

Gloria Oliver

THE DISCOVERIES OF JULIA XERO



The SECRET
AFTERMATH

THE SECRET AFTERMATH



The Discoveries of Julia Xero
Book 2

Gloria Oliver

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The Secret Aftermath

The Discoveries of Julia Xero – Book 2

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ISBN: 978-1-957230-17-7 (Kindle), 978-1-957230-19-1 (Paperback), 978-1-957230-20-7
(Hardback)

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Cover design by Dimension Palace Publishing

Book editing by Serenity Editing Services

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Glossary

Also by Gloria Oliver

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CHAPTER 01

To say I'd had a bad day was an understatement. It had been *catastrophic*—and it wasn't over yet.

If you'd told me three months ago that I would work for a crime and trauma scene decontamination company based in Dallas, discover there was a secret race called the *Paphal Saîgiga* (or "Secret Humankind") living amongst us, and that they would put a tracking device/bomb in my neck to ensure I kept their secrets, I would have avoided eye contact with you and run for the hills until it was safe to come out again.

And that wasn't even the *worst* of it!

I had also become the fixation of a Secret Humankind assassin. One who was working through a list of names given to him by his master. A list of people who were indirectly connected to some hush-hush project that had been ongoing for years, even decades. But we didn't know how close the project was to implementation, much less how to stop it. We'd managed to capture the assassin, but

unbeknownst to everyone, including him, he too had a bomb in his neck, and his boss hadn't hesitated to activate it—*on one of his own kind*.

There was one more thing—and it was a doozie. The assassin had always insisted I had a secret—a secret even *I* didn't know I had. But it had been revealed as I lay in a pool of my own blood after I got in his way when he tried to kill my roommate.

I had the ability to tap into the energy exuded by all living things, the ambient energy the Paphal Sağiga fed from. The same power that allowed some of them to do feats that most people would consider magic.

But *I* wasn't one of *them*.

"Yes, Miss Xero, I'm afraid the summons is legitimate. You've been ordered to appear before the Council of Purpose." Dawn Anghelescu, owner of Remington Safe and Clean and my boss, allowed the fancy scroll she'd been reading to roll itself closed. She was a European beauty, tall and graceful, with luxuriant hair of gold and brown. She'd been molded into a *vâlvă*, a Romanian spirit, when overcome by the Change. Yes, she was part of the Secret Humankind—but for some reason, not only did she seem to want to protect me, she was also vested in stopping the clandestine project we'd discovered.

In case you were wondering, my last name is pronounced the same as "zero." As in the zero luck I was currently having.

A group of us was currently having a pow-wow in a unique conference room that included palm trees. The plants acted as living batteries to power the symbols etched into the art-nouveau glass greenhouse nestled inside the room. From my understanding, it kept

others from mentally eavesdropping or electronically bugging the room.

"I figured," I said. "But thank you for checking."

Not that long ago, I'd been *furious* at Anghelescu—for spying on me after I'd applied for the third-shift job at her company, for hiring me and then putting a bomb in my neck during orientation, for not telling me about the "special" jobs I'd need to deal with. But I had realized recently that she'd also made it possible for me to make some genuine friends—maybe even some I could think of as a family—and had given me a place to belong. I'd decided to fight for these things rather than run away.

The woman in the crisp blue suit standing next to Anghelescu frowned at our exchange. Her male partner wore an identical suit, and his expression stayed neutral—but the red aura around him looked spiky and prickly, as if he were eager for a fight and any excuse would do.

Oh, didn't I mention? I can "see" auras now. Yeah, because having a "spidey sense" for danger and odd hunches hadn't made me weird enough already. Though as an orphan in the foster care system, it *had* come in handy several times. My dead friend Laurel would have had a *field day* with all this.

The rest of my companions were no happier than I was about this confrontation. We were an eclectic mix of SH and humans in the know. Karamel Oaks, bubbly and a little hyper at times, was a dryad, and the nicest person you would ever meet. Stan Lockhart, my work partner, looked like a guy plucked out of the sixties with his telltale muttonchop sideburns, and was a hundred percent human. Cillian

Doyle, a short and mostly harmless lecher, was a *korrigan* who had visions. He was hiding under the table at the moment, hoping to stay off the party crashers' radar. Last, but in no way least, was another human, Detective Rafael Ruiz. A Puerto Rican, he was handsome—Laurel would have deemed him "too hot to handle" if they'd ever met. As it was, my roommate Penny Baxter had become an instant badge-bunny when she'd caught a look. I was still working out exactly how I felt about him.

Since I had tapped into the living energy, proving I wasn't strictly human, Ruiz might want nothing to do with me. *I* might want nothing to do with me, even if I lived through the day—which, to be honest, was looking highly unlikely. The somber looks plastered on my friends' faces told me they knew it, too.

But I was done running. For the first time in my life, there was something I wanted to stay and fight for—even if I ended up dead.

From what little I'd learned about them, the leaders of the SH were a paranoid bunch. So I highly doubted they would take it very well to learn the news of a human who was able to tap into the energy that kept them alive and made them special.

I stepped slowly around the conference table to approach my "escorts" and Anghelescu, who were standing by the open door of the meeting room. Despite being aware of my new ability to tap into the ambient energy, I had no idea how to use it, so balking at the summons was out of the question. No point in giving the suits an excuse to end me right then and there. Besides whatever powers they'd gained at the time of the Change when they'd reached puberty, I was also aware the Secret Humankind could carry

weapons that were kept hidden until they needed to use them. Since these suits represented the Council of Purpose, I was sure they had plenty of tricks up their sleeves.

The stiff postures of my friends, who had all shot to their feet when the suits first arrived (except Doyle, who picked that moment to cower under the table and try to remain unseen), told me they thought it could come to violence as well.

The woman suit put up a hand to stop me from coming closer. "That's far enough. Now put your arms out."

"Is that necessary?" Anghelescu asked. "As you can see, Miss Xero is cooperating."

The woman didn't look at her, keeping her entire focus centered on me. "I have my orders, Guardian."

I stuck my arms out as requested, pretty sure I knew what was coming next. If there was one thing I'd learned about the leaders of the SH during the short time I'd known about them, it was that they were incredibly distrustful. That they wouldn't want an anomaly such as myself standing unrestrained before them, despite the bomb implanted in my neck, didn't surprise me one bit.

The woman pulled a pair of weird-looking cuffs from inside her suit jacket and slapped them on me like a veteran cop. The moment they closed, it felt like the air had been sucked out of my lungs and my body cut into tiny pieces. My knees gave way at the shock, but Anghelescu was there and propped me up. My vision was blurry, and I felt weak and gooey, as if I had a severe case of heatstroke.

"I've got you, Miss Xero," Anghelescu said. "You'll feel better in a moment. Deep breaths will help."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ruiz take a menacing step toward us. "What did you *do* to her? "

The woman's companion moved forward, too. While I appreciated Ruiz's concern more than I could say, the last thing I wanted was for the detective to get hurt on my behalf.

"I'm—I'm okay." I wasn't, but I couldn't let things escalate. Raising my head to look in his direction took a lot more effort than it should have. That was when I realized the auras I could see before were gone.

"Detective, everything is all right." Anghelescu raised a brow, still propping me up from behind. "The cuffs have a dual purpose. Not only do they restrain the wearer, but they also cut off access to the ambient life force. It can be quite a shock, but it won't harm her."

I wasn't so sure. My whole body was shaking. I hadn't tapped into the energy for long, but not being able to connect with it now made me feel like a junkie needing a fix in the worst way. How much worse would it feel to someone who had been connected to it for most of their life?

"I'll be coming with you, Herald." Anghelescu aimed this at the woman.

"That is unnecessary, Guardian," the woman answered stiffly, as if offended. "You are not part of the summons."

"Nevertheless, I insist," Anghelescu said, adding a bit of steel to her voice. "Miss Xero is within my purview and, therefore, my responsibility. She's not been with us long enough to know what to expect or what rights she holds. I will be her advocate in this matter."

I was rallying from the trauma of being cut off from the energy, so I straightened to take my weight off Anghelescu. It was the least I could do. By shoehorning herself into this, she was putting herself at risk.

The herald's eyes narrowed in displeasure, but she made no further comment. Instead, she turned on her heel and led the way out of the room. Anghelescu and I followed, with the male suit bringing up the rear. I glanced at Karamel as we walked by and found her eyes brimming with tears, her brow furrowed with worry. I tried my best to give her a reassuring smile, but I wasn't sure how well I managed.

Rather than steer us toward the primary set of elevators in the building, the herald walked briskly through the halls until we arrived at the service elevator. As we waited for it in charged silence, I noticed my reflection on the doors. Instead of the new thick and madly curling brown mane with golden highlights, my hair had returned to its regular state: mousy brown and limp. I itched to put it back into its usual ponytail, but I doubted I could manage that in cuffs, and I had no rubber bands, anyway. To my surprise, my dark amber eyes hadn't returned, but neither were they the same new bright gold color. They were currently somewhere in between. What that meant, I didn't have the faintest idea.

We piled inside the elevator car when it arrived.

The female herald removed a ring from her pocket and put it on, then touched its gemstone to the keyhole on the panel and uttered words I couldn't quite hear. The elevator started down. None of the numbers on the board lit up or showed on the tiny screen above the

doors, so it was hard to tell, but the descent seemed to take longer than usual. My ears popped just before the car finally came to a stop, which was weird. Just how deep did we go?

The doors opened, showing a stone passage only a foot wider than the elevator doors. The white natural stone had been smoothed and polished. *A chalky white like how my skin will look like once I'm dead*, I thought.

The female herald didn't hesitate; she stepped out of the elevator, leaving the rest of us to follow. Compared to the openness and extended visibility outdoors, the corridor felt somehow heavy, almost oppressive. Runes along the curved ceiling glowed, giving off light for us to see by.

We didn't go far, for which I was grateful. The day's strenuous events and the suddenness of being cut off from the energy had left me bone weary. Anghelescu walked beside me, and I caught the occasional half-glance coming my way, as if to make sure I wasn't about to fall on my face. The calm, even set of her expression during all this would have made the top poker players in the world proud.

A metal door stood open, its hinges fused into the stone wall, allowing entry into a twenty-by-twenty room with no other exit. In the middle of it sat an octagonal stone dais, which held a freestanding pointed Moorish arch. There was nothing else in the room. The herald headed straight for it.

Anghelescu and I followed. The second herald loomed like an executioner behind us, ready to chop off our heads if we tried to go back the way we had come in.

As we approached the dais, the gem on the ring the herald wore emitted an inner light. The area within the arch grew suddenly opaque and then shimmered as the scrollwork carved into the arch and the edge of the dais began to glow, and then somehow to *move*. A weird sense of noise and pressure started to build. The herald stopped before the shimmering arc and spoke a string of words I couldn't hear despite being right behind her, the unheard clatter eating the sound as it issued forth.

My spidey sense remained quiet, though I couldn't tell if that was because of a lack of danger or if it, too, had been cut away from me. My switchblade, Stitch, was the only thing I knew for sure they hadn't taken, a comfortable and reassuring weight in my pocket. That they hadn't searched me before coming here was either stupid or overconfident of them.

The pressure seemed to stabilize, making my ears pop again as the shimmering area inside the arch turned into a mirror. The female herald stepped into her reflection and was gone—more crazy magic. Laurel would have dealt with this so much better than I could. *Suck it up, Xero.*

I stared at my now-unimpeded reflection, frown lines showing clearly between my brows.

Anghelescu placed her hand on my arm. "This is merely a transportation device, Miss Xero. Just walk into it like any other doorway," she said. "We can do it together."

I gave a curt nod, unable to look away, and held my breath as I stepped forward when she did. A shiver coursed through me, tingling cold covering me from head to toe even as my foot settled

on a different dais than the one I'd been on before. The female herald was there, looking impatient, waiting for us. Anghelescu encouraged me forward to make room for the second herald before he could smash into me as he also came through. The first herald removed her ring from her finger, and the space inside the arch returned to normal.

Unbidden, I wondered what would happen to a person caught in mid-passage when the portal closed. Would they be cut in two, or be trapped in between, lost forever?

I've never had much of an imagination. This *definitely* wasn't the best time to start having one.

Unlike the room we used to get here, this one was large—at least twice the size of the first room—and so was the pointed Moorish arch. The rock was different, too—sedimentary and colorful layers rather than the previous white, though it, too, was smoothed, polished, and beautiful. Light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, due to means I couldn't fathom. Despite the direness of my situation, I couldn't help but gawk.

There were four exits from the room, though only one stood currently open, the other three sealed by thick metal doors covered in glyphs. The fourth stood on its own next to the open entrance, the door's depth measuring longer than my arm. Each of the four locations had two guards, though their uniforms didn't match. One was dressed like a Roman centurion; another wore samurai armor with a gruesome mask to drive fear into the enemy. One sported a conical hat and a chest-piece that looked as if it were made of bronze—a Hittite? There was even one dressed in the blue coat and

tricorn hat associated with the Continental Army during the American Revolution. All their weapons looked brand new, easily able to bring me death if they were so inclined.

Old-world empires and history had seemed so unnecessary when I'd been in high school, but luckily, downtime at the job and discussions with Stan had slowly been filling in some gaps since I had become aware of the SH.

The female herald set a brisk pace out of the room and down the hall. There were guards at each intersection we passed, all wearing different garb. Columns were carved at the corners, each representing a different culture or people—Minoan, Ionic, Mycenaean, Persian. I could only assume this was an attempt to preserve their past in some way. Perhaps to show the Paphal Sağiga who came here that they were one people, regardless of where they originated? Except I saw no one here but the guards.

And the more of them I saw, the slimmer my chances for survival grew if I ended up having to make a run for it. Not that I had the faintest chance of activating the arches to escape from here anyway.

The passageways were broad enough that four or five people could walk side by side. After several minutes of hearing our footsteps echoing, we finally reached a set of curved double doors. I really hoped this was our destination—I felt ready to drop at any moment. The door guards asked no questions, just opened the doors to let us through.

It seemed we were expected.

An involuntary shiver racked its way through me. But at least this time, I wasn't walking into danger alone. Anghelescu was with me.

Even if she could do nothing to help me, it was still less nerve-racking than when I had gone to meet Jake in the parking garage alone for our final confrontation mere hours ago.

Or so I kept telling myself.

Considering how quickly the council had drafted the fancy scroll and sent the heralds to fetch me, they must be panicking. Fear bubbled in the back of my mind as I stepped inside, about to meet those who held my life in their hands.

The first thing that caught my attention was the high, domed ceiling, then the circular walls of the vast room. The latter were split into three evenly spaced rows by grooved borders. The bottom row was carved, the second was carved and painted, and the highest was only painted. Each row depicted mythical beasts from the oldest to the newest. A Secret Humankind historical record—one representing the changes in humanity's imagination and the creatures the SH had become during their time of the Change. Creatures like a hunter figure with the head of a bird, a sphinx, a basilisk, and a manticore; a minotaur, a medusa, a lamia, and a naga; followed by unicorns, dragons, and even a paper umbrella with one eye and a leg sprouting from inside it. On the top tier, I spotted vampires and werewolves; trolls, yeti, and Bigfoot. I didn't recognize most of the figures represented there, but they ranged from the fantastical to the terrible and the sublime.

A few feet into the room, the central area sat lower than the rest, with three steps leading down to it. At the very center was a large inlaid ceramic tile depiction of an ouroboros—a serpent eating its tail. Anghelescu signaled me to follow her there. Though they were

made to blend with the snake, I spotted several chain anchors bolted to the floor. I felt a shudder course through me.

The heralds remained at the top of the three steps in a ready stance. On the far side of the upper area sat a dark, curved marble desk with seven matching cushioned thrones. Five men and two women of varying ethnic backgrounds filled the seats. Some were dressed in historical garb, while others wore modern suits. Almost all of them had open laptops or tablets on the formidable desk. The position of the counter and thrones, set above those standing in the lower circle, made for some heavy subliminal intimidation.

All seven of the seated figures stared at me, some with unreadable expressions, others with open disgust, and one or two with a measure of curiosity. All but one looked to be in their mid-twenties to -thirties, which didn't surprise me, given how long the SH seemed to live. The last appeared to be in his mid-forties.

The people seated there could be none other than the Council of Purpose—the very ones holding my fate in their paranoid little hands.



CHAPTER 02

"Guardian, why are you here?" asked an Asian woman, the halo of black hair around her head adorned with golden ornaments. She wore a colorful, long-sleeved, wrapped top tied at the chest with a one-looped bow. At a guess, I'd say she was Korean.

I blinked several times when I realized I could hear her and understand her clearly, though I could also tell she was not speaking in English. I could only assume it was an effect brought about by the circle in which we were standing, not some new power I'd acquired.

Anghelescu bowed, then answered. "Councilor Kim, as I informed the heralds, Miss Xero is my employee and my responsibility. I am here as her advocate and witness."

A man with a pinched face, long aquiline nose, and wearing a scarlet cassock leaned forward. "You overstep, *Guardian*."

He spoke in Spanish, but with his S's made to sound more like 'th's,' which marked him a Spaniard. His impatient and entitled tone instantly tagged him as a bully. While I was grateful Anghelescu had

come with me, I had no desire to get her into trouble, but I doubted these people would give much weight to anything I said on the matter.

"I must respectfully disagree, sir. Miss Xero was vetted thoroughly before I extended her an offer of employment. I've watched her deal with the revealed knowledge of our existence and her work on our behalf, which has exceeded standard expectations. No one is better qualified to help answer any questions you might have."

And also to ensure we had our stories straight and didn't say more than we needed to about the events that had led up to today. I felt a drop of sweat make its slow way down my spine. One of these seven people, or someone close to them, was responsible for the human population fertility-curbing project we needed to stop.

The problem was that we couldn't talk about it. The council certainly would have rejected the original proposition outright if it had been brought forward. However, now that it was so close to fruition, they might consider it a viable solution and let it happen—thus decreasing the fertility rate of millions, if not billions, of humans without their consent in an effort to curb human overpopulation of the planet.

The Spaniard sat back, part of his upper lip raised in dissatisfaction.

"You may not be aware, Guardian, but we received some rather disturbing intelligence from the Eye. Visions regarding this woman." Though the middle-aged man spoke in English, his hooked nose, symmetrical jaw, and tanned coloring marked him as Egyptian. He wore a white linen suit rather than a historical outfit, though the

color was reminiscent of the kilts and robes worn by the ancients. It was hard to tell from where I stood, but his eyes seemed to have a thin line of kohl around them. "Revelations seen not only by the Dallas branch, but by branches worldwide."

I swallowed hard. A ton of them had seen *me*? That was crazy! I could believe I was part of a vision, but surely not the *center* of one. I would think Jake being executed by one of his own kind would trump the discovery of a human who could tap into their energy base.

"Pardon me, sir," Anghelescu said, in the humblest of tones, "but were the visions *only* about Miss Xero, or did they also include the cold-blooded murder of one of our own by an unknown assailant?"

The silence that settled around us at Anghelescu's question felt like that of a tomb. Several of the councilors stared at her with such heat in their eyes it was a wonder we didn't catch fire.

"That is a separate issue, Guardian, and not one to be discussed at this time." The Spaniard then stared at me and smiled as if looking at a bug he was about to squash. "Besides, the perpetrator of that atrocity is likely standing right beside you."

"Santiago, that was uncalled for." The soft admonishment came from an ephemeral beauty of Indian descent. She wore a gorgeously patterned pink and gold sari and sat in the chair to his left. A topaz glimmered brightly from a piercing in her left nostril, and intricate hoops adorned her ears.

"Apologies, Badami, but that is one of the possibilities we should consider."

How unoriginal—trying to make the orphan the scapegoat. "*I didn't kill anyone!* And I don't appreciate being accused of it just because it would make your life more convenient." I would have said more, but Anghelescu touched my arm and minutely shook her head.

"You will not speak unless spoken to," said a dour-faced man with a Hungarian mustache at the end on the left. He wore a red turban and a blue, yellow, and orange jacket. I'd never heard the language he spoke before. "The Guardian has rights here and may speak, but you do not. If you cannot control yourself, we can do it for you."

How utterly shocking—*not!*

If these beings had ever been genuinely enlightened and filled with the wisdom to guide humanity, I hadn't seen much evidence of it. Despite the awe-inspiring setting, I wasn't impressed by the council so far. I typically had no problem keeping my mouth shut, but I was getting so very tired of being stepped on.

"Forgive her. She is very new and is not acquainted with the council's rules, and it's not been long since she was put through a great ordeal. The summons did not allow time for her to be properly prepared." How Anghelescu could plead for me yet at the same time make it sound as if she were scolding the council itself was something I'd never be able to pull off.

"Please enlighten us about her, Guardian," said a small man with brown, reddish skin, a shaved head, and an orange Buddhist robe. With two of them dressed in religious clothing, did that mean some of the SH had spiritual beliefs, or did they merely use religion as another tool with which to manipulate humans?

"Miss Xero is a foundling. She was discovered at a DART rail stop just before the morning commute. There was no note. Notices were placed in the local newspaper and other media, but since child abandonment is a felony in the state of Texas, it was not surprising when no one came forward."

I knew all this, but it felt odd hearing it said out loud. I felt like a germ under a microscope.

Anghelescu went on. "She was entered into the foster care system and moved from home to home. No serious applications for adoption were ever filed, though one of her social workers took Miss Xero under her wing and watched over her even after she was released from the system."

I still missed Laurel terribly—her loss a yawning pit inside me.

"We found nothing to indicate she was being monitored, followed, or would in any way be a threat to us. She also had all the qualities of the type of employee I'd hoped to find. Her work to date has been highly satisfactory."

The last council member finally spoke. "What year and month was she found?" He had a pleasing but androgynous appearance, and had the lightest colored skin of the set.

"The year was 2001," Anghelescu answered. "She was believed to be several weeks old when discovered. Her approximate birth date was officially marked as the fourth of July."

Pointed looks were shared amongst the councilors. The time frame seemed to mean something to them. But what? Jake had always insisted I had secrets. It had bothered me when he'd said so—if he was right, it meant there were things about me I didn't know. Now,

it appeared as if my newfound powers might not be the only "secret" I had no clue about, that it might be tied somehow to the Secret Humankind.

Dread shot through me like a rocket. I didn't need my spidey sense to know things were taking a turn for the worse.

"I think we've heard enough, don't you?" Santiago sent me a scathing glance and then pointed directly at me. "These abominations were supposed to have been destroyed!"

"Calm down," Councilor Badami said. "We don't want to jump to conclusions. It could just be a coincidence."

Santiago pulled his arm away when she reached over to touch him.

"Are we *jumping* to conclusions?" the councilor with the red turban asked. "She tapped into the energy and healed herself. She was found as a baby around the same time as that odious project was destroyed. The Eye saw her. How much more evidence do we need before doing something about it?"

Do something about it—about *me*—like what, exactly? Why did these people think they had a right to do *anything* to me? My nails jammed into my palms, but I barely felt them.

"Councilors, what precisely are you referring to?" Anghelescu asked. I wouldn't have put it so nicely. It was taking all I had to keep quiet. Since when had all my hard-earned self-control gone out the window?

"That is not your concern, Guardian," Santiago spat.

"I hate to disagree with you, sir. Miss Xero is *my* responsibility."

The Egyptian in the white suit flicked his hand in our direction. "You might as well tell them. It will lead to greater understanding."

Something about the way he said it bothered me, but I couldn't put my finger on why. I half hoped the others would disagree. I wasn't sure I wanted to know about my ancestry. My life was weird enough already. The last thing I needed was an origin story, like some comic book superhero.

"Twenty-plus years ago, we were alerted by the Eye of a possible... situation." This came from the androgynous councilor at the end. "An unsanctioned project was being carried out in secret. A misguided attempt to make an SH-human hybrid of sorts."

"Don't sugarcoat it, Suwan. Filthy abominations are what they were making!" Santiago was almost frothing.

Suwan gave a tiny nod, acknowledging Santiago's opinion before going on. "Many of the infant subjects had died during years of experimentation, but the visions implied they were very close to succeeding. We voted to shut them down and punish those responsible. And so we did. But it would seem our efforts were not entirely successful."

Bile rose in my throat. I was the product of an experiment? It felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. Was I human at all?

"Now do you understand our concerns, *Guardian*?" Santiago asked. "It is your duty to rid us of what should never have been allowed to exist in the first place."

I couldn't read all of their expressions, but it was easy enough to tell that few disagreed with his statement. Had I decided what I wanted for myself, only to never get a chance to have it?

I didn't dare look at Anghelescu. Seeing the same ugly disgust on her face would be more than I could bear. It also horrified me that

Santiago had just ordered her to kill me. These people were supposed to be wise and enlightened, but I'd yet to see a single sign of that.

"I disagree, sir." The conviction behind Anghelescu's words shocked me. "Miss Xero is an innocent. If she was indeed a part of that project, she did not choose to participate. She was completely unaware of her possible origins until today."

The turbaned councilor shot to his feet. "What if she decides to breed? What would you have us do then?"

Anghelescu turned ice-cold eyes in his direction. "There is no proof that whatever was done can be passed onto progeny. Dr. Morgan can examine her in detail and find out."

Santiago also jumped to his feet. "And hand over the secret of how to make *more*? To a *human*?" I didn't know if it was a trick of the light or part of whatever he'd been transformed into at the time of the Change, but his eyes had turned red.

"Biological reverse engineering isn't that simple," Councilor Kim said, sending an arched-browed look in Santiago's direction. "Even I know that."

"But do we dare take that chance?" Santiago insisted.

"Life in all its forms is sacred." This came from the councilor dressed like a Buddhist monk.

"Yet our responsibilities to our people sometimes call for lives to end!" With focused deliberation, Santiago pressed a button on his laptop.

Sure to my core of what he had just done, I shut my eyes, waiting for the corresponding burst of pain as the bomb in my neck

exploded.



CHAPTER 03

Nothing . To my confused surprise, I felt nothing at all, so I reopened my eyes. Santiago was glaring at his laptop, pressing a key over and over again.

"Why isn't this *working*?" His eyes glowed red, and their shape changed, becoming more circular. Small black feathers began to protrude from his hairline. "She's done something to it!"

He swiveled his head to look straight at me. My body froze in place—I couldn't move, twitch, anything. "Heralds, cut her down where she stands!"

The rest of the councilors jumped to their feet. "Belay that order!" Badami walked the two steps separating her from Santiago and slapped him—hard. My body was free again. I almost slumped to the floor in relief. Even cuffed and powerless, being frozen like that had been a whole new level of helplessness.

Anghelescu turned to watch both the heralds and the council. Though she in no way appeared alarmed, she seemed primed to

deal with anything that came our way—which was more than I say for myself. I was still wondering how the heck I wasn't dead, blood spewing in an arc from my carotid being blown by the bomb implanted in my neck.

Santiago had fallen back into his seat after being struck. With one hand cupping his reddened cheek, he stared with wide eyes at Badami, his expression a mixture of hurt and shock. She glowered at him, both sets of canines elongating, her beautiful face somehow made more so by her wrath. The end of a green-scaled tail rose from beneath her sari and stood higher than the desktop, its end twitching in displeasure. "You forget yourself, André. We do not act or give orders until we have reached a *consensus*," she said. "I am very disappointed in you."

"*Cariño*, please don't say that." A pained grimace marred his face. He raised a trembling hand in her direction, but let it fall before it reached her. "I did it for us. For *all* of us."

Those two were a *thing*?

Badami turned her face away, her canines returning to normal, though the twitching tail end remained. "You're fortunate it glitched, or I'd wash my hands of you." She sighed. "'The eyes do not see what the mind does not want.'" She sighed again. "It would seem I am as guilty of this as you."

Santiago slumped in his chair. "You don't mean that!"

Badami didn't even glance in his direction as she resumed her seat. An uneasy silence settled over the room as the rest of the councilors sat back down. I was just happy to still be breathing. But I'd been

saved by a glitch? It seemed far-fetched even to me. So how was I alive?

"Surely we aren't going to ignore what just happened?" the man in the red turban asked.

"To which part are you referring, Hakobyan?" the Egyptian replied.

"I would have thought it obvious, Şēru," Hakobyan answered with a sneer. "The fact that she's still alive after Santiago activated the fail-safe."

I was astonished to see surprised expressions pop up on a couple of faces. Had they not realized what Santiago had tried to do?

"I can help with that."

It became my turn to be shocked. The one who'd spoken was Anghelescu. She now held everyone's undivided attention.

"It's quite simple, sir," she said, her conversational tone belying the gravity of the topic and the power of those who were seated before us. "The explosive component of the tracker was disabled before it was implanted."

Dead silence settled over the room as the implications of her answer were mulled over. Hakobyan was the first to rally. "Are you saying *that* somehow tampered with the tracker?" He pointed at me to make sure everyone knew who "that" referred to.

"No, sir, I am not. This happened long before Miss Xero became my employee." Anghelescu's brow rose. "*I* disabled that feature on all the trackers in my possession."

She did *what*? I stared at her, aghast. So the chilly conversation we'd had after I first learned about the Secret Humankind, the veiled

threats to keep me in line, had all been a farce? Had that been for my benefit or her superiors'?

"Explain yourself, Guardian." Şēru's kohl-lined eyes looked grave. His stiff posture was mirrored by that of the others. Santiago had recovered somewhat and threw daggered glares in my direction.

"It would be my pleasure, sir." Anghelescu's casual air hadn't buckled in the least. She had to be a lunatic to have gone against their orders and now stand there looking like it didn't matter. Yet, if not for me, who knows how long she would have gotten away with it before being discovered?

"The policy was wrong, so I circumvented it," she said. "I am a Guardian, after all."

Oh, she was *definitely* insane. That I might not leave there alive went without saying, but she was one of *them*—so why purposely put her head on a platter?

Suwan chortled at the end of the massive desk, then broke out into actual laughter. It echoed around the room as if it were such a rare circumstance the walls didn't know what to do with it.

"This is no laughing matter," Kim said, slapping the desk with a folding fan. "We did not agree on this unanimously, but the policy did pass." She turned keen dark eyes in Anghelescu's direction. "It's for the protection of our people. Who are you to ignore it?"

Anghelescu met her stare for stare. "I did not. I did as commanded. Bitter as it might be, I followed orders and implanted your devices. I made my people believe they were active. I only neutralized the actual threat to their lives.

"I am a *Guardian*—by nature and nurture. I may not be as old as some of you, but I am old enough. Our path has always been one of peace, wisdom, and tolerance. We need humans to survive. But they don't need *us*. Yet we're not all that different. We've worked in harmony with a chosen few of their kind each generation for millennia. Incidents of betrayal have been few. Many have willingly given their *lives* on our behalf. It is a partnership built on trust.

"Placing bombs inside their bodies destroys all that. Rather than cooperation, we're now building resentment, suspicion, and debilitating fear. We've seen over and over what those kinds of emotions will elicit. The poison and corruption it will create. We may not be human, but neither are we better or less than them. The Paphal Sağiga have always strived to impart wisdom, to build a better future for both our species. But these bombs and trackers say the exact opposite."

I stared at her in awe, even though a part of me knew her sentiments were too naïve, her goals too high. Her own people had fallen away from those lofty ideals. Yet, here she stood, still pushing forward. There was much to admire there. I finally understood why Stan felt like he did about working for her.

Anghelescu looked at each of the councilors before going on. "This policy runs contrary to the function and purpose of a Guardian. Councilor Santiago even demonstrated how easy, how *tempting* it is to use these bombs we've placed inside our allies. Worse yet, now we also have proof that they're being used on our own people. That one of our kind implanted one of these horrible devices into a Paphal Sağiga, and *killed* them with it."

"What utter nonsense!" Santiago sprang to his feet again, but his temper ran less hot than previously, and barely veiled fear glittered in his eyes. I noticed he didn't specify which part of Anghelescu's statement he found ridiculous.

"Is it?" Anghelescu asked. "Our kind are driven by emotion as much as humans are. Murder among our own is rare, but not unheard of. And look at what unsubstantiated paranoia has already led us to: a horrible weapon that has now been turned on and used against those it was meant to protect. How is looking into that matter *not* the highest priority here? As a Guardian, I have to ask why you set it to the side and ignored it. Why are you not as horrified as I am, and looking into it above all else?" She took a solid step forward.

"Miss Xero was created by one of our own. Her power was awakened by one of our own. If not for us, she might never have realized what she was. *We* did this to her. But rather than face our responsibility in this matter and shoulder it, you'd rather kill her and sweep it away. Then, once she no longer has a voice to dispute your claims, why not blame *her* for the murder that took place earlier today, rather than hunt for the ugly truth? As a Guardian, I cannot allow that. Hiding our heads in the sand will *not* protect our people from this."

The sadness I'd caught glimpses of a time or two before was open to all to see—except now it looked more like dismayed outrage.

"We hear you, Guardian." Though the Buddhist monk spoke in a whisper, we had no trouble hearing him. All their expressions were veiled, even Santiago's. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

"I'd like to request that Miss Xero be released immediately and placed under my care. I will take full responsibility for her and her actions going forward." Anghelescu lowered her head in reverence. "Then the council can feel at ease and focus on more critical concerns."

I held my breath, waiting to see how the council would take this. Anghelescu was walking a very thin and dangerous line—on my behalf, of all things. I lowered my head to match her pose, not having the faintest idea of how else I could help.

The seconds ticked silently by. Anghelescu did not move, so I remained frozen as well. As upset and outspoken as some members of the council had been previously, the silence seemed unnatural. I risked rolling my eyes up so I could glance in their direction—but there was nothing to see. A white shimmering wall stood in front of the curved desk, cutting off the view to the councilors and muting any sounds they might make.

The cuffs at my wrists grew heavier with each passing moment.

I counted the tiles making up what I could see of the ouroboros several times, trying to keep busy and hold my nerve-racked anxiety at bay. The minutes filed silently past. My neck muscles loudly complained at having to maintain the awkward position for so long, and threatened to revolt before the silence was finally broken.

"Guardian, we've reached a decision."

Anghelescu straightened to view the councilors fully. I followed suit, though nowhere near as gracefully, and tried to stretch my neck to ease the kinks in it without being too obvious. The veiled expressions from before were still firmly in place. It made their

heated emotions from earlier seem like something I had imagined, or a play they'd put on to see how we'd react, how much we'd give away. I suddenly grew cold all over.

"Your request for custody has been granted, as long as you agree to several stipulations." The Egyptian's weighted gaze rested on her for several seconds before he went on. "First, you must be aware of Xero's whereabouts at all times. Second, regarding the matters that have been revealed or discussed here today, you may not mention anything about them outside of this chamber. Third, you will not allow anyone to run tests on her or attempt to discover how she can tap into the living energy. Fourth, under no circumstances is she to knowingly use the ambient power for any purpose whatsoever. Disobedience will be met with permanently fitted bracers to cut off all access to the ambient energy, and incarceration."

As if I had *any* desire for my life to get any more complicated than it already was.

Anghelescu nodded. "Agreed."

Ṣēru raised his palm to forestall anything else she might have said. "Understand that this matter is far from settled, and this solution is merely temporary. Innocent or not, Xero's continued existence is a threat to us all. The danger may not be immediate, but neither is it gone.

"As to your defiance of a council-approved mandate, that too will come under discussion, and a suitable punishment will be agreed upon if required. You'll also receive a summons in the near future to give your official statement regarding the events you witnessed

surrounding the death in the parking structure of your building. That will be all for now."

Anghelescu bowed at the clear dismissal. I did the same, in case it made any kind of difference. Șēru using my last name was a step up from "it" or "that," but I didn't dare believe for a second it meant anything favorable. The guillotine was primed and ready, and they'd be happy to use it if given sufficient cause. For a few of those seated before us, any semi-believable trumped-up excuse would do.

We came up out of our bow. I blanked my expression and kept my gaze lowered, knowing this wasn't the time for defiance or showing I was anything other than a grateful little experimented-on orphan, overwhelmed by their magnanimousness. Anghelescu touched my arm, and we turned around and left the way we had come.

I could feel some of the councilors boring holes in my back with their gaze as we walked away.

We took the three steps to where the heralds waited. Their expressions seemed mixed, as if not sure what to make of what they'd heard. Or maybe they were just surprised we were still alive. They split up as before, the woman in front and the man bringing up the rear.

No one spoke, and I was fine with that. I doubted anything said here would be in any way private. We finally reached the arch, and the female herald put the ring back on to activate it.

I held up my arms in a silent demand to get the cuffs removed. The woman ignored me, paying attention solely to her current task. I'd only been able to tap into the energy for a few hours. I didn't know how it worked or how to use it. So what were they so afraid

of? I fumed in silence, despite knowing that if I'd been in the herald's shoes, I'd probably have done the same.

As before, the area inside the arch grew opaque and then shimmered, the engraved symbols taking a life of their own and moving about. The woman spoke to the arch, and once again I couldn't catch any of what she said. She stepped on through. The second herald indicated for us to follow her.

I stared at my exhausted reflection and held my breath before stepping through with Anghelescu at my side.



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GLOSSARY

Basilisk— a serpent-like legendary beast in Roman mythology that can turn people into stone with its gaze and wither plants with its breath.

Bú—a black owl creature with big red eyes that can paralyze its victims.

Cacat—Romanian curse word meaning bad level of 'shit.'

Coño—equivalent of 'damn' in Puerto Rico. The word has a different, more vulgar meaning in Spain.

CTS decon—crime and trauma scene cleanup and decontamination.

Cuneiform—ancient writing system of wedge like shapes.

Dryad—a nature spirit or nymph that lives inside trees and takes the form of a young woman. Originally, they were specific to oak trees.

Gaelic—the Celtic language of Scotland

Guardian—title for the leader of SH and humans who protect the secret of the Paphal Saĝiga's existence.

Gumiho—a nine-tailed fox that changes into a beautiful woman to lure men so it can eat their liver.

Herald—messengers of the Council of Purpose and summoners of those they wish to speak with. Combat trained.

Korrigan—a fairy or dwarf-like spirit in Breton.

Koprophagos— ancient Greek cussword meaning 'shit-eater.'

Naga/Nagi—a half-human and half-serpent entity considered to be semidivine beings. Then can change fully into a normal human or a wholly serpentine form.

Ogham—an ancient British and Irish alphabet. It consists of twenty characters formed by parallel strokes on either side of, or across, a continuous line.

Paphal Saĝiga—(pap-hal sag-gig-ga)—Secret Humankind—(Sumerian/Old Babylonian) in the cuneiform writing system.

Piatek—Armenian mythological creature. Similar to a griffin but without wings.

Poftă mare—wishing you a good/great appetite in order to enhance your eating experience. Traditional.

Seer—a member of The Eye. SH with the ability to foresee events that will affect the race, directly or indirectly.

The Eye—a network of SH Seers used as an early warning system for matters that can affect the Paphal Saĝiga.

Tengu—mythical Japanese creature with human, monkey, or bird features. Shapeshifters who could fly or teleport. Typically rendered with black wings.

Vâlvă—a Romanian spirit, female. White vâlvă are benevolent and protective, while black vâlvă are considered evil. There are many types of vâlvă, each with different associations.

Yeti—a large, six to nine-foot, ape-like, furred creature purported to live in the Himalayas.

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Gloria Oliver lives in Texas with her family and her masters (three cats and two dogs). She is the author of several novels in the genres of fantasy, YA fantasy, science fiction, and historical cozy mystery genres. Many of her speculative fiction short stories can be found in a handful of anthologies. She is a proud member of Broad Universe, though she has yet to work her way into the top list of Cat Slaves R Us.

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