”

We walked in silence to the underground teleportation Tube that connected the Vampire Intelligence Agency to anywhere we wanted to be in a matter of moments. One had to be able to give the magic that operated the transport the name of a stop, and I pondered for a moment. It didn't work to give a modern day address. This magic was old. Older than the First Vampire. I chose the site of a long ago battle I'd had with a dark vampire, long before the agency was even a thing. Before London was more than a smattering of people gathered together near the banks of the river.

We stepped into the stream of light, and within moment found ourselves on the shady, dark streets of PLACE, Gabriel's dark trench coat billowing like a superhero's cape in the autumn breeze.

“Why do you insist on living in these sorts of neighborhoods, Flem? Surely you have a mansion or a castle or two saved away somewhere after a millennium of existence.” Gabriel gave a small wrinkle of his nose. He did like the finer things in life. They didn’t call him the Golden Boy only for his winning personality.

I didn’t answer his question because we both knew why I chose to live well below my means.

I led the way to Lily’s tea shop, and when we stepped inside, my senses were instantly flooded with the familiar scents of hot chocolate, Earl Grey, and freshly baked scones if I was correct. Lily was at the counter, helping another customer, but she spotted me and her face lighting up when she saw me.

My heart skipped another precious beat.

“Back again so soon?” she asked.

“Ah, yes. Your tea made quite an impression. I wanted to share the experience with my colleague, Gabriel.”

Lily’s eyes flicked toward Gabriel, who gave her a nod of acknowledgment. “Pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine,” she replied, her gaze lingering on him for just a moment before returning to me. “So, what’ll it be this afternoon? In need of the mid-day slump pick me up?”

I glanced at Gabriel. “Why don’t you choose for us?”

Gabriel surveyed the chalkboard menu. “Let’s try your cream tea with the Earl Grey, shall we?”

Lily nodded and prepared our order, and we sat at a table away from the windows. Gabriel’s eyes very subtly wandered the room, but I knew he was making mental notes about everything. When Lily set a delicately decorated pot of tea, scones, strawberry jam, and clotted cream on the table, I found myself licking my lips.

Damn. My fangs had dropped again.

“Enjoy gentleman. And do let me know if you need anything else.” Lily licked her own lips and I just about

jumped out of the chair to pull her into my arms and find out exactly what that cute, pink tongue tasted like.

Instead I dug my fingernails into my hands under the table and gave her a soft nod. “Thank you.”

She gave a little dip of her head, hesitated like she was disappointed I hadn’t said more, and then awkwardly took a few steps backward, bumped into the empty table behind her, and then let out the most musical guffaw I’d ever heard. “Oh, pardon me, sorry, oops. I’ll just be going back to work now.”

I had to look away or risk letting her see how I wanted to destroy the table that deigned to be in her path. I waited until her scent faded, although, it was still pervasive all through the shop before I turned to face Gabriel. I was eager to hear his untainted observations.

I had purposefully not told him what we were doing here so that my completely unscientific conclusions wouldn’t affect his judgement. I cleared my throat and poured us both a cup of the fragrant tea.

“So, what do you think?” I asked, keeping my eyes on my teacup.

Gabriel took a sip from his cup and looked at me. “She’s your Soul’s Serenity, isn’t she?”

And just like that, the bottom fell out of my world.

LILY



I adjusted a saucer on one of the display shelves, making sure the pretty antique teacups I'd collected at charity shops sat just so. Between the scent of brewing tea and the clinking of porcelain, I felt at home, even if home was a concept my amnesia-shrouded mind couldn't fully grasp.

The little bell above the door tinkled, and I held my breath waiting to see if my mysterious new patron that I went all swoony for was back. But it was Eve. Not that I was disappointed anytime she breezed into the shop. She was a whirlwind of energy, always bringing a frenetic energy that I liked.

"Lily, love bug, hit me with some good stuff and tell me all about how the planning for the historical cosplay event coming along."

God I wished I had her confidence and fashion sense. We were both plus sized, but somehow she always looked like a model straight out of a sixty's fashion magazine, and while I certainly didn't think I was ugly or anything, nothing I ever put on felt right.

Except my costumes. But one couldn't go around dressed as a Norman princess every day, now could they?

"One afternoon pick-me up coming your way." This was by far my most popular tea, and I had loads of it ready to go for the inevitable afternoon rush of frantic Londoners who needed some extra energy to make it through their day.

I made her tea and smiled as I turned to face her. “The plans are coming along, slowly but surely. I’m just trying to pick a date.”

Eve’s smile twinkled, like an ad for toothpaste, and she clapped her hands together like she’d just had a brilliant idea. “How about Halloween? It’s just around the corner.”

“Halloween?” I’d only been around for a few when I was doing my recovery in America, and in Rogue, New York, where I’d stayed, it seemed more like a children’s holiday. “Do adults or even people in London celebrate Halloween? I thought it was mainly an American thing for kids.”

Eve waggled her eyebrows like she knew something I didn’t. Which of course, she did, because I knew squat. “Oh, you’d be surprised. It’s definitely not just for Americans. although, to be fair, they do go a bit overboard with it, don’t they? Everybody I know is really into it, especially if they get to be vampires for a night, and no one will look at them funny.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the irony. “Vampires, huh?”

Eve with fangs and a long black cape? Only if it was Chanel.

“Absolutely. A historical themed night of fantasy and mystery could be just the ticket to draw people in.” Eve’s tone made me think she was enjoying a private joke with herself. I felt like that a lot around her.

I used to wonder if there was more to it, but figured my fragmented memories couldn’t make the connections, so I quit bothering.

“Alright,” I finally said, “a Halloween historical cosplay event it is. I think you’re right. That will bring new people into the shop. Vampires and you know, regular people who like to dress up in costumes.”

Eve beamed. “I know a few people that would enjoy that. I’ll be sure to make sure they know.”

She took her to go cup, and gave me a little wave, whisking away, like she always did. It was almost freaking

magical.

Just after I finished putting another batch of scones in the oven the little bell over the door jingled again. My heart did a little skip and hop as Fleming walked in. My mysterious, flustered patron, who also had me flustered. He wore another immaculate suit today, gray this time, and carried a small, wrapped package under his arm.

“Good afternoon, Miss, um, Lily,” he greeted, almost tripping over his own words as if they were too eager to escape. “Ahem, I mean, just Lily, of course.”

I smiled, and ran a hand over my hair, trying to make sure I wasn't a total mess. “Good afternoon, Fleming. What can I get you today? Another cream tea, perhaps?”

His eyes darted to the small package he was holding. “Well, yes, just a well-sugared Earl Grey please. But also, um, I brought something for you. A gift, actually.”

“For me?” My insides started doing the cha-cha.

“Yes.” He handed me the package, and his fingers brushed against mine for just a moment. The simple touch sent a shiver up my spine. What was it about this man that made me feel so electrified?

I unwrapped the brown paper and string which was so adorably old-fashioned, to find an old book, its leather cover worn and beautiful. The title read “The Lore and Love of English Tea.”

“It's a book about tea,” Fleming said, suddenly looking everywhere but at me. “I thought it would be apropos.”

“It's perfect.” I flipped through the pages gently. It wasn't just that he'd bought me a book about tea. No, this one was deliciously antique. Anyone of my cosplay characters would carry a book like this around, reading it in dim light of a candle on a foggy evening. “How did you know I would love something like this?”

He finally looked at me, his eyes meeting mine. “Well, I, ah, have become something of an observer of character. And,

uh, you strike me as a woman who appreciates the finer, historical things. And, you know, the tea shop.”

I turned another page, and a folded piece of paper fell out. I picked it up and opened it. It was an old map of London.

“Wow, this is amazing. I didn’t know it had a map inside,” I said, looking up at him.

“I didn’t either, actually.” He raised an interested eyebrow. “A happy accident, I suppose.”

As I looked at the map, my eyes focused on one of the streets, and suddenly, I was hit with a rush of images, cobblestone streets, horse-drawn carriages, a man tipping his hat to me, a man in a black cape following me, but not threatening... but protecting me.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Fleming reached for me, but his hand stopped just shy of touching my arm.

I blinked a few times and tried to cement the images in my mind. “No, no, just a déjà vu moment. Thank you for the book, Fleming. It really is the perfect gift.”

He smiled, and for a moment, he looked relieved, almost as if he’d passed some sort of test. “I’m glad you like it.”

Something told me that this man would play a significant part in unveiling the mystery that was my life.

Fleming’s eyes suddenly flicked toward the door. Two men walked in, their demeanor entirely different from my usual patrons. They wore long trench coats and had a gruff, scrutinizing look about them that instantly unsettled me.

“What do we have here?” The taller of the two had a voice like broken chunks of gravel that creeped me the heck out. The other one grumbled and looked around the shop, but not really at the teas. Crap. I had the worst feeling I was about to be robbed.

Fleming stiffened beside me. “Is there something specific you gentlemen are looking for?”

His voice had gone darker and a whole lot more brusque than he usually spoke. Why was that a turn on? I definitely shouldn't be having naughty thoughts about him right now. That would be weird.

I was definitely weird.

"Maybe. You got something to hide?" The shorter one sneered, glancing between Fleming and me.

I took a few steps back, ready to grab my phone from out of my apron pocket and dial nine-nine-nine from under the counter.

The air in the room suddenly dropped a few degrees, and the lights flickered. I looked around, worried now that not only was I being robbed, but that also my cute tea shop was being possessed by spirit of long ago.

Maybe they'd been robbed by ruffians like this too? Come on ghosties, be on my side. Sadly, no ghosts, ghouls, or even vampires appeared. I glanced over at Fleming and saw he was completely unbothered, aside from his slightly more tense than usual set of his shoulders. He was calm and almost unnaturally so.

The two men looked momentarily disoriented, unsettled by the atmospheric shift or something. Their growly mean-looking faces went a bit slack, like they'd forgotten what they were doing.

Fleming gave me a quick glance and a nod that said without words that he was going to take care of everything, even though these two guys were at least twice his weight. He stepped away from the counter, taking advantage of their momentary distraction, walked right up to them and spun them both around to face the door.

"These are not the teas you're looking for," he said, his voice laced with a subtle authority I hadn't heard before. "You should go about your business. Move along."

And... huh. I strangely remembered seeing Star Wars: A New Hope in the theater. I could smell the popcorn, feel the heat of all the other bodies around us, even feel the excitement

of seeing how this hero's journey would play out in outer space. But that movie came out in 1977. The doctors estimated that I wasn't a day over twenty-five.

The taller man shook his head as if breaking a spell and then glared at Fleming, sizing him up as if contemplating whether or not he could take him. Fleming folded his arms and tipped his chin toward the door.

The pure unadulterated protectiveness coming from Fleming had me gripping the counter so I wouldn't swoon, just like the first day he'd walked into the shop. I was no damsel in distress that needed saving. Well, maybe a tiny bit right at this particular moment. But ever since I'd realized that no one else in the world was going to take care of me and help me recover my life, I'd taken on the world all by myself.

I didn't need any man to fight my fights.

So this absolute warmth growing around my heart as Fleming did exactly that was unexpected. I'd been alone for so long, that it was really nice to have someone so completely on my side that they'd stand between me and danger.

Damn it. I was going to cry.

"Fine," the taller man said, finally breaking eye contact with Fleming. "We'll be on our way. But this isn't over, blood-sucker."

Wait, did they just call Fleming a blood-sucker. That was a super bizarre insult. Maybe I'd misheard. I did have vampires on the brain.

They left and I looked at Fleming, amazed. "What was that about?"

"I'm not entirely sure," he replied, looking somewhat relieved but still tense. "But it's over for now. If you'll excuse me, I need to make a phone call to ensure they don't come back to bother you again."

"I can just call the police." I'd been ready to anyway. "You've done so much already."

“The police can’t help in this matter. But I can. I’ll take care of this, my sweet Lily.”

How was my dorky, but somehow now dangerous, crush, who looked more like an accountant than the kind of guy who could scare off big scary thugs, going to ‘take care of this’?

Did I have the hots for some sort of head of the London mafia?

After Fleming had left, promising to handle things in his own enigmatic way, I returned to my counter feeling fidgety and nervous. I didn’t have any customers to look after for the moment, so I picked up the book Fleming had gifted me.

My fingers itched to flip through its worn pages again. The strangest feeling washed over me, as if the book was more than just a collection of words and pictures about tea. I looked around the shop again and wondered once again about the ghosts.

There were definitely ghosts.

I opened the book and began to thumb through it. When I reached the page where the old map of London had been tucked, something else caught my eye—a folded, aged paper, sticking out from the book’s spine.

Curiosity piqued, I carefully pulled it free and unfolded it. It was a handwritten letter, the ink faded but still legible.

Dearest,

I hope this letter finds you in a future where you’re safe. If you’re reading this, it means you’ve come across this hidden message, and I’m not there to explain. Remember, things are not what they seem. Trust your instincts. You know more than you think you do.

Yours Eternally, F.

My heart pounded in my chest. A letter from F? Was that Fleming? Had he placed this here intentionally? And what did he mean by “a future where you’re safe”? It was all too much, and not enough at the same time. My mind raced through the possibilities.

I was about to put the letter back when something fell out from it—a tiny, ornate key, old and yet unruined, but with a peculiar shape that seemed hauntingly familiar.

I looked at the key, and then at the door where Fleming had exited. What in the world was happening? And why did I feel like I'd just unlocked a door to something far more perilous than I could have ever imagined?

FLEMING



The moment I was out the door and out of sight of Lily's shop, I called into the VIA with my report. Why in the hell were vampire hunters in Lily's shop? It wasn't because of me. I'd been working on a serum to mask my supernatural aura. So far it worked casually, like if you passed someone on the street. But once someone with the ability to sense the supernatural put their complete focus on you, the effects faded.

One of those thugs had that ability. The other had been a mundane lackey. But a danger to my fair Lily none the less. My report through VIAs switchboard with request for immediate backup was met with an instant reply. Eve dispatched George Saint. He was the perfect ally for this, with his shapeshifting abilities.

With a growl, I turned in the direction the hunters had gone, even though I wanted to go straight back to the tea shop. I had a job to do. People depended on my work at VIA to keep them safe from threats like these vampire hunters or Daughters of Bathory. I would continue to protect humanity, even if I could never truly join them.

But that didn't stop me from dreaming of the life that might have been. A life where I was mortal, and free to love a girl with a radiant smile who liked tea, and antiques. I had lots of antiques, which of course were new when I acquired them over the years.

Damn. I turned back toward the shop and found just the right shadows to conceal myself in across the street to keep

watch.

Two women entered the shop, both wearing long coats that obscured their forms. Not unusual for the changeable weather, but something about them set off my preternatural instincts. I peered closer, using my vampire vision to zoom in on their features. Pale, hard faces. Coiled tension in their movements, like snakes preparing to strike. And a sinister gleam in their eyes as they watched Lily move around the shop. Daughters of Bathory. Had to be.

Bollocks. Why was Lily and her tea shop being targeted by supernatural hunters all of a sudden?

I peered through the windows, watching her bustle around and chat with other customers. The afternoon rush, I'd specifically avoided, was in full force now. Her chestnut hair swayed as she moved, and her eyes crinkled with her bright smile. Just looking at her increased the constant hunger gnawing inside me.

But I couldn't go in. Not with all those innocent humans in the same space as the Daughters of Bathory. They would attack me immediately and had no compunction about scaring humanity with the realities of the supernatural all around them. Brits especially would likely be horrified that the kings and queens of England had been Royal Immortals since the conquest of the isle by the immortal William the Conqueror.

The monster inside of me roiled as I watched their pale gazes tracking Lily's every move. They hadn't approached her yet, but it was only a matter of time. Where the hell was George?

Lily glanced up suddenly while serving the girl with her laptop sitting near the window. She frowned, and peered out into the shadows where I lurked. I froze in place, hardly daring to breathe. Had she seen me? But after a moment she shook her head and went back to her work. I sagged in relief, then tensed again as two more Daughters appeared essentially out of nowhere and entered the shop. Four of them were inside now, and they greeted each other with snarls twisting their lips. They were planning something bad.

Rage and fear warred inside me as I watched them surround Lily. I had to save her, but it would cost me more than I'd ever had to sacrifice before. She would learn the truth about me. See me for the monster that I was.

In that heartbeat of stillness, I made my decision.

I wasn't waiting for George or anyone else to save my Serenity. She was mine to protect, no matter the consequences. For Lily, I would face any danger or heartbreak. I zipped across the street with supernatural speed and burst through the door with a roar, launching myself at the nearest Daughter, and the fight began. The Daughters pulled out their weapons, swords and daggers gleaming in the dim light.

I grabbed the first by the throat and hurled her across the room. She crashed into a table, shattering wood and sending scones flying. Patrons screamed. Lily screamed. I risked a glance at her and she was trembling behind the counter, eyes huge. I wanted to reassure her, but had no chance.

But she was tougher than I gave her credit for. She motioned to her customers to hurry to her side behind the counter, and then armed them all with broken teapots cups. After I destroyed the threats, I'd erase all of their memories.

But something deep inside told me I couldn't do that to Lily.

Lily shook her shards of glass in our direction. "It's time for you ladies to get the hell out of my shop."

Ladies. Not you monsters, not all of you, just the Daughters of Bathory. Could that possibly mean, she wanted me to stay? I'd have to wait and see.

The remaining three Daughters ignored Lily and attacked me en masse, in a flurry of blows and snarls. I dodged and spun, lashing out with kicks and punches. I could take them down without using my fangs. I could. My hat tumbled away, revealing my pale skin and sharp teeth. Still Lily watched, frozen in place. What must she think of me now?

A Daughter slashed metal claws across my face, burning pain erupting along my cheek. Some kind of poison welled

and dripped onto my shirt. With a snarl, I seized her arm and twisted until the bone snapped. She collapsed with a shriek.

Two left.

George Saint burst into the room, looking more like an elderly gentleman than a vampire. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a bit of a dust up, now don’t we?”

I envied his shape shifting gift right then. I may have many other vampire powers he did not, but at if I could hide my identity like he did, Lily wouldn’t have to see the real me.

“Run away, sir, run!” Lily cried out from her vaguely protected spot with the other patrons behind the counter.

“I’ll think I’ll stay for a spell. Can’t have ruffians making a terror of this nice little neighborhood, now can we. What do you say old chap?” George gave me a nod and then pulled a sword from his cane.

“I staunchly agree.” My voice was a dark and deep snarl, barely words at all. The monster I kept so very hidden from the world was rising.

The remaining Daughters exchanged a glance, lips curling, and began to circle the two of us. I turned with them, muscles coiled. They were toying with us, like cats with a mouse. Except they truly didn’t understand that they were the prey and we were the true hunters.

Rage burned in my veins. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of an easy death. In a blur of motion, they attacked from both sides.

I roared, grappling with the closest one, and we tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs. We rolled across the shop, crashing into furniture. The scent of blood saturated the air, sharp and metallic. Somehow I wrenched myself free, flinging the Daughter away. She hit the wall hard enough to crack the plaster.

The wall next to the counter where Lily and the customers were bunkered down.

I looked at my Serenity and back to the Daughter. The woman's muscles bunched and she was ready to pounce toward my only vulnerability in this battle. Lily.

Before the Daughter could even move a muscle, I attacked. In less than a blink of an eye, I was across the room, ripping her throat out with my teeth. With roar, I tore her head from her body and threw it directly in the trash bin. Her dead, but still spasming form slumped to the floor, more blood pooling at my feet.

No one touched my Serenity.

No one but me.

I stood panting, vision swimming, with the tainted blood in my mouth. I had defeated the threat, but had I destroyed my only chance at salvation in doing so?

Lily was curled up behind the counter, clutching her apron and staring at the destruction around her. I took a step toward her and stumbled, bracing myself against a table.

"Lily," I said softly. My voice came out ragged.

She flinched, eyes locking on my bloodied face and sharp teeth. With a sinking heart, I knew she would never accept me as I was. I had saved her, but lost her forever.

I swallowed hard, fighting back the sting of rejection. There was no point in lingering. George had incapacitated the other Daughters, without the bloodshed I'd caused. Even he was looking at me like I was evil incarnate.

I was. For the first time in more than a thousand years, I was the face of evil.

With a last glance at Lily, I turned and dragged myself toward the exit. The door creaked open, and cool fog brushed my face. I had to find a semblance of normality again, or I'd fall back into the horror of my first years as a vampire, killing, and taking what didn't belong to me.

I'd file a report. I'd call in the team. They would help clean up my mess, and perhaps Gabriel, or if I called in a very old favor, V himself would use their mind control to erase any

memory of what had just happened. I couldn't bear to try to do it myself.

But even if she forgot me, forgot these horrors, I could never be with her. I could certainly never ask her to share her soul with me.

"Wait." Lily darted after me, grabbing my arm. I stiffened, startled by her touch. "You're hurt, Fleming. Please, let me help you."

Help me? Why would she want to do that? I searched her eyes for any sign of fear or disgust, but found only concern. Still, I hesitated. "You mustn't."

"You saved my life, all of our lives" She traced a finger down the line of my jaw, and I shivered as if I was human and the frigid air affected me. I gently grabbed her hand, but I couldn't bear to pull it away. "What are you, exactly? Who are you, aside from my knight in shining armor, my protector?"

A reckless hope flared in my chest. I clasped her hand, turning it over to press a kiss to her wrist. The steady beat of her pulse thrummed under my mouth. The scent of chocolate wafted from her skin to my very core, igniting several hungers deep inside of me. I said the dumbest thing ever to pass through my lips. "Would you like to find out?"

She wouldn't. She couldn't.

Lily shivered, eyes darkening, and squeezed my hand. "Yes. On one condition, you have to let me take care of those wounds first."

I huffed a laugh. By the time she got to them, my vampiric healing would erase all but the traces of blood from my skin.

Lily led me back inside, where George was leading a prayer with the other customers. I realized it was his way of calming them with some very subtle mind control. Within the words of the prayer the remaining humans would forget everything that had happened in the last twenty minutes, and leave Lily's tea shop with a sense of happiness and peace.

He gave me a jerk of the chin, indicating that I should go about my business. I could trust George to take care of this

aftermath, while I took care of... other things. “Do you have someplace a little more private?”

She bit her lip in a way that had me wanting to kiss her. Which was absolutely not what I should be thinking. Lily didn't say a thing, but led me back out the door and into a small side door that opened up to a set of steep stairs. She led me up them and into a small flat above the tea shop. There was a whole rack of floofy dresses, quite accurate to several historical time periods, a small sewing machine, and a small love seat. The whole place smelled of the most delicious dark chocolate, so purely of Lily.

“Sit here and I'll get the first aid kit. And put a kettle on. I think I might need a something quite strong. Like whiskey.” She disappeared into a kitchen area and I simply sat there and stared after her. She'd not only let me into her home, but insisted that she could take care of me.

Me. The monster she'd just watched rip a human head from an assassin who'd set out to kill her. She wanted to take care of... me.

She returned with a small tea pot in a knitted cozy, two mismatched cups, and that bottle of whisky. She settled it on the footstool next to the loveseat, and pulled a first aid kit out of nowhere. She reached for my shirt and a becoming blush stained her cheeks. “I'll need to remove this.”

I couldn't do anything but lean in closer.

“I try to be prepared for any situation. Even mysterious strangers appearing out of nowhere to fight the man I've been wanting to kiss, apparently.” Her teasing smile faded. “Those creatures...what were they?”

I took a deep breath. Wait. Did she say the man she'd been wanting to kiss? Surely I'd misheard. Even though I had the ability to hear a pin drop a kilometer away.

No going back now. “Vampire hunters. The corrupted, savage kind that have no regard for human or immortal life.”

I watched her carefully for her reaction. Lily's eyes widened, but she didn't pull away. “Why would they be in my

shop. I'm...just a normal, well normalish woman. And you don't seem like a monster. A ninja maybe, but..."

"Because I choose not to be." I brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, relieved when she leaned into my touch instead of recoiling like she should. "I was made, not born, and for a long time I've struggled against what I had become."

Here, in the haven of her presence, I could imagine what a life together might be like, free of secrets and fear. A life where I was simply a man, and she was simply the woman I loved. Apparently she thought so too, because she leaned forward and kissed me.

LILY



*M*y lips touched Fleming's, and for a fleeting second, the world around us faded away. There was something so perfect about kissing him. Like this was the place I belonged. I never wanted it to end.

But Fleming gently pulled away, breaking the kiss far before I was ready. I looked up into his eyes and saw something I hadn't expected. Utter surprise. It was as if he'd been bracing himself for rejection, for fear, but had found neither.

And he wouldn't. Not from me. I supposed after everything I'd just seen and experienced I should be scared out of my mind. Yet my mind had never felt more like mine that watching Fleming tear that assassin apart to protect me. My mind knew exactly what it was doing when I kissed him too.

For the first time since I could remember anything, my mind was my own, and I didn't feel crazy, or scared, or lost.

"You're surprised." My lips curling into a faint smile, and I reached up to cup his cheek, not allowing him to pull away any further.

"I am," he admitted, his eyes still locked onto mine. "After everything that just happened, after you learned what I am, I thought you might... distance yourself."

Such a polite way to say he thought I'd run away while simultaneously telling him to fuck off.

My heart pounded in my chest, not out of fear, but realization, acceptance, and hope. "I've seen monsters, I don't

know when or where, but I have. And you're not one of them."

The glow in his eyes dimmed, as if my words had quelled some inner storm. He leaned closer, his voice dropping to an intimate whisper. "Lily, your acceptance means more than you can imagine. I don't understand why you aren't frightened of me, and it's more than I ever hoped for."

He wrapped his arms around me, and took off the glasses that had inexplicably stayed on his face the entire battle. "But there's more you need to know. A connection exists between us, one that transcends the ordinary, and it may be the thing that does frighten you away from me."

I pressed a soft kiss to his lips again, but just so he'd see that there was nothing he could do to scare me away. "A connection? Like fate?"

"In my opinion it's more like biology," he explained. "Vampires have no soul. I have no soul."

"You have more soul than anyone I've ever met." He was kind, and generous, and daring, and brave. I'd call that soul.

"I mean, quite literally." He took my hand and pressed it to my chest. I am so very empty inside."

"Oh. Oh my stars. You really mean that. You believe souls are a real, tangible thing? I just sort of figured it was sort of an amorphous idea of what makes us individuals. But you're telling me a soul is...what? Like another organ?"

For the first time since our discussion began, he smiled and chuckled softly. "I love how you think, Lily. It's not physical, and I suppose as you are just now learning of the supernatural, it will take time to accept the magic that is inherent in the world. And a soul is just that... the magic that is in all living beings."

"But you don't have one?" I shook my head. I could believe in vampires, but not that. "You're living. Very much so."

"Ah, but I'm not. Not really." He shook his head in such a sad and lonely way. "Not in the same way that you are. I am the undead."

“Umm, excuse me, but I believe that’s zombies.” Although, if he told me zombies were a real thing right now, I may actually start freaking out. “But what does that have to do without connection?”

He blew out a long breath, as if he’d been holding it in for centuries. Maybe he had. “You are what my kind calls a Soul’s Serenity. It’s not just a poetic term, it’s literal. Your soul has the potential to fuse with my soulless existence. You could make me more complete, yet also more vulnerable. You would gain eternal life, but our lives would be bound together forever.”

His words filled the room, heavy but not crushing, they were an anchor, grounding me.

“If I shared my soul with you.” There was no if. I shouldn’t have even said it. I would, I almost felt like I already had. Like so many other things in my life, I didn’t understand how I knew, but this made so much sense. This idea of Fleming and I being inextricably bound was like a piece of my missing puzzle floating down from the heavens to click into place.

Outside, the wind howled— a haunting reminder of the danger that had driven us to this intimate sanctuary, my small flat above the tea shop. I looked into his eyes, realizing that what he offered wasn’t just forever, it was a forever with stakes.

The kind that killed vampires.

“How do I do that?” I asked, urgency coloring my words. “How do I share my soul with you? Because now that you’ve told me that’s what is meant to happen, I want it to happen right away, immediately, sooner rather than later.”

“Lily, I can’t. I couldn’t ask you to take such a risk.” He looked down and away, so much shame written in his features. “It’s too much, and I’m undeserving.”

Ooh. I was going to smack him. “That’s some bullshit right there, mister. No one is undeserving of love, so shush your face and don’t ever let me hear you say that again. Besides, I

already love you, and you have no say in the matter. I just do. I think I did the first moment you walked into my shop. Maybe even before.”

He searched my face, his eyes flicking back and forth between mine, looking for something. Whatever it was, he found it, because he thrust his hands into my hair and crushed his lips to mine.

Now, as far as I knew, I’d never kissed any man before, or even a woman for that matter, but, with Fleming, it felt as though we’d done this a thousand times, and it was as natural as breathing. Except breathing didn’t get me all hot and bothered.

Our tongues tangled and I moaned into his mouth. I never wanted to stop kissing him. This was absolutely delicious. Better than Earl Grey tea with scones, jam and clotted cream. It was even better than ice cream. With a cherry on top.

How did I not remember doing this?

Then my mind flashed and a memory appeared. I was lying in a plush bed, a man over me, kissing, and touching, and feeling like my body would ignite. Another memory flashed and was on a chaise longue, my legs spread wide, with a man’s head between my thighs. My mind flickered again, and again. I’d had dozens of lovers over the years. Years and years. I had done this, and more, just not with Fleming.

And that somehow tainted the memory. How could I have ever let anyone else touch me but him. I never would ever again.

Even though our mouths were fused together, Fleming’s voice filtered into my mind. “*Don’t bite, don’t bite, don’t bite.*”

He might think he was a monster, but he was the cutest, most adorable man on the whole of the Earth. He was trying so hard to restrain himself, but I wanted the real Fleming. The man and the monster.

I crawled onto his lap, with not even a fear that my thick thighs, and round butt and belly my hurt or squish him. He was strong, immortal, and mine. My mouth never left his for a

moment, and I sucked his bottom lip between my teeth. Then I. Bit. Him.

His inner monologue screeched to a halt and turned into a full on groan that rumbled up from his chest. The coppery taste I expected never came, instead the tiny amount of blood I'd drawn tasted like...chocolate. Hot chocolate.

I ran my tongue over his lip, but the wound was already healed. His voice popped back into my mind, and this time I was a sensual, husky baritone that had tingles surging up and down my spine. "*Now it's my turn, sweet Lily.*"

He tipped my head to the side and the flash of his fangs sent a jolt of arousal straight to my pussy. Oh god. This was going to be good. "Do it, Fleming, please."

I leaned into him, needing his bite, for his to taste me, more than I needed air. Fleming scraped his teeth across my throat and whoo, boy, I almost came right then and there. If this was foreplay, I couldn't even imagine what it would be like when we actually got naked.

"Just a taste, sweetness. I need only a taste of you. Your blood has been a siren's call to me and I can resist you no more." He gripped my hair tight with one hand and wrapped his other around my shoulder to pull me even closer to him.

Before I could even anticipate his move, Fleming sunk his fangs into my throat and drank from my life's blood. My body went from sixty to a thousand million billion in that millisecond and a full body orgasm exploded through me. His touch, his bite, the power of his feelings poured into me, igniting every cell I had, torturing me with exquisite please like I'd never known before.

He didn't take only a small taste, he drank from me like a man who'd never known a drink in his life. With every pull, my body begged him to take more. I wrapped my arms around his neck, sliding my hands into his hair at the nape of his neck, to hold his lips to my skin for as long as I could have him there.

“Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop. I’ve never felt anything like this before.” I didn’t care if he drank every last drop from me. I never wanted his to stop.

“I don’t think I could even if I wanted to. I need more of you, all of you.” I sensed the worry behind his need. He didn’t want to hurt me, like he had others. He would indulge himself, but was paying remarkably close attention to whether I showed any signs of withering.

I didn’t. In fact, I felt more powerful than I’d ever felt before. And I think that included even before my amnesia. He didn’t weaken me, with every drop of my blood he took, he gave me something even better back. He gave me love.

Something inside of me broke open, and I think it was my actual soul. Warmth and light shimmered at my core, and it reached for Fleming.

That stopped him, and he withdrew his fangs, licked the wounds, but they were already healing. “First Vampire save me. I’ve never tasted blood like yours, Lily. You’re quite literally intoxicating, like the finest of chocolate liquor.”

“I want to give you more of me, Fleming. I want to share my soul with you.” I knew this part of our connection scared him, and it hurt my heart that he had wounds so deep that he would tell himself he wasn’t deserving of my soul or my love. But I wasn’t going to give him a chance to get all up in his head about it.

I ripped open his shirt, and then slipped mine over my head, tossing it over my shoulder. “Take off your pants, Fleming. And then take me.”

I thought he might hesitate once again, I would need the power of naked boobs to get him to give into my demands to let me love him, and make love. But he smiled, a beautiful, sensual smile, and with a dash of long jagged nails that just appeared like claws, he slashed both his clothes and mine, so they fell away, leaving us both naked as the night.

FLEMING



I knew two things for sure. Lily was no mere mortal. Her blood was anything but human. Later we would figure out together what she was. Because I didn't think for a moment that she was lying about who she was or wasn't. Whatever kind of supernatural being she was, she didn't know it.

And the only other thing I knew to be true in this world was that she was mine, and I was hers. We belonged together. Forever.

And forever was starting right now.

I didn't have as much experience with the ladies as many of my compatriots, but I had bedded and pleased enough women in my time to know how to make sure my partners were well satisfied. It would have been derelict for me to not have learned the arts of bringing a woman to orgasm over my thousand year existence.

Lily would look absolutely stunning coming on my fingers, my tongue, and my cock. Not to mention my fangs.

I slid a hand between her thighs, and though I could smell her arousal, I enjoyed finding her cunt slick and wet. "Tell me what you like, sweetness. I want to watch you come apart for me over and over."

"I like everything you do to me. But there is something I very much want from you." Her eyes twinkled and it was going to be so very fun to make love to her.

"Anything." As long as I got to touch and taste her.

“Your dick.” She winked, but then brought her lips down to mine for a soft kiss. She whispered against my lips. “I want you inside of me, and I want to share my soul with you. I want you.”

“I was going to suggest you let me make you come another dozen or so times before we attempted the sharing of your soul, but who am I do deny the woman I love what she wants.”

Love. I did love her. I shouldn't.

No. Lily was right. That was some bullshit. I may have a darkness inside of me, I may have killed and hurt people in the long ago past when I had been hurting myself, but the universe had seen fit to bring her, the one woman who could share her soul with me, into my life. I was going to accept her beauty, her love, and her soul.

“I'm yours, Lily. All of me. Forever.” I gripped her lush thighs and spread them so she straddled me. I knew I was well endowed, and this position would allow her to take as much of me as she was comfortable with, and I got to see every bit of pleasure written on her body and her face.

With more restraint that I thought I had left in me, I raised my hips, and pulled her down, slowly, excruciatingly slowly, and I thrust my cock into her. Her eyes drifted closed and she let her head fall back on her shoulders, taking my cock into her centimeter by centimeter.

“Fleming, ooh, yes, you feel so good. More, please, I need all of you.” Her eyelids fluttered and she groaned as she sunk down onto me, taking me deeper and deeper.

Our bodies fit together far too perfectly, and when she'd taken my entire shaft, her inner muscles squeezed and pulsated, sending jolts of intense pleasure through me. “All of me, for all of you.”

I grabbed her hips, loving the feel of her plush, pillowy body in my hands, on my cock. Then I lifted her, and then brought her back down, helping her fuck me.

And. Fuck. Me.

I knew quite well how to control my body, my cravings, my need. But after drinking from her, and now fucking her, I had no more mastery over my own desires. Only a few strokes of Lily's hot, wet, and soft cunt, and she was going to make me come.

A vampire and a gentleman would never come before his lady.

But if what had happened between us as I drank from her and we kissed and fondled each other before, was the key to the sharing of her soul, my bite and her orgasm would bring us both the satisfaction and the salvation we both needed.

"Fleming, I need you, I'm so close, already, but..." She licked her lips and whimpered as I bounced her on my cock faster and harder than before. "I need more of you."

"Don't worry, my love. I'm going to give you everything you need." My hips jerked, and I thrust into her. Her breasts and belly, hips and thighs, bounced and shook in such a gorgeous and sensual way that I wanted to touch and caress every one of her curves. Damn how I loved a thick, plush woman.

She panted, and gasped for more breath, her nipples pearled into tight buds, and a flush crept up her chest and neck. Her body was clamoring to come, and she just needed a push to get over that edge into the bliss of orgasm, into oblivion.

I slid my hand around the back of her neck and pulled her down to me, never once letting up with the thrusts of my hips. She lost her rhythm entirely and it was my turn to take control of her pleasure. I licked across the artery pulsing with her blood, and her cunt clenched around me again.

I couldn't hold back any longer. I sunk my teeth into her flesh again, and let everything I'd ever been and would ever be go. Together, our bodies detonated and in that flash of love and desire, was the light and beauty of her soul reaching out for me.

The golden glow of her filled the room, it coiled and floated everywhere, and she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. My heart ached with it, even as my cock and my seed pulsed into her, sending more pleasure through me than I ever thought possible.

Her voice surrounded my consciousness and she was me, and I was her. *"I share my soul with you, and bind us together for all of eternity. You are mine, vampire, man, lover, and partner. I love you, Fleming. I love you."*

"I am yours, bound to you and you to me for eternity. You are my queen, and I your faithful lover and partner. I love you, Lily."

The wisps of her soul pierced the darkness hiding inside of me and filled it up with so much joy and love that I was ready to burst into a thousand shards of a rainbow. I'd been so scared of that darkness, and of how it would feel to have her share her soul with me that I was completely shattered at the pure radiance of her, my one true love and savior.

Lily collapsed over me, and we held onto each other, letting the glow of the aftermath of our lovemaking and our new bond envelope us. If making love to Lily was going to be like this every time, I may have to quit the VIA and dedicate my life to fucking her and making her come as many times a day as possible.

Lily chuckled, a pretty soft sound right next to my ear. "I heard that, Fleming. You're not quitting your job just so we can fuck each other's brains out and neither am I. But I would like to take you up on that offer at least several times a day regardless."

"We can debate the merits of capitalism and work at a later date. For now, allow me to carry you to your bed and do all of this all over again, but this time, I'm on top."

She slid off of me, and both I and my cock were bereft without her. She moved to get off my lap. "You're not carrying me anywhere."

I grabbed her under the knees and behind her back, pulling her into my arms like the princess she should be treated as. “I believe that I am doing that as we speak, and I’ll remind you that I am a supernatural immortal vampire, and an agent of the immortal crown, and there is very little you can do to stop me.”

She giggled, but then her eyes went hazy and her mouth slack jawed. “Lily? Love? What’s wrong? Lily.”

I quickly laid her back down onto the love seat, and searched around for my mobile. But who was I going to call. I was the one who usually figured out what was wrong with agents or immortals. What did I know about humans?

But Lily wasn’t human. I simply didn’t know what she was.

Before I could even decide, she snapped out of her fugue state and blinked up at me. “Fleming. You need to tell me more about these immortal royals. Right now.”

“What just happened? Did you have some sort of a vision? Do you experience this altered state of consciousness often?” I sat down next her, running my hands up and down her arms, needing to touch her and see that she was okay.

“More so since I met you. They’re flashes of memories. I think of my life before I got amnesia a few years ago. But they aren’t making sense. Why would I have a memory of talking to Henry VIII as if I was friends with him?”

That was quite strange indeed. I had so many questions, and I quickly sorted through them in my mind to find the most relevant that might lead us both to some answers. I’d start with just a couple. “First, please tell me when and how you got amnesia, and second, what was Henry wearing in your memory flash?”

“You say that like it’s not strange that I was talking to him, and I’ve never heard anyone refer to him as just Henry.” She was giving me a frown and a head askew glare which I understood to mean she didn’t trust the validity of what I was saying.

“Henry VIII and both his predecessors back to William the Conqueror, and his successors to our modern day, were and are immortal beings, demigods, descendants of Anki Enki and his, uh, fruitful loins.” I had no more secrets from my Serenity. She had every right to know whatever she liked about the world she somehow belonged to. “As is their Gods’ will, they have ruled this part of the world for more than a millennia now. But they mustn’t allow humans to know of their supernatural origins. So when they’re ready, they fake their deaths, and let another succeed them. Although, they have all tended to get a bit stroppy over the years and wage war on each other from time to time. That War of the Roses business was a doozy.”

With each sentence her eyes got wider and wider. “Yeah, uh, I bet it was. So, wait. You’re telling me Queen Elizabeth isn’t dead?”

“Elizabeth has a lovely flat in Mayfair, but would appear to the average everyday citizen to be a pretty young woman of about twenty-something. Although, at some point someone is going to question the number of corgis.”

Lily put her fingers to her head and made an explosion motion accompanied by a matching sound. “And Henry as you refer to him.”

“A close ally of the VIA, while also being a pain in the arse. Once a ladies man, always a ladies man.” And ever being taunted by Anne, and Catherine, and Jane, and Anne, and Catherine. All of whose deaths were also faked because of his philandering.

“Okay, okay. Umm, I’m trying to wrap my head around this. But what do vampires have to do with these immortal royalty people, and how do I fit into all of this?”

The moment the questions were out, she gasped and covered her mouth. “I’m not some mistress of Henry’s that he’s had beheaded, am I? That would definitely give someone amnesia.”

“The VIA very carefully monitors all of Henry’s affairs. So I doubt it. I would know who you were already if that was

the case.” The black ops team knew all, saw all. Although, there were secrets even kept amongst each other. I would be checking in the Gabriel and likely Miss Primrose shortly.

“We are the protective agency of the immortal royals. None of them can make a move without us knowing, and few even try. Those same vampire hunters who attacked at the tea shop would very much like to destroy all the immortals and supernaturals in the world, and try to do so often.”

“Huh. So were they trying to kill you, or me?”

I had assumed they were after me, but now that I understood that Lily was some kind of supernatural being herself, I supposed it could have been her. “I’m not sure. I’d like to call in my team to investigate. We need a few clues to get us going down the right path.”

“Oh.” She jumped up from the love seat and crossed the room to her small desk. My mind took a backseat for a moment as I watched her pretty rounded peach of an ass sway as she walked away from me. She grabbed a book, the book I’d given her earlier in the week and brought it back to me. “I found the note and the key you left me between the pages. Is that a clue we can use?”

“Lily. I did not write you a note or leave you a key.” This was all highly suspicious.

“Sure you did. Look.” She opened the book and showed me the yellowed paper nearly as old as the volume itself. I read it over and Lily pointed to the signature at the bottom. “See. Isn’t that F for Fleming?”

I stared closer and ran my thumb over the print. “That’s not an F. It’s an E.”

And I knew exactly whose E it was.

LILY



In the few days I'd known Fleming, and now the couple of hours I'd known about the supernatural world, I felt more at ease with all this bizzaro crazy paranormal stuff than I had living in the regular human world in the past three years. We popped out of some magical transportation system that functioned like the vampires' version of the Tube and I stared at the sprawling underground complex we'd just entered.

My mind still spinning with all I'd learned, and yet my brain was functioning better than ever. Immortal Royals? Vampires? A secret agency? And I was somehow a part of all of this. It was too much to take in, and yet here I was, with Fleming at my side, about to uncover even more secrets.

Fleming squeezed my hand, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Ready?"

I met his gaze. "As I'll ever be."

As we walked down the stone dungeon like corridor, we passed people who I supposed were also supernatural agents who nodded respectfully at Fleming. One or two glanced curiously at me, but said nothing. Then Fleming pushed open a set of double doors to reveal a lavish office. At the desk sat Eve... my friend and landlady.

"Miss Primrose, we have some questions for you," Fleming said before I got over the shock. He slapped the letter down on her desk, which she barely glanced at.

"Eve?" I stammered. "You're Fleming's, I mean the agency's Miss Primrose?"

She rose gracefully and came around to greet us. “I had hoped we would have this conversation under different circumstances, Lily.”

“Hope? You knew about all this?” My voice raised a notch, disbelief flooding my mind.

Eve, Miss Primrose, whatever her name is sighed. “Yes. I did. And there’s more you should know. But first,” she glanced at Fleming, “we need to discuss the serum.”

Fleming’s eyes darkened. “Which serum, and how do you know my Serenity?”

“Several years ago, and by several, I mean during the nineteen-nineties when we were going through all that mess with the Chuck and Di. You remember the one, don’t you?”

Fleming balked, looked at me with quite a bit of horror on his face, and then back at Eve. “That serum was locked away for a reason. It has the power to erase someone’s existence from everyone’s memory. It was designed as a last resort for agents whose identities were compromised beyond repair, but I soon realized its potential for misuse.”

Miss Primrose nodded. “And yet it was taken and used. On Lily.”

I felt like the room was spinning. “You mean to tell me that not only did I lose my memory, but everyone who ever knew me has forgotten me as well?”

Fleming looked pained. “I’m afraid so.”

I took his hands in mine and gave one of them a brief kiss, so he’d know I didn’t blame him for any of this. “Eve, does that mean you know who I am?”

“Not exactly, but I have some ideas. The effects of the serum don’t seem to be the same on me as they are on the Immortal Royals or the agents of the VIA.” She looked around as if she thought the walls had ears. Perhaps they did. “I do know that you were supposed to have been assassinated, but whoever was hired to do it, flubbed it up, and hid that fact by dumping you in the colonies. I believe the attack earlier today

was because someone else has realized that and now must finish the job.”

“But who would do this? And why?”

Miss Primrose sat down, gesturing for us to do the same. “That’s what we need to find out. And quickly. Because whoever did this has endangered not just you, but the balance of our worlds.”

“Miss Primrose, please enlighten me with your theories as to who Lily was before she was... Lily.” He squeezed my hand and I prepared myself for some more revelations.

Eve stared at me and then nodded. “Only you’ll be able to tell us. Hopefully sooner rather than later. But, I believe you are an Immortal Royal.”

I gasped. Like literally. I sucked in air that my lungs didn’t know what to do with. Fleming and I looked at each other and I shook my head. Fleming blinked. A lot. I could practically see his brain working a mile a minute.

Before either of us got to any conclusions two more men walked into Eve’s office. I recognized one from the fight, George I think I’d heard Fleming call him. But the other one couldn’t be a vampire. He was too... golden.

“Eve’s been pawning this theory off on me for weeks, Flem. I just don’t see how it could be. All our Immortal Royal charges are here and accounted for,” Golden Boy said.

“Yeah, but she’s something, Gabriel.” George folded his arms and gave me a wink. “The Daughters of Bathory sure thought so.”

Fleming looked at me and stared so deeply into my eyes, I thought he was going to crawl inside my head. “Empress Matilda.”

Matilda.

Tilly.

Lily.

“Nah,” Gabriel said. “Empress Matilda’s a legend. Like Arthur.”

George also shook his head. “No way old Will’s kids would let a woman rule. Sorry, ducky. They were a bunch of pricks towards women back then.”

My mind flashed with a memory. My brother and his friends, crashed. The ship sank in a storm. The heir to the throne was dead. I was the rightful heir. I would fight to claim my throne, my kingdom.

“Lily?” Fleming held my hand and stroked my cheek.

“Wait. Immortals can die? How does that work?” I looked around at the four supernatural beings who thought I was as crazy as they were at the moment.

“Just like us,” Fleming instructed, “immortals don’t age, don’t get sick, but they can be injured and if it’s severe enough that the inherent immortal healing isn’t enough, an immortal can die. Many have.”

“Like say if they were sliced in two when they crashed their ship on the rocks in a horrible storm?” Was it an accident? Or had I arranged for my brother to be killed?

George, Gabriel, and Eve all nodded. Eve answered my question. “You’re referring to the White Ship disaster, and the Anarchy that followed when Henry I had no heir.

“Yes. I think I was that heir.”

“Do you remember who you were, love?” Fleming asked.

“Not quite. But I that flash of memory I just had, well, you know how you mentioned sometimes the Immortal Royals fight amongst themselves? I... I think I arranged for my brother William to be killed.”

What kind of horrible person had I been? No wonder someone tried to have me offed.

Fleming squeezed my hand, his eyes searching mine for any signs of distress. “Love, you can’t blame yourself for actions taken in a different lifetime, especially if you don’t fully remember them.”

George, who had been silently observing, chimed in. “Besides, motives are never as simple as they seem. We have to dig deeper to understand the full picture. And who knows? You might have had your reasons.”

Eve nodded, her eyes shifting from me to Fleming. “Remember, we’re all molded by the times we live in. If you were the Empress Matilda, you were a woman in a man’s world, struggling for power and respect. And it’s not as if the men around you would’ve played fair either.”

“Still,” Gabriel interrupted, his golden aura seeming to shimmer in disdain, “we have no proof yet. Theories and speculation won’t protect Lily or solve our problem. What are we doing about the person who wants her dead?”

Fleming stood, his demeanor changing to that of a decisive leader. “First, we need to keep Lily safe. Second, we need to identify the traitor in our ranks who’s targeting her. And finally, we have to understand why and how her memories were erased, and by whom.”

“And where do we start?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest. The reality of the danger I was in finally settling in.

“We start by reaching out to some old friends,” Eve said, her eyes locking onto mine as if she could see straight into my soul. “And maybe some old enemies.”

Everyone nodded. Was I about to become a spy?

Then Eve added the final blow. “And we invite them to a Halloween party.”

She laid out her plan to catch the conspirator and oh, she was a sneaky one. I was glad she was on my side.

Fleming tightened his grip on me. “Lily, whatever you are, whoever you were, we’re going to find out fast. Your enemies are mine now too, and I’m no longer afraid to let the monster out if it keeps you safe.”

As we left Eve’s office, I felt the weight of my unknown past and the peril of my present bind together, forming a knot of urgency. Whoever I had been, I was now Lily—a woman in

love, in danger, and possibly the key to a mystery that spanned lifetimes.

And I was going to fight to unravel it.

In a twelfth century historically accurate dress.

Fleming led me through a maze of winding corridors until we reached a door with top-level security measures. He punched in a code and the door slid open, revealing a lab that looked like something straight out of a sci-fi movie.

“This is where I’ve spent countless hours, tinkering with the laws of life and death,” he said, a touch of vulnerability in his voice.

He walked over to a desk and with a click, opened a secret compartment. Inside lay an antique box, looking so ordinary among beakers, vials, and complicated machinery. It was the kind of box that needed a key to be opened.

He placed the box on a table and took a deep, unnecessary breath. “Lily, in this box is a serum that I’ve been working on for decades. It has the potential to make me human again.”

I looked at him, startled. “Human? But why would you—”

“Because for the longest time, I thought being human was the only way I could ever deserve love or happiness,” he said, cutting me off, his eyes locked onto mine. “But meeting you changed that. I don’t need to be human to deserve you or to love you.”

I reached for the box but hesitated. “May I?”

Fleming nodded. “Go ahead.”

My hand went to the key around my neck, the key from the book. It was an exact match to the lock on the box. With trembling hands, I unlocked it and lifted the lid. Inside was a single vial filled with a liquid that shimmered in the dim light of the lab.

“For all its potential, this serum represents my past, a past where I thought changing who I am was the only way to happiness,” he said softly.

“But now?” I asked.

“Now,” he said, taking the vial from the box and holding it up to the light, “I think we should destroy it. Together.”

“Are you sure?” The weight of his words hung heavily between us.

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life,” he said. “Or in my many lives, for that matter.”

I took the vial from him, and we walked over to a chemical disposal unit. As I dropped it in, he pressed the button that would neutralize it forever.

We stood there for a moment, the gravity of what we’d just done settling in. We’d chosen each other, come what may, for eternity.

He turned to me, his eyes gleaming in a way I’d never seen before. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve just chosen to spend forever with the right person.”

FLEMING



It felt like the eve of a great battle, and not simply All Hallows' Eve. An unsettling mixture of anticipation and dread settling in my bones. Tonight, secrets would be unearthed and masks would fall. Either we would finally catch the snake slithering in the shadows, or we would be forced to confront an even more terrifying reality, that the enemy among us was here to bring us all crashing down.

I glanced at Lily, resplendent in her Empress Matilda cosplay, fully aware of the layers of deceit surrounding her. Inviting all of the Royal Immortals under the guise of a quaint Halloween fancy dress party where they could wear the costumes of the eras they were born to had been a brilliant idea on Miss Primrose's part. It was enough to lure the Immortal Royals out of their secluded lives.

It wouldn't be suspect to any of them that the black ops team was there to keep an eye on them under the guise of protection. The more eyes we had on us, the more protected Lily would be, or so I hoped.

It looked like a place where people could socialize and dance away their worries for the evening without worrying that mundane humans might figure out who they were. All while they were unaware of the poison that sometimes lurked in a cup of tea.

Well, not poison, but an antidote to the infamous amnesia serum. I would never be so careless as to develop a serum that dangerous without having a cure for its consequences.

Whoever had stolen the serum from me in the first place wasn't smart enough to realize that.

The plan was to serve it in the tea, restoring the memories of everyone who'd known Lily before her life was stolen from her. Their reactions would be our clues, revealing, perhaps, the one responsible for her amnesia.

George, Gabriel, and a few other trusted agents were stationed discreetly around the room, ready to intercept should things go awry.

As the Immortal Royals started to arrive, I took Lily's hand, guiding her toward the mingling crowd.

"Are you ready?" I whispered to her, our fingers intertwining.

She gave me a tight-lipped smile. "As I'll ever be."

We made our way to the elegantly arranged tea table. Lily and Miss Primrose had coordinated the whole thing, ensuring that the antidote would be indistinguishable from the other flavors. The trick would be to serve the tea at the perfect moment, and then watch.

As the guests took their seats, the tension in the room was palpable only to me, Lily and the rest of the team, a taut string ready to snap. To everyone else, this was going to be a grand old time. My eyes scanned the room, resting momentarily on each Royal Immortal present. Who among them had wanted Lily gone so desperately that they'd attempted to erase her from existence?

I nodded to Miss Primrose. It was time.

The music swelled as Miss Primrose approached the tea table. Her eyes met mine for just a moment, a quick glance filled with a gravity that only the two of us understood. She lifted the teapot, elegant and ornate, and began to pour.

Each drop of tea that fell into the porcelain cups seemed to echo in my mind, a ticking clock drawing us closer to unmasking the truth. Or, at the very least, shaking it loose from the depths of collective memory.

“Tea is served,” Miss Primrose announced, her voice tinged with an all-too-appropriate British formality.

One by one, the Immortal Royals made their way to the table, intrigued by the assortment of teas on display. Their hands wavered over the cups, choosing between the varieties that Lily and Miss Primrose had so painstakingly arranged.

It was a surreal moment, watching these eternal beings, some of whom had walked the earth for centuries, oblivious to the turning point they were about to experience. They sipped their tea, blissfully ignorant, chatting about eras gone by, their attire making them look as though they’d stepped right out of history books.

My eyes kept darting to Lily, who was also surveying the room with an intensity that mirrored my own. We were looking for any sign, any telltale twitch or flicker of realization. Our gazes met, and for a brief second, I felt a wave of reassurance wash over me. Whatever happened, we were in this together.

Minutes passed like hours. Conversations around us started to change; the air grew thick with a renewed sense of urgency. And then it happened.

Henry, known to most as Henry VIII, an Immortal Royal most of us found to be both endearing and insufferably arrogant, suddenly choked on his tea. His eyes widened, a look of horror overtaking his previously smug expression. He glanced from me to Lily and back again, as if seeing us both for the first time.

“Henry,” I began, my voice low, almost a growl, “is everything quite all right?”

Henry VIII, formerly content with his elaborate Tudor attire and chatting with his fellow Royals, suddenly spat out his tea in surprise. His eyes locked onto Lily, his expression morphing from astonishment to recognition to sheer joy in a matter of seconds.

“Matilda! By the heavens, it’s truly you!” he bellowed, his voice full of uncontainable excitement as he drew Lily into an

enveloping hug, lifting her slightly off her feet.

For a split second, an unfamiliar pang of jealousy surged through me. I had always been the one at her side, her protector. But as quickly as it arrived, it vanished; Henry's enthusiasm didn't appear malicious. His eyes were full of nothing but pure elation at seeing an old friend reborn.

Several other Royals chimed in, shouts of "Matilda!" and "It's really her!" echoing throughout the room. The amnesia antidote was working; they remembered Lily, and the room was buzzing with exclamations and gasps of amazement.

My eyes were on everyone, but they were also on no one in particular, until they settled on Princess Isabella. Unlike the others, who were swarming Lily with jubilant excitement, Isabella was slipping away, her face flushed, her eyes avoiding contact with anyone else's.

A sinking feeling settled in my stomach. Princess Isabella had been someone I had considered a friend, maybe even more at times. She had been in my lab, sat on my lap during past gatherings, always batting her eyelashes as if we were sharing secrets. But now, it all clicked into place. The flirtations, the close proximity, they had all been a ruse.

My gaze turned steely, and I tightened my grip on Lily's hand. "Excuse me for a moment, love," I whispered, kissing her forehead quickly before I detached myself from her side.

"I have something I must attend to."

I nodded subtly to George and Gabriel, who were already eyeing Princess Isabella with suspicion. They got the signal and started moving, skillfully weaving through the crowd of costumed Royals. They were close behind her just as she reached the door leading out of the tea shop.

"Princess Isabella," George called out, his voice cold and official. "Would you mind coming with us for a moment?"

Isabella froze, her eyes widening. She turned slowly, pasting a feigned smile on her lips. "Is there a problem?"

"That's what we intend to find out," Gabriel said, his eyes never leaving hers.

As they escorted Isabella back toward the counter, I returned to Lily, who was still awash in the adoration of her rediscovered friends.

“Lily,” I whispered, drawing her attention. “It’s time.”

She nodded, her eyes hardening with resolve, but she also gave a nod to the group of women around her. She’d reconnected with the Council of Princesses. Those women ruled the underground society of the Immortal Royal, and they did not like betrayal in their ranks. Together, we walked to the center of the room, where George and Gabriel had brought Princess Isabella.

“Would you care to explain yourself, Isabella?” Lily’s voice was steady, but tinged with an unmistakable note of betrayal.

Isabella’s eyes darted nervously, her composure unraveling. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Do not lie to me,” Lily hissed, her patience worn thin. “Why would you do this? We were friends. Sisters on the Council of Princesses, even.”

Isabella looked cornered, her eyes welling up with tears. But whether they were genuine or another act, I couldn’t tell. “I thought if you were gone, out of the picture, I could finally have what you have,” she stuttered.

“By erasing my existence?” Lily’s voice trembled with disbelief and hurt. “All this, for what? Envy?”

Isabella finally broke, her facade crumbling entirely. “I wanted to be seen, to be loved, to have even a sliver of the life you have, Lily. You’re the most powerful of us all, and you have no idea what it’s like to be perpetually overlooked.”

The rest of the princesses surrounded Lily, their eyes were fierce. The enigmatic Mary O, who had taken up the position of head of the council in Matilda’s absence spoke, her voice resolute. “No jealousy can justify what you’ve done. We hereby ban you from Immortal Society for a period of one-hundred years.”

With a flick of her wrist, Lily signaled to George and Gabriel. “Take her away. She’s lost her place here.”

As Isabella was led away, the room erupted in a myriad of reactions, gasps, murmurs, and shocked silence. Lily turned to me, her eyes meeting mine.

“We did it,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I smiled, pulling her close, “we did.”

“But Fleming, why is it you don’t recognize me?”

I did. But I didn’t understand how I could have known her for centuries and not have needed to claim her as my Soul’s Serenity.

A tall, dark, and shadowy figure that few would recognize swooped into the party, wearing a very cheesy Dracula costume. He appeared right at our sides and put a hand on each of our shoulders. “I’m afraid that was my fault, dearest Tilly, ah, Lily.”

What? The First Vampire had kept me from my Serenity?

“I knew the pain that Fleming had gone through in his transition to the immortal life. There was no room in the broken darkness inside of him to heal. But I saw how he fell in love with a powerful and strong princess, called Matilda.” He picked up a cup of tea and took a sip. Gave it a polite nod, and set the cup back down. “So I made a deal with the Goddess of Love herself, and she created a gift I could give to all vampires created for ever more. The gift of a mate whose soul would be the serenity from the darkness inside of us all. But don’t blame me for making you two wait. She’s the one who decides when you’ll find each other, and she’s been quite busy with her own children. Fucking Dragons. Oops. Don’t tell George I said that.”

Lily and I looked at each other. Then Lily poked V right in the chest. “You? Us? What?”

He took her finger from his chest and handed it over to me. “Fleming understands. He’ll explain. Lovely party. You should host it again next year. It’s quite fun to play dress up and hang out with the little ghosties that inhabit your shop.”

Before either of us could question him more, the First Vampire turned into a bat, flew around the ceiling for a few moments and then poof, disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Lily looked up at me. “Did... did the First Vampire have the Goddess of Love create the bond of a Soul’s Serenity because... you love me?”

I swallowed hard. I did love her. I had loved her for a thousand years, and would for a thousand more. “Yes. A love so powerful that not only I was lost without you, so were the rest of all vampires.”

She smiled up at me so prettily, and I could hardly wait for her to confess her long-standing love for me too. “Holy shit. We’re the OG power couple. I love that for us.”

Lily winked at me, and then wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me down for a kiss. “I do love you so, Fleming. My soul is yours and always has been for all of time.”

I kissed her back and slipped into her mind. “I love you so very much, my sweet Lily. Now let’s go see about quitting our jobs so I can spend the rest of eternity making love to you.”

NEED JUST a little [more Lily and Fleming](#)? Join my Curvy Connection Newsletter and I’ll send you a bonus chapter for them!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Aidy Award is a curvy girl who kind of has a thing for stormtroopers. She's also the author of the popular Curvy Love series and the hot new Dragons Love Curves series.

She writes curvy girl erotic romance, about real love, and dirty fun, with happy ever afters because every woman deserves great sex and even better romance, no matter her size, shape, or what the scale says.

Read the delicious tales of hot heroes and curvy heroines come to life under the covers and between the pages of Aidy's books. Then let her know because she really does want to hear from her readers.

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