



FORGED OF BONE

PARANORMAL SHIFTER ROMANCE
SUPERNATURAL CURSE
BOOK FOUR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KRISTA STREET

Forged of Bone

Supernatural Curse
Book Four

KRISTA STREET

Copyright © 2022 by Krista Street

All rights reserved.

First published: October 31, 2022

No part of this publication may be reproduced, scanned, transmitted or distributed in any printed or electronic form, or stored in a database or retrieval system for any commercial or non-commercial use, without the author's written permission.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and plot are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, or any places, business establishments, events or occurrences, are purely coincidental.

5841022102606849

Cover design by Covers by Combs.

Also by Krista Street

PARANORMAL ROMANCE NOVELS

Supernatural Curse

Wolf of Fire
Bound of Blood
Cursed of Moon
Forged of Bone

Supernatural Institute

Fated by Starlight
Born by Moonlight
Hunted by Firelight
Kissed by Shadowlight

Supernatural Community

Magic in Light
Power in Darkness
Dragons in Fire
Angel in Embers

Supernatural Standalone Novels

Beast of Shadows

YA NOVELS

The Lost Children Series

Awakened
Forgotten
Remembered
Reborn
Retribution
Creation
Illumination

The Makanza Series

The Second Wave
Compound 26

Reservation 1
Section 12
Division 5

Links to all of Krista's books can be found on her website:
kristastreet.com

Table of Contents

[Also by Krista Street](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Krista Street's Supernatural World](#)

[Also by Krista Street](#)

[Thank you](#)

Preface

Forged of Bone is a paranormal shifter romance and is the final book in the four-book *Supernatural Curse* series. The recommended reading age is 18+.

Chapter 1

Cool autumn wind swirled around me, Tessa, and Kaillen as I gaped at my sister outside of the Supernatural Forces' office in Chicago. Crisp leaves fluttered around our ankles as we stood on the sidewalk. I inhaled the evening air sharply, still reeling from the news that Tessa had just shared about somebody coming through the portal from that new realm—a world we hadn't even known existed a few days ago, a world that I'd inadvertently created a portal to when Jakub had used me as the key.

"They may be here for me," I emphasized as my twin sister wrung her hands. "It could be why they've come through that void."

Kaillen growled and took a step closer to my side. "They can't have you," he said in a deadly quiet voice, repeating the words he'd said only moments ago, but then his head jerked to the side, and a low snarl erupted from his throat before he took a step back.

My heart squeezed. The expression on his face held a look that I was coming to learn meant he was battling his wolf, because in his wolf's confused mind, his mate had died, even though I stood right in front of him.

My breath caught when I remembered the moment those foreign octopus arms had reached through the portal and obliterated the wolf inside me, but just as quickly as those memories surfaced, I banished them. Now was not the time to think about the destroyed mate bond between Kaillen and me.

My twin sister pulled her bottom lip into her mouth as her long blond hair fluttered in the wind. Reaching out, she clasped my hand. "Kaillen's right. Whoever's come through that portal, they *can't* have you." A look of defiance shone in her sapphire-blue eyes, all flirtatious joking and coy smiles gone. She looked as fierce as I felt.

I gave her hand a grateful squeeze. "Maybe they're not here for me and actually want Jakub."

Kaillen's nostrils flared. "Doubtful."

I shrugged. "It's possible. Jakub did say he'd be rewarded."

Tessa let out a nervous, tinkling laugh as the hunter's eyes narrowed, but it was true. Jakub—that fucker—had been telling Commander Klebus that he would be rewarded for using me as the key to open the portal to that new world. But since that cryptic declaration, Jakub had stopped talking and now appeared to simply be waiting. But waiting for what? None of us had known before, but perhaps . . .

“I hope you're right.” Kaillen tore a hand through his hair. “But I imagine it's wishful thinking.” Crimson fire flashed in his eyes. He still stood a few feet away, his body rigid as tension coiled through his pumping fists. “Even if they are here for Jakub, I imagine he's not the only one they want. They tasted your power when they killed your wolf. Klebus told me so.”

I gave him a fleeting smile. “A girl can hope, though, eh?”

His lips twitched for the merest second when I impersonated his Canadian accent, and for the briefest moment, my chest lightened. Despite all the shit we'd been through, at least we could still make light of anything.

But whereas only a few days ago, when I would have slipped my arm around his waist and molded my body to his, I now kept my distance as I watched for his wolf's reaction. That golden glow that I'd grown so used to seeing in Kaillen's eyes every time his wolf pushed through was long gone. But dammit. I wasn't giving up on us, and Kaillen said he wasn't either.

Determination burned through me. Just because opening that turquoise portal had killed my wolf and had made Kaillen's wolf think his mate had died didn't mean his wolf was right. *I* was still here, and *I* was still his mate even though I looked a bit different now with my weird-as-shit neck tattoo and stars exploding in my eyes. But hey, minor details. I was still me, which meant that I needed to remind his wolf I was still here.

However, now wasn't the time to think about that either.

Squaring my shoulders, I said, “Whatever the case, we need to know who's come through that portal and what they want.”

Tessa's forehead crinkled in worry. “I hope they're not the Bone Eaters that Mom warned us about.”

Kaillen opened the SF's front door. “How about we find out?” He gestured for Tessa and me to go first.

My sister and I stepped through the illusion spell that concealed the Supernatural Forces' office. When I passed Kaillen, a sharp inhale lifted his chest, and a look of intense longing washed over his face.

A hopeful smile curved my lips, but in my next breath his chin jerked, and a deadly growl rumbled in his throat.

I winced. “Your wolf again?”

Kaillen released the door and stepped into the office behind me. He scowled. “You have no idea.”

And sadly, I didn’t. I’d never lost a mate before.

In fact, up until a few days ago, I hadn’t even known how closely one’s inner wolf meshed with a werewolf’s very essence. No woman had, because until me, there’d never been a female werewolf who’d ever shifted. Normally, female werewolves only carried the gene. But now I couldn’t shift, and I wasn’t a werewolf. My wolf was dead.

Shelley, the SF secretary, was a whirlwind of movements when we approached her desk. Phones rang incessantly, and her hands flew over her desk when we stopped in front of her.

“Oh my, you’re back!” Shelley held two phones to her ears, one on each side. A myriad of calls continually rolled through, as though her phones were on steroids. “Hold, please,” she said into one of the phones before setting it down. She then picked up another and said in an unsteady tone, “Yes, that’s right, sir. Commander Klebus is requesting three full squads from Boise. She’s asking that portal keys be used to transport them here.” A moment passed, in which whoever she was talking to replied. “That’s right, sir. It’s an emergency.”

She hung up on that call, then went to the previous. My feet itched to move as we waited for her to help us, and it suddenly struck me that we didn’t need to wait. I’d been coming to the SF for three days now, spending eight to ten hours each day in their conference rooms as they grilled me, tested me, and tried to piece together all that had happened in Jakub’s warehouse.

“Let’s find Klebus.” I nodded toward the corner door. “Don’t worry about us, Shelley,” I called to the secretary.

Shelley gave a flustered wave, but then another shrill call rang, and from the sounds of it, it was a second inquiry from the Supernatural Forces headquarters in Boise.

Kaillen let out a low whistle. “If they’re calling headquarters for help, this can’t be good.”

“But surely they have it under control.” Tessa twisted her hands again, then squealed in relief when she saw Private Merrick down the hall. She

rushed toward him, leaving me and the hunter to walk side by side.

Kaillen moved silently, in step with me. Even though he weighed at least two-fifty and was built from solid muscle, he was a werewolf, which meant he was as silent as the wind. And only days ago, I'd been coming to learn how to move just as lethally.

That aching chasm of pain threatened to split my chest again.

"You okay?" he asked, his nostrils flaring.

I forced a smile. "Just peachy."

He eyed me and looked like he was about to say more, but then Commander Klebus's stern tone reached us. "Stay with your squads and follow my commands precisely."

We rounded the corner to see her issuing orders to the new Boise squads who'd arrived. Other Chicago SF members pushed past us in the hall, heading toward the underground garage that stored their battle gear.

"Holy shit." I stopped dead in my tracks when I beheld everyone's tense expressions and frantic movements. "This must be *really* bad."

Kaillen and I shared a concerned look, then we both picked up a jog. Tessa was still with Private Merrick, letting him comfort her even though I was fairly certain he would have gotten an earful if Klebus knew that was how he was spending his time.

But he was right to waylay my sister. Tessa barely held any magic. There was no way in hell I was letting her get anywhere near that portal. She was better off here, where she could be kept safe and guarded.

"Corporal Charlotte Morris, good to have you with us," Commander Klebus said briskly.

Kaillen and I reached the commander just as she began addressing an SF member I didn't recognize.

Corporal Morris stood tall and proud, her body strong and capable-looking. A bow and arrow was slung over her shoulder, and she wore a fierce expression.

"Yes, ma'am. Commander Fieldstone requested Squad Three be sent to assist you. What can we do to be of service?" the auburn-haired corporal replied.

"You've been briefed?"

"Yes, ma'am. A threat from a newly discovered realm has entered Earth, and the newcomer may have power we haven't battled before."

Klebus gave a curt nod. "Correct. If you would rally the squads that accompanied you, we'll all depart shortly using portal keys. The threat only just presented itself twenty minutes ago. It's contained at the moment but —" She stopped short when she spotted me and Kaillen. "Ms. Davenport, Mr. King, is everything all right?"

I scoffed. "Oh, yeah, everything's great. We just heard that someone's come through the portal in Jakub's warehouse, so ya know, life couldn't be better right now."

Her lips pursed. "You've been eavesdropping on our conversation?"

"No," I replied. "We heard about it a few minutes ago. That's why we came back inside looking for you."

She bristled. "Who told you?"

"Not important." Kaillen planted his hands on his hips. "But we'd like to know what's going on."

"What's going on," the vampire commander replied, "is that we have a very serious situation that we're about to confront. I need you two to stay away and stay safe. Mr. King, would you like to escort Tala back to your home? Or shall she join Tessa at Tessa's former safe house? Perhaps you could take the twin sisters there since you're quite adept at creating personal portals." Her sapphire eyes glittered as she beheld the hunter.

But before he could answer, I took a step closer to her. "We're not going anywhere. If you haven't noticed, we're not the running type, and considering whatever came through that portal could very well have come here for *me*, I think it's only fitting that you tell us what's happened."

She stilled after I said *come here for me*.

My eyebrows pinched together. "Has whoever's arrived told you what their intention is?"

"Not exactly."

"Then who is it? Or *what* is it?"

Her expression turned icy. "Disclosing that information wouldn't be following proper procedure. You're still civilians."

"Is that really what you consider us?" Kaillen drawled. "I believe both Tala and I have proven we're more capable than your average *civilians*."

Commander Klebus cocked an eyebrow. "Regardless, I'm not sure bringing you along is wise."

"Why not?" I challenged.

"Because our job is to protect you."

“We can protect ourselves.” I crossed my arms. “And what if they are here for me? What are you going to do if they refuse to leave without me?”

Kaillen stiffened, but I didn’t soften my words. I would never forget the way those octopus arms had clamped ahold of me during the battle in Jakub’s warehouse. Whoever that had been had sought me out, quite violently.

I stared at Commander Klebus imploringly. “If there’s anything I know about that new world, it’s that their supernaturals are powerful, but if they want me, they’re going to have to fight to get me, and quite frankly, I’d rather face them now, when they’re most likely not expecting resistance.”

Commander Klebus cocked her head as Corporal Morris’s lips curved up. The corporal assessed me head to toe. Given her build, I guessed she was a female werewolf, but considering I no longer had my wolf within me, I couldn’t detect her scent.

Damn. I missed the superior sense of smell that had come with my wolf. I’d initially found it so nauseating, but now I realized it’d given me an edge.

Ignoring the returning ache in my chest, I raised an eyebrow at Commander Klebus. “So, how many have come through the portal? Who will I be up against?”

She was silent for a moment, her gaze shrewd, then she breathed forcefully through her nose. “Only one . . . as of now.”

Relief hit me hard. *Only one?* I could handle one. Well, maybe. If the newcomer was who I’d been fighting during the battle with Jakub, then I would struggle. But without me there, that alien newcomer could take down dozens of SF members within seconds, which meant none of the squads Klebus had called in would stand a chance. *Shit.* I couldn’t risk that.

I loosened my arms. “Commander Klebus, you need me there. I can protect you and be an asset. Please. Let me join you.”

Her lips pressed tightly together, and I had a feeling she was struggling with following procedure versus listening to common sense.

I reached for her hand. “If whoever’s arrived holds power like me, you *need* me there.”

Another moment passed, and she finally exhaled. “All right, but you’re staying in the back.”

“No, I’ll be in the front,” I countered. “I’m the only one on Earth, that I’m aware of, who can wield power from that realm. If whoever’s come

through the portal wields that same power against the SF, you're all dead. I'm literally your best weapon. I can shield your squads."

Something flickered in the commander's eyes. Her lips pursed as her gaze slid over my face, taking in my star-flecked eyes, then drifting down to my neck where the tattoo encircled it. "Will you be able to sense if they begin using power like yours?"

I knew she was referring to my awakening magic, the one that had been born inside me very recently that could suck anyone's magic and life force from them. I could literally kill anyone in seconds with that power alone. "I'm fairly certain I'll be able to. If nothing else, I can tell you if you need to retreat."

The commander glanced between me and the hunter. "It's settled then. Tala will be in the front with me and Squad Three."

Kaillen growled. "I'll be in front too. I also have unique talents."

I snickered. Cause, yeah he did. Those black flames from hell could roast anyone, probably even some weirdo octopus supernatural from an unidentified universe.

Commander Klebus seemed to agree, because after a curt order to Corporal Morris, she nodded at both me and Kaillen. "Let's move."

Chapter 2

I retreated briefly to find Tessa in the hallway and quickly filled her in, trying not to act like it was a big deal that I was joining the squads, but fear still permeated my twin's expression.

"Oh gods, Tala," she exclaimed as she pulled me into a tight hug. "What if they take you? What if they're here for you and try to abduct you?"

"People do seem to have a thing about abducting me lately."

She swatted me. "How can you joke at a time like this? They could kill you!"

I hugged her one last time, then pried myself from her arms. "I don't think they want to kill me. If anything, I think they're curious about me, but I'm not going to run anymore, Tess. If they're here for me, I want to face them now and get this over with. I'm done hiding. Because whatever's in that new world, whether we like it or not, it's a part of us, and there's no running from that."

Her face crumpled when I said *us*, but she and I were identical twins. We had the same genetics. Even though I'd been born with extraordinary magic, and she'd barely been born with any, it didn't change our lineage. If I had ancestors from that world, Tessa did too, even if she couldn't wield their power.

"Please stay safe," she said desperately. "I couldn't bear to lose you."

"You won't." I gave her another quick hug, then handed her back to Private Merrick, who ushered her forward to guide her away.

"Look after her," I called to him.

Kaillen waited behind me as I waved goodbye to my sister, but the second she disappeared from view, we took off down the hall. Energy strummed from the large hunter as we hurried to catch up with Commander Klebus and Corporal Morris.

The hunter's dark hair shimmered in the overhead lights, and his forearm muscles pumped every time he clenched his fists.

Adrenaline pounded through me, too, and my heart was beating so fast. It felt as though I couldn't catch my breath as we hurried to the garage. Because what if Tess was right? What if the newcomer was here to abduct me? And what if it was the same one who had been reaching for me during the battle? That supernatural had been freakishly strong. It would take all of my strength to fight them off—if I could.

When we reached the garage where all of the SF squads waited, Kaillen grabbed my wrist and pulled me to a stop beside him.

"What?" I said breathlessly, my stomach flipping at the sensation of him touching me again.

Kaillen's nostrils flared as a squad member began handing out portal keys. "Do you really think you can fight them off if they try to take you?"

"It's like you can read minds."

He gave me a quizzical look.

"I was literally just thinking that."

But even though my tone was joking, the hunter released my wrist and crossed his arms, his muscles rippling with tension. "What's our plan if they engage?"

"Um . . . fight like hell?"

"This isn't a joke."

"I wasn't joking."

Scowling, he asked, "What if they take you?"

I bit my lip. "Can you still track me?"

His eyes shuttered. "No. Our blood link died when your wolf did. If they take you through that portal, and I follow, I'll have to rely on my hunting skills only, but I don't know what kind of magic is in their realm or if it would interfere."

"Right. That's . . . not promising." I tried to smile, but my heart was cracking open again at the realization that not only was my wolf dead and our mate connection broken, but the blood bond had also been severed. Funny to think that I'd been giving Kaillen a hard time about that bond not too long ago, because right now, his ability to track me through our shared blood would have come in handy.

Black flames leaped to life in Kaillen's eyes. "Dammit. I don't like this. I wish Barnabas and Fallon were here to cover us."

"Me too, but they're not, so we'll make do with what we've got. Just us, and them—" I waved at the four squads in front of us. "We don't have

the blood bond anymore, and it's possible your hunting skills won't work if they take me." A snarl curled his upper lip, so I quickly added, "But we're not exactly unarmed or unprepared. Even if they're unfriendly, we'll deal with whoever's here."

He took a step closer to me. Those black flames receded from his irises as his gaze drifted down, past my eyes, over my mouth, and to below my chin.

His finger drifted up to flutter softly against the skin on my neck, right where my new tattoo lay. It was a fleeting touch, reminiscent of how he'd touched me after the battle when my tattoo had first emerged.

A shiver danced down my spine, but then that tightness filled his shoulders, and that all-too-familiar look descended on his face of an oncoming war with his wolf.

He dropped his hand and took a step back, another irritated snarl working up his throat.

I gave him a sad smile as he growled low again, but that growl wasn't directed at me. Oh no. It was definitely for his wolf.

It was crazy to think that not even an hour ago, I'd been convinced any relationship with Kaillen and I was in the past, and it was possible that was still the case—given how his wolf was acting—but I knew now it wasn't a guaranteed break. Both of us were fighting to stay together.

Still . . . only sixty minutes ago I'd been finishing up with Klebus, had planned to head out with Tessa and hang with Prish—

I smacked a hand to my forehead. "Oh my gods, Prisha!" I whipped my phone out and hurriedly typed in a text.

So . . . crazy change of plan. I have to go to Philadelphia again so can't meet up. Tessa can fill you in. I'm so sorry! Love you. xo

"Ma'am? Sir?" An SF member tried to hand me a portal key, which Kaillen brushed off, telling them it wasn't necessary.

I stowed my phone back in my pocket and let out an aggrieved exhale. Seriously. I needed to put a stop to these life-altering moments in which I was constantly contacting my best friend to tell her that another doom-and-gloom event had come up.

"Everything okay?" Kaillen asked, eyeing my phone as he pulled out his yellow crystal.

I ran a shaky hand through my hair as he began to swirl his crystal in the air, yellow sparks emitting from it. “Prish and I were supposed to hang out tonight.”

“I figured as much,” he replied as his portal formed.

I didn’t wait to see if Prisha texted back. We’d already wasted enough time trying to convince Klebus to let us join them, but I seriously owed my best friend a hundred nights out for flaking on her again.

“Ready?” Commander Klebus called brusquely as all of the squads turned to face her. “I trust you’ve all read the briefing that has been sent to your tablets?”

A chorus of “yes, ma’am” rang out through the garage, and one by one, groups linked up, and portals opened.

I gave Kaillen one last look before he clenched his jaw, the muscle ticking in the corner of it as he grasped my hand.

“Back off,” he snarled under his breath, right after our hands connected.

“Me?” I asked, stepping away.

“No. My fucking wolf.” Kaillen’s hand tightened painfully around mine until he seemed to realize it and loosened his grip. “Sorry.”

“No worries. A little crushed bones is nothing.”

His lips twitched, and we jumped into his looming portal just as the other squad members disappeared around us.

Only seconds passed before we all landed just inside Jakub’s warehouse, near the cell that I’d woken up in several days ago after Jakub had abducted me from the fae lands using a portal key.

In the center of the domed chamber, that glimmering turquoise door waited, barely visible over the heads of the dozens of SF members standing in front of us.

Memories slammed into me the instant I caught sight of the portal door’s crest. Images of what had happened here all whirled together into an epic slideshow, moving faster and faster through my psyche until it was a swirling tornado of pain and regret.

Jakub’s twisted plan.

My abduction that had landed me in his cell.

The battle.

My journey to that foreign realm.

The death of my wolf.

Kaillen's and my broken mate bond.

The twelve supernaturals that I'd killed.

Despite willing myself to stay calm, my stomach tightened. It was here that my life had been irrevocably changed.

I drew in a shuddering breath, but the deluge of emotions continued to fire through my veins, making my nerves prickly and my heart pound. Magic surged to the surface of my skin, my otherworldly powers heightening and straining against my control, as though they knew that their world was close, and the call of that portal was as alluring to them as a siren's song.

My feet itched to move forward, to go to that newly discovered universe, but I kept myself frozen, willing myself to stay in control.

Kaillen cast a veiled glance my way. Power vibrated around him as his hands clenched into fists. I could only imagine what he was feeling or what his wolf was reliving too.

Swallowing down my nervous trepidation, I took a step forward. Kaillen strode with me, and we moved stiffly through the mass of SF members, pushing through their sea of bodies until we reached the front of the squads.

Commander Klebus kept pace beside us. Her lips had thinned into a slash of a line, and her sharp gaze swept through the circular room, but while the atmosphere was tense, danger didn't feel imminent. Perhaps whoever had come from the new realm wasn't hostile.

A girl could hope.

When we reached the front of the four squads, we met the dozen SF members who had been stationed around the portal.

All twelve of them stood with their particle guns raised and reminded me of spokes on a wagon wheel. Each gun was pointed inward, and they stood in a perfect circle around the portal, but no one was firing, although their fingers were poised over the triggers, just waiting to strike.

But they were all so tall that it wasn't until I peered between two of them that I saw the person standing in the center of the room.

A single supernatural confronted the whole of the SF, positioned just outside of the wavering portal door. He wore an irritated expression, and his build rivaled a human's. Not overly surprising since I looked human too and had come from his world, but I hadn't been sure what to expect.

I assessed his black cape that was clipped around his throat and hung to mid-thigh, and underneath that, his shirt appeared crafted of the finest blend of wool, making me wonder if they had that fabric in his realm. His pants shone with a gem-like texture that sparkled subtly in the light, and his footwear was just as supple. Tall, sturdy boots that rose to his knees looked to be crafted of the smoothest leather.

The newcomer looked like a man who was used to the finer side of life, but his broad shoulders and thickly muscled legs told me he was anything but coddled. If anything, his build was similar to Kaillen's.

But even though he looked human, all it took was a glance at him to know that he *wasn't* mortal, although it was subtle, making me think that an everyday person wouldn't have detected it. But to me, it was as apparent as the feel of my magic humming just under my skin. An aura surrounded this man that screamed *other*.

I pushed completely through the SF members until I stood in front of them, and the second I appeared in the newcomer's line of sight, his gaze shot to mine.

My breath sucked in when I beheld the plethora of exploding stars in his eyes. Like me, his irises shimmered with flickering light that was as beautiful as a swirling galaxy.

His attention drifted to the tattoo encircling my neck, and his eyes widened briefly before his lips curved in a smile. My gaze dropped to his neck as well.

He had a tattoo just like mine.

Before anyone could say anything, the man's hand shot into his pant pocket, creating a collective intake of breaths from the entirety of the Supernatural Forces, but before anyone got trigger-happy, the man's hand withdrew, and he raised a scroll to me.

His sensuous lips curved as he said in a sultry tone, "Your Highness."

His deep words hit me like a punch to the gut as two things registered within me simultaneously. He'd just spoken English, and he was talking to *me*. Apparently, I was the receiver of that exalted title.

But instead of accepting the scroll, I stood frozen. The room grew completely silent, and blood thundered through my ears.

"Who are you?" I finally said, breaking the quiet.

"My name is Malikhi." A slight smirk lifted his lips before he added, "I'm pleased you've come to me so readily. I didn't know how extensive

my journey would be if I wasn't able to find you immediately, and these"—he briefly eyed the original twelve supernaturals circling the portal, his smirk turning into a mocking smile—"individuals asked me to wait, but I could only wait so long."

I didn't know what conversation he'd had with the SF members guarding the portal, but they'd obviously managed to convince Malikhi not to venture outside of these walls. But Malikhi had only come through the portal in the last thirty minutes. A half hour wasn't a terribly long time to wait, but what if Klebus hadn't let me come? Then what would Malikhi have done?

The acid in my stomach churned as a sense of foreboding filled me. Kaillen shifted at my side, a low growl rumbling in his chest. I eyed the hunter, but all of his focus was still directed at the newcomer.

Eyeing Malikhi warily, I debated if I should let my awakening power out, but I had to know. I *had to know* if he was the one who'd killed my wolf.

Anger began to simmer in me at just the thought. I took a deep breath and let a subtle stream of my power out to cloud around Malikhi.

But instead of feeling him out covertly, the second my magic made contact with his aura, Malikhi's lips lifted in a genuine smile. In the next instant, his own magic reached out, stroking mine.

My breath sucked in, and I whipped my magic back inside my body so fast my head was spinning. Horror filled me at how intimate that had just felt, but I also knew from that subtle feel it wasn't Malikhi who had killed my wolf. His power felt different, *less* somehow than the one who I'd faced during the battle, but that didn't mean he was weak. Oh no. In the mere second I'd felt his magic, I'd glimpsed the depth of it.

His power was just like mine.

Another knowing smirk tilted Malikhi's lips, and that was when it hit me. *Really* hit me. Malikhi was truly another supernatural like me, which meant he could wipe out every SF member in this room with a mental flick of his powers.

Holy shit.

Malikhi cocked his head. He still held the scroll, and he arched a midnight eyebrow, then held it out again. "I've come at the request of the queen. Please, take her offering."

Kaillen growled when Malikhi's hand drifted closer to me.

Malikhi flicked him a side-eye, obviously finding the hunter inconsequential from the fleeting glance he gave him. But Malikhi had no idea about the depth of power Kaillen held, and he was a fool to brush him off.

Kaillen was coiled so tightly that he reminded me of a cobra ready to strike. I placed a steadying hand on the hunter's forearm, then snatched the scroll from the newcomer's hand and put more distance between us.

"Thank you, Your Highness." Malikhi smirked again. "Now, if I may, will you please inform me who opened the portal?"

I stilled. "Why?"

"The queen would like to thank them and repay a debt long due."

My blood chilled. *Thank them? Repay a debt? Was this what Jakub had been waiting for?* I cleared my throat and said carefully, "Technically, I opened the portal."

There was no way in hell that Jakub-Dipshit was getting any credit for creating this turquoise door. That fucker would spend the rest of his life rotting in the supernatural prison if I had any say in it.

Malikhi cocked his head slightly. A flash of something drifted in front of his luminescent eyes before it vanished. "Of course." He bowed slightly. "We look forward to your arrival."

My eyebrows pinched together, but before I could ask what those cryptic words meant, Malikhi stepped backward into the portal and disappeared in a ring of light and billowing stars.

Chapter 3

“He knew that you were lying about opening the portal. I could scent it off him.” Kaillen paced at my side, then drew up short when a snarl ripped from his throat. “Not fucking now,” he said under his breath, then stalked farther away from me.

“Kaillen?” I called anxiously, but he shook his head and kept moving.

The rest of the SF was talking to one another, and snippets of their conversations floated toward me. Everyone was relieved that the encounter had ended peacefully, but it could have been so different. If I hadn’t come here, and Malikhi had been forced to search for me . . .

I knotted my hands. Just because tonight hadn’t resulted in bloodshed didn’t mean future encounters would end the same.

I glanced to Kaillen again, but he’d already retreated to the edge of the room and was currently muttering under his breath as he paced. That familiar ache bloomed in my chest again. A ball of nerves had worked its way into my stomach, and more than anything, I wanted to go to the hunter and be at his side while we dealt with our broken bond together, but fate was working against us as his wolf started another raging, confused battle within him.

Kaillen snarled intermittently to himself while also talking in low, heated tones. I had no idea what he was saying since my enhanced hearing had died with my wolf, but whatever he was muttering, it didn’t look good.

My shoulders fell more just as Commander Klebus reached my side. “Tala, what’s in that scroll?”

“The scroll?” I answered dumbly.

She gave it a pointed look.

Right. I’d nearly forgotten about the thin tube that I still held. I ran it between my fingers. It felt as if it were made of silky material, like paper but more durable, and similar to Malikhi’s pants, it held a sheen, as if whatever it was made of possessed the strength of diamonds and the beauty of the stars.

Commander Klebus's brow knitted, and she fixated on the scroll. "Do you sense anything from it?"

"No." I shook my head, forcing myself to concentrate. "But let me try something." I let a steady stream of my witch magic flow forth and channeled the psychic portion of my abilities, letting it settle over the scroll like a cloud of mist.

An image came to me immediately, barreling to the forefront of my thoughts with the intensity of a hurricane. It was of a woman sitting at a desk in a room made of stone. A beautiful gown of iridescent silk draped over her lithe figure. Like me, she had a tattooed ring of stars and constellations encircling her neck.

An excited flush filled her cheeks as she wrote across the papery material, her slim fingers moving with efficient purpose, but she wasn't holding a pen. Instead, her finger pads hovered over the scroll's surface, and words appeared beneath her fluttering movements, as though spelled from phantom ink.

When she finished writing, she flicked a hand, and the scroll rolled itself up until a seal pressed to its ridges. The seal held a symbol: a single eye in the middle of a constellation. With that, she turned in her seat, muttering something I couldn't decipher to a man standing behind her. With a start, I realized it was Malikhi. He bowed to her and took the scroll.

The vision vanished, and I gasped in surprise as I once again became firmly rooted in Jakub's warehouse.

"What did you see?" Commander Klebus asked, her eyes bright.

Kaillen stopped pacing by the wall, his attention shooting to me.

I kept my hands balled around the scroll. "This was written by a woman, someone important."

"How do you know?" Commander Klebus asked sharply.

"I saw it."

The tension strumming from Kaillen kicked up a notch, and I gave him another cursory glance.

Commander Klebus eyed the scroll skeptically. "Do you feel it's safe to open?"

"I think so. They don't mean us harm." I paused as some other portion of my psychic magic registered deep within me. *Yet*. That second thought came to me like a ghostly kiss. This new supernatural race didn't mean us harm at the moment, but a part of me also knew that . . .

I frowned and grasped for the knowledge that was just on the edge of my mind. But whatever my psychic magic had detected vanished. My heart picked up a staccato beat as that uneasy bit of knowledge wormed itself inside me, burrowing through any relief I'd felt.

Not knowing how to tell Klebus of the new realm's potential threat, without her freaking-the-fuck-out, I kept my lips pressed together and tried to pull that fluttery psychic feeling to me again. If I could better understand what the woman's intentions were, maybe I could figure out why I'd detected that strum of malicious energy.

But despite trying, I wasn't able to coax any more visions out again.

"Tala, do you want to open it?" Commander Klebus's impatience shot toward me, making me wonder how long I'd been standing there lost in my magic and thoughts.

"Oh, sure." I turned the scroll over. A wax seal stared up at me. It looked exactly as my psychic vision had shown: an eye in the middle of a constellation. And the crazy thing was that it felt as though the eye was *watching* me.

Not creepy at all.

Quickly breaking the seal, I crumpled the wax as magic from it tingled against my palm. Feeling even more creeped out, I squished the eye in on itself, just in case somebody *was* watching, then I hastily unrolled the scroll.

Dark ink in a beautiful script stared back at me. I gaped. "It's in English."

"Will you please read it aloud?" Commander Klebus folded her arms. I cleared my throat and read:

My sovereign sister,

It is with great joy that I've learned the knowledge of your existence and sound health. We are thrilled beyond measure to know that what we thought had been lost is in fact found.

Please join us at the Lunarian Palace within two weeks' time. We understand that arrangements may need to be made before you reside with us in the land from which your soul was born, so we graciously grant you this time to seal all matters that have yet to be closed.

Make haste, though. We grow impatient to make your acquaintance. If you need assistance traveling to our realm, Malikhi will assist you.

*With a loving embrace,
Queen Nameena*

“Whoa. What?” I scanned the letter again, reading it slower and to myself. “Travel to their realm? Queen Nameena?” That oily feeling I’d gotten after reading it the first time strengthened. Was that who the woman was that I saw in my vision? *The queen?* “Um, why does this letter feel like a barely veiled threat?” I asked after finishing it a third time.

“Because it is,” Kaillen snarled from across the room. “They’re demanding that you come to them, and if you don’t, they’ll send Malikhi back to assist you.” He glanced at the portal menacingly, as though he were about to leap through it and rain his black-flamed vengeance down on the whole of that universe.

A flutter of hope brushed through me. Kaillen’s reaction was one he would have had before everything had gone wrong for us.

But just as quickly as that anger stirred in the hunter’s frame, it vanished. He tore a hand through his hair again. Stalking back to the wall, he began muttering once more under his breath and in general looked like a crazy person as he carried on a conversation with his confused wolf.

Yep. Mr. Wolf was once again reminding the hunter that his mate was dead, and who the hell cared if an unknown queen wanted me to join them at their summer home. Granted, Kaillen looked like a hot-as-fuck crazy person, but still a crazy one nonetheless.

My heart squeezed when the reality of my existence hit me painfully once more. For the past three days, I’d been alone with the knowledge that Kaillen was no longer my mate, and watching him at this very moment made that glaringly obvious. His wolf wouldn’t even allow him to feel rage over Queen Nameena’s manipulations.

Damn Jakub. If not for that fucker and those octopus arms that had reached through the portal to murder my wolf, the man who was supposed to be destined for me wouldn’t be pacing on the side of the room like a lunatic. Oh, and some royal bitch from another universe wouldn’t be demanding that I leave Earth and join her at a palace.

My fingers curled into my palms and dug into my skin. Whoever had reached through that portal, grabbed me, and killed my wolf had apparently told this foreign queen what I was. And now, she was not so subtly inviting me to dinner.

“Fuck them.” I snapped the scroll closed. On its own, it whirled into a tight roll as quickly as a winding spool, which made me realize it was spelled.

“Excuse me?” Klebus raised her eyebrows.

“Fuck them!” I said louder. “Whoever these bastards are, they’re the reason that my wolf is dead and our bond—”

Commander Klebus placed a hand on my forearm. “I know, Tala. None of this is right or fair, but it’s happened, so we have to deal with it.” She stepped back, breaking our contact. “We need to return to the SF, and that”—she gave a pointed look to the scroll—“needs to be handed over to be studied.”

I somehow managed to take a deep breath and cool my lid that wanted to blow. Following that, I handed the scroll over to her. “Fine by me. I don’t want it anyway.”

“Even so, I’m afraid they want you, so we’ll need to discuss further how to handle this very delicate situation.”

“Delicate?”

“This appears to have turned into a political ordeal.”

“Seriously?” Gritting my teeth, I wanted to argue with her but then realized she was right. “Okay, fine. It does seem a bit political. But maybe it won’t end up that way. Maybe if I go to their palace, they’ll be appeased and will then leave us alone.”

“And what if they’re not appeased? What if they don’t let you leave?” Kaillen shouldered his way through the crowd. When he reached me, veins strained in his neck, and the energy emanating from him told me he was fighting his wolf . . . again, but he still added, “They *can’t* have you.”

I gazed up at him imploringly. “But if I don’t go, what if they come back and obliterate the SF members guarding this portal? Or worse, kill even more people beyond these walls as they’re searching for me?”

“Give us a bit more credit.” Corporal Morris quirked an eyebrow at me, and even though I could tell she was strong and capable, she had no idea about the kind of power that came from that realm.

“I’m not saying you’re not all trained fighters who can handle your own,” I replied, “but you don’t know what you’re up against.”

She shrugged. “Then show me.”

Commander Klebus cast the young corporal an aggrieved stare, and even though I knew they’d all been briefed about this realm and what it could possibly hold, none of them had ever *felt* power like mine.

I gave the commander a shrug. “Maybe I should. So they know what they’d be battling.”

The vamp commander sighed. “Fine. One demonstration.”

Corporal Morris’s curious expression grew, so I let a stream of my power out.

It flowed from me so easily now, no longer in that dark cavern or hidden within me. The second my awakening essence hit Corporal Morris, her eyes bugged out. I drew out her werewolf strength, only a little bit of it, and she gazed at her chest, then began clawing at herself as my magic siphoned hers away.

“That’s enough, Tala,” Commander Klebus said.

I reversed course and gave the young corporal’s werewolf mojo and life force back to her, and her ashen expression slowly regained color. Her wild eyes met mine. “You were . . . *draining* me.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

The remaining SF members encircling her all gave one another uneasy glances. Granted, I didn’t know Corporal Morris at all, but something told me she wasn’t one to be dramatic.

“That’s what could have happened to all of you if I hadn’t been here,” I said, my voice echoing through the silent room. “Except it would have been more violent and would have resulted in a lot of you being dead.”

Corporal Morris nodded. “She’s right. If Malikhi can do what she just did, we could have all died.”

“So you’re going to sacrifice yourself to not risk anyone’s death?” Kaillen growled.

I looked up at the hunter, at the man who could bring me to my knees with only a look. His amber eyes blazed with fire despite the constant war he was waging with his wolf. “I don’t want to sacrifice myself. The last thing I want to do is go to the Lunarian Palace, but if they’re going to come for me if I don’t go, then there’s only one way out of that.”

His eyes narrowed. “Which is what?”

I pointed toward the turquoise portal. “We figure out how to close that. If the portal disappears, the link between our universes vanishes, and then they won’t be able to reach me.”

Commander Klebus nodded. “She’s right, but all efforts to disable the portal so far have proved fruitless.”

My lips thinned. “Maybe it’s not possible to close this portal now that it’s open, but if it is, I have a feeling there’s one person who’ll know how to do it.”

Chapter 4

“Jakub?” Kaillen snarled.

I nodded. “The one and only.”

Commander Klebus bristled. “Jakub is currently behind bars, which is where he needs to stay.”

“Unless Queen Nameena frees him as a thank you for opening the portal,” I countered. “You heard Malikhi. They want to repay a debt long due, whatever the hell that means.”

Commander Klebus gave me a skeptical glance. “They’ll never find him.”

“Are you sure about that?” I crossed my arms. “How many lives are you willing to risk to ensure they don’t discover his location?”

Her jaw tightened. “I don’t plan to risk any lives.”

“And hopefully you won’t have to,” I replied, “because if Jakub knew how to open this portal, then maybe he’ll know how to close it too.”

The commander tapped a foot. “He’s stopped talking, though. We’ve asked him repeatedly how to close the portal, so if he knows, he won’t tell us.”

“Even with vamp compulsion?” Kaillen asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “That kind of interrogation is illegal.”

He shrugged. “But it would be highly effective.”

“Possibly, but unless the courts granted us permission,” Klebus replied, “I’m unable to do so.”

Kaillen scoffed. “A portal opened to another world isn’t a good enough reason for vampire compulsion?”

Commander Klebus started to roll her eyes but then stopped herself. “I’m as frustrated as you, Mr. King, but the law is the law. Obtaining permission from the courts to conduct a vampire compelled interrogation takes time. I’ve applied for it, but I don’t know how long it will be before it’s approved.”

“And time is what we don’t have.” I worked my jaw. “Maybe Kaillen and I could pay him a visit? Maybe Jakub would talk to us.”

Kaillen grinned. “Now, there’s an idea I like.”

My lips curved, and my pulse thrummed like a butterfly in my wrist. Because when Kaillen looked at me like that, I wanted to sink into him. Melt myself to him until we were. . .

Kaillen’s breath sucked in, and he took a huge step back.

My cheeks heated. Arousal coursed through my veins like hot lightning. I was probably giving off the muskiest scent of lust and unquenched desire a girl could have, all while we were fantasizing about compelling Jakub. *Seriously, girl, get a grip.*

When I eyed the hunter apologetically, Kaillen shook his head, that frown pulling his eyebrows together again even though he inhaled deeply over and over.

My fingers itched to touch him, and despite his wolf’s aversion to me, it seemed Kaillen was intent on soaking up the lust that flowed through me as hotly as lava. His nostrils flared again, but then his head cocked, and he took another step back.

He muttered something under his breath and ran a hand through his hair. Throughout it all, the SF members surrounding us all gave one another confused glances, no doubt wondering what the hell was going on with Kaillen.

Commander Klebus cleared her throat after Kaillen and I were standing at least ten feet apart. “I do hear what you’re saying about interrogating Jakub further, and while I agree that questioning Jakub again is in order, I’m afraid neither of you will be paying him a visit. Jakub is currently in the maximum security portion of the supernatural prison. Civilians aren’t allowed to visit that wing.” She placed her hands on her hips, looking coolly authoritative. “And as I said earlier, this has turned into a delicate situation. We have many things to consider moving forward.”

“And I’m at the center of it all, yet once again I’m being pushed out.” I sighed and scrubbed a hand over my face. It was getting late. I’d already had a hell of a day, and now I had a two-week deadline before Queen Bitch came looking for me. And, of course, my best option at avoiding all of that was to interrogate Jakub into revealing how the portal could be closed. Yet, once again, I’d run into red tape regarding the SF’s rules.

“Let’s head back to Chicago.” Commander Klebus began issuing orders to the squads after a fresh group of SF members relieved the dozen that had been stationed around the portal.

Corporal Morris gave me an intrigued glance as she joined Squad Three, and they began linking up to return to the SF’s office. I felt a little bad about sucking her power from her, but I figured it was for the best. The more they all realized what we were up against, the better.

“Mr. King, do you intend to escort Tala home?” Commander Klebus asked him.

Kaillen gave a curt nod and withdrew his yellow crystal.

“Will you at least keep me informed about what’s going on?” I asked the vamp.

She gave me an exasperated look. “You know the rules. Unless you’re an SF member with clearance—”

I stopped her with a raised hand. “Yes, I remember.”

She inclined her head and bustled to the remaining Supernatural Forces members as Kaillen’s portal began to form. Huffing, I waited until the hunter had his glowing yellow circle ready before looking at him warily. “Is he gonna bite me if we hold hands during the transfer?”

Kaillen smirked. “Maybe, but last I remember, you don’t mind being bit.”

My lips parted, then I laughed. “Did you just make a sex joke?”

“I did.”

“And he’s not growling at you?”

“Oh no, he’s definitely growling at me, but right now, I’m in control. Not him.”

Steel determination made his eyes glow with a fierceness that caught my breath. And that grim stubbornness grew in me again that despite what was stacked against us, neither Kaillen nor I were giving up on our chance at happiness.

For the second time, I marveled that Kaillen actually wanted me. He was currently *fighting* his wolf so he could be with me even though it was probably shredding his instinct into ribbons.

“Thank you,” I said simply as he reached for my hand.

He cocked his head. “For what?”

“For not giving up on me.”

Kaillen's jaw clenched as flames stoked in his eyes. "I'll never give up on you."

∞ ∞ ∞

We emerged from his portal right outside of my apartment. Kaillen checked the hallway to ensure none of my neighbors were in the stairwell before dispersing the illusion spell that had concealed our arrival.

A tingling sensation washed over my skin as the newly installed wards surrounding my and Tessa's home pulsed with magic. I gazed up at the hunter. "Do you, uh, wanna come in?"

Even though it was getting late, and I was beat, the last thing I wanted to do was go to sleep. Now more than ever, I felt that my time with Kaillen was precious, so I wanted to soak up every second of it while I still had the chance.

Kaillen's lips thinned, and he glanced sideways before muttering, "Yeah, I do."

My heart soared even though the hunter's jaw was ticking.

I hastily pulled my key out and deactivated the wards. Once the hunter and I stepped over the threshold to my apartment, I locked the door behind us, then checked my phone to see text messages from Prisha and Tessa. Both were anxious to know where I was and if I was okay.

I replied to each of them, telling them I was home safely. Following that, I put my phone down and gazed at Kaillen, who'd moved across the room.

The hunter was currently standing in front of the aquarium, studying Tessa's and my fantail goldfish swimming lazily around. Both Agent Orange and DJ Finster meandered by the glass, their mouths opening and closing as they swam in slow circles.

"How's your wolf right now?" I asked, wanting more than anything to glide to his side but not knowing if I should. Maybe Kaillen had positioned himself so far away for a reason.

"If I look at the fish and not at you, he's . . . tolerable."

Tolerable. Okay . . . While that wasn't what any girl dreamed of her boyfriend saying, I supposed it was a step in the right direction.

"Is he still mourning for my wolf? Right now?" I twisted my hands.

"Every second of every day."

"What does it feel like?"

“He howls constantly, and there’s this—” He lifted a fist to his chest and placed it over his heart. “It feels like there’s a hole inside me. That a part of my heart has been ripped away.”

My lips parted as my pulse beat steadily faster. “Your heart or your wolf’s heart?”

He shook his head. “I think it’s his heart, but I’m not sure.”

Tears pricked my eyes at that quiet statement. Because while I hated that Kaillen’s wolf had become so enamored with my wolf that he’d stopped seeing *me* as Kaillen’s mate, at the same time, I totally understood it. My wolf had loved Kaillen’s wolf just as fiercely. And I’d just started to feel the same about her. Even though I’d initially hated that she’d been born inside me, I’d quickly grown to see that we could exist as one, and after she and I had become in sync, I’d finally grasped just how special of a relationship it was. Not only had she enhanced my senses and lent me her strength when I’d needed it, she’d also kept me warm, helped me heal, and provided me company. In the short span I’d had her inside me, I’d never felt alone.

And now . . . now there was an aching chasm that had been ripped into me. As though I’d been wrenched in two.

“Do you miss her?” Kaillen asked, still watching the fish.

I snapped myself out of my reverie. “Yeah, I do. I wish she was still with me.”

His head whipped toward mine. “You do? But when she was first born in you—”

“I know.” I raised a hand, because I hated remembering how I’d initially felt about her. “But that was only at the beginning. Just before she died, things had begun to change between us. I was only starting to realize how much I valued her when she was taken from me.”

A deep-seated golden glow filled his eyes. But instead of that look giving me hope, I knew it was only because of what I’d said, and his wolf was feeling my wolf’s loss as keenly as I was.

Sadness grew in Kaillen’s eyes. The anguish in them pulled me into their bottomless depths, making me want to drown in those amber irises. “I’m sorry about what happened,” he finally said.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I’m still sorry.” He prowled cautiously toward me.

When he stood only a few feet away, that desperate longing pulled at his features again, as though he wanted to jerk me toward him but didn't know if he could.

He inched closer, carefully, until we stood toe to toe. I had to crane my neck up to look him in the eye.

A heated flare shimmered in his irises. It was exactly how he'd looked at me when we'd been outside of the SF's office right after he'd come through his portal and told me that he wasn't giving me up.

My insides fluttered, and my skin prickled. We stood like that, staring at one another, as though each of us was too scared to make the first move. That by even trying to force this, we were tempting fate, and nothing good ever came from playing with destiny.

But *fuck* all of that.

I'd meant it when I'd told him that I could be stubborn too. If he was willing to fight for me, then I was willing to fight for him too.

I fisted my hand in his shirt before I could second guess myself.

A low growl came from him just as I inched up on my tiptoes. Fire erupted in his eyes, and I didn't know how to interpret that, so I slammed my mouth against his before his wolf could rip Kaillen away.

Warmth from the hunter's chest burned into me, and the feel of his hard abs and slabbed pecs felt like coming home.

"Tala," he growled just before his mouth parted my lips.

I moaned as I reveled in the taste of him. My tongue swept into his mouth, and his hands curled around my waist, holding me possessively to him as his firm lips molded to mine.

"Tala," he breathed again as an intense groan of longing rumbled in his chest.

Heat flared in my core, and I pulled him closer, rubbing myself against him harder, anything to claim him as mine again as my body ached to join with his.

His taste and scent flooded my senses. A hint of whiskey. The fragrance of citrus and cedar.

I slid my fingers through his hair, threading them through the thick, silky strands at the nape of his neck as my boobs crushed against his chest.

The rumble in his throat increased, turning deeper just as his grip slackened on my hips. I was about to jump up and wrap my legs around his waist, but then he wrenched himself away.

“Fuck!” he roared, breaking our kiss.

In less than a blink, he was on the other side of the room. Cold air swirled around me from his abrupt departure, and I swayed, nearly losing my balance at how quickly he’d moved from our embrace.

“Kaillen?” I called in an anguished whisper as I placed a steadying hand on the table near the front door.

But he didn’t look at me. He stayed on the opposite side of the room as his chest heaved, and the muscles in his forearms rippled every time he pumped his fists. He propped one of his arms against the wall and sagged into it as his shuddering pants filled the room.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Did I push too far?”

His gaze cut to mine as a smoldering inferno erupted in his irises. “I almost lost control.”

I wrung my hands. “Lost control in a good way?”

“No.” He didn’t elaborate, even when the silence between us grew.

“Then almost lost control how?”

“He—” Kaillen swallowed thickly and raked a hand through his hair. “My wolf recognized your scent, and I thought that maybe, just maybe, if I flooded him with it for long enough that he’d remember who you are, but it had the opposite effect.”

My stomach sank. “Meaning?”

“He wanted to attack.”

I gaped. “He wanted *you* to attack *me*?”

Kaillen eyed me for a second longer, then gave a curt nod. The muscle in the corner of his jaw clenched so tightly I thought it would cut through the skin. “Male wolves are monogamous as fuck.”

“You don’t say,” I finally breathed. “Shit.” I cursed again, then again, because it was either cuss this situation out or begin crying. That lump formed in my throat once more, but I quickly swallowed it down and blinked back the moisture that wanted to coat my eyes.

How? How could we possibly overcome this? His wolf seemed intent on the hunter staying single.

But just as that debilitating thought tried to take root in my consciousness, I shoved it away. *No.* We would figure this out.

I took a deep breath and straightened my shirt. “Well, I guess since a makeout session isn’t in the cards tonight, should we try and sort out how the hell we close that portal?”

The hunter gave me a defeated smile, then nodded and sat in the chair near the fish tank.

Being mindful of his wolf, I inched carefully around the furniture until I was seated on the couch. While I hoped that Kaillen maintained enough control over his wolf that he wouldn't actually attack me, I didn't feel like pushing him enough to find out.

Scooting to the far side of the sofa, I was certain that at least a dozen feet separated us in this position. "Is this okay?" I asked.

"No."

I bolted upright. "Do you want me to move farther away? Should I sit in the kitchen?"

He grumbled. "I'd rather you sat on my lap."

My lips parted, and a flush of relief ran through me before I let out a soft laugh. "You do?"

"Yes. I mean, no." He stabbed a hand through his hair. "I guess what I mean is . . . *fuck*." He scrubbed his face. When his hands finally fell, he forced a smile. "I know that I want you on my lap, but you're right. I can't stop this deep-seated instinct that's telling me you should stay on the opposite side of the room." He gave me an anguished look, as though he expected me to hate him for that.

"It's okay. Really, it is. One day at a time, right?"

He smiled humorlessly. "Right."

"So, I'll stay over here"—I patted the couch—"and you'll stay there." I waved at his chair but didn't mention the fact that sleeping together wouldn't be a possibility anymore if we couldn't even sit beside one another on a sofa. Well, maybe if we had bunk beds, it would work, but slumbering side by side? Yeah, that wasn't happening anytime soon.

Not wanting to dwell on that, I forced myself to straighten and switched subjects. "So, about that portal . . ."

Kaillen sighed. "Right. The portal."

I settled more against the sofa and forced my thoughts to realign. "Jakub's the key to finding answers. He's got to be. He's the one who discovered a way to open that door, so maybe he knows how to close it, which means that we have to find a way to talk to him. I don't think Klebus or anyone else in the SF is going to be able to get more information out of him, but perhaps we'll be able to."

The hunter settled back in his seat, and slowly some of the tension bunching his shoulders eased. “Even if we do find a way to meet with him, something tells me Jakub won’t talk readily. One of the first things Malikhi wanted to know was who had opened the portal, and Jakub seems so convinced that he’ll be rewarded for what he’s done. He’ll fight that portal being closed.”

“Okay, so how do we get him to talk?”

“I think the more important question is, how do we get into the supernatural prison? Once there, I have a few tricks I can try.”

My eyes widened. “Like . . . torture?”

Kaillen chuckled. “What a dark mind you have.”

I snorted and couldn’t help my smile. “If it’s not torture, then what are your tricks?”

“I never said I was above torture.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“But if you insist on knowing my plans, there’s a spell that I’ve perfected that makes people very willing to spill their secrets.”

“Like vampire compulsion?”

“It’s similar.”

My jaw dropped. Resisting a vamp’s compulsion was difficult at best, and unless a supernatural was strong enough to shield from it, it was near impossible. “Why haven’t I seen you use it before?”

Kaillen stroked his chin. “It’s a bit illegal, and it’s also quite draining.”

I snorted. “You, doing something illegal? How shocking.”

“The nine-to-five lady doesn’t seem nearly as bothered by that as she used to.”

“Are we talking about ourselves in the third person now?”

A genuine smile lifted the hunter’s lips. “No, should we start?”

I laughed. “Please don’t.”

His smile spread as a twinkle grew in his eye.

Even more tension seemed to melt away from him, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the key to making our “relationship” work was not to treat it like a relationship at all. Perhaps if we kept our focus on our usual banter, solving our portal problem, and the minor inconvenience that an unknown queen had demanded that I take up residence in her palace, perhaps then Kaillen’s wolf would eventually come to accept me.

One day at a time.

But the only thing was, we only had fourteen days now until all hell broke loose, which put a bit of a time crunch on our mating bond issue.

But I simply straightened my spine. *Minor details.*

“So how are we gonna get into the supernatural prison?” I tucked my legs beneath me as I settled in for a brainstorming session just as Tessa’s key sounded in the front door’s lock.

“Simple,” Kaillen replied as Tessa swung the door open and burst into our apartment with Prisha at her heels. “We join the SF.”

Chapter 5

“Come again?” I replied just as Tessa hurried to where I sat on the couch and threw her arms around me. I was momentarily waylaid when I got a mouthful of my sister’s hair, but then I remembered that the last she and Prisha had heard was that I was venturing back to Jakub’s warehouse to confront whoever had come through the portal.

Tess and Prisha literally knew nothing about what had happened, other than that I’d survived.

Prish wrapped her arms around me too, until I was sandwiched between them.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Prisha added after she’d nearly chokehold me in her hug.

I groaned under her tight squeeze. “Don’t be. Kaillen just had the brilliant idea of us joining the Supernatural Forces.”

My sister blinked, her wide sapphire eyes first assessing me and then the hunter. “Why would you do that?”

“So we can interrogate Jakub at the supernatural prison.” Kaillen leaned back in his chair, his legs sprawled in front of him. I soaked up his appearance greedily, drinking him in since for the first time tonight, he truly appeared relaxed and at ease.

In his current position, his stomach was flat, his pecs clearly defined, and his heavily muscled thighs were spread in that typical man sprawl that gave his junk room.

Damn, just *damn*. The man was literal perfection, and I wanted to climb all over him.

A small smile tilted his lips, and his nostrils flared. But I didn’t even care when that cocky expression emerged, because when he looked like that

Kaillen’s smile abruptly vanished, and his jaw clenched. He straightened in his seat and growled something under his breath.

My arousal withered. *Right*. His damned wolf was still awake.

When Prisha gave me a confused side-eye, I somehow managed a placating smile, but *gods*, things had finally started to feel normal between Kaillen and me, and then I had to go and ruin it by enjoying the eye candy.

“Everything okay?” Prisha asked.

“No,” I replied with a sigh.

She glanced at Kaillen—who once again looked like a lunatic as he snarled at his wolf.

“What the hell’s going on?” she hissed under her breath. “Last I heard, we were supposed to meet up tonight so we could binge on Mexican food and ice cream and watch reruns of *Emily in Paris* as we lamented the male race, and then I heard that Kaillen and you were on your way to Jakub’s warehouse to confront someone who’d come through the portal. Care to fill a sister in?”

Prisha tucked a strand of midnight hair behind her ear as the soft lamplight glowed on her brown skin while she waited for all of the details.

“Kaillen and I aren’t back together in the normal sense,” I said quietly. I nodded toward the pacing hunter. “His wolf won’t allow it, but he wants to try to make things work, and so do I.”

Unlike Prish, Tessa’s attention stayed on the hunter. I couldn’t blame my twin for not listening. Kaillen was pacing by the wall as tension rippled from him so heavily that I feared Agent Orange and DJ Finster were about to experience an underwater sonic boom if his magic unleashed.

“And how did this change of heart happen?” Prisha asked.

I explained it to her as quickly as I could in a hushed tone, hoping that Kaillen wouldn’t hear that we were talking about him. Normally, he totally would have, but considering he looked like a deranged weirdo talking to himself again . . . well, something told me he was a bit distracted.

When I finished summing everything up, Prisha’s eyes bugged out. “So he wanted to win you back before all that crap happened with the portal?”

I nodded. “But I’m not sure how much time we can devote to that. As you can see, his wolf is still firmly rejecting me, and now Queen Nameena is demanding that I go to the Lunarian Palace in two weeks, and if I don’t show up there, she’s gonna send Malikhi to retrieve me.”

Prisha bristled. “Malikhi? Who the hell is he?”

An image of the hot-as-sin, raven-haired man kissed the periphery of my thoughts. “The dude who came through the portal.” I explained that too

until Prisha was well and truly up to date on all the things.

“You’re joking, right?” she said when I finished. “Honestly, your luck can’t be this bad.” But even though Prish was attempting to make light of it, her hands were shaking.

“Apparently, it is. I must have well and truly pissed karma off.”

She let out a breath just as Kaillen came to an abrupt halt. “I gotta go,” he said on a low growl, irritation washing through his words. “I can’t talk him out of this one.”

“Sure, no problem.” I gave him a brave smile and had a feeling I was going to be giving him a lot of those in the near future. “I understand, really. I do.”

His jaw locked again, that muscle ticking in the corner. “I’ll talk to you in the morning?”

“That works.” I stood to let him out, but I made sure to keep my distance because, given the energy rippling through his shoulders, his wolf was about to decapitate me.

Once in the hall, Kaillen pulled his yellow crystal from his pocket and gave me an apologetic smile. “Sorry about this.”

The despair in his voice was nearly my undoing, but I managed to keep my tone even when I replied, “Don’t be. It’s no more your fault than anyone else’s. If you want to take it out on anyone, take it out on Jakub.”

A dark smile lifted his lips. “Now, there’s an idea.”

I laughed. *Oh yes.* His demon would love nothing more than to rip Jakub a new one.

And his demon easily could have. Now that the SF had removed Jakub’s tattoo and the spell that accompanied it, a tattoo similar to the constellation tattoo that the European mobster had placed on all of his minions, Jakub no longer wielded extraordinary power. The dude was seriously average at best when it came to the magical department.

“See you tomorrow?” Kaillen added as he began to swirl his arm and create his personal portal.

A grin split my lips, and a thrill ran through me. It was stupid. I knew that. I was acting like a teenager with a massive crush, but I craved this man *so much*, and three days ago I’d thought for sure that I’d lost him. Now that I knew neither of us was giving up without a fight, those butterflies were dancing in my stomach again.

“Sure,” I replied.

“I’ll pick you up, and we can go to the SF together.”

“About that . . .” I raised my eyebrows. “Are you serious about joining them? Because don’t all new SF members have to go through rigorous training? I have a two-week deadline over my head, so how would we be able to do that? Not to mention, we’d then be SF members, and I kinda already have a job, even though it doesn’t feel like it half the time.” I couldn’t even remember the last full day I’d spent working at Practically Perfect, the magic shop Tessa and I owned. My sister and one of our long-term employees, Nicole, were currently running the place. “Surely there’s another way to interrogate him?”

Kaillen arched an eyebrow. “Trust me on this one. I have a plan.”

Before I could ask him to explain, he leaped through his portal and disappeared.

I huffed and crossed my arms. *Bastard*. He knew that by leaving me hanging, I’d be dying to see him again first thing come sunrise.

But maybe, I thought to myself as I entered my apartment again, *maybe that was what he wanted*. Even though Kaillen’s wolf was beside himself at the death of my wolf, the hunter obviously had other ideas.

Chapter 6

With Kaillen gone and the Lunarian Palace on a two-week hold, Tessa, Prisha, and I continued with our original evening plans. We gorged on chicken fajitas and plenty of Mexican beer, then ate huge bowls of ice cream as we watched half a dozen reruns of *Emily in Paris*.

It was such a normal evening, like one I would have spent with my sis and BFF before my life went to shit, and it was exactly what I needed because for a few short hours, I was able to forget about Jakub, Queen Nameena, and my broken mate bond.

I even fell asleep easily, and only one nightmare woke me. But like the other nightmares that'd been plaguing me, I bolted upright in bed when images of those dozen supernaturals that I'd killed lay dead and dying all around me.

In my dreams, they were always reaching for me, pleading with me not to kill them.

Yet I did anyway.

On day two of my SF conferences, I'd demanded that Klebus tell me more about the dozen supernaturals that Jakub had used in the ritual. I now knew each of their names, their ages, where they'd lived, if they'd been married and had kids, what they'd done for work. I knew it all.

And guilt devoured me every time I thought of them despite Klebus's assurances that the supernaturals I'd killed had long since been lost due to Jakub's manipulations, or his *harvestings*, as he'd called it. But I still wondered if maybe they would have had a chance to survive if I hadn't killed them.

What if witch healers had found a way to fix their broken minds? What if the SF sorcerers had found a cure for the debilitating tattoos that Jakub had burned into their skin? *What if? What if? What if?*

I had a feeling those doubts and fierce regrets would be haunting me for the rest of my life.

When morning finally arrived, I tried to push the guilt from my mind and brace myself for another day.

I got up early to shower and dress so I'd be ready to go when Kaillen contacted me.

In jeans and a cropped sweater, I stood in the kitchen and had just finished putting the last scoop of coffee into our coffee pot when a text dinged on my phone. My heart skipped. *Kaillen*.

I flipped my phone over, a smile parting my lips, but the text wasn't from Kaillen.

Any chance you'll let me take you out for dinner tonight?

Carlos's text blazed across my screen, and I drew in a deep breath as the scent of brewing coffee began to fill the air.

I'd been avoiding my ex-boyfriend, not because I wanted to lead him on, but because I hadn't had the energy in the past few days to let him know that I wasn't interested in him.

But it was time I told him that, especially after the heartfelt letter Carlos had written me when I'd been in Ontario.

I nibbled my lip as I debated the best way to break it to him. The last time I'd tried to let him down gently had been in the SF garage right before Squad Twenty-eight had whisked me off to Tessa's safe house. That hadn't gone well. We'd had a huge audience, and letting him down was something I'd wanted to do in private.

Perhaps a quiet dinner was the perfect solution. I tapped in a reply.

Sure, but I can pay my way. What time?

His response came back immediately.

7. I'll pick you up, and I'm paying. :)

Shit. He'd put a smiley face. A freakin' smiley face, *and* he'd insisted on paying.

Oh my gods. Of course. My ex didn't view this as a business meeting. He obviously had meant it as a date.

But I saw this as a way to meet up with Carlos to let him know, without an audience, that I wasn't interested in him, but he'd obviously

interpreted it differently, and short of telling him now via a text that I didn't want to be his girlfriend—which was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid since texting was so impersonal—I didn't know how to correct his belief.

I draped my arms across the kitchen counter and dropped my head onto them. *Way to fuck this up, Tala.*

"That bad of a morning already?" Tessa called cheerfully when she breezed into the kitchen.

I straightened. "You don't even want to know."

Her expression fell. "Oh no. What's happened now?"

I showed her Carlos's text.

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're so mean. You actually had me worried that something was wrong."

"But this *is* something that's wrong."

She pulled out a coffee mug from the cabinet. "How is having dinner with your old flame something to worry about?"

"Because he wants to get back together, and he obviously thinks this is a date, which means he thinks I'm agreeing to be with him."

"So?"

"But I'm not."

She raised her eyebrows.

I sighed in exasperation. "Tess, I feel like I'm leading him on. The only reason I agreed to dinner with him was to tell him that I'm not interested."

Her nose scrunched up. "Again, so? I don't see what the big deal is."

"The big deal is that Carlos wants us to be a couple again, and now he thinks we're going on a date."

Tessa gave me a cheeky look, then waltzed to the coffee pot, her long blond hair swirling around her shoulders as she poured herself the first cup. Even though winter was approaching, one never would have guessed it from Tessa's sleep attire. She wore a pink silk nightie that clung to her curves and had barely enough lace to cover her nipples, but that was Tess for you. She wore sexy nightwear regardless of whether or not she was sleeping with a man.

I crossed my arms and grumbled as she drained the coffee pot. Now I'd have to wait for the next cup.

Tessa smiled at me over the rim of her cup. "What do you think Kaillen will think about your date with Carlos?"

“It’s not a date.” I frowned. “And what does Kaillen have to do with this?”

“This *non-date*”—she put air quotes around the word—“could work to your advantage.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Whatever you’re thinking, just stop right now.”

But my sister’s mischievous smile remained. “Tala, don’t you see the possibility here?”

“No, and whatever you’re seeing, I don’t want to know. Because now I have to figure out a way to let Carlos know that I never viewed meeting him as a date while also telling him that I don’t want to be his girlfriend, which means I’ll probably have to do it all by texting, which is exactly what I’ve been trying to avoid.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “You’re throwing away a huge opportunity.”

I eyed her excited expression, and against my better judgment asked, “What do you mean?”

“Kaillen’s wolf won’t let him be with you, right? And Carlos wants to be with you.”

“So?”

“Oh my gods! Do I really have to spell this out for you?”

“Apparently. Our brains don’t work the same, remember?”

“Tala, male werewolves are notoriously jealous creatures. A little rivalry could work to your advantage.”

“You want me to make them jealous of each other?”

“Not both of them, just Kaillen.” She took another sip of coffee, her eyes twinkling.

“Tess . . .” I was about to explain to her why the hunter couldn’t feel jealous when he had a mourning wolf inside of him, but then a knock sounded on our front door.

“I’ll get it,” I grumbled.

I left the kitchen, intent on putting a stop to our conversation, but Tessa padded behind me.

Since the perimeter wards didn’t hum in warning against my skin, I flung the door open without checking the peephole, and my lips parted in surprise when I saw who stood in the hallway.

“Coffee?” Kaillen held out a to-go cup to me.

I took it automatically, the fresh aroma making my mouth water. “Um, yeah. How did you know I desperately needed this?” I gave my sister a

side-eye since she'd stolen the first cup.

Sorry, Tess mouthed. A flush worked up her cheeks, and she shrugged apologetically. At least she had the decency to look guilty about hogging the first pot.

Kaillen smirked. "Call it a hunch."

"Thanks." Bringing it to my lips, I tried not to notice how good he looked, but damn, I couldn't help it.

The hunter wore a leather jacket, loose jeans that hung low on his hips, and a dark shirt. His hair was tousled, as if he'd just jumped through a portal, which he probably had.

When my perusal finally returned to his face, a blaze of heat coated his eyes, but then a low growl rumbled in his chest, and he abruptly took a step away.

Muttering under his breath, he nodded toward my coffee. "It's how you like it. Dark brew and two sugars."

"How did you know that's how I take my coffee?"

He shrugged. "I may have noticed when you made coffee at my house."

My stomach flipped. The fact that he cared enough to learn how to make my coffee made me absurdly happy.

His gaze lingered on my face. "Your eyes light up when you're excited."

"They do?"

He stared at me, his expression impossible to read. "It's almost like lightning flashes across your irises."

I fingered my neck self-consciously, right where my new tattoo lay. "Are my eyes . . . weird looking?"

He took a step closer, his movements rigid, as though he were forcing his wolf to submit. "No. They're beautiful."

A hum of heat flowed through me at his husky declaration, but then I remembered how last night had gone when we'd tried to push things too far, too fast, so I cleared my throat and widened the distance between us. "Do you want to come in? I just need a minute to grab my coat."

I opened the door wider and whispered the spell to allow him to enter through the wards.

Once he was inside our apartment, his large build filled the room. I tried to ignore the way his broad shoulders strained against his jacket and

the enticing citrusy cedar scent that wafted around him and drew me in.

Tessa still hovered to the side, not looking the least bit perturbed that she still only wore her nightie in front of my boyfriend.

My twin coiled a strand of hair around her finger. "Sleep well?" she asked the hunter.

He grunted and took another sip of his coffee. I tugged my coat on, then grabbed my shoes.

"Tala's probably not going to get much sleep tonight," she added when Kaillen didn't respond further. "She has a date with Carlos."

The hunter's coffee stopped halfway to his lips. "What?" Fire flashed in his eyes.

I whipped my attention to Tessa, but she innocently twirled her hair while batting her eyelashes.

"Really?" I said in a firm voice. "You had to go there?"

She shrugged. "What? It's true. You and Carlos might be out late. You never know." She winked at me before swirling on her heels and sashaying back to the kitchen. "I'll be at Practically Perfect all day," she called over her shoulder. "Nicole's taking a day off, so if you need me, you know where to find me."

Some of my ire fled since my sister, for the first time ever, had started pulling her weight at our store. Still . . . she'd just intentionally stirred the pot between me and the hunter, and now I was left to clean up the mess.

"It's not what you think," I said as Kaillen tracked my every move. That familiar mask had descended over his features, the one that hid all of his emotions. I zippered my boots up. "Carlos asked me out for dinner, and I accepted so I could tell him that things are over between us."

"You're going on a date with Carlos to tell him you'll no longer be going on dates with him?"

I grimaced. "When you put it like that, it does sound a bit odd."

Kaillen's jaw flexed, the muscle bulging beneath the skin. "Why is Carlos asking you out?"

"Probably because he wants us to be together? Just guessing here, but you saw his letter when we were in Ontario."

Kaillen's stance grew even more rigid. "I thought things were over between the two of you."

"They are, but I haven't spelled that out for him yet."

Kaillen growled. "Then text him and tell him. You don't need to do it over dinner."

I somehow managed to keep my mouth from dropping open, because for the first time since my wolf had been obliterated, the hunter looked jealous, even though I hadn't thought that would be possible.

I eyed him more. Yep, the dude was indeed fuming. My lips parted, but I quickly returned my attention to my shoes. Maybe, just maybe, Tessa was on to something.

I cleared my throat and straightened, then watched the hunter carefully as I said, "It's kinda rude to tell him that in a text. Carlos deserves better than that."

Kaillen took a step closer to me, then stopped midstride and snarled inward.

Seeing his wolf's reaction to being forced within my vicinity deflated all of the hope building inside me. Maybe Kaillen wasn't actually jealous, and it was just wishful thinking on my part.

I glowered, then said bitterly, "You know, your wolf might like it if I go on a date. He certainly doesn't want you going on one with me."

Kaillen's fire-filled eyes shot to mine. "Not funny."

"I wasn't trying to be." I sidestepped him and reached the front door. "Should we go?"

Kaillen's nostrils flared, but he followed me into the hallway. "This conversation isn't over."

"Fine, but right now, we have bigger things to deal with."

Chapter 7

It only took a few minutes to reach the Supernatural Forces' office since we used the hunter's personal portal, but even a jarring portal transfer didn't ease the brewing tension between us.

When we emerged on the sidewalk, Kaillen's fists pumped at his sides as he strode forward. He didn't say a word when he pulled the door open and held it for me.

I brushed by him, but when my arm fluttered across his chest, a slight golden glow flared in his eyes.

I drew up short.

The hunter stared down at me, his jaw locked tight as the faint stirrings of his wolf peered back at me.

"Are you going in?" he asked.

Heart thundering, I kicked myself into action and stepped over the threshold, but that didn't stop my mind from spinning.

Because his wolf had just risen enough to make Kaillen's eyes glow. It was the first time since our bond had broken that I'd seen a flash of Kaillen's wolf that didn't involve him wanting to bite my head off.

Instead, it was a reaction I would have seen in his wolf previously.

I nibbled my lip as I proceeded to the reception area. Tessa could be right. By stoking Kaillen's wolf's territorial instincts, his wolf might begin to feel things for me again.

I debated if I wanted to venture down this fucked-up path, 'cause in what world was dating other guys ever the source of a healthy relationship? But if there was one thing my sister was an expert at, it was men, and for the first time since our bond had broken, the hunter—and perhaps his wolf too—did seem genuinely aggrieved at the thought of me with another guy.

I walked slowly toward the reception desk as my heart beat even harder, but then I sighed. I was on a two-week deadline until I potentially disappeared from Earth for who knew how long, and stoking Kaillen's

territorial reactions was the only option that had presented itself to mend our bond.

Fuck it.

Throwing caution to the wind, I said over my shoulder to Kaillen, “You know, chances are Carlos won’t try anything with me tonight.”

Kaillen stalked closer to me. “He better not fucking try anything.”

Guilt threatened to drown me, but I forced myself to shrug nonchalantly. “It’s just dinner.”

“Just dinner my ass.”

I mashed my lips together to stop my disbelieving smile that the hunter *was* jealous, but my short-lived high soured when I saw who the SF receptionist was today.

Jeff was working. *Great. My favorite.*

I gave the secretary an annoyed glare, since Jeff was too preoccupied with whatever online poker game he was playing this time to notice us, but then I realized Jeff’s inattentiveness gave me an extra second to bait Kaillen.

I faced the hunter as we waited for Jeff to address us and said under my breath, “You know, I only agreed to dinner with Carlos because it gives me a chance to tell him things are over between us, and for your information, I tried to end things between Carlos and me before, but at that time we had an entire SF squad witnessing it, so I had to stop.”

That muscle ticked in Kaillen’s jaw again. “Why would it matter if an SF squad was there or not? Just tell Carlos to get lost. He’s not with you anymore.”

“Because I don’t want to do that to him. He deserves better than that. Despite what you think, Carlos is actually a decent guy.”

Flames leaped in Kaillen’s eyes. “But you’re *mine*.”

My breath caught at his possessive claim. “Is that really how you still feel?”

“I—” His eyebrows drew together. “I think so.”

When I beheld his conflicted expression, my shoulders fell. Maybe this wouldn’t be as easy as I’d hoped. “So *you* consider me yours, but your wolf doesn’t?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

His scowl grew. “It means that at the moment my wolf isn’t telling me to keep my distance from you, but he’s also not telling me to claim you.”

I perked up. “That seems promising.”

Kaillen raked a hand through his hair. “Maybe, but seeing you go on a date with another guy isn’t how I’d like to fix this.”

“It’s not a date. Like I said, it’s just dinner.”

Kaillen snarled. “That’s a fucking—”

“Tala Davenport.” Jeff’s booming voice interrupted the hunter. “Here to see Commander Klebus?” For the first time ever, Jeff wasn’t looking at me with disdain.

“Yeah, is she in?”

“She’s in her office. You know where it is.” Jeff returned his attention to his computer, and sure enough, when Kaillen and I rounded the desk, a new poker game was pulled up. I seriously didn’t know how the dude wasn’t fired.

Kaillen and I slipped through the corner door, and energy continued to strum off the hunter as we maneuvered the familiar halls.

As we rounded the final corner to Commander Klebus’s office, I realized we’d been too caught up in my non-date with Carlos to discuss the hunter’s grand plan to get us into the supernatural prison.

“You forgot to tell me how we’re gonna join the SF and avoid training,” I said to him in a hushed whisper.

“No, I didn’t. I just chose to discuss more important things.”

I raised my eyebrows. “My dinner with Carlos, in which I tell him that I’m not interested in him, is more important than interrogating Jakub?”

His teeth ground together. “Perhaps.”

My stomach dipped at his growly response, and given the fire flashing in his eyes, I now wanted to kiss my sister. She was definitely onto something.

“Mr. King. Ms. Davenport.” The vamp commander stood from behind her desk when we appeared in her doorway. “This is a surprise.”

“Is it?” Kaillen drawled as we stepped into the room. The usual holographs of Chicago glowed near the far wall in the otherwise no-frills office.

The commander’s sapphire eyes shone with curiosity, and her brown skin, paled from her vampire transformation, glowed golden in the overhead lights. “Here with more questions about the investigation?”

“Actually . . .” I pulled out one of the chairs opposite her desk and sat. “Not quite.”

“Oh?” She lowered herself to her seat as Kaillen did the same. “Did something new happen?”

“You could say that.” Kaillen casually leaned back in his chair. “We’d like to work for the SF.”

Commander Klebus’s eyebrows shot clear to her hairline, but she quickly smoothed her expression. “Is that right? But wasn’t it just last week that you were telling me you weren’t interested? And the week before that? *And* the week before that?”

Kaillen shrugged. “That was last week . . . and the weeks prior.”

She gave the hunter an amused look that was one pinch short of an eye roll. “And now you want to join the SF because you want to question Jakub?”

He didn’t flinch. “Is that a problem?”

“Not necessarily, but I won’t have you joining the SF just to use us for this one task.”

“We won’t,” he replied smoothly.

“*And* as I’ve told you, I highly doubt you’ll be able to pull any information from Jakub anyway. We’ve tried every avenue and haven’t had success.”

“But you’re also not me.” I leaned forward in my seat, then realized how arrogant that sounded, so I clarified, “Jakub knows that I’m from that new realm. He may be willing to talk to me because of that.”

The commander cocked her head, then drummed her fingernails on her desk. “Possibly. Okay, I’m listening.”

I smiled as my hope grew. “Let us join the SF and interrogate Jakub as our first task.”

An amused curve tilted her lips. “You do understand that *I’m* the commander, and *I’m* the one who decides your orders. Not you. Correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her amusement grew, no doubt since I’d addressed her properly. I smirked. I could kiss ass when needed, especially if it meant closing that damned portal so I could get on with my life.

“But I would hope you would assign us that task,” I added. “Especially since I also came to you with those findings from the SF library about the Bone Eaters and their terrible power. Have you been able to uncover

anything about that yet?" I asked, referring to the text Archie had sent my sister yesterday morning, right before I'd arrived at the SF for my daily questioning.

"Not yet." She steepled her fingers. "With Malikhi's arrival, my priorities changed."

I eyed her, making a mental note that we still needed Archie's findings uncovered too.

Kaillen cocked an eyebrow. "So, are we hired?"

Commander Klebus's amusement died. "You're actually serious about joining?"

"Dead serious," Kaillen replied.

My eyes widened at his tone, because from the sounds of it, Kaillen *was* deadly serious even though he'd always been adamantly against joining the SF.

The vampire grinned broadly. "Very well. We can get you enrolled in basic training starting Monday—"

"Not quite," Kaillen cut in. "We're not interested in joining as full SF members. We'd like to be hired as consultants only, not permanent staff."

Consultants? A wave of relief barreled into me. So *this* was the hunter's grand plan.

Commander Klebus's eyes narrowed. "Consultants have limited responsibilities."

"As I'm aware," he replied.

She leaned back and crossed her arms before giving him a shrewd once-over. "What's your end game?"

"We want to interrogate Jakub." He whipped forward in his seat so fast his body was a blur. "The only way to keep Tala safe is to close that portal."

Her lips pursed. "And you think that Jakub's the key to making that happen?"

Kaillen's eyes glittered darkly, reminding me of blood diamonds. "He knew how to open it, and as Tala pointed out last night, that could also mean he knows how to close it."

The vampire inclined her head. "Very well, but even as consultants to the Supernatural Forces, you still don't get to dictate what you do for our organization. Don't expect to garner all of the privileges that come from being a member of our elite institution. When we call upon you for work,

we expect you to answer, even if it's something you're not particularly interested in."

I straightened in my seat and resisted the urge to fidget. Because even though Kaillen and I needed to question Jakub, that didn't stop my other responsibilities.

I was already weeks behind in my administrative work for Practically Perfect, and joining the SF would only further strain my time. Granted, it wasn't lost on me that if Queen Nameena took me against my will and enslaved me in her realm, it wasn't like working ten hours a week for the SF would have even mattered, but if by some miracle we were actually able to close the portal and I then found myself shackled to the SF, I didn't exactly want to bite off more than I could chew.

"One question." I raised a finger. "How much time are we talking here?"

The commander cocked an eyebrow. "As a consultant, it's less about the time that you give our organization and more about being available when we need you."

"So we'd be on call?"

"No, you wouldn't be on call, but you would be expected to respond to a percentage of our requests. Consultants are also required to attend quarterly meetings—those are non-negotiable—and you're always required to follow our rules of conduct in all matters of your life." She gave a pointed look to Kaillen. "You may find that challenging."

The hunter only smiled darkly, but she had a point. If Kaillen wanted to go through with his plan to work as an SF consultant, he'd have to kiss goodbye to any further illegal activities.

"Do you think following the rules is something you can do?" the commander asked him bluntly.

"I can play nice," Kaillen replied.

"And I'm sure if Ms. Davenport's life is on the line, you could."

Kaillen's eyes narrowed, but instead of falling into his usual habit of baiting or goading Commander Klebus, he simply nodded. "That's why I'm here."

"Excellent." The commander withdrew her tablet from her desk drawer. "Consultants are all required to . . ." She pulled up a list of job duties and began reading them to us. When she got to the part about it being

mandatory to respond to at least thirty percent of all SF requests, I sputtered.

“Yes, Ms. Davenport?” she said, a winged eyebrow rising on her golden face.

“How many times a year would the SF be calling?”

“There’s no limit. If your particular skill set is needed, you’re required to respond to at least thirty percent of the calls.”

I balked. “Even if you called every week?”

“Yes.”

I gave Kaillen a look, but his expression had turned into a stoic mask. *Holy shit*. He was really willing to do this and go through with it. And it was all for me.

“How often do you think we’d be called?” I asked.

She leaned back in her chair. “Your strength of witch magic and your otherworldly capabilities mean you would be invaluable in a crisis situation. If we encountered an individual who needed to be stopped quickly and effectively, you could expect a call.”

“So I’d be like an assassin?” I nearly snorted. Barnabas and Fallon would no doubt get a kick out of that.

“Not quite. Assassins work on the Black Market. Supernatural Forces members are working to uphold the law.”

“But I’d still be killing people.”

“Also, not necessarily. You’d be draining them to the point that apprehension would be swift and easy. The supernatural courts would take it from there, and if the criminal’s activities deemed them candidates for gargoyle leeching, the law would take what was needed.”

I bit my lip as some of the nerves in my belly calmed. So I wouldn’t be killing anyone, but from the sounds of it, I’d be called in for their most dangerous arrests. I bit back a smile when a slight thrill ran through me. Hell, I might enjoy that.

“And him?” I asked, jerking my thumb toward Kaillen. “How often would he be called?”

She gave my mate a slow smile. “Your hunting skills would prove invaluable in not only abduction cases, but also to find some of our most elusive criminals.”

Kaillen’s expressionless mask fell into place.

I shifted in my seat, not liking the gleam in the vamp's eyes. "Aren't there a lot of criminals on the run and supes who've gone missing?"

She shrugged in a noncommittal way. "Perhaps."

"So you would potentially be calling Kaillen all of the time?"

She shrugged again. "It's hard to say."

But given the furrowing brow that had broken through the hunter's blank expression, I knew he'd reached the same conclusion as me. The SF would be calling him *a lot*.

No wonder he'd always refused to join them.

"And if we don't respond to your calls?" I asked in a clipped tone.

"You'd be required to," the commander replied immediately. "If not, you would face criminal prosecution."

Okay, then . . . In other words, don't fuck with the SF unless you intended to go to your grave with guns blazing.

"So we can never quit once we join?" I asked, even though I knew that wasn't true. Carlos had quit after all.

"No, you may quit *after* your contracted time finishes," Commander Klebus clarified.

My stomach churned more because even though we could eventually quit, I had no doubt the commander would insert an iron clause into our contracts that forbade us from quitting right after we'd questioned Jakub. We'd have to stick out the contracted term.

But as much as that made me feel trapped, I could also see the vamp's point. It would be a real asshole move on our part to join and then walk off the job the day after we got what we wanted from Jakub. Still, how much was joining the Supernatural Forces going to change our lives if we managed to succeed and close the portal? I had a feeling they'd try to lengthen our contracts as much as they could.

"Are you both on board?" the commander asked, her expression carefully guarded.

"Yes." Kaillen's jaw worked. "I'll uphold the commitment."

My eyes popped, because Kaillen seemed as grave as a mortician right now. He'd meant it. He wouldn't break his promise and risk prosecution. He'd answer when the SF called.

I gave Commander Klebus a resigned nod. "Yes, me too."

She grinned broadly. "In that case . . ." She pulled out her crystal sphere from her desk drawer, tapped a few things on her tablet, and before

our eyes, contracts appeared on the screen. One for me. One for Kaillen.

I frowned. "You already had these drawn up?"

"I'm always prepared."

The churning in my stomach grew, and it felt as though I'd just eaten a can of sardines. We were seriously committing to this.

"Feel free to read them over and ask any questions that arise. Consultants must commit for two years, which shouldn't be a problem since you just stated—"

"Two years," I interrupted. "That's way too long."

A growl rumbled in Kaillen's chest as his eyes flew over the contract. "I agree with Tala. Make it one."

"But two years commitment is the standard for consultants," Commander Klebus replied.

"One." Kaillen bristled. "That's non-negotiable." He locked eyes with the commander, and her expression turned shrewd.

I leaned back in my chair. Kaillen was a pro at this stuff. I figured I'd let him hash out our contracts' details.

"One and a half." The vamp's sapphire eyes turned to chips of ice as her tone grew glacial.

"One," Kaillen replied.

"Fifteen months."

"One or we walk."

Commander Klebus's nostrils flared, and I wondered if she would call the hunter on his bluff. Because we couldn't walk. We needed to learn how to close that portal, but the vamp also really wanted Kaillen on their payroll. She'd been trying to recruit him for years, so I didn't know if she would risk calling him out.

They held eye contact for what felt like eons, and the tension grew so thick between them that it felt like gelatin.

Finally, the commander whipped the crystal back to her side and set her palm on it. The writing in our contracts changed before our eyes as she altered the magical draft. "Fine. One year's commitment, but I'm also subtracting your pay by ten percent."

"Noted," Kaillen replied with a smug smile.

I swallowed a snort. Personally, I would have enjoyed the extra pay, but Mr. Money Bags here probably thought of it as chump change. But I'd

rather lose the pay than have two years of my life taken from me. If I even had two years to give . . .

“There. All done. Please read through them and sign at the bottom.” The commander shoved the crystal back our way.

Kaillen and I leaned forward in our chairs and read through the three-page document. It was rather standard, the basic stuff I would expect: maintaining confidentiality, following their code of conduct, having to respond to the SF when needed in a crisis, yadda, yadda, yadda. At the end of the day, the SF would be the puppet master, and we would be the puppets. But if it meant closing the portal . . .

Kaillen and I both signed, and after we handed the crystal back to her, a wave of trepidation filled me. The hunter had said to trust him, and I had. Because of him, we would only be consultants, and we’d only have to commit to a year’s service.

Still . . . a *year*. That was what Kaillen and I would be undertaking. Granted, a year wasn’t that long in the grand scheme of things, but for a woman who enjoyed her independence and a hunter who relished his morally gray lifestyle it seemed like a lifetime.

But all of this was assuming we could close the portal. Because if we couldn’t, then none of this would matter. I’d be up against Queen Nameena, and that was more daunting than any SF contract.

I eyed Kaillen. He gave me a tight smile even as his jaw worked, and I wished so much that I could wrap my arms around him.

Despite all of the shit going on with his wolf, it was obvious that Kaillen truly did care for me. Because a week ago, he never would have joined the SF. Now, he’d signed up, all in hopes of getting into the prison so we could force the info from Jakub that would finally end the nightmare that had become my life. He was essentially doing all of this for me.

“Now,” Commander Klebus said briskly, jerking me from my thoughts. “For your first task, I’m assigning you to interrogate Jakub in the supernatural prison.”

Chapter 8

Since the supernatural prison was in the fae lands, the commander leaned over her desk and handed us a small bag of portal keys. *Holy hairy balls.* This was legit.

My eyebrows rose. “We won’t be using natural portals to travel?”

“Ma’am.”

“Excuse me?”

“The proper way to address me is *ma’am*, and you should address male superiors as *sir*.” Commander Klebus pulled out two electronic tablets from her drawer. I recognized the devices. Carlos had carried one just like it when we’d been together, and I’d seen them strapped to other SF members’ belts. It seemed all SF members had them.

Commander Klebus handed one tablet to me and the other to Kaillen, making me realize she’d not only had our contracts ready to go but our tablets too. “Please read the SF handbook on your tablets. You’re expected to follow the rules even if you’re consultants. While basic training isn’t necessary, proper protocol still is.”

“Okay . . . ma’am,” I replied as I studied the electronic device.

She inclined her head. “And to answer your question, no, you won’t be using natural portals for your trip to the prison. Given what Queen Nameena’s letter said, this is a time-sensitive manner, which is why I’m issuing you portal keys.” She waved toward the bag she’d given me.

Kaillen’s expression turned icy. “Speaking of that scroll, has the SF found anything further about it?”

The vamp pursed her lips. “It was spelled, so they have magic in their realm, probably of a similar level to the fae lands’ universe, but the material it’s made of is entirely foreign. We’re still analyzing it.”

I opened my tablet as I thought about how the fae lands were in an entirely separate universe from Earth’s, but since our universe and the fae lands’ universe bent toward one another at odd angles and touched, natural portal crossings existed. I wondered if this new realm’s universe also

touched ours or if the new turquoise portal had created a worm hole that now allowed passings. Who knew.

When the tablet powered to life, it automatically opened to the SF handbook. I read the greeting, then asked, “Now that we’re officially SF, can we have access to everything the Supernatural Forces has uncovered regarding the new realm?”

The vamp nodded at our devices. “Everything we currently know is on your tablets. But first, please review the handbook. Now, I’m guessing you’re impatient to get moving, so please refer to the introduction on page one. It will give you detailed information about proper protocol—again, something you’re expected to follow—as well as how to enter the prison.” She gave a devious smile, as though she’d just been waiting for this moment when we were finally in her clutches.

Kaillen’s eyes shuttered. The dude was obviously *not* amused.

“Also, before you go, you’ll need to pick up your SF uniforms.” Klebus nodded toward Kaillen’s tablet. It showed a picture of some badass-looking suits, which had appeared on page two.

“Uniforms?” Kaillen drawled and angled his tablet’s screen to me, so I could better see the picture. He gave the commander a sardonic smile. “I don’t wear uniforms.”

The vamp smiled sweetly. “You do now.”

“Is that what we’re wearing to the prison?” I asked incredulously.

“I would recommend it,” Klebus replied. “The suits give you an edge when dealing with difficult situations, but as consultants, you’re not required to wear them. You may wear your street clothes if you prefer, but since both of you have been trained independently in combat, and considering that what we’ll be asking of you could require fighting, you’ve both been issued suits in case you’re involved in any missions.”

My palms tingled when I swiped to the next page and studied my uniform.

Commander Klebus stood from behind her desk. “You two have a lot to do to get oriented and a busy day ahead of you. I suggest you begin reading and walking. It’s already mid-morning. Since this is a rushed orientation, I’m guessing you’ll inevitably have questions. If you do, call me. I’m happy to explain, but in the meantime, the clock’s ticking.”

The hunter and I stood, and Kaillen asked dryly, “Is this where we salute you?”

Commander Klebus gave him a smug smile and glanced down at his screen. “Ah, I see you’re on clause 2.4, so you’re already aware that yes, you salute superiors when you’re dismissed.”

“Do we have like, titles or something?” I asked as I swiped to the next page on my handbook.

“No, as consultants, you’ll continue to be addressed as Mr. King and Ms. Davenport.”

“Bummer,” I said under my breath. It might have been fun to be Private Davenport.

Kaillen snickered quietly, and I nudged him playfully. Strangely, this time when I touched him, he didn’t immediately retreat.

“We better get moving, Mr. King.” I nodded toward the door. “We have a prisoner to interrogate.”

∞ ∞ ∞

In the hallway, Kaillen strode at my side but gestured when to turn or go down stairwells. He’d obviously read more of his orientation handbook than me since he seemed to know where we were supposed to go.

“How do you know your way around here so well?” I thought that had been my department since I’d been here so many times following Tessa’s disappearances.

“This isn’t my first meeting with Klebus.”

“Ah, you mean ’cause she’s been trying to recruit you for years?”

He gave me a sly grin. “Something like that.”

We reached the end of the hall, and he was about to push through a stairwell door when a familiar voice called from behind me, “Tala?”

The hunter stilled.

No freakin’ way. Without turning, I knew who’d called out to me.

I swiveled around to see Carlos striding down the hall after us. Carlos’s warm brown eyes focused on me, as though he didn’t even see the hunter, and a broad grin broke across his handsome face. “I just got a memo that you joined the SF.”

“Yeah, I did.” It wasn’t lost on me that Carlos didn’t say anything to Kaillen when he reached us, even though I was pretty sure the memo included Kaillen’s recruitment as well.

I gave my ex a smile as the energy around Kaillen grew. “We’re on our way to get our suits, and then we’re going to the fae lands.”

Carlos's smile slipped, and he gave an irritated side-eye to the hunter.

Kaillen bared his teeth and stepped closer to me. "Is there something you need, *pup*?"

"Nothing that concerns you," Carlos replied coolly before turning his attention back to me. "I was just going to see if Tala was okay with sushi tonight. I know how much she loves Japanese food."

My jaw dropped, and the initial reaction to correct Carlos on this *not* being a date flared up in me, but I forced it down. Igniting Kaillen's territorial response was the only avenue I had at the moment to quiet his wolf, even if that meant temporarily leading Carlos on.

Forcing myself to smile, I angled my chin up and grinned broadly at my ex. "Sushi sounds great. You're picking me up at seven, right?"

Carlos nodded as his gaze skittered over my face and then down to my new tattoo. "Yeah, seven. You look beautiful by the way. Your eyes are just . . . incredible now."

The energy pulsing off the hunter leaped, but before Kaillen could act on Carlos's blatant come-on, the corner of Carlos's mouth kicked up. "I'll see you tonight."

With that, my ex wheeled around on his heel and sauntered down the hall. There was a definite swagger in his step that hadn't been there when he approached, and I cringed inwardly. These kinds of games were not my usual style. This was totally Tessa's department, and the guilt was already piling on inside me. I was legit leading Carlos on, and it *soooo wasn't cool*.

"Not a date, huh?" The hunter was suddenly standing right in front of me, having moved in a blur of werewolf speed. He planted his hands on his hips. "What the fuck, Tala?"

I stared up at his furious expression, which looked molded of steel and forged in fire, and swallowed the lump in my throat.

Gods, I loved this man. I wanted to be with him, and I didn't want to repair our relationship by being a dishonest asshole, but I didn't know what else to do.

I sighed. "I'm doing this on purpose, you know."

His scowl grew downright scary. "Doing *what* exactly on purpose, my love?"

My heart tripped at that endearment, but since the hunter wasn't stepping away from me, I supposed his wolf wasn't snarling at him to do so . . . yet.

“Baiting you,” I admitted. “Making you jealous. You said earlier that your wolf grew quieter when he realized I was going out with another guy. Maybe this is how we remind your wolf that *I’m* your mate, too, and it wasn’t just my wolf who belongs with him. Before she was born, your wolf recognized *me* as your mate. Maybe this is how we nudge him in that direction again. If he thinks another male is going to swoop in and take me away, maybe some of his confusion will clear.”

Kaillen cocked his head, and a subtle flare of gold showed in his eyes, but it was there so briefly and was such a tiny glow that I knew I could have imagined it.

“What’s your wolf doing right now?” I asked and held my breath.

Kaillen shook his head angrily. “He’s confused again, and he’s pacing. A part of him is telling me to keep our distance, but the other part of him recognized Carlos as a former threat, and he doesn’t particularly like that your scent was just mixed with his, which is why he’s confused.” A low snarl worked up Kaillen’s throat, and he closed the distance between us completely and slipped an arm around my waist. “But like I said earlier, you’re *mine*, even if my wolf doesn’t fully remember that.”

“But unless we can convince your wolf to feel that too, it won’t matter if you want me.”

His nostrils flared. “Like hell it won’t.” His head dipped down, and his nose brushed along my skin, right where my new tattoo lay. The powers inside me rumbled, humming through me like an electrical storm.

His hand tightened briefly, fisting my shirt’s fabric as he inhaled. “Your scent is amazing.”

“Has it changed that much?” I asked breathlessly. My heart was beating two hundred times a minute, but I was too afraid to move or pull Kaillen in, in case I set his wolf off again.

“No. You still smell like you, but it’s stronger, richer. It’s as though your power has grown.”

He was right on that account. Not only did my witch magic swirl around inside me, but my forbidden power and awakening one now coursed through my veins like lightning.

The power of another world flowed hotly just beneath my skin, and the call of that realm pulsed within my soul. I still had no idea how I’d come to possess these powers, but they were mine. I’d been born with them, I knew

how to wield them, and now it was time to figure out how to keep them here with me on Earth and shut that freakin' portal.

"We should get moving." I shivered when the hunter trailed his lips feather-soft along my skin. "I don't want to piss your wolf off, and Jakub's waiting."

Kaillen's grip tightened as the soft puff of his breath warmed my skin. "I know. My wolf's starting to get restless again since I'm touching you."

"Hopefully, he's not telling you to attack me this time?"

He chuckled darkly. "No, not attack. A part of him wants to bite you, though, and the other part wants me to put distance between us."

"He wants to bite me? That doesn't sound good."

"It's not the kind of bite you're thinking about."

"Oh."

Kaillen moved his lips again, then nipped.

"Oh," I breathed more knowingly just as my knees threatened to sag. "You need to stop, or I'm going to do something embarrassing."

"Maybe I'd like that."

A sizzle of hope fluttered through me. "Do you think we'll figure this out so your wolf accepts me again?"

"If figuring things out means not having to watch you go on dates with Carlos, then fuck yeah, we're figuring this out."

I muffled a laugh as I finally managed to pull back. "Does your wolf see me as his mate again?"

Kaillen frowned and dropped his arms when I inched away more. "No, not yet."

I arched an eyebrow and crossed my arms. "Then you're gonna have to watch me go on a date."

His jaw ground together, and his nostrils flared.

Trying to ignore how my heart was suddenly racing, I inclined my head toward the stairwell. "You wanna lead the way, Mr. King?"

Chapter 9

Kaillen and I said goodbye to the SF member who'd fitted our suits, and I marveled at the obsidian material that clung to my body like a second skin.

Kaillen didn't look nearly as enthused despite amazingly comfortable boots covering our feet. The footwear rose to mid-calf and muffled our steps. Around our waists, slim utility belts held our tablets and any weapons we chose to strap to them. There were also various areas to carry weapons on our legs that would be easy to access.

I held out my arm again, admiring the sleek look, and couldn't believe how supple my new suit felt. "This suit is badass."

Kaillen grunted. "I can't say that I feel the same."

I managed to muffle my laugh, because the hunter was looking like someone had just pooped on his birthday cake.

I elbowed him. "Oh, come on, you have to admit that the magic flowing through these suits that keeps our temperature regulated is kinda nice. And the belt with the clips isn't *that* different from your chest harnesses."

He glowered down at me. "I look like a cartoon superhero."

I eyed his all-black apparel. "Not really. You don't have a cape."

"I look like I just visited an adult store and asked for a rubber suit. All I need is a paddle, a ball gag, and a swing."

I raised my eyebrows. "It sounds like you have experience visiting adult stores."

"My demon likes them."

My belly tightened. "Is that right?"

"If my wolf were on board, I'd take you to one."

"Okay, now we're getting off track." I whipped my gaze away from him, because even though Kaillen hated his suit, I was pretty sure every heterosexual female on the planet wouldn't agree with him.

Everything about his large, powerful frame was highlighted in the material, from his broad shoulders to his toned waist and heavily muscled

thighs. Even his junk was on display in the front cup. Granted, you couldn't actually see it, but the bulge stood out . . . and, well, it didn't take much imagination to figure out the size of him.

Trying to quell the flush of arousal coursing through me, I added, "I, for one, think you look quite nice in your suit, even if it reminds you of ball gags."

He gave me a once-over, his gaze heating slightly when he skimmed over my tits and ass, which like the hunter, were on full display in the fitted material. "I can't say that I'm fond of you in that suit. If Carlos sees you, he'll probably try to rip—"

"All ready to go, I see?" Commander Klebus called from ahead.

A blush warmed my cheeks when I gazed at our commander down the hall. She was smiling broadly, like a cat who'd just gotten into the cream. "You two look as if those suits were made for you."

"Thanks . . . ma'am," I remembered to tack on at the last minute.

"Are you heading out now?" she asked as she clasped her hands behind her back.

Kaillen grunted. "We are."

"Excellent. I've alerted the prison to your impending arrival. You shouldn't have any problems being admitted to the maximum security wing. Do you have a plan in place? Questioning Jakub won't be easy."

I eyed the hunter. He'd mentioned earlier that he'd perfected a spell that made individuals spill their guts, but now that we were SF members and no longer allowed to partake in illegal activities . . .

"We do," Kaillen said in a bored tone. "We'll let you know how it goes, *ma'am*," he added, and I swear he was about to smirk. Yep, the dude was going to take the piss out of Klebus even though she was his superior officer.

Some things never changed.

But Commander Klebus's grin grew despite Kaillen's mocking response. "I look forward to reading your report."

∞ ∞ ∞

The portal keys dropped us just outside of the supernatural prison in the fae lands, on the outskirts of a forest. Large trees towered around us as their golden leaves fluttered in the wind. Some of the foliage shimmered a deep blue and magenta, glinting in the sun as I glanced upward to see layers of

pastel-colored clouds filling the sky. Some of the clouds near the horizon were darker.

“Looks like rain’s coming.” I pointed toward the navy clouds as distant thunder rumbled. “In which case, you might be thankful for your suit. You know, since it’ll keep you warm and dry.”

“My wolf blood keeps me warm. I don’t need a Batman suit for that.”

“But your wolf doesn’t keep you dry.”

“Nothing’s wrong with getting a little wet.” A slight tug lifted his lips. “Last time I checked, you quite liked getting wet.”

My jaw dropped. “Oh my gods. Did you just make *another* sex joke?”

“I did.”

“Two in twenty-four hours.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m on a roll.”

Even though Kaillen and I were on our way to question the fucker who was responsible for my nightmare life, I laughed.

His lips kicked up. “I can think of a few more—”

The words died on his lips when an arrow whizzed by my face. I instinctively crouched to the ground as the tiny arrow lodged into a tree beside me.

My eyes widened when I took in its shape. It wasn’t an arrow exactly, rather—

“Forest sprites,” Kaillen growled in annoyance. “And they have weapons.”

Out of nowhere, hundreds of tiny wooden points flew at us from all angles from sprites that were obviously hiding in the forest at our backs. Yips and screams filled the air as they made quite the show of throwing hundreds of their crude arrows right at us.

They weren’t sophisticated weapons, so they couldn’t pierce one’s heart, but they would hurt like a motherfucker if they hit us.

I whipped a shield spell around us in a flurry of magic, and the needlelike arrows hit my shield all at once, coming from every angle.

“Where the hell did they come from?” I glanced behind us at the towering forest, but we were on the edge of it. Sprites were usually known for attacking supernaturals and fae in the *middle* of a forest, not on its perimeter.

“No idea,” Kaillen replied, “but they seem pretty angry.”

“Should we make a run for it?” I nodded ahead at the prison that sat on top of a hill. It was only a hundred yards to the prison’s outer ward. “I can shield us so they can’t reach us.”

Kaillen smirked. “And miss the fun?” Fire flamed in his irises. “I haven’t done nearly enough killing lately to appease my dark side.”

I rolled my eyes. “Such a demon . . .” But I couldn’t stop my smile. Forest sprites were such nasty creatures that the fae were thankful when any were killed. “Fine, if you insist.”

I waggled my eyebrows, then whipped my shield spell off of us as we both turned in a burst of speed.

In a blink, Kaillen blurred away as a swell of power crashed in his wake. I threw out my awakening magic in the other direction, letting it sizzle from me like crackling lightning bolts. It hunted out the sprites among the trees, searching for their tiny heartbeats and life sources.

Hundreds of monkey-like creatures dangled from the branches and crawled among the leaves on the forest floor. The violent pests stood no more than two feet tall and ran on spindly hind legs, but their razor-sharp teeth, impressive speed, and wicked claws made them deadly. It wasn’t unheard of for a child to wander into a fae forest and never come home thanks to these creatures.

“Come and get me, fuckers.”

The vicious little creatures clawed out of tree trunks, emerged from the forest floor, and fell from the canopy above, as though they’d heard my taunt.

On my left, a blur of movement and flashes of fire told me Kaillen was close. Squeals of pain erupted in his wake as the sprites he targeted were incinerated.

I pulled upon the small creatures’ life forces that my awakening magic had latched onto, marveling that my new power could suck the magic from animals too and not just people.

Every sprite that I’d tethered my magic to screamed in agony before they fell. Around me, they tipped over like bowling pins, falling from the trees and trunks that they’d been clinging to. It was all so easy with my power.

But they weren’t known as deadly creatures for nothing. I hissed in pain when two sprites sprang onto my back and tangled in my hair, their claws sinking into my scalp.

“Need help with that?” Kaillen’s mocking purr reached me just before a flash of heat blazed against my skin, then two thumps sounded behind me.

I whirled around to see two charred sprites on the ground. “Thanks!” I called, but Kaillen was already blurring away.

Another dash of the creatures came at me from the left, their angry hisses and crude arrows flying at me relentlessly. Despite the fact that we hadn’t invaded their home or done anything to provoke them, didn’t seem to matter. This herd of sprites seemed intent on murdering us.

I dodged, dipped, swayed, and fought them off as fast as they came.

The only positive aspect was that my suit cooled me as soon as I began sweating. Normally, damp tendrils of hair would’ve plastered to my forehead by now, but thanks to my newly enhanced SF suit, cool air flowed around me as the hunter and I took out the forest creatures one after another.

When the yipping finally died down, Kaillen emerged from the forest, a cocky smile splitting his face as his disheveled hair fluttered in the wind.

“You still hate the suit?” I asked, nodding at his intact clothing. “Their claws couldn’t puncture the material.”

“Fine, I guess they’re not as terrible as I’d thought.”

“And you still look hot.”

His grin turned sensual. “So do you.”

When my cheeks warmed, a flash of gold appeared in his irises, and his eyes widened.

“What is it?” I asked.

His gaze grew even more heated. “My wolf just remembered how strong you are, even without your wolf inside you.”

“Because I killed the sprites?”

He nodded. “Most supernaturals would have struggled with it, if they’d been able to defend themselves at all, yet you killed dozens in a blink.”

My heart beat harder. “And . . .”

Kaillen’s eyes grew hooded as he trailed a finger across my neck, right over my tattoo. My power shimmered inside me. “And, he realizes that makes you on an equal playing field with me.”

My heartbeat picked up even more. *A worthy mate*. It was what I’d always suspected had drawn his wolf to me in the first place—my strength and my power rivaled the hunter’s.

“He, uh, needed to see my magic in action to be reminded of that?” Before, all his wolf had needed was to smell my true scent, but I’d stopped wearing my cloaking spell weeks ago. His wolf now swam in my scent. That alone obviously hadn’t been enough.

Kaillen’s expression turned hopeful. “I think so.”

I smiled tentatively. “One day at a time.”

He nodded but then frowned and took a step back, as though his wolf had just reminded the hunter that despite realizing my power, his mate was still dead.

Ugh. I ran a hand through my hair, then nodded toward the prison. “Should we get going? Jakub’s waiting.”

“Yeah, let’s move.”

Some of the lightness filling my chest dimmed when Kaillen kept a yard of distance between us. It didn’t help that the prison looked scary as fuck and only reminded me of what we were truly here to do.

The supernatural prison was three stories tall and looked as though it’d been cut from rock. Its jagged gray walls were several feet thick and had been constructed from a fae lands stone that was as hard as diamonds.

The prison had been added onto over the years, so several wings protruded from the pre-existing foundation, making the building look like a drunken Lego structure.

Unlike human prisons, there wasn’t barbwire on top of the two solid walls encircling the prison’s perimeter. Instead, a heavy cloak of magic was suspended in a dome over it. It wasn’t easily apparent and instead looked like a hazy, low-lying mist.

On the other hand, the solid walls—set three dozen yards apart from one another—were very noticeable. Each wall rose twenty feet and encircled the entire inner building. Given the preternatural strength of wolves, vamps, and fairies, the walls needed to be that high so supes couldn’t jump over them. But since some fae species could fly—and there were still a few dragon shifters in existence—the prison was also covered by a magical dome to prevent one from escaping via the sky.

We strode toward the tall gates ahead, and Kaillen nodded at the magical barrier. “Be careful around the wards. If you approach the wrong area, they can burn you.”

“And you know this how?”

“I’ve been here before.”

My jaw dropped. “As a prisoner?”

He smirked. “No, as a hunter. I’m much too skilled to be caught and sentenced.”

I muffled a laugh as the prison’s energy pulsed slowly toward us.

The feel of the prison’s wards let me know that the mist surrounding the prison wasn’t from Mother Nature. Similar to the wards used to protect SF facilities, the magic here felt thick and heavy. I had a feeling that any soul unfortunate enough to attempt escape would be fried on contact with the powerful energy that wove like a suffocating scarf around the entire perimeter.

“Do you know how old the wards are around this place?” I asked. “I’ve never felt any like them.”

“Hundreds of years old, ever since the prison first came into existence.”

“Interesting. Too bad they don’t offer tours. This place kinda reminds me of Alcatraz, minus the water . . . and sharks.”

His lips tugged up.

“So how did you get in previously, if you weren’t an inmate?” I asked.

“The non-maximum security portion allows civilians to enter after you’ve applied for permission.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So, what did you need to come here for?”

“For the same reason we’re here today.”

“To question prisoners?”

“Yes, my love. In my line of work, I deal with individuals daily that call this place home. Sometimes, I need to speak with them to find a client I’m hunting.”

I shivered slightly at his husky endearment. “Using your spell that you’ve perfected?”

He gave me a wicked grin. “If necessary.”

“Speaking of that . . .” I cast a silencing spell around us that muffled our words so the guards ahead wouldn’t be able to overhear us. “Why did you tell Klebus we had a plan to question Jakub? Last I checked, we didn’t.”

“Have you forgotten what I said earlier when I told you that I have a perfected spell?”

“Yeah, but that was before. We just signed contracts with the SF. We’re not allowed to do illegal stuff.”

“Who said it’s illegal?” he asked with mocking innocence.

I stopped midstride and faced him. “Um, *you* did.”

His gaze roamed over my features, taking in my eyes—that were probably exploding with stars from our budding argument—and then drifted down to the tattoo circling my neck. His finger feathered over it, just for the merest second. “Carlos is right. You are incredibly beautiful.”

My skin pebbled from his fleeting touch, and my worry over his illegal questioning dimmed as my greater anxiety over our broken mate bond surfaced. “Does your wolf think so too?”

He cocked his head, his features looking chiseled and striking in the dying sunlight as the storm rolled in. “He’s still on the fence, but your little stunt to make him jealous and your magical display with the sprites has definitely hit a nerve in him.”

“That’s good, right?” I shivered when his finger caressed my skin again before he dropped his hand.

“Maybe. But he still doesn’t want me touching you.”

My hope died when his jaw clenched, and I knew he was fighting his wolf again.

“We’ll get there.” I forced myself to take a step back. “But back to the matter at hand. How are we going to question Jakub?”

“I’m using my spell. That hasn’t changed.”

“But the rules—”

“I don’t follow rules, beautiful.” His head dipped until his lips were right against my ear. “I never have, and I don’t intend to start now.”

A shudder of desire and nervous apprehension tingled down my spine. “But if Klebus finds out—”

“Are you going to tell her?” He pulled back to search my gaze.

“No, but what if she hears about it?”

“You underestimate me. Do you really think I’m a rookie?” He threaded his fingers through mine and squeezed, the contact fleeting before he dropped my hand.

But my stomach still tightened, because this wasn’t a game. We would be in serious shit if Klebus found out that we’d questioned Jakub illegally, but at the same time, I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel a thrill at the thought of dancing on the edge of the law.

Even though I was still the nine-to-five lady who paid her taxes, Prisha and I hadn’t done every rebellious activity we could think of while we were

teenagers because we were rule-followers.

I thought I'd outgrown that, but apparently, I hadn't. "All right, Mr. King. I'll follow your lead."

Chapter 10

“Credentials?” A short fairy guard with bright red hair eyed us up as we stood at the first gate.

Kaillen and I showed him our Supernatural Forces badges courtesy of our new tablets, and the guard’s gaze lingered on my eyes for longer than what was considered polite as he compared my tablet’s photo.

Kaillen growled quietly, and the guard whipped his attention away as his companion continued to scan the forest behind us. “You really took care of all of those sprites?” the taller guard with a nasally tone asked.

“We did,” I replied as I eyed the glowing batons and cuffs strapped to the guards’ waists.

“The warden will thank you,” Nasal Tone replied. “We haven’t been able to clear them out, and they keep attacking families when they come here to visit.”

Kaillen gave him a sardonic grin. “Happy to be of service.”

“Place your hands here.” The red-haired guard held out a scanner, similar to the crystal spheres the SF used.

Kaillen went first, and a whip of magic lassoed around his wrist, holding him in place. Energy flared from the scanner and wrapped around the hunter’s large frame. Kaillen gritted his teeth, and I was guessing it was less from the feel of the magic and more from the fact that it was processing our identity. Mr. Secretive Hunter probably hated everything about this.

“*Pass. Mr. Kaillen King, consultant to the Supernatural Forces.*” A sing-song tone emitted from the device, and the guard released him and turned to me.

The guard’s shrewd gaze didn’t abate even when I also passed with flying colors.

“Next checkpoint is ahead. Have your credentials ready.” He and the other guard inserted keys into locks on opposite sides of the gates.

They turned their keys simultaneously, the movement so precise it was obvious they’d been doing this for years. A shudder in the wards appeared,

and a doorway materialized through the thick magic.

“Thanks again for your help with that herd,” Nasal Tone called.

“Anytime,” I replied as Kaillen and I stepped through the door.

My entire body shuddered from the feel of the prison’s admittance magic touching my skin. We strode to the next checkpoint and did the same procedure again.

“Your guide will arrive shortly,” the guard said after we passed the final inspection. “She’s usually on time, so it won’t be long.”

“Guide?” I inclined my head as Kaillen and I shared a veiled look. “Will she stay with us when we question the prisoner?”

The guard shrugged. “Not sure. That’s not my department.”

Kaillen and I exchanged another set of looks because how would Kaillen weave his spell over Jakub if the guide was able to detect his spell?

We waited just outside of the prison’s outer wall. The giant building rose in front of us, and I ran my palm over the rough exterior, too curious not to touch it.

The entire wall felt like tiny needles. I hissed when a jagged piece of rock nicked my skin, drawing blood.

“The prison was purposefully constructed from durvestine quartz,” a female said from behind us. “It deters inmates from trying to scale or climb down the walls.”

Kaillen and I swirled around to see a petite woman with near-white hair and wings flying toward us. Her wispy wings fluttered, making them appear translucent, as she peered at us with a curious expression. “Looks like you’re the wall’s latest victim.” She landed on the ground and nodded toward my palm as she stepped closer to me. “May I?”

She held out her hands, and since the guards didn’t look concerned about her, I figured she was a prison employee, so I gave her my injured palm.

The woman cupped my injury and closed her eyes. Warmth pulsed from her skin, and a tingling sensation worked up my arm before a cool sense of relief flowed through me.

“There. All done.”

She released me, and I inspected my hand, which was now completely healed. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

I studied my palm again, amazed that not a trace of my cut remained. "I've heard that some Solis fairies can heal."

"Some of us can. Our magic is quite diverse. Now, you'll have to excuse me for not introducing myself first. My name's Wenzil Flusserwine, and I was told by Commander Klebus that time is of importance."

My eyes bugged out. "Are you our guide?"

"I am." Wenzil turned. "Please follow me."

Kaillen drifted closer to my side as Wenzil's wings flapped, and she began flying only inches above the ground. She moved completely silently, her presence like a ghost.

"Did you hear her coming?" I asked under my breath to the hunter.

He frowned. "No. She's quieter than most of them."

We hurried behind her as she led us away from the main door, on a cobblestone path along the prison's perimeter.

I skipped over the stone rocks imbedded in the ground. "Where are we going?"

"The maximum security center. It has its own entrance," Wenzil called over her shoulder.

Fat rain drops suddenly began to fall from the sky, the drops shimmering in color. I cast a shield spell around us, thickening it to stop the rain from hitting us directly. Regardless, Wenzil picked up her pace as thunder rolled through the sky, and the pastel-colored clouds directly above turned into angry colors of magenta, indigo, and navy.

"They say it'll be a real gale today," Wenzil remarked as we rounded the prison's corner, and a new path appeared. It led straight across a field of short rainbow-colored grass, and at the end of the path lay a squat building that looked like a mound of lava.

Kaillen and I exchanged curious glances as Wenzil flew at a clipped pace, and we ran behind her.

When we reached the massive lava rock, I marveled at the smooth rectangular slabs along it, and with a start, realized they were doors.

"What is this place?" I asked, unable to help myself.

"It's where the most dangerous convicts are kept." Wenzil pulled a small pouch from her pocket and withdrew a pinch of powder. She cupped about a teaspoon of the silver powder on her hand and with a forceful blow, blew it onto the large slab in front of us.

A small keypad appeared, and she placed her finger against it. A flash of blue emitted from under her finger, then the slab began to glow, turning from a smooth rock to liquid onyx. "Hurry through. We only have thirty seconds before the rock solidifies again."

She beckoned us closer, and heart pounding, Kaillen and I both stepped over the threshold simultaneously.

I nearly yelped at the feel of ice pressing against my skin, then realized that I couldn't breathe as a moment of panic seized me, but it was over before it'd begun, and then we were on the other side of the rock, and a small reception area stood before us.

A guard was positioned behind a desk, and he nodded at Wenzil. "Prisoner 9837 has been moved into the conference room."

"Thank you," Wenzil replied.

My heart picked up as Wenzil led us through the door, a normal one thankfully, that opened to a long hall lined with solid cells on the left. "Is this where prisoners are kept?"

"No, this wing only contains rooms for meetings such as yours. The actual cell blocks are deeper in the prison."

A very faint sound of maniacal laughter drifted to my ears from behind us.

"Please ignore any unpleasant distractions," Wenzil said briskly as she led us to the third door, which had another guard stationed outside of it. "The convicts kept in here can be quite . . . disturbed."

Kaillen snickered.

The guard opened the door to our conference room, and my heart stuttered when Jakub came into view.

He sat behind a table, his hands and feet shackled. Dull brown hair fell around his ears, making me wonder when he'd last had a haircut, but the cool, clinical detachment that had always surrounded him was still present as he sat with calm disinterest.

"You have thirty minutes. If you need anything during your questioning, please signal the guard by pressing here." Wenzil waved toward a button on the wall, then at a camera in the top corner. "All questioning is recorded. It's one of the few technologies we've allowed into the fae lands from Earth. Of course, that was at the generosity of the king and queen after the Supernatural Forces requested it from the courts. Now, you'll have to be mindful of the rules. Prisoners are not allowed to be

touched under any circumstances, for your safety of course. And if you finish early, let the guard know. All you need to do is knock on the door, and he'll let you out."

Wenzil was about to leave, fluttering toward the door on silent wings, when Kaillen stepped in her path. "Why only thirty minutes?"

She nodded toward the walls. "The walls shift at that time. The rooms in the maximum security portion of the prison change constantly. After thirty minutes, you may find yourself somewhere you'd rather not be."

"And there's no way to stop that?" I asked.

"No. This prison was warded and crafted from ancient magic from the time of the gods. It moves to its own rhythm. Our spellcasters merely strengthen the magic but are unable to alter it, but count yourself lucky. This prison has never been breached." Her wings fluttered again, and she levitated several inches off the floor and closed the distance to the door. "I'll leave now. You're already down to twenty-eight minutes." She nodded upward, and I realized that behind us a clock hung on the wall.

With that, the door shut with a finality behind her, and Kaillen and I turned to face the sorcerer who had made my life a living hell.

Chapter 11

Jakub leaned back in his chair, his expression aloof. Cuffs encircled his wrists and ankles, which shackled him to his seat, and I had to bite back a smirk. The irony of seeing *him* cuffed filled me with perverse pleasure.

“You’ve become SF members,” Jakub stated, his tone saying he was neither interested nor surprised by that fact.

“Did the suits give it away?” I held out my arm and inspected the black material.

Ignoring my sarcastic quip, Jakub’s gaze traveled to my neck tattoo. “You bear your true magic now.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Kaillen snarled. “You don’t deserve the right to speak to her. You talk to me.”

Jakub raised an eyebrow as he studied Kaillen. “You would have made a valuable collective. It’s truly a pity we never captured you.”

My temper flared at the absolute arrogance of this man. Even here, locked away in a prison built from diamond-hard rock and ancient magic kissed by the gods, the European mobster was still so sure of himself, as though nothing could hurt him. Not even here.

Jakub inclined his head toward me again. “Tell me, have they come?”

Kaillen seethed, and a pulse of magic shot from the hunter. In a blink, Kaillen had Jakub’s jaw in his hands as black fire flamed in his eyes.

“What did I say? You don’t talk to her.” Kaillen’s tone shook with power, and a tremor ran through me as the strength of the underworld flowed from his lips. “You talk to *me*.”

Jakub’s eyes widened briefly, but then his gaze flicked to the camera. “You’re being recorded, Fire Wolf.”

Kaillen smirked. “If you say so.”

My breath caught when I realized the pulse of magic I’d just felt had been Kaillen casting an illusion spell.

The hunter released Jakub, and the sorcerer thumped back into his seat, his cuffed wrists banging on the table just as a whispered spell flowed from

Kaillen's lips.

The hunter's eyes had locked on Jakub, and those black flames danced in his irises. The temperature in the room rose until it felt as if a fire roared at my back.

My otherworldly powers swirled inside me, as though recognizing that another supernatural—whose power rivaled mine—was also present.

When Kaillen finished whispering the words, I realized it was the first spell I'd ever heard him say aloud, which could only mean that it was so complex even the demon hunter had needed words to cast it.

A shroud of magic descended over Jakub, and his cold expression vanished. The mobster's eyes turned vacant, but he stared directly at the hunter.

"Who do you belong to?" Kaillen asked in a lethal-sounding voice, a voice colder than I'd ever heard him speak before.

"You," Jakub replied.

"Who do you answer to?"

"You," Jakub replied, without missing a beat.

"Holy shit," I whispered under my breath as I cast a worried glance at the camera. "Kaillen, the cameras are recording—"

"They're still seeing the illusion that I already cast. They won't see this."

Kaillen's power-imbued tone hadn't lessened, and goosebumps peppered my skin. The hunter's gaze was still locked onto Jakub's, but I had a feeling that if Kaillen looked at me, I would see pitch-black eyes with the strength of Lucifer's grandson shining through them.

"Tell me how you opened that portal," Kaillen commanded.

Jakub stayed slack in his chair. "I used the key."

"What key?"

"A descendant of the Bone Eater line."

My breath caught, but Kaillen's questioning didn't slow. "Who's the descendant?"

"Tala Davenport."

A shiver ran through me. *I was a Bone Eater?* I'd known I was the key Jakub had been searching for, but to also learn that I was a descendant of the Bone Eaters was new information.

"How did you know Tala was the descendant?" Kaillen asked again as the temperature in the room rose even higher. It felt as though the

underworld was just beneath our feet.

“I didn’t until I saw her power. When Preston came to me, telling me he’d heard of a supernatural in Chicago who could enhance another’s magic, I suspected it could be her, but I didn’t know until I saw her demonstrate her power on you in New York.”

My nostrils flared when I remembered that day. It was the day I’d revealed my forbidden power to Kaillen, and that was only because I’d had no choice. If I hadn’t, we would have died.

“How did you know Tala was the key to opening the portal?” Kaillen asked.

“The tomes told me.”

My eyebrows drew together, but Kaillen’s attention on Jakub didn’t waver. “What tomes?” the hunter asked.

“The tomes in the Phantasia library in Bulgaria.”

The Bulgarian libraries? How the hell did Jakub get in there? The five supernatural libraries in Bulgaria were the most coveted libraries in the world, but the average supernatural wasn’t allowed admittance. Only those in a position of authority were allowed entry, yet you still had to have a gargoyle representative at your side.

“How did you get in?” Kaillen asked, obviously wondering the same thing.

“I didn’t. I used a mob contact with SF ties who was able to enter.”

I crossed my arms. *Klebus will certainly want to know about that.*

“What did the tomes tell your informant?” Kaillen asked.

“They confirmed what an old sorcerer told me, that there is an ancient spell that could create a portal to where the Bone Eaters lived if I had the key. He also said there’s an ancient spell that tries to replicate the Bone Eaters’ power. The spell worked, although it didn’t give me power as strong as theirs. But with that spell I could command others, make them do my bidding, and I could use their power to open the portal if I had the key.”

Again, this wasn’t new information. The SF had confirmed the neck tattoos had been the catalyst to that spell, which had fueled Jakub’s immense strength, but learning of this old sorcerer explained how Jakub had come to learn of that spell and my lineage.

“What old sorcerer told you of these tomes?” Kaillen demanded.

“He was a sorcerer that owed my organization money. We went to his house to collect payment. He didn’t have it, so I told my men to break his

legs. The old man started begging me not to, and then he told me that he could give me riches greater than anything I'd ever dreamed of if I let him live and let him go."

I figured the organization Jakub was referring to was the European mafia that he'd been a part of. *Leg breaking*. I nearly scoffed. How original.

"What did this old sorcerer reveal?" Kaillen asked in that scary-as-fuck voice.

"He showed me a document that had been passed down in his family. It said that thousands of years ago, an ancient royal race had come to this land and had terrorized the supernaturals and humans with their colossal power as they searched for someone they had lost. But the person they sought was never found, so before they returned to their realm, they commissioned a family of powerful sorcerers. This family's job was to hunt for the missing descendant and to alert the royal line if they were ever found. Time passed. The descendant was never located, but their pact with the ancient queen lived on."

My brow furrowed. *Repay a debt long due*. Malikhi's words slammed into me. *Holy shit*. This was what he'd been talking about. And that text from Archie that spoke of an ancient civilization from a lost realm must be referring to the same group as well.

"Tell me everything else you know of this," Kaillen commanded.

"This sorcerer told me that his family had been promised riches greater than anything of this world if they were able to find the descendant, but then the portal to Lunaris abruptly closed. It happened suddenly, without his family being alerted. The sorcerer's family believed that the descendant closed it, but they also knew the descendant could reopen it if they were found."

"Lunaris?" I asked.

"What's Lunaris?" Kaillen demanded.

"The Bone Eaters' realm."

My lips parted. *Lunaris was the name of the new realm?* That was why I'd been summoned to the Lunarian Palace. It was probably their capital.

"How am I from there?" I asked.

Kaillen locked eyes with Jakub again. "Answer her question."

"You're her descendant," he replied simply.

"Who's descendant?"

"The royal that was lost."

My blood chilled. *Your Highness*. It was what Malikhi had called me. I rubbed my arms. “But how? And why doesn’t my sister have any of this power?”

“Answer her,” Kaillen commanded again.

“The tomes say that the descendant hid among the supernaturals and humans on this planet and eventually birthed children. However, her blood became diluted as the generations passed, and her star-flecked eyes and tattoos were no more. Yet every few generations, the power of the Bone Eaters would surface, a fluke of nature activated by the gene again. Because of that, every few centuries, one of the descendant’s generational offspring would wield the Bone Eaters’ power. But the family must have known the consequences of that great power, because if the portal was formed again, and the other Bone Eaters sensed her power, they would come.”

I sagged against the wall as heat from it pushed into my back. This was why my mother had warned me and Tessa never to reveal my power? That we needed to protect the secret of our ancestry?

I shook my head. “But why? Why would you open the portal again if it risked bringing the Bone Eaters here?”

Jakub’s expression stayed blank. “Power. Money. I shall be rewarded for my service. The tomes said as much.”

“Which is why you’re waiting for them,” I snarled in a cold tone. “But news flash, dude, they’ll never find you. You’ll rot here for the rest of your life for what you’ve done.”

“Are you sure about that?” Jakub’s attention stayed on Kaillen, but his question was directed entirely at me.

Kaillen’s hands clenched into fists. “How do we close the portal?”

“You can’t.”

“There must be a way if you were able to open it.”

“Only the queen can close the portal.”

“But you just said that you think the descendant closed it thousands of years ago.”

He shrugged. “It’s only a guess.”

Kaillen and I shared a confused look. “So either the queen or the descendant closed it, but it makes no sense that the queen would have if they were still hoping to find the descendant,” Kaillen said.

I nodded in agreement. “Which means there has to be a way to close it from here if the descendant did. We just have to figure out how they did it.”

Kaillen nodded, a satisfied gleam filling his black-fire eyes. Turning back to Jakub, he asked, "What else do you know that you're not telling us?"

"Nothing."

The hunter banged his fists on the table. "You know more. Tell me now."

"I don't know more," Jakub repeated in that eerily calm tone again.

And I realized Jakub truly *didn't* know anything other than what he'd told us.

"Kaillen," I said, glancing at the clock. "We only have a few minutes."

The hunter scowled, his chest rising with every breath, but after another deep shuddering inhale, the energy around him receded, and the sweltering heat in the room abated. Whatever magic he'd commanded in the spell he'd just wielded retreated.

Jakub blinked, then shook his head. He mopped at the sweat on his brow, then looked between me and Kaillen as though waiting for us to say something.

"He doesn't remember anything?" I said quietly.

"No." Kaillen shoved his chair back, not bothering to elaborate as a rush of magic shot from him. It washed over me, the feeling similar to how it'd felt when we'd entered the room, and I knew that whatever illusion magic the hunter had initially cast had just been dispelled. A glance at the camera told me that it was still recording.

"Let's go." Kaillen clamped a hold of my wrist with only minutes to spare and banged on the door.

"Why did you come?" Jakub asked, his interest once again detached, as though we were merely filling in time while he waited for his reward.

Neither of us answered.

The guard opened the door, and the hunter and I emerged into the cool hallway. "Do we need to wait for Wenzil?" I asked him.

But before the guard could reply, Wenzil breezed around the corner at the end of the hall. "All done, I see. Were you satisfied with his answers?"

I gave a tight smile, wondering how well Kaillen's illusion spell had worked as Kaillen replied smoothly, "Very."

Wenzil's smile widened as she floated toward us on her beating wings. "He must be feeling the heat of this place. I was watching to see if he'd be more cooperative with you and was delighted to see that he was so eager."

My smile now felt like it was about to crack. I had no freakin' clue what illusion Kaillen had shown them. For all I knew, he'd had me doing handstands in the corner while he man-sprawled in his chair as Jakub spilled his guts.

"Like you said, maybe he's starting to realize what a shit position he's in here," I said with a shrug. "Maybe he's hoping that by complying his sentence will become more lenient."

Wenzil nodded. "He wouldn't be the first."

"We better be on our way." I tugged the hunter with me.

"Yes, we best hurry." Wenzil shot to the front of us, guiding the way. "The walls will be shifting soon."

Behind us, the door banged open, and the guard led Jakub out. The mobster and I locked eyes, his cool detachment so familiar that I nearly shuddered, but then I remembered that for once, we'd gotten the better of him.

Because of the complexity of Kaillen's spell, Jakub had no idea that we'd just forced all of that information from his slimy lips.

As if thinking the same thing, Kaillen gave Jakub the finger as I blew the mobster a mocking kiss.

Chapter 12

Neither Kaillen nor I said a word about the interrogation as we went through the exit process of the prison. Although, I wasn't sure we could call it an interrogation considering Kaillen had basically compelled Jakub to talk against his will, even though the fucker had no recollection of the hunter doing so.

Rain fell heavily outside, but I kept a firm shield spell around us, stopping any of the drops from hitting us since apparently the prison's thick wards still allowed the weather in.

It was only after we were on the other side of the wards and back in the field outside of the prison that I finally felt like I could breathe again. We'd somehow gotten away with our illegal questioning.

"Let's get back to Earth," I said as Kaillen tugged a portal key from his suit.

He clasped my hand and pulled me closer to his side, and since he didn't snarl a heartbeat later, I hoped that meant his wolf was still brewing over my potential date tonight or show of power with the sprites.

But I knew that could be wishful thinking. Realistically, Kaillen was probably exhausted from the amount of magic that spell had taken from him.

"Open key, for though I ask, I need a door for this new task." Kaillen's words activated the portal key, and it felt as though the world dropped out from beneath us.

We fell through time and space, then plopped out onto damp pavement as cool air blew around us, and the portal key disintegrated into dust.

Heavy industrial sounds filled the air, and tall brick walls lined either side of us in an alleyway. A quick glance toward the alley's mouth, which showed a distant bridge, confirmed my suspicions.

"Is there a reason we're outside of your man cave in Portland and not back in Chicago?"

“My base is safe and private. I need some time to recharge my magic after that interrogation. That, and we need to talk.”

“Talk about what Jakub said?”

“Among other things.”

Kaillen pulled me through the familiar wards surrounding his man cave, and I tried not to think about the last time I’d stepped through this magical doorway. It’d been right after Kaillen and I had made love for the first time, had claimed one another, and then had gone off to the fae lands to capture Jakub.

My belly knotted at the memory. Little did either of us know at that time that our claiming would be so short-lived.

That aching hole opened up in my chest again at the loss of my wolf and the destruction of our mate bond. It reared its ugly head viciously and threatened to sink jagged teeth into me, but I shoved those feelings aside, determined not to dwell on them.

The wards released us, and the hunter’s base materialized, the brick wall now at our backs. His man cave was small, more like a studio apartment than anything. Several doors were on the far side of the room. A couch and chair, along with a large flat-screen TV, sat in the corner. Beside that was the familiar tiny kitchen with its small fridge. The last time I’d been here, I’d pretty much cleaned out the hunter’s cupboards since my wolf had made me so ravenous.

I eyed the corner area, which was still curtained off. It was there that the hunter did most of his scrying. I still had no idea what was hidden behind the thick drape or how his scrying magic worked, but my usual curiosity fled when I beheld the large bed just to the side of it.

It was in that bed that we’d laid claim to one another.

The hunter cleared his throat, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he was reliving those memories too.

“Should we sit on the couch?” I asked awkwardly.

The muscle in the corner of Kaillen’s jaw clenched. “I think he’ll allow it. He’s pacing again. Between the looming threat from Lunariss, the show of your strength, and your *date*”—he growled the word—“my wolf is once again finding you tolerable.”

“Back to tolerable.”

“It beats having him tell me to attack you.”

“True,” I replied, feeling a bit more hopeful. “Should we try sitting a little closer this time and see how he reacts?”

Kaillen nodded swiftly, then eyed the fridge. “Beer?”

“For sure.” Alcohol was definitely needed right now, and not just because I’d learned that I was a descendant of the Bone Eaters, but also because I was about to try sitting beside my boyfriend and was hoping that I didn’t get a nasty bite because of it.

Funny to think I’d craved those bites only a few short days ago. Now, they freaked me the fuck out because they’d gone from being love bites to the potential of losing a chunk of skin.

Kaillen was at the fridge in three large strides and had two beer tops popped in seconds. I moved to the couch and sat near the middle. On silent footsteps, he joined me.

When we were seated only inches away from one another, I tried not to focus on how strong his thighs looked as he handed me my drink.

I swallowed a large gulp, letting the frothy brew wash over my taste buds, then took another long pull as my heartbeat ticked up since the hunter was watching me intently.

I finally set my beer down. “Is your wolf growling or something?”

“No, but he’s . . . agitated.”

“Because we’re sitting so close?”

He shook his head, his amber eyes glittering. “Because of your date.”

“Non-date,” I corrected.

“It’s a date,” he growled.

“Aren’t we supposed to be talking about Jakub?”

“I’d much rather be zipping that suit off you.”

“Really?” A rush of heat crawled up my neck, and my suit instantly regulated my temperature. A light whirl activated as a breeze of cool wind flowed over my skin.

Kaillen’s lips kicked up. “You seem to be getting a little hot under the collar. Was it something I said?”

I took another drink from my beer, giving him a nonchalant side-eye. “You’re so damned cocky.”

“It’s my most redeeming quality.” When I laughed, he added, “And I think we both know that I can get you hot with just a look.” He leaned closer, and my heart pattered in my chest.

“Is he going to bite me if we try anything?”

“Your suit should protect you against a werewolf’s bite.” He leaned down, his intentions clear when his gaze dropped to my lips.

A rush of anticipation shot through me, and my fingers itched to run up his chest. He looked hot as sin.

But just when his sweet breath puffed against my skin, he reared back and snarled. “She’s our fucking mate!” he roared, then snapped his teeth. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I jumped back as another grumble came from him, then a second snarl. My breathing sped up more as I watched Mr. Lunatic Wolf raise his deranged head again.

“Anyway, back to Jakub,” I said in a rush and scrambled to the end of the couch. I grabbed my beer on the way and took another hasty drink. Already, the alcohol was beginning to take effect since I hadn’t eaten in hours, but I welcomed the dizzying feeling.

Kaillen snarled once more as irritation washed from him in waves. “Stupid fucking wolf,” he said under his breath.

I hiccupped, and he cast me a side-eye. “Are you drunk already?”

“Nope, but I am pleasantly buzzed.” I patted my tummy. “Empty stomach.”

“You should eat.”

“Probably. I imagine somewhere in that handbook of ours it says we shouldn’t be drunk when we’re wearing our Batman suits.”

His lips twitched.

“Do you have any snacks?” I asked hopefully.

“I don’t have much. You cleaned me out last time we were here, and I haven’t had a chance to restock.” He went to the kitchen before I could reply and opened a cupboard. “Nuts sound okay? It’s all I got.”

“I love nuts.”

“My nuts?” he asked with a devilish grin.

I nearly blew beer threw my nose. “Oh. My. Gods. That’s officially sex joke number three.”

“I couldn’t resist.”

“And your wolf doesn’t mind your bad sex jokes?”

“He’s too simple to understand that one.” Kaillen strode back to the couch with a mostly empty canister of nuts and poured a portion into a bowl.

I scooped up a handful and began munching on peanuts and cashews as the hunter watched me.

“Something on your mind?” I asked.

“Are you still planning to go out with Carlos?”

Somewhere in my fuzzy brain, it struck me that even after everything we’d learned from Jakub, the hunter was still mostly concerned about another wolf stealing me away.

A smile curved my lips as I flicked a peanut in the air and tried to catch it, but it hit my cheek and fell to the floor. “Yep.”

Kaillen settled back more on the sofa and slung an arm over the couch back, his thick bicep clearly visible in his suit. “Even after learning what we just did? Don’t you think we should keep searching for ways to close the portal, instead of”—a low growl rumbled in his chest—“going on *dates*.”

“Non-dates,” I corrected and popped a walnut into my mouth.

“It’s a—”

“Hey, if you could have a non-pack, I can go on a non-date.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Is that what this has come to?”

I shrugged and grabbed another peanut. This time when I tossed it in the air, I actually caught it in my mouth.

“Tala,” the hunter growled.

But I ignored his irritation and kept eating. “And actually, to answer your question, I’m definitely going out with Carlos after what we just learned. If I’m up against some portal that we might never close, then I think the least I deserve is some decent sushi and the chance to make your wolf think I’m his mate again.”

Flames appeared in Kaillen’s eyes. “There has to be another way.”

“Maybe, but how much time do we have to find one? The only thing your wolf’s positively responded to in the last forty-eight hours is a bit of jealousy and some sprites trying to kill me. And since I’m trying to stay alive, it only makes sense to embrace the safer of the two options, so I plan to rub your wolf’s damned stubborn muzzle in my non-date with Carlos.”

The flames in the hunter’s eyes turned into an inferno, but they were the scarlet embers I was used to, not those scary-ass underworld black flames. “I’ll take you out for sushi. You don’t need Carlos for that.”

“I know.”

“Then don’t go.”

“You seem to be missing the point. Do you have a better idea to get your wolf back on my side?”

The hunter snapped his teeth together. “But you’re *mine*.”

My insides fluttered. It was the third time since our bond had been broken that he’d said that. Heart beating faster, I replied, “And you’re mine.”

“Then how the hell would you feel if I went out with another woman?”

I shot another nut into the air, caught it, and said while chewing, “I’d claw her eyes out. Then I’d cut your nuts off.”

A dark smile lifted his lips. “Gods, I love that violent side of yours.”

“Still? That’s hopeful.”

Kaillen leaned closer to me. “Does that mean you’ll understand if I disembowel Carlos with a dull spoon?”

“Eww, super graphic.”

He inched more toward me, and for the briefest moment, golden light flared in his eyes. My heart picked up a furious pace at that sight, even more so when he rumbled, “My wolf is paying attention. He’s not telling me to attack you, so you’re not going out with Carlos. That’s final.”

Magic hummed inside me, as though rising to the challenge of the hunter trying to control me. I finished the last of the nuts, dusted my hands, and faced him. “Yes, I am going out with Carlos, and *that’s* final. If your wolf is letting you sit next to me at just the thought of me dating Carlos, imagine how he’ll be if I actually have dinner with the dude.”

“You can’t be—”

“Now, back to the matter at hand. Jakub. Remember him?”

We held eye contact, the seconds ticking by, and the urge to squirm rose when Kaillen let a push of alpha dominance surge from him, but I called upon my witch magic and didn’t cower. Still . . .

Damn. Was this what Klebus felt every time she and the hunter got into one of their pissing contests? My respect for her grew by a billion, because the urge to look away strengthened as the hunter’s dominance pummeled me, but I refused to submit.

He eventually glowered and tore his gaze away. “Dammit, Tala.”

“Look, let’s not fight. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get your wolf onboard with me again, but I won’t kiss Carlos or anything like that.”

The hunter whipped back to me. “If he tries to kiss you, I’m fucking killing him.”

“Fine, then carry a spoon around if it makes you feel better.”

He scowled. “How much time do we have before your *non-date* with Carlos?”

I eyed the clock on his stove. “It’s already two in the afternoon here, which means it’s four back home, so I officially have three hours.”

“And we still need to report back to Klebus.”

“Yeah, and we better include in our report that a traitorous SF member is how Jakub got info from the libraries.”

He nodded, then smiled wickedly. “That’ll surely piss her off.”

I laughed. “Try not to look too pleased over that. We’re supposed to be on the same team after all.” I drained the last of my beer and added, “We better rehash things quickly while you rest and recharge your magic, so we can figure out what the hell we’re going to do from here.”

Kaillen took a drink, his expression sullen. I could tell he was still pissed about Carlos, but then he raked a hand through his hair and said, “We need to find the source of that information that old sorcerer spoke of.”

I nodded. “It sounds like that sorcerer knew of my family in Lunaris, and Jakub also said that he learned how to open the portal from some old tomes in the Phantasia library in Bulgaria.”

“We need to find those tomes, and whatever other old books or scrolls have information about Lunaris and the Bone Eaters.”

“But we can’t get into the Bulgarian Libraries without a representative.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re officially SF members now. We could ask Commander Klebus to line one up for us.” Kaillen took another pull from his beer as his expression turned brooding.

I grabbed the few remaining nuts, and in my buzzed state, I couldn’t help but envision zipping off the hunter’s suit as I munched on them. It felt like years since I’d touched his smooth skin and solid flesh.

Kaillen’s nostrils flared. “Care to share what you’re thinking?”

“Your wolf wouldn’t approve.”

“No,” he replied, his voice dipping, “but I definitely would.”

I snorted a laugh. “I may be fantasizing about something. I know you don’t like your suit, but we didn’t get nearly enough time together before all of this shit happened, and I’m seriously sex deprived.”

His gaze darkened. “Should we try it?”

My breath lodged in my throat. “Try . . . having sex?”

“I don’t think my wolf would allow that yet, but we could try other things.”

My heart raced. “Other things?”

Kaillen set his beer down and moved an inch closer. “Kissing . . . and stuff.”

And stuff. Okay, I’d apparently turned into a parrot, but it was funny how those two little words had me wanting to squirm as all sorts of images formed in my head. “Can you control him if he suddenly wants to attack me?”

“Yes.”

I smiled sadly. “I was only beginning to learn how to control my wolf when she was taken.”

The hunter’s finger grazed over my cheek. “Do you genuinely miss her? You’re not just saying that?”

“I do. I wish I still had her, so whatever guilt you’re still holding onto, you can officially let it go. Initially, I hated everything about having her born inside me, but it’s crazy how quickly we were growing in sync after I’d established dominance over her.”

A sad smile lifted Kaillen’s lips. “That’s how it’s supposed to be. They’re supposed to feel like an extension to yourself.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I guess I’ll never know.”

“Tala,” he murmured, his wolf’s pain echoing in that one word, and then his lips were covering mine.

The kiss took me so much by surprise that for a moment, I didn’t move. But then the taste of the hunter and the feel of his tongue sweeping into my mouth pulled a moan from me. I threaded my fingers through his hair and drew him closer. Needing him. Wanting him. Craving him so badly that it physically hurt.

Kaillen growled low in his throat, and I stilled, but then his hands clenched tightly around my waist, caging me in.

Softening, I molded myself to him, loving the feel of his hard chest pressing against mine but cursing his damned suit since it covered every inch of him.

In a swift move, he had me straddling him. My knees pushed into the sofa’s soft cushions as I marveled at how easy it was to bend despite being covered head to toe. And the feel of the hunter beneath me . . . *Gods.* Kaillen was already hard and ready, and from his frantic movements, I

could only assume that he was soaking up every second of this until his wolf made it impossible.

I settled more onto him, rubbing my core against his hard length. My belly clenched, a rush of desire shooting through me as I ached to join with him.

His fingers found the zipper to my suit, and he unzipped it in a flourish, and then his hands were on me. Skin to skin.

I moaned in pleasure as he worked down my body, kneading my flesh and massaging my muscles.

“Yes, Kaillen,” I breathed when his hand dipped down, shoving my panties out of the way until he found my moist heat.

A low growl rumbled in his chest when his fingers found me wet and ready. He began working my nub, that sweet bundle of nerves.

I gasped when he stuffed a finger inside me as his palm worked me, demanding that I respond to him as he thrust his finger into me again and again.

“More. More,” I demanded.

Kaillen rubbed me faster and harder as he continued to kiss me and fuck my mouth with his tongue. I ground against him as his finger scraped and pumped. “Yes, I’m getting close.”

Another growl ripped from him, but this one sounded deeper and more menacing.

I rubbed on his finger, grinding against him harder, intent on release, but then I was suddenly sitting on the couch cushion beside him.

Before I could process what just happened, Kaillen was standing on the other side of his base. He stabbed his fingers through his hair, making the short locks stand on end.

That wild look entered his eyes again. “*Fuck!*” He pounded his fist against the wall, the wards flaring upon contact. “Fuck him!” he snarled. The hunter tore another hand through his hair and paced furiously back and forth.

“Fuck who?” I asked in a thick voice. My entire body was vibrating with need for him, and dammit, it was hard to think. Forcing the fog to clear from my mind, I finally managed, “Fuck Jakub? Or Carlos? Or your wolf? Who are we fucking?”

Kaillen stopped his frantic stalking and faced me. His broad chest heaved as fiery flames coated his eyes. “My fucking wolf. It’s like a war is

breaking me apart from the inside.” He glanced at his chest, then beat a fist against his heart. “I can’t even begin to describe how much of a battle it is with him. I want you so fucking bad, but even though he’s starting to remember your taste and knows your scent, he now feels like you’re an imposter. He thinks you’re someone trying to impersonate our mate, and he’s howling in rage.” A burst of heat shot from the hunter, those flames in his eyes growing higher.

I let out a harsh laugh, the alcohol making my own anger rise. “Why? It’s still *me*,” I said, coming to my feet as my hands balled into fists. “I’m still Tala. Still his mate. Still the woman he chose for *you*.” I poked a finger into his chest, wishing I could do that right to his wolf. “And just because my powers are stronger now, and my scent is more powerful, and you know, I’ve got these weird-ass eyes and neck tattoo, it doesn’t change that I’m still me. *I* haven’t changed. I’m still Tala.”

“I know,” he replied with a frustrated sigh. “*I* know that, but *he*’s a fucking psycho.”

I crossed my arms, huffing. “Well, how the hell do we remind him that this is initially how I was when he met me, minus my stronger scent?”

Kaillen’s teeth ground together, the muscle in his jaw ticking. “I don’t know. I have no fucking clue.”

I tapped my foot as my rage over all that was happening between us threatened to overtake me, but anger wouldn’t help this, and I had no idea what would.

Letting out a defeated sigh, I asked, “Is your magic recharged enough to leave?”

Kaillen nodded. “I’m at about twenty percent. That’s good enough.”

“Then let’s get back to Chicago, tell Klebus what we learned, and see if she can get us into the Bulgarian libraries. If we can’t fix our bond, then let’s sure as hell close that freakin’ portal.”

Chapter 13

We were back in Chicago, warming the familiar chairs in Commander Klebus's office as Kaillen and I sat across from the vampire. We'd used a portal key to transport us here, since Kaillen's magic was still recharging.

"So we have a traitor." Rage burned in the commander's eyes. "I will be on that immediately, and when we find who he is, he'll regret ever having been born." Smoothing her expression, she added, "The rest of your report is very interesting." The vamp leaned back in her chair, her golden skin shining in the overhead lights. "And how did you get this information from Jakub? It sounds like he was very forthcoming with you. More so than he ever was with us."

"I must be better looking, ma'am," the hunter replied without missing a beat.

Her eyes narrowed, but then she said with mock sweetness, "Despite your dashing good looks, Mr. King, it's quite surprising that Jakub would willingly reveal so much."

"Maybe we have a knack for questioning," I interjected. While I wasn't sweating yet, the look in the commander's eyes was making me nervous, but Kaillen seemed to be relishing it if his grin was any indication.

The hunter lifted his shoulders. "Or we're just better at this than you are."

I kicked him subtly under his seat when Klebus's expression turned heated.

"I'll be reviewing the video from that interview," the commander said shrewdly.

Kaillen's grin grew. "I hope you find it as informative as we did."

I gave a tight smile and wondered if it was illegal to wring my mate's neck.

On our way here, Kaillen had told me that the recording would show Jakub telling us everything that he'd revealed to us under the compulsion spell. However, the illusion spell Kaillen had cast to hide our true activities

meant that it would appear as if *I'd* asked the questions, not the hunter. When I asked him why he'd done that, Kaillen had said that it made more sense for Jakub to be willing to answer to me, since I was who he'd been so infatuated with.

I had to admit the hunter's logic made sense. Still, I was now neck deep in this illegal-as-fuck plan, and there was no turning back now.

But if Kaillen was nervous at the risks we were taking, he hid it completely. "Will that be all, ma'am?" he asked and rose from his seat. "You're now fully debriefed, and it's getting late. Not to mention, we have a trip to prepare for."

Commander Klebus bristled. "For the time being, yes, we're finished, but may I remind you of the oath you took. You're to uphold the Supernatural Forces' ethics. They're clearly spelled out in the handbook, and you signed a contract that stated you understood and are in complete compliance with that code of ethics."

Kaillen brought a hand to his chest. "Are you doubting me, ma'am? We didn't do anything unethical. Jakub seemed to be in awe of Tala and answered everything that she wanted to know."

The vamp eyed him, then me. She was clearly suspicious as hell, but I somehow managed a bright smile.

The vamp huffed. "I hope that's true."

Kaillen gave her a cocky grin. "Should I remind you that you were nearly tripping over yourself to hire me? Now that you have me, you almost look as though you're having second thoughts . . . ma'am."

"No, I'm not having second thoughts, Mr. King. We're delighted that you've joined us. I'm merely reminding you of protocol since you're new to the organization."

"Consider me reminded, ma'am."

I stood from my seat too and eyed the clock. It was already half past five. "What's the likelihood that we'll be able to travel to Bulgaria tomorrow?" I asked, hoping to break up their little duel.

Klebus tapped on her tablet. "I'll need to contact our gargoyle representatives to see who's available, but yes, plan on leaving first thing tomorrow. If answers lie in tomes hidden away in the Phantasia library, then we need to uncover them."

I dipped my head, and together, Kaillen and I left her office. It was only once we were safely outside on the street that I said quietly to the

hunter, “She’s on to you.”

He grinned wickedly. “I know. I like it.”

I snorted. “You probably want to get caught just to see what she’d do.”

He shrugged. “It’s the demon in me.”

“Never would have guessed.”

We lingered on the sidewalk as cold November wind blew around us. Now that I no longer wore my SF suit, having changed back into my jeans and cropped sweater, the cold was biting.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow?” I asked as I wrapped my coat tighter around me.

“Hmm, about that.” All joking left Kaillen’s face. “What sushi restaurant is Carlos taking you to tonight?”

I arched an eyebrow. “Why do you want to know?”

“Call me curious.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re not going to follow us there, are you?”

“You’re almost making me sound like a jealous boyfriend.”

“That’s because you *are* a jealous boyfriend.”

He sidled closer to me until our chests nearly brushed. I sucked in a breath. It was the closest he’d come to me since his man cave. “What restaurant?”

“I’m not saying. It’s not a date, and nothing is going to happen between me and Carlos. I’m going there to break up with him, which is super weird since he and I aren’t together, but he deserves to know the truth without an audience about how I feel. However, your wolf can stew all night about how close we’ll be sitting together.”

Kaillen glowered. “You’re really not going to tell me?”

“Nope.”

He grumbled more. “Then call me when you leave.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied and saluted.

He gave me a heated look. “And if Carlos makes a move on you—”

“He’s not going to make a move on me after I reject him.”

“He said he loves you in that damned love letter he sent you,” he snarled.

I cocked my head. “Speaking of that letter, whatever happened to it?”

“I shredded it, burned it, stomped on the ashes, and then spat on it.”

“In that order?”

“Roughly.”

I covered my mouth to hide my laugh. "When did you do that?"

"When I went back to Ontario to confront my brother."

Hearing about Cameron sobered my amusement. "Have you talked to your brother, since . . . you know?"

I couldn't bring myself to talk about my first abduction that Cameron had orchestrated. Just the thought of it made my throat constrict.

Kaillen's brow furrowed, and a low growl vibrated his chest. "He won't hurt you again."

"I know," I replied quickly.

"Do you?"

I shrugged.

"I mean it, Tala. I won't let him hurt you again."

The intensity of his tone and the sheer violence swimming in his eyes made my pounding heart calm. "So have you spoken with him?"

"No. He's still hiding from me like the fucking coward he is, but I'll find him as soon as I can divest some time into hunting him, and when I do, there won't be any talking. Just slaying."

My eyes bugged out. "You're still planning to kill him?"

"We've already been over this. Yes. His days are officially numbered."

"But now that your wolf doesn't believe I'm your mate, is the, you know, urge or whatever to seek revenge still as strong?"

He frowned, then paused, as though truly contemplating my question. Another gust of wind hit us and ruffled his hair. "The soul-biting rage at what he did to you is still there, but you're right. It's a bit different. But in a good way. My thinking is clearer. I'm not so clouded by bloodlust."

"And you would be clouded by that if your wolf still felt mated to me?"

"Probably."

I made a face. "Are you always going to be this violent?"

"If someone harms you or tries to hurt you? Yes."

"Right. Noted." And the crazy thing was, that didn't overly bother me anymore. It was just who Kaillen was, and I accepted him for that. Fuck, I didn't just accept him. I freakin' loved him.

Kaillen pulled out his yellow crystal. "Should I take you home?"

"Do you have enough magic to do that?"

"I'm nearly fully recharged."

My eyebrows rose. It'd only taken him a few hours of rest to replenish his magic stores. That was mind-boggling since most sorcerers took at least a day, if not more, to fully recover after draining their magic. "I suppose it'd be rude to say no to an escort who just said he'd slay for me."

Kaillen began to swirl his arm as he gave me a wicked smile. "You can't say I'm not a gentleman."

∞ ∞ ∞

"So what's Kaillen think of Carlos taking you out?" Tessa asked with wide, sparkling eyes as she lounged on my bed. She lay on her stomach with her knees bent as her calves waved in the air. She'd been like that ever since I'd started getting ready for my non-date.

"He's not happy about it." I dusted some powder on my face, then lined my lids with eyeliner before twirling a mascara wand through my lashes. I'd already glamourised my features, using a concealment spell that would last for at least three hours. Once again, my irises looked sapphire and entirely human. The exploding stars, which I was slowly growing used to, were firmly hidden.

"I *knew* he'd be jealous."

I laughed. "Yes, you're right about that one."

"So has he gone all dominant on you again?"

I stopped my search for a blood-red lip gloss and remembered how Kaillen had tried to make me bend to his will and cancel my pseudo-date. "Um, you could call it that."

"And? What happened?" Her eyes lit up like a kid's on Christmas morning.

Since I knew she wouldn't stop hounding me for details until I spilled everything, I told her.

Her jaw dropped. "He said he's going to gut him with a dull spoon?"

"Gruesome, I know."

"He's got it bad for you, Tala, even if his wolf is super weird right now."

"I hope so, because I'm completely in love with the guy."

She sighed, a small smile lifting her lips. "It's good to see you happy again and acting like your old self. Seeing you so depressed when he disappeared—" Her face clouded. "I've never seen you like that before, not even when Carlos left you."

“I know. I know. I kinda lost it for a while, but I’m good now.”

“And you’re going to stay that way if I have any say in it.”

I eyed her suspiciously in my mirror. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you up to something?”

“No.” She smiled coquettishly. “I’m just referring to my genius idea to make him jealous. It looks like it’s working.”

Since I couldn’t find my red lip gloss, I plucked a lipstick called Berry Bomb from my cosmetic bag and smeared the pink-tinted lipstick across my lips. “Well, if jealousy is all it’ll take to get his wolf to recognize me again, then I’ll go on a date with a new dude every night.”

“Now, that would be fun!” She squealed just as a knock came at our front door.

A shimmer of magic washed over me, the wards alerting me that the newcomer didn’t intend us harm. “That must be him.”

“I’ll get it, so you can finish up.” Tessa leaped from the bed and dashed out of the room. Even though she’d spent the entire day working at Practically Perfect, one never would have guessed it. She was a ball of energy, but that wasn’t entirely surprising since she lived for drama, and my life was currently swimming in it.

I eyed myself in the mirror one last time. I’d dressed up a bit, but not so much that it would appear that I was trying. I wanted to look nice, but I didn’t want to impress my ex.

I figured my denim flared dress with a cinched belt and suede ankle boots were perfect for dinner out without screaming *take me home and fuck me*.

In a hurry, I put in simple stud earrings, then draped a few gold chains with small pendants over my neck. After running a quick brush through my hair, I called it good.

The sound of Carlos and Tessa talking in the living room filtered into my bedroom. I couldn’t make out their words since I didn’t have my wolf anymore. My footsteps faltered when that aching sadness stabbed me again. *Deep breath, Tala. Sooner or later, you’ll stop missing her.*

Squaring my shoulders, I strode out of my room and down the hall.

Tessa was laughing at something Carlos had said just as I rounded the corner. I stopped dead in my tracks. Carlos was holding a huge bouquet of two dozen roses.

Oh shit. He brought flowers.

My ex turned to me, a broad grin on his face. He froze as soon as he saw me, then he slowly looked me up and down. “Wow, Tala. You look incredible.”

“I do?” *Well, that backfired.*

He stalked toward me, his eyes never leaving mine, until he stood directly in front of me.

Carlos’s brown eyes glittered, and I took in his trendy button-up shirt, jeans, and leather shoes. Some kind of cologne clung to him that I wasn’t familiar with, and even though it smelled good, it didn’t draw me in.

Despite the nervousness that I was convinced was written all over my face, the predatory look in Carlos’s eyes remained. His smile widened as he held out the flowers. “These are for you.”

“Oh, thanks, but you really didn’t need to do that.”

He shrugged. “I wanted to.”

“All right, well, thanks,” I said again and then hurried to the kitchen to put them in water.

It was only as I was filling a vase that I noticed the card attached to a stem. I plucked it from the roses. *Hoping this is only the first dinner of many. Carlos xx*

I groaned and plopped the flowers into the water before returning to the living room.

“Should we go?” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling awkward as fuck, ’cause why had I thought this had been a good idea? Oh right, I wanted to make the hunter jealous. *Brilliant plan, Tess, just brilliant.*

And from the avid way my sister was watching both of us, she obviously still felt it was.

“Do you want a coat?” Carlos asked. “It’s chilly out, or I could keep you warm if you want to walk close.”

He seriously just said that.

“I’ll grab something.” I hurried to the coat rack hanging near the door and plucked my short leather jacket off the hook, but before I could put it on, Carlos was right behind me, running his hands lightly up my arms.

“Let me.” He took the garment and held it out for me to slip my arms into.

Guilt began piling onto me because it was so freakin’ apparent that Carlos thought this was a date.

When I turned around to face him, his nostrils flared, and a slight flare of worry hit his eyes. Yep, the dude had just caught my ashy scent that would have alerted him to how I was feeling.

Shaking himself, he smiled again, then he cocked his head. “Are you wearing contacts?”

I blinked and realized he was asking about my eyes, which were once again blue. “No, it’s a concealment spell.”

“You look like you used to.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was going for.” I waved toward the entryway. “Anyway, should we get going?”

“After you.”

I opened my mouth to tell Tessa goodbye and smothered an eye roll ’cause the girl was grinning like nobody’s business. “Need some popcorn?” I hissed at her.

But Tessa ignored me and waved us off. “Have fun, you two! Can’t wait to hear all about it.” She winked at me just as Carlos opened the door.

At least I only had my sister to contend with, because if Kaillen knew that Carlos had brought me flowers, written me a love note, then helped me get my coat on?

Yeah, he’d totally be reaching for his spoon . . .

Chapter 14

Carlos opened the door for me at the restaurant too, even though I tried to beat him to it, but the dude seemed intent on acting like a chivalrous gentleman, which was a bit odd since we'd never had that kind of relationship before.

"Is opening doors your new hobby?" I asked, trying to dispel the romantic atmosphere that my ex seemed intent on making.

Carlos cocked his head. "No, it's uh—" The door closed behind us as we stood in the restaurant's warm entryway, and the quiet din surrounded us. He ran a hand sheepishly through his hair. "I'm trying too hard, aren't I?"

I wrung my hands together. "You really don't need to."

He frowned for the merest second before the host asked us how many.

"Two. Reservations under Lopez," Carlos replied.

The host, a young guy probably in college, picked up two menus. "You can follow me."

"Have you eaten here before?" I asked Carlos as we followed the college kid through the sea of tables.

"Nope, but I heard that you wanted to try it."

I arched an eyebrow. "Where did you hear that?"

"Tessa. I texted her earlier today and asked her if there were any sushi restaurants you preferred, and she told me you and Prisha have been wanting to try this one."

"Did she?" I turned around to dip by another table, wondering what other meddling my sister had gotten herself into.

The host took us to a cozy two-person booth with a candle flickering in the middle of the table and a small purple orchid sitting just to the side of it.

"May I?" Carlos's hands drifted to my coat, lingering on my shoulders.

The feel of him touching me brought back a million memories from the time when we'd been together, but when my stomach dipped, it wasn't from excitement. Instead, guilt began eating away at me again. The dude

was really trying, and here I was, hoping to make Kaillen's wolf jealous so we could force our mate bond again. And I was doing that at Carlos's expense, since I was basically leading him on, although that truly hadn't been my initial intention.

Still . . . I was officially the worst person ever.

I made some kind of noncommittal noise in the back of my throat, and Carlos slipped my coat off, hanging it on the hook outside our booth before ushering me to sit first.

The host waited patiently until we were both seated, and I grabbed the menu from his outstretched hand. "Thanks."

"Your server will be with you shortly."

After he left, I made a point of studying the menu.

"Should we start with an appetizer?" Carlos asked as his hand reached across the table. He ran a finger over the back of my wrist.

My stomach turned over. This was going too far. "Carlos, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—"

A sudden push of dominant energy washed through the room, and Carlos drew his hand back, his nostrils flaring. My eyes snapped to the side, searching for the other supernatural that was among us.

Before I spotted anyone, Carlos growled, "What the fuck is *he* doing here?"

My eyes widened when I beheld none other than my lovely boyfriend, who was currently being seated at a table by the window. Kaillen made a show of angling in his seat to face us, as though he had no idea we were here and had only just noticed our presence.

The humans around us continued eating and sipping their drinks, none the wiser to the energy that was slamming through the room.

Another growl slipped from my ex. "Did you tell him where we were going?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then why is he here?"

"I'm sure you can guess the answer to that."

"I thought you two weren't together anymore?"

My attention snapped back to my ex. "I never said that."

Carlos's fingers tightened around his menu. "Then why did you come to the SF and request to be transferred to Tessa's safe house?"

“Because . . .” I shook my head, feeling flustered. “For a lot of reasons.” When I didn’t continue, he raised his eyebrows, so I huffed, “To be fair, it’s really none of your business.”

He frowned. “Hiding things from one another isn’t the best way to rekindle our relationship.”

I bristled, because as much as I’d originally had good intentions to let Carlos down gently, it was beginning to get on my nerves that he thought he could dump me years prior, then walk back into my life to pick up right where we’d left off, and then demand that I explain myself to him. As if *I* should be the one explaining.

Setting my menu back on the table, I said, “Have you ever wondered why you never felt I was your mate after we spent so many years together?”

He grunted. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You’re not at all concerned that I’m not your mate?”

“No. Most werewolves never meet their mate. It’s only by chance that it happens.”

“But don’t you want to hold out for that? Don’t you want to find your true mate?”

His eyes darkened. “No. I want *you*, Tala.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but the waitress appeared. “Hi there, my name’s Shalissa, and I’ll be your server tonight. Can I get you two anything to drink?” She set coasters down in front of us.

“Just water,” I replied.

Carlos’s frown grew. “You can order what you’d like. I’m buying.”

“No, you’re not, and water’s fine for me.”

Shalissa’s eyebrows rose.

Carlos muttered something under his breath, then said, “Water for me too.”

Across the room, dark energy strummed toward me. I cast an irritated glare at Kaillen, which he received wholeheartedly since he was currently staring at me. And considering he had enhanced hearing, he’d clearly heard everything Carlos and I had just said, which only aggravated me more.

Swinging back to Carlos, I grumbled, “This is not how I intended for this evening to go.”

Carlos sighed. “Me either.” He leaned forward, and his tone gentled. “Tala, what’s going on?”

I shook my head. "This was a mistake. I should have just told you at the SF, but I didn't want everyone overhearing it." I trained my gaze on him and softened my tone more. "I'm sorry, Carlos, but I don't want to get back together. Not today. Not tomorrow. We were done years ago. But I do want you to know that I really appreciate how honest you were in your letter and for putting yourself out there. That took courage, but I'm sorry. This relationship isn't for me."

Carlos's lips parted, disbelief coursing through his features. I knew I was being brutally honest, but at this point, I needed to set things straight with him.

"But we were so good together," he replied. "How can you not—"

"If we were so good together, why did you leave me?" My question came out sharply, more accusingly than I'd meant it to, but it was something I'd been wondering even if I had fully moved on from my ex.

His forehead furrowed. "I told you. I needed to explore and work some things out of my system. It was never because I stopped caring about you or wasn't attracted to you anymore."

"Even so, I got over us a long time ago. I've moved on. The only reason I accepted your dinner request tonight was to tell you that in person. I figured after that heartfelt letter you sent me, you deserved it. Especially after I tried to tell you back at the SF's garage when they were transporting me to Tessa's safe house, but then everyone was there and listening and I didn't want you to feel embarrassed."

"That's what you were going to say?" His jaw clenched, and he was silent for a long moment. Even though Carlos didn't voice his rage, I could see it building on his face in slow waves. With the muscle working in his jaw, he finally said, "Does this have anything to do with the Fire Wolf?"

"It has everything to do with the Fire Wolf," Kaillen replied smoothly.

I nearly shrieked because the hunter appeared from out of nowhere, which meant he'd cast an illusion spell to cover his movements while using his werewolf speed to blur to our table.

A growl tore from Carlos's throat. "This conversation has nothing to do with you."

"On the contrary . . ." A flicker of flames appeared in Kaillen's eyes. "This conversation has *everything* to do with me."

Carlos sneered. "But you're a womanizer."

The corner of Kaillen's mouth kicked up. "I know."

Carlos turned angry eyes on me. “Is this really the kind of guy you want to be with, Tala? A cheating and lying—”

“How about you direct those questions at me?” Kaillen said in a glacial tone.

Carlos leaned back in his seat and glared at Kaillen accusingly. “What kind of spell have you woven over her?”

I huffed. “Oh my gods, he has *not* spelled me.”

But neither man reacted to my comment. Instead they stared at one another so icily it was a miracle the table hadn’t frosted over.

“Best be on your way, *pup*,” Kaillen said darkly. “You heard the lady. She’s not interested in you.”

“But she’s interested in *you*, is that it?” Carlos spat.

Kaillen took a menacing step closer to him. “She’s my *mate*. It’s best you remember that before I need to remind you.”

Carlos’s eyes widened. “So it’s true?” he shot at me accusingly. “He really is your mate?”

“It’s true.” Of course, I didn’t mention the issues we were currently having.

Carlos’s gaze coasted to the base of my throat. “Then where’s your mating mark?”

It felt as if he’d punched me right in the heart. My breath caught, and I literally couldn’t breathe for a moment as a tsunami of gut-wrenching memories slammed into me.

Kaillen snarled, then the scent of an illusion spell settled over us before the hunter wrapped his hand around Carlos’s throat. He wrenched my ex closer to him, hauling Carlos up in his seat. “Don’t. Upset. My. Mate.”

“A fucking womanizer.” Carlos sneered but then made a gurgling sound when Kaillen squeezed him harder.

My ex flailed, wrapping his hands around Kaillen’s wrist and wrestling against the hunter’s grip until Kaillen finally released him. But those deadly flames in Kaillen’s eyes didn’t abate.

Carlos straightened his shirt, his hair disheveled. He glowered at me. “Fine. Whatever. If that’s who you want, Tala. Good luck.” He grabbed his coat before pushing angrily to a stand.

He glared at me one last time, but I didn’t respond. I was still reeling from that aching void about losing my wolf and my bond with Kaillen.

Kaillen shouldered closer to Carlos, and a flash of gold appeared in his eyes. “What did I say about upsetting my mate, *pup*?”

Shalissa appeared, walking swiftly around a corner while she balanced our waters on a tray, but when she saw Carlos and Kaillen, she stopped in her tracks. She glanced between the two of them, then to me, then did a one-eighty back to the kitchen.

Obviously, the hunter’s illusion spell had only concealed the throat choking.

Carlos took a step away from the hunter before turning angry eyes on me. “Enjoy your time with him, Tala. I hope he doesn’t use you like he’s done to countless other women.”

“Oh, I intend to use her in many ways,” Kaillen replied in a dark purr. “And I can guarantee that she’ll enjoy every one of them.”

“What a fucking joke.” Carlos ground his jaw before he shot a final furious scowl at me. With that, he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

It was only after Carlos left that I realized the patrons around us were all giving us wide eyes.

Kaillen flashed everyone a grin and said, “Show’s over,” before he slid into the seat across from me.

I resisted the urge to bury my face in my hands. “What a shit show,” I muttered under my breath.

Guilt still rode me hard for turning down Carlos once and for all, but it was quickly disappearing when I recalled how quickly he’d turned his angry comments on me.

Kaillen watched me from across the table. The smugness left his expression as his unreadable mask descended into place. “Are you okay?”

“Just peachy.”

He leaned over the table. “I’ll fucking kill him if what he said is still upsetting you.”

My lips twitched slightly. “It’s okay. No need to get your spoon out.”

Shalissa appeared again at the edge of the dining room, eyeing us. Kaillen waved her over.

“Did you follow us here?” I asked him as our server made her way toward us. Since we didn’t have the blood bond anymore, I figured he had.

“Follow you?” A cocky smile lifted his lips. “Amateur move. Of course not.”

“You *hunted* us here?”

“It’s what I do best.”

“You seriously stalked me.” I rolled my eyes. “Of course you did.”

Shalissa reached our table, and her gaze flicked between me and Kaillen. “Did you still want waters?” she asked uneasily.

“Yes, and we’ll also take two Asahi beers,” Kaillen replied, not even cracking the menu. “Along with salmon sashimi, edamame, and gyoza to start. For our main course, we’ll take the spicy tuna roll, the signature yellowtail chef roll, two orders of the dragon roll, and . . .” He rattled off another four signature chef rolls, all which sounded scrumptious.

Shalissa scribbled everything down in a hurry. “Got it. I’ll be back with your beers.” She swung around as I gaped.

“How the hell do you know what I like?”

His lips quirked up. “Carlos isn’t the only one who gave Tessa a call earlier today. I might have called Prisha too.”

I sat back in my seat. “Some women might be concerned that you’ve gone full-blown stalker.”

“But you’re not like other women, are you?”

I arched an eyebrow. “No, apparently, I’m much less sane, but I thought I asked you to let me do this alone.”

“You did.”

I crossed my arms. “Yet, you still followed me here.”

His stoic mask descended again. “Are you angry with me?”

“A little.”

He leaned back, his eyes never leaving mine as that impossible-to-read expression stayed on his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

His apology was the last thing I expected. Some of the tension left my shoulders as my arms fell back to my sides. “Then why did you come here?”

He toyed with his water glass. “Because of what Carlos might try.”

“You didn’t think I could handle him on my own?”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “On the contrary, I know you’re more than capable of handling anyone on your own.” His hand crept across the table toward mine, then he stroked my wrist, his touch sending a ripple of goosebumps skating along my skin. “But I also knew he could upset you, and I wanted to be here to . . .”

I raised my eyebrows. “To what? Protect me?”

A flash of gold appeared in his eyes. "Perhaps."

"Was that need to protect from you or your wolf?"

"Both of us."

A surge of hope billowed inside me as Shalissa returned with our appetizers and drinks. After she placed everything down and left again, I asked carefully, "And . . . how's Mr. Wolf right now?"

Kaillen picked up his beer. "Strangely content."

I picked up my beer too and took a sip. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It is. When you were sitting here with Carlos, he didn't like it even though he didn't understand why."

"But he's happier now that Carlos is gone?"

"Very."

"So does that mean he's starting to feel things for me again?" I popped one of the pork dumplings into my mouth.

"Possibly, but it's too early to tell."

"So what do we do from here?"

Kaillen's gaze darkened. "From here, we go back to my place and see what happens."

My entire body squirmed as that implication took root.

Chapter 15

Despite Kaillen's sensual promise, we managed to polish off all of the sushi he'd ordered. Of course, he ate most of it, since he still had a werewolf's metabolism, but even though I no longer needed eight billion calories a day, I couldn't stop myself from gorging too. It was just so damned good. Consequently, I was stuffed by the time we finished, and I wondered if he'd have to roll me down the sidewalk.

"That was delicious," I said as we stepped out of the restaurant into the cool night.

He smirked. "I told you I'd buy you sushi."

"You really didn't have to pay the bill. I could have split it with you."

"And not hold up my end of the bargain?"

"We made a bargain?"

"No, but in my mind I was taking you out, which means I pay."

"But the bill was nearly two-fifty."

"So?"

I eyed him. "You have a lot of money, don't you?"

"Why, Ms. Davenport, are you asking me about my finances?"

I muffled a laugh. "Sorry, I know it's rude, but you own fifty thousand acres in Montana, in the fae lands you threw a thousand rulibs at Valahan like it was no big deal, and just now, you didn't bat an eye at our very expensive bill. What can I say? I'm curious."

He shrugged. "I've done well for myself, and since you're my mate, I have no problems sharing that with you."

Mate. For a moment, I couldn't breathe. He still considered me his mate, even if his wolf didn't. A flush worked up my neck. "Were you this generous with your past . . . women?" I could barely get the word out. Just the thought of him with other women made me see red.

He pulled me to a stop on the sidewalk and peered down at me with those amber eyes that burned right into my soul. His lips quirked up. "You're almost sounding jealous."

I shrugged. “You get jealous. I get jealous. It’s a two-way street, apparently.”

“My wolf likes that.”

“He does?”

“Yeah, and what’s more, he wants me to reassure you.” He leaned down and whispered into my ear. “I never took another woman to a sushi restaurant before. You’re the first. And if you really want to know, I hardly ever took women on dates. It didn’t fit my womanizer image. But now, there’s only you.”

My breath caught because the way he’d just said that, he’d almost sounded like he had before my wolf died—that he’d do anything for me.

We resumed walking, and I tucked my hands into my coat pockets. At the next alleyway, Kaillen pulled his yellow crystal out and then ducked us between two buildings.

As we stood side by side while he swirled his arm, I realized we’d been standing closely with our arms brushing, ever since we’d left the restaurant.

“Do you really think your wolf is coming around to me again?” I asked hopefully as his portal formed.

He shoved his crystal back into his pocket. “He hasn’t told me to get away from you yet.”

“Even when we’re physically close?” I nudged my arm against his.

“Even when we’re close.”

“How much of that has to do with Carlos?”

The hunter glowered. “More than I care to admit.”

I gave him a cheeky smile. “So you’re saying that all I need to do is date old boyfriends on a regular basis, and everything should work out fine between us?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “I thought it *wasn’t* a date.”

“Sorry. Non-date.”

He closed the distance between us. Our chests brushed, and I sucked in a breath as my body grew alive at the feel of him. “Like I said before, we’ll find another way.”

“But if we can’t—”

He growled. “You’re not dating anyone but me. Got it?”

The desire shooting through me ratcheted up another notch at his possessive tone, but I couldn’t help my snarky reply. “We’ll see.”

He growled again, then threaded his fingers through mine. We dipped into his portal as a rush of wind surrounded us. The popping and jolting sensations hit me all at once, and then we were standing in his living room in Montana.

My jaw dropped as I took in the familiar surroundings. The lights were off, yet moonlight penetrated the curtains.

Achingly familiar details emerged—the neutral furnishings, the large windows, the kitchen stool with the floor I’d gouged out beneath it. A flood of memories crashed into me, making the death of my wolf so much more poignant. It was here that she’d been born, and my life had irrevocably changed.

My heartbeats grew faster. “Why did you bring me here?”

He prowled closer to me, his eyes growing hooded, and his hair looked delectably tousled. “I was thinking we could try things.”

My stomach dipped at his husky tone. “What kind of things?”

“Things involving you and me naked. My wolf isn’t trying to stop me, and after seeing you with Carlos, I’m feeling rather possessive.”

“Like you need to stamp your mark?”

“Something like that.”

My chest rose and fell faster with rapid breaths. “What if we’re doing *things*, and your wolf tells you to attack me?”

“Then we’ll stop.” He leaned down and brushed his mouth along my jaw. “We can take it slow. If he starts getting cagey, I’ll back off.” His hand drifted to my waist, and his fingers curled into my dress.

I tentatively placed my palms on his chest. His muscles jumped beneath my touch, and their rock-hard feel brought back so many memories of me and him. Memories that were much too short and something we’d not had nearly enough of.

“I’ve missed you,” I breathed. “Missed touching you, kissing you, fucking you.”

He dipped his head and ran his nose along my throat, inhaling. A deep rumble came from his chest. “He knows your scent.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. Let’s help him remember the rest of me.” I wrapped my arms around Kaillen’s neck and tilted my mouth up to his.

He groaned and hauled me closer, his lips angling over mine. In a blurred move, I was flush against him, as my arms curled around his neck

and his tongue plunged into my mouth. Our breaths mingled and swirled until we turned into an avalanche of frantic limbs and heated claws.

In a flash of movement, Kaillen blurred us from the living area, and then he was pushing open a door and striding into a room while I clung to him, and my mouth moved with his.

He threw me down onto a huge bed in a large airy bedroom. Like the rest of his house this room was done in all neutral colors: light-gray, cream, beige, and white. But it was a room I hadn't seen before.

"Is this your bedroom?" I asked, forcing my gaze to drag away from his muscled body as he removed his shirt, then his pants. His stiff erection throbbed against his boxers, hard and ready.

"It is."

I gazed around the large space. A fireplace sat opposite the bed, a chair near the window, and a bookshelf filled with books waited beside it. And the bed . . . It was massive, and I wondered if it was larger than a king, perhaps custom sized.

I ran my hand over the smooth charcoal-gray sheets. The headboard was wood, a deep walnut, and a mountain of pillows lay fluffed behind me. "I've never seen your room before."

"You can see it later." He descended on me with fire in his eyes.

I cradled him to me when my dress rode up, loving the feel of his large body against mine as he settled between my thighs. He felt hot and ready, like an inferno about to burst with endless embers sparking from its depths.

"Kaillen," I whispered.

He kissed along my jaw, down my neck, and along my collarbone. In a whipped movement, he pulled me up and had my dress over my head. When his eyes beheld my breasts in my lacy bra and the matching G-string, his irises burned fire. "*That's* what you were wearing on your date with Carlos?"

"He was never going to see it."

Another flash of gold appeared in his eyes when he curled a finger around the strap on the G-string. "I will fucking kill him if he ever sees you in this."

I toyed with the clasp on my bra, wondering if pushing this jealous streak in him would truly keep his wolf at bay and maybe, just maybe, would forge our bond a little bit more.

Deciding I gave zero fucks anymore about *not* making him jealous, I replied, “Then perhaps I shouldn’t tell you that Carlos has seen me like this before. Back when we were together, and we used to—”

The golden light in his eyes flashed so brightly that my words caught in my throat. In a blink, he shoved me up the bed and was on top of me, pinning me to the mattress. His mouth met my neck and bit into my skin.

A thrill ran through me, and my heart fluttered as I waited for his canines to descend and his wolf to claim me once more.

But the claiming bond never came, and with a frustrated snarl, I realized he was actually *biting* me in anger, not in the claiming ritual.

I bucked beneath him, my frustration at his damned stubborn wolf getting the better of me, but that only seemed to ignite him more.

His weight sank onto me, as though he were trying to freeze me in place as he ground his hips against my core. His hard erection pressed into my damp panties, and a breathy moan escaped me.

“Who do you belong to?” he snarled, the pressure of his bite increasing.

But I refused to submit, not when his wolf wasn’t one hundred percent committed. “No one,” I breathed.

Kaillen bit harder, and his teeth nearly broke my skin. “Dammit, Tala. You’re fucking mine.”

“Then prove it,” I challenged. “Claim me.”

His grip on my hips increased as his cock tried to spear me through my panties. A shudder ran through his body.

“I can’t,” he finally groaned. “I can’t force it on him. He’s not letting me. He’s still . . . *fuck*,” he snarled.

A wave of despair crashed into me, but I refused to give up so easily. I pushed Kaillen to the side, and he finally relented and fell onto his back.

In a hurried movement, I straddled the hunter and let my hair fall in front of my face as I gazed down at him. With any luck, I could get his wolf back on track.

“Then let’s make him remember that *I’m* your mate too. Not just my wolf.” I settled onto his crotch, letting my damp sex nestle on his erection.

Another groan vibrated his throat. “Tala,” he rasped. Desire flowed through his tone even though his wolf was being a stubborn asshole.

I pushed my hair over my shoulder so it draped down my back, then reached behind me to unclasp my bra. When it was free, I let the lacy

material fall to the side as I bared my naked breasts to him.

“Does he remember these?” I asked, leaning down and trailing my tits in front of Kaillen’s face.

The hunter’s erection grew even larger, his skin hotter. He tongued one of my nipples, then sucked it into his mouth.

“Or how about this?” I whispered. I swept my panties to the side, then brought his hand to my sex.

Kaillen’s entire body hardened when I took his finger and plunged it inside me. I moaned at the feel of him, even more so when he sank a second digit into me.

“Or how about this?” I asked, dragging his fingers out of my sex before dipping my entire body lower until my mouth was at his dick.

“Does he remember me tasting you?” I sucked the head of his cock into my mouth. “I did this to you before my wolf was born, before he even knew she existed. Does he remember that?” I pumped him into my mouth again in a long, hard stroke, sucking him with each swallow.

The golden glow in Kaillen’s eyes returned, just a flicker, but it was enough for determination to burrow its way deep into my soul.

“Fuck, woman.” Kaillen’s hips jolted up when I began sucking him more, going faster and faster. A guttural groan escaped him as his hands tangled in my hair, knotting into fists.

I pumped him harder and sucked him frantically as his velvety steel filled my mouth and grew larger and stiffer the more I licked.

Closing my eyes, I let myself get lost in the taste and feel of him. He was *mine*, dammit. And it was time his wolf remembered that.

Kaillen’s thighs strained, his entire body stiffening as I bore down on him. I refused to let his wolf’s confusion take away the man that had claimed me and I had claimed in return.

Bringing my hand to the base of his shaft, I curled my fingers around him and began pumping him hard as I swallowed him again and again and again.

“Tala!” Kaillen’s roar cut through the night when his ass bucked off the bed, and his hot cum flooded my mouth. His hands clawed my hair relentlessly as his release flowed down my throat.

But I refused to release him. Refused to let his wolf forget.

The hunter was my mate, and I was his. This time, I was claiming him first.

Chapter 16

“Fucking hell, woman,” Kaillen said between ragged breaths. He lay spent on the bed, naked in front of me, as I slowly popped his cock from my mouth.

I crawled back up his body, draping myself over him as he panted in the dark room. Outside, the wind whistled through the trees, and a light dusting of snow fell from the sky.

“Your eyes,” Kaillen whispered when I stared down at him. “Such power.”

My otherworldly magic hummed and flowed through me, that steely determination I’d felt only seconds before vibrating inside me as it burned right through my concealment spell.

It would be so easy to unleash it, so incredibly simple to whisk the hunter’s power from his wolf and remind him that *I* was equally dominant and was a worthy mate to him.

I let some of it out, and tendrils of my awakening magic sought my mate’s, dipping into his body of its own accord, but the second my power touched his wolf’s, an inferno of flames shot up from the hunter, as though his Fire Wolf was reminding me that *he* was dominant too.

I sucked my magic back inside me and tamped that desire down to join with my mate’s. One step at a time.

Settling into the crook of Kaillen’s arm, I tried to look at the bright side. “I just gave you a blow job, and you haven’t killed me yet. Or thrown me out the window. Or shoved me to the floor. I suppose that’s a good sign.”

He chuckled and threaded his fingers through my hair again before kissing me thoroughly. “You made me see stars. Just like you did the first time.”

“Does your wolf remember that?”

“I think he’s starting to.”

My heart squeezed, and I snuggled into him even though my core still throbbed from unspent desire, but I didn't want to push Kaillen's wolf more than I already had. He'd let me blow the hunter, and for now, that had to be enough.

As if reading my thoughts, the hunter said in a low growl, "I should fuck you. Or at the very least, I should pleasure you, even if my wolf's being a stubborn ass." He angled his body to mine, but I stopped him.

"It's okay. It's only been a few days since"—my voice caught—"she died, and we're together in a rather intimate position, so I think we're doing pretty good."

A rumble vibrated his chest. "It shouldn't have to be this hard."

"I know, but it's not like we can change the past and undo what's been done."

He pulled me back to his side and tucked me closely to him. His warmth soon lulled me to sleep as dreams of running wolves, clashing galaxies, and ancient queens filled my sleep.

∞ ∞ ∞

I pushed into Kaillen's warmth as his soft bed sank beneath me, and rays of dawn's light glowed around the rims of his curtains. The hunter slept at my side, his large body hard and heavy.

I'd just woken up, and despite the early hour, I didn't want to go back to sleep. An ache of desire curled my lower belly as I watched him. The hunter looked so peaceful. So at ease. So unlike how he'd been the past few days.

I pushed up onto my elbow, my breath already quickening at just the sight of him. We hadn't tried anything else physical after my blow job last night, as though both of us were concerned about tempting fate twice, but we'd just spent the night together, sleeping side by side. Forty-eight hours ago, I would have thought that would be impossible.

A smile curved my lips. And today was a new day. A new day to try new *things* . . .

I grinned devilishly and slid the sheet slowly down his body until his slabbed pecs, rippled abs, and *very* impressive erection appeared.

Someone has morning wood.

I stifled my giggle and gazed upon his stiff rod, the desire in my body unfurling at just the thought of what we could do.

He was my mate after all. Our bodies were made for one another, and maybe his wolf would stay asleep for a while longer so I could . . .

I ran my hand lightly up his cock. Kaillen stirred, his body shifting slightly, but he didn't growl or move away. If anything, that one light reaction seemed to have been pleasurable for him if his low groan was any indication.

Feeling emboldened, I did it again. Kaillen's ass clenched, and his erection speared upward as another low groan came from him.

Well, good morning, Mr. Hunter.

Taking it further, I dipped my head down and ran the tip of my tongue lightly over his shaft, my body aching when Kaillen murmured something in his sleep, and his hips jolted upward.

Not knowing how much time I had before he roused and his wolf fully became present, I did it again, then again, until Kaillen's cock was slick from my mouth, and his body was as heated as fire.

"Tala?" Kaillen groaned huskily, and hearing my name on his lips caused a bolt of excitement to zing through me. The hunter opened his eyes, still fogged from sleep.

"Morning," I replied quietly. "Is your wolf up?"

His lips curved slightly, and he closed his eyes again. "No, he's still asleep."

Sitting up, I silently lifted my leg over his waist until I was straddling him. "Then he's none the wiser if I do this?" I slowly eased myself back onto him, moaning in need when the tip of his cock spread my entrance.

Kaillen groaned. "No, he has no fucking clue what you're doing." The hunter's large hands gripped my hips and slid me down his dick even more. "Fucking hell, woman. You really know how to wake a man up."

"Gods, I've missed this." I sank more onto him, his thick girth stretching me inch by inch.

A ragged breath hitched his chest, and Kaillen's hands gripped my hips more. "Fuck, you have the sweetest pussy."

More than anything, I wanted to bury his cock inside me, then bounce on him over and over until we were both screaming our release.

I moaned as another inch of him entered me.

"Gods, you're so tight." Kaillen's eyes abruptly flashed wide open, but instead of desire hooding his gaze, a flash of gold appeared in his eyes, then a deadly snarl curled his lips.

I stopped mid-movement. “Kaill—”

I was suddenly sailing across the room, thrown so fast that I didn’t even know what was happening until my back hit the wall, cracking from the force of it before I fell to the floor and landed with a thump.

I moaned when pain seared through me, and for a moment, I couldn’t move as shock rippled my frame.

An angry yell tore from across the room, then Kaillen was flying toward me, his eyes wild.

He slid to a stop on his knees, his shins skating across the floorboards as panic blazed on his face. “Tala? Fuck, Tala, are you okay?”

His crazed look grew as he pulled me gently into his arms, another snarl tearing from his throat before he said in a menacing tone, “If I could fucking kill you right now, I would murder you, you *fucking beast!*”

Somehow, I managed a smile between the ache of my throbbing spine and bruised ass. “I hope you’re talking to your wolf and not to me.”

Kaillen’s enraged eyes met mine again, and then a look of bottomless guilt wracked his features. “Fuck, *colantha*. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.” He lifted me from the floor, crossing the distance to his bathroom in a blurred move.

“It’s okay,” I said as he placed me on his bathroom counter, balancing me on the edge as though I were a delicate flower. I briefly took in the double sinks, huge walk-in shower, and sunken Jacuzzi tub that overlooked the mountains. “I thought maybe we would have some time until your wolf woke, but that obviously didn’t go as planned.”

“It would have,” he said in a rush as his fingers moved in a frantic procession over my body, searching for injuries and wounds with every path they crossed, “but he woke up just as you started to ride my cock with that beautiful pussy of yours.”

A flush crawled up my neck, and despite the lingering ache along my spine, my toes curled. “I shouldn’t have done that. I pushed too far again.”

“You *should* have, and my fucking wolf should have recognized you and not thought you were some random woman climbing on my cock.” His nostrils flared, and he sighed angrily before tearing a hand through his hair. “He could have killed you.”

“But he didn’t,” I pointed out, then eased slowly off the counter.

He watched me moving gingerly, pain blazing across his features before rage took its place. “I want to kill my fucking wolf.”

“It’s okay,” I said again in a hurry. “Like I said, I pushed too far, too fast. I just hoped that after last night, maybe—” I shook my head. “I shouldn’t have.”

Kaillen’s breath sucked in when he caught sight of my back, and a flame of fire leaped in his eyes.

I frowned. “Is it bad?”

His fingers trailed so softly over my skin one would have thought I was made of the most exquisite glass. “I did that to you.” His voice turned hollow, and his fingers dropped. “I fucking did that to you.”

I caught sight of the bruise in the mirror that was already blooming across my spine and winced. It was big, spreading across my entire lower back. Despite that, I spun to him, not even hesitating when I grabbed his face between my palms. “No, you didn’t. Your crazy wolf did. I know that *you* would never hurt me.”

A whine crept up the hunter’s throat, and I cocked my head.

Kaillen’s brow furrowed as another flash of gold appeared in his irises. I stiffened, instinctively taking a step back, but Kaillen encircled my waist, being so careful with where he placed his hands as that agonizing whine came from him again.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” I whispered, trying to understand his wolf’s crazed mind but falling short. I’d never heard his wolf whine like that. Not once.

“He just saw what he did to you.”

“And?” I asked warily.

“He’s howling. He’s fucking howling and pacing. He’s torn up that he hurt you. He didn’t realize it was you when he did it.”

My shoulders sagged in relief. “Thank the gods,” I said humorlessly. “I don’t think I’ve ever battled anyone naked in a bathroom at sunrise before. I didn’t particularly want to start today.”

But Kaillen didn’t even crack a smile. “Nothing about this is funny. He hurt you. *I* hurt you.”

I gazed up at him again. “Not on purpose. It was an accident. Your wolf is still confused, and we’re still not mated. Remember that.”

Taking a deep breath, I began walking to the door and wished more than ever that I had my wolf inside me. She would have healed me within seconds. Instead, I’d have to use the spare healing potion I always carried if I wanted to be able to walk normally today.

Kaillen followed closely on my heels, and his agony surged into my back in heated waves.

“I suppose it’s good that he feels guilty?” I called over my shoulder.

Kaillen scowled. “He needs to bury himself in a fucking hole with his tail between his legs.” He paused, and his brow furrowed. “He just indicated that he agrees with me.”

I eased myself back onto the bed and gave the hunter a hesitant smile. “Would he feel that way about hurting any woman?”

Kaillen sat beside me, the mattress dipping under his weight. “A mated male werewolf would have reacted that way to any female climbing on his lap who wasn’t his mate, so no, it’s not normal that he’s feeling so guilty by this.”

I perked up. “Really? That’s good, right?” I shifted a bit more until we were closer, then froze. “Will he attack me again?”

Flames appeared in Kaillen’s eyes once more. “He’ll *never* hurt you again.”

“You sound so sure.”

“Because I am. Between the sprites, your date with Carlos, and now seeing that bruise on your back, that fucking bruise that *he* put there . . .” Kaillen shook his head. “As fucked up as it is, my wolf’s head just cleared a little bit more.”

I settled on the pillows. Warmth seeped through my soul. “Good, then it was worth it.”

He scoffed. “It was not fucking worth it.”

“If it helps him see me more as your mate, it was.”

But the hunter’s tortured expression didn’t abate. He stood abruptly. “I need to get you a healing potion.”

“I have one of my own in my purse.”

“Where’s your bag?”

“Downstairs. I think I dropped it in your living room right after we landed here.”

The hunter’s frown didn’t lessen even when he blurred from the room, and despite me having already forgiven him, something told me that Kaillen wouldn’t forgive himself so readily.

“Has there been any more activity from the portal?” I asked Commander Klebus as Kaillen and I sat in her office a few hours later.

The hunter’s back was stiff, the brooding expression on his face still present. He’d been beating himself up all morning over what had happened even though my potion had healed me completely.

“No,” the vamp commander replied. “Since Malikhi came through the portal, nobody else has appeared, but we’re down to twelve days until Queen Nameena demands your arrival in Lunaris. We haven’t a moment to spare.”

“Then let’s get on with it,” Kaillen grumbled.

The vamp eyed him curiously as she pulled out her tablet. “Your gargoyle representative is lined up. I’ve sent the details to your devices. His name’s Nicholas Fitzpatrick, he’s a vampire, and he’s been working for the Bulgarian libraries for several hundred years. He’ll be your representative as you search to uncover more information about Lunaris, the Bone Eaters, and a way to close the portal.” She laid her tablet back on her desk as we all stood. “Keep me informed on what you find, and Mr. King and Ms. Davenport?”

I raised my eyebrows at her while Kaillen merely thrummed his fingers on his thighs.

She gave us a grim smile. “Good luck.”

Chapter 17

Kaillen and I needed to retreat to our individual homes to pack our bags, but the hunter insisted on seeing me to my apartment first.

I tried to reassure him again, but it didn't help. It was as though he and his wolf had gone into hyper-protective mode after this morning's incident.

He eyed my lower back again as we stood in my apartment's entryway, worry strumming through his features. "You're sure you're not sore? Do you need to rest before we leave? Or see a healing witch?"

I managed to smash my lips together so I wouldn't smile. "Nope, I don't need any of that. Honestly, I'm fine. See?" I turned and lifted my shirt for him.

His eyes narrowed, and he carefully assessed my skin, his fingers trailing over my flesh softly, almost reverently. After a thorough inspection, he finally pulled my top down, and when I turned, a bright ring of gold surrounded his irises.

"Kaillen . . ." A lump grew in my throat.

But he just shook his head, his expression devastated. "I'll never forgive myself for that."

I laid a palm on his chest. The gold in his eyes grew. "You need to. It wasn't on purpose. Honestly, it was an accident, even if you refuse to see it that way."

His throat bobbed, then he shoved a hand through his hair. "How long do you need to pack?" But he didn't make any attempts to leave. Instead he lingered in the doorway, his large build brushing the frame on each side as his citrusy cedar wafted to me.

I shrugged. "Twenty minutes?"

"Okay, I'll be back soon." He leaned down, his nostrils flaring as my scent hit him, then he brushed his lips over mine.

I placed both hands on his chest, tentatively feeling his strength vibrating beneath my palms before he pulled back and whispered, "I'm so fucking sorry, *colantha*."

I rested my forehead against his and breathed in his scent. “I know. I really do. But please, stop beating yourself up. My potion healed me completely. I don’t have a bruise anymore or feel sore. I’m one hundred percent healed, so you really don’t need to keep apologizing.”

“I do. My wolf keeps howling, and I’m not feeling much different.”

I bit back a smile, for the first time feeling hopeful that the broken threads of our mate bond were stitching back together. “Go pack. I’ll see you soon.”

He kissed me before finally allowing me to close the door. From there, I ventured to my room and shoved clothes into my bag, not really paying much attention to what I was packing as my thoughts turned from our slowly healing mate bond to what lay ahead of me.

We had twelve days until my deadline was up with Queen Bitch and the Lunaris realm. Twelve days to uncover a way to close the portal and end Jakub’s reign of terror once and for all.

Totally doable. I snorted at that thought but figured if I didn’t have hope, then I didn’t have much at all.

My phone dinged just as I zipped my duffel bag closed, and I picked it up to see a text from Prisha.

What’s up? Anything new?

I swore my bestie could read minds. But instead of texting back, I called her.

“Oh, oh,” she said by way of greeting when she answered. “The fact that you’re calling and not texting isn’t a good sign.”

I laughed. “It would take too long to explain in a text.”

“Oh gods, what’s happened now?”

“Nothing bad. Well, not really.” I filled her in, telling her about my dinner with Carlos, my night at Kaillen’s, his wolf’s attack, and now our plans to head to the Bulgarian libraries.

“Um, that sounds like a lot,” she said when I finished. “But seriously, his wolf *attacked* you?”

I could hear the horror in her voice, so I quickly told her that it was actually a good thing, since it had healed our bond a little bit more. “And I realize that makes me sound like a domestic abuse victim sticking up for her abuser.”

Prisha laughed. “That’s exactly what I was thinking, but I get it. I know what you mean, and I also know you would never put up with someone actually beating you.”

“If he intentionally hit me, and his wolf didn’t do it in his sleep-induced state, I’d slice Kaillen’s belly open.”

“I’d help you.”

I laughed, ’cause she totally would. “But in all seriousness, things feel a little better now. He kissed me without any hesitation when he said goodbye a few minutes ago. No growls or crazy talking to himself.” I wandered into my bathroom to pack some toiletries and kept talking. “I don’t think our mate bond is fully healed yet, but for the first time, I think it’s actually possible to repair it.”

When I finally finished filling Prisha in, she said, “So, do you need help with anything?”

“I need all the help I can get right now.”

“How about I tag along?”

I leaned against the bathroom counter as a smile streaked across my face. “I would love that, but I don’t think they’ll allow you in the libraries.”

“No biggie. I’ll keep you company when you’re not slaving away over old texts and books or whatever they have there.”

“Gods, Prish. It would mean the world to me to have you there.”

“Let me pack and make a few arrangements with work. How about I meet you guys somewhere in Sofia tonight?”

“Awesome, that totally works. Just text me when you get there.”

After we hung up, I sent Tessa a message to fill her in on the latest too. She replied immediately, which told me the store was either slow today, or she was doing who knew what while our employees ran the place. But then she sent a second message that had my stomach sinking.

Well, apparently the news is out about your magic. I just had a customer ask if I’d crafted the spell he’d purchased or if you had. Don’t worry. I covered, telling him the plan we’d come up with that we did this to support each other. He took it okay. I think.

Ugh. This was the last thing I needed right now. Not wanting to have this conversation via text either, I called her too. The second she picked up, I said, “Tell me everything.”

She gave a tinkling laugh. "It's basically what my text said."

"But how did he seem? Was he mad? Is he going to bad mouth the store? Ridicule us?"

"Tala, relax," my sister said calmly. "I've got this. I've already put together an announcement for our social media sites and have been doing damage control all day. Don't worry about it." When I remained silent as I pictured pitch forks and angry mobs descending upon Practically Perfect, she added, "You said I should go into PR, remember? Let me prove to you that you're not the only one in our family with talents."

Hearing how confident she sounded made some of the stiffness in my shoulders abate. "Okay, fine. I guess you're right. I'll leave it up to you. Still, good luck."

Tessa gave another tinkling laugh. "I don't need luck. I just need to do what I do best."

We hung up, and I shook my head as a smile grew on my face. Maybe Tessa was right. This could be exactly the kind of stuff my sister excelled at.

Deciding that channeling belief in my sister was the only way not to freak out, I let it go, then shot Kaillen a text, telling him I was ready to go and that Prisha was also planning to tag along.

His reply had my smile growing even more.

Our friends must be alike. Barnabas and Fallon are both coming to Sofia too.

I grinned and replied back.

That makes me so happy. I'd love to see them again.

That's what Barnabas said. Not sure I'm a fan of that.

I laughed as I pictured the scowl that was no doubt forming on Kaillen's face, because Barnabas was nothing if not a shameless flirt who reveled in riling Kaillen's mating instincts.

I typed in another text.

You're sounding jealous again.

Apparently it's my new way of existing.

You can't hold it against him. He's a vamp, you know.

On the contrary, I can hold everything against him. You're my woman.

My toes curled at that fierce declaration, especially after our disastrous morning, because even though Kaillen's wolf still had issues, I now firmly believed that with enough time, Kaillen and I could be mated again.

∞ ∞ ∞

I stood outside of my apartment, waiting on the sidewalk as a cool nip hung in the air. Since Azad, Prisha's father, had placed protective wards around our house, nobody could portal transfer into our home directly anymore. And instead of waiting in the hallway for the hunter to arrive, I'd opted to get some fresh air.

My bag sat at my feet on the sidewalk as a few cars drove by. Dangling hoop earrings hung from my ears, and my hair was knotted in a messy bun on the top of my head. I hopped from foot to foot, trying to keep warm. In my faded jeans, long sweater, and leather jacket that was definitely made for mild temps, it was a struggle. I knew I could pull out the scarf and mittens in my bag, but I figured it'd be more hassle than it was worth.

I'd prepared for the weather, though, since my internet search had told me the temps in Sofia this time of year were comparable to Chicago, and who knew how cold it would be within the libraries. I'd heard they dwelled underground, right beneath the streets of Bulgaria's capital, the humans living there none the wiser.

I was about to rub my hands together, hoping the friction would warm them, when Kaillen's circular gold portal appeared. The hunter stepped through it, his illusion spell masking his magical capabilities.

The swirling yellow void closed behind him until it disappeared from view. A duffel bag was slung over his shoulder, the large pack making his bicep bulge as a crooked smile lifted his lips. Of course, the dude only wore a fitted T-shirt despite the fact that it was near freezing. His werewolf blood

and metabolism kept him warm no matter the temp. Hell, he probably hadn't even packed a jacket.

My heart fluttered as his gaze locked onto mine. The man could still get my pulse racing with only a look.

"Ready to go?" he asked as he sauntered toward me. His gaze flicked to my back, guilt rolling through his eyes again.

I placed a hand on his forearm. "I'm fine, and yeah, I'm ready. Prish is meeting us there tonight, so it's just me for now."

"Barnabas and Fallon will arrive tonight too." He fingered one of my earrings, then took in my messy hair and my cheeks that were probably a dusky pink from the cold. "You look like you just got fucked."

I could have sworn a flash of gold appeared in his eyes. "Is that right?"

"Just-fucked hair. Rosy cheeks." A slight growl worked up his throat. "My wolf doesn't like that."

I cocked my head. "Jealous again?"

"It's stupid. I know nothing like that happened, but I think my wolf is only starting to realize that we don't have a claim staked on you anymore. Because of that, you're open game to any male werewolf."

I blew a strand of my messy, just-looked-like-I'd-been-fucked-even-though-I-hadn't-been hair from my face as the hunter threaded his fingers through mine. "There's one easy way to fix that."

He growled. "I know, but I don't know if he's ready." He seethed, then extracted his yellow crystal from his pocket to form his portal, but before I could reach down and grab my bag, he did.

"Such a gentleman," I remarked as two bags were now draped over his shoulder.

"I aim to please, since it's apparently the only way I can pleasure you right now."

I muffled a laugh. "I believe I remember you complaining once upon a time that you were irritated at your innate need to please me."

"That was then. This is now. I haven't made you come in nearly a week, and it's really starting to get to me."

"There's an easy way to fix that too," I replied breathlessly.

Another flare of gold formed in his eyes before the amber hue returned. He tugged me forward. "Good thing I told Klebus to book us one room."

We disappeared into his portal as the world dropped out from beneath us, then reappeared seconds later on a sidewalk of a bustling street, just outside of a building lined with large windows. The city of Sofia spread out before us, and I pulled out my SF tablet to ensure we were in the right spot.

“This should be it,” I commented, then peered at the building closest to us. A tingle of magic pulsed along my skin when I stepped toward it. The wall of windows revealed a hallway with black-and-white checkered tiles on the floor and beyond that, a coffee shop and a book store.

The book store staring back at me looked like a normal shop. I swung around to face Kaillen. “Didn’t Klebus’s memo say that above the libraries were a bookstore and café, and that they were legitimate businesses?”

“It did.” Kaillen nudged me toward the main door, our duffel bags still slung over his shoulder.

“Hopefully, our gargoyle representative knows we’re here,” I commented, ’cause I sure as shit didn’t know how to contact him. All Klebus had told us was to portal transfer to this location since Kaillen had insisted on using his own portal means.

Even though we were SF now, my former mate still had an independent streak a mile wide, which meant that if he didn’t have to rely on the Supernatural Forces for something, he wasn’t going to. I had a feeling he’d be a bee in Klebus’s bonnet for the foreseeable future. His demon side relished winding her up too much to stop.

I checked the time before shoving my phone back into my pocket. It was already late afternoon in Sofia, the time difference jetting us into the future. I snickered internally at my bad joke. “We’re a little early. Maybe that’s why Nicholas isn’t here.”

A gust of wind caught the main door when Kaillen pulled it open. I ducked in first with him at my heel. Inside, the black-and-white checkered floor gleamed like glass, and the scent of coffee hung in the air.

“Want anything?” he asked, nodding toward the café.

I shook my head. “I’m good.”

“I might grab a—”

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting!” A clang of metal came from down the hall, then a vampire appeared, gliding toward us. With a start, I realized that some ancient-looking elevator—with a mesh-like metal door—had just closed behind him.

The vamp picked up his pace, so it looked as though he was at the end of the hall one second and then right in front of us the next. Luckily, no humans were around to witness his speed.

When he reached us, he bowed deeply. “Nicholas Fitzpatrick, at your service.” His words lilted with a European accent that reminded me of Transylvania. He held out his hand to both of us to shake.

“I’m Tala Davenport, and this is Kaillen King.”

A smile lifted his lips as I assessed him. He wore slim-fitting tailored black pants, what looked like expensive Italian-leather loafers, and a crisp button-up shirt open at his throat.

“Very nice to meet you both. I’m one of twenty representatives that work with the gargoyles here at the libraries.” Wavy blond hair hung to Nicholas’s shoulders, and his smoldering blue eyes regarded me with interest. “You’ll be working directly with me during your stay. Once we venture underground, you may also see other staff in the halls, but if you have questions or concerns, I’ll be your contact.” He eyed me with interest. “I hear you have a date with a foreign queen in a few weeks.”

“You hear right,” I replied.

“Then we haven’t a moment to lose. Right this way.” He did a one-eighty and began gliding back toward the ancient-looking elevator. “I’ll show you where your rooms are first. Then we can head straight to Phantasia.”

Chapter 18

“Will phones work in the libraries?” I asked as we followed Nicholas down the hallway. “I have a friend coming to Sofia tonight, so I’ll need to know when she arrives.”

“Of course, they will,” he replied with a wink when he entered the elevator. “We’ve firmly moved into the twenty-first century.”

Despite Nicholas’s claim, the elevator looked as if it was crafted over a hundred years ago. Its rickety metal doors clanged together when he slammed them closed, and a rush of magic shimmered over the contraption. I figured the elevator was either spelled to conceal it from humans, or we’d just stepped through an illusion.

The aging elevator began descending with a jolt, and bare rock appeared behind the open chain door. It reminded me of elevators used to descend into mines.

Nicholas eyed me, probably noticing my apprehension, and a pulse of sexual vampire energy drifted from him. “I have to say you’re quite beautiful.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Um, thanks?”

Kaillen stepped between us, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

“It’s her eyes,” Nicholas said in a hurry. “I’ve never seen eyes like yours before, Tala.” Another wave of lust shot to me from the vamp.

Sigh. So perhaps Nicholas was just like Barnabas in the sexual energy aspect. Either that or he was trying to distract me from the claustrophobic elevator.

Nicholas clasped his hands behind his back and gave a bright smile, not appearing the least bit ruffled by Kaillen’s surly expression. “Commander Klebus told me of your unique skills,” he said to Kaillen as the whir of the elevator hummed around us. “It’s a pleasure to meet you in person.”

But the flattery did little to wipe the scowl from the hunter’s face. I nudged him, ’cause I doubted Nicholas meant to come on to me like that.

Most vampires couldn't help themselves when it came to their sexual appetites. It was too ingrained in their nature.

Kaillen's glower finally relented. "Commander Klebus told us you've been working for the libraries for hundreds of years and are one of the best."

Nicholas's lips lifted. "How kind of her to say so. I do pride myself in my work." A jolt came from the elevator when it stopped. "Ah, here we are." Nicholas opened the metal door, and with a screech, it slid back.

Before us, a long and wide hallway waited. The ceiling rose to an impossible height, and dim fairy lights lit the vast chamber.

So this is the Bulgarian library . . .

I stepped out of the elevator, and the second my foot made contact with the floor, it felt as though I was pushing through a thick curtain, but after two steps, the heavy feeling ended, and I was once again free of the tingling magic.

I cocked my head at Nicholas. "I'm guessing that was a ward?"

He nodded. "Ah yes, it surrounds the entire structure."

"It felt strong," Kaillen commented.

Nicholas rocked back on his heels. "Indeed. One of the strongest in the world."

"So . . . is this the library?" I asked in confusion because I didn't see any books. I pivoted in a slow circle, taking in the faint scent of anise and thyme—herbs commonly used to magically preserve parchment.

"It's one of the hallways between libraries," Nicholas replied. "If you'd arrived via an SF portal key, you would have landed near here. Nobody can portal transfer directly into the libraries. The closest you can arrive are the hallways if you have pre-approved clearance to breach the wards. Now, if you'll please follow me."

We ventured down the wide hallway that was so dimly lit the subterranean structure was perpetually coated in shadows. Huge towering columns rose up around us as a marble floor sprawled beneath our toes.

We came to a branched intersection, and another endless hall stretched down either side of us. Nicholas turned right, and Kaillen and I followed.

The hunter moved silently, drinking everything in as much as I was, and the absolute *stillness* of the place struck me. Heaviness blanketed the air, as though we'd been transported to an ancient mausoleum that nobody had disturbed in thousands of years.

I continued to gaze at everything, wide-eyed. Just the fact that we were now SF members and had been admitted to something as mysterious as these libraries made a dash of excitement pound through me. A week ago, I never would have been allowed within these walls.

“There are five libraries total,” Nicholas explained as we walked down the endless hall. “Sacramentum, Phantasia, Veritas, Sapientiae, and Cognitionis.”

“Latin names,” Kaillen remarked.

I gave him a side-eye, and the hunter smirked. Yep, the dude loved his books, and for some reason, I found that sexy as hell.

“Indeed they are Latin names.” Nicholas inclined his head. “Now, for your stay, Commander Klebus has requested we work predominantly in the Phantasia library, which doesn’t surprise me given what we’re searching for. The Phantasia library is where the majority of our texts are contained on mysterious legends and unverified suspicions. Since we’re searching for a realm that nobody knew of until a few days ago, we’re hoping to uncover past documents hinting at its existence.” He eyed both of us. “I hear that someone you’ve captured has already seen documents regarding this realm. Is that right?”

Kaillen nodded curtly. “The information he gave us is why we’re here. He said he obtained his info from the Phantasia library.”

Nicholas inclined his head. “Your commander has also commissioned another one of our representatives to research past admittances as I understand you have a traitor in your mix.”

“Yeah, have you found anything?” I asked.

“Not yet, but we keep very detailed records. We’ll hand over documents that highlight all SF members that have visited our libraries during the past two years and will leave it to your organization to uncover who the bad apple is.”

Kaillen cocked an eyebrow. “I bet Klebus will go through those documents herself.”

I nodded in agreement. “Probably.”

“As for your visit . . .” Nicholas clasped his hands behind his back. “To assist you, I’ve appointed two gargoyles to your case. They’ve been working since sunrise, ever since we received Commander Klebus’s request, but they’ll have to retire soon when the sun goes down.”

I eyed the hundreds of stone columns lining the halls. “Do the gargoyles sleep up there during the night?” I pointed upward.

Nicholas’s eyes brightened. “They do indeed. My, what an observant one you are.”

I muffled a laugh at Nicholas’s overzealous flattery while Kaillen scowled again.

But even Kaillen’s mood swings couldn’t diminish the excitement tingling through me. I’d never worked with a gargoyle before, and I was especially excited since everyone knew that their knowledge superseded any other supernatural’s. The one drawback, however, to working with gargoyles was that they only came alive during the day, and that was only if they had a supernatural’s life force to draw on.

Because of their less than scrupulous way of existing, the supernatural courts were ultimately in charge of all library gargoyles throughout the realms. Since gargoyles were naturally made of stone, they needed a human’s or supernatural’s life force to harvest in order to live. And that harvesting was granted from the courts as gargoyle leeching was the typical punishment for convicted criminals. So when some unlucky bugger got caught for his misdeeds, it wasn’t uncommon for a gargoyle to be brought in to feed off his life force.

Without those sacrificed lives, gargoyles would remain stone indefinitely. In other words, gargoyles weren’t born alive. They only came alive through magic.

Nicholas clucked his tongue and slowed his pace. “Ah, here we are. Your chamber for the next two weeks.” He stopped at a solid wood door that was curved at the top, but it didn’t have a doorknob. Instead, an old metal ring hung where a knob normally would have been. “Commander Klebus told me you only needed one chamber.”

“She told you right,” Kaillen replied, and my insides warmed to hear him say that so readily.

Nicholas pulled out a four-inch key from his pocket. It was made of smooth carved metal and held an eagle with its wings outstretched at the end of it.

After inserting it into the lock, Nicholas pushed open the door, and we stepped into a large bedroom chamber. A huge canopied bed waited by the far wall, a fireplace across from it. Through an arched opening in the back of the room, a separate living space with floral brocaded couches and a

wingback chair waited. And through the door on the other side was a modern bathroom.

Nicholas waved toward a bell near the door. “Meals will be brought to you three times a day. You’re not allowed to venture between libraries unaccompanied, nor are you allowed to leave your rooms during nighttime hours. Such behavior is forbidden. If you do so, or if you try to gain access to the libraries without me—your representative—you will be instantly banned.” He gave a small shrug. “I do apologize for the stringent security, but I’m sure you can appreciate how precious the items are within these walls.”

My mouth dropped open as I thought of Prisha, Barnabas, and Fallon coming to visit us. “So we’re not allowed to leave this place at all?”

“Oh no, you may leave, but in order to do so, I’ll have to accompany you to street level and also escort you back, but at nighttime hours, we ask that all guests remain in their chambers. Now, as I was saying about meals . . .” Nicholas pulled on the rope attached to the bell and gave it a sharp tug. A tray instantly appeared on the table near it.

My eyes popped when I saw the kettle, two cups, and a plate of cookies. “Did you just conjure food?”

Nicholas laughed softly. “Oh no, the food is merely transferred from the kitchen. We don’t practice alchemy here, but I did notice Mr. King eyeing the coffee shop upstairs and figured refreshments were in order.” He waved at the kettle. “It’s enchanted to stay hot no matter how long it’s left.”

Kaillen frowned, not one to gush over being waited on, but he obviously had good enough manners not to snap at Nicholas either.

“Thanks,” the hunter finally replied, although begrudgingly.

“I shall leave you for a few minutes to unpack and have a drink, and will wait in the hall until you’re done.” Nicholas stepped out of the room with a flourish, closing the door behind him.

For a moment, the hunter and I just stared at each other.

“Do you also feel like we just stepped into the Twilight Zone?” I joked. “Underground labyrinths. Strict curfews. Magically transferred food.”

He sneered. “As long as that vamp keeps his eyes off you, I’m fine with this library’s idiosyncrasies.”

A thrill ran through me at his possessive tone, but since time was limited, I didn’t comment, and neither of us wasted it. We unpacked in a

hurry and got things situated.

Kaillen wolfed down most of the cookies in several bites, his werewolf metabolism obviously needing the fuel, and drained the coffee in several gulps.

When he finished, I pulled the door open to find Nicholas standing as still as a statue in the hall, waiting in that frozen way that only vampires could master. But the second Kaillen and I appeared in his line of sight, he jumped into action.

“Ah, all done, I see?” Blond hair bobbed on top of his shoulders as he sashayed toward us. “You may lock your door behind you and follow me.”

I did as he said, and once again, we set off down the hall.

“How much time do we have before the gargoyles return to stone?” I asked.

Nicholas checked his watch. “About fifteen minutes. Just enough time to make introductions and see what else they’ve found. Tomorrow, we can spend the entire day pouring through their texts as I imagine you’ll both want to sleep tonight.”

“Not necessarily,” Kaillen replied, giving me a wicked smile.

Nicholas continued ahead, probably pretending he hadn’t heard the double meaning in the hunter’s words, but I leaned closer to Kaillen. “Back to the sex jokes, I see?”

He smirked. “I apparently can’t help myself.”

Near the end of the hall, two huge ancient-looking doors waited. They had to be around twenty feet tall, with arched tips and door handles at least three feet long. I wondered how they were opened, since each door looked as though it weighed a ton.

“That is the entrance to the Sacramentum Library,” Nicholas said with a wave. “Phantasia is farther this way.”

When we reached the end of another long hall, Nicholas stopped at doors that looked very similar to the ones guarding the Sacramentum Library, but they were darker, the wood appearing stained with black oil.

With a flourish, Nicholas pulled the door open, and the heavy monstrosity slid across the floor. We stepped over the threshold, and another rush of magic stole over me, reminding me of the thick wards surrounding the library’s perimeter.

Once inside, the dizzying aroma of metallic-scented wards coated every surface, nook, and crevice. “Wow,” I breathed as I took it all in.

Fifty-foot tall walls, rows and rows of bookshelves in domed caverns that seemed to stretch for hundreds of yards waited before us. And the *feel* of this place. It was unreal. Inside the actual library, it felt as though time and sound were swallowed.

I waved my hand in front of me and marveled at how it felt as if I was pushing against a barrier, as though the air was heavier here.

"I know it's a strange sensation to those not used to it," Nicholas said with a smile as he watched me.

I dropped my hand, my eyelids fluttering sheepishly as I studied the area nearest to us.

Several large tables with chairs sat near the front of the library. A group of four supernaturals worked at one table, pouring over some musty tome as a gargoyle waited at their side with several more books in his arms.

The gargoyle stood around four feet tall and wore a royal-blue woolen robe. The garment draped over his small body, brushing the floor and hiding his clawed feet.

"Well, this is interesting," Kaillen drawled. As soon as the hunter finished speaking, the air grew heavy again, as if the air had parted reluctantly for the hunter's words and then snapped back together.

"My thoughts exactly," I replied.

Nicholas led us down a row of stacks, but despite our hurried movements, not one breeze fluttered the pages in the massive leather-bound books on the tables we passed. And the scrolls' that the other group had just unrolled didn't crackle or make a sound.

"It's like the air stands still in here," I commented.

"The libraries swallow sound and time," Nicholas explained. "Everything the air touches in here is designed to preserve. It's like being touched by the fountain of youth. When you're within these walls, the magic preserves everything."

We reached a table, and Nicholas pulled out a chair. The legs squeaked on the floor, yet the grating noise didn't carry.

"Master Remus has left a few documents for us here." Nicholas waved toward the large tomes sitting in the middle of the table.

Another gargoyle hobbled by us on his way to a bookshelf and smiled pleasantly, but his smile would make any child scream considering it revealed sharp, hideous-looking teeth. The rest of his features weren't any more comforting. Dark, solemn eyes regarded us steadily, and his stone-

colored skin looked ashen in the fairy lights. A huge hooked nose draped forward on his face, his nostrils long and black.

“And here he is, right on time,” Nicholas said as a third gargoyle shuffled quickly to us from deeper within the library. He looked similar to the one that had just passed us, but his nose wasn’t as long.

“I’ve found one more,” the gargoyle said in excitement when he reached us. He set a large leather-bound book on the table.

“How do you do?” he said with a bow. The gargoyle’s claws curled delicately around my palm before he kissed the back of my hand. Cool, rough lips grazed my skin. “I’m Master Remus, and I’m at your service. Master Valentina is also collecting more tomes. He’ll join us shortly as time is withering.” He waved toward a piece of paper on the table. “I’ve already translated our findings.”

“Many thanks,” Nicholas replied, then said to us, “Most of the texts here are in dead languages, so they require translations.” The vampire settled onto a chair and indicated for me and Kaillen to do the same.

Once we were all seated, Nicholas opened the first book and held up the translations. “Now, shall we begin?” He eyed us, his expression bright with anticipation.

The one advantage to having a vampire gargoyle representative was that he didn’t require sleep, so if Nicholas chose to do so, he could help us twenty-four hours a day.

My lips curved up as I sat beside him. “Yeah, let’s see what they’ve found.”

Chapter 19

“Truly fascinating,” Nicholas commented for what felt like the fiftieth time.

He and Kaillen sat huddled over the last of the translated documents. Despite Kaillen’s initial dislike of the flirtatious vampire, the two had bonded over their love of history.

Nothing like spending several hours in a magically infused library, while studying dusty old books, to meet your newest BFF.

“So this one mentioned the Lunaris realm too?” I asked, peering over Kaillen’s shoulder. “And it also talks about an ancient guild?”

Nicholas’s expression glittered with excitement. “Correct. As you can see here . . .” He ran his finger along the tome and then to the separate sheet the gargoyle had translated. “It says that a lost princess from the Lunaris realm was thought to have run away to Earth, and that she commanded the power of her royal line. A guild was formed on Earth to find her since she refused to return to her home realm.”

I tapped my chin. “The guild must be the family the old sorcerer spoke of that Jakub mentioned. I wonder if that old sorcerer was a member of the guild.”

“He probably was, as that would explain how he knew all of this.” Kaillen pointed farther down the text. “It also says here that the royal line possessed dark magic. *She embodied the power of the gods, able to wield the power of others or enhance their gifts.*”

I stilled. *The power of the gods?* That described my forbidden power and awakening magic perfectly and also aligned with what Archie had found. *Terrible power.*

It was finally all coming together.

Kaillen and Nicholas gave each other intrigued glances.

I let out a long exhale. “So this lost princess is truly my ancestor since it doesn’t look like she was ever found after she ventured to Earth, which means she probably stayed here, and that’s how I’m her descendant. She must have had children.”

“That’s precisely the conclusion I’m drawing,” Nicholas replied with a nod.

I frowned. “But we still don’t know how the portal to Lunaris was closed or why my ancestor came to Earth in the first place.”

“But we do know that the old sorcerer that clued Jakub into Lunaris was part of the guild.” Kaillen rested his hand on my lower back, the movement so natural that I wondered if he was aware he was doing it.

“Mr. King’s right.” Nicholas nodded. “We’ve uncovered two very interesting pieces of history tonight: the lost princess and the ancient guild. And like Mr. King said, the sorcerer belonging to that guild explains how Jakub came to learn of your existence.”

Irritation flared inside me at the mention of Jakub. “But I always thought guilds were created to protect something, not to hunt it.”

Nicholas cocked his head. “It is interesting that the guild these texts speak of was created to find the lost princess and bring her back to Lunaris, not to protect her.”

Kaillen arched an eyebrow. “Maybe that guild was created to protect the royal family and not the princess.”

“But why would she run from her own family?” I asked with a frown.

Nicholas bobbed his head. “And that is another *very* interesting question.”

The hunter leaned forward in his seat, his amber eyes sparkling like chips of glass in the fairy lights. “Have the gargoyles found anything about a reward?”

I nodded eagerly. “Jakub’s convinced he’ll be rewarded for opening the portal because that’s what the sorcerer said was promised to the guild if they returned the princess. Do the tomes mention that?”

Nicholas pulled out a pen and paper and began making notes. “I shall ask the gargoyles to hunt for that answer tomorrow.”

Kaillen’s forehead furrowed. “Another mystery we haven’t unraveled is who precisely the Bone Eaters are. We know Tala descends from them, but it’s important that we understand exactly *what* they are because Tala’s mother said to be careful of them.”

As Nicholas was writing down Kaillen’s question, I added, “I also want to know why the royal line in Lunaris wanted the princess back so badly. Was it only because she was family? Or was it because of something else?”

Kaillen nodded. "And why did she flee Lunaris in the first place?"

"And most importantly," I reminded both of them, "how do we close that portal?"

Nicholas jotted down all of our questions. "Right. We shall keep hunting for answers. Now," he said with a flourish. "As it's getting late—"

My phone buzzed in my pocket, cutting him off. I pulled it out to see a text from Prisha. Some of the unease I'd been feeling at what we'd uncovered vanished. "Prish is here."

Nicholas checked his watch, then stood as he began to file the translations away. "Perfect timing. We shall retire for the night, and I shall escort you to street level. You have three hours until you are required to be in your chambers."

We all stood, and Nicholas led us back to the ancient elevator.

As the elevator climbed out of the subterranean libraries, I applied a concealment spell to hide the exploding stars in my eyes and ringed tattoo on my neck. When complete, Kaillen leaned down and pressed a kiss to my throat, right where my hidden tattoo lay.

"You smell delectable," he murmured.

Kaillen pulled back, and it struck me again that the bond between us, while still broken, was definitely mending.

When we reached street level, Nicholas handed us a slip of paper with his phone number. "Text me when you've returned, and I'll escort you back to your chambers."

Kaillen saved his number, and since the hunter was so eager to do so, I had a feeling he'd be contacting Nicholas again in the future whenever he wanted to talk books and history with someone.

"Found a new friend, eh?" I elbowed him as we stepped out onto the street. The dark night greeted us, the stars barely visible through the city lights.

He shrugged. "I may not hate him."

I snorted. "As long as he's not flirting with me."

The hunter chuckled. "Exactly."

I laughed as Kaillen pulled out his yellow crystal and cast an illusion spell to hide our magical transportation.

We emerged in the middle of a raucous pub, and the low ceilings, dark wood interior, and creaky floorboards hinted at the age of the bustling bar.

“Where are we?” I asked over the loud music, laughter, and conversation. Songs in Bulgarian blared from the speakers.

“Near the city center. This is a pub Barnabas has been coming to his entire life.”

“So this pub is hundreds of years old?” I replied, then abruptly lurched forward when someone bumped roughly into me from behind.

The guy muttered something in a language I couldn’t understand, and Kaillen’s eyes glittered as he tugged me closer as the drunk dude ambled off.

The hunter’s arm slipped around my waist, and his eyes tracked the guy who nearly made me fall over.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it. He’s drunk,” I said and laid my hand on Kaillen’s chest. His muscles clenched beneath my palm.

“He touched you,” he growled as a golden flare shone in his eyes.

My heart pattered harder. “Is your . . . wolf coming around more?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” Kaillen growled. “He’s starting to feel *very* protective of you. I think he’s really beginning to understand that you *are* our mate.”

My heart squeezed. “Then let’s do whatever we can to help him continue on that path.”

Kaillen’s nostrils flared, and he tugged me closer until I was flush against him. “Perhaps a taste of what’s between your legs would also jog his memory.” The hunter’s lips lifted in a seductive smile.

I curled my fingers into his shirt as his head dipped, his mouth descending to my lips, but then a strong slap to my back jolted me away from the hunter.

“Well, if it isn’t my two favorite lovebirds!” Barnabas shouted over the music. The vamp stood at our side, sneaking up on us by using his assassin mojo. He patted both of our backs quite vigorously. “Fallon and I have been wondering when you two would show. We’re already well into our drinks, and it’s grown quite lonely here without you both, although another lovely lady has joined us.” He nodded toward a booth where Prisha sat next to Fallon.

“Prish!” I called in excitement and raced toward her.

She grinned and jumped up from the booth, hugging me as we danced in happiness.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, pulling back. “Not that I’m complaining. Barnabas and Fallon have been nice enough to buy me a drink.”

I eyed the fairy assassin. Like me, Fallon was glamoured to conceal his true looks. At the moment, nobody could see Fallon’s pointy ears, sharp teeth, or shimmery skin. Everything else about him looked the same apart from that—the bright yellow hair, hazel eyes, and tall, lean build were all revealed.

“Hi,” I said happily to him. I sank onto the seat next to Fallon and pulled him into a hug. “It’s so good to see you again.”

Fallon patted me awkwardly, and I could have sworn a faint blush marred his cheeks. “You too,” he said simply.

“He’s truly a man of many words, isn’t he?” Barnabas slid into the booth across from us as I pulled Prisha in next to me.

Fallon arched an eyebrow at the vamp. “Don’t you know that women like dark and mysterious men?”

Barnabas’s gaze raked over his frame. “You, my friend, are neither dark nor mysterious.”

“Men with few words are by definition mysterious,” Prisha chimed in, then gave Fallon a quick glance.

The fairy assassin’s expression didn’t change, but his gaze lingered for a second on Prisha before he picked up his drink again.

“Made yourself right at home, I see,” Kaillen commented when he surveyed the empty beer glasses in the middle of the table.

“Our poor waitress can’t keep up.” Barnabas picked up his beer and drained the entire thing in one swallow, then slammed his empty mug down and slid it near the others. “Now, what can I get you beautiful ladies?”

I shrugged. “Whatever’s on tap, but I can help you carry them.” I nudged Prisha to let me out of the booth and then joined Barnabas as we sauntered toward the bar.

When we reached it, the vamp assassin flashed the female human bartender a titillating smile. She merely gave him an unamused look and said something in Bulgarian.

Barnabas replied readily, the foreign words rolling from his tongue, and before I knew it, we had five huge mugs of beer in our hands.

“Steady there, Tala,” Barnabas said. “We don’t want to be losing a drop of this precious cargo.”

“Does *The Only Lady I’ve Ever Loved* ever carry cargo like this?”

His eyes brightened in delight. “Back in the day, me ship carried all sorts of cargo between the ports in the fae lands,” he said in his pirate accent. “But now, she’s simply a vessel for me to enjoy.”

I snickered. “How is your fair lady? I’ve been wondering ever since the damage she took in the siege against Jakub.”

Barnabas sighed dramatically. “The fact that you carry such concern for me lady touches me in more ways than I can share. And yes, thankfully, me ship is back in one piece. The fairy crew at the wharf was able to repair her completely.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“And I’m delighted that you asked.”

I snorted a laugh. “Kaillen said you’d swear your loyalty to me if I cared about your ship.”

“And he’s not wrong.” Barnabas’s grin turned wicked. “How has that grumpy chap been?” His eyes dipped to the base of my neck, where my mating mark should have been, as we carefully skirted the other patrons on our way back to the booth.

I shrugged. “Surly. Ever since we lost our mating bond, his wolf’s been on edge.”

Barnabas frowned. “So it’s true that his wolf doesn’t believe you’re his mate?”

“Yeah, unfortunately, but there have been a few times when he’s seemed to remember me and recognizes me.” I lifted my glasses higher when a guy’s arm swiped out as he spoke boisterously with his friends.

Fallon’s yellow hair came into view as we neared our table. I hurriedly recapped the moments Kaillen’s wolf had grown jealous of Carlos and how my fight with the sprites had triggered memories in Kaillen’s wolf about our mate bond. I left out the incident where Kaillen’s wolf threw me across the room, though. I figured that incident required too many intimate details that Barnabas would probably use to rile Kaillen, which my mate probably wouldn’t appreciate.

Despite not revealing that last part, a devilish light appeared in Barnabas’s eyes. “Ah, so jealousy triggers your spliced bond and flares it back to life?”

“It’s helped.” I gave the vamp a side-eye. “What does that look on your face mean?”

Barnabas's devious smile grew. "It means, lovely Tala, that I have the perfect plan to make his wolf remember you completely."

Chapter 20

Before I could ask what plan the vamp was talking about, Barnabas crossed the remaining distance to our booth and plopped the mugs onto the table, then took the ones that I was carrying and did the same.

“All right, lovelies, there we are. Drink up!” He slid into the booth and tugged me with him, which put Prish and Fallon across from us and Kaillen in the middle. Barnabas settled his arm around my waist, then nuzzled into my neck. “You still smell quite delicious, dear Tala.”

I squeaked at the feel of his nose running along my skin, then the scrape of his fangs near my jugular.

“What the fuck?” Kaillen snarled, but Barnabas lifted his head from my neck and cocked an eyebrow at the hunter.

“You’re not mated to her anymore, old friend. I don’t see what the problem is with sharing.”

My lips parted in surprise just as a dark expression overtook Kaillen’s face, but before the hunter could react, Barnabas whipped me out of the booth and back to the floor where several couples were dancing to the music.

He twirled me to the center of the room, moving so fast he was almost giving away the fact that we weren’t human, before he pulled me into his arms and drew me so close to him that my body planted against his.

“Barnabas!” I exclaimed as my boobs squashed against his hard frame. Beneath his thin shirt, his body felt cool and chiseled. “What the hell are you doing?”

But instead of answering, his arms snaked around my waist, and one of his hands settled dangerously close to my ass while the other drifted to my hip.

When I didn’t return the embrace, he lifted my arms and draped them around his shoulders. “Dance with me, love. It will drive him wild.” He gyrated his hips against mine as he moved in time with the music.

“So this is your plan?” I asked.

He smiled wickedly. "It is."

Sure enough, an angry bellow came from across the room, and a flash of Kaillen's murderous glare appeared in the crowd. But just as the hunter cut through the dancers like a knife, Barnabas twirled us away, moving expertly through the throng of people as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Breathless, I held onto him as Kaillen stalked toward us, the veins in the hunter's neck standing on end.

"I hope you know what you're doing," I whispered under my breath.

"Oh, darling, I know exactly what I'm doing," he replied before his mouth drifted to my neck, and he pressed a kiss flush against my skin.

I gasped in surprise as Kaillen roared, "Barnabas!"

Energy slammed into my back as the hunter was nearly upon us, but once again Barnabas expertly sashayed us across the floor, moving through the crowd like liquid silk.

Another snarl came from behind me, and I clung tightly to the vamp's shoulders. "If your intent is to piss him off, you're doing a marvelous job."

Barnabas's indigo eyes flashed with mirth. "My intention is to do much more than piss him off." And with that, his head dipped down until his mouth sealed over mine.

The kiss took me so completely by surprise that I didn't even realize the vamp's tongue was sliding into my mouth until Kaillen's furious energy slammed into my back.

But before the hunter could catch us, Barnabas waltzed us through a group of college-aged kids to the other side of the room, breaking the kiss only long enough to see where we were going.

"Was that necessary?" I demanded and avoided the urge to wipe his kiss away.

Barnabas's eyes twinkled. "It was. You want him back, don't you?"

"More than anything."

"Then play along, love. Trust me on this one."

My heart squeezed at how wrong it felt to be in Barnabas's arms, but he was the hunter's best friend. He probably knew Kaillen better than me, and I knew that despite all of his tricks and cheeky comments, Barnabas only wanted what was best for us.

"I hope he doesn't kill you," I said and forced myself to soften in his arms.

Barnabas flashed me a gleeful smile. "Oh, he'll certainly try."

He twirled me around the room again, our pace dizzying. I glanced over the vamp's shoulder to see Kaillen's seething expression from across the room. Veins stood on end in the hunter's neck, and his face had turned a furious shade of scarlet.

"Holy shit," I breathed. "He's *definitely* going to kill you."

Barnabas grinned wickedly. "See? What did I tell you? Those mating instincts are flaring back with a vengeance." He laughed in delight. "I do so enjoy riling him."

I squealed when the vamp squeezed my ass and then pressed his hard cock into my belly. "*Seriously?*"

Barnabas caressed my ass again, then winked.

I sighed. "Copping another feel, I see."

"You can't blame me when you're so delectable."

Despite Barnabas's behavior, I couldn't help my soft laugh as Kaillen fought his way through a tangle of sweaty dancers who seemed so intoxicated they didn't even realize the danger they were in. One of the world's most lethal hunters was currently slicing through them with wrath etched into his face, yet most of them just grinded and bumped together, not even noticing.

"Barnabas?" I said uneasily when my gaze locked onto Kaillen's. "He's *really* pissed."

Flames burned in Kaillen's eyes, and if it wasn't for the crowded dance floor, dim lights, and pounding music that was distracting everyone, I would have been worried that the humans would notice something was amiss.

Barnabas laughed, the sound filled with delight. "Oh, yes. Now he's gettin' *real* riled up."

"He's seriously going to stake you. You know that, right?" I murmured when the vamp slid us through another couple as Kaillen continued trying to reach us.

"Only if he catches me."

"He'll eventually reach us."

Barnabas chuckled gleefully. "Oh, I hope so. I haven't had a proper brawl in a long time."

I scoffed. "Not even when those six fairies attacked you guys at Valahan's place?"

“Oh pish, posh. That was merely a little scuffle.”

He spun me around the room again, moving at a nauseating speed. My head was swimming when he circled us to a stop right in front of the booth that Fallon and Prisha were still sitting at.

Barnabas paused long enough to gulp down half his beer while my bestie eyed me with interest.

“Are you okay?” Prisha asked as she took another drink from her mug. A twinkle lit her eye when she glanced over my shoulder to where Kaillen was currently located.

The hunter was still across the room, and given the expression on his face when Barnabas wrapped his arms around me again, he was about two seconds away from unleashing the underworld on this place.

“Just fine,” I finally managed to reply. “You?”

Prisha gave Fallon a sideways look, then hurriedly lifted her glass as the fairy assassin also glanced at her. “I’m good,” she squeaked.

Both guzzled another drink, and I couldn’t help but wonder at their sudden discomfort. Prisha was never uncomfortable around men. She handled them as efficiently as her blades, but with the fairy . . .

“And we’re off again!” Barnabas exclaimed before dashing me across the room at a whirlwind pace.

Another roar reached my ears, and I caught a flash of Kaillen’s dark hair as he reached our booth a second too late.

Despite the drunk humans dancing in the bar, more and more of them seemed to be becoming aware of the cat-and-mouse game Barnabas was playing. As the vamp circled us around the room a third time, some even began to join in, purposefully putting themselves in Kaillen’s way when the hunter tried to reach us or giving Barnabas openings so he could slip more easily through the crowd.

I had no idea how long we’d been dancing—or rather traveling—around the room, but the vamp’s hands had completely glued to my ass.

“You feel divine,” Barnabas said loudly, which I knew was for Kaillen’s enhanced hearing to pick up. “So ripe for the picking. Perhaps we should take this somewhere more private?”

In his next twirl, Barnabas released a huge swell of his vampire sex mojo, and it slammed into me with such unexpected force that I didn’t have any shields in place to protect myself.

In the blink of an eye, I was filled with molten heat and unfiltered lust. The absolute *need* to wrap my legs around the man holding me, while claiming his cock, overpowered me.

“Barnabas,” I moaned. “Yes. Now!”

The vamp slammed us against the nearest wall and hoisted my legs up. I wrapped them around his waist until my ankles were locked, and then his mouth was on me. Kissing. Biting. Scraping. His tongue trailed a path down my neck before a colossal wave of energy hit me that was so strong I couldn’t breathe.

In a dizzying whoosh of air, Barnabas was ripped away from me, and then the hunter stood in his place as I stared up at him with glazed eyes. Molten desire still scoured across my flesh like a raging fire as Barnabas’s sexual energy refused to dissipate.

A jerked movement had me flush against the hunter, and his nostrils flared as those black flames appeared in his eyes.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” he said in such a deadly growl that somewhere in my fogged mind I knew he meant it.

I still had zero shields in place, and it felt as though Barnabas had targeted all of his sexual energy on me. All I wanted was to fuck and bite, writhe and taste. And the man before me, the huge hunter with his rising flames and fisted hands, was who my body ached to be with most of all.

“Fuck me,” I whispered to the hunter.

“His smell is all over you,” Kaillen snarled. Veins popped in the hunter’s neck, and he turned to sweep the room, but Barnabas had either left in a dash of speed or was hiding in a corner. Wherever he’d went, he was long gone.

Kaillen turned back to me and slammed his hands against the wall as fire raged in his eyes so darkly that the depths of the underworld were staring at me. “Fight his thrall, Tala! I can’t fucking stand that another man’s done this to you.” He bit my neck, the pain of it jolting me enough from Barnabas’s vampire magic, that for a moment, my head cleared.

“Gods,” I whispered.

I quickly called upon my witch powers to create a shield, and despite my throbbing clit, the pull of the vamp’s sexual thrall dissipated, but I was still turned on, and Kaillen was right in front of me. So large and hot, so furious and *mine*.

Perhaps Barnabas had been right to push the hunter this far, because I hadn't seen Kaillen this enraged since the fight with Jakub.

Kaillen hauled me closer to him, his large hands cupping my ass as another snarl worked up his throat.

"His fucking scent is *all over you*." His voice turned gravelly at the end, and I knew his wolf was nearly out of control.

Before I could respond, the hunter crushed me to him and raced out the door.

Outside, the cool night air washed over my scorched skin. Lust still pummeled me, but it was no longer from Barnabas's sexual mojo and was entirely about Kaillen.

My body ached with need for the enraged demon hunter holding me in his arms. It'd felt like so long since we'd been like this.

"Kaillen," I moaned.

"You're in his fucking thrall!" he snarled. "You're *my* woman, and your body is nearly climaxing for another man."

But before I could tell him that it was no longer about Barnabas, another guttural roar of fury left him before he whizzed us away from the bar's entrance. The dark night closed around us as he moved at werewolf speed, blurring us over the sidewalk into a dark alleyway behind the pub.

The faint thump of the music from inside reached my ears as he brought us to a sudden stop and placed my back flat against a hard concrete wall.

"Kaillen," I whispered. "It's not for him. It's for *you*." I clawed at him, demanding that he see me for who I was because Kaillen was here, holding me, so close, yet too far away, and I needed him.

"I can't fucking take this," he seethed. "His scent's on you. His taste is on your skin. Your pussy's wet for him, and, *fuck*. I need to claim you. Make you mine. Erase him from your body. Fucking Barnabas—"

Before he could continue with his psychotic tirade, I arched my body into his until a groan of longing left his lips. "I'm yours. Always yours," I whispered.

"Fucking right you're mine," he said, his eyes glowing bright gold. "You belong to *me*. Not him."

And then his lips were on me, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, his lips bruising and demanding as he sought to mark me with his scent and

taste. And in the back of my mind, some small sliver of my consciousness was aware of not only Kaillen's need to claim me but his wolf's too.

"Yes," I breathed.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, crushing myself to him even more as he drove me against the wall relentlessly. Taking, needing, wanting. Every part of him seemed to crave me as much as I craved him, and I didn't want to lose this moment. The thought of going back to when he'd rejected me, and his wolf no longer saw me as his . . .

I couldn't bear for that to happen again.

His hands ripped at my clothes, pulling and dragging the material across my skin, and my scorched flesh welcomed any wanton action he inflicted.

"Need you. Now." His guttural tone sent a new wave of lust through me, sharpening the ache between my thighs and sending my mind into a tailspin.

And then cool air washed over my bare legs, sending goosebumps rising along my skin as I felt his hard length between my thighs. We were doing this. Here. Now. Fucking like nothing else mattered in the world.

With my back braced against the concrete wall, he grabbed my ass and thrust inside me. I cried out at the exquisite feel of him as he groaned and pushed my knees higher, so he could drive into me deeper again and again.

"More. More," I breathed.

He slammed into me, fucking me harder with every thrust, owning my body with every pump. "My woman. My mate. You're fucking *mine*, Tala," he rasped.

My body quivered around the thick girth of his cock, my mind so far gone that everything became about sensations and lust. I arched against him again as his erection scraped my insides, and the waves began to build, growing higher and higher. Fuck, he felt so good. So big. So hard. And *mine*.

"Kaillen. Yes. Don't stop," I panted.

A guttural growl tore from his lips, and he thrust faster, his huge body as hot as fire.

"Fuck, I've missed you." He leaned down and claimed my lips with his, his tongue fucking my mouth while his cock pounded my core.

I cried out just as I spilled over the edge. My entire body spasmed in a shattering climax, and the second my release hit, Kaillen came too.

His body shuddered, and he drove his cock deeper, filling me to the hilt.

And when I finally became aware of our surroundings again, my head tilted back to see nighttime clouds washing over the bright moon as the chill air brushed against my skin, and I realized what we'd done.

Kaillen still held me to him as my legs stayed wrapped around his toned waist. His cock was still buried inside me, and the hunter's heavy breaths puffed against my neck.

"Kaillen," I whispered. Even though the hunter hadn't claimed me in every sense, he had claimed my body, my mouth, and my mind. But his canines had never pierced my skin, and his magic hadn't coated my insides. Our souls were still unconnected, and our magic separate, but we'd had sex, and only yesterday, that hadn't been possible. I grinned. "We did it."

"Don't you mean *I* did it?" he replied against my neck. "Pretty sure I'm the one who just fucked you raw right now."

I giggled, unable to help it.

He shifted, moving slightly inside me, but he didn't harden again instantly. Not as he had when we'd been mated. "I'm still going to kill that vamp," he growled.

I bit my lip to stop my smile. "He did all of that on purpose, you know."

He grumbled. "I know."

"Perhaps you should be thanking him then."

"Not fucking happening," he said on such a low snarl that I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. He lifted his head and cocked an eyebrow at me. "You don't have to sound so pleased that my friend had his hands all over you."

I shrugged helplessly. "Kinda hard not to when it resulted in an amazing round of sex with the man who's supposed to be my mate."

Kaillen's amber eyes glittered in the night. "Not supposed to be. I *am* your mate."

Another rush of warmth seared my flesh. "Yes, you are." I ran a hand tenderly over his cheek, and his eyes darkened.

"You know Barnabas is going to gloat about this. We reek of sex now."

I curled my fingers into his hair. "As twisted as this may sound, he did it because he cares about you. He's your friend, and he's trying to help you and your wolf connect again."

Kaillen inhaled my scent. “Just as long as he doesn’t use that excuse again to grope your ass.”

I laughed, then toyed with his hair again. “So . . . is your wolf finally fully accepting me again?”

He lifted his head, meeting my gaze again. “He might be. He encouraged me to fuck you. That’s unheard of in a mated male werewolf who’s lost his mate, but he didn’t urge me to claim you.” Kaillen’s fingers coasted over the base of my throat, where the claiming mark would have gone.

“One day at a time, right?”

“As many days as it takes.”

My stomach curled at that fierce statement just as another gust of frigid air blasted around us. I took in the dark alleyway and realized that at any moment somebody could turn the corner and find us naked and still joined.

As if also sensing how exposed we were, Kaillen finally pulled back, and his cock slid out of me. I immediately missed the feel of him, but I also knew that getting caught with our pants down—quite literally—probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do in a foreign country, even if we could use our magic on human police or bystanders to avoid any consequences.

Kaillen straightened my clothing first before tending to himself, and that attentiveness shot another ray of hope through me. It was such a typical mated male wolf way to act, to always tend to his female first.

“So since you know that Barnabas did all of that intentionally,” I said after we were fully clothed again. “Does that mean that we can go back into the pub and continue our evening?”

Kaillen growled softly as he wrapped his arms around me. “I suppose I can forgive him this one time, but if he does anything like that ever again, I *will* rip his throat out.”

“Fair enough.”

Kaillen kept my hand firmly locked in his as we made our way back to the pub’s front door. Inside, the mood was as boisterous as ever, and our friends were still in the booth, pounding drinks while talking and laughing.

Prisha still sat beside Fallon, and Barnabas had returned. My bestie and the fairy were both smiling as Barnabas lounged back in his seat, looking smug as shit as he regaled how easy it was to stir Kaillen’s mating instincts.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kaillen muttered when we reached them and slid into our seats. “It worked, so I won’t kill you.”

Fallon smiled knowingly, his nostrils flaring since we probably *did* reek of sex, while Barnabas merely grinned.

“Lovely,” Barnabas said as he assessed us. “You porked her, then?” He clapped Kaillen on the back.

Kaillen gave him a deadpan look. “Say that again, or touch my woman one more time, and I’ll end you.”

But Barnabas just laughed and said boisterously, “You’re welcome, brother.”

Prisha’s eyes bulged, and I could see her silent question. I gave a guilty nod, then couldn’t stop my grin as she fell into laughter. “Holy shit, girl. You actually had sex just now? In public? That’s a first.”

I thought back to the alleyway outside of the New York club, the night that Kaillen’s wolf had detected my true scent, and cringed. “Well, technically, not really the first time.”

That confession only made her laugh harder as Kaillen gave me a knowing smirk.

Barnabas’s indigo eyes twinkled when our gazes met, and I gave a silent nod of thanks. He raised his glass, gesturing to all of us to do the same. “To true love and even truer friendships.”

“You’re not getting all sappy on us, are you?” Fallon asked.

Barnabas brought a hand to his chest. “Are you mocking my sincerest toast, which I’ve conducted with the utmost respect for all mated couples who leave random bars to fuck in alleyways?”

I blushed in earnest as Kaillen drew me closer and growled a warning at his friend.

But Barnabas just raised his glass. “To endless fucking!”

Prisha cringed as Fallon face-palmed, but we all still clinked glasses and took long drinks.

The night passed with more drinking, plenty of laughter, and a sense of happiness that I hadn’t felt since my life had been dipped into turmoil, but despite loving every second of it, Kaillen and I eventually had to leave.

“We have a curfew,” I explained to Prish as Kaillen and I stood. “It’s a library thing.”

“Pooh.” She pouted. “See you again tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” I replied just as Barnabas and Fallon also offered their goodbyes.

The bar was still so loud as we slipped our coats on that I nearly didn’t hear the alarm going off on my SF tablet.

Kaillen frowned when he did the same, and together, we pulled them out to see calls coming in from Klebus.

“What in the world?” I murmured as I cast a silencing spell around our booth so the bar’s patrons wouldn’t hear us, then swiped the device to answer.

Kaillen silenced his and instead looked over my shoulder as Klebus’s face filled my tablet’s screen. Her golden complexion looked pale, and her sapphire eyes were bright with concern.

“Mr. King. Ms. Davenport,” she said as soon as the connection was made. “I’m afraid you need to return to the U.S.”

My stomach sank. “Why? What’s happened? Is Tessa okay?”

“Your sister’s fine, but”—her lips pressed into a line of worry before she said in a clipped tone—“Malikhi has come through the portal again.”

“What?” Kaillen snarled, energy immediately rising off of him. “Why? It’s only been two days since Tala received their queen’s letter.”

“Two days on *Earth*, yes,” the commander agreed. “But I’m afraid their letter was referring to two weeks in Lunaris, not Earth. It seems that time moves similarly to the fae lands on Lunaris, which means that two weeks in their realm has come to pass.”

My mouth dropped just as Fallon, Prisha, and Barnabas grew quiet around us, either hearing what Klebus was saying or knowing from our expressions that something had gone terribly wrong.

Kaillen’s teeth ground together, the muscle in his jaw working. “You’re saying that Malikhi has arrived to collect Tala.” The hunter’s arm tightened around me, drawing me protectively against him.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Commander Klebus responded. “And I fear if you don’t return promptly, he will enact the terrible power we were warned of, and many lives will be lost. Please, hurry, Tala. We haven’t a moment to spare.”

Chapter 21

Kaillen and I whipped into action the second our call disconnected. “Our bags. The scrolls. What about the research we’re supposed to be conducting in the library?” I said in a rush as we hurried to the front door, our friends hot on our heels.

“I don’t know,” Kaillen replied. “But I can message Nicholas and ask him to return our things. As for the research—” He tore a hand through his hair. “I don’t fucking know.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Prisha asked when the five of us stood outside on the dark sidewalk. “I overheard some of that conversation but not all of it.”

“They’re here,” I replied as dread twisted my gut. “Apparently time moves differently in Lunaris. My two weeks are up, and Malikhi has come to collect me. And if I don’t make an appearance, Klebus is concerned that he’s going to start killing.”

Barnabas’s cheekbones sharpened in the moonlight, and Fallon let out a low hiss as Kaillen’s deep growl reverberated through his chest.

“Over my fucking dead body he takes you,” Prisha said in a cold voice.

I shook my head. “I can’t *not* go. I have to. If Malikhi starts killing people just because I don’t—” I wrung my hands. “Oh gods, what about Tess? She doesn’t even know.”

“We can find a way to tell Tess,” Prish said in a hurry. “But there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go through that portal alone.”

“She won’t be alone,” Kaillen cut in. “Because he’s not taking her.”

“Kaillen . . .”

But the hunter stopped me with a look. “You’re my *mate*.” Gold flashed in his eyes, and for the first time, that shining color remained, no longer a fleeting glimpse to the depths of his wolf’s feelings, but a true and raw portrait of how he felt.

I nearly cried at the irony of it. Our bond had finally formed again, but the last piece to click it in place was the arrival of a sinister Lunarian with alien purpose and power who was here to collect me, and if I didn't do his bidding . . .

"I have to go, Kaillen." An image of those twelve supernaturals I'd murdered scorched my mind. "I won't be responsible for more innocents dying."

"Then I'm going with you," he growled.

"Me too," Prish replied. "I'm not gonna get left behind this time."

My eyes widened. "But what if he—"

"I'll come too," Fallon added, taking a step closer to the hunter.

"I will as well." Barnabas nodded. "Me thinks this prick needs to be put in his place."

My heart threatened to break under the weight of how fiercely strong and loyal my mate and our friends were, but just the thought of Malikhi sucking my friends' magic from them and watching their bodies become shells as they withered and died . . .

I shook my head. "No, you can't. I won't risk it. I'd rather die a thousand times than watch any of you be hurt."

"Now, now," Barnabas said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Let's not get dramatic. I'm already dead, remember?"

"You can still experience true death," I reminded him.

Barnabas shrugged. "I haven't lived four hundred years in bubble wrap, my dear, and I don't intend to start now. We're joining you. Simple as that. No more arguments, dear Tala."

I gave Kaillen a pleading look, but the hunter only stepped closer to me and wrapped an arm around my waist, drawing me close. "You're *my mate*. Stop telling me to stay. Everything in me commands me to protect you. I would never fucking stay."

"Maybe he'll give us more time," I said hopefully. "I'll tell Malikhi that two weeks isn't up here and demand another week."

"It's worth a try, but if he doesn't, I'm not letting him take you. If you go, I go." Kaillen's eyes breathed fire.

"I don't know if Klebus would allow—"

"Fuck Klebus's rules and *fuck* the SF. I'm not one of them and never will be. The SF doesn't tell me what I can and can't do. I'm going and so are they."

I swallowed at the fierceness of Kaillen's declaration. Even though Kaillen and I were technically SF now, in my heart, I knew that Kaillen never would be. Forever he'd be the demon hunter from the Shadow Zone who worked alone and only asked for help from the loyal friends at his side. I had no idea what kind of childhood Fallon and Barnabas had suffered from, but Kaillen had hinted that it wasn't pretty.

And in a way, Kaillen was cut from the same cloth. He'd always been rejected and was an outcast among his pack. And that shared trauma and disjointed upbringing had obviously forged a bond between the three of them that was entirely unbreakable. The three of them considered one another family, and they all meant it when they said they'd stick by my side. Since Kaillen was my mate, Barnabas and Fallon obviously now considered me part of their family too.

And I felt the same way about Prisha. She was my sister, even though we didn't share blood. Our souls were fused, and the two of us would fight to the death to protect one another, just like Kaillen and his chosen brothers would do for him. Our hearts would always fight for each other.

And it wasn't fair to tell them they couldn't stand with me now.

I finally nodded, relenting to all of them. "Okay, fine. We'll all go, but the second I see any of you begin to fall—"

Kaillen snarled. "You're not sacrificing yourself for us."

I gave his hand a squeeze but didn't reply, because if it came down to saving them or giving myself to the queen, I already knew what I would do even if Kaillen would never forgive me.

∞ ∞ ∞

Kaillen's portal dropped us in the hallway of Jakub's warehouse. We'd messaged Klebus before leaving Sofia, telling her where we'd land.

The second our feet hit solid ground, the vampire commander was in front of us. She opened her mouth, then caught sight of Prisha, Fallon, and Barnabas. A shrewd scowl descended over her features. "What's the meaning of this?"

"They're our friends. They're coming to confront Malikhi with us," I replied.

"They're not SF members."

"As we're aware," Kaillen replied, that tone entering his voice that he seemed to reserve for the commander only. "But they're still joining us."

“Mr. King. Once again, this is highly irregular.”

“But not illegal,” he countered. “Something exists in this warehouse that’s outside of Earth. SF’s jurisdiction ends with this realm, and considering Tala is a descendant of the people that come from Lunaris, if anything, she’s the one with authority here.”

“Please, we don’t have time to argue,” I added. “If Malikhi is here for me, and if I’m unable to convince him to leave and give us more time, there’s nobody I’d rather have at my back than the people standing at my side.”

The commander’s lips pursed as her gaze traveled over all of our determined expressions. She finally sighed. “Fine.”

The six of us hurried down the hall with Klebus and the squad members who’d accompanied her. The familiar concrete floors and windowless rooms we passed brought back nightmares of all that had happened here.

Twelve supernaturals. I killed twelve innocents within these walls.

The familiar feeling of my chest tightening caught me unaware. Shallow breaths made my lungs constrict, and my footsteps slowed as that consuming feeling of dread filled me.

Twelve innocents. So much blood. So much gore.

I stopped and leaned against the wall, a rush of dizziness consuming me.

“Hey.” Kaillen’s soft word drifted to my ears, then the warmth of his hand pressed into my back. He moved up behind me, steadying me as I leaned against the wall. “I got you.”

“Is something wrong?” Commander Klebus asked with a frown.

Kaillen bared his teeth. “Give her a minute.” It was as though he *knew*, and when his nostrils flared, I realized that he did. He could scent the fear and heartache rising from me, that soul-lashing pain at what I’d done.

Feeling Kaillen so close and knowing that we’d broken down barrier after barrier between our souls had light entering my mind again. I sank against his chest, concentrating on breathing deeply and soaking up his scent, and that nightmare feeling slowly receded.

Commander Klebus’s frown grew.

I gave her a shaky smile as I straightened, but Kaillen refused to let me go.

“Sorry about that,” I said to her. “I think I’ve got some PTSD from *you know*, that whole battle with another realm thing.” I tried to make a joke, but it fell flat.

Her brows pinched together. “Can you continue?”

I straightened more. “Yes.”

Prisha eyed me with concern blazing in her dark-brown eyes, but I simply squeezed her hand and started walking again. Kaillen stayed close to my side, his arm brushing mine as he gave lethally infused glares at any SF member who looked twice at me.

A hush fell through the group as we approached the circular chamber where the portal waited. And when we entered it, and that great domed room greeted us, I ground to a halt when I saw three full squads encircling the billowing turquoise portal. A heavy energy hung in the air, the promise of violence and bloodshed whispering through the room.

“Well, that’s something you don’t see every day,” Barnabas said under his breath as they took in the otherworldly portal standing proudly in the center of the room.

My heart began to pound when I beheld the group of supernaturals standing at the portal’s door. There were six of them, and Malikhi stood at the front.

As before, he wore fine clothing—expensive-looking slacks, tall leather boots, and a woven top. His cape was missing this time, though.

Malikhi’s attention zoomed into me, honed with razor-like precision. And when our gazes locked, my breath sucked in. Stars exploded in his eyes, their whirling inferno hinting at a barely controlled storm within him. The men behind Malikhi had similar irises and throat tattoos, but unlike Malikhi, their tattoos didn’t wrap around their necks.

I took a step closer to them, my friends at my sides as I continued to assess the newcomers. None of them carried weapons or held potions or electronic devices. But if they all commanded the terrible power I’d witnessed in Malikhi, we were in deep shit.

My powers hummed and flowed within me, as though straining against my skin at the new threat and being so close to the portal.

As I drew closer, a small smile lifted the corner of Malikhi’s lips, and I was struck again by how attractive he was. Raven-black hair covered his head, the locks thick and glossy. And with the galaxies in his irises and skin

that reminded me of warm summer days spent basking in the sun, he would make any woman look twice.

“Princess Tala.” He inclined his head when we reached them. “We meet again.”

I froze. *Princess?* Okay, he’d never called me that before.

My powers again raged through my veins and, of their own accord, reached out. The octopus-like tentacles writhed and flowed invisibly from every limb of my body, undulating out of me until they reached the Lunarian.

The second my power came into contact with Malikhi, an answering stroke caressed my power, as though another tentacle—a foreign one—responded with a feathered touch.

My breath sucked in as Malikhi smirked.

I swallowed my powers back inside me, horrified that our magic had just caressed one another’s *again* so unintentionally, just like when we’d first met.

A low growl came from beside me, and pulsing energy from Kaillen strummed through the room. Yep, the hunter had detected that.

Flustered, I crossed my arms. “You’re early. It hasn’t been two weeks yet.”

“On the contrary,” Malikhi replied. “We’re right on time. You’re overdue for a trip to Lunaris, and we’ve been waiting for you with great anticipation.”

I shook my head frantically, my nerves frying more at how unexpected all of this was. I thought I’d get twelve days in the library. Instead, I’d gotten three hours. “But *why?* You don’t even know me. Why do you want me there?”

He flashed a smile, and it completely transformed his face. Gods, the man was too beautiful for Earth. Everything about Malikhi wreaked masculinity and sex appeal, and he apparently wasn’t remotely put-off by my bluntness and less-than-welcoming demeanor. He grinned slyly. “Why don’t you come with me, and I’ll show you.”

The energy blasting from Kaillen raked up another notch as his furious snarl thundered through the chamber. “She’s not going anywhere with you.”

But Malikhi continued talking, as though Kaillen weren’t even there. “Did I mention when we first met how absolutely beautiful you are?”

I prickled at Malikhi's attempts at flattery and how easily he'd just disregarded my mate.

Barnabas hissed under his breath from behind me, "Now that comment is *not* going to go over well."

Sure enough, the growl rumbling in Kaillen's chest increased, and he stepped forward until he was only inches from Malikhi. A moment of panic seized me when Malikhi's attention cut to Kaillen.

"Is there something you need, *isumpi*?" The smooth texture of Malikhi's tone rose in a challenge as he addressed Kaillen with a sneer.

Black flames appeared in Kaillen's eyes as his lips curved in a demon's smile. "Oh, there's something I definitely need. Your heart on a plate with—"

"As I asked before, what is it that you want from me?" I said sharply and forced myself between the two men.

Malikhi's star-flecked gaze left the hunter to land on me again, and his tone softened. "I would like you to accompany me to Lunaris."

"Why?"

"Because you are a princess of our realm, and Lunaris is where you belong."

There was that word again, *princess*. "What if I don't want to go?"

Malikhi lifted a finger to caress my face, and every single SF member in the room went on high alert, their particle guns buzzing, as tension strummed through the air so thickly that I nearly choked on it.

Malikhi dropped his hand and eyed all of them, a hint of amusement rolling through his features. "I'm afraid I must insist. The queen wishes to see you."

"But I have twelve more Earth days. Could you please relay that message to her?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry, but your time is up."

Heat grew from Kaillen as I curled my hands into fists. "What do you intend to do with me there?"

Malikhi's eyebrows rose. "We don't intend to do anything with you. The queen merely wants to meet you, and we'd like you to see your true realm."

My eyes narrowed to slits. "What's in it for you?"

The amusement on Malikhi's face increased. "Is it strange that I'm delighted at how suspicious you are?"

Kaillen bared his teeth, then snarled, "If Tala doesn't want to go with you, she won't be going."

But Malikhi ignored him.

"Please, can I have another week?" I pleaded.

Malikhi gave me an apologetic smile. "No, the queen insists."

I scowled. "You really suck at negotiating."

Malikhi's eyebrows rose as his mouth opened in surprise. Then a harsh laugh escaped him. "I can't say that I've ever heard a princess speak like that before."

"Well, contrary to what you think, I'm *not* a princess, so perhaps you should stop calling me that."

"Oh, but you are. Your mark confirms that." His eyes drifted to the tattoo encircling my neck, and I automatically raised my hand to it, my fingers drifting over the swirling patterns and beautiful stars. I frowned. "This mark signifies royalty?"

"Indeed."

"But . . ." I looked at his neck. "Does that mean you're also royal?"

He gave a slight bow. "I am. Prince Malikhi Drugarus Celestial Everlon III at your service."

Okay, quite the name. "Well, Prince Malikhi Drugair, um, Ever-Whatever, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm going to insist that you tell the queen that I'd like another week."

His smile disappeared. "That's not possible."

"You can't make me go."

Kaillen grunted in agreement as tension coiled around the hunter.

"Is this really how you wish to proceed?" Malikhi's eyes darkened, those swirling galaxies flaring brighter. "Very well."

To the left of him, one of the SF members abruptly fell. A look of panic descended over the member's features, and with a start, I realized it was the female werewolf I'd met the other day, Corporal Charlotte Morris. The very one I'd used my power on as a demonstration.

"No!" I lunged forward as the powers inside me thrashed. "What are you doing?" My awakening power unleashed itself of its own accord, and my newly born magic thrust out of me, spearing right toward Malikhi just as the SF members encircling the portal all began to shoot, and my friends whipped into action.

But the bullets from the particle guns met a shield, and Kaillen's and my friends slammed into the invisible barrier.

Horror filled me when I realized the prince had created a shield around us, trapping me, him, and Charlotte inside.

Banging came from outside of the shield as flames grew on its edge, black fire raining down on it.

The prince grimaced when Kaillen's fire grew, but his shield held, and I knew Corporal Morris would die if I didn't stop him.

I poured everything I had into my attack as the young corporal writhed. I let my power rise like a tidal wave, but the second it reached the prince, another one of his tentacles splayed out, stopping my attack and coiling around my power.

I gasped at the absolute strength that flowed through Malikhi as I flailed against his hold. And worst of all, through our warring connection, I could *feel* him sucking Corporal Morris's life from her. Panic for the SF member barreled into me.

"Stop! Please! Don't kill her!" I thrashed and fought, trying to break Malikhi's hold on me as my mental claws raked on his power.

He grunted, then began to visibly sweat as Kaillen's flames grew higher, but the prince still smiled. The fucker actually *smiled*. "I will admit, you're very strong along with the *isumpi*, but you're unpracticed. While your power could rival mine, you're untrained. I would suggest you stop this nonsense and come with me."

"Fine," I panted. "I'll go. But release her and drop your shield. I won't go unless you do."

Malikhi blinked, and Corporal Morris—whose eyes had begun rolling back in her head—fell to the ground. She abruptly sucked in a breath, her hand going to her throat as her expression cleared.

In the next instant, Kaillen was at my side, fire in his eyes while our friends' blades and the SF's bullets flew toward Malikhi.

But the prince waved his hand, and the blades and bullets dropped, just as Kaillen positioned himself in front of me.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This was the terrible power that Archie's text had spoken of. We didn't stand a chance against Lunarians.

Heart pounding, I sidestepped Kaillen until we were side by side. The hunter's entire body was brimming with heat as black flames ringed his

eyes.

“Don’t.” I placed a hand on his forearm, holding him back because I knew he was seconds away from tearing into Malikhi, and the only reason he hadn’t was because he didn’t want to leave my side.

“Hold your fire!” Commander Klebus barked as Corporal Morris’s squad members rushed to help her to her feet.

The prince clasped his hands behind his back and gave me an apologetic smile. “This isn’t something I take pleasure in. I would like you to know that, but the queen insists that you join me.”

“Fuck you!” I spat. My chest heaved as rage burned through me. More than anything I wanted to tear into him and show Malikhi what happened when a bully came to Earth and tried to overrun us, but . . .

I couldn’t.

He was right. I was still untrained even though I’d practiced so diligently in Ontario to learn better control of my awakening power. And even though my powers had been unleashed since the battle with Jakub, I still didn’t fully understand them. I knew that now after seeing what Malikhi was capable of.

But even if the queen did let me stay, what was another week of practice compared to a lifetime of learned control that the prince obviously had?

Bottom line, I didn’t stand a chance against him in a fight, which meant the only option we had at beating them was to close the portal.

“Shall we?” Malikhi gestured toward the billowing turquoise door.

A furious snarl erupted from Kaillen, and I tightened my grip even though I wondered what would happen if Kaillen unleashed his underworld black flames on the prince without the prince having his shield in place. Would he burn Malikhi before the prince could stop him? Or would Kaillen die trying?

I wouldn’t risk it to find out.

I curled my fingers around the hunter’s forearm more, begging him with my touch not to advance as I addressed the prince. “I’ll go peacefully with you under one condition.”

“Tala,” Kaillen said in a warning growl.

“Perhaps we can find another way,” Commander Klebus said abruptly in a soft, diplomatic tone as she rushed forward. “If you would join us to discuss—”

“What condition is that?” The stars in Malikhi’s eyes shone brighter, and their beautiful swirling depths pulled at me.

Commander Klebus stopped in her tracks as her lips pressed into a thin line.

I tugged Kaillen back more, wanting to shield him, wanting to shield all of them from Malikhi’s wrath. “That I have your word you won’t harm anybody else on Earth while I’m with you. I also need you to promise that I can return here after I meet the queen.”

“Tala,” Kaillen said under his breath as fear befell his expression. “Don’t do it. You’re not going alone.”

I gazed at him, the love and longing inside me shattering at the thought of what could happen if my friends joined me.

Black flames leaped in his eyes. “I’m not letting him take you.”

“And I’m not going to let him hurt you,” I said quietly, hoping Malikhi wouldn’t hear. “I won’t risk you and everyone else’s lives in this room simply to appease myself.”

“Like hell this is happening!” Prisha brushed past me, coming to stand in front of me as she leveled Malikhi with an icy stare. “We’re coming with her, or we’re fighting this out here and now. Hell will freeze over before I let you take Tala alone.” She slipped a blade from her pocket, sheathing one in each hand as a ring of blue fire erupted across the metal.

Behind me the sound of knives being pulled from sheathes echoed in the room, and I knew that Barnabas and Fallon were willing to fight too as well as every SF member standing in Malikhi’s path, despite the terrible power Malikhi had shown.

My heart thundered at the impending bloodbath. *No, no, no. This can’t happen!*

But I also knew my friends wouldn’t back down. They wouldn’t let me go alone, so it was either fight now or ask if they could come.

Kaillen’s hand drifted to mine until his fingers wrapped around my palm. He squeezed me tightly, our hands locking in a symbol of unity.

I stood up straighter and looked the prince in the eye. “If I go, so do they.”

Malikhi’s eyes dipped, taking in our joined hands as a slight tick formed in his jaw. The prince’s nostrils flared as he gazed first at Prish, then Kaillen, Barnabas, and finally Fallon.

He shook his head, his expression turning irritated, but then he nodded. “Very well, if it would appease you, Princess Tala, your friends can join us. Now, I must insist we go. The queen is waiting.”

Chapter 22

“Tala,” Commander Klebus called before she rushed toward me and pulled me into a hug.

The gesture took me completely by surprise, since the commander had never hugged me before, but then her lips pressed to my ear, and she whispered, “Gather as much information as you can. Try to learn their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. We’ll need every advantage we can get. I’ll assign new SF members to continue searching the libraries while you’re gone. We’ll figure this out.”

She pulled back as a sorrow-filled smile spread across her face. She almost looked sad that I was leaving.

I cocked my head at her as she ran her hands down my arms, but my confusion didn’t stop her. When she reached my hands, she clasped them and smooth metal trinkets pushed into my palm.

No, not trinkets.

Portal keys.

She was secretly giving me, Kaillen, and our friends a way out.

The vamp commander gave me another small smile and acted the picture of remorse so perfectly that I knew Malikhi had no idea that all of this was a ruse, a sad farewell staged for my benefit.

“I’ll miss you too,” I said to her, keeping up the façade.

Once our faked goodbye was done, I faced the prince. “Lead the way.”

Malikhi and his men turned their backs, and the second they did, I shoved the portal keys into my pocket. Kaillen side-eyed me, and I knew he’d heard everything the commander had said.

The hunter and Prisha stayed at my side as we followed Malikhi to the portal, Barnabas and Fallon at our backs, and while I loved all of them so much for being willing to risk their lives for me, the other part of me felt sick.

If anything happened to any of them, I would never forgive myself.

Malikhi went through the portal first as the men accompanying him waited for us to follow. We all jumped through, one after the other, and the horribly turbulent sensation of popping, falling, spinning, and expanding seemed to happen all at once.

It took longer than portal transfers on Earth and even longer than crossing to the fae realm, but when we finally emerged, I landed on a bed of sand.

Bright sunlight filled a tan sky as a trickling river wove through an endless field of swaying beige grasses that seemed to grow from a desert.

“Well, am I the only one who didn’t plan to venture to a new realm today?” Barnabas commented as he took in the scenery of the planet Lunaris.

It was a world awash of beiges and grays, bleak and desolate, yet on the horizon, color billowed like a flag in the wind.

Black flames danced in Kaillen’s eyes, and he glued himself to my side. All of his attention was aimed at Malikhi as the prince gave a bow and then a sweep of his hand across the dry landscape. “Welcome to Lunaris.”

“Where are we exactly?” I asked.

“Just outside of the capital.” He gestured toward the color billowing on the horizon. “Our ride shall arrive shortly, and then we’ll venture to the palace.”

“Which is where the queen lives?” Prisha asked.

Malikhi gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Correct.”

“Is that where you live too, since you’re also royalty?” I asked.

Malikhi’s lips curved genuinely when he assessed me, and he moved with liquid stealth my way.

Kaillen growled and pressed in, the gold in his eyes shining like the sun, and my heart jumped wildly at the return of his wolf’s acceptance of me. Given the look on the hunter’s face as Malikhi drifted closer, I had a feeling if I could detect Kaillen’s scent, I’d be inhaling jasmine and night right now.

Malikhi stopped in front of me, not giving Kaillen a passing glance. “I don’t live in the palace now, but it was my birthplace.”

“So you’re the queen’s son.” I crossed my arms. I’d suspected as much, but I hadn’t been certain.

“I am. Now, join me. Our ride is here.” A shimmering vessel appeared in the distance, flying across the sand. The small craft appeared sleek and

smooth looking. It didn't have a roof and strangely, reminded me of crafts from the movie *Star Wars*.

My eyes popped. "That's your . . . car?"

"Hovercraft." The craft reached us, stopping just short of the prince as it floated in mid-air. The prince waved a hand, and a rush of magic stole over me. Steps materialized from the small, open craft. The prince bowed. "After you."

I eyed him suspiciously. "My friends are coming too."

Malikhi's jaw tightened. "I've summoned a second craft for them."

"No," I replied just as Kaillen curled his arm possessively around my waist. "We stay together."

Malikhi's eyes dipped to Kaillen's hold on me, and a flash of something appeared in his eyes before he gave a tight smile. "Of course."

We all climbed aboard the hovercraft that dipped slightly under our weight but remained floating. Once all of us were seated, the men who'd accompanied Malikhi all jumped to the craft's rim, standing outside of it with ease. The craft abruptly took off, jetting across the desert-like landscape at breathtaking speed.

I took in the barren terrain of dry fields that seemed to thrive in the sandy soil, but there was nothing else out here. No homes, roads, or cities. I angled my head toward the prince.

"How did you know the portal had been formed?" I asked. "There's no one out here to see it."

"I felt it." Malikhi sat at my side, his leg brushing against my thigh. Kaillen still had a firm hold of my waist, but the prince didn't seem perturbed. He leaned closer until his warm breath puffed against my neck. "I felt you when you created it, Princess. Your power called to me."

He straightened just as Kaillen gave a fierce snarl and yanked me closer to his side.

"This won't end well," Barnabas said under his breath from behind me, where he sat with Prisha and Fallon.

"My thoughts exactly," Fallon replied.

Neither assassin seemed overly concerned about the fact that we were entirely outnumbered in this realm, but I guessed that in their profession, unknowns happened frequently, and showing weakness could get one killed.

But despite the hunter's heat, and the assassins' bold words, a chill ran through me as a flash of something Jakub had said came back to me. *"If the portal was formed again, and the other Bone Eaters sensed her power, they would come."*

Apparently, the Bone Eaters had sensed *my* power that I'd inherited from my ancestor and that had called them.

"Is that where the palace is?" Prisha asked, pointing ahead and breaking my concentration from that disturbing thought.

An ancient-looking city built of stone and brick careened toward us, but the wall surrounding the city didn't slow the craft. We zoomed upward, right over it, as the guards at the wall below saluted as we passed.

It wasn't lost on me that Malikhi neither replied to Prisha nor looked at her.

I bristled. "Do you always get saluted, *Prince* Malikhi?"

"I do, and you will too, Princess." Malikhi smiled sensuously, and the fact that he addressed me so readily while ignoring my friends made my hands clench into fists.

I ground my teeth together as the simmering energy off Kaillen kicked up another notch.

The richness of the new city swirled by us as we zoomed through the sky. Below, a maze of zigzagging lanes and stone streets meshed together like a crossword puzzle. Most of the city was the same colors as the landscape: beiges and grays. But random sparks of vivid color shone from the shops selling clothing, accessories, and artwork. And a few of the buildings had splashes of color on their outer walls, but they were done minutely, as though honoring the landscape's neutral hue.

Despite the foliage also being brown and gray, the plants didn't appear dead. If anything, the soaring trees at the city's center, which encircled a fountain filled with crystalline violet-colored water, seemed to be thriving. Water from the fountain abruptly shot into the sky as music trilled from some location. It took me a second to realize that the fountain's water was dancing to the music as a huge pulse of magic drifted around it.

"So strange," I murmured as I soaked everything in. My otherworldly powers hummed and throbbed as though some part of me recognized the magic of this world. I swallowed that uneasy realization down and asked the prince, "Do any of your plants have color?"

“Not in this area of Lunaris,” Malikhi remarked. “But in other regions, some of the plants do. But here, in the heart of our world, the birthplace so to speak, is where magic thrives. The landscape honors that, not trying to detract attention from our planet’s magical aura.” He gave a sly smile. “It was here that the Bone Eaters were born.”

I stilled as wind whipped through my hair. “Bone Eaters?”

Malikhi shifted closer despite the tension rolling from Kaillen. “The Bone Eaters are the royal line that blessed this world with our gifts and power.”

Our. He’d said *our* gifts and power. So that confirmed that Malikhi was a Bone Eater too. He and I were one and the same.

My insides turned to ice as the craft abruptly dropped from the sky, careening toward the ground. Barnabas let out a whoop of delight, and Kaillen turned an irritated glare at him, but the vamp only shrugged. “No harm in having a little thrill, old friend.”

Even Prisha’s eyes brightened, and despite the stony mask Fallon wore, I still caught him assessing the city streets with interest.

Yep, it seemed all of us were succumbing to our curiosity, even if the demon wolf at my side was determined to hate everything about this place.

“And here we are,” Malikhi said with a smile.

We dropped toward a huge palace that rose from the sunbaked streets like a beautiful pearl. Opulent gates made of golden spires and stone pillars surrounded it, and just behind the main entrance, a circular pool of violet water housed fish and sea creatures swimming just below its surface.

Beige foliage surrounded the palace. Shrubs and plants of varying sizes lined every stone walkway that led to decadent outdoor seating areas filled with lush-looking couches and throws. It struck me that so much of the palace appeared exposed to the elements.

The palace’s cream exterior was made up of circular curves and rising mounds, reminding me of shimmering beads stacked in an intricate pattern. Curtains blew from the palace’s open windows and appeared made of the finest silk. Their glittery quality looked to be the same material as Malikhi’s pants.

“Your windows don’t have glass panes,” I observed as the craft settled just outside of a huge circular entrance to the palace.

“Glass?” Malikhi cocked his head.

I shook my head, realizing that was a material used on Earth and in the fae lands but obviously not here. “And the curtains seem to be made of the same material as your pants. What kind of fabric is it?”

He smiled, as though happy about my curiosity. “They’re spun from the finest *pattomon*.”

My brow furrowed as we all stood to get off the craft. Kaillen stayed at my side, the tension off him rising, but I couldn’t help asking, “Is *pattomon* harvested from a plant or animal?”

“Plant. Our river valleys in this region of the world grow it.”

Malikhi hopped over the edge of the craft, his legs swinging to the side as though he were vaulting a fence. Since he’d bypassed the steps completely, he skirted around the craft’s front to hold out his hand to me.

“I’ve got her,” Kaillen growled, descending the steps in front of me, then turned and offered his outstretched hand too.

I stared down at the two men vying to give me assistance. I quirked an eyebrow at Kaillen. Since when did I need a man’s help to get out of a vehicle?

“Like I said, this won’t end well,” Barnabas said in a loud whisper.

“Should I get off and help you too?” Prisha batted her eyelashes at me.

Fallon snorted, and I smirked before shooting her a grin. “It’s like they think I’m helpless or something.” I gave Kaillen a placating smile, placed a hand on the craft’s side, and vaulted over the edge, similar to how Malikhi had departed.

Once standing on the dusty ground, I slid closer to Kaillen and peered up at him with a teasing smile. “Thanks for the offer, but I got it.”

He smirked as mirth filled his eyes.

Teasing him more, I poked his side. “I didn’t realize you were such a gentleman.”

He leaned down and nipped my neck. “I’m not, but this asshole keeps trying to get your attention, and I just can’t help myself.”

“Ooh, he just called the prince an asshole,” Barnabas whisper-hissed. “Do you think the prince knows what that means?”

“I’m guessing he’ll figure it out,” Fallon replied.

Ignoring the theatrics, I gazed up at Kaillen. “So you’re not a fan of Malikhi?” I asked in an actual whisper that I hoped the prince couldn’t hear, but I could feel the prince watching us. I didn’t care, though. Kaillen was my mate, in this realm and the next.

“What do you think?” A flash of fire and gold rimmed Kaillen’s eyes. He bared his teeth next. “You’re mine, and he’s obviously interested in you.”

My heart stuttered at his wolf shining front and center in his irises. “And your wolf? Does he finally feel I’m his too?”

“Firmly back onboard,” Kaillen said in a clipped tone. “Between Carlos, seeing you kill the sprites, that incident in our bedroom, Barnabas’s stunt, and now Prince Maladick here, he seems to have remembered that you truly *are* our mate. Any confusion he’d felt before is gone.”

“Thank the gods,” I muttered just as Malikhi cleared his throat loudly.

“If you’ll follow me,” the prince said, his nostrils flaring. “I’ll show you to your chambers so you may dress for the midday meal. The queen will be in attendance, so you’re expected to look your finest.”

“Um, slight problem there, kind sir,” Prisha said in a mockingly polite tone. “None of us brought our fine dining wear.”

Malikhi again glazed over her before saying to me, “A closet’s been prepared for you. I’m sure if you choose to share a dress with your . . . *friend*, that could be arranged.”

Prisha fumed just as my otherworldly powers flashed.

“My *friend* will definitely be wearing whatever’s been set aside for me,” I replied, “and I would appreciate it if you treated her more respectfully.”

“Oh, look at his face,” Barnabas whisper-hissed. “He doesn’t like the lady telling him what to do.”

Fallon elbowed him, and Kaillen snickered.

And maybe we were all stupid to be gunning for the princely descendant, but even though Malikhi was bending over backward to be courteous to me, if he didn’t extend some manners to my friends, we were going to have a major problem. And something told me Malikhi wanted me to like him. Why he wanted that, I had no idea, but given that was my only advantage, I was going to exploit it.

The exploding stars in Malikhi’s eyes strengthened until it looked like a flash of lightning bolted through them. “Very well.” He looked Prisha in the eye. “I’m sure Princess Tala would be happy to part with one of her dresses.”

“Indeed, because Princess Tala isn’t exactly the type to wear dresses.” Barnabas gave Malikhi a sympathetic look. “But I’m sure you couldn’t have

known that she prefers pants and potions to dresses and frills.”

Another flash of lightning zigzagged through Malikhi’s eyes, but he turned his back on Barnabas as the men who’d accompanied him scurried off to join the other people walking the palace halls.

With a start, I realized that every single person ducking around hallways and peering around corners from the palace’s open design was probably a servant, including the men who’d accompanied the prince on his journey to Earth, and they were all staring at me.

A woman standing about twenty feet away sucked in a breath before whispering to the woman next to her. Malikhi shot them a glacial stare, and they both turned and bolted.

“This way,” he said to our group.

He led us into the palace, and the cream exterior gave way to gray walls, stone floors, and decadent artwork. Most of the walls held dazzling tapestries, murals, paintings, or sculptures.

“So beautiful,” Prisha commented as Malikhi took us to a wide staircase.

“The queen enjoys art,” the prince called over his shoulder. “She even dabbles in it herself from time to time.”

The prince led us to the second floor. Every servant we passed watched us wide-eyed, and more than one stared at me as though they were seeing a ghost.

Another weird thing was that each servant we passed bowed or dipped their head at Malikhi and then *me*. None saluted me, but the prince hadn’t been kidding when he’d said I would be treated similarly to him.

A flush worked up my neck. I realized they truly thought I *was* a princess, but honestly, I was just a chick from Chicago who happened to inherit some long-dead woman’s power.

“Princess Tala, your room is here.” Malikhi stopped at a set of double doors and opened them with a flourish.

A warm breeze flowed over my cheeks, and my eyes widened as I gazed at the huge chambers. The room had to be larger than the entire apartment Tessa and I lived in, and the textures and decadence of the furnishings and decorations made me think of fine jewelry stores in which one was too afraid to touch anything for fear of breaking it.

“Wash room and sitting area are through that hall, and a closet is on the other side of the room,” Malikhi said as he watched me intently. A low

growl came from Kaillen as the prince took a step closer to me. “Do you like it?” Malikhi asked.

“I . . . I mean it’s beautiful, but why? Why are you having me stay here?” I would have been happy in a single room or sharing a double bed with Kaillen. I didn’t need this kind of opulence.

The prince gave me an incredulous look. “Because you’re a Lunarian princess.”

“Right,” I replied lamely.

“If your friends would follow me.” Malikhi waved to the door.

“I’m Tala’s mate. I stay where she stays.” Kaillen’s eyes flashed fire.

Malikhi merely arched an eyebrow. “It’s forbidden in our culture for an unwed female to spend the night with any male.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Prisha rolled her eyes.

“But I’m not from here,” I commented and looped my arm through Kaillen’s. “And like he said, he’s my mate.”

“Are you married?” Malikhi asked through clenched teeth.

“No, but we’re—”

“Then he’s forbidden to stay here,” Malikhi snapped. A galaxy exploded in his eyes, and I wondered if mine were beginning to do the same.

“So let me get this straight,” I said through gritted teeth. “You force me to come to this realm, demand that I meet the queen, and then expect me to bow to your customs and traditions even though they’re not mine?”

Malikhi gentled his tone. “They would have been yours if you’d been born where you belong.”

“I *was* born where I belong,” I snarled.

Heat grew between my shoulder blades, and Kaillen’s chest pressed into my back. His hands clamped possessively on my hips as he eyed the prince over my head.

Malikhi’s eyes dipped, his nostrils flaring when he beheld Kaillen’s possessive hold on me. “Perhaps you believe so, Princess, but I cannot allow him to stay with you.”

“And what if I refuse to have Kaillen leave?”

Another flash of stars burst in Malikhi’s eyes. “It’s only for a few days. Surely, you can handle some time apart?”

“If he’s not staying with her, then I am.” Prisha strode to my side.

Malikhi dipped his head. “That can be tolerated.”

“And what if *I* also refuse to follow your traditions?” Kaillen growled.

Malikhi turned a deadly glare on the hunter. “Then I would be forced to make you come to heel.”

Kaillen smirked. “I’d like to see you try.”

Panic jolted through my heart at the thought of Malikhi tearing Kaillen’s insides to ribbons. “It’s fine,” I said in a rush. “Prish will stay with me in here. And my mate can stay with his friends.”

Barnabas and Fallon both stood icily by the door, and given their lethal gazes upon our host, I knew they’d already calculated the odds of how this fight would go. But as competent as the assassins were, and as powerful as Kaillen was, I wouldn’t risk their lives all due to a pissing match.

“I’ll see you at lunch.” I spun in Kaillen’s arms and gave him a quick squeeze. “Please.”

With a low snarl, Kaillen swept me to him and captured my mouth with his. My head spun at the scent and feel of him, and an ache started low in my belly with the thought of any harm coming his way.

A low whistle came from behind us. “Do you scent that, Fallon? Sheesh, this room would be *reeking* of sex if we left these two alone in here.”

Breathless from his kiss, I finally pulled back from Kaillen, but his hands lingered on my waist as he gave Malikhi a deadly glare that screamed violence.

Malikhi returned Kaillen’s stare with an icy one of his own before doing a one-eighty and snapping his fingers. “Come.”

Kaillen scowled, and neither Fallon nor Barnabas looked thrilled at being called like dogs, but with stiff movements they followed Malikhi from my room, leaving me and Prisha alone.

“And what the hell is all of this about?” Prisha asked, turning in a low circle. “You’re a princess, and that prince dude has bedroom eyes all for you, and he’s shackled you up in the palace’s penthouse?”

“Not normal at all, right?” I asked, biting my lip. “Do you think he’s going to treat Kaillen, Fallon, and Barnabas okay? I’m worried he’ll—”

But before I could continue, the doors to my new chambers swept open, and a line of servants marched in.

The woman leading them bowed to me as the ones following her hurried to the washroom and closet and became a flurry of work.

“Princess Tala, it is with great pleasure that I finally meet you. I’m Geriam, your lady’s servant.” The woman who’d led the party curtsied deeply, her eyes also filled with stars. I took in her rosy-pink hair coiled at a harsh bun at the nape of her neck. She wore simple earthen-colored clothing and no makeup.

Geriam straightened, then dipped her head at Prisha, and some of the anxiety bubbling through me lessened since it didn’t seem that Geriam was going to be a complete bitch to my bestie.

Geriam clasped her hands in front of her. “The prince has requested we assist you in bathing and dressing for the queen’s luncheon. Please come with me.” She gestured toward the washroom and the dozen attendants waiting in there.

Prisha and I gave one another apprehensive looks.

“They’re going to *wash* us?” Prish said under her breath.

I shrugged, finding this as weird as her, but Geriam seemed genuinely delighted at the thought of serving me. “Just go with it.”

But that genuineness gave me an idea as Prish and I headed into the bathing chamber. Commander Klebus had wanted me to gain insight into this realm’s weaknesses, and what better resource was there than the servants who kept this place running? Surely, Geriam would know a thing or two about the great Bone Eaters.

I plastered a bright smile on my face and followed my lady’s servant.

Chapter 23

As much as I wanted to learn what I could from the servants, that proved harder than I'd anticipated. If I wasn't having water poured over my head, my hair dried, or my clothing fluffed, I was certain I would have had a better chance at speaking with them.

But since all of the servants seemed intent on dolling me up to look like the princess they all believed me to be, nobody was exactly loquacious. Apparently, serious concentration was needed to make one look like a Barbie doll.

About halfway through this process, I remembered the portal keys in my discarded pants, so I hastily requested they leave my clothes on the floor. Thankfully, none of them questioned me and simply bobbed their heads. Score one for being royal.

And the other good thing was that even though talking was difficult, Geriam did seem thrilled at how compliant I was being, and I figured that made for a good first impression. Hopefully, I could pry information from her later when we actually had a chance to talk.

"You look beautiful, Princess Tala," Geriam said with a flourish when they finally finished. "Prince Malikhi's breath will be as quietened as a falleck's on a summer's day."

I had no idea what a *falleck* was but guessed it was a Lunaris animal. But Geriam was right. I did look beautiful. So much so that I barely recognized myself.

In a long mirror that two servants held in front of me, I surveyed the vibrant purple gown they'd dressed me in. It was made of the same material as Malikhi's pants. The amethyst fabric shimmered in the setting sunlight streaming in through the windows, making the silky-feeling garment sparkle like stardust. It was a simple design, yet still stunning. The choker-style gown encircled my neck, just below my tattoo, which drew attention to the swirling pattern on my skin, and the material draped over my bra-less chest, cinched in at the waist, then flowed like water to the floor. The entire

back was strapless, exposing my skin to just above my ass, and my shoulders and arms were completely bare. If not for the warm climate, I would have been freezing, but the temperature hadn't dropped even though evening was approaching.

"It's a beautiful dress," I told Geriam, because even though I hated that I'd been forced to visit the Lunarian Palace, it was an amazing gown, and she'd worked so hard to make me look stunning.

"Fit for a queen." Geriam drifted behind me. "And last but not least."

My eyes widened as she lifted a crown with glittering gems. Hundreds of precious stones that looked like diamonds, amethysts, and a few rubies sparkled in an intricate pattern on the breathtaking crown. The rubies' blood-red color drew my attention most as I watched in the mirror as she pinned it to my head.

"Holy shit," Prisha breathed when she emerged from the bathroom in a dusky pink gown that while pretty, didn't hold a candle to what I'd been dressed in. "You look amazing, girl."

I gave her a wobbly smile as Geriam finished securing the crown.

Once my wardrobe was complete, I stared at myself, and all of this suddenly became real. I was in Lunaris. I commanded immense power that originated from this world. The people viewed me as royalty. The queen wanted to meet me, and *I* was a Bone Eater.

I'd never wished more desperately for my simple life back in Chicago.

Because despite the fanfare, I didn't want to be royal or live in a palace or have people fawn over me. I didn't want any of that. I just wanted my sister safe, my best friend happy, and a chance to be with Kaillen. All of the other stuff didn't matter. What mattered to me most were the people I loved.

But now, I didn't have a choice about any of that. If I didn't meet the queen and do what was expected of me, my friends and family could die if her son enacted his soul-sucking revenge.

A soft knock came on the door just as Geriam finished. The door swept open to reveal Malikhi in attire just as resplendent as mine. He looked dashing, yep *dashing*, even though that was a word that had never entered my vocabulary before. Dressed in all black that rivaled his hair and contrasted nicely with his light-brown skin and star-flecked eyes, he looked every inch the prince, and the growing smile on his face told me he felt similar about me.

I ignored the urge to pull at the dress's choker as I eyed the hall anxiously behind him.

"Where's my mate, Fallon, and Barnabas?" I asked when I didn't spot them as he strode into the room.

Malikhi stiffened. "They're in their chambers."

"Are they getting ready too?"

A muscle bulged in the corner of his jaw when he clenched his teeth. "Tonight is about you, not them, and can I just say that you look lovely?" He swept closer, as though he were going to grab my hands or kiss me on the cheek, but I pulled back.

"Are you saying they're not invited?"

A flicker of lightning flashed in his eyes. "Food will be provided to them."

My nostrils flared as I took another step away from him. "But not in the dining hall or wherever it is that we'll be eating."

"They're not royalty."

"Neither am I."

His finger drifted to my neck before I could stop him and brushed lightly across my tattoo. "Yes, you are."

I took another step back. "Despite what you think I am or am not, I'd like Kaillen to attend, along with Barnabas and Fallon."

Malikhi's star-flecked eyes flashed again, so subtly that if we weren't standing so close, I would have missed it. "Very well, I'll have them called down."

He offered me his arm, but I didn't take it. Instead, I looped my arm through Prisha's. "We'll follow you."

Geriam's eyes were as wide as saucers when we passed her near the doorway, the other servants looking similar. But when Malikhi brushed by with stiff, angry movements, they all dipped their heads and scuttled away.

We followed the prince through a maze of stone walkways and stairwells. Fresh air from the outdoors flowed through the entire palace, and despite being anxious at where Kaillen and the guys were, curiosity got the better of me. "Is it always this warm here?"

"It is," Malikhi replied.

"Is it like that everywhere in Lunaris?"

He drifted closer to my side, his eyes only on me even though Prisha's arm was still linked through mine. "In this region, yes. It's warm year-

round. In other parts of the world, it's cooler, but overall our climate is warm."

I frowned as we headed toward the end of a hall. We'd returned to ground level, and ahead two huge open doors waited and just beyond them the dining hall. We stopped at the entrance as I absorbed the soaring ceiling, smooth rock floor, and breathtaking artwork on the neutral walls. A table that could easily seat a hundred sat in the middle of the huge room as dangling lights lit the room in a soft glow. On the opposite side, tall narrow windows were cut into the palace's exterior wall. Like the other rooms, there was no glass. The windows were fully open to the outdoors.

On top of that, the room was full of Lunarians. All of the women wore beautiful gowns, the men in similar finery. Drinks circulated around the room, being carried by servants as whoever all of these people were sipped and conversed.

But I lost all interest in everything as soon as I scanned the space for Kaillen and the assassins and didn't see them. "Where are—"

"Tala!" Kaillen called from behind me.

I swirled around to see the hunter and his friends walking at a hurried pace down the hall. Unlike Malikhi, they weren't dressed in finery, but they'd changed, and from the looks of it, they'd done so in a hurry. Plain and wrinkly earthen-colored clothing, similar to what the servants wore, covered their frames. It looked like they'd been wrapped in burlap sacks.

I gritted my teeth. I had a feeling that wasn't by accident.

After glaring at Malikhi, I rushed to the hunter and threw my arms around Kaillen's neck. For some inexplicable reason, I wanted to touch him and know he was safe. It was crazy. The hunter was more than capable of looking after himself, but here in this strange world where everything was new and unknown, I'd hated being parted from him.

Kaillen wrapped his arms tightly around me and drew me close as a hiss came from Malikhi. "*Colantha*, you're . . ." He finally pulled back, and his gaze raked up and down my frame. "Fucking hell. You're breathtaking."

"I have to agree," Barnabas chirped. "You're as mouthwatering as a plump roast brandished over a spitfire."

"Um, thanks?" I said with a laugh.

Fallon rolled his eyes but cast a wayward glance toward Prisha, who'd joined me by the men. "You look lovely too."

Prisha dipped her head. "Pink's not really my color, but thanks."

Energy buzzed around the five of us. We all stood closely together, and for the first time since we'd all been parted, I felt like I could breathe again.

But then Malikhi crossed the distance to Kaillen and me. Any lighthearted energy I'd felt died away.

"If you will come this way," Malikhi snapped as he gave Kaillen an irritated glare. "It's untoward to touch a female as you've done. Release her."

Kaillen growled low in his chest as that golden light flared in his eyes. But instead of releasing me, his arms tightened. "I'll touch *my* woman any damned time I want."

"*Your* woman?" A pulse of power wafted toward me, coming from Malikhi as stars exploded in his eyes.

Shit. I hastily pulled back, putting distance between Kaillen and me even though I was loathed to do so. But if Malikhi speared my mate with his magic-sucking tentacles . . .

My heart thundered.

I gave Kaillen a pleading look. His jaw ground together, and murder shone in his eyes when he looked at the prince.

But the prince once again only had eyes for me. He held out his bent elbow. "May I?"

I kept my arms at my sides. "Do I have a choice?"

His eyes flashed. "Please, Princess, let me escort you."

Heat grew from Kaillen as Malikhi extended his arm, but once again, I felt trapped in whatever game the prince was playing. Stiffly, I hooked my hand around his elbow, resting my palm lightly on his forearm. A tingle of energy spun through me the second our bodies made contact.

The growl working up Kaillen's throat increased, but Malikhi glided us away and through the crowd until we reached the head of the table. Once there, he pulled out a chair for me.

As soon as the Lunarians around us saw that Malikhi was seating me, they all came to the table, everyone going to specific seats even though no name cards were present.

And every one of them eyed me curiously. Blatant interest and what almost looked like relief shone in their gazes.

Not knowing what else to do, I sat down. The prince had seated me near the head of the table. Across from me was another empty place setting,

then two more at the very top of the table. All of the other seats around us were filled.

My lips parted as the prince took the empty seat across from me. “What about my friends?” I waved angrily toward Prisha, Kaillen, Barnabas, and Fallon, who stood near the end of the hundred-foot table. There were no seats left.

A light flutter of laughter drifted up from those attending.

“Why would they be seated here?” somebody whispered under their breath.

“Commoners,” another person sniveled.

Rage built up inside me since my friends had clearly been snubbed, and given Barnabas’s crossed arms, Fallon’s lethal stare, Prisha’s hot expression, and my mate’s palpating rage, I wasn’t the only one finding our newest predicament insulting.

I swung back to the prince. “Malikhi, if they aren’t welcome here, then I’m leaving.”

That statement brought a hush to the room. The Lunarians seated near us, who I assumed were some form of nobility, either gasped or looked at one another in horror.

But Malikhi merely reached across the table and placed his palm over mine. “Relax, my sweet. The servants are seeing to it. Have no worries.”

“Get your hands off her!” In a blink, Kaillen was at my side, his wolf flashing in his eyes.

More gasps filled the room as Malikhi leveled Kaillen with a withering stare. “Back to your end, *isumpi*.”

Isumpi? It was the third time the prince had used that term toward my mate. *What the hell did that mean?*

But it obviously meant something abhorrent since those closest to us who’d heard Malikhi’s sneering comment brought hands to their mouths as laughter trilled from their lips.

Before I could ask what insult he’d just dealt my mate, a flood of servants bustled into the room, carrying dinnerware, glasses, and silverware. They created four new place settings at the very end of the table, but those settings were a good two yards away from the nobility seated closest to them.

It was a snub of the highest level.

Fuming, I eyed Malikhi hotly. “Why are they being seated down there?”

“Only royals are allowed at the head of the table and nobles in the middle. I’m sorry, but traditions run deep in our land.” He held up his hands in apology, as though this was completely out of his control.

I opened my mouth to tell him what I thought of his self-righteous traditions when the door swept open in the corner of the room, and a man and woman sailed inside.

I stilled. My heart felt as if it froze in my chest. It was the woman from my psychic vision, the one who’d written the scroll.

It was the queen.

“Oh, how lovely, she’s here!” The queen clapped her hands and seemed to float toward me just as a scrape of dozens of chairs echoed through the room.

My mouth opened, then closed, as I took in Queen Nameena’s gem-encrusted gown, thick midnight hair that was arranged in an intricate twist atop her head, and the large crown placed amidst her raven locks.

The man beside her was dressed similarly to the prince, and he wore a crown too. One look at his arrogant persona told me he was the king.

Malikhi stood and bowed to his parents, and everyone around me bowed as well.

The prince gave me a side-eye when I just sat there. Standing on stiff legs, I pushed my chair back, and for lack of anything better to do, I curtsied as swirling anger burned inside me.

What in the actual fuck. It was like I’d been transported to 1748 and was at some freakin’ royal ball.

The queen waltzed toward me, and I couldn’t help but notice the galaxies swirling in her eyes and the tattoo encircling her neck. It was near identical to mine.

“So exquisite,” she said when she reached me. Clasp my hands, she held my arms wide as she looked me up and down. “Oh yes, perfect in every way. She’ll do nicely.”

Nicely?

But before I could fully comprehend that comment, the king and queen sat, and a line of servants marched into the room carrying trays of delicious-smelling dishes.

Everything happened so fast. Music was suddenly playing, my plate was filled with decadent meats, morsels, and dumplings, wine was poured, and everyone around me began talking and laughing.

Reeling, I glanced toward the end of the table to see my friends all leaning back in their chairs with either surly expressions or downright anger coating their faces.

My eyes connected with Kaillen's, and that brimming power inside me flowed, shooting through my veins like lightning. *I'm sorry*, I mouthed to him.

He shook his head, as though saying I had nothing to be sorry for, but in a way, I felt like I did. Because it was my ancestors who had come up with these traditions that ostracized my friends to the lowest seating area.

Turning back to my plate, I stared down at the foreign-looking food that looked mouthwatering. But I couldn't eat. My stomach was roiling, because everything about this felt so *wrong* even though my power had felt pulled to this land.

"My dear, does the food not please you?" the queen said softly from my side. "If it's not to your liking, I can have something else prepared."

"No, it's not that." I fingered my napkin. "I, um. I can't eat."

Queen Nameena's eyes widened, starlight sprinkling in their violet depths, and I realized it was the only difference in our eyes. While the base color of mine was still the sapphire that I'd been born with, hers was a deep, rich purple.

She inclined her head toward my abdomen, the light catching all of the gems in her crown. It twinkled in a dazzling display. "But it's important that you keep your strength up."

I cocked my head. "Strength up?"

She nodded, smiling at me as though I were a child who didn't understand. "Of course. If you're going to bear my heir, you'll need to be strong and fit. Our births aren't easy, and your womb is needed."

"Come—" I sputtered, then cleared my throat. "Come again? It almost sounded like you thought I was going to birth you an *heir*?"

She gave me another patronizing smile. "That's exactly what I said. Didn't Malikhi tell you? It's why we've retrieved you, Princess Tala. You're who we've been waiting for. Didn't you know that you're the lost princess who still holds a fertile womb? This land greatly needs you, for from you, the next generation of Bone Eaters will be born."

Chapter 24

I gaped. “You want me to *birth children* for you?”

“Not for me directly, but for my son.” She nodded toward the prince, her smile saccharine. “Malikhi and you are to be wed. He shall breed you on your wedding night.”

A terrifying-sounding snarl cut through the air, and then dozens of gasps filled the room.

In a blink, Kaillen leaped from his seat to stand on the table. He rose to his full height, his expression contorted with rage, then he blurred down the middle of the table. Dishes and plates flew everywhere as the hunter sprinted to where I sat.

Shocked screams filled the room. Nobles fell back on their chairs, some tipping right over when Kaillen whizzed by them. Skirts flew up, lady’s undergarments visible as Barnabas laughed in delight.

“Now, the party’s getting started!” the vamp yelled.

Before I could process what was happening, Kaillen was standing on the table in front of me as he kicked the center piece clear across the room. Then, he was at my side, sweeping me out of the chair and locking his arms around me.

“Unhand her this instance!” The king rose from his seat.

“Over my dead body!” Kaillen snarled as he tore away from them with me in his arms.

“That can be arranged,” the queen called at our backs.

We were almost to the door, Prisha, Fallon, and Barnabas at our side with their blades ready, when a violent burst of magic skated right through me to my mate.

I felt the queen’s octopus-like tentacles spear him, and if I’d thought Malikhi’s powers felt strong, it was nothing compared to hers.

And the *feel* of her. My eyes flew wide open. *It was her.* She was the one who’d come through the portal and caressed me as though I were her child. It was her astronomical energy that had ultimately forged the portal,

with me cracking it from our side. And she was the one who'd *murdered my wolf*.

"No!" I screamed just as I fell from Kaillen's arms.

Fallon caught me before I hit the floor, and Kaillen snarled even though pain twisted his features. He bared his teeth at the queen as she advanced toward us.

The rest of the room was in disarray as servants rushed about, trying to clean up the mess that Kaillen's mad dash down the entire table had made, while the other guests tried to stand from their falls and straighten their mussed attire.

"You're not the only one who commands power in this room." Kaillen slumped more onto the floor as the queen gazed at him with wrath and vengeance in her eyes.

She hissed and more of her enormous power sucked life from the hunter.

Anguish contorted my mate's features, and a primal roar tore from my throat. My otherworldly powers shot from me straight for the queen, but as Malikhi had done, one of her tentacles met me before I could reach her, wrapping around me and playing that awful tug-of-war game.

"Tala!" Kaillen growled. Black flames burst to life in his eyes as Barnabas and Fallon dove for the queen, knives out, and Prisha moved with liquid grace. Blue fire erupted from a blade Prisha had hidden in her dress, and she aimed right for Queen Nameena.

The queen stumbled back, Prisha's blade missing her by millimeters. Queen Nameena's eyes flashed in shock, then rage, as the three came at her, but my friends' attack seemed to catch her enough off guard that her hold on the hunter loosened, and she wasn't able to create a shield like Malikhi had done in Jakub's chamber.

Kaillen's underworld flames shot to life. The entire room was suddenly ablaze in black flames, and the queen screamed in agony and stumbled back more when a rush of fire soared to life at her feet.

But before the assassins and Prisha could inflict any damage on the stunned queen, Malikhi and the king were there, stars exploding in their eyes, and I felt their power shoot toward my friends.

"No!" I screamed again as I shot another burst of my awakening magic toward them, meeting their tentacles halfway as the queen fought Kaillen's flames.

Kaillen rose from the floor, heat pouring off of him as he looked at the queen with murder in his eyes.

All of us strained and heaved, our mental powers clashing and clawing at one another. It was our realm against theirs, and only one world would be left standing.

The table abruptly erupted in an inferno of black fire as Kaillen's underworld power let loose.

"My queen!" a voice called from behind us as hundreds of footsteps pounded on the outside hall's floor.

My eyes widened when I beheld dozens of soldiers at our backs, all sporting the galaxy-infused irises as their gazes locked onto all of us with shock, then rage. But none of them shot tentacle-like power toward us.

"Kill all of them!" the queen called as she sprang back. Sweat poured from her forehead as Kaillen's black flames advanced her way. "All except the princess. We need her!"

A guttural roar came from Kaillen as he twisted in sudden pain, but despite the queen battling him, his flames grew.

The hunter turned toward the guards as I struggled to keep the king's and Malikhi's powers from killing my friends while the queen worked just as hard to stop Kaillen from burning her. My mate staggered under her wrath, but his flames grew higher.

I frantically scanned the room as more and more soldiers poured in. We were heavily outnumbered. "We need to leave. Now!"

"My thoughts exactly, dearest Tala." Barnabas appeared at my side, a manic gleam coating his eyes. The crazy vamp was enjoying this.

I dipped a hand into my gown where I'd secured a portal key to my skin with a spell, then snagged a hold of Kaillen before he could move farther away.

"Join hands!" I called frantically.

The soldiers rushed in as the queen's lip curled while the nobles still screamed and yelled at the atrocity of such chaos.

I shot another tentacle of power toward the guards and tossed the key to Barnabas. "Use it! Now! I'll hold them off."

The vamp whispered the words to activate the key just as another spear of the queen's power hit me, but then a flash of magic surged around us, and I was falling through time and space, transporting across this realm and to the next. I sought my friends in the transfer, frantically feeling for them.

A hand brushed mine, then another. *Please let us all be together.*

We landed in an alleyway just outside of a pizza joint in downtown Chicago. The cold wind hit me first, icy needles biting into my bare flesh.

With goosebumps rising, I gazed around in fright, terrified that Malikhi or the queen or someone else had been sucked through the portal with us.

But only my friends stared back at me.

A shuddering breath of relief nearly brought me to my knees as I sagged against the pizza joint's exterior wall.

"A pizza place?" Fallon said to Barnabas. "Really?"

Barnabas gave him an affronted look. "I'm hungry, and I've had plenty of blood lately. Pizza sounded good."

"You actually think we're going to go inside and have pizza *after that happened!*" Prisha shrieked.

Barnabas brought a hand to his chest. "Calm down, dear. Hysterics never helped anyone."

While Prisha looked like she was about to throttle the vampire, I surged to my feet and frantically sought my mate.

Kaillen crushed me to him the second we were within arm's reach, and he held me so tight that I thought for certain my bones would crack.

But I held him just as fiercely. It had been so close. I'd thought for sure they'd outnumber us, and we wouldn't escape.

As though reading my mind, Kaillen pulled back and cradled my cheeks as he gazed into my eyes. Once he seemed certain that I was with him, unharmed and unscathed, he kissed me.

His kiss stole my breath, but I sought him just as hungrily. And when he finally pulled back, he rubbed his hands along my arms, his heat warming me.

"Prisha's right," he said over Barnabas and Prisha's bickering. "We need to head back to the SF. None of us are dressed for this weather, and the Supernatural Forces need to know that we may have just initiated a war."

A chill ran through me despite Kaillen's heat. My arms were still bare, the amethyst dress doing nothing to warm me in the elements.

Kaillen whipped out his yellow crystal. But his portal took longer to create than it normally did, and one glance at his expression told me that his fight with the queen had drained him more than he probably wanted any of us to know.

My heart beat harder as his portal finally formed. A second later, we landed just outside of the SF's office.

We barreled through the front door to a startled-looking Jeff rising from his seat. "What's wrong?"

I breezed past him without replying and nearly ran into Klebus when we rounded the corner. Her eyes turned to saucers when she beheld us in our Lunarian clothing. Prisha's dress was streaked with food from Kaillen's antics, and the men's robes had all torn. Somehow, only my gown had made it unharmed through the scuffle.

The commander eyed us frantically. "So it's true. You're actually back."

My stomach sank. "How did you know we returned?"

Her face paled. "Malikhi's come through the portal again, and he's furious."

Kaillen snarled just as a ball of dread formed in my stomach. The queen and her prince really weren't going to leave me be. "When did he get here?"

"Just now. I was notified less than a minute ago."

"How long were we gone in Earth time?" Kaillen asked.

Klebus glanced at her tablet. "Less than an hour. What happened there?"

"They want to use Tala as a brood mare." Kaillen's jaw clenched so tightly the muscle in the corner looked as though it would cut through his skin.

"Brood mare?" Klebus's brow furrowed. "As in, for *breeding*?"

"Yep," I replied dryly. "Apparently, that's why they want me. But why they don't use some other noble to make their babies, I don't know."

Commander Klebus's gaze drifted to the tattoo circling my neck. "That makes sense then."

"What makes sense?" Kaillen and I asked simultaneously.

The commander's gaze swung between me and the hunter. "The first thing Malikhi said is that he wants his bride back."

Chapter 25

“He can’t have her!” Kaillen roared.

Barnabas and Fallon’s expressions turned stony as the gravity of the situation descended.

“Malikhi’s making threats again?” Prisha’s brows knitted together.

Klebus nodded. “He said we have ten minutes to bring Tala to him, or he’ll start”—her nostrils flared—“how did he put it? He would *remind all of us why his ancestors had been feared in this world.*”

“He’ll kill everyone.” My chest felt as though it’d crushed inward. “How many are guarding the portal?”

“Twelve.” Commander Klebus pulled out her tablet and listed off their names.

“Twelve more deaths that I’ll be responsible for.” I sagged against the wall, and Prisha surged to my side.

“It’s not your fault.” She pulled me into a fierce hug. “This is all because of Jakub. He’s to blame.”

I hugged her back, and when Prisha let go, Kaillen was there, his eyes rimmed in fire and gold and a rumbling snarl vibrating in his chest. He took Prisha’s place at my side the second she gave him room.

Fallon inspected his blade, his expression hard. “Jakub needs to pay for what he’s done.”

I straightened as Kaillen locked an arm around me. “But he won’t if Malikhi gets what they want. His family will free Jakub for helping them.”

Commander Klebus placed her hands on her hips. “But why you? What’s so important about them getting *you* specifically?”

I shrugged. “I still don’t know, but they apparently think that I have amazing ovaries. Whatever the case, I have to go back to Lunaris. I can’t stay here and put everyone’s lives at risk. If I’m what they want, and I go, then everyone else stays safe.”

“Not fucking happening,” Kaillen seethed.

I placed a hand on his arm, gripping his steely bicep. “I don’t intend to marry him, but if I can buy us time, stall them while I try to find a way to close the portal from there, and you all try to find a way to close the portal from here—”

“Whoa, hold on a minute,” Prisha shrieked. “What do you mean find a way from there, and we find a way from here?”

I gave her a pleading look. “I’m not willing to risk you all by having you there with me. They want me to bear children. They’re not going to kill me, but you heard the queen. She’ll kill all of you.” I shook my head. “I’m not risking that. I’ll go back to the portal and join Malikhi and learn what I can in Lunaris, but you can’t come with me again. We know now that I’ll be safe, but as for the four of you? You heard what the queen said. They have no problem killing others.”

The flames in Kaillen’s eyes rose. “What if the queen closes the portal after she has you?”

My stomach sank. I hadn’t wanted to admit that was a possibility, but he was right. “I’ll have to figure out a way to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“And if you don’t?” Klebus pursed her lips. “You could end up trapped there.”

I tried to imagine marrying Malikhi, being a queen, ruling a world that was as foreign to me as Mars, and I just couldn’t. Because even though that world felt familiar in a way and pulled at a part of my soul, it wasn’t my home. My home was here with my friends, my sister, and my mate.

I glanced at Kaillen. He was watching me with a thunderous expression. “Find a way,” I pleaded. “Go back to the library. Question Jakub again. Search everywhere that there could possibly be answers. Find a way to close the portal. It’s the only chance we have at ending this.”

“But the time difference between the realms.” Prisha shook her head, her midnight hair swaying against her shoulders. “A day here is almost a week there.”

“I know.”

“How are you going to stall them for that long?” Fallon asked.

“I’ll think of something.”

Kaillen clasped my face in his hands as fear entered his eyes. “You could be spending months there while only a week passes here. That’s not a lot of time for us. What if we fail, and we don’t find anything?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “We won’t fail. But if we do—”
He growled and shook his head.

I placed my hands on his chest. “If we fail, I promise you that somehow, some way, I’ll find my way back to your side. Eventually.”

When his mouth turned into a slash of a line, I pressed further. “If worse comes to worse, and we can’t find a way, and I’m forced to marry Malikhi, then eventually I’ll be queen. And as the queen, I could close the portal.”

“Tala, no!” Tears filled Prisha’s eyes. “Kaillen’s right. Not fucking happening.”

Barnabas nodded, for once looking gravely serious. “They’re right, dear Tala. We won’t allow you to be a martyr.”

I gave them all a determined smile. “Then let’s all find a way to beat these motherfuckers and close that portal once and for all.”

∞ ∞ ∞

Commander Klebus wasted no time alerting the squad members around the portal to my imminent return before brandishing me with more portal keys so I would always have an escape from Lunaris.

Following that, she gave me a new SF tablet that was smaller and easier to hide in my clothing. It was also equipped with calendars and clocks noting the time difference between the two realms. Since she did it so fast, I knew she’d already been working on it, no doubt thinking ahead in case a situation like this happened. I didn’t know why I was surprised. The SF had that kind of technology for the fae realm, but to know their technicians had already done the calculations based off the little information we’d gathered from Lunaris was a testament to how seamlessly this organization ran.

Of course, Kaillen refused to leave my side while Klebus was decking me out. Even though I told him repeatedly that no harm would come to me ’cause of my amazing ovaries, and how it was best if he kept his distance from Malikhi, he wouldn’t budge.

“I guess the one good thing that’s come out of this is that Mr. Wolf firmly views me as your mate again,” I tried to joke as Klebus spoke with the team surrounding the Lunarian portal, letting them know that I was on the way.

Prisha, Fallon, and Barnabas had already left since Klebus had granted them a temporary pass to the Bulgarian libraries and had alerted Nicholas to their impending arrival. Kaillen was supposed to join them as soon as I departed, but given the fierce light growing in his eyes, I was beginning to wonder if he would leave me at all.

“You’re my mate in this world and the next.” His portal shone behind him as he interlocked our fingers, his powers clearly returning since he’d formed this one more easily. “My instincts demand that I protect you.”

“Just like my instincts demand that I protect *you*.”

His jaw tightened. “But—”

“No buts.” I brought a finger to his lips. “I’m your *colantha*, remember? Have faith in me that I can stall them while we all hunt for answers.”

His teeth ground together. “Malikhi wants you as his wife.”

“I know.”

“But you’re *mine*.”

I suppressed a smile as warmth tingled through me that he was once again looking at me as he had before. “As I also know.”

“I don’t share.”

“You won’t be.”

“But if he makes you—”

“If he tries to make me do anything, I’ll cut his balls off.”

A hint of a smile ghosted his face. “Would you tear them off instead? Make it painful for him? Perhaps rip them slowly?” Demon fire rolled in his eyes.

“If it makes you happy, I’ll even video it on my new handy dandy micro tablet so you can relive it in all of your demony glory.”

He chuckled, low and deep, before he abruptly pulled me into a hug. “Gods, I love your violent side.”

My breath sucked in as his arms curved around me, drawing me close. He dipped his head, his nose running along my neck as he drank in my scent. But he didn’t do anything further. He didn’t kiss me or nip at my skin. He just . . . held me.

And I couldn’t remember the hunter ever just hugging me. With us, it was always passionate and filled with teasing foreplay, and while Kaillen would occasionally sling his arm around me or hold my hand, he’d never just *hugged* me.

I locked my arms fiercely around him. "I'll come back to you."
"You better."

∞ ∞ ∞

Malikhi stood with his hands on his hips right outside of the turquoise portal as he sneered with disdain at all of the SF members encircling him. He didn't seem the least bit concerned that everyone's particle guns were pointed at him.

Instead, he gave them a cold smile. "I could end all of you in a blink."

Corporal Morris laughed. "And I could end *you* with an arrow through the eye."

He rounded on her, and I rushed into the room, the power inside me brimming with strength as I once again came into contact with the portal's energy from Lunaris. "How about we don't kill anyone today?"

Kaillen's energy swirled into my back, and I knew the hunter was inches behind me.

Malikhi's attention dropped from Corporal Morris in an instant as he rounded on me. Starlight burst to life in his eyes, but the second he saw Kaillen, a bolt of lightning shot through them.

My heart jolted when the power around him rose, as though calling my own to join his. Panicking at what the prince was about to do, I rushed to his side.

"I'm here!" I brought a hand to his face and forced his gaze to lock onto mine. "I've returned, and I'm coming with you alone this time. No need to take anything out on them."

"You left," he said accusingly, but his hands settled on my hips.

A ferocious snarl rumbled from Kaillen, so I said in a rush, "Um, yeah, 'cause you just told me that the only reason you want me is to pop out kids. Not exactly every woman's dream."

Some of the swirling galaxies in Malikhi's eyes slowed, and a softer array of stardust glimmered instead. "I intended to court you first."

The snarl from Kaillen turned into an all-out roar.

I shot my mate an appealing look, then turned back to the prince. "I'll come with you now willingly, without anyone else, and I promise to stay with you on Lunaris if you do two things for me. If you don't, I'll fight you every step of the way."

His eyes narrowed. "You're trying to bargain?"

“Yes, take it or leave it.”

“And what two things are you demanding?”

“You have to promise to leave the portal open so I can still return here to visit friends and family if I wish, and you have to promise not to harm anyone on Earth.”

He shrugged. “That can be arranged. Naturally, we wouldn’t deprive you of never seeing your family again, and since we’re stronger than anyone in this realm, it will become known what we’ll do if forces collude against us.” The galaxies in his eyes swirled as he gave Commander Klebus a pointed look. “As long as no one here stirs trouble, we are happy to keep matters between our realms peaceful.”

“So we have a deal?” I said tentatively.

He smirked. “Indeed we do, Princess Tala. Because after we’re married—”

A terrifying bellow came from Kaillen, and then he was lunging at the prince. “Kaillen!” I screamed.

But the hunter was already mid-flight, just hearing that the prince intended to steal me away had obviously set off his mating instincts with a vengeance.

The prince’s eyes widened in surprise, then a burst of tentacles shot from Malikhi, aimed directly at the hunter.

“No!” I barreled in front of the prince, letting my power rise up to meet his.

Our Lunarian magic collided, our tentacles writhing and twisting, but I stopped his power from advancing as I clamped a hold of his fervent magic, and then I did the only thing I could think of.

I kicked Malikhi’s knees out with a hooked leg behind him.

The prince gave a cry of surprise and buckled, just as I shoved both of us toward the turquoise portal, our bodies falling clumsily backward.

The surprise in Malikhi’s eyes and the anguish on Kaillen’s face as his careening body landed right where we’d been standing were the last things I saw before the portal winds swept around us.

Chapter 26

We landed in the same spot as before, on the sand outside of Lunaris's capital. But since we'd entered the portal in a tangle of limbs, we didn't emerge much better. The prince came out first, falling flat on his back, with me right after him, landing smack on top of him. And it truly was a smack. We dinged heads, and I briefly saw stars.

But I wasn't the only one hurting. Malikhi gave a solid *oomph* when all of my weight landed right on his abdomen, and I felt a moment of satisfaction at that sound.

"This is most unbecoming." Irritation prickled his features as I hastily pulled back.

It was awkward since I still wore the long purple gown and heavy crown, but I might have played that up a bit, acting clumsier than I really was.

So when I knocked my knee somewhat forcefully into his family jewels, I hastily gave an apology when he let out a prolonged groan.

I peered at him innocently. "Are you okay?"

He forced a smile. "Nothing that won't heal."

How unfortunate.

He rolled to his feet, only grunting once, as I dusted the sand from my dress. Malikhi's craft waited beside us, not needing to be summoned this time as it looked as though he'd parked it by the portal, obviously expecting to return immediately. The hovercraft floated above the dry, dusty landscape like an enchanted carpet from the fae lands.

"Shall we?" Malikhi waved toward the craft.

My heart beat frantically as I gave him a tight smile. The mini tablet Klebus had given me, along with the portal keys, were concealed in my gown with a witch spell, but it wouldn't be hard for the prince to find them if he decided to really start looking. Concealment spells only did so much.

Bottom line, I had to play this perfectly. Prince Malikhi knew that I didn't want to be here. He knew I was in love with Kaillen. So if I started

acting like a love-struck teenager, he would undoubtedly grow suspicious. But if I was too much of a bitch, he might lock me in my chambers or force the gods-knew-what on me.

So in order to buy time and insist that he court me before we wed, I had to be resistant yet pliable. Irritated yet able to be soothed. Angry but willing to be softened. Right. I could do that. Espionage 101.

Gods, Tess, I wish you were here. My sister would handle this like a champ.

I quickly smoothed my facial expression as the prince walked languidly to his craft. “Would you like a hand aboard?”

“I don’t need help.” I squared my shoulders and marched toward him, which didn’t go very well. High heels on sand didn’t exactly agree. I stumbled once but still managed to keep my head high.

“As I’m coming to see.” A crooked smile lifted the prince’s lips, his starlight eyes swirling with night.

Once I was seated on his craft, he vaulted over the side and sped back to the palace. I kept my chin angled away from him the entire time, pretending to stew and take in the scenery, but if anything, I’d turned entirely inward.

Because the truth was, I was completely out of my element. It was embarrassing. I held more magic than most on Earth, yet when it came to matters of manipulation, I was a complete dunce.

What I wouldn’t give for Tessa’s advice at the moment.

∞ ∞ ∞

The afternoon passed painfully slowly. The queen was enraged over what had happened at the luncheon. So in order to *better educate* me, I had to spend the afternoon in her sitting quarters as she lectured me on the *civilized ways of royalty*.

Apparently, those lessons didn’t extend to her. Oh no. I wasn’t allowed to kill anyone, but she clearly was. But I gritted my teeth and played the part. That was probably the only reason she didn’t lock me up in punishment. In hopes of avoiding that, I mumbled numerous apologies, telling her that I wasn’t actually a violent person—Kaillen would definitely disagree—and that I hadn’t meant anyone harm.

Thankfully, she seemed to buy it. Probably because it sounded sincere. All I had to think about was my friends dying, and remorse and regret

nearly overwhelmed me and painted my words in tears.

Following that, I maintained my contrite demeanor as Malikhi showed me the palace grounds. They were beautiful, exotic, and so incredibly foreign, but I couldn't even enjoy seeing the sights of a new realm because all I could think about was what if my friends failed, and I was stuck here forever? Even though my powers vibrated warmly inside me, as though that part of me was happy to be in this realm, my heart was another story.

This wasn't what *I* chose.

The afternoon trailed by without a moment of reprieve, and by the time evening rolled around, I had to sit through another meal as the king, queen, and Malikhi gazed at me like I was a prized brood mare that everyone was gleefully waiting to breed.

We sat in the same dining hall as the luncheon, minus the other nobility. Instead, it was just the four of us in the huge room.

And as the food was served, I gaped at the room's transformation. One would never have known the destruction that had taken place within these walls only hours ago. The mess Kaillen had made when he'd destroyed the dishes and platters had been cleaned up. Spotless floors glistened around us, and not one burn mark remained, which meant Lunar is must have some wickedly strong cleaning charms. And somehow, the burned furniture had been replaced.

The queen also seemed in much higher spirits. Sadly, whatever underworld power Kaillen had used on her hadn't left a lasting injury either.

When the meal finally finished, Malikhi escorted me to my chambers, then kissed me on the cheeks before bowing. The dude was pompous to a fault, but he did have impeccable manners. I'd give him that.

"Sleep well," he said when he pulled back. "I'll come for you in the morning."

"In your pants?"

His head cocked at my crude quip, so I hastily shook my head, missing Kaillen more than anything. The hunter would have loved my sex joke.

"Never mind," I said to Malikhi. "Goodnight."

I closed the door firmly behind me, breathing a sigh of relief at finally being alone.

"There she is, looking as lovely as ever!" Geriam gushed as she rushed to my side.

I startled, not even realizing she'd been in my chambers.

“Let’s get you out of this gown and into bed, shall we?” She fingered the purple dress and eyed the heavy crown that was beginning to make my neck hurt.

“Um, I need to use the bathroom first.”

She curtsied. “Of course.”

I made a beeline for the bathing room, and once inside, I locked the door and removed my mini tablet and portal keys. I started to type a message to Klebus to report that I was fine, my fingers shaking, but Geriam knocked on the door, nearly making me drop the device.

“Do you need assistance, Princess Tala?”

“No!” Frantically, I searched for a hiding area in the bathroom and finally settled with a tall vase on the counter with some kind of powder in it that was more like tiny beads. I buried the portal keys and tablet in the beads with the intention of retrieving them as soon as I was truly alone.

Following that, I somehow managed to plaster a smile on my face and return to the bedroom chambers, where Geriam removed my gown like I was a toddler, then slid a silk nightgown over my head. Of course, it wasn’t actually silk, but rather a material indigenous to Lunaris, but since the textiles here were all new to me, I figured I’d call it what it felt like.

“Lots of purple,” I commented when the nightgown swirled around my legs. Similar to the evening gown, it was a deep-violet shade.

“Oh, yes. It’s the prince’s favorite color on a woman.”

I smiled tightly. “Is that so?”

“He believes it accentuates the stars in a woman’s eyes.”

“Ah, good to know. Does that mean he’s dressed a lot of women?”

Geriam nearly dropped the hairpins she was removing from my hair. Thankfully, the dreaded crown was off and sitting on the vanity. “Oh, forgive me, my lady. How uncouth of me to speak so.”

I waved a hand. “It’s fine, really. If I’m going to marry him, I figure it’s better to know as much about him as I can. He likes a woman in purple. Good thing I don’t hate the color.”

Geriam gave a small smile. “So you’re more accepting of marrying Prince Malikhi then?”

I tried to pull off looking annoyed but resigned at the same time, but I probably just looked like I had bad gas. “I don’t think I have a choice.”

She finished with the hairpins, then picked up a brush and began combing it through my hair. “Well, you’ll come to see how lucky you are to

be with him.”

“Because he’ll be giving me babies?”

She laughed. “Won’t that just be darling? It’s been so many years since the royal line has had a babe. We’ve been waiting for so long.”

I cocked my head as she ran the brush through my hair again. “Well, it can’t have been that long ago. Malikhi was just a baby, what, thirty years ago or so?”

Geriam fumbled with the brush, then righted herself and began forcefully pulling it through my hair again. “Thirty years? Oh no, Princess Tala. It’s been over three thousand years since Malikhi was a babe.”

My mouth made an “O” in a similar rendition to Agent Orange. “What?”

She nodded vigorously, then pulled out a jar of some kind of cream and began applying it to my face. “Malikhi’s the last of the royal line, and if he doesn’t produce an heir, the Bone Eaters will be no more.”

There was that word again. *Bone Eaters*.

I gazed at her imploringly. “But, how can he be three thousand years old? He looks my age.”

Her expression turned grave. “He should have died many years ago.”

“But . . . he hasn’t?”

“No.”

I waited for her to continue, but a sad expression downturned her features.

“Why not? How is he staying alive?”

Her brow puckered, and she glanced at the door.

I gripped her hand, forcing her attention back to me. “Please. Tell me. If I’m going to be a part of this family, I need to know who they are.”

She set the brush down, her hands shaking, then she pulled another stool over to sit beside me. Her rose-gold hair shone in the twilight coming in through the window as she clasped my hands. “What I’m about to tell you cannot leave these walls. The queen doesn’t like it spoken of even though everyone knows.”

My throat bobbed. “Okay.”

“The reason the royals are still alive is because they’ve been *harvesting the Well of Souls*,” she hissed the last part under her breath.

The Well of Souls, as if that meant anything to me. “I’m lost, Geriam. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She sighed. “And you shouldn’t have to. What they’re doing shouldn’t be happening, but all of them have been drinking from it, the prince, the king, and the queen, and it’s begun to run dry. If they don’t breed soon, their lives will run out, and the royal line will be gone.”

I frowned and squeezed her hands more. “I still don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this, but I want to. If these are my people, I need to understand them.”

She gave me a sad smile. “You’re right. If you’re to be the next queen, and the babes that come from your womb are to carry on the great Bone Eater name, then it’s important you know your history. Just like the last princess.”

“The last princess?”

“The princess that was lost to your realm. Princess Heathermore. She was supposed to marry Malikhi, but for some reason she didn’t want to. She didn’t want this life, and she didn’t want to be the next queen.” She gave a disgruntled snort. “Silly girl. She was born to rule, yet all she wanted was to be free.”

My breaths grew faster. Princess Heathermore. Was that who the tomes in the Bulgarian library had been talking about? Was she the one who had fled from Lunaris to Earth?

“Why didn’t Malikhi just marry someone else?” I asked. “If Princess Heathermore didn’t want this life?”

Geriam shook her head. “Because there wasn’t anyone else to marry, not like there used to be. Before, thousands of years ago, there were more royal families—*true* royal families—that also carried the Bone Eater line, not like the nobility we have today, which don’t hold *aureth*.”

I had no idea what *aureth* was, but I didn’t focus on that. “Geriam, who are the Bone Eaters?”

She laughed. “Silly me. How could you know? The Bone Eaters are the royals that hold *aureth*. There used to be more, but now there is only the Everlon line.” Her forehead puckered. “Before the Great Death, there were eight Bone Eater families, but that last generation of Bone Eaters bred only one girl.” She shook her head sadly. “So many boys and Princess Heathermore was the sole girl. The entire weight of the royal line fell to her shoulders. She would need to keep giving birth until she’d bred seven girls so each girl could be married off to one boy from each Bone Eater family. It was the only way to ensure that the royal families carried on their *aureth*.”

I gaped. “Seven girls? But what if Princess Heathermore gave birth to boys?”

Geriam shrugged. “She would need to keep being bred until she produced seven females. It was needed.”

“So, she was needed for breeding too?”

Geriam nodded, her eyes wide and flecked with stars.

I imagined my ancestor, Princess Heathermore, fleeing from this world, from a life she didn’t want. I couldn’t blame her. She was truly to be a baby-making factory. “But what happened to the other seven families?”

“They died out when no further females were born. It was the Great Death.”

I shook my head. “Why didn’t they just breed with someone else so their line didn’t die out?”

“You’re not understanding. Only a Bone Eater female could continue the line.”

“What about their mothers? Why not just have more children until they produced more girls?”

“Because their wombs had run dry.”

“But wouldn’t me giving birth to a child just prolong this by one more generation? If there’s no one left for my child to marry—”

Geriam leaned forward, her eyes growing even wider. In a hushed tone, she said, “That won’t happen. The queen preserved the seed of the seven other Bone Eater families. After you give birth to seven girls, they will breed your daughters with the other families’ seeds in hopes of creating a diverse royal line again that can replenish the great Bone Eaters that once ruled this land.”

My mouth dropped, and I stared at Geriam in shock. A sick feeling swept through me.

I was to be a sex slave—literally. As would my daughters.

Heart pounding, I took a deep breath and squeezed her hand. “Will you tell me everything? The whole story? About what happened to Princess Heathermore and what will happen if I don’t give birth to Malikhi’s children?”

Geriam gave a grave nod. “Yes, my princess. It’s a long story, but it’s time you know your true purpose in life. Because without you, the royal line will fall, and this world will be left without a monarchy.”

And that’s a bad thing?

But I didn't say that out loud since it was obvious that Geriam was devoted to the queen, but I was beginning to see why my ancestor had fled. In the single day I'd been here, I'd already started to feel like I was suffocating. This was a life of luxury, but it was also a life of oppression. I was to be bred continuously while also looking pretty. That was it. And worst of all, the girls that I bore would be forced to do the same.

A moment of kinship for Princess Heathermore bloomed through me. I could never blame her for escaping. Her life was to be one of suffering and heartbreak.

It was a life anyone would have run from.

∞ ∞ ∞

Geriam wasn't kidding about it being a long story. By the time she finished, two moons shone in the sky, and the dark night filled the open window as my chamber's curtains blew softly in the warm breeze.

But I'd stayed rapt the entire time Geriam told me the history of this world. So many of my questions were now answered.

"So if I don't marry Malikhi, the royal line will fall, the Bone Eaters will be no more, and all of the citizens in this world will no longer be subjected to the Bone Eater's *aureth*?" I asked the lady's servant.

"Yes, Princess Tala. That's correct."

I'd come to learn that Lunarians called my awakening power *aureth* and my forbidden power *draipal*. Every Lunarian held *draipal* power, but only the Bone Eaters commanded *aureth*, which explained why the guards hadn't been able to assist the queen in spearing us at the disastrous luncheon. And it turned out that one's *aureth* typically manifested around a Bone Eater's twenty-fifth birthday, which was why I'd never had it prior to a few months ago and why it had come on so gradually.

Not surprisingly, the Bone Eater's *aureth* was why they were so feared and revered, and it was also why they'd been ruling this land for thousands of years. Their great power could spear hundreds in moments and suck their lives away. Malikhi on the battlefield, and the men of the previous seven families, had truly been invincible.

"You are very much needed, Princess Tala. The royal line will die once the Well of Souls runs dry." She said the last bit in a hushed voice, which I wasn't surprised about.

The other seven families had refused to drink from it, even once their lives grew old. I'd come to learn that the Well of Souls wasn't supposed to be touched. It was apparently some ancient well carved deep into the land and was considered sacred, but Malikhi's family had been drinking from it despite that. With their *aureth*, nobody questioned them, even though behind their backs, the public was outraged at what they were doing.

"And the queen doesn't care that the public's against her and her family?"

Geriam's lips tightened, and she gazed out the window. "The queen has done what's been needed to keep the Bone Eaters alive and keep order in our land, even if the seven other families didn't agree with her."

"What'll happen when the Well of Souls runs dry?"

She swallowed, her throat bobbing. "They'll die, and the Bone Eater power will be no more."

"I still don't get this breeding thing. Why didn't Malikhi and the other seven families just have kids with non-royal females? Couldn't they have had girls who possessed *aureth*? My ancestor obviously had kids with a non-Bone Eater, and I still have *aureth*."

Geriam patted my hand again. "Of course. Let me explain better. I wish it were that easy, but when a Bone Eater breeds with a commoner, only children of the same sex can inherit their *aureth*, and it's very sporadic. Most of the children won't inherit it at all."

"Oh. Meaning, Malikhi and the men of the other families could only produce boys who held *aureth*, but never a girl, and it might have been generations until that power even appeared in a descended boy."

"Precisely."

I sat back on the couch. Well, that explained why so many generations of my female ancestors hadn't held *aureth*. It also explained why the queen wanted me so badly. I truly did have one-of-a-kind ovaries.

I sighed deeply as the plump couch cushions sank beneath me. We'd moved into the sitting area next to the bedroom hours ago. "When do they expect me to marry Malikhi? I mean, I hardly know the guy. I can't marry him tomorrow."

Geriam leaned forward, her rose-gold hair looking magenta in the dim light illuminating the room. "Oh no, please don't worry. Malikhi will court you for three months, as dictated by tradition, before your nuptials."

Three months. I gave an inward sigh of relief but then remembered the time change between the realms. *That gave us . . .* I did the rough calculation in my head, and my shoulders slumped even more.

That only gave us thirteen Earth days to close the portal, and we were nowhere near solving that dilemma.

Fuck a duck. Once again, I wished that I had my sister to talk to. She could give me advice for how to manage Malikhi and his family for three months while the SF scrambled to find a way to close the portal.

I laughed inwardly. Hell, if only Tessa and I could trade places. Then I could work like hell in the library to find a way to close the portal, and Tessa could wield her charm and keep the Bone Eaters distracted. She could probably even delay the wedding and give us more time.

My eyes popped. *Trading places with Tessa truly would help this situation.*

But as soon as that thought came, I brushed it off. No way could I ever bring my sister here and risk her safety.

I yawned and stretched my arms overhead as the weight of all that was expected of me began to take its toll.

“Oh dear, look at you, so exhausted from all that’s happened today, and my incessant yammering is only tiring you further.” Geriam rose, then helped me to my feet even though I was more than capable of standing on my own. “Why don’t you head to bed? You’ll need your rest before your classes begin.”

I frowned. “Classes?”

“Yes, Princess Tala. You must learn our traditions and what’s expected of you. Not only will Malikhi be courting you, but you’ll also need to learn our ways and customs. The queen insists on that.”

“Of course she does,” I muttered under my breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I gave her a tired smile and climbed into bed.

“Goodnight, Princess,” Geriam said. “We’re all so happy you’ve arrived. You shall be the womb from which the great Bone Eater line will continue.”

Not if I have anything to say about it.

But I managed a smile, since Geriam did seem genuinely kind, then I closed my eyes before the weight of the next three months could crush my spirit entirely.

Chapter 27

“Good morning, my sweet.” A finger trailed softly over my cheek.

“Kaillen?” I murmured sleepily.

The finger’s progression abruptly stopped.

I reached for my mate, wanting him, but the scent that fluttered toward me wasn’t that of citrus and cedar, and the hunter’s warmth didn’t greet my fingertips when I met a hard thigh.

I peeled my eyes open and nearly shrieked when I saw the Prince of Lunaris sitting on the edge of my bed. Early morning sunlight spilled into the room, highlighting Malikhi’s raven-black hair.

His jaw tightened. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I clutched the sheets closely to my chest. My heart was pounding painfully, but that didn’t seem to deter Mr. I Want To Give You Babies.

The prince’s gaze flitted down to my neck, taking in my tattoo. Following that, his attention wandered south, to the swells of my breasts pushing up against the purple nightie. “That color suits you.”

An angry flushed warmed my cheeks, and I lifted the covers higher. “I hear it’s what you prefer women to wear.”

A flash of lightning skittered across his irises. “Who told you that?”

I worked a swallow, then berated myself because fighting with him *wasn’t* what I was supposed to be doing. Not to mention, I’d just unwittingly put Geriam in harm’s way without intending to. *Dammit.*

I forced a smile, hoping it looked genuine. “No one. I mean, I kinda figured it out since most of my gowns are in this shade.” I gestured toward the wardrobe across the room before clutching the sheets to me again.

His posture relaxed, and a slight smile curved his lips. “Ah, of course, and you would be right. Come, my sweet.” He stood and held out his hand. “The day awaits us.”

My throat suddenly constricted as I darted my gaze around the room, hoping to see Geriam, but she was nowhere to be found.

Knowing that I needed to play the part so Kaillen and my friends could continue searching the libraries, I released my death grip on the sheets and let them fall.

Malikhi's eyes grew hooded when he took in my silky nightwear, exposed legs, and swelling cleavage. "I have to say, Princess, I'm very delighted at how exquisite you are. Your beauty surpasses anything I'd hoped for."

Somehow I managed to press my lips together and not give a biting reply, but it was hard. Damn hard. Once again, I was being sized up for my breeding potential. Good to know he'd have no problem getting a boner to do the deed when the time came. *Gag.*

"Can you give me a minute?" I asked more sharply than I intended.

His gaze shuttered, and I wanted to smack myself again. *Play nice, Tala. You're supposed to be being sweet.*

I forced a smile. "Sorry. I'm kinda cranky in the morning."

The prince's expression smoothed, then he stood and gave a small bow. "Of course. I'll wait outside of your chambers for you."

Once the prince was gone, I cast a shield spell around the door to ensure he wouldn't barge in again. From there, I retrieved my SF mini tablet to see if Klebus had messaged. After Geriam had left last night, I'd hidden the tablet and portal keys behind a bulky framed picture on the wall. It was a better hiding spot than the bathroom vase.

Casting one more anxious glance toward the door, I whispered a maximizer spell just to ensure my shield would hold before unlocking the device.

A single message waited for me from the vamp commander.

No news yet from the libraries, however, only a few hours have passed since you left. I'll message when there's something to report.

My shoulders slumped. It'd only been a few hours since I'd left Earth. The next few months were going to feel like a lifetime with how differently time moved between the two realms. It would literally be *months* in Lunar time before I could return to Earth.

If I could return.

My heart squeezed when I pictured Kaillen. Klebus had warned the hunter and me against communicating too frequently using our SF devices.

Since the SF was still working out if the Lunarians would be able to detect the earthly technology, she didn't feel it was safe. Given that Malikhi had a hovercraft and how I'd seen a few appliances during my tour yesterday, I knew Lunaris had some technology—unlike the fae lands—but the Supernatural Forces still didn't know how extensive their machinery was. It was possible that they wouldn't be able to detect any of our communications, but until the SF could confirm that, I was to tread cautiously.

I was about to stash my tablet away in its hiding place when a silent text message suddenly appeared.

Hey, sis! How's it going there? Are you charming the socks off all of them? :)

My heart jumped into my throat when I recognized Tessa's number, and then I smacked a hand to my forehead since my twin obviously wasn't adhering to the SF's recommendation.

But even though I knew I should put my phone away and ignore her, the lure of home, of *her* and everything I loved, won out. Besides, it was just harmless messages between sisters. Even if the Lunarians did discover them, it was hardly incriminating or something for them to forbid. After all, it was normal for women to vent with each other, and they couldn't expect me to be falling at Malikhi's feet on day two.

So I typed in a reply, not holding back.

Hardly. I'm so bad at this, Tess. They want me to learn their culture, dress in gowns, and allow their servants to primp and preen over me. Nothing about this is *me*, but I'll have to do what's needed. But anyway, I hope everything's going okay at Practically Perfect. Love you. xo

My spirits lifted when I sent the message off. Just reading that simple text from Tess and lamenting what I'd been forced into was enough to remind me of what could be lost if I failed.

Taking a deep breath, I lifted the picture from the wall to hide my tablet when another silent text message lit the screen.

Is Malikhi as hot as everyone says he is? Oh, Tala Bala, what I would give to be in your shoes! A sexy prince. A stunning palace. Gowns and pampering. All while charming the prince and his family while twirling them around your little finger? I'm sorry, sis. I know you're probably hating it, and don't be mad at me for saying this, but I wish it was me there instead of you.

My breath stilled in my chest when I read her words. *I wish it was me there instead of you.*

I nibbled my lip as the thought crashed into me a second time at how much better suited Tessa would be at this job. She was the expert at flirting with men and manipulating people in that subtle way of hers.

What if we did trade places?

But as soon as that unbidden thought came, I squashed it. What if they hurt Tess? Or what if we swapped, and something happened to her?

I typed in a reply.

I know you'd be better at this, but you're too important to me. Now, I gotta go and get ready for the day. Love you.

Thankfully, when I pulled the picture out for a second time, my mini tablet didn't light up again, so I stashed it away and with a sigh turned back to the luxurious chambers.

Day one of my captivity had officially begun.

∞ ∞ ∞

"Back straight, chin up." The matronly Lunarian sashayed around me as my spine quivered from how ramrod still she was expecting me to sit. Even though I was no stranger to intense training sessions, I'd at least been allowed to breathe when I exercised. Here, I was to keep everything not only rigidly vertical but *sucked in*.

Her words, not mine.

Seraleese nodded approvingly when I corrected my position. "Very good. Yes, that's it. Now, keep that posture as we converse."

The older woman assigned to my etiquette lessons sat down gracefully across from me in the large sitting room. Around us, a sea of fluffed settees and curved sofas waited. None of them had couch backs, though, because in

Lunaris, royal women were expected to sit for hours when in attendance of their husbands and visiting foreigners *without* relaxing their positions. Yep, once again, I felt like I'd been transported back several hundred years as I was made to look pretty and sit still. *FML, seriously.*

I was two hours into my first official cultural lesson after sitting through a breakfast with the prince in which we made small talk that was so boring I wanted to claw my eyes out. Even though Malikhi had pulled my chair out for me, ensured I was served first, and made sure all of my needs were met . . . I'd hated it.

I didn't want him to dote on me. I didn't want to be made to feel helpless.

I wanted equality. I wanted a man who knew I could fight my own battles and didn't coddle me.

I wanted Kaillen.

That familiar tightening happened in my chest again when I thought of my mate, but one sharp look from Seraleese had me recovering. Unwittingly, my shoulders had begun to droop when that thought had snuck in.

Once I was sitting properly again, she folded her hands in her lap. "Now, we shall begin our first lesson in the art of communication. As a princess, you're expected to charm any visitor the palace hosts. So we shall begin with . . ."

∞ ∞ ∞

By the time my first official day in Lunaris came to a close, I was ready to peel my gown from my skin, shred it with my bare fingers, and burn it. I was beginning to detest all shades of purple.

"You did wonderfully today," Malikhi said smoothly as he strolled at my side down the hall.

We'd just finished dinner with the king and queen. As before, they didn't seem the least bit interested in getting to know me. They simply wanted to mold me to suit them. The entire dinner they'd told me what was *expected* of me.

The prince grinned down at me. "I'm feeling quite proud."

As if he'd had anything to do with me being a good student during my lessons. But I pushed my anger down and said, "Thank you."

He tipped his handsome face in my direction. “Seraleese tells me you’re a quick learner.”

I forced another smile, but it felt brittle. “I do aim to please.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

When we reached the door to my room, he lingered. My heart started beating erratically when his gaze swept over my gown—this one was low cut with a cinched waist. Even though I hated it, it did highlight my curves in all the right places.

Lifting my hand to his mouth, he kissed the back of it, his breath warm on my skin. “Goodnight, my princess. I shall fetch you again in the morning.”

My throat bobbed, and the second I could pull my hand back without seeming rude, I did. “Goodnight.”

I pushed the door open, nearly tripping in my haste to get away from him, then kicked myself when I basically slammed the door in his face.

Once again, Tala, that’s not how you’re supposed to be acting.

“Princess Tala, good evening,” Geriam called from across the room.

I sighed when she approached me. She was all smiles and beaming pride. Even though I liked the lady’s servant, it was a struggle to hold my tongue and let her undress me, and it felt like forever before she finished.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else you need?” she asked as she arranged a newly cut bouquet of beige flowers at my bedside.

“No, I’m fine. I’m just tired. I’m ready to turn in.”

“I’m sure it’s a lot to adjust to.” She bobbed her head. “Sweet dreams.”

The second the door closed behind her, I placed another shield spell over it, then raced to the picture frame to grab my mini tablet.

My fingers were shaking as I pulled it out, and hope surged through me that maybe the SF had found something in the libraries that could ensure the portal’s closure so I could leave Lunaris once and for all.

My breath caught when a message from Commander Klebus popped up.

Still nothing from the library other than more findings about Lunaris that don’t pertain to the portal. And you may rest easy on sending messages now. Our technicians have confirmed that while Lunaris has technology, they don’t have the communication abilities that we do. Sending messages at will is now considered safe.

My excitement died even though I could send texts to Kaillen now whenever I wanted, because I'd hoped the commander's message was going to tell me to use a portal key and get the hell out of Dodge.

I was about to tap in a reply when another message from her suddenly appeared.

Also to report, your sister visited me today and was very insistent that the two of you should swap places. She's informed me that she's "perfect" for the job you've undertaken, and you're much better suited in the libraries. Normally, I wouldn't entertain the idea, but given the unusual circumstances of this mission, and seeing firsthand how charming your sister can be, I'm inclined to wonder if she's correct. If you do choose to swap, we would need to ensure her tattoo is an exact replica of yours. Please let me know your thoughts.

I gaped. Tessa had gone to the SF to advocate for us switching places? Anxiety clawed up my throat when I shot a message off to my sister.

Are you crazy? You went to see Klebus to ask if we could swap? Tess, this isn't a game. These people could kill you!

Thankfully, her reply came readily, which told me she had her phone on her as she worked at Practically Perfect. Either that or she was at home lounging on the couch.

Hi, sis! Don't be mad . . . you know I'm right. And I know you always worry about me getting hurt, but when it comes to what they're asking of you in Lunaris, I'm the expert in that department. Not you. Remember what you said about how I should work in PR? I just wish you'd trust me for once. I would pull off what you're doing perfectly. Because knowing you, you're probably already pulling your hair out. Am I right? ;)

xoxoxoxo

Her words made a laugh bark out of me while also making me want to throttle her. Because, no, she wasn't wrong. I did want to pull my hair out even though I'd only been here a day. Already, I was counting the seconds until I could leave.

I sat down on the chair near the window, my spine aching from everything Seraleese had demanded of me today.

As I stared out at the night sky, while a warm breeze drifted through the open architecture, I nibbled my lip. From how hard my sister was pushing, Tessa really wanted to come here. She'd gone out of her way to tell Klebus that.

And something else my sister had said struck a chord in me. *I would pull off what you're doing perfectly.*

And she would. Tessa was literally the perfect person for this job. But she didn't have magic or *aureth*. She would be defenseless here.

A sour taste filled my mouth, and I began to jiggle my knee.

I sat like that, staring outside as I contemplated what I'd done today. I'd pretty much achieved nothing. All they'd had me do were my *classes* while wearing a pretty gown and showing off the fact that I had ovaries.

If anything, the only thing they needed me for was my baby-making abilities. And since they'd already seen use of my *aureth*, they didn't seem inclined to test it again or have me train it.

That was the one thing I'd been hoping for during my time here—to learn how to better use my *aureth*—but Seraleese had been aghast when I'd asked if my lessons would include it. She'd told me only the queen could use her power that way. Daughters were not to show dominance, only submission.

I'd literally bitten my tongue to keep from replying, *but what if I'm queen one day? Shouldn't I train for that occasion?*

I didn't bother asking that, though, because I had a sneaking suspicion the queen had specifically prohibited any training of my *aureth*. As much as she was trying to hide it, the debacle in the dining room had rattled Queen Nameena. She'd not only tasted Kaillen's power but mine too, and I knew she saw my strength as a threat. So what better way to squash that threat than not to allow it to develop?

I glanced at my sister's text again, and her words nearly screamed at me. *I wish you'd trust me for once.*

Squeezing my eyes shut, I couldn't believe where my thoughts were going. Maybe it was because I hated it here so much. Or maybe it was because my sister had a point, but I found myself actually considering her request.

Not only that, but for the first time in my life, I contemplated something everyone had been urging of me for years—to let my sister make her own choices and to let her live with the consequences.

My palms began to sweat. *But what if she dies?*

That age-old fear clawed up my throat, the fear I'd lived with for as long as I could remember. A part of me knew that my terror stemmed from the death of our parents. With them gone, I'd always been petrified of losing Tess too.

But she wasn't a child anymore, and the gods knew I'd done way riskier things than she ever had, and I'd live to tell about it.

I gazed at the two moons, my breaths coming so fast that I had to take a moment to physically control my breathing.

Because if my sister and I did swap places, the question then became, would Tessa be reliable? But it was more than that. Here, alone in Lunaris, Tessa would be at substantial risk if her cover was blown. I chewed my lip more as my jiggling knee began to move as fast as a jackhammer.

Tessa had told me on multiple occasions that this exact kind of predicament amplified her strengths. She loved the excitement of possibly getting caught.

I took another breath and fingered my mini tablet, then cautiously typed in a reply to Klebus.

If Tessa and I did swap places, I know she would be better at this than me. BUT, if we do that, she's going to need some pretty amazing glamour because she'll need my exact tattoo encircling her neck and eyes that look like mine. And we'll also need to ensure that she has multiple ways to exit this realm. If she doesn't, I won't even contemplate it.

I stared at the text for a long moment, nearly in disbelief that I'd not only typed it, but I was contemplating *sending* it.

But then Tessa's plea floated to the forefront of my mind. *I wish you'd trust me for once.*

Closing my eyes, I tacked onto the text.

If the SF can figure out a way to meet my requests, I'll swap with her.

I prayed quietly to the gods in this realm and all the next. *I really hope I'm not making the biggest mistake of my life.*
With a firm exhale, I sent the message.

Chapter 28

“Are you sure you know what you need to do?” I whispered to Tessa.

“Are you kidding me? I’m going to do fabulously.” She stood in my bedroom chambers as the very first rays of dawn lit the Lunarian sky. I’d been awake, pacing my room all night since sending that text to Klebus, but the SF hadn’t wasted any time, and now Tessa was here.

“They certainly did a good job meeting my requests.”

Tessa pivoted, showing off her tattoo. “I know, right? Doesn’t it look amazing on me?”

The Supernatural Forces’ head sorcerer had done a bang-up job on Tessa’s glamour. Eyes that mirrored mine stared back at me, the tattoo encircling her neck was a perfect replica of mine, *and* the glamour spell would last for twelve weeks. It was truly the work of a master sorcerer.

Not only that, but they’d also glued a portal key to my sister’s skin, concealing it under magic, so no matter what, Tessa would be able to escape in the event of an emergency.

As for Practically Perfect, we’d cut our store hours. What Nicole couldn’t handle would lead to lost business, but desperate times called for desperate measures. I sighed. Our store was literally the least of my concerns right now.

“Are you clear on what you need to do?” I asked my sister.

Tessa gave an excited nod. “I’m supposed to act somewhat resistant because I’m supposed to be in love with Kaillen, and I’m not supposed to enjoy the classes or whatever they’re forcing on me initially, but over the coming weeks, I’ll start to soften to Malikhi as he courts me. And then I’ll find that the classes are becoming more interesting and feel as though they have a purpose.” She tapped her chin. “I think I’ll give that about a month, and then next month, I’ll start to act like I’m growing more accepting of their ways, thoroughly charming the king and queen as I do.” She gave a tinkling laugh. “That’ll be the easiest part. And by month three, I’m going

to act more smitten with Malikhi and stop being so opposed to the wedding and having all of his babies.”

“But don’t sleep with him.”

She eyed me coyly. “Who are you to tell me who I can sleep with?”

“Tessa,” I hissed.

But she just waved her hand. “Leave the prince to me. He’ll be a piece of cake to win over, and don’t worry. If anything, *he’ll* be the one in love with *me*, not the other way around.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because I’ll learn what he’s like and tailor my antics to what he prefers.” She fingered the purple nightgown that Geriam had originally dressed me in, but Tessa now wore.

We’d traded clothes the minute she’d arrived, so once again, I was in familiar attire—jeans and a crop top—while the silky gown clung to Tessa’s curves.

My sister gestured toward the nightie. “Honestly, I won’t even have to fake this. This slip is divine, and all of the clothes in your wardrobe are just magnificent.” She squealed. “Did you know that I actually love the color purple? Something tells me I’m going to be requesting a lot of dresses that have purple hues, especially since it matches my star-flecked eyes now.” She batted her lashes, and her glamour reacted flawlessly.

I breathed a little easier. I’d seen Tessa in action so many times over the years when it came to manipulating people of the opposite sex that I knew she was a master.

Still, I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “And what do you do if, out of the blue, they require you to demonstrate your *aureth*?” While I didn’t think that would happen, I wanted to make sure we had all of our bases covered.

She gave a dismissive wave. “I’ll distract them so they forget that they wanted a demonstration. I’m sure I can make that work, but if they’re insistent on me proving my *aureth* power, I’ll stall them and contact you. You’ll return. I’ll hide. And you’ll give them whatever show they’re requesting before sneaking out again and leaving me in your place once more.” She smiled brightly, and an excited gleam filled her eyes.

Of course, my sister no doubt found all of this exhilarating. Never mind that it was dangerous as hell, because if she got caught . . .

I squeezed her hand harder as fear and pride poured through me simultaneously. “Are you sure you can do this? I don’t want you to feel

unsafe or that you're in over your head."

She pulled me into a hug, then laughed, actually *laughed*, that tinkling sound like a soothing balm to my nerves. "You underestimate me. You always have. I may not have your magic, but when it comes to things like this, I've always been better than you."

I pulled back, tears shining in my eyes, and I had a feeling that my wild, unpredictable sister was finally coming into her own. "You're right. I have no doubt you're gonna trick the crap out of them."

She grinned before placing a portal key in my palm. "Now, you better go, sis. Your hunter is waiting, and we have a realm door to close. In the meantime, just leave the dashing prince to me. He'll be putty in my hands. You'll see."

Even though a part of me was still scared out of my mind over what could happen to Tessa, I knew I'd made the right decision to pull her into this, because just as I was getting ready to leave, she stood in front of the mirror, as though assessing her new role, and before my eyes, it was like a transformation came over her.

Her normally joyful, carefree smile disappeared, a harsher expression taking its place, and she moved with a more assured gait back and forth in front of the mirror until she had the walk of a seasoned fighter down to a T.

With a jaw-dropping realization, I realized what she was doing. She was becoming *me*.

She waved goodbye and blew me a kiss when the portal winds pulled me into their embrace.

I gave one last wave before I disappeared. And as the void dropped out from beneath me, I knew the second my feet landed back on Earth, I would be running.

Because time was our biggest enemy right now. We were down to thirteen Earth days until I was expected to marry Prince Malikhi, which meant if we didn't find answers soon, all of this would have been in vain.

∞ ∞ ∞

The SF's portal key spat me out in one of the designated hallways deep within the Bulgarian libraries.

I stumbled a bit in the dim corridor but caught myself before falling. Before I could look around for Nicholas, large warm hands closed around my biceps, and then I was dragged against a hard male chest.

“Thank fuck,” a very familiar, deep voice said.

Kaillen crushed me to him before I had a chance to reply, and I got a mouthful of his shirt. But I wasn’t complaining. His citrusy cedar scent hit me, and before I knew what was happening, I was returning his embrace just as forcefully.

He finally pulled back, his amber eyes flicking from my face to my neck, then my body. “Did he—” His jaw clenched, the muscle bulging like a marble. “Did the prince force you to—”

“No.” I placed a hand on his cheek, his prickly stubble grazing my palm. “The prince didn’t touch me. I spent the last two days strolling around their palace, doing ridiculous classes, getting lectured by the queen, and being trotted about like a brood mare.”

He took in my jeans and crop top, then smirked. “No gown, I see. Or crown.”

I flipped my hair back. “Or heels.”

His lips kicked up more. “Now, if you wanted to wear heels while you were naked . . .”

“Technically, if I was wearing heels, I wouldn’t be naked.”

He inched closer, that curve of his lips so familiar that my heart ached. “I would love nothing more than to see you only in heels right now.”

“And your wolf?” I asked, the anxiety creeping into my tone. “Does he still want me too?”

A fierce flash of gold pierced Kaillen’s eyes. “More than anything. With you being gone, out of our reach, and with that fucking prince—” Flames appeared amidst the gold. “He’s been restless as hell.”

My belly tightened as that aching need to be with the hunter pulsed through me. It was no longer the incessant demand that had been present when my wolf had ruled me, but instead it was similar to the pull I’d felt before she’d been born. There was something about Kaillen that drew me to him. There always had been. And it wasn’t just because of his looks and physique. There was a rawness to him, a fierceness that I’d never encountered in another male before, and his very essence called me in like a siren. He was mine. I was his, and fuck fate and mating bonds. We’d chosen each other in the end despite all that had been stacked against us.

“I missed you,” I breathed.

A low growl vibrated in his chest, and his fingers curled around my hips. “I missed you too.”

“Where’s everyone else?” I managed as my heart began to flutter at the savage longing growing in his features.

“In the library.”

“And Nicholas? I thought you couldn’t be alone in these libraries without him.”

The hunter jerked his chin to behind us, and my breath sucked in when I spotted the vamp standing near the wall about twenty feet away. He’d been so still that I’d skipped right over him.

I gave a slight wave, which Nicholas returned, but the gargoyle representative stayed in the shadows.

“If Nicholas is here, who’s with Fallon, Barnabas, and Prisha?” I asked Kaillen.

“We’ve been assigned a second representative. We now have Nicholas and Millicent working with us and four gargoyles.”

“Four?” I said, my eyes widening.

“We’ve already found more info about the Bone Eaters and Lunaris. We’re getting there.”

“So are we joining everyone in the library now?” Even though a yawn threatened to overtake me, I shook it off. Sleep was a luxury right now that I couldn’t afford.

Kaillen shook his head. “Not yet. We need to do something else first.” In a blurred move, the hunter had me cradled to his chest and was flying us down the hall. He did it so fast and with such alarming speed that I barely had a chance to squeal before he stopped at our bedroom chambers and inserted the magical key.

A flash of Nicholas’s knowing smirk came from behind a column, and I realized the vamp had moved with us until we were back in our chambers.

I didn’t have time to tell him goodbye before the hunter was kicking the door shut behind us, and his lips were locking onto mine.

Kaillen released me from his hold and let my body slide languidly down his chest as he ravished my mouth.

A moan escaped me as the taste and scent of him flooded my system. “We need to hurry,” I said frantically as we ripped and tore at one another’s clothes. “Every moment we lose is a moment Tessa is forced to stay there longer.”

“I’ll make it quick. Promise,” the hunter replied with a dark smile.

My gaze dipped to his impressive length as he stepped out of his pants and backed me up to the bed. Gleaming, smooth skin covered his entire body, and my hands curved around his shoulders to trace the tattoo across the width of his back.

Heat rose from him as a possessive growl tore from his mouth. "*Mine.*"

Our lips locked onto one another's as he hoisted me up, wrapping my legs around his waist before shoving me back against a column of the canopied bed.

I arched my back, my ass digging into the post as his erection pierced my entrance, his cock's broad head prodding at my folds.

A desperate moan parted my lips, and Kaillen curled his hands around my ass, holding me easily above him, teasing me as he rubbed against me.

A deep groan escaped him, then he kissed me again, his tongue dancing with mine as he lowered me just an inch onto his cock.

"Yes, Kaillen. More."

His throaty chuckle vibrated against my lips. "Such a greedy woman."

I bobbed in his grip, trying to sink more onto his shaft.

"Is this what you want?" He lowered me, letting his thick erection fill me inch by inch.

I moaned a reply, my body coiling around him, gripping him tighter and tighter as I bounced in anticipation.

His gaze tore away as he drank in my breasts' dusky peaks, then he dipped down and sucked a nipple into his mouth before I bobbed more on him. "I like seeing your tits bounce in my face."

"Then let me ride you harder," I begged.

With a hiss, he finally let me sink down all the way. My head rolled back as I squeezed tightly around him, eliciting a groan and a rasped breath from the hunter.

"Do that again," he commanded.

I squeezed more as he picked me up, then slammed me back onto his shaft, and we quickly picked up a rhythm, moving and writhing as one, biting and fucking until sweat kissed our skin and the scent of sex filled the air.

My entire world became the hunter between my legs as he demanded that I respond. But just as the waves began building in earnest, he swung me from the post onto the mattress, and then he was doing me from the

side, the new position ramming his full length into me so deep that I screamed from the pleasure of it.

“Tala, you’re mine,” he growled before shifting positions again.

The next thing I knew, the hunter was above me as I gazed up at the glowing gold in his eyes. My lips parted when his canines lengthened, and my belly quivered as I took in the transformation.

“*Mine*,” he said in a guttural growl as his wolf stared at me front and center.

“Yes.” I curled my hand around his neck and wrenched him to the base of my throat.

Another deep growl of possession and need vibrated his body, and as he thrust his cock all of the way inside me, he bit into my neck too.

The feel of the hunter’s thick girth and canines piercing my skin undid me. Lust clouded my gaze as he fucked me harder and harder as the claiming bond took root.

And while this was different from the first time since my magic didn’t swim into him, I welcomed the feel of the hunter’s potent energy slamming within me, soaking my cells and bathing my essence in the savage ferocity that embodied Kaillen’s sheer power.

My entire body tightened at the feel of our souls tying together once again, and my fingers turned into claws as I gripped him to me possessively as the world around me exploded into a rainbow of never-ending light.

My climax hit me so hard that I screamed, and then Kaillen’s mouth was biting down harder as he followed me over the edge, his cock spasming when he roared his release.

The waves went on and on as Kaillen’s magic bathed my body in fiery power. We were connected again and entwined. Once more, I no longer knew where my soul ended and his began.

Because we were one.

Kaillen collapsed on top of me, his large body completely covering mine as we both lay spent and panting. Carefully, he extracted his teeth from my skin, and I savored the pleasing ache that was left.

He licked my wound clean as magic sealed the punctures, and warmth burst over my throat.

A myriad of emotions slammed into me when I peered up at him, and with a start, I realized half of those emotions were coming from the hunter. The thread that had once connected us had been born again.

Tears threatened to fill my eyes as I angled my head. “Is it back?” I whispered. I traced over the base of my throat, wishing I could feel the mating mark, but only smooth skin greeted me.

A thoroughly contented growl rumbled the hunter’s chest. “Yes. You carry my mark again.” He leaned down and inhaled deeply. “And my scent. Every male wolf will know you’re claimed. You’re officially *mine*.”

“Damn straight I am.” I pulled him back toward me for a long kiss, my toes curling when his hand locked onto my hip as his length grew inside me once more.

He began to move in sensual thrusts. “I’ve been wanting to claim you since the second you left,” he confessed as he nipped along my skin and began to slide in and out. But his movements now were slower, more reverent, even though his cock was once again as hard as steel.

“You have?” I gasped at the feel of him sliding out and then plunging back inside me.

A fierce glow lit his eyes. “I can’t lose you, Tala. You mean the fucking world to me. And it’s not just me who knows that now. My wolf does too.”

He leaned down and licked his mating mark. A bolt of pleasure shot straight through me, and I gripped him tighter as a pulse of lust nearly made me come right there.

“Holy fuck!” I exclaimed in surprise.

He chuckled and began to pick up his pace. “Like that, did you? I’m going to make you come a dozen times between now and—”

“Excuse me, love birds!” Barnabas’s sing-song tone carried through the thick wood door to our chamber. Kaillen stopped mid-movement and snarled. “Sorry to interrupt what is no doubt a serious study session, but your presence is requested in the library. We’ve found something.”

My eyes widened, just as Kaillen’s did the same. With a regretful kiss to my neck, he whispered in my ear, “Maybe we can find a deserted corner in the library, and we can finish this.”

My core tightened around him. “Promise?”

“Hell yeah, I promise. I’m gonna have to fuck you at least a dozen times a day. My need for you—”

I brought a finger to his lips. “You’ll get no argument here.”

He chuckled just as Barnabas knocked briskly on the door again. “I know you’ve stopped plowing her, so may I ask why this door’s not open?”

Kaillen's nostrils flared, but he finally slid out of me, and we both dressed in a rush.

I opened the door to find the auburn-haired vamp leaning casually against it. "Tala, lovely to have you back. Hopefully that means this bugger will finally calm down and stop biting everyone's heads off."

Kaillen glowered. "Did you really interrupt us to welcome my mate back?"

Barnabas's eyes coasted to my neck, and a grin lit his face. "Brilliant! You're mated again! Glad that's now sorted out, but to answer your question, no, I didn't interrupt your fuck session to wish Tala a good day. We've found something. It's about more royal families that carry the same power as Malikhi."

My hope died like a wilting flower. "Are you talking about the seven other royal families?"

Barnabas frowned. "You already know about them?"

"Yes, and they're all dead."

The vamp frowned. "I see. I thought this was new information we'd uncovered."

"Unfortunately, it's not." I glanced over my shoulder at the rumpled sheets on our bed and realized that once again, Kaillen and I wouldn't be going on a mating holiday.

As if sensing the same, Kaillen's fingers curled around mine, his large palm hot and rough before he leaned down and whispered, "You. Me. Dark corner. Alone."

My stomach flipped.

"What was that about a dark corner?" Barnabas asked with a cocky smile.

"Nothing!" I said shrilly, then raised an eyebrow at the hunter. "I suppose we should get back to work?"

Kaillen tugged me to his side and leaned down, inhaling along my neck. "We should, and have I mentioned that I love that you carry my scent now?"

Barnabas inhaled. "She certainly does. I could smell that delectable combination of sex, freesia, and—"

Kaillen snarled viciously, his teeth flashing.

Barnabas raised his hands and took a large step back. "It was just an observation." He straightened his clothing and gave me a teasing wink.

“Even I’m not stupid enough to come within three feet of a newly mated male werewolf’s female.”

But Kaillen’s only response was to slip an arm possessively around me as he continued to growl at the vampire like a possessive wolf.

“Should we go to the library?” I asked the hunter.

He grunted, and some of his territorial reaction finally calmed when I firmly molded myself to his side. Kaillen ran a hand through his hair. “I might actually be of some use now that you wear my mark again.”

Barnabas sighed dramatically. “Yes, he may be, and thank the gods you’ve returned, Tala. He’s been quite a bear since you left. Did you know that this afternoon, when one of the gargoyles came by . . .” The vamp trailed on, telling me how horrendous their first day had been in the library since Kaillen had been so on edge, and as the three of us walked down the hall while Nicholas trailed quietly behind us, for the first time since the portal had opened, it actually felt as if something right had come into the world.



The next week passed in a haze of studying, reading, guzzling caffeine, tearing our hair out, and sensual rendezvous with the hunter. While Kaillen and I couldn’t go on a mating holiday, the Scourge of the Shadow Zone did make good on his promise to utilize dark, deserted corners whenever we found one.

I’d never in my life thought I’d be fucked so many times against a bookshelf, but I wasn’t complaining. The hunter had perfected his technique.

But even though we were working tirelessly, we hadn’t found anything substantial despite pouring through every tome, scroll, book, and document that the gargoyles found. Those findings had revealed more about Lunaris, Princess Heathermore’s flee from her realm, and the great Bone Eater line, but still nothing about how to close the portal.

And even though we’d found more tomes regarding the guild that Jakub had told us about when we’d interrogated him at the prison, the most important answer of all still eluded us: how to close the portal and who exactly had done that thousands of years ago.

“My eyes are going to fall out of my head,” Prisha said on our tenth night. “Everything’s blurring together.”

Fallon held up the enchanted pot to her. “More coffee?”

“Please.” She held out her empty cup, and he poured her a generous dose of the steaming liquid.

“Could you give me one of those lovely biscuits?” Barnabas asked, pointing toward the plate in the middle of our table. Of the five of us, he was the only one who didn’t look tired since vampires didn’t require sleep.

Fallon tossed a cookie to him as Kaillen grumbled beside me and thumbed through another book. The hunter and I hadn’t had sex in five hours, and I knew he was itching to fill me again.

Squeezing my thighs together in anticipation, I checked my tablet, just to make sure Tessa hadn’t contacted me. Despite our witch twin bond keeping us connected, even across realms, I still liked to hear from her just so I knew she was okay.

Of course, every text I got was usually brimming with excitement. True to her promise, Tessa had woven all of the Lunarians around her little finger. Nowadays, her texts were usually to gush over whatever ball gown she’d worn, or she would share all of the details about the enthralling outing Malikhi had taken her on—the last one being to a desert oasis that they’d visited under the stars—but each message always made me breathe a little easier. My sister was okay, and she was safe.

And even though Tessa hadn’t been able to uncover any information about how to close the portal from Lunar’s side—apart from the queen doing so—she had charmed the royal family completely. Because of that, there’d been no talks of moving the wedding day up and impregnating me pronto, which had bought us the time we needed.

In a way, I felt sorry for the prince. Malikhi truly seemed utterly smitten with my sister, and I knew he was going to get his heart broken. But then I remembered all that the prince wanted was an obedient wife for breeding purposes, and if he learned of my deception, he would violently force me back to Lunar if necessary. Once I remembered that, any guilt I was feeling vanished.

The hunter grumbled again, drawing me back to the present, and I slipped a hand onto his thigh as I made light, teasing motions on his hard muscle.

He glanced at me, his eyes growing hooded, and the look that I’d come to recognize that meant *I-need-to-be-inside-you* overtook his face.

My breathing sped up, and we both subtly pushed back our chairs as a knowing smirk came from Barnabas, but our movements halted when a sudden shout came from the stacks, the sound moving through the air like thick water.

“Tala!”

Nicholas rushed toward us with Master Valentina on his tail. Everyone turned wide eyes their way.

When they reached us, the panting gargoyle set a huge tome on the table as his black eyes glittered like obsidian. “I think we’ve finally found what you seek. This book tells of two ways to close a portal. It contains two spells, and it briefly mentions this being done once, eons ago by a princess of a lost realm.”

I snapped upright, all thoughts of slinking to another dark corner disappearing. “You found how Princess Heathermore closed the portal?”

Master Valentina nodded and opened the book. “It says that she had to use her *aureth* to suck power from hundreds of souls. She needed to harness that much magic to close the door.”

My chest tightened. “*What?* She killed hundreds to close the portal?”

Nicholas offered a grave nod. “Apparently. It was the only way to do so. She needed the power of a god to close it by herself because she wasn’t queen, and she didn’t have Lunar’s magic fueling her.”

As we’d come to learn in the past week, the tomes had revealed that the queen of Lunar held *aureth* power that was a hundred times stronger than any other Bone Eater, thanks to the land granting her that gift. When a queen or king ascended in Lunar, the land gifted the chosen ruler with the power of the gods. It was why only the queen could close the portal from their end.

I shook my head. “But I can’t *kill* innocent people to close the portal. That’s just . . . It’s just wrong. I can’t do that, so what’s the second option?”

Everyone leaned forward, anticipation running rampant in my friends’ expressions.

Nicholas cleared his throat. “You use a slightly different spell but channel power using your *aureth* from supernaturals volunteering their power. You use their strength and combine it with your own power to create the energy needed to close the portal. The spell will protect them from death.”

I stilled. “That’s what Jakub did.” And the spell would have protected the dozen supernaturals he’d used if I hadn’t unwittingly killed them. That familiar ache cracked in my chest again.

Nicholas nodded. “The spell he used is in here too, along with the counterspell, which is what you will need. This must be the tome he found and the spell he used to create the portal.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t Jakub tell us about this book when we interrogated him?” I asked. “It would have saved us a lot of time.”

Kaillen frowned. “He must not have known which tome had the information, only that it came from Phantasia. It’s not surprising, especially if he hadn’t seen the book himself and only knew of it through a corrupt SF member.”

I exhaled in frustration but then my relief won out. At least we’d found it in time. “All right then,” I said. “So this is it. This is what we’ve been searching for.”

Cheers rose in our group as everyone hugged one another.

“And since there’s no way in hell I’m killing hundreds of innocent people to close that portal,” I added, “we’ll go with option two.” I grinned. “We should prepare now. The portal could be closed by tonight, and Tessa will be home—”

“There’s a catch.” Nicholas’s eyes shuttered.

The cheers and my excited planning died.

“What catch?” Prisha demanded.

“Tala can only use power from twelve supernaturals to close the portal. She needs to find a dozen that are strong enough to fuel her. If she doesn’t, the spell won’t work.”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly, not liking the worry in the gargoyle representative’s expression. “So we find twelve supernaturals. Commander Klebus can help with that. The SF database should make that totally doable.”

Nicholas’s eyes grew even more sympathetic. “The amount of power that will be needed is unheard of.”

“But surely, there are still twelve . . .” My lips parted as I realized what Nicholas was trying to gently tell me.

“Jakub spent months searching for his twelve,” Nicholas said gravely.

Kaillen’s brow furrowed.

I twisted my hands. “But with the SF’s database, we can find twelve more.”

Nicholas gave a tight smile. “Of course. We can try.”

I crossed my arms. “Damn straight we will. I’d give myself to the Bone Eaters first before willingly killing a hundred innocent people.”

Fiery flames leaped to life in Kaillen’s irises.

I held eye contact with him, and my insides turned over. I didn’t want to leave him. I didn’t want to wed Malikhi. Just the thought made me feel sick, but I couldn’t murder people either. The names of the dozen I’d killed when Jakub had used me to open the portal flashed through my mind, and I frowned as I remembered channeling the energy from them—those dozen uber-powerful, zombie-like supernaturals.

When the portal was first formed, when it’d only been a crack to Lunaris, I’d started to close it with only my magic during the battle in Jakub’s lair. I’d been able to do that without the counterspell since I’d had enough magic to do it on my own, until Queen Bitch threw one of her tentacles through it and smashed my efforts to shreds. My chest ached at that memory. That had been the moment my wolf had died.

I eyed the spell in the tome that could close the portal if I only had enough power. Determination burned through me as hotly as an inferno. “Okay, so we need to find twelve strong supernaturals *now*.”

“I’ll do it,” Kaillen said immediately.

I gave him a grateful smile. “We’ll need eleven more. Sounds like it’s time to contact Klebus.”

Chapter 29

Prisha, Fallon, and Barnabas all volunteered their magic too, and while I loved them for that, they didn't hold anywhere near the magic Kaillen did, which meant it wasn't nearly enough. We needed eleven other supernaturals.

We all sat in the Phantasia library, staring at the spellbook that Jakub's informant had found that contained the spell Princess Heathermore had used to close the portal, while Klebus had the SF technicians scouring the database.

The lines creasing Prisha's forehead said it all as I stared more at the spell's limitations.

Without having the power of a god inside me—the power Heathermore had contained when she killed a hundred supernaturals and stored their magic inside her—the spell only allowed me to channel power from a dozen supernaturals, which was why Jakub had needed twelve to open it. And the more we studied the spell, the more we realized just how much magic each supernatural had to possess. It was *immense*.

"What if we alter the spell?" Fallon asked. "Make it so you can draw on hundreds without actually killing them and only borrowing their power instead?"

"Dammit, she can't," Prisha replied. "Look here." She pointed at a page in the book. "The spell's linked to the earthly universe and the zodiac signs, which in a way is good since that means nobody from Lunaris can open the portal from their end since they don't have our zodiac signs. But since it's linked to the very fabric of time and matter in this realm, we have to adhere to the twelve zodiac constellations. This spell will only work with a dozen supernaturals aiding Tala if she doesn't kill hundreds and harvest their power."

I bit my lip as the thought I'd had before kept swirling through my mind. The Lunaris queen was gifted the ability to close the portal from her end. One day, if I returned to Lunaris and married Malikhi, I would be

queen, and then the land would grant me the power of a god. Then I could close the portal without hurting anyone. If worse came to worse . . .

“No,” Kaillen grunted beside me.

I glanced up to find him watching me.

The muscle worked in his jaw. “No.”

“But if we can’t—”

“No, Tala,” he said more forcefully. “You’re not sacrificing yourself.”

“Has that lovely vampire commander of yours come up with anything yet?” Barnabas asked.

I glanced at my watch again. “She said she’d have an answer within the hour for who on Earth and in the fae lands possesses enough magic to hold a spear.”

A frown tugged at my features as I pictured the fierce desperation Princess Heathermore must have felt to flee from her home realm, then kill hundreds in order to seal the portal’s door, which forever locked her on Earth while trapping Lunarism within itself.

Yet, she must have been a bit of a ruthless sociopath too. To knowingly kill that many people, all to ensure her own safety required an amount of cold indifference that I didn’t possess.

But the Bone Eaters did.

I remembered again what Geriam had told me, how the eight royal families had felt they were truly above others since they possessed *aureth*, and nobody else did.

Perhaps growing up in their world and being constantly told that her life was more important than others had led to Heathermore’s intrinsic belief that there was nothing wrong with killing others to ensure her own survival.

A sour taste filled my mouth. *Yeah, no thanks*. I might be related to the lost princess, but I was nothing like her.

A buzz came from Kaillen’s tablet, and Commander Klebus’s picture flashed on his screen. He swiped the tablet to answer it.

“Find anything?” he asked by way of greeting, then put his tablet on speaker.

The commander steepled her hands as she sat in the huge command center in Boise. The entire operation had been moved to the SF’s headquarters since this mission had become so critical. “In addition to

Kaillen, the database has located seven individuals that may possess enough magic to fuel that spell.”

My stomach dropped. “Only seven?”

Her lips thinned. “Unfortunately, the amount of magic that spell takes isn’t easy to come by. There were more supernaturals several months ago, but Jakub got to them.”

A stone sank even more in my gut. I’d unwittingly killed all of them.

A discontented grumble came from Kaillen, and he shifted closer to me and placed a hand on my lower back.

I flashed him a brave smile as he began to massage my tense muscles. “So there’s absolutely no way this spell is even possible because I killed those”—I choked on the words, barely able to get them out—“those twelve that Jakub captured?”

The commander’s lips thinned. “I’m sorry, Tala, but that’s correct.”

I let out a breath. “So, that’s it then? If we can’t find that much power, then the portal can’t be closed? Are we seriously out of options?”

Kaillen’s fingers tightened as the commander’s nostrils flared.

“I’m afraid so,” Klebus replied. “We must discuss the possibility that this portal will never close and that life as we’ve known it is in jeopardy.”

Prisha frantically shook her head. “There has to be another way.”

Commander Klebus raised an eyebrow. “Unless you’re able to magically create genetically enhanced supernaturals or create a new spell that will close a realm portal, there isn’t.”

The commander’s cool response said it all. The SF had accepted that closing the portal was no longer an option. Their technicians had run all of the search results. They’d combed through every file in their database, and the results had all concluded the same finding. There weren’t enough supernaturals alive anymore to fuel that spell.

“How can you give up so easily?” Fallon growled.

“Because facts won’t change just because you want them to,” Commander Klebus snapped. “There aren’t enough living supernaturals to fuel that spell, and the SF won’t allow hundreds of innocents to die to fuel option one, so we’re moving on to plan B. We need to deal with the possibility that someday the Bone Eaters may come to Earth if they’re not appeased with what they have in Lunaris and want to rule our realm too.”

It felt as though the world had fallen out from beneath me. There was only one way to prevent that.

I would have to go to Lunaris and marry Malikhi.

Then I would have to birth his children until I produced seven daughters because if I didn't, everyone on this planet and in the fae lands was potentially at risk of the Bone Eaters' wrath.

"No!" Kaillen shoved back from his chair with so much force that the sound screeched through the library. "She's not going back." His words cut through the air like a knife and sliced me open. The hunter stared at me with gold swirling in his eyes amidst those black flames. "They're not taking you, do you hear me? It's *not* happening."

"But if our realm is at stake—"

"There's another way," he replied.

My brow furrowed. "How? The database keeps track of all supernaturals. If Klebus said there's only seven, then where would we find four more?"

Kaillen's jaw locked as fierce determination shone in his eyes. "The database only tracks supernaturals on Earth and in the fae lands, but it doesn't track those in the divine realms."

I stared at him, not understanding, but then it clicked. "You mean you want to venture to the underworld? But only demons live there, and none of them will help us."

"Maybe or maybe not," the hunter replied. "But Asuran's there, and her blood flows through my veins. Her power is even stronger than mine. Her strength could make up for the missing four, which means that with her, we'd only need three other supernaturals with average to above-average strength to hold a spear and complete the twelve zodiac signs." He gave a nod toward Prisha, Fallon, and Barnabas. They all straightened as fierce smiles stretched their lips, before Kaillen turned his eyes back to me. "Perhaps it's time I returned to my birthplace and gave my dear mother a visit."

Chapter 30

“I thought you said you couldn’t create portals to other realms?” I said as I gazed at the hunter’s personal portal that dipped into Hades. Instead of the usual yellow color, this portal was silver-lined and barely visible in the night, as though the darkness it led to cloaked the door in perpetual shadows.

“The underworld is my birthplace. I can create portals easily to it. It’s just to the fae lands, Lunaris, or other realms that I can’t.”

“Well, that’s handy, since if shit hits the fan down there, I’m assuming you can get us out fast.”

He flashed me a dark smile, as if his demon relished the idea of things going haywire. “You have such little faith in my influence in the underworld?”

“No. I mean, yes?” I shrugged. “I’ve never been there, so I’m not sure what to expect.”

“You don’t have to come. I can find Asuran and convince her to help us on my own.”

“And miss the chance to see your birthplace? No way. There’s not a chance in hell that I’d pass this up.” I gave him a side-eye. “Did ya like what I did there?”

Kaillen snorted.

“Good luck!” Prisha called from behind us.

She, Fallon, and Barnabas all waited at the mouth of a deserted alleyway just outside of the Bulgarian libraries. Since our friends didn’t hold any divine or otherworldly blood, they wouldn’t be able to make the portal crossing. Most likely, the crossing would shred them to ribbons. But since Kaillen was half-demon, and I was a Bone Eater who possessed god-like power, we should both be allowed to cross.

“Ready?” Kaillen asked, a sinister light entering his eyes.

“Yes,” I replied as the hunter threaded his fingers through mine. “You have a plan, right?”

“Plans are overrated.”

“But didn’t you run into problems when you tried to find Asuran when you were a teenager? Something about the other demons not letting you get to her?”

“That was then. This is now. I didn’t know then how to effectively wield my underworld fire when I was a teenager. Now, I do.” An abrupt rush of black flames entered his eyes.

“In other words, you’ll incinerate anyone who tries to mess with us?”

A wicked gleam entered his eyes. “And enjoy it.”

“You almost look like you hope someone tries to stop us.”

“Can’t say I’d mind killing a few.”

I shook my head. “Such a demon . . .”

He chuckled, then tugged me toward the portal, and a rush of adrenaline filled me.

As one, we leaped into the silvery darkness, and it sucked us into its dark embrace. A force like a tidal wave slammed down on me, pushing me into a void that felt as if I was being squeezed under immense pressure.

But just when I thought my heart would burst from the crushing sensation, the portal ended and shot us out onto black rock that was hot and smoky.

My eyes widened as I took in the horrific terrain and atmosphere. Thick, sooty air that tasted as hot as fire filled my lungs, and the ebony ground beneath our feet rumbled and shook, as though in a never-ending earthquake. And the *heat*—it was so intense I was worried my eyebrows would singe off.

I swirled around, taking it all in. Everything was black, desolate, bleak, and unnerving. The sky was dark, the terrain devoid of life, and fire and lava spewed from random craters, geysers, and jagged mountains. I didn’t see any cities or homes. Instead, it was a vast wasteland of death.

“This is where you lived for your first six weeks of life?” I asked incredulously as more black flames swirled in Kaillen’s eyes. Yep, Mr. Demon was riding him front and center right now, probably reveling in his return to home.

Kaillen cocked an eyebrow. “It’s rather nice, don’t you think?”

“Very. Perhaps we should build a summer home. Maybe right over there.” I pointed toward the dark volcanic-looking rock in the distance,

butting up to far away mountains shooting fire and ash on the horizon. “Looks about perfect.”

He drew me to his side. “Stay close. Even though I know you can defend yourself, without me at your side, you’ll be fair game to any demons you encounter.”

“Fine by me. I’m just here for the view.”

Amusement filled Kaillen’s eyes amidst the dark flames, then he swung me up on his back and took off at breathtaking speed, his werewolf powers still able to be harnessed even in this oppressive realm.

Somehow I managed to keep breathing despite the thick, ashy air coating my lungs, and when Kaillen rounded a hill, and the gates to Hell appeared, my jaw dropped.

“Holy shit.” I coughed. “Are those guardian dragons?”

“Yep,” Kaillen breathed easily against my ear, his voice like a silky caress. “The one on the right is new, trained by Xanthia, the dragon master herself.”

I eyed the huge, and I mean *huge*, dragon that rose from the right side of the gate, spewing fire into the sky when a smaller demon flew above it.

“You know the dragon trainers?” I asked Kaillen as the gates grew closer.

“I’ve met a few. Xanthia is one of the more tolerable ones.”

We reached the gates, and Kaillen slowed when we were about fifty feet out. Lucifer’s entire kingdom was ringed in a tall wall of black rock that looked smooth as slate, and the gate’s bars flickered in flames.

“Don’t touch the gates or wall,” Kaillen advised. “It’ll burn your hand off.”

“Noted.” My eyes widened even more as I took in the dragons.

The ginormous reptiles snarled and blew fire before stomping their massive feet and dipping their heads to us. Each had to be at least fifty feet tall.

My throat bobbed when two slits in the dragon’s enormous snout came within a foot of my face. Smoke poured from its nostrils as it breathed in Kaillen’s scent, then mine. Its huge, yellow-flecked eyes regarded us as foot-long teeth poked from its mouth when its jaw opened.

The dragon blinked, then inhaled Kaillen’s scent again before lifting its head.

The gate opened on huge hinges, swinging inward enough for us to enter.

“I take it we passed inspection?” I said under my breath to Kaillen.

“You guessed right.” Kaillen immediately burst into another sprint, and I gazed in awe behind us as another demon approached the gate, his fearful, beetle-like features staring up at the dragons in terror.

“Do you always get in that easily?” I asked as my heart rate picked up even more.

“Yes, as Lucifer’s grandson, I carry his scent,” Kaillen said easily, obviously not being encumbered at all by the sooty air he was breathing or the fact that he was carrying me as he raced as fast as the wind. “The dragons always let me pass and allow entry to anyone in my company.”

A shrill scream came from behind us, and my eyes widened as the dragon that had just let us through bit the demon in two who’d been behind us. The demon’s lower half began to fall back to the ground before the dragon on the other side swooped in to wolf it down. The first dragon roared and shot fire at the second. They snapped at each other a few times before assessing the newest demon approaching the gates as more smoke and fire emitted from their huge throats.

“Apparently, they don’t let everyone in,” I commented.

“No,” Kaillen replied. “Those on Lucifer’s shit list occasionally get eaten.”

Kaillen continued to fly across the ground as shrieks and screams of demons fighting and lost souls being tormented filled the air. Around us, humans, obviously souls who had been damned, were being slaughtered one after the other by doglike animals, which looked as big as horses and had thickly muscled shoulders, low haunches, and jagged black teeth. But as soon as they were killed, the humans’ bodies regenerated, and they came alive again, only to have the same painful process begin once more. Other demons, with black scaly bodies or physiques like insects, battled and fought, their strikes vicious and meant to kill, not maim.

My heart beat harder as I caught glimpses of the horrors of what happened in this dark kingdom. Absolute violence and never-ending torture ruled this place. “This is a dog-eat-dog world, I take it?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

Kaillen finally slowed when we dipped over a rocky mound. Spread out before us was a demon-like version of a castle. Like the rest of the

underworld, it was made of black rock and brimming embers, rising from the ground like an architectural nightmare.

“Lucifer’s home,” Kaillen said, nodding in its direction. “Asuran lives just beyond it.”

He sped past it, skirting around battling demons and terrifying creatures, until we came to another castle, smaller than Lucifer’s but made of similar rock and fire.

Kaillen set me down, and his mouth set into a grim line. “Stay here. I’m not sure how she’s going to react to me, and I’d feel better knowing you’re out of her line of sight, but whatever you do, don’t wander.”

His body grew tenser, veins popping in his forearms, and with a start I realized it was the first time he would lay eyes on his mother when he was old enough to remember it.

“Hey,” I said, touching his arm. Black-fire eyes met mine, tension oozing from his expression. “Good luck, and if she won’t come—”

“She’ll come. It’s the only way.”

I squeezed him harder. “But if she doesn’t, it won’t be your fault.”

The savage determination on his face grew. “She’ll come.”

He disappeared inside the home, if one could call it that, and I stood waiting just outside the door. More shrieks and wails filled the air in the distance.

Despite the skin-melting heat, I shivered. This was where Kaillen had been born and would have died at a very young age if Paxton hadn’t commissioned his rescue.

Minutes ticked by, and my stomach knotted into a tighter and tighter ball when the hunter didn’t emerge with Asuran. I didn’t want to think about what Kaillen would do if Asuran refused to come, because without her, we couldn’t close that portal, and then Malikhi would return for me when he finally figured out that Tessa and I had duped him.

Another scream cut through the air, and then the sound of snapping pinchers. Except those pinchers sounded *close*.

I whirled around to see two demons scuttle out from around a large rock only a few paces away. Four large horns rose on each of their heads, two to each side just above their ears. Their shiny black bodies reminded me of insects, since their legs and arms were long and spindly.

Pincers snapped on the end of each of their arms. They looked long, deadly, and unnervingly razor-sharp.

I gave a small wave. “Evening. Nice night, don’t you think?”

They glanced at one another, and a scuttle of noise emitted from their mouths that sounded more like clicking than language. Or maybe that was their language.

“It is a bit hot, though, I have to say.” I fanned myself, then eyed Asuran’s door again. No sign of Kaillen or his mother.

Another clutter of clicks left the demons’ mouths, and they both advanced. With a jolt, I realized that was their version of a laugh.

Balling my hands into fists, I stood my ground, knowing that running would only excite them further, then let my *aureth* swirl hotter inside me, zapping and sparking in my veins.

The demons took another step my way, those clicking sounds emitting from their mouths again before they abruptly parted, moving swiftly to each side of me, and without a doubt, I knew they planned to kill me.

I leaped from my spot at the exact moment both of them charged. The rush of their coordinated attack made hot air slam against my back. Landing on the hot ground, I hissed when the sharp rock cut into my palms as I rolled.

The second I came back to my feet, I swung as both demons charged simultaneously, their large pinchers open and ready to cleave my head off.

Two invisible octopus-like arms shot out of me, flowing from me like Spiderman’s webs. They pierced each demon’s chest, halting them midstride as their vile, potent dark energy barreled into me.

Vicious hatred and the thirst for blood consumed me, making me want to retch. I stumbled back as they fell to the ground, their chatter turning higher pitched as their deaths made them squeal.

In the distance, a herd of passing creatures paused from their advancement to Lucifer’s castle, their beady eyes taking in the scene.

“Oh shit,” I whispered when the entire herd abruptly turned and began galloping down the slope toward me just as the demons I’d been feeding upon gave one last twitch before going slack.

The two demons’ dark power swirled inside me, so wretched that I wanted to puke. I backed up more, my legs bumping into the oily rocks around Asuran’s abode as the herd of twenty black-scaled creatures with gaping maws and leathery tails with deadly barbs ran straight for me.

Excited yips filled the air as they barked, then snarled, and my heart pounded as the scorching air filled my lungs in fast breaths. I coughed,

adrenaline spiking through my veins as my *aureth* heated again.

“Come and get me, motherfuckers,” I said under my breath. I crouched just as they rounded the slight mound to Asuran’s home, then let a stream of tiny tendrils spew from my body, all of them filled with the demons’ energy that I’d just consumed, which made me even stronger, and I latched onto one after another of the newcomers.

My *aureth* immediately grasped their life sources and power, drawing it from them like siphons.

The strength of the entire herd hit me at once, and my knees buckled just as the leader of the pack slammed into me, somehow managing to keep up his run, even with me leeching his power away.

His vile breath hit me first as we went down in a tangle of limbs. I slammed another octopus-arm into the demon, then called upon my witch magic and shot him with a huge dose of telekinetic energy right as his gaping mouth tried to rip my face off.

The demon sailed off me just as a terrifying roar filled the sky, and my eyes widened as I whipped around, searching for the next attack.

But that bellow had come from Kaillen as he stood at Asuran’s door. Pitch-black flames filled his irises, and wrath rippled across his features.

A huge gush of the hunter’s energy shot past me, and then the entire herd along with the two demons who’d initially attacked me burst into flames. Ebony fire blazed around them, turning all of them to ash within seconds.

I scrambled away from the sooty remains of the scaled creature that had tried to bite me and hurriedly got to my feet just as Kaillen reached my side. Murder shone in his eyes as he quickly assessed me. “Did they bite you?”

I shook my head. “No, only tried to.”

Another rush of power hit me, and with a start, I realized that the heat of it wasn’t like Kaillen’s energy. It was different. Stronger.

My eyes widened as I took in the demon who came to stand behind Kaillen. She rose fifteen feet tall, walked on two legs, and had a body that was somewhat human-like, but her black-slicked skin that appeared shiny and hard—like a beetle’s shell—covered her entire body.

Her face had features more similar to our kind, though, two eyes, a nose, and a mouth with thin lips. She studied me with an intensity that made

my power swirl and rise, but the color of her irises held an amber hue that was so familiar my breath sucked in.

Kaillen smiled darkly as the female demon advanced. “Tala, this is Asuran, my mother and the princess of the underworld.”

Chapter 31

I gaped at Asuran and stood there like an idiot. I didn't know if I was supposed to shake her hand, bow, or curtsy, so instead I said like a diplomatic marvel, "Hi."

She cocked her head, those amber eyes still assessing me, but she didn't say a word.

"Come on, we don't have a moment to lose." Kaillen picked me up in a blurred swing, then took off at a sprint with Asuran right behind us.

She followed easily, her large body fluid and graceful as she leaped over the terrain like she was out for an afternoon jog.

"How did you get her to come?" I whispered to Kaillen.

"Long story," he replied, "but she agreed, and right now, that's all that matters."

We flew over the terrain again, dodging rocks and spewing geysers as herds of creatures, other demons, and wailing humans ran around us.

A few times, the demons in our paths scattered before we even reached them, their beady eyes turning fearful as they stared at the female demon following us.

And it quickly became apparent why that was. Demons fell randomly as we flew by them, their bodies growing alight in black flames that singed them to ash within seconds.

"Are you killing them?" I asked Kaillen even though I hadn't felt any rushes of power from him.

"No, my mother is."

"But . . . why? They're getting out of the way."

"Because she enjoys it."

Asuran's power shot through the landscape as Lucifer's daughter maimed and killed random demons one after another. Her dark laugh reached my ears a few times as her incredible power vibrated the air around us. I shuddered. Something told me we wouldn't be inviting her to Thanksgiving anytime soon.

With Asuran at our back and Kaillen's black-flamed eyes simmering, we didn't encounter any problems as we whizzed back to the gates. When the dragons saw us coming, they didn't even pause. The gates swung open, letting us fly through them in blurred speed.

We stopped once we were clear of the gates that would allow Kaillen to form his portal again.

"Let's hope she can pass," I mumbled nervously as Kaillen began to swirl his crystal. I eyed Asuran, only to find her watching Kaillen, as though curious of what he was doing.

And she damn well should be curious. Normal portals didn't allow full-blooded demons to venture to Earth, only half-bloods. Something had happened thousands of years ago that prevented it, and I wasn't up to speed on my history enough to know why that was, but I did recall that demons couldn't come to Earth. They could still travel to the fae lands, though, so that was where they usually ventured when they wanted out, but it'd been thousands of years since any had come to Earth via a natural portal.

"Do you think it'll work?" I asked as Kaillen's portal fully formed.

"Only one way to find out."

Asuran continued watching us in that alien-like way of hers, and her gaze landed on me more times than I felt comfortable with, but she hadn't set me on fire. I took that as a good sign, although my *aureth* rattled inside me at the sheer power she emitted.

"After you," Kaillen said, gesturing for his mother to enter first.

Since Jakub's warehouse was on Earth, it was possible that Asuran wouldn't be able to join us, but since we'd be landing right next to the portal to Lunaris within Jakub's lair, and that new realm's energy filled that circular concrete room, we were hoping that Asuran would be allowed to pass. The ancient spells that had been crafted thousands of years ago to prevent demon crossings to Earth would hopefully not inhibit her in that one room.

Fingers crossed.

Asuran cocked her head, the movement predatory, before she stepped toward the portal and dipped down. Her huge body disappeared into it, and I raised wide eyes to Kaillen. "Does that mean it worked?"

"Let's find out." He grabbed a hold of my hand and pulled me into his void. We fell through time and space, the immense pressure crushing me

again before it abruptly released us, and we reappeared in the circular room in Jakub's warehouse.

A dozen SF members surrounded us, their eyes wide as the gleaming turquoise portal to Lunaris billowed behind them.

Prisha, Commander Klebus, Fallon, and Barnabas rushed toward us as they cast unsure glances to someone standing near the portal.

"Where is she?" I asked, searching for Asuran's monstrous form as my heart beat painfully hard. I didn't see her.

"She's here," Kaillen said, a note of relief in his words. He pointed toward a beautiful, ethereal-looking woman who stood in front of the portal.

My lips parted as I took in the glamour Asuran had obviously cloaked herself in. Dark hair trailed down her back, a short red dress clung to her voluptuous curves, and bright amber eyes assessed the portal curiously.

"Is that what she looked like when she visited the fae lands to meet your father?" I asked quietly.

"I'm assuming so, until she adapted his dead mate's form and seduced him," Kaillen replied.

"Will she comply with orders?" Commander Klebus asked Kaillen.

He gritted his teeth. "I hope so."

"Then let's get Tessa out of Lunaris." The commander pulled out her tablet and shot off a message to my sister.

It felt like eons passed before a portal appeared at the edge of the room, and Tessa came shooting out of it.

She let out a squeal when she landed on her feet, looking radiant in a gown the color of lilacs, her skin glowing in excitement, as a small tiara nestled beneath the curls piled on the top of her head.

"Tess!" I shrieked. I ran toward her, her doing the same to me, and we embraced mid-run. "Oh my gods. You're finally back!" I cradled her face between my palms, my heart bursting with relief. "Shit, Tessa, you did it! You gave us the time we needed, and we may be able to close the portal now. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

My twin laughed, the tinkling sound so familiar that I nearly choked. "Of course not, silly. And I won't even complain about the ball you just pulled me from. It was divine. The dancing and music." She gave a wistful smile. "I'm going to miss that part of it, but I'm not going to miss the food." She made a sour face. "You wouldn't even believe what Seraleese said princesses are supposed to do at political dinners. Apparently, eating a bite

of everything that's offered from the foreign host is a requirement." She made a gagging face. "And the visitors the queen was hosting last week insisted on the kitchen serving these little sea slugs. They're kind of like worms but even slimier, and their taste is just *foul*, and—"

I laughed so hard that tears streamed down my face. My relief was so great that Tessa was okay and safe, and still just so . . . *Tessa*, that I couldn't help myself.

"Ms. Davenport? Does anyone know you've left Lunaris?" Commander Klebus asked, and we finally pulled apart from one another.

"Not that I'm aware of, ma'am. I said I needed to use the restroom and then used the portal key that I carried with me at all times while I was in the privacy of the bathing chamber. I've only been gone a few minutes."

The commander's lips thinned. "Which is already creeping into an hour of their time. Your absence has probably been noted. Tala? We need to begin. Now."

I sobered, but my heart still felt full as Tessa gave me one final squeeze before being ushered out of the room by two SF members.

I was still struggling to catch my breath as relief pounded through me when I made my way back to the center of the room. Because for once, everything was going as planned. We'd convinced Asuran to join us. We now had enough power to fuel the spell with the demon, Kaillen, the seven powerful supernaturals the SF had found, and then Barnabas, Prisha, and Fallon offering to hold the three remaining spears. And Tessa was back on Earth safe.

We just might do this.

I flashed the vamp commander a shaky smile. "Ready?"

"Nearly." Commander Klebus snuck a glance at Asuran, who was nowhere near her spear.

Kaillen and I eyed one another as Barnabas, Fallon, and Prisha watched on. Asuran slowly turned away from the portal, as if the portal's draw had lost its appeal. She hadn't glanced once at me or Tessa during our emotional outburst. Apparently, the portal was much more fascinating than two simpering females.

The demon's gaze slid to each supernatural in the room as she assessed us with predatory ease. My powers rattled again inside me, as though detecting the new threat that lay so close.

Asuran strolled from where she'd been standing, her gaze traveling around the room, taking in the domed ceiling, the symbols carved into the floor, and the spears that lay waiting to be used.

Everyone watched her, uneasy expressions on more than one person's face.

I glanced at my device again. Five minutes had officially passed since Tess had arrived. *Crap.*

"Asuran? You need to hold that spear." Kaillen pointed at it. He was the only one in the room who didn't look scared shitless by his mother.

Her lips curved at her son, but it wasn't a friendly smile. I held my breath as she glided gracefully toward it, but she took her time, seeming to enjoy the anxiety she was producing.

I tapped my foot as Kaillen slid closer to my side while everyone else waited by their spears, shuffling from foot to foot as the demon commanded their attention.

Kaillen's hand slid to my lower back. "Do you remember how you started to close the portal before?"

I nodded tightly. "I threw every ounce of power I had into it. Hopefully with the spell and all of you helping me, I'll be able to close it completely once and for all."

"You got this." He leaned down and kissed me softly before retreating to his spear.

A relieved sigh escaped me when I saw that Asuran was *finally* in place.

"Spears up!" the commander barked.

Everyone lifted their spears as a ring of SF members stayed behind them. Each SF member had their weapons ready in case anything came through the portal while we were closing it. And the SF wasn't taking that duty lightly.

The head of the SF, General McCloy, who was stationed in Boise, had given the order to shoot to kill. They weren't messing around. If a Bone Eater tried to come through the portal, the SF intended to end them before their *aureth* could take hold of anyone. After today, Lunaris and Earth's connection would be forever sliced.

"Asuran?" Commander Klebus said cautiously, keeping her gaze down when the demon glanced at her. "If you would keep your spear pointed

toward the center at all times.” She gestured toward me. “Your energy will be needed to assist Ms. Davenport throughout the entirety of this spell.”

Asuran cocked her head, the tilt so strange that it didn’t look human, even though she currently wore a female figure. The supernaturals beside her, a woman and a man, neither of who I knew but were listed in the SF’s database as being two of the most powerful supernaturals on Earth, eyed her warily.

Asuran flashed each of them a macabre smile, letting her glamour slip momentarily to reveal the monster within.

Both of them whipped their gazes back to me as Barnabas whispered loudly to Fallon, “Paxton must have been drunk as shit when they hooked up for him not to realize who he was banging.”

Fallon snickered, and Prisha elbowed the vamp. My bestie and I made eye contact briefly, and she gave me an encouraging smile, then a thumbs-up, before she gripped her spear again. I smiled in return as best I could. Prish always believed in me. Now, I just needed to believe in myself.

“Tala?” The commander angled her head to the center of the room. “Begin.”

I gave a sharp nod and moved to stand directly in front of the portal. The turquoise mist wavered around my body, as though beckoning me to come closer, and that feeling pulled at me again, as though my body knew that its birthplace lay within that void, and all I would have to do was take that last step forward to go home.

But Lunaris wasn’t my home.

It might have been where my *aureth* and *draipal* hailed from, but it wasn’t where *I* belonged, and if I’d learned anything throughout this journey, it was that fate only decided so much. Ultimately, we were the makers of our own destiny, even if fate chose otherwise.

I gave Kaillen one last glance as his amber eyes bore into mine. *I love you*, I mouthed.

Flames leaped in his irises. *I love you too*, he mouthed back.

And seeing that and knowing that Kaillen and I had forged our own paths despite all that had been working against us made a soul-lashing determination to end this here and now spiral through me.

Because Kaillen had chosen me. Not his wolf. Not his demon. But him, the man behind all of his magic. *He’d* chosen to be with me.

And I chose him.

For every fault, character flaw, or lack of morals that his gray soul held, he was mine even though he wasn't a man of righteous scruples or selfless acts. He was raw, brutal, real, and imperfect in the most perfect way.

I stood straighter as raw power coiled inside me, and my mate gave me a fierce nod, his expression turning entirely lethal.

Across the room, Asuran watched him, as though for the first time seeing what had become of her own flesh and blood.

I gave Kaillen one last look, then widened my stance as I gazed upon the void before me and called upon the spell I'd memorized to close this portal once and for all.

"Here goes nothing."

Chapter 32

I whispered the spell to activate the spears' power, then called upon my *aureth* to heighten the supernaturals feeding me their energy. The spell was designed to protect the recipients, allowing me to draw their energy but not kill them. Instead, the spell channeled their magic to me, making their power more precise, malleable, and easier for me to wield.

When Jakub had cast this spell and activated the spears using me as the conduit, he'd been in charge—the puppet master with all of us his unwilling puppets. But now *I* was in charge. I was controlling my destiny, and I was responsible for every life standing in this room as I took their magic and life forces into my metaphorical hands.

I wouldn't fail again. I wouldn't lose control and unknowingly annihilate everyone in this room like my power had done the first time.

Magic gushed down the spears with laser-focused precision the second the spell finished leaving my lips. My breath sucked in at the amount of power barreling through each of those points, as though arrows of potent energy zoomed into me on silent beams. The power from Asuran was the greatest of them all. Her energy was so dense and bottomless, but surprisingly, Kaillen's was a close second. He'd obviously inherited his mother's immense strength.

My lips parted as Asuran's darkly delicious power filled me. It sang with shadows that promised domination and might, while it whispered tales of greatness into my ear, telling me that if I harnessed all of it, I could command the underworld.

I shuddered when I felt the well of her strength and the sinful messages that came with it. I couldn't help but wonder if those were her thoughts or the thoughts put in her mind by her magic. Whatever it might be, she was an entity to be feared, and if Lucifer's power was even greater than hers, may the gods help us if he ever decided to leave his deathly kingdom and break through the barriers keeping him from Earth.

Scrunching my eyes closed, I coaxed more power from the spears, drawing upon them like a siphon until my entire body vibrated with the strength of the most powerful supernaturals among our kind. And once I'd reached the limit of what I could hold, my concentration folded inward, going down, down, down to that place within my soul that contained all of my witch magic, *aureth*, and *draipal*. I would need all of it and what the twelve were feeding me to seal the portal between Earth's universe and Lunaris's.

Raising my hands, I wielded the power brimming within me and concentrated on the portal door only inches away. I gauged its height and width before gripping it between my mental claws and dragging the edges toward the center.

The portal bowed under my strength, slowly at first, but then began folding inward. The amount of exertion it took to move it at all had veins popping on my neck and sweat dripping from my brow.

More, more, more. I needed more.

I coaxed myself to draw deeply from my own wells as I pulled harder on the twelve around me, eliciting groans from a few and panting from others.

And amidst the immense magic swirling inside me, I felt Kaillen's power soak into every cell of my being, a part of me devouring him and the lushness of his taste. His magic was so very different from the others, unique in its terrifying power yet filled with darkness and light, the battle constantly raging within him between his demon and earthly self.

Breathing heavily, I forced more magic into the portal, and the very middle of it sealed closed, a zap of energy emitting from it when that portion of time and space healed, which gave the remaining door an hourglass shape as I struggled to zipper the rest of it up and down, desperately trying to seal it entirely.

But gods, it was taking *so much magic*.

An ocean of power was being fed into me, yet the portal's closure demanded all of it. It took everything from me as I clawed and fought with the misshapen door, my mind feeling as though it would crush under the exertion of what I was forcing upon it as I demanded that the portal door bend to my will.

The magic within me soaked into the rift in time, sealing that gate with the ancient spell Heathermore had used, and with every inch that closed, it

almost felt like a sigh on the wind. As though the universe was beckoning me to continue, because this wasn't a door born of the natural world—not like the portals to the fae lands. The door to Lunaris had never been meant to exist. Our universe and theirs did not belong together.

Another few inches of the portal sealed, then a couple more. Each time it happened, powerful zaps of magic emitted as though part of the seal had been cauterized, but instead of smoke emitting from those zaps, it was waves of cosmic energy.

I sweated and grunted as the process moved painfully slow. My body began to shake, and I trembled from the exertion, but the rip in our universe slowly sealed until the entire upper half was gone, the turquoise light disappearing from that portion and only the bottom half remaining.

A wave of triumph filled me. *Almost done. Don't stop. Don't give up.*

I coaxed myself to push through the pain and mental fatigue as sweat trickled past my temples and poured down my spine in rivers, my muscles quivering and my insides burning. But it was working. The portal was closing. It was finally fully sealing, and we were almost there, and—

A scream of fury and a deeper howl of betrayal pierced my ears, as though echoing from a place long ago.

On the other side of the portal, an abrupt push of power slammed into the portion of the door that I'd just closed, trying to rip it back open as a terrifying snarl of vengeance came from the other realm.

The queen. The prince.

They're there.

They know.

It was only me wrenching on Asuran's strength that kept the prince and his mother from wrecking what I'd done. Panic coated my lungs, making my breath stutter in my chest when I felt Queen Nameena's and Prince Malikhi's immense power barrel toward me for a second time. They were working in tandem, using *both* of their powers to try to widen the rift and repair what I'd closed.

"More!" I screamed through the pain of fighting with the foreign queen and her entitled son. "I need more!"

I pulled on everything that Kaillen and Asuran had as some in the circle began to run dry, the ancient spell stopping me from drawing too much, halting me from taking their lives as several supernaturals collapsed to the floor. First Barnabas, then Fallon, and then Prisha.

A scramble of yells and shouts came from behind me, then fresh magic shot down the spears, my head turning only enough to see Corporal Morris, Major Fieldstone, and Commander Klebus holding those spears as they offered up their magic as Kaillen's and my friends panted from exhaustion.

"Don't stop!" Prisha screamed to me amidst the bellows of fury coming from Lunaris. "Whatever you do, don't stop, Tala!"

But then a hand came through the portal. Trim nails. Honey-kissed skin. A large palm.

Malikhi.

"Tala, why? Damn you. Why?" he screamed through the void, anguish and betrayal coating his words. He thought that *I'd* left him. He had no idea that he'd been with my sister for weeks, but then he snarled, all pain leaving his bellows as rage took its place. "You belong to me!"

The SF members raised their guns, but Malikhi was too low. His hand was near the ground, and the SF would have to shoot through me to get him.

"Hold your fire!" Commander Klebus yelled.

"You're mine, Princess Tala!" Malikhi proclaimed.

A cry of rage came from Kaillen, my mate's face twisting savagely.

I gasped, barely able to hold the queen and Malikhi back as I tried desperately to keep the prince from yanking me through the portal.

"Mother! No!" Kaillen's furious shout came a second before I felt the demon at my back.

My breath shuddered out of me when an ethereal-looking figure appeared in my peripheral vision. Another gasp left me when Asuran was suddenly right beside me, bending down near the portal, her head cocking in dark curiosity as she studied Malikhi's hand while still holding her spear.

Thank the gods she still held the spear. If she let go, the spell would break, and all of our efforts—

Malikhi's forearm shot through the opening, then his face appeared. He was *climbing through the portal*.

I screamed and wrenched the portal together tighter, yanking and clawing on it to close. *Dammit, close!*

But Malikhi's other arm shot through next, and his star-kissed eyes met mine.

I stared down at him, horror stealing my breath. It was as though he was going to climb up through the bottom of the portal, like a sewer's drain

had been lifted in the middle of the street, opening to that dark void beneath us where death and nightmares lurked.

“Asuran!” Kaillen bellowed. “Get back to the edge of the circle. If you don’t, I won’t deliver him!”

Asuran bared her teeth at Kaillen, the monster appearing beneath her glamour, before she turned back to Malikhi. In a blur of speed, she crouched by the prince.

Malikhi’s eyes widened in horror when Asuran’s lips peeled back, and she lurched forward.

Oh my gods, she’s going through the portal!

“No!” I cried.

But Asuran stopped just short of falling through. Malikhi jolted back, but Asuran was too fast. She locked her hand around his throat and yanked him to her, nearly pulling him entirely through the portal, and I knew this was it.

We wouldn’t win. Not with Malikhi in this world and able to use his *aureth*.

“Mother!” Kaillen called frantically.

But just when I thought all of my friends and family would die right here and now from a Bone Eater’s wrath, Asuran moved at lightning speed, her glamour falling as her demon mouth fully emerged.

Malikhi jerked in her grasp, a look of abject terror coating his features, and I felt his *aureth* rise as all of his tentacles slammed into the demon.

But the second his tentacles came into contact with her form, Asuran tore into his face and ripped a chunk of flesh away, the shock making Malikhi’s *aureth* wither.

My jaw dropped as blood dripped down her chin, and Malikhi’s cry of pain bellowed through the room. And then Asuran was shoving the prince back into the portal, flinging him through the void of time and space as she feasted on his cheek while a dark light filled her eyes.

“Get back to the fucking circle!” Kaillen yelled to her, yet an answering darkness filled her son’s eyes too, and when they glanced at each other, a silent exchange passed between them, as though one demon to another was relishing the violence that had just spilled blood in this room.

I breathed heavily, and it took everything in me not to lose my concentration and implode with all of the magic barreling into me.

“Don’t stop, Tala!” Prisha called, as though knowing that I was at my breaking point. “You can do this. I know you can!”

Using my best friend’s voice to ground me, I heaved in a breath, closed my eyes, and concentrated on the door again, willing my power to finish what it had begun.

Barely able to breathe, I called more power into me, nearly draining the remaining magic from the circle while using the *aureth* shooting through my veins to latch onto them and make them give me everything they had.

Asuran had backed up to her initial place, a wicked smile on her lips that were once again glamourised to look human, yet her mouth still dripped with fresh blood as she savored the flesh in her mouth.

I drew more on Asuran and Kaillen, the demons in them so horribly strong that their magic wells ran so deep that they still had plenty to give, so I took more, more, more from them until the power of the underworld flowed through my veins, and I screamed in fury as I yanked the remaining portion of the door closed and sewed it shut with the magic of three worlds colliding into one.

And when I felt the last inch of the portal begin to seal, that tiny hole that had almost fully closed, a rush of relief so intense filled me that for a moment, a smile lifted my lips, and I turned elated eyes on my mate.

“It’s closing!” I called, my smile turning into a grin. “We did it. We actually did it!”

But then a tendril of power shot through the door. A thread of immensely strong *aureth* wielded itself through that inch of space remaining, barreling right for me with razor-sharp precision until it viciously pierced my stomach.

The shock of it made me scream, and then it was stabbing my body over and over until it sank so deeply within me while thrashing about that my insides began to shred.

And as the shock of what was happening began to register in my mind, a vicious voice filled my conscious, and the raw fury of the queen’s wrath echoed in my skull.

“If you doom us all to death, then you die too.”

Her tentacle abruptly released itself from my body, but its barb-like tail ripped me anew as it severed through my arteries and intestines on its way out, tearing everything in its wake before the queen’s power was finally free

of me, and her tendril of destructive *aureth* retreated to its wrathful owner as the final inch of the portal door sealed closed.

The turquoise light vanished in a blink, and a shock wave swept through the room, the immense power flooding the domed ceiling.

And then my *aureth* finally ran dry, and the spell disintegrated. Around me, most of the dozen who'd stood on the circle fell, panting from exertion and weakness of what the spell had demanded of them.

My hand automatically went to my stomach, to the blood seeping out of me.

Blood. Everywhere. All over my hands. Drenching my clothes.

A look of horror spiraled across Prisha's face when I sagged to my knees. Barnabas and Fallon's eyes widened in horror, and Kaillen . . .

My mate's expression had frozen in a picture of disbelief and terror. Time fractured in that moment, and then he was moving, careening toward me in a blur of werewolf speed.

I slid to the floor, and my blood pooled around me. The crimson life source gushed from me in rivers as it soaked my clothes and filled the cracks, symbols, and constellations etched into the concrete.

I gazed downward. My stomach was open. Gaping. Torn. And there was so much blood. My blood. It was everywhere.

"Tala!" Kaillen pulled me to him.

"Get the medic!" Commander Klebus shouted.

A rush of wind hit my cheeks when Kaillen maneuvered me in his arms as a terrible coldness seeped into my veins.

Cold, cold.

I was so very cold.

"Tala, no!" Kaillen held me to his chest as the world grew fuzzy, my body limp, as the echoing screams of the man I loved faded away to nothingness.

Chapter 33

“Drink, Tala, please drink! I know you can do it. I know you can! Don’t you dare die on me, my love. I’ve only just found you. I am not letting you go!” Kaillen cradled me, and an anguished expression rippled across his features as he held me to his neck.

His blood gushed between my lips, pooling in my mouth as my eyelids fluttered as I drifted in and out of consciousness. That seeping coldness buried itself in my veins and bones.

I was dying. And even the indomitable hunter couldn’t save me.

“No!” Kaillen snarled.

More of his blood filled my mouth, yet I couldn’t swallow. My body was limp, useless, and cold. So very cold.

“Fight, Tala. Fight!” Alpha power imbued Kaillen’s words, scorching my soul and demanding submission.

I clung to that command and held it to me with everything I had. My tongue rolled over his sweet blood as I desperately fought against the weightless feeling that wanted to consume me.

But blood continued to drain out of me, and my soul hovered just on the edge of my body, between this world and the next. I could feel it detaching, as though wanting to rise above me and transport me to that realm beyond the veil. The divine world that only angels were allowed to readily pass to.

“Tala, no!” Prisha wailed. My best friend grabbed my limp hand as a few drops of Kaillen’s blood trickled down my throat.

“*Drink!*” he commanded again as a rush of air flowed over my cheeks. SF members moved frantically around the room, assisting my mate in whatever way they could.

But my soul was detaching more from my body as a deep aching sadness cleaved my heart. I was dying. It was inevitable. My soul was drifting from my body, and despite desperately wanting to be with my mate . . . I couldn’t.

An immense soul-lashing pain filled me, but no amount of pleading could make me return.

Goodbye, Kaillen. I love you. I tried to mouth the words, tried to tell him, but nothing came out.

An agonizing bellow filled the room as Kaillen rocked me closer to his chest. My blood-soaked clothes stained his face and arms. “No, dammit,” he roared. “*NO!*”

Kaillen snatched a blade from Fallon in a blurred move, and then he was slashing his wrist so deeply that blood poured from him in a solid gush. He whipped it to my mouth, propping my jaw open before smearing his blood across my tongue as a sob shook his chest. “Please, Tala. Live. Please, live!”

“Kaillen,” Commander Klebus said gently. “I don’t know if it’ll be enough.”

“It will be!” he snarled. More of his blood poured into my mouth, and my body abruptly stopped rising as though I’d slammed into an invisible wall.

Sweet nectar filled my essence as the tiny blood vessels in my body began sewing back together. First one, then two, as though a phantom needle repaired their torn edges.

I hovered there, watching my mate fight and rail to keep me with him, pouring more and more of his blood into me as his face took on a deathly pallor.

The sparkling light that had begun to grow around me faded.

Fierce determination distorted my mate’s features as a deep shimmer of magic spread across my body, and the pull from the great beyond drifted away even more.

I hovered, still not moving, but not retreating either. I wasn’t fully on Earth, yet I wasn’t in the divine realm either.

Another gush of blood dripped down my throat, and the beckoning call of the afterlife faded a touch more.

Back, back, back. Go back.

My soul was inching toward my body, and then a steady jolt came from my heart when it restarted, and I was slamming back into my limp body with the force of an anvil.

My soul returned to the hunter that had refused to let me go, back to his endless love that my savage mate wove around me, and then . . .

Breath.

∞ ∞ ∞

Warmth trailed over my cheek, the feeling fleeting and reverent as though someone had run their fingertip across my skin, almost as if touching me to assure oneself that I was real.

My eyes fluttered open, and morning sunlight illuminated a ceiling light above me. Around me a sea of rumpled lilac-colored sheets waited. Beside the bed stood a small wooden table with a water ring near the corner. A lone window that had a gauzy white curtain pulled over it shone with bright daylight. I was in my bedroom.

And beside me—

Kaillen. I flung my arms around him as foggy memories shifted in my mind. The circular room, the closed portal, the twelve supernaturals standing strong as I drank their magic, Malikhi's horror when Asuran tore his cheek off, the queen's wrath when she realized she couldn't tear the portal back open . . . and then, blood. So much blood.

My hand flew to my stomach as I lifted my shirt frantically. But all that remained of the battle was the shadow of a scar, so faint it was barely visible.

"How am I here?"

Kaillen cradled me to him, his entire body vibrating with barely leashed power. His hands were everywhere, touching me, feeling me, caressing me, as though assuring himself over and over that I was real and awake.

I pushed back from him just enough to see his eyes.

Fire and gold warred in his irises. "How, Kaillen?" I whispered imploringly. "How did you save me?"

He pushed a lock of hair from my face, his touch reverent. "My blood."

"But how? I remember dying. Or almost dying." The fuzzy memory surfaced of peering downward at my mate, my friends, the SF.

Kaillen's throat bobbed in a swallow. "But you didn't."

"Your blood saved me again?"

"I gave you almost everything I had," Kaillen whispered in a raw voice. "You were so close to crossing to the other side." His throat worked another swallow, and a wild, brutally clear defiance shone from his eyes.

I shook my head, wonder filling me. "But you refused to let me go."

"I'll never let you go."

My throat thickened. "I love you. I should have told you that so many times before. I don't know why I didn't."

Gold burst with a savage flame in his eyes. "My mate. My woman. *Mine*. I'll love you until the underworld claims my black soul, and even then, I won't stop loving you."

I lay a palm across his cheek. "You're too good to end up in the underworld."

A ghost of a smile lifted his lips. "I'm not."

"You *are*."

"Whatever you say, my love."

I drifted closer to him and pressed my face into his chest as his cedar scent flooded me. "Is the portal still closed?"

"Entirely. It's vanished."

"And Asuran?"

"Back where she belongs. She disappeared before any of us were even aware of it. The wards that lock demons from Earth sucked her back into the underworld moments after the Lunar is portal fully closed."

I sagged in relief. If Asuran was unleashed on Earth . . . I shuddered. It wouldn't have been pretty.

"And the others?" I asked as my fingers curled into him.

"Safe." He kissed my temple, then began kneading the skin on my hip, then my ass. "Everyone survived. You didn't kill anybody."

I sagged against him and finally relaxed.

We lay like that for a moment, touching and breathing one another in, as though needing to reassure ourselves that we were alive, here, and together.

My lips thinned when I pictured the moment the queen's *aureth* had penetrated the last slivered opening in the portal. "She tried to murder me."

Kaillen's chest flexed as heat rose from his skin.

"She nearly succeeded in killing me, and all because I refused to bow to her wishes and doomed them to deaths that they should have naturally experienced thousands of years ago."

"If I could kill her now, I would." He resumed his distracting massages, and my stomach tightened from the feel of him.

"So would I."

A smirk lifted his lips. "You just may end up in the underworld with me."

I laughed softly, then nipped at his shoulder. "And what's the latest on Jakub?"

His smirk turned into a dark smile. "He's still waiting for his reward."

My eyebrows shot up. "Nobody's told him the portal has closed?"

"No, and I don't think anyone's going to."

I laughed. "Poor Jakub. He'll be so disappointed when the Bone Eaters never come for him."

Kaillen chuckled. "I think everyone's happy to let that little prick spend the rest of his life wondering what happened."

I poked him in the chest, laughing more. "I have to say I like that idea. And what about his informant? Has the SF caught him yet?"

"Not yet, but now that the portal is closed, Klebus is going to devote all of her time to uncovering who it was. I have no doubt she'll find the asshole soon enough."

"I wonder if they'll let us watch his gargoyle leeching."

He chuckled, then sobered as golden light flared in his eyes as he tenderly brushed a lock of hair from my ear. "There's something else you need to know."

My laughter died. "What is it?"

"When I was feeding you my blood"—his eyes darkened, flames appearing—"I also used my magic, spelling it as I forced it into your body."

"You did?" My lips parted. "Does that mean . . ."

He lifted his shoulders. "I don't know yet. It's too early for your scent to have changed if she's to be born again."

My breaths turned shallow as my fingers curled even tighter around him. "How soon will you know?"

"Within a few days. If your wolf is able to be recovered, if she's able to find you again in whatever magic births our wolves inside us, I'll be able to scent it on you soon."

I buried my head in his chest, tears filling my eyes at the thought of reclaiming my wolf once more. Of having her back inside me and being a female werewolf again. "Thank you. Thank you for trying to give her back to me."

His arms locked tightly around me. "So you're not mad? Because the blood bond goes hand in hand with giving you your wolf again."

I pulled back, my eyes widening. “So you can track me too? We’re connected through your blood like before?”

His expression locked down. “I couldn’t do one without the other. I’m sorry if it’s not what you wanted.”

A grin streaked across my face since he looked so unsure. “It’s exactly what I want. You can know my whereabouts at all times if it means I get my wolf back. I didn’t think it would ever be possible to have her again.”

Relief washed over his face before his eyes darkened. “It shouldn’t have been. Near death, consumption of a werewolf’s blood and an ancient spell are the only way to turn a non-wolf into a werewolf. Considering there was no way in hell I was ever going to let you get near death again, I didn’t think it was possible either.”

“Let me? Are we back to that again?” I teased.

He chuckled but then said in a deadly-serious voice. “I would rather cut my arm off than watch you almost die again.”

I sobered. “Kaillen . . .”

The gold in his eyes grew as a savage need twisted his face. “You’re mine, Tala. My mate. My woman. The reason I breathe. And anyone who tries to take you from me, hurt you, kill you—” A snarl tore from him. “I will fucking *end* them.”

My heart swelled. “You’re mine too. I love you, Kaillen King. I think I have from the moment I laid eyes on you.”

The flare in his eyes brightened, and he placed my palm across his chest. “You have my heart. For as long as you want it.”

“Are you sure?” I teased. “Cause I’m keeping it forever.”

His lips twisted in a dark smile, then crashed to mine as our limbs tangled together. Before I knew what was happening, clothes flew from our bodies as our mouths kissed, sucked, and bit one another in a frenzy of need.

And when he sank into me, claimed me once more as the mate bond between us flowed with savage emotion, I could have sworn that an answering yelp came from within me, that single howl promising what was to come.

Chapter 34

One week later

Kaillen pushed up on his elbow, the wild beauty of Montana visible through the window behind him as he gazed down at me. We'd been at his reclusive Montana home for the past three days, fucking like bunny rabbits as we finally reveled in the peace that nobody was hunting me, nobody was trying to end the world, and nobody was coming from unknown realms. I was finally free to continue my life as I chose without something awful looming over my head.

His nose drifted closer to my neck, inhaling my scent. "She's growing stronger."

My toes curled as I relished the return of my werewolf magic. In the past few days, scents had subtly heightened, and my movements had grown faster. My wolf was coming alive in me again, and I couldn't fucking wait for the next full moon. "Sometimes, I swear I can feel her."

"You're sure I didn't fuck up by giving her to you again?"

I cradled his face between my palms. "You most definitely did *not* fuck up."

He grinned, and for the first time since I'd met the hunter, I felt like I could breathe. I was safe. He was mine. My wolf would be reborn. Everything was so fucking perfect. Well, mostly.

There was still the matter of Practically Perfect. Since Kaillen and I were bound to our contracts with the Supernatural Forces, we were still SF consultants, but Commander Klebus had agreed to give us a two-week break before calling on us for any assignments, so I could get my life sorted out while Kaillen helped.

It was enough time to relax and discuss Practically Perfect with Tessa. We hadn't figured out all of the details yet, but I was leaning toward signing the business entirely over to my sister, and Nicole had asked if she could also be part owner. I would still supply them with products I'd created with my magic when I had time to do so, but the shop wouldn't rule my life

anymore. Nicole was already looking into other witches and sorcerers who could produce supplies, and she was also taking a spin at creating her own concoctions. Since Nicole was a decently strong witch, she could end up surprising all of us.

I laid my head against Kaillen's chest as I marveled at all that had changed in my life. Only a few months ago, I'd been convinced that I'd spend the rest of my life running a magic shop in Chicago while I hid who I really was.

One thing I was certain of now, the life I had known was truly behind me. My life in Chicago had fully come to an end.

And all of that was because I was no longer hiding. I'd accepted who I was and wasn't afraid to let the world see me as I'd been born. I had incredibly strong *aureth* and *draipal* that I knew with enough time and practice, I would become proficient at wielding. I had a surprisingly exciting new career with the SF that I was actually looking forward to, and if in the future I decided that I didn't want to be an SF consultant, I figured I'd start working with Kaillen. We made a pretty good team after all. My sister was safe and happy. I'd made new friends and kept old. I snorted in amusement when I pictured how quickly Fallon and Barnabas had accepted Prisha into their fold. Fallon often giving my bestie side-eyes while she and Barnabas bickered like an old married couple.

But most of all, I was soon to be a werewolf again, and I had the freakin' love of my life at my side—my mate, my love, my everything. I glanced at the hunter, so content I was drunk on it, and I knew that I would cherish every moment we had together. Because fate had tried to rip us apart too many times, and there was no way I would ever take one second with Kaillen for granted.

"Everything okay?" he asked, his head tilting as he continued to run his fingers lazily up and down my spine.

I laid my palm on his chest. "Yeah, everything's good. I had no idea life could be this amazing."

"Have I told you how much I love this black nightie on you." The hunter's eyes darkened as they skated over my frame. "It's about time you wore it for me."

I pulled back and peered down at the lacy cups holding my breasts. A rumble of appreciation came from him. "Maybe once or twice."

His lips rolled into a sultry smile as he stroked a finger across my neck, right where his mating mark was below my tattoo. A shiver danced over me. "There's something I need to do today."

"What's that?" I asked as I stretched languidly. A delicious ache had already started to pulse between my thighs. Every time he touched his mark, that tantalizing need filled my belly.

His fingers dipped between my legs, and my moist heat met him, but I eyed the time. We were due to meet Tessa, Barnabas, Fallon, and Prisha for dinner in the fae lands' capital in a couple of hours. They'd given us such a hard time for not leaving Kaillen's bedroom that we finally relented and agreed to a meal out.

Kaillen's nostrils flared as he parted my folds. I moaned when he slipped a finger inside me. "A contact of mine texted me when you were in the bathroom a few minutes ago. Cameron's back in Oak Trembler."

My lips parted as my arousal came to a careening halt. *Cameron*. I pushed back, but the hunter wouldn't be waylaid that easily. He clamped ahold of my thighs and dipped his head. "I still have time to taste you again before I need to take care of that."

"Take care of what exactly?" I asked when his tongue lapped at my taut nub. My entire body bowed.

"His death."

My toes curled as he rumbled hungrily. "Should I be disturbed that I want you to fuck me again after you told me you still plan to kill your brother?"

His lips cocked in an arrogant smile as he lifted his chest, maneuvering himself over me until he brought his cock to my entrance. "That's why you're so perfect for me." He pushed the head of his dick inside me, stretching my entrance, and I moaned in rapture. "You were made for me."

He prodded me more with his tip, as his hips began to roll in that maddening way that turned me feral.

When he leaned over me, I raked my nails down his back as I became lost in his touch. "So, you want to go back and, what . . . kill him?" I asked breathlessly.

His eyes darkened as he pushed fully into me, then groaned tightly before rasping, "Sadly, no."

"Then what are you going to do?" My breath caught again when he began to move.

“You’ll see.”

∞ ∞ ∞

The hunter portaled us to his former pack town with his yellow crystal, and when we emerged just outside of a pack member’s home that I didn’t recognize, a wicked smile spread across Kaillen’s features.

“Hold this, will you?” He held out a bag he’d brought from Montana, and I took it as wary trepidation swam through me. Kaillen still hadn’t told me what he’d planned, but I knew whatever he was doing, it wouldn’t be pretty.

I took the bag, and the hunter disappeared in a blur of werewolf speed, the front door to the house opening and closing behind him. It wasn’t long before a shriek, then a snarl of fury reached my ears. Waves of magic shot from the house, the front window exploding under the impact of the cataclysmic dominant werewolf power within.

I pulled up my witch magic, creating an effective shield around myself as my Lunarian powers zinged in response through my veins. A few neighbors in the surrounding houses peeked out from behind curtains. Some even ventured to their front lawns.

Snow sprinkled the ground, and cold wind bit into my cheeks. I was beginning to wonder how long this would take when the front door banged open, and the hunter appeared with a maniacal grin on his face. He drug Cameron by the hair. Legit . . . *by his hair*. Yep, apparently, my mate had turned full-blown cave man.

Kaillen dragged his brother out, Cameron’s body thumping on the steps as the hunter hopped down the porch, his wild grin growing. “Do you mind grabbing what’s in that bag?”

Cocking my head, I zippered it open, and my breath sucked in when I beheld the blue cuffs that had been Jakub’s favorite disabling device. “Did you take these from the SF?”

Kaillen shrugged when he reached me, a deviously innocent expression appearing on his face while Cameron hung limply from his grasp. “Are you accusing me of stealing?”

“Klebus will be pissed.”

He grinned. “Klebus doesn’t have to know.”

I rolled my eyes but knew there was no point arguing. The hunter was going to do what he wanted, when he wanted, and no amount of authority

was ever going to change that. “Are you at least going to return them?”

“I will when I’m done.”

I narrowed my eyes as the crowd of onlookers grew, but when a warning snarl came from Kaillen, they all wisely kept to their yards, none coming any closer.

But a few gave nods of approval. One woman even clapped her hands as a few others joined in.

And seeing that not everyone in his pack wanted an alpha like Cameron, that they agreed that Cameron wasn’t fit to rule, made some part of this debacle feel poetically justified.

Taking the cuffs from me, Kaillen kneeled down and slapped his brother hard across his face. “Wake up.”

Cameron groaned, and I could only imagine how hard the hunter’s initial blow had been to knock his brother out cold.

When Cameron didn’t open his eyes, Kaillen punched him—this time in the gut—and Cameron’s eyes flew open just as a snarl parted his lips.

“Remember these?” Kaillen held the cuffs up.

Before Cameron could react, the hunter slapped them onto his brother’s wrists, the cuff’s power activating as the magic-sucking device stole all of Cameron’s alpha power from him.

“Those were the cuffs you placed on *my mate* when you handed her over to Jakub to be used and killed.” Black flames filled the hunter’s eyes as he leaned down and said in a deadly quiet whisper, “I told you I was coming for you.”

“Your fucking whore of a—” I slapped a hand over Cameron’s mouth before he could continue, rage building up in me, and he turned hateful eyes upon me before trying to bite down on my hand.

But I was so much faster than him, my werewolf powers already coming through even though my wolf hadn’t been born again.

“Such bad manners,” I tsked.

A binding and gag spell descended over Cameron, spells that Kaillen had cast, and his brother’s eyes widened in panic.

The hunter stood and swiveled to the onlooking crowd. “Let it be known that this fate will come to anyone who ever tries to harm my mate.” He grabbed Cameron roughly by the hair again, hauling him clear to his feet as Cameron’s eyes rolled back in his head, the only things able to move

in Kaillen's binding spell, as the pain of that maneuver appeared to nearly make him pass out.

A few men in the crowd jutted their chins up. "It's the werewolf way. It's in your right, Kaillen."

"It's in your right!" more men yelled, their fists rising in the air.

My breathing sped up as I beheld the fierce expressions among the males with women who they pulled protectively to their sides—women who were no doubt their mates.

It was the werewolf way, and for the first time, I understood it.

Maybe it was my developing wolf. Or maybe it was because I'd come to accept their culture and the bloodshed that came with it. Or perhaps it was because I was mated now, too, and the thought of anyone trying to harm Kaillen . . .

A curl lifted my upper lip. I would end them too. Without a moment's hesitation.

A flash of dark hair appeared at the back of the crowd, and the surrounding group parted as Ocean and Paxton stepped forward. Gavin was nowhere to be seen, probably too scared to make an appearance with Kaillen around, but even though pain bound Paxton's features, and stark regret filled his eyes, he stopped when he reached the front of the crowd.

A hush fell among everyone as their alpha silently took in his oldest son bound and spelled.

Paxton's brow furrowed, and he gave a single nod. "It's the werewolf way."

Ocean placed her hand on her father's shoulder as tears swam in her eyes, but when our gazes connected, she also dipped her chin. "It's the werewolf way."

Kaillen locked eyes with his father, then his sister. Something passed between the three of them that spoke of a lifetime of missed chances and fierce regrets, and I couldn't help but wonder if perhaps this wasn't the end for Kaillen and his pack. Perhaps, even if the chance was small, he'd find a place here that allowed us to visit and blend with his people.

"I wish it didn't have to be like this," Kaillen said roughly.

Paxton nodded. "Me too, son, me too. But Cameron chose his path."

The hunter's throat bobbed before he pulled his yellow crystal from his pocket and created a new swirling void that had absolute blackness rotating inside it before he whispered another spell that fell over Cameron.

When the magic he'd cloaked his brother with settled, Kaillen's savage eyes met mine. "Ready?"

"Yes?" I replied, eyeing the portal warily. It was ringed in silver.

He pulled me to his side with one hand while hauling Cameron by the hair with his other, and then he dipped us into his portal.

A huge crushing sensation pushed down on me the instant we were in the portal's embrace, and I knew immediately where we were going.

The portal dropped us just outside of the gates of Hell, the huge guardian dragons breathing fire into the sky as that sweltering heat that felt as though it'd melt my skin off descended upon me.

I looked up at Kaillen, a question on the tip of my tongue, but then the gates parted, and Asuran walked through them.

She was back in her demon form as all of the other demons scurried to get out of her way.

Cameron's eyes grew wide, terror coating his features as he saw what was approaching us.

"How is he still alive?" I whispered as Asuran's lips split into a macabre smile.

Kaillen glanced down at me as black flames swirled in his irises. "I created a spell that allows non-demons or divine beings to transfer to the underworld in my portal, but it only allows transfer to this realm. I can't bring non-demons back. If I tried to return Cameron to Earth, the transfer would shred him."

My jaw dropped as a vague memory surfaced. It was of something Kaillen had yelled to his mother as I'd been trying to close the portal. "*Get back to the edge of the circle. If you don't, I won't deliver him!*" I peered up at my mate. "You're giving Cameron to your mother. This is how you convinced her to help us with Lunaris."

He pressed a soft kiss to my throat. "Exactly. A human is the ultimate reward for a demon since it's a fresh sacrifice. Humans are near impossible to come by since full-blooded demons have been banned from Earth, and the fae lands' laws prohibit demons from taking lives back to the underworld with them."

"Yet, you knew a way around it, so you promised your mother a human sacrifice if she helped us."

"Yes." He grinned as immense satisfaction rolled through his features.

I shook my head just as his mother reached us. Asuran took Cameron, and I swear a look of pure pleasure crossed her face as she gathered the alpha wolf greedily, then slunk back to the gates of Hell with Kaillen's brother's eyes bulging in terror.

My heart beat harder as I tried not to be horrified by what she would do. "It's certainly a violent end for him."

"A fitting end." Kaillen flicked his fingers, dissolving his binding and gag spells on Cameron, and his brother let out an agonizing scream as Asuran was already doing who knew what to him.

My mate watched until they were no longer visible, not once commenting that his mother had just seen him and didn't so much as acknowledge him, but I knew that would always be the case.

Demons didn't care about their offspring. They never had, and Asuran hadn't helped Kaillen or me out of the goodness of her heart when she'd agreed to hold a spear.

"Are you okay?" I asked when Kaillen continued to stand there, his gaze not leaving where his mother and brother had disappeared from. "You'll probably never have a relationship with Asuran, and Cameron—" I swallowed. "He's gone forever."

Kaillen finally looked away from where they'd vanished, his expression impossible to read. He ran a finger down my cheek. "I accepted a long time ago that I would never have a mother. Meeting Asuran doesn't change that. As for my brother, Cameron got what was coming to him. I meant it when I said that I would end *anyone* who harms you."

My throat bobbed. "Does that mean we'll be making trips down here regularly whenever someone threatens me?"

"Oh no, *colantha*," he purred, and his eyes danced with delight. "I can come up with much more creative ways to torture them."

A laugh barked out of me, and Kaillen flashed me a grin before holding out his arm. "Shall we go? I believe we have dinner plans."

Epilogue

Barnabas was doing a jig in the middle of the dance floor when Kaillen and I entered a *salopas* in the fae lands' capital. Tessa was swirling happily beside him, her tinkling laugh filling the air as the vampire's grin grew while he twirled her around.

"Those two are quite enamored with each other," Kaillen commented as we made our way toward the booth Fallon and Prisha sat at.

I snorted. "You know that both of them are only in it for the sex."

He flashed me a grin. "Do you think she misses Malikhi?"

I shook my head. "Doubtful. No man has ever been able to enamor my sister for long."

Fallon and Prisha were deep in conversation when we reached them, the fairy's smile broad as he gazed upon my bestie.

"Hope we're not interrupting anything," Kaillen said as he slid into the booth, his cocky smile telling all of us that he really hoped he *was* interrupting.

Fallon scowled at him and inched away from Prisha when we crowded them.

"Having fun?" I asked Prish, a knowing smile lifting my lips.

She dipped her eyelashes, that telltale look saying it all. I'd never seen her more smitten with someone and was so happy that she and Fallon were beginning down the journey of wherever life was going to take them.

"Ah, look who's arrived!" Barnabas called from across the room. He sashayed over with Tessa in his arms. My sister's cheeks were pink with merriment and probably too much *leminai*.

They plopped down at our sides, and the vamp asked my mate, "Did you off your brother, then?"

Kaillen raised his hand to the bartender, signaling that we'd take more drinks, and within a second, an enchanted tray was floating toward us with mugs of *leminai* for all of us. "Yeah, he's living in the underworld now. Literally."

Prisha's eyes widened, and Tessa squeaked when Barnabas pinched her side.

"Good riddance to the bugger." Barnabas lifted his glass, that cheeky expression forming on his face as he looked between Tessa and me. "So there really are two of you. Now, what do you say we try—"

Kaillen snarled and shot a hand over the vamp's mouth. "No more threesome offers with my mate and her sister. My wolf is once again two seconds away from ripping your throat out."

Barnabas's smile streaked wide as he dipped out from under the hunter's hand. He gave me a cheeky grin. "He sure is a testy one, isn't he? I hope you know what you're in for."

I elbowed him good-naturedly as I gazed at Kaillen. Even though we'd just delivered his brother to Asuran, I couldn't stop the rush of contentment that filled me.

I fingered the mating mark on my neck, eyeing the smooth patch of skin on Kaillen's.

His nostrils flared, probably inhaling the scent of my returning wolf and the desire that swam through me at the thought of claiming him again too.

"I know exactly what I'm getting with him," I said to the vamp, raising my glass to the group even though my eyes remained on my mate's. "And I can't wait to see what adventures are in store for us."



Hi there! Krista Street here.

So, another series is done, which is always such a bittersweet feeling as an author. Before you go, I just wanted to say *thank you* for going on Tala and Kaillen's journey with me. Writing is such a fun career, but I wouldn't be able to do it without *you*, so thank you for reading my books.

Also, are you interested in a bonus chapter about Tala and Kaillen?

If you want to know what happens to Tala at the next full moon, sign up for my new release text messages, and I'll send you a FREE bonus chapter!

Simply text the word **TALA** to **888-403-4316** on your mobile phone.

Message and data rates may apply, I'll only text you when I release a new book, and you can opt out at any time. Visit my website to learn more.

Or, if you live outside of North America, join my newsletter to get the free bonus chapter, [by clicking here](#).

Last, if you're looking for more books to read, turn the page to check out my other series. If you're not interested, no worries! But if you love the Supernatural World I've created, then check out my complete *Supernatural Community* or *Supernatural Institute* series or my standalone *Beast of Shadows*. Nicholas's and Corporal Charlotte Morris's characters are explored more in *Supernatural Institute*, and the dragon trainer, Xanthia, is one chick you don't want to miss in *Supernatural Community*. All of my paranormal romance books are set in the same world as *Supernatural Curse*.

Anyway, that's all from me! Thank you again for reading my work, and as always, if you have a minute to leave a review on *Forged of Bone* on Amazon that would be awesome.

Krista xx



Krista Street's Supernatural World

Want more paranormal romance from Krista Street's Supernatural World?

Check out her complete [Supernatural Community](#) and [Supernatural Institute](#) series, or her standalone [Beast of Shadows](#).

These are completely separate series, so can be read before or after *Supernatural Curse*, and both are set in Krista's Supernatural World.



She heals others with one touch. He'll protect her with his life.
[Download the complete Supernatural Community series to get the bonus chapter exclusive to this box set!](#)



She's a low magic witch who needs to pass basic training. He's her werewolf commander forbidden from claiming her . . . until fate intervenes.

[Download *Fated by Starlight* now!](#)



His rogue beast craves her blood, yet his heart aches for her to save his soul.

[Download *Beast of Shadows* now!](#)

Last, Krista is currently writing a brand new series set in her Supernatural World. If you don't want to miss it, sign up for her [text messaging service or newsletter](#).

Also by Krista Street

If you enjoy Krista Street's writing, make sure you check out her other complete series!

[The Complete Lost Children Series](#) – **YA Paranormal Fantasy**

Lena's not the only one with a supernatural power and mysterious tattooed symbol. The dark-eyed man she's drawn to may share her forgotten past.



The Complete Lost Children Series is suitable for readers aged 16+ . . . sexy times are non-descriptive. ;)

[The Complete Makanza Series](#) – **YA Dystopian Romance**

A deadly virus. A brilliant young researcher. And an infected survivor who threatens to steal her heart.



The Complete Makanza Series is suitable for readers aged 15+. No sexy times in this one!

Thank you

Thank you for reading *Forged of Bone*, the final book in the *Supernatural Curse* series.

If you enjoy Krista Street's writing, make sure you visit her [website](#) to learn about her new release text alerts, newsletter, other series, and news about her latest writing ventures.

Or you can join [Street's Peeps](#), follow her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), or her [Amazon Author Page](#) by clicking on the yellow button labeled, "Follow."



Finally, if you enjoyed *Forged of Bone*, please consider posting a review on Amazon. Authors rely heavily on readers reviewing their work. Even one sentence helps a lot. Thank you so much if you do!



Thanks again for reading Krista's work. She hopes to meet you again in another novel soon!



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.sk

z-lib.gs

z-lib.fm

go-to-library.sk



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>