



CLAIMED
BY THE
WOLF
LORD

SKYE WILSON

Claimed By The Wolf Lord

An Enemies To Lovers Paranormal Romance

Lunar Bride

Book 3

Skye Wilson

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Chapter 1

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 30 Days

Shit. Shit. Shit!

I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Celeste was gone, that she'd been *taken* from me. Her presence remained close, then was only a distant pinprick. If we weren't fated mates, I wouldn't have felt her at all. Even now, I couldn't begin to guess *where* she was. It took all my strength to keep my wolf from springing free, an angry, snarling beast insistent that his mate was in danger. The only thing stronger than his rage was my fear that he was right.

Still, snarling at Val or biting at Walter would get me no closer to Celeste. I'd roused Walter at once, just as I'd told my mate I would, and Walter was already on the phone with Delila Devins. The trick would be convincing the persnickety old witch to transport me to Abu Ghurab.

Even if we persuaded the witch that her help was urgently needed, we'd still have to travel to Egypt. I was grateful Celeste had at least mentioned the name of the city, but I had nothing else to go on. Depending on the size of the area, we could end up being miles away.

I could hear Walter still speaking in his room and growled softly to myself. If he was still talking, then Delila was still

resisting. *Do I have to do everything myself?* I thought bitterly, wheeling around to storm out of my house and get down to the docks. I swung down the hall and hurried down the stairs in a few bounds, nearly slamming into Val as I beelined toward the back door, then onto the patio.

“Oh!” the witch gasped. Her face was white. “I’m so sorry, Fenris,” she said, refusing to meet my gaze as she brushed her dress. “I wasn’t paying attention. I thought I felt...” She trailed off, looking up past me.

“It’s fine,” I said, about to maneuver around when my mind caught up to Val’s words. I turned back to the witch. “What did you feel, Val?”

She licked her lips nervously, blinking a few times before she finally tore her eyes away from the stairs. “I...” She took a deep breath. “Someone used dark magic here.”

I inhaled sharply, and somehow Val went paler. “It was Celeste, wasn’t it?” I asked.

I could barely say the words. After Celeste had transported us to the deserted island Lyka had been on, I’d thought she wouldn’t use it again. She hadn’t *promised*, but she’d insisted that *my welfare* would be the deciding factor. I didn’t have complete control over that, especially with Sabine and the Solar Sovereign lurking about. But this?

“She vanished,” Val said, and I forced myself to take a breath. “She was insisting the dream she’d woken up from was a vision. I told her we’d go at once, but...”

My nose wrinkled, and I ran my tongue over my teeth, barely able to contain my rage. Val at least had the sense not to question me any further.

Before I could get myself together and get out the door, Walter came trotting up behind me. “Delila has agreed to help,” he said, a bit breathless. My assistant looking so frazzled, with his gray hair a mess, only solidified the disaster of this situation for me. “She’ll be here momentarily. She wanted to make sure you had something of Celeste’s?”

I fought the urge to growl at Walter—if anything, I should be thanking him for wrangling the troublesome conjurer. Instead, I kept my mouth firmly closed, trusting myself only to nod as I turned about to hurry back upstairs.

It didn't take me long to find her grimoire. Celeste had hairbrushes and various articles of clothing, but she seemed to value the grimoire more than anything. It was associated with the other Handmaiden witches, after all, and she was the only one left.

Delila was standing in the entryway when I got back down the stairs, the heavy tome tucked carefully under my arm. The witch had the audacity to look as if I'd interrupted her beauty sleep. "Lord Fenris," she said with teeth-grinding irritation, barely restraining a glower.

This time, I didn't stop my wolf. I snarled and practically thrust the book at her. "Find Celeste," I growled, doing everything in my power not to let my wolf rely on our alpha command. If I did that now, she'd refuse to help me ever again.

"Egypt?" she said, taking the book with grace. "That's all Walter said."

"Abu Ghurab."

"Ah. The catacombs," she said. She looked thoughtful, and for a moment, I felt a brief flash of relief.

As Delila muttered to herself, I glanced at Walter. "Call our allies out in Egypt, whoever you trust. Just make it quick. I want the area secured, and I want whoever Celeste found there captured at once."

"Of course," Walter said, hurrying away. Val went after him.

As I turned back to Delila, I motioned toward the book. "That is sealed to the Handmaiden witches," I warned her. "Do not—"

"Do not insult me, Fenris," she snapped, her eyes glowing. "Do I look like a petty thief to you? Now quiet yourself, *Lunar Lord*, and pray I don't end up at the wrong tomb."

I jerked. “The wrong—”

She was gone before I could finish, disappearing in a cold snap of air that left a chill running down my spine. All I could do now was wait for the excruciating minutes it would take Delila to find Celeste.

My wolf writhed as he agonized over the possibility of someone luring our mate into a trap. I hadn’t thought that Delila could end up in the wrong spot, but now I found myself wondering about that possibility as well. She *might* end up with Celeste, but without enough magical strength to make it back.

I did not plan enough for this! I bristled, starting to pace down the hallway. I made it to the end before wheeling around on my heel and pacing back toward the entryway. *I shouldn’t have trusted her to—*

I halted the thought right there. No matter what, I had to assume Celeste was acting in good faith. Using dark magic was incredibly dangerous, yet I couldn’t believe that she was working with the Solar Sovereign. She must have truly believed her aunt was in danger.

You cannot allow your paranoia to rule you, or you will not make it to this eclipse, I thought, and continued to pace.

I was only vaguely aware of Val and Walter in my periphery, then finally that all too familiar snap of cold air burst into my home again. I whirled around as Delila appeared, supporting not one but two women. I didn’t recognize the older witch slumping to the floor. Though not covered in blood like the other woman, Celeste was unconscious, her head slumped against Delila’s side as the witch avoided dropping her on the ground.

In the space of a breath, I was next to her, scooping my fated mate up without a word. I could hear Walter and Val behind me, speaking to Delila, but I didn’t take in the words. I didn’t care. I strode down the hall and up the stairs, pacifying my wolf’s rage with the knowledge that our *khuya* was back in our arms, still in one piece. As I shifted Celeste’s weight in

one arm to open the master bedroom, she stirred, her dark lashes fluttering open.

She exhaled softly as I glanced down. I closed the door before crossing the room and setting her down gently on the bed, carefully arranging the plush pillows beneath her head. “Fenris?” she murmured, sounding half-dazed, as if she weren’t sure she was dreaming.

“I’m here,” I murmured quietly, settling my racing heart. I removed her shoes first, discarding them carelessly on the floor. “Are you hurt?”

She didn’t answer me, just licked her lips. Celeste opened her mouth, but seemed to forget how to speak—or was simply too *tired* to try. The exhaustion was written all over her face. She sank back on the bed and took a deep breath.

Deciding not to take her safety for granted, I carefully removed her clothing. Though I didn’t see any blood, that didn’t mean she wasn’t injured. I paused once I’d removed her top: an angry burn mark stared back at me, partially obscured by her bra. I frowned, but then a soft noise escaped Celeste. When I glanced back, her silver eyes looked wet.

“I’m so sorry,” she finally whispered, voice thick with emotion. Her lower lip trembled as she tried to hold herself together. She sniffed hard. “I’m so sorry,” Celeste said again, refusing to meet my eyes.

A moment later, I realized that a hint of fear rolled off her. It wasn’t residual. It was new. She was afraid of *me*. Of my *reaction*.

The sting of that epiphany was so sharp, even my wolf took notice, recoiling as he recognized the impression his earlier fury had made on our fated mate.

“Who did this to you?” I asked. I didn’t need to see it all to know this wound was a magical brand. It took all my willpower to keep the venom out of my voice. After all, it was not Celeste who’d branded herself. The last thing I wanted was for her to shrink any further.

She sniffed, losing the battle against her emotions, and as she bit her lower lip, fat tears rolled down her cheeks, leaving wet trails as she looked away at the far wall. She didn't even try to get up. Didn't try to explain, either. She said nothing.

I took a deep breath, sitting down next to her. My hand hovered for a moment before I placed it over hers, giving a gentle squeeze. "You can tell me," I whispered, as if raising my voice might send her into retreat. "Celeste, please. Who hurt you?"

Again, she sniffed, but this time, she finally turned to look at me. Or near me, rather. Tears kept rolling down her cheeks, and I moved to wrap an arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

"Forget my questions," I said quietly, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. "Rest now." She was safe, and there was nothing more important than that.

Celeste shuddered, then leaned her weight against mine as if savoring the warmth. I resolved to hold her as long as she needed it. I had no idea how much time had passed before she suddenly cleared her throat.

"I made a mistake," Celeste said, so soft, I could barely hear her. She still refused to meet my gaze, but she'd moved enough to sit more upright. "I can't—I can't tell you what happened," she said a few breaths later. "I can't—I'm so sorry. I'm so, *so* sorry, Fenris. I made a mistake. I made such a big stupid—"

"Celeste," I murmured, taking her chin in my fingers. I tipped her head up gently until our eyes met. I couldn't allow her to keep berating herself like that. Her fear had only grown, and my wolf recoiled further. There was little I wanted more than answers now, but if Celeste couldn't tell me in this moment—

I blinked.

If she can't answer me, that means she's under a command, and there is only one being powerful enough...the Solar Sovereign. My blood practically boiled at the thought, and it

took all my focus to simply remember to breathe instead of tearing off, intent on hunting them down for hurting Celeste.

But my rage wouldn't help her. If this had happened even two months ago, I might have sent her away, banishing her to an island not unlike Lyka's until I could complete my bloody task. I had no idea what else the Solar Sovereign might have commanded my fated mate to do, and this meant a far greater risk than Sabine's possession. *I cannot do that to her.*

More than I feared betrayal, I loathed the idea of any harm coming to Celeste. I *couldn't* cause her even more pain than what she'd already suffered. I couldn't live with myself otherwise.

I took a deep breath while my wolf retreated. For once, we were on the same page when it came to regulating our fury.

Unfortunately, Celeste seemed to take this differently and sniffed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'll figure out how to make this right, Fenris. I swear I will. Please trust that I will. If it's the last thing I do, I'll fix it. I promise."

"Celeste," I said firmly. "We can talk about it later."

She was clearly exhausted and weak from the amount of magic she'd used. I hated seeing her like this, hated knowing this was the toll dark magic took on her. I wanted to scold her—after everything that'd happened, she'd gone and used it again, but she was clearly repentant. If anything, scolding her would just make this worse.

I turned and leaned in to press a kiss to her cheek before taking my arm off her shoulder to gently wipe her tears. "For right now, you need to rest. You're clearly exhausted." She was clearly emotionally frayed as well. "I'll see if Val has anything that'll help, alright?"

Celeste sniffed, but eventually gave a nod, carefully easing herself back down into the bed. "Don't be too long," she whispered, turning away from me to curl around a pillow.

My wolf growled softly, furious to see her so vulnerable. "I won't be," I promised, and turned to see where my house witch had gone off to.

As I hurried downstairs to retrieve Val, I found Walter instead. He touched my elbow to stop me. “The members of the Orders of the Stars we sent to Abu Ghurab have been scouring the area,” he said quietly, inclining his head. “But thus far, they’ve been unable to find a trace of who was there, or where they disappeared. Delila thinks they cleared out before she’d arrived, ditching Celeste and the other witch.”

I hissed to myself. *Another one of the Solar Sovereign’s tricks.* I didn’t know how they did it, but they always managed to disappear without a single piece of evidence left behind. That itself was a calling card, though not a useful one from my perspective. I bristled, repulsed once more by my celestial rival using the woman I loved against me. *Whatever you’ve done to her, you will pay for it,* I thought bitterly.

As much as I wanted to question Celeste about anything she might have seen or heard, I knew that must wait. “Did they find evidence of anyone else in the surrounding areas?”

Walter shook his head, looking disappointed. “No,” he said. “*We have* received more reports of shifters, vampires, and faefolk going missing after you asked me to alert other members of the Order. No one can confirm if any of these missing individuals are deceased, which I fear doesn’t bode well for us.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I growled. The eclipse was now less than three weeks away, and if they were disappearing in growing numbers, I had little doubt they were under recruitment. The possibility of coercion mattered less than the Solar Sovereign’s rising numbers.

I should’ve been looking forward to the total eclipse, when I’d finally be able to claim Celeste as my mate, when she tied her life force to mine. However, I was instead staring down an inevitable battle. The Solar Sovereign would make their play for power—and that would mean eliminating me in any way, shape, or form. They’d move after my allies, my home, the Order of the Stars, and anyone else who’d pledged their loyalty. The idea that so many could get hurt—or worse—was a weight that only grew heavier with time.

Worst of all, I would be at my weakest. I wouldn't be able to protect them, and I wouldn't be able to protect Celeste from whatever the Solar Sovereign had done to her. My wolf bristled, snarling and snapping as we just stood there, doing nothing to prevent this.

"I need to go for a run," I told Walter, realizing I wouldn't be able to hold my wolf's baser impulses for much longer. The last thing I needed right now was to lose control. "Send Val to my room to tend to Celeste. I'll be back soon."

"Of course," Walter said, turning to hurry back down the hall as I made a beeline for the door outside.

Chapter 2

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 28 Days

“Knock knock!” I looked up at the sound of my best friend’s voice as someone rapped their knuckles against the bedroom door. “Can I come in, or are you two *occupied*?”

I could practically *hear* the way Abi wiggled her eyebrows and sighed. “Come on in,” I said. “It’s just me.”

I’d spent most of the past few days sleeping, as much as I’d have liked to practice honing my magic or researching the damn brand Zyanya seared into my flesh. It didn’t ache anymore, but it was all I could see whenever I glimpsed the mirror. I’d started avoiding looking at myself altogether. It didn’t help that Fenris had seemed distant over the past forty-eight hours, though I’d also have questions if he suddenly showed up with a weird mark on his chest he couldn’t talk about.

After all the progress we made talking about things, I bet he thinks I’m a big liar. I sank deep into my thoughts as Abi opened the door and let herself in. She flounced across the room and flopped over next to me on the bed like she owned the place.

“Man,” she said, looking winded. I wrinkled my nose when I realized there was a slight sheen of sweat on her skin.

“Grant just kicked my *ass*. I mean, I know I asked him to teach me how to be a paranormal hunter, but for some reason, I didn’t think it would be such a *workout*.”

I laughed. “What did you think it was going to be like?” Fenris had mentioned a Grant Oakley showing up sometime yesterday when I’d woken up between naps, but I clearly hadn’t registered that he was the same hunter who was mentoring Abi.

She shrugged as she propped herself back up. “I dunno, but it’s *awesome*. I’m going to be fit in, like, a matter of days. I can feel it.” She gave me a winning grin. “I’m gonna be such a badass. Well, at least once I stop getting my butt handed to me. He doesn’t seem to appreciate when I call him ‘sensei’ for some reason. Surely everyone’s seen *The Karate Kid*, right?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t met the man, but the movie was iconic. “Maybe he’s just giving you a hard time,” I said, gently nudging my friend with my knee.

Abi snickered. “No one can do that. Look at this face!” She paused, making a silly face. “Hey, you should join in when you’re feeling better! It will be just like that time we took that 7 AM yoga class together in our senior year. I thought you were evil for making us get up that early, but honestly, it’s a really nice way to start the day.” Abi’s smile softened. “How are you feeling, anyways?”

I sighed. “I’m alright. Better than yesterday,” I said while looking down at my hands. It was true, if not the entire truth.

“Well, progress is progress!” she chirped. “What happened to you?”

I bit my lip. As if it sensed my wishes, the death mark on my chest felt tight. I could practically hear Zyanya’s words ringing in my ears. My heart rate soon picked up. *Burnt from the inside out*.

“Look, as much as I wish I could tell you, I just can’t,” I said.

Abi watched me for a moment, her smile falling from her face as she studied me, but eventually, she gave a nod. “No

problem,” she finally said, clearly concerned, but at least she’d accepted my answer. “I went to check on your aunt earlier. She still hasn’t woken up, but she’s still among the living! Morgan and Val have been taking shifts monitoring her so she isn’t alone.” She sighed and looked toward the open door. “She looks like she really got put through the wringer.” She grimaced. “Magical torture is some scary stuff.”

I knew she was thinking of her own run-in with the psychic witch, and I reached over to squeeze her knee. Abi looked at me. “It’s crazy to think that just a few months ago, we were at the bridal gown store with her and Liana, you know? Everything seemed so...regular. A nice, normal wedding for you and Ben. A normal gown. I mean, it was pretty! But...” She shrugged. “Normal. No offense.”

“None taken,” I said, giving her a wry look. “I guess it does feel like a whole world away now, doesn’t it?” I sighed as I thought of the girls’ evening. Ben had said he’d pay for the afternoon, but totally flaked. The only reason I’d accepted Abi’s suggestion to spend a weekend in the mountains at a spa in the North Carolina mountains was because he said he’d pay. If I’d known I’d have to pay for it, anyway...

I wish I had tried more things. I was always so careful. Always taking my anxiety ‘medication,’ avoiding anything I even suspected might set it off. Avoiding trips so I wasn’t too far away from Ben. I wish I’d visited more places. Tasted more food. Tried more—

I cut myself off with a sigh before I got too sad. Still, the intrusive thought managed to push through. *I might never get the chance now.*

If I didn’t find a way to deal with the death mark Zyanya had given me in the next three weeks, I wouldn’t get that opportunity. No matter what that witch had cursed me with, I couldn’t hurt Fenris. I wouldn’t. I’d find a way to break his curse during the eclipse and circumvent what the Solar Sovereign had commanded me to do, even if I lost my life in the process.

“Hey, are you okay?” Abi said, leaning over to nudge her shoulder against mine gently. “I don’t just mean physically. You look down.” When I glanced up and met her gaze, she offered me a soft smile. “You know I’m here for you no matter what, right? Even if you can’t—or don’t want to—talk about it right now. I’m here if you just want a shoulder, or if you change your mind and you just want to vent, but you don’t want me to say anything. Any of it. I’m here for that.”

I sniffed, my throat suddenly feeling thick. Not trusting myself to speak without dissolving into a frustrating amount of tears, I leaned over and wrapped my arms around my friend, squeezing her against my chest. “Thanks,” I said after a few minutes. “That...that really means a lot. I really appreciate you, Abi.”

“Of course,” she said as she returned the hug, gentler than I usually considered my friend to be. “Even if you can’t talk about some stuff or we can’t do everything joined at the hip, I’m always here for you.”

We stayed like that for a few moments before I finally pulled back. “I’m glad we met,” I said, untangling my arms and reaching out to squeeze her hand instead. “You’re always so upbeat and motivated. There are so many things I wouldn’t have done if not for you.” I paused, pressing my lips together. “And while I’d never have wanted you to get in a car accident, I *am* glad you got pulled into the paranormal world, too. I couldn’t imagine handling this without being able to tell you about it.”

Abi laughed, bumping our shoulders together as she leaned in. “As if I’d let you keep all the paranormal hotties to yourself,” she said, winking. “Besides. Gilbert is...” She trailed off, looking thoughtful. I had to hide my smile. I’d never seen my best friend look so *pensive* when it came to a guy she’d been seeing. “Well. Let’s just say I’d absolutely get in another five car crashes if that’s what it took to meet him. It was so, *so* worth getting that chance.”

Before I could reply, Gilbert appeared in the open doorway as if speaking his name had summoned the vampire. “There you are,” he said, hazel eyes settling on Abi. “I was looking

for you.” His expression darkened. “Though there’ll be no more car accidents for you.”

“Aw,” Abi said, beaming. I saw a flash of mischief sparkle in her eyes as she held up a finger and gave a “come hither” motion.

Gilbert obeyed without delay, his long strides carrying him over to us in a matter of seconds. As he leaned in, Abi sat up straight, darting in to plant a sloppy kiss on his lips. “You’re so cute when you’re all serious and protective,” she teased, clearly pleased by the flustered expression plastered on his face.

“Can you blame me? You are a danger magnet,” he said, his faint French accent getting thicker, a sure sign she was getting under his skin.

She gave him a smug look as she motioned to her workout tank and bare biceps. “A few more classes with Oakley, and I’ll be able to kick any vampire’s ass. Even yours.”

Gilbert grinned and leaned down to whisper in her ear. Despite his attempts at privacy, with my heightened hearing, I could still make out most of what he was saying. My cheeks went bright red as I cleared my throat. Abi seemed to realize and gave me a wicked grin.

“You know, no one would ever believe the filthy stuff he says, but now I have *evidence*,” she said.

“I *am* right here,” he said.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” I said. The way Abi’s face lit up was worth it. Gilbert made an exasperated noise. “And he’s had lifetimes to think of these things,” I added.

Her eyes glowed. “You’re *right*,” she said. “I should raise my bar about what’s *spicy*.” She paused. “Though I should give credit where credit is due. It’s *way* better than any novel I’ve read.”

Gilbert gave an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes. “After centuries with Piers,” he said, “your teasing is nothing to me.”

My grin soon mirrored Abi's. "You should ask him to read one of your romance books and see what he thinks. He might have a few pointers."

"Oh, yeah!" She turned to him. "I bet you could, if you tell Celeste aaaaall about what you did to m—"

Gilbert shook his head, gently placing his hand over her mouth. "If you'll excuse us," he said in a strangled voice. I didn't need my superhuman senses to recognize the speed with which he wrapped his other arm around her, hoisted her off my bed, and spirited her out of the room.

I looked at the empty door, happy Abi had found someone who clearly matched her level of energy—and mischief. I wouldn't have ever imagined it, but watching her and Gilbert together made sense.

The longer I considered it, though, the more melancholy I felt. I didn't know if vampires got married, but I'd never get to attend my best friend's wedding if I up and died in three weeks. I wouldn't get to go back to Florida and help Liana find a new guy. I'd never get to go on another girls' trip with them. I'd never get to travel at all.

Hell, I likely wouldn't get the answers I needed from my Aunt Esme by then. Even if she made a complete recovery from whatever Sabine and Zyanya had done to her, I imagined it would take longer than my own timeline.

I bit my lip and fought the sudden prickling in my eyes when Val stepped into view, gently tapping her knuckles against the door frame. "Ah, you're awake," she said. "I was coming to check in on you. How are you feeling?"

"Tired," I said, sitting up a bit straighter as Val walked over. We'd done this check-up a few times now since I'd gotten back. Physically, I felt pretty good, but my magic still felt far more tenuous than before. "Hey, Val? Have you ever seen a mark like the one I have before?" I asked.

Her expression fell. "No," she said solemnly. "I admit it's troubled me. I've been scanning hexes and spells in books

when I have the time...which is, unfortunately, not as much as I'd like. I'm sorry I can't tell you more."

I made a frustrated noise. *I* knew what it was, but I couldn't *tell* them, and I wasn't sure about the specific rules of this death mark. How much of a hint could I offer?

And do I really want to test the boundaries when crossing the line means being burned alive?

Val gave me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I'll have Morgan help me with the research, but that's not why I came up here. Esme started stirring, and I thought you'd like to know."

"Really?!" I forgot all about my mark for a moment. I'd assumed it would take weeks for her to wake up. "Can I go see her?"

"Of course," Val said, offering me a hand as I hauled myself out of bed. "I'll show you where we've been taking care of her."

My heart was hammering by the time we'd made it down the hall to the guest room Esme was in. It took all of my willpower to keep walking when I laid my eyes on the frail woman lying in bed, staring up blankly at the ceiling. Esme looked dazed, but more than that, she looked like she'd aged decades. She was frail and thin, bones poking out of skin that looked three sizes too large. Her face was sallow, her cheeks were sunken, and her hair was wiry and dry.

I cleared my throat as I took the seat next to her, reaching out to touch her hand. Her fingers felt cold. "Aunt Esme?" I said.

The Aurora witch blinked, taking too long to turn her head and look at me. She blinked a few more times, and I'd nearly given up hope when she spoke up in a raspy voice. "Oh," she said, sounding confused. "Enora?"

I cleared my throat, not entirely sure how to respond. *I guess she knew my birth mother. Do I look that much like her?* "How are you feeling?" I asked.

Unfortunately, she seemed like she'd gotten distracted, and when she looked back, I got met with the same confused question. "Enora?"

I offered a sad smile and patted her hand. "I'm here," I said. "Why don't you get some more rest? You look exhausted."

"Mhm." She nodded and looked away again. Once I was certain she wasn't paying attention to me, I excused myself, allowing Val back in to check on the Aurora witch.

When I returned to the master bedroom, I retrieved my mother's grimoire from the nightstand and flicked it open. When I'd been able to keep myself awake over the past few days, I spent time browsing the notes, looking for any information at all about "death marks."

It's possible Handmaiden witches don't practice them.

Zyanya had summoned her Aurora witch coven to place the mark upon me. It was a specialty *they* passed down, but I wouldn't have that history. Esme was the only Aurora witch I knew, and she...she clearly wasn't in a position to answer questions.

There could be something here that'd help repair her memory.

I hadn't lasted more than twenty minutes when I found myself reading the same sentence three times over. I was restless and anxious, like Fenris often looked when the full moon approached. *A run with my wolf would help.* If nothing else, it'd help with feeling like I didn't even fit in my own skin.

I closed the book and stood up, then reached out for my wolf, prompting her to come forward, when the realization struck: Zyanya had never given me permission to shift into my wolf form. Furious, I reached for my wolf again, trying to *drag* her forward, but nothing happened.

I wailed as I dissolved into tears, sinking down onto the floor as my frustration and helplessness finally won out. I heard more, then I saw Fenris enter the room and approach,

crouching down to wrap his arms around me. At a loss, I gave into my tears.

What have I done?

Chapter 3

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 28 Days

As Celeste wept, I sank further to the floor, aware we might be here awhile. I did not say anything, only keeping my grip solid around her. I did not need to ask to know what she'd been doing—I'd felt her wolf briefly come forward as I made my way up the stairs. At first, I'd feared she'd lost control. Instead, it was as if her animal had slammed into a wall. Celeste had clearly tried to call on her again, and—

Nothing.

My wolf snarled and thrashed as I held our fated mate close, repulsed and enraged in equal measure that someone had managed to do this to her. I didn't know of any magic that restrained a shifter from shifting, outside of wolfsbane. However, if someone had forced Celeste to drink wolfsbane, I would have smelled it on her the moment she returned, and it would've eventually left her system.

If it wasn't a curse and it wasn't potion, there was only one other thing that had cut Celeste off from her wolf form: the Solar Sovereign had used an alpha command on her. The notion of my mortal rival getting anywhere near her made my blood boil, but this was inconceivable.

The only reason I didn't give into my wolf's feral instincts then and there was Celeste. She needed me—she needed *us*.

Somehow, that realization kept my wolf's basest instincts in check. This was normally more of a battle, but not this time. Despite my outrage, Celeste's well-being was the most important factor. Her comfort. I ran my hand up and down her back, pressing my cheek against her hair as frustrated sobs shuddered through her.

I could feel the base, animalistic fear, too, radiating from her wolf. I couldn't imagine what it'd be like to try and shift, then realize you couldn't. I could only imagine it was like getting caught in a hunter's trap, steel jaws crushing against bone, with no way to escape more bodily harm. My experience, if anything, was the opposite. There were times when that primal urge was so powerful that it overtook me.

Eventually, when Celeste's breathing evened out, I leaned down, catching her chin with my finger and guiding her face to place a gentle kiss on her lips.

She snuffled and drifted between meeting my eyes and staring down at her lap. "I'm sorry," she whispered again. "I'm so—I'm so sorry."

"Celeste—"

"I know you must be furious with me," she blurted out. "But I just—I need you to know I didn't mean for this to happen."

I took a deep breath. "I know you didn't," I said, and I meant that. I believed her. "I'm not angry with you."

Finally, she looked up, her silver eyes watery as she searched my face. "But you've been avoiding me the last two days."

I sighed. "I thought you needed the space while you recovered, and I'm—I am not *angry*, but I am conflicted. Someone *did this* to you, and just the sight of you in this state—" I forced myself to stop and take another breath. "I did not want to take that out on you." I looked back at her. "I suspect I know exactly who was holding your aunt hostage in Egypt,

and that your free will's been...tampered with." I narrowed my eyes. "And if it is who I think it is, then they've opted to use you as a weapon against me. Who else would be closest to me during the eclipse? Who is the one person I'd simply refuse to hurt?"

Celeste inhaled sharply, then blinked rapidly as she looked away, tears welling up again. I growled despite my best intentions to keep myself calm and wrapped my arms around her more tightly, pulling her closer against my torso. "I will not allow my *enemy* to use my *khuya* against me, Celeste. We will simply change plans and forgo the ritual at the eclipse entirely."

Celeste reeled backwards, her eyes wide as she looked me up and down. "You can't do that!" she exclaimed. "You've been waiting for the eclipse for centuries. And I won't be around for the next one if we don't break your curse now."

Despite myself, I found one corner of my mouth tipping upward. "I have been waiting for *you*, my dear," I said gently. "Everything comes second to that—even lifting the curse. I am willing to give up on that if it means we both make it through the eclipse—*together*. I will only be vulnerable for seven minutes. If we can be apart for that short duration, than it is worthwhile." I paused. "With their plan thwarted, the Solar Sovereign will have to fade into obscurity again. They have no way to build on their power."

Celeste gave me a dubious look. "This specific eclipse won't return for another four hundred years," she said. "If we don't complete the ceremony, I'll remain mortal. I'll live one hundred years, at best, and your inner wolf will still be feral, and only get worse with time. You'll be alone after I die. You'll be...we *must* break the curse, Fenris. There must be a way we can make this work."

I sighed. I didn't want to contemplate an immortal lifetime without my fated mate. But risking her now, and robbing us of any time at all, was a worse proposition. "Celeste," I said, leaning in to kiss her again. "I never imagined I would meet my fated mate, much less that she would be such a brilliant, kind, compassionate woman. I have never loved anyone as I

love you now. I would give up everything to spend just one lifetime with you. That includes the chance to break my curse.”

“Really?” She inhaled sharply, as if she couldn’t believe this would be true. “But Fenris, you’re...” She trailed off, waving at me vaguely. “You’re you. The god of wolf shifters. Protector of the paranormal realm. I’m just...Celeste Soleil. Space nerd and a...part-time witch.”

I pulled her into my lap. She didn’t resist. “Do not sell yourself short,” I said, kissing her cheek and nuzzling her ear. “You are also spectacularly patient and capable of seeing the complexity of the mortal condition. Despite our less than ideal introduction, you agreed to help me out. I do not deserve you. I certainly didn’t deserve you then, paranoid and curt as I was, but here you are. I would not give that up.”

Celeste shuddered, squirming in my lap. “Stop,” she said, placing her palms against my chest. Sensing her pulse quicken, I couldn’t help a smug grin while mouthing at her earlobe.

“Stop telling you how wonderful you are?” I asked.

Her soft sigh told me everything I needed to know.

“I think not,” I said, my voice low. “Clearly, you were deprived of the praise you so rightly deserve for entirely too long. I shall rectify that now.”

Celeste squirmed again. “Fenris,” she said, but her voice was already breathier. My grin only grew.

My mind made up, I gathered her close, my arms wrapped firmly around her torso before I stood with her in one swift motion. Celeste all but shrieked, throwing her arms around my shoulders as she clung to me. “Fenris!” she shouted, her cheeks flushing. I could practically feel the sudden burst of excitement rolling off her and allowed it to feed my own mounting desire.

We were only a few steps to the bed, and while I didn’t quite toss her onto the sheets, I was more vigorous than I’d been in the past. Celeste laughed, her silver eyes bright with

amusement. My chest warmed at the sight. *This* was how I wanted Celeste to feel. Always.

“Get undressed,” I murmured. I stood at the side of the mattress, already beginning to unlace my shoes.

Celeste sat up, but paused as she reached her waist. Her fingers traced the hemline of her pants. “All the way?” she said, her cheeks getting pink. It was as if I’d never seen her naked before.

“All the way,” I said. “Unless you would rather I take you half-dressed.”

I couldn’t place the noise she made after that, but she licked her lips and swallowed before grabbing the bottom of her shirt and pulling it over her head. “Not on the bed,” she said.

I faltered only a moment as I did the same. I wanted to ask *where* she thought she might like to go, but I needed to stay focused. “Good girl,” I murmured as she reached to undo her pants.

She whimpered softly, fumbling with her belt loops before shimmying her way out of the pants, tossing those to the side to join her shirt. She paused, dressed only in her dark navy bra and panties, and shivered as she glanced back up at me.

“Cold?” I murmured.

“Yes,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself.

“You won’t be for long,” I said before stepping out of my trousers. They were too expensive to just leave on the floor like that, but I didn’t care. Celeste’s happiness was priceless.

I put my knee on the bed and crawled over to her. “Alright, sweetheart. Take the rest of it off for me.”

Celeste swallowed again, her cheeks getting pinker, but she did as I’d asked, reaching behind her back to unfasten her bra and shrug out of it. I took the moment to appreciate how nice her breasts were. I admired the way they moved as she lifted her hips, hooking her fingers into the elastic waistband before wiggling her way out of her underwear as well.

Then she lay there, a splendor just for me. “That’s it,” I crooned, aware of the little shiver she gave, but my sense of smell told me that wasn’t just from a chill. The scent of her arousal filled my nostrils, and I had to take a moment to steady myself. Patience was key—this wasn’t about me. Not today.

Getting onto my knees, I nudged her thighs apart and sat between them, taking a moment to simply bask in her beauty before I gave my next instruction. “Prop yourself up on the pillow and lean back,” I murmured, nodding to the nest of softness behind her.

Celeste readjusted herself, piling a few of the pillows against the headboard to prop herself up a bit more. I gave her a wolfish grin. “Now, do not look away from me, Celeste,” I said, sinking lower while pulling her thighs closer against my body. With one swift movement, I had sunk to my belly, lifting her knees to hook over my broad shoulders.

I glanced up through my dark lashes. Celeste’s cheeks had turned a deep shade of red, but she was still doing just as I’d asked. Her silver eyes stayed on my face as I tipped my head to one side, kissing up her thigh. My nose grazed against the crease of skin where thigh met body, but I didn’t give in. Instead, I turned my head to the other side and repeated my ministrations, grinning as she squirmed.

“Do you like that?” I asked against her soft skin.

“Fenris,” she sighed, one hand reaching my hair. She kneaded her fingers, gently scraping her nails against my scalp. If I weren’t so aroused, I’d have found the action relaxing.

“Yes?” I said, leaning away so we could lock eyes.

A tiny whimper escaped her lips, but she didn’t say anything, and when I raised my eyebrow, she bit into her lower lip. I tried to smother my grin as I turned my head to bite her knee.

She yelped. “Hey!”

I smirked. “Good girls get rewards. Naughty girls don’t.”

Celeste stuck out her lower lip in a pout. “Fenris, please.”

“Please *what?*” I asked, tipping my head to one side. “I couldn’t possibly know if you do not ask me, sweetheart...but I am happy to give you *anything*, if you would just say the word.”

She took a shuddering breath as if she had to brace herself to speak. She whispered only a jumble of words. I shook my head, and she sighed, but straightened up and tried again. “Fenris, please...please use your mouth on me,” she whispered.

I beamed. In time, I would teach her she never needed to feel self-conscious with me, but it was still a step forward. “Of course, my darling girl,” I said. Before she could say anything, I put my mouth exactly where she wanted it, bracing my hands on her inner thighs as I lapped against her outer lips.

Celeste shuddered, her muscles tensing and quivering at once beneath my fingertips. I would have grinned if I wasn’t otherwise occupied, but I was all but drunk on the scent of her. I rumbled deep in my chest as I lapped at her, teasing for a few moments before I shifted slightly and flattened my tongue, moving slightly northward to worship her clit.

She whimpered again. I could still feel her hands in my hair, but...I pulled away for a moment, out of breath, as my eyes met hers. “I want to hear you,” I growled.

Celeste bit her lip. “There are people all over your mansion.”

“So? It’s *my* home, and you are *my* fated mate. It is my duty to make sure you know just how much I value you. It is none of their business, and they know that.”

She swallowed hard. “But Fenris—”

“Oh, Celeste,” I sighed despite the small grin on my wet lips. “You really are giving me no choice.” My expression now turned downright wicked. “I’m just going to have to take you apart, piece by piece.”

Celeste’s eyes went wide, and her mouth made an *O* shape. She licked her lips again, but no words came out, and I pulled myself away from where I’d been worshipping her. Venturing

further up the length of her torso, I kissed swells and dips of skin, memorizing each mark and little freckle. I paused to nip at one of her breasts, and she gave a startled yelp, but her fingers curled further into my scalp as she tugged on my hair.

“Good girl,” I purred, pleased to hear her voice. I paused and flicked my tongue over the offended nipple, rumbling deeply against her as she groaned. This time, she squirmed, pressing her hips up against mine. The brief bit of friction against my erection gave me pause. Until this moment, I’d managed to ignore most of my arousal, but I suddenly became starkly aware of how trapped I felt.

I pulled back, controlling my breath, and rose back to my knees, gently pushing Celeste’s hands out of my hair. As she gave me a confused look, I nodded toward the headboard. “On your knees,” I said, nudging her.

It was neither a suggestion nor a request. Celeste’s eyes flashed with understanding, and she rolled over without hesitation, as though I’d given her an alpha command.

Heat prickled on the back of my neck as she settled on all fours, and I had to adjust myself before losing my underwear altogether. The cool air of the room was just enough to settle things for a moment, and I moved closer, tracing my fingertips over the back of her thighs. She shivered.

“Shoulders down. Spread your legs for me,” I crooned, stroking my hand over the curve of her ass.

Celeste sighed, then did as I requested, shoving the pillows out of the way to lower herself to the bed as she spread her knees apart and raised her rear.

“Gorgeous,” I said, sighing. Without warning, I pressed two fingers deep inside her, already soaking after my earlier ministrations. This time, Celeste groaned. It was a quiet noise, but as her head hung lower, I saw her resist the urge to bite her lip.

“Yes, that’s it, *khuya*,” I growled, pleased. “That’s my good girl.” I curved my fingers, massaging her tight walls before adding a third.

“Fen—Fenris,” she whimpered, a tiny shake in her voice.

“Yes, my darling?” I murmured, leaning down to drop a butterfly kiss on the small of her back. I did not stop moving my fingers, methodically stroking them in and out. “What is it?”

She sucked in a breath like she was drowning. “Oh,” she said as she clenched the sheets. “Oh, that feels...that feels so *good*.”

I could have purred. “Good,” I said, working my fingers longer before I withdrew. With one hand on the inside of her thigh, I pressed her legs further apart, adjusting as I lined the tip of my cock with her slick lips.

We both groaned as if shocked by the mere touch. She canted her hips, rocking backward against me as I brushed her, enjoying her arousal.

“Fenris, please,” she sighed, lashes fluttering. “I want you...” She took another breath. “I *need* you.”

As if I could ever deny her, much less when she was looking at me like *that*. Growling under my breath, I realigned myself and pushed inside in one steady thrust, inch by slow inch. Her heat enveloped me, and it was all I could do to keep my senses about me. She groaned as I bottomed out, and I draped myself over her, propping myself on one arm as I pressed my chest against her back.

Celeste groaned again, and I paused as I nuzzled against her ear. “I’m not crushing you, am I?” I murmured quietly, barely able to hold myself still.

She shook her head. “No, I...I love feeling you like this,” she whispered back, her lips curling. “How strong you are. How *big* you are.”

My cock twitched, and I nipped at her ear before pulling my face away. I couldn’t trust myself to stay that close to her neck for too long, not when we were this intimate. “You take me so beautifully,” I murmured, looping my free arm beneath her, cupping one of her perfect tits. “Look at you, *khuya*. You

are like the moon herself.” Mysterious, yet so dependable. I knew I could always rely on Celeste.

She gasped as I tweaked a nipple, practically writhing beneath me as I built up a steady rhythm, rocking in and out of her. She clenched down, fisting the bedsheets as I moaned and picked up the pace. “Harder,” she whispered, reaching down to play with her own clit. Her fingers traced over where my cock had disappeared in her, and we both groaned. “That’s so hot...”

I smiled. “Anything for you.” I increased my pace, aware my own climax was looming ever closer. “I want you to come for me, my beautiful girl. You have been so good. Now, give me that.”

“Fenris, I...” She shuddered.

“I know you can,” I insisted, kneading into her skin. “Come for me. Come *with* me.”

She gasped as if I’d said the magic words and jolted, clamping down on me as her orgasm suddenly rocked her. Her moans and cries fell from her freely, and I leaned against her, offering my weight as I joined her moments later, my release a sweet relief as I covered her shoulders in kisses.

“Good,” I panted. “You are so, so good, my *khuya*.”

As we caught our breath and came down off the rush, I rolled onto my side and draped my arm over Celeste, pulling her closer until her bare back pressed against my chest. I smiled, enjoying the quiet moment, her calming scent of orange blossom and clean cotton. When I closed my eyes, I could imagine us on the warm sands of somewhere remote. Peaceful.

I nosed Celeste’s hair. “I have an idea,” I said softly.

“Mhm?” she said.

“Let’s go somewhere beautiful while the eclipse occurs. Somewhere far away from Peru.” That was where the Solar Sovereign would assume I’d be, and his followers would arrive there to apprehend me. “A private cabana on an island in Thailand. Or the Maldives. I’ve never been there.”

A new place always intrigued me—and being somewhere more remote would afford us more privacy. It would mean that Celeste and I would be together during my most vulnerable moments. If the Solar Sovereign did instruct her to kill me, I'd have to restrain her, but...it was still better than the alternative.

Celeste sighed heavily, but didn't say anything.

If we went this route, I could call off the preparations the Order of the Stars were undertaking, the allies I'd summoned could all return to their homes, and no one would risk themselves on my behalf. "Our friends will be able to engage in their lives as usual," I said when the silence stretched on too long.

There would be no ritual, and I'd eventually be in the position in which Celeste met me—alone and suffering, with no hope of relief. But I would at least have her memory with me.

Finally, Celeste rolled over so we were chest to chest, her expression morose as she studied one of my tattoos instead of looking at me. She didn't say anything as her fingers traced the dark ink, but as I closed my eyes and inhaled, I received a vision of us, somewhere I recognized—Paris. It wasn't a memory, however, as I'd never been there with Celeste.

A vibrant purple sunset, highlighted with pink and golden clouds, supplied a glorious backdrop for Notre Dame. Celeste held my hand as she stared up in awe at the old cathedral. She pointed, turning to grin at me, before tugging on my hand and leading us closer. When I took a breath, the vision faded away, and instead I saw bright blue.

After a moment, I realized I was looking at the teal waters of the Caribbean. I couldn't name the exact island, but it didn't matter. My eyes were only for Celeste, giggling girlishly as she scampered through the gentle surf. I could practically feel the warm sea tickling my legs as I followed her, the sea breeze intoxicating as Celeste spun around, laughing as she kicked water in my face. I ducked, and when I looked up, we were now in the snow.

We were back in Snowmass, Colorado. I recognized Keziah Palm's pack lands at once, but I didn't have time to admire the tall blue spruces or towering Douglas firs. A snowball *thwacked* the side of my face, and I jumped, cold snow dripping into my scarf. I whirled around, shouting to Celeste as she laughed and darted away into the forest, calling out an invitation in her wake.

As I pursued her, the darkness overtook us, and when I came out of the woods, we were back in Europe. France. Paris? Except, as I turned around, I realized it wasn't *we*. Celeste wasn't there when dusk faded into a cloudy night, with only street lamps instead of brilliant stars overhead.

I was about to ask when the vision faded, and Celeste hissed and recoiled, closing her eyes tight. "You can't just hide away during the eclipse," she said quietly, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "As the Lunar Lord, you're responsible for the welfare of the paranormal world. Even if you're okay *now*, you'll slowly become less stable over time. Who's to stop the Solar Sovereign from taking over when you're as feral as Lyka? You'd just be like an annoying fly on the wall to her. Even if she couldn't kill you, she could absolutely make you *go away*."

Her.

I hadn't known if the current Solar Sovereign was a *she* or *he*, and Celeste had just confirmed it. How else would she know if she hadn't seen my rival for herself?

"Besides," Celeste said, oblivious to her revelation, "even if she didn't, you might go on a rampage during your moon sickness and assault humans. Who could stop you? You're immortal. It's my duty as the last Handmaiden witch to make sure the Lunar Lord and the paranormal world remain protected. I know I only just learned that, like, a month ago, but I don't think that's a good reason to just abandon my responsibility. And..." She inhaled. "I want to make my ancestors proud. I want to make *Enora* proud. Everything is riding on *our* success, Fenris, and we can't just abandon people who need our help."

At last, she met my gaze. “Please don’t change any of the eclipse plans. Not yet. We should keep preparing, and if we don’t need those plans...no big deal. It would be much worse if we ended up needing them when the Order of the Stars scatters across the globe.”

I took a deep breath, fighting the urge to bristle. I knew, though, that underneath all those words, she was pleading not for the chance, but for my trust. “How do you plan to solve these problems?” I asked.

“I can’t explain,” she said. “But I want to start by helping my Aunt Esme recover, and hopefully we can help Lyka heal as well. I’ll still be training my magic, and if we can get Esme back, she can give us her insights. I...I’m forming a plan, and even though the eclipse is getting closer, I know I can figure this out, okay? I just need you to believe in me. Please.”

I paused as she looked up at me, licking her lips as she held her breath. Her expression was hopeful, if not guarded, and I realized that she was waiting for me to reject her. The thought stung.

Eventually, I gave a stilted nod. “I believe in you,” I said. And I meant that whole-heartedly.

“Thank you,” she said, finally leaning back into my embrace and pressing her forehead against my chest.

I sighed, no longer basking in the pleasant afterglow of sex, but ruminating on our future. I trusted Celeste, yet I couldn’t simply rely on a plan I knew nothing about. I would have to come up with a failsafe—I couldn’t put *her* at risk for my own sake. I refused.

Chapter 4

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 26 Days

I slept terribly, plagued by strange dreams and racing thoughts. When I finally decided to give up and get out of bed, the light was still hazy. It wasn't long past dawn, but I knew I wouldn't get any more rest.

Fenris still pressed against my back, one arm slung lazily over my hip, but his breath was slow and steady. A haunting fondness crept through me, and I slowly slipped from the sheets before I could change my mind.

Fenris had other ideas.

He rumbled quietly, and his limp arm at once became a strong anchor, his hand shifting to splay against my sternum and hold me there. I debated struggling against him for a moment, but...*there's a real chance I won't get to do this for much longer.* If I failed...

I took a breath and stopped the thought before the worry could gain traction. Even if my "anxiety" growing up was the result of magic I could never express, I still had an excess of it compared to others.

Instead of wiggling free, I settled in, leaning back into Fenris's chest. I could feel him nuzzle my hair, making a

satisfied little noise as he got comfortable again.

He traced gentle lines against my skin, and I paused, interpreting what he was sketching. Eventually, his movements faded, and I supposed he was drifting back to sleep, but when I tried to move again, that firm pressure was back.

I sighed wistfully. “Fenris,” I said quietly, “you can’t keep me here forever, you know. We both have things to do.”

He simply made a pleased noise. “I rather believe I could,” he said. He nipped at my earlobe before pressing his forehead again on the back of my neck.

I couldn’t have kept myself from smiling even if I’d wanted to. Despite the knowledge that this moment wouldn’t last forever, I craved it, anyway. “You probably could,” I said, staring out across the bedroom and into the hallway. “But I need to work on this plan, and I’m sure you have important, Lunar Lord-y things to do.” I could feel him grin against me, and I was glad I could lighten the mood, even if only a little. “Besides, I have no problem picking this up where we left off later today. I’m just...ready to get out of bed.”

“Hmm,” Fenris said, sighing as if this was a massive decision. “I suppose that is agreeable,” he finally said, but not without one last nip to my earlobe before release. “I will hold you to that, though.”

I stared over my shoulder at him as I managed to get out of bed and stand, giving him just a moment to admire my naked back before heading over to the closet to grab some clothes. I intended to get back to using my magic today, so I picked out a pair of jean shorts and a comfortable cotton tee. Even though it was early March, temperatures during the day often felt like April or May back in Tallahassee.

After cleaning myself up, I gave Fenris a kiss goodbye before grabbing my grimoire from the nightstand and heading out into the hall. I beelined for the room my Aunt Esme was recovering in, only to find none other than Cody King standing in front of the door to Val’s supply room.

I stopped. “Is everything okay?” I said, fearing the worst. “Did something happen to Esme?”

“Huh? Who?” Cody said. I scowled at him, and he blinked. “Ohhhh,” he said, as if he at last remembered what had happened or even who Esme was. “No, she’s fine. She’s in her room. I wasn’t waiting for her. Morgan and Val are working in there. I was waiting for Morgan.”

Obviously, I thought, biting my tongue as his blue eyes shifted back to the door, as if he couldn’t bear to tear his gaze away for more than a few seconds at a time. “Does your fated mate know you’ve turned into a low-key stalker?” I asked wryly. “Or are you just following her in the shadows?”

Cody looked mildly scandalized. “Wolf shifter or not, I would *never* stalk anyone, Celeste,” he said. I’d rarely seen such a serious look on his face. “She knows I’m here. And I’m glad to see you here, too!” Just like that, his usual happy-go-lucky expression returned. “Abi told me what happened. I’m glad you’re doing better.”

Whatever hostility I felt soon faded away, touched by the genuine concern in Cody’s tone. But then, he kept talking. “I mean, I already have emotional blue balls, then my friend disappears comes back, looking like a train hit her! I mean, c’mon.” He made a face at me, and I smiled.

“I’ll put in a good word for you,” I said, shaking my head. Despite coming on too strong sometimes, Cody was clearly a sweetheart, and if Morgan reciprocated, I suspected they’d make a good couple. She could use help getting out more often, and Cody would rescue her from any unwanted social situation. Morgan might also help him slow down and appreciate the things around him more.

If I didn’t survive beyond the eclipse, I wanted to do what I could for my friends. I reached for the door before I paused, glancing back at the shifter. “Wait. Why are you still out here?”

Cody shrugged. “Well, I’m not a healer. I wanted to talk to Morgan and didn’t want to interrupt her. Waiting’s weird, but sniffing her out when she’s doing magic with her aunt is even

weirder, right?” He picked up even more speed. “Besides, she doesn’t even know we’re fated mates yet. I’m just *dying* to tell her, but I don’t want to freak her out. That’s not a thing witches do! It’s a shifter thing. But...it really matters to *me*.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, processing everything he’d spit out. At least he’d realized blurting out that information wasn’t the best course of action. Even if Morgan wasn’t shy and reserved, announcing someone was your fated mate could feel coercive. Hell, I’d wanted to punch Fenris in his handsome nose for a few weeks when he’d told me that because I was so angry with him.

“Have you tried, you know, inviting her for a walk on the beach?” I asked. Isla Lobo was a particularly romantic location, I was coming to realize, and I wondered if Fenris had always wanted it to be one. “Let her get to know you a bit?”

“Well...”

I frowned. “Cody, I don’t know how shifter couples do it, but I know how weird it feels when a shifter starts going on about a ‘fated mate’ and you aren’t a shifter yourself, or you don’t know you are one.” I shook my head. “I think you’ll have a much better outcome if Morgan gets to know you as *Cody* first. I don’t think it would hurt for you to learn more about her, either.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You know, that’s a good idea,” he said. “It’s not like I’ve never been on a date before. You think she’d say yes if I asked her to go for a walk?”

I nodded. “I do, though don’t hover around doors, waiting for her to come out. Just be normal, charming Cody King. You know, like when you first met me and Abi.”

He laughed. “When you psychically knocked me out? Yeah, I must have made a real good impression.”

My smile returned. “You know that was nothing personal,” I said, shaking my head. “I had stuff to do.” Like finding my Aunt Esme, in fact. Back then, I’d just thought she’d gone globetrotting again, as she often had before.

How naive I was...

My smile fell when I thought of how I'd found my aunt. "Now, shoo. I want to talk to Val about Esme."

"I'm going, I'm going," Cody said, starting to retreat down the hall. "But if Morgan says anything about me, promise me you'll tell me."

"Promise," I said as I turned around to open the door.

I crept into the room quietly, not wanting to cause a disturbance in case Val and Morgan were concentrating. Instead, the pair of witches were chatting quietly as they placed a few ingredients into the mortar in front of them. Though I couldn't name most herbs by sight or smell alone, the potent *green* scent was particularly reminiscent of the healing tincture Val had given me before.

"Do you need some help?" I asked as I walked over to Val's side, setting my grimoire down on the bench in front of me.

"I'm glad to see you up and about," Val said warmly.

Morgan glanced up, looking like she was about to speak when her gaze fell on the large book. She inhaled sharply as her dark brown eyes widened. Setting a few leaves back down on the bench, she stepped around her aunt to join me. "Oh, Celeste! You have a Handmaiden grimoire. It's beautiful!" She reached out before stopping herself, giving me a sheepish look. "Do you mind if I touch it?"

"By all means!" I stepped sideways to make more room for her as she ran her fingertips over the moonstone. I smiled at her awed look as she leafed through the pages. "Do you have a Thalassa one?" I asked her.

"Hmm? Oh, no, not me. Some of the coven elders do, though, and I've studied from it." Morgan paused. "I've read so much about the Handmaiden witches, though, and I assumed all of their ancestral work was lost when..." She stopped herself as her cheeks turned red.

I bit my lip and tried to shake a distant, longing feeling. "Someone had saved this. It'd been sealed, but Fenris was able to retrieve it for me." I paused, giving Morgan a thoughtful

look. She was one of the most well-read people I'd ever met, and this included the professors I'd worked with back in graduate school—they just read about different subjects. “So, do all lines have books like these?”

“Well, for the most part, yes,” Morgan said, her eyes already back on the old pages. “Appearance and style differ, of course, but most keep a record to pass on from one generation of witches and warlocks to the next.”

“Have you ever read any texts from the Aurora witches?” I asked, trying to hold in my excitement. *Morgan might know something Val doesn't. She's always bragging about how much her niece knows, after all!*

Morgan looked up, biting her lower lip. “Unfortunately, no,” she said, shaking her head. “The Aurora witches are, ah... a bit hostile toward all other covens. They aren't willing to share information like some of the others the Thalassa coven works with.”

Val stopped grinding the ingredients inside the mortar and glanced at us. “There was a time when folk within the paranormal world freely exchanged ideas and discoveries. However, the last time the Solar Sovereign was in power, several Aurora witches pledged to him. He's long since gone, but I wouldn't be surprised if several witches were still loyal to whoever is the Solar Sovereign now. They'll most likely show up at the eclipse.” She frowned at the idea.

I sighed. *Oh, Aurora witches will show*, I thought, but didn't dare say anything else. I didn't know the limits of my death mark, but I didn't want to test the boundaries. I let the topic go as Morgan continued to leaf through my grimoire, pausing when she came to an intricate sketch. “Oh!” she gasped. “Auntie, look!” She motioned Val closer.

They both murmured appreciations and pointed at the handwritten notes. I'd done nothing but inherit the old tome, yet still felt a swell of pride as the pair of witches appreciated the work my ancestors had recorded, glad I could help for once. It felt good to be part of a network, sharing what I could, even though I was still new to this world.

I watched until they flipped to a page with a beautiful illustration of a wolf. It was obvious that it wasn't just a wolf but a shifter, and as I leaned in, I recognized my mother's handwriting in a small note underneath the drawing. She'd referred to the psychic spell I'd come across before, the one used to name a wolf shifter's fated mate.

Morgan flipped the page, and I realized my mother's notes continued onto the next one.

Wolf shifters are often soothed by one another. They do not need to speak a word, as if the presence of their match alone is a balm for frayed nerves or open wounds. They're truly two halves of one whole and will go to extraordinary lengths to keep others—even themselves—from causing harm to their fated mate. It is a truly beautiful bond. — Enora

I paused and bit my lip. When Fenris's wolf was feral the first time I went to Antarctica, and he'd pinned me at that icy gorge, I could've sworn it was *Fenris*, not his inner wolf, who'd stopped the feral beast from killing me. It was Fenris who'd thrown himself off the cliff to keep me out of harm's way. *Does the curse impact how he views his fated mate when he's that close to the full moon? Would all wolf shifters be that way if the Solar Sovereign reversed the curse and they all fell under it again?* As terrifying as that idea was, a happier thought followed. *If I can help Fenris lift his curse, will he be more in harmony with his inner wolf?*

I wanted to help him if I could. I wanted peace for him. Security. If I was gone, at least he'd draw on his wolf's strength instead of fighting against bloodthirsty urges.

"Ah, here's one." The sound of Val's voice drew me back, and I looked at them leafing through the different psychic spells the Handmaiden witches had recorded over time.

Morgan nodded and tapped the book. "Yes, I think that'll be helpful as we untangle some memories. It will help reduce some of the confusion. I think..." She went past a few more before returning to the previous page. "I think it will work nicely in conjunction with this one, which should provide more of a healing effect to the psyche."

Val looked back at me. “If you’re feeling up to it, I think this would be a good place to start with your aunt. But I would still practice at night, as your magic will inherently be stronger then, and you may feel unstable after your recent...practice.”

“Of course!” I said, eager for any way to help my aunt.

Val gave me a stern look. “Remember,” she said gently, “we have no way of knowing what Sabine has done to her. The recovery process may take weeks, even months. If it doesn’t seem like it’s working right away, we cannot get frustrated and give up.”

“I know,” I said, nodding.

But this can’t take months.

We started working with Esme that night, and the night after, but we’d made no real progress. As each day crept by, it felt like my death mark got heavier, and I had no more answers than what I’d started with.

For the third night in a row, Morgan and I were together, slowly smoothing the sharp, jagged edges Sabine had left in my aunt’s mind before Val stepped in with a soothing spell, gently lulling my aunt to sleep when she showed signs of distress. She hadn’t said anything to me beyond when Val had first let me see her, and I was beginning to worry she wouldn’t recover at all.

I should practice with Lyka, too, I thought as I bid goodnight to Val and Morgan. I need to be as strong as possible, and he hasn’t been doing any better since his run in with Sabine, either. I can get him on the right path before... before the eclipse.

Finding my way to Fenris’s office, I knocked on the door frame and poked my head inside. To my surprise, Grant Oakley was standing next to Fenris’s desk, leaning over as he murmured and Fenris nodded along.

“Oh!” I said. I’d been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn’t even heard them speaking before walking in. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Grant glanced up, his bushy, silvering eyebrows pushing together as he inclined his head, muttering what might've been "hello." Fenris, on the other hand, trained his attention on me at once.

"You never interrupt me," he said, his amber eyes warm. "Did you need anything?"

"I actually wanted to go and see Lyka," I said, chewing on the inside of my cheek. "Val and Morgan and I have been working on some psychic healing spells for Esme, and I thought Lyka might benefit from them, too."

Fenris nodded, getting to his feet. "I'll accompany you," he said. "It might help with what I have in mind, anyway." He paused just long enough to nod to Grant, promising to speak to him later before he was at my side, leading me down to the silver-lined cell holding his brother.

"He has become more and more listless with each day," Fenris said as we walked down the corridor. "I was always concerned he might hurt himself during one of his manic outbursts. Yet, seeing him so despondent is...disturbing."

My heart ached at the hurt in Fenris's voice, and I reached out to give his hand a quick squeeze. "I'll do whatever I can," I promised as we stopped in front of Lyka's cell.

I stretched out my mental awareness and found Lyka easily. It was too easy for me to push past the first "barrier" into his mind, and I took a breath, readying myself to cast one of the smoothing spells we'd used for Esme when Lyka suddenly erupted into a savage snarl. He slammed his body into the door moments later, a heavy, metallic thump echoing around us while he forcibly recoiled from my presence.

I grimaced, realizing that even if he was despondent, he was still sensitive to someone prodding his mind. *Why should he trust me? All he's gotten from a psychic witch so far is pain.*

Fenris gave me a sideways look, but I simply licked my lips, taking a moment to steady myself. I couldn't imagine how hard it was for him to see his brother, his best friend, reduced to this state, and I refused to make it any worse. There

was a softer, gentler spell I could use, and I was about to cast it when I remembered what my mother had written about the soothing effect of a fated mate.

“Hey, Fenris?” I said, taking a step away from the door. As I retreated from Lyka’s mind, the howling and snarls faded, and he went silent again. “If we track Lyka’s fated mate down, would that help him recover?”

Chapter 5

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 25 Days

I frowned, not sure how to answer Celeste's question. The first issue was the matter of *tracking* the fated mate down. If they weren't in your pack, or in a neighboring one, you might not ever find them. Even now, when the world was a much smaller place with the Internet and all the connections it offered, you might meet your fated mate and never know it. It wasn't a bond recognized without meeting in person—you smelled it. You *felt* it. As powerful as the inner wolf was, it wasn't so *magic* it could transcend that fact. Otherwise, fated mates wouldn't be such an uncommon prospect.

And that didn't even address the second issue: I had no reason to be confident finding this person would soothe Lyka's tortured mind.

"I am not sure that would be a good idea," I said, looking warily at the door. My brother had gone silent in his cell, but the furious snarling was a stark reminder of the past. "He was unhinged hundreds of years ago, and that was *before* Sabine messed with his mind. What if he ripped another person apart?"

"I don't think he will," Celeste said.

“How are you so sure? Is that really a risk we should take?”

“I found some notes in the Handmaiden grimoire about wolf shifters. About the lengths they’ll go to keep their fated mates from harm, even from themselves.” She paused for a moment, giving me a thoughtful look. “You did throw yourself off a cliff into a ravine instead of harming me, remember?”

I grimaced. That I’d even put Celeste in any danger at all still didn’t sit well. I’d left her alone in the Antarctic wilderness, but it was the lesser of two evils. I couldn’t take the risk of my wolf causing her harm under the influence of the moon sickness.

“I suppose you have a point,” I said, rubbing my chin. I trusted Celeste’s judgment, and her interpretations of the Handmaidens’ written history. “If you’re able to pinpoint who his fated mate is...it’s worth investigating. If you can’t, magically speaking, then we don’t have the time or resources to spend on it right now. Not before the eclipse.”

“I understand,” Celeste said, already looking brighter.

“And,” I continued, holding up a finger before she got too carried away, “If we can’t bring this person safely to the island, it will still have to wait, alright?” As much as I cared for my brother, I couldn’t jeopardize Celeste’s safety. Not now. Not when we were so close to sealing our own bond.

After that, we’d have eternity to help Lyka heal.

Celeste paused for a moment, then gave a nod. “I understand,” she said again. “But I think I at least have to try. I’ll start practicing right away.” She turned, already hurrying back down the corridor.

I trotted after her, grabbing her by her wrist before she could escape into the night. “The moon is weak,” I said. It was barely peaking over the horizon, which meant it wouldn’t provide Celeste with much power. “And you’ve already done quite a bit of work tonight. Come back upstairs with me. We can pick up where we left off.”

She stopped as she held her book against her chest. “Uh-huh. It’s not dawn yet. I’m not *that* tired.”

I rolled my eyes. “Celeste, I am well-aware you’d work until you dropped if you thought it was the right thing to do,” I said, matching her smug smile with a smirk. Her optimism that she could help Lyka had buoyed my own mood. Celeste had made a good point regarding my inner wolf. I found I struggled against him far less often now that I’d met her. It’d given him a new focus I hadn’t even known was possible.

However, that didn’t mean I wanted Celeste to wear herself out just as she was getting back on her feet. “I can think of plenty of ways to tire you out,” I added.

Celeste leaned in and gave a playful nudge. “Are you sure? Because I could—”

I leaned in to press a kiss to her lips. “I am sure,” I growled. “And I can think of nothing I’d rather do than make sure you’re well-cared for. Come to bed with me, and I will make sure you’re relaxed enough for some *real* rest.”

She gave me a thoughtful look before she stood up on the tips of her toes, kissing my nose instead. “Alright, consider me intrigued,” she said, turning to the corridor back toward the main house. “Do your worst, Fenris.”

“On the contrary, I will do my absolute best.”

As promised, Celeste spent the next few days working with Val and Morgan, continuing to train with her magical abilities, while I moved on the plans I’d made prior to her disappearance. I was no longer in contact with the Order of Stars alone, but with various faerie courts, covens witch and vampiric alike, shifter packs—the list went on. I didn’t want to leave any corner of the globe uncovered. The Solar Sovereign was still trying to hide, but I couldn’t afford to leave her unpressed, even if I did not want her to know the extent of my plans.

The undercurrent of the paranormal world had grown tense since my visit to Florida to meet with the Order of the Stars a few weeks ago. Everyone had become aware this would

culminate in an all-out fight, and few within the paranormal world wanted that, no matter how inevitable it became. Thankfully, the Order had been swaying beings who'd pledged to neither myself nor the Solar Sovereign over to my side.

The legend of the Lunar Lord went in and out of fashion, and they made sure to retell the story of the "wolf god" who protected the balance between the normal and paranormal worlds, ensuring no human looked too carefully beyond the veil. By carrying his curse, instead of depending on the moon's cycle and the sickness that came with its full power, the Lunar Lord allowed shifters to shift at will.

General knowledge of the Lunar Lord ebbed and flowed among the supernatural community, depending on how involved I'd been in paranormal affairs within a given century. Mortal beings tended to forget me quickly as my name faded from their stories. If we hadn't met, the "Lunar Lord" seemed more like a mythical being than a real one and, frankly, I'd tended to prefer this as the decades stretched on. Who could come after me if they didn't even know I existed?

Now, though, that plan was coming back full circle to bite me in the ass. There were multiple families or clans, even a few covens, who had trouble believing I was real at all. It was up to the Order of the Stars to ensure they understood how important the upcoming eclipse would be, and why their help was needed to support the current balance within the paranormal world. It did not matter if they believed in me or the Solar Sovereign—she was going to strike, and she'd stop at nothing to ensure the scales of power would tip back in her favor.

What still concerned me, however, was how this would ripple through the human world. I had far less control over that, and though the Order did their best to infiltrate human organizations, catching any rumors of paranormal activity before they spread too far, their numbers were only so many. There was only so much they could do, and gathering allies was more important right now.

One issue was the group of astronomers who were planning to travel to Peru, excited to experience the apex of

the total solar eclipse from a prime location. It'd be best if they could simply be *convinced* to view it elsewhere, but so far, they'd resisted gentle suggestions. I was debating sending a vampire with hypnotic talents such as Piers, but hadn't come to any firm decision yet. There was also the possibility of using my alpha command, though this meant potential exposure to humans.

I sighed, my mind drifting from my own alpha command to the one Celeste appeared caught under. I was convinced the Solar Sovereign had commanded Celeste to kill me, and her inability to shift was part of the curse. A hot rush of anger flooded through me, and I took a breath to settle my fury before it took over. My fated mate had already suffered enough, having her magic silenced and wolf ensnared most of her life, and for someone to rob her of that now...

I took another breath and looked down at my desk. I'd continued with the current strategy, but I hadn't stopped coming up with a Plan B, either. If something were to happen to her, I'd call off my forces. I'd still be vulnerable, but the Solar Sovereign would surely expect me somewhere near Machu Picchu. There was no way she'd be able to find me in the seven minutes I was most vulnerable if I was across the globe.

My cell phone rang, and I glanced down, frowning at the name. *Game time*, I thought before forcing on a false smile. Convincing the humans to leave my site alone was all part of the plan.

"Hello, Dr. Bronson," I purred into the speaker. "Thank you so much for returning my call. Now, I'd like to talk to you about the upcoming eclipse and a potential donation to the Bronson Astronomy Lab from the Southern Sky Research Station..."

After spending several hours with little to show for it, I nearly threw my phone at the wall. I'd convinced Dr. Bronson to go elsewhere, but there were still six other scientists who weren't persuaded by donations nor by other means. That meant I'd have to send Piers and Gilbert to finish the job.

I stretched as I got up from my leather chair and headed down the hall, hoping to find Celeste in the library as she prepared to train in magic tonight while the moon rose in the sky.

Chapter 6

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 23 Days

Val had given me free rein in her storeroom, offering me whatever I wanted in her catalog. I was welcome to use anything, and at first, I balked at the idea, but the older witch insisted it was easy enough to replace anything I used. She also insisted that even the rarer items weren't as valuable as Esme or Lyka.

Not for the first time, I found myself wishing Val had been my aunt when I was a little girl, but I was still grateful to get to know her now. Her mentorship was invaluable.

I grabbed some rose petals and a few basil leaves, then dropped them into the stone mortar and grinded the plants methodically. It was a monotonous task, especially considering how many tinctures and spells I'd tried in the past few days. There wasn't anything in the Handmaiden grimoire that specifically mentioned death marks or anything similar, so I'd been rifling through some of the books Fenris kept in his library. Even with Morgan's help researching Aurora witches, I couldn't find anything specific to death marks or even tangentially related to the spell.

I'd resolved to make things work for Esme or Lyka, but after my experience transporting myself to Egypt, I was also

determined not to touch anything to do with dark magic again. Regardless of my walking right into the Solar Sovereign's waiting claws, I was still completely wiped out by the experience. It wasn't worth draining my energy so thoroughly that I'd be unable to do any other magic for days after. I wouldn't help anyone if I exhausted myself like that, and if it went poorly enough, I wouldn't even be able to perform magic when the eclipse rolled around. The only plus side was that my wolf wasn't such a powerful undercurrent in everything I did.

I refused to let her aggravation and fear bleed into my thoughts and my actions, but that was getting harder. It wasn't like I'd shifted every day before Zyanya cast an alpha command over me, but the knowledge that I *couldn't* at all drove my wolf crazy.

The restlessness was not a good enough reason to grind myself down, though. Instead, I took Abi up on her offer to join some of her training sessions with Grant Oakley in the morning. I was mostly there for the physical exertion, but I had to admit, the former hunter knew every magical creature known to man—and some that weren't. This morning, he showed Abi how to take down a siren if she ever found herself under one's call. Yesterday, he explained how to hold your own against a witch without magic at your disposal.

These were all good things to know, but I didn't feel any better about the upcoming eclipse. If anything, I worried Abi might need to take *me* down so I didn't hurt Fenris, and the last thing I wanted to do was fight my best friend again. She still felt a lot of guilt for trying to drown me while under Sabine's control, no matter how many times I told her it wasn't her fault.

Suddenly Fenris's scent filled my nose, and I only had seconds to process the familiar warmth of wood smoke and cinnamon before he leaned down to kiss my cheek. I paused, standing still at the workbench as he pressed his chest against my back, one hand on my hip while the other settled into the bench top.

"I could practically feel your stress out in the hallway," he murmured, moving to brush a few strands of hair away from

my face before leaning in to kiss my neck. “I would much prefer my *khuya* be relaxed and satisfied.”

I glanced down at the herbs I’d ground into paste before placing the pestle in the mortar, then slid the stone tools across the bench until they were against the wall. “Is that so?” I asked, allowing myself to press my weight back into Fenris’s warmth.

I felt the rumble in his chest as much as I heard it. “It is,” he said. “I would be more than happy to take you to bed to help resolve the issue.” He kissed the shell of my ear.

“Why take me to bed when there are so many other places you *haven’t* taken me yet?” I asked, canting my hips to grind my behind against him.

Fenris’s nostrils flared, and I heard his sharp inhale as he nipped at my skin, grabbing my hip to turn me around so we stood chest to chest. “Well, we should remedy that right now,” he growled, lifting me up to sit on the bench before sealing his lips over mine.

I sighed softly, content to melt into his affection. As he nipped at my lips, I granted him entrance, groaning gently as his tongue pushed against mine. Fenris kissed like he made love: purposeful, determined, and focused. I threw my arms around his neck, tangling my fingers in his dark hair. He growled as I scratched his scalp, and I groaned in response, rolling my hips again as heat pooled inside me. Then I tipped my head to one side when he pulled back for a breath, exposing my neck to him.

Fenris’s amber eyes flashed, and he leaned back in, running his tongue up the length of my neck. He didn’t bite, but he teased my skin with sharp teeth.

My wolf charged forward, like *I* was preventing her from shifting.

I gasped and reeled backward. I barely registered the fact that I smacked my head on the wall, too distracted by the sudden agony that came alongside a forcibly aborted shift. I

couldn't breathe. The spark of arousal gathering in my belly was doused by a cold wave of pain.

Fenris's expression morphed from one of desire to concern as he got close, carefully smoothing the back of my skull with his hands as he checked for signs of injury. "Take a deep breath," he said, his voice calm. Firm. I found it easy to follow his directions and do exactly as he said.

As I exhaled, some of the rising panic ebbed, replaced by dull pain.

"Are you alright?" he asked once I caught my breath, giving my knee a gentle squeeze. His voice remained controlled, but I suspected he was on the brink of outright rage.

"Yes," I sighed. "Well, no, I'm not. But at the moment, yes."

Fenris pressed his lips together. "I assume you're unable to explain what happened, strictly speaking. But is there anything we can do that'd allow you to shift again?"

My shoulders sank, and I looked down at my knees, fiddling with my hands. "No." As far as I knew, the only way I'd be able to shift again was when Zyanya gave me *permission* to do so, and I wasn't going to see the Solar Sovereign again until the eclipse.

I took a deep breath and looked back up at Fenris. "I finished putting some ingredients together. I'd like to try finding Lyka's mate now, if that's alright with you."

Fenris gave me a concerned look, and for a moment, I was afraid he'd deny that idea. However, the moment passed, and he gave a nod, offering me a hand as I got down, my feet back on the floor. "Of course."

Lyka was quiet when we arrived at his cell, but I knew it wouldn't last long. I sat on the cold, cement floor in front of the reinforced room, placing the mortar holding the herbal mixture in front of me before closing my eyes. If there was one thing particularly useful about being a wolf shifter *and* a witch, it was my heightened senses. I inhaled the aroma of

basil, rose, and dill, allowing the medley to permeate my thoughts. It would've been best if Lyka had consumed ginger as well, but at best he'd be despondent, and at worst, actively hostile.

Fenris stood behind me, one hand on my shoulder as he offered his silent support. I drew from his strength before I reached out to Lyka's mind, ready for his violent rejection of my presence this time. I was stronger than I'd been a few days ago. I was also able to work more quickly, combining elements of psychic magic and conjuring as I looked for the unsevered sign of a fated mate.

As I tugged on it, a distant image appeared in my mind's eye, as if I were looking at a photo through dark water. The more I focused, the sharper the image became, until the shapes became not a person, but an entire vision. I didn't have time to wonder if I was viewing a memory; instead, I fixated on a blond woman, on a beach, walking in the gentle surf despite the late hour. The stretch of sand and scraggly trees felt familiar right away, and I had to wonder if this person was somewhere in Florida or the Gulf Coast.

She bent over, scooping something up out of the sand. As she stood, she turned, smiling as she handed it to...

My eyes flew open. "Oh my god!"

"What is it?" Fenris demanded, fingers gripping my shoulder. "Did he hurt you?"

I glanced at the door, only just realizing that Lyka was snarling and hissing, clearly infuriated that I was in his mind. I blinked as I tried to contain my shock, then I took Fenris's hand and got to my feet. "No, I—I saw his mate. I *know* his fated mate," I said, barely able to believe what I'd seen. This was no memory. There was no way Lyka was in Florida any time in the past century, much less the past few years.

"You are sure?" Fenris asked with some trepidation. "This isn't a memory of yours?"

I shook my head. "No. I haven't been to Shell Point Beach in a few years, and the last time I went, I was with Abi." I

frowned. “Actually, I’ve never been with Liana alone. The last time I went with her, it was a big group of people.”

“Who?” Fenris said, pursing his lips. “Wait...isn’t that who I paid for the dress?” He wrinkled his nose at the reminder that I’d been engaged to someone else once upon a time.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, practically bouncing up and down. “Yes! That’s her. Liana Edgington. We all went to college together. She spent the summers working at a dress boutique and really fell in love with it, so she switched to a business major. She opened her own shop about two years ago now.” I grabbed Fenris’s hand and squeezed his fingers. “She lives in Tallahassee, Fenris! We can go get her. She can meet Lyka, and that’ll help him with recovery.”

Fenris looked thoughtful for a moment. “We can bring her to Isla Lobo to at least see how it goes,” he said, licking his lips. “But not for a few more days. I want to send people ahead to meet her to make sure she hasn’t been found by someone else.” His expression went dark, and I knew he was thinking of Sabine. She’d gotten to Abi before my friend came to Isla Lobo, so I could hardly blame him for his concern.

“Of course,” I said, nodding. As my shock waned, my left brain suggested Liana might not want to come to the island at all. She had a business to run, and that was just one mundane reason. Liana had always been more superstitious than Abi or me, avoiding black cats and believing whole-heartedly in jinxes, karma, and horoscopes, but that was a stretch when it came to wolf shifters or vampires.

Still, Liana told us a story one night. She’d said that her godfather was a powerful shaman who had healed her broken foot when she stayed with him one summer. When she told other people, she’d said no one had believed her. At the time, I’d dismissed it as drunk rambling. Now I wondered if it was just a silly story or much more.

I guess I’ll find out soon, I thought.

Over the next two and a half days, I debriefed Abi and Cody before Walter escorted them to Tallahassee to meet up with

Liana. I hoped Abi would be able to ease Liana into the reality of the situation, while Cody would be the more “paranormal” of the pair. If anything odd was going on with Liana, he’d sense it. If nothing else, Fenris was quite confident in Cody’s loyalty, much as I was in Abi’s.

Despite my friend’s departure, Grant agreed to keep training me, which helped when it came to the awful, restless feeling I woke up to every morning. Knowing it wasn’t anxiety, but my wolf, helped me control my thoughts. But there was only so much physical exercise one could do before reaching outright exhaustion.

I also had to research during the afternoon and work with Val and Morgan under the moon as we continued to try easing Esme’s pain. The spell work I’d managed to fit in between had had no effect on my death mark so far.

However, I had found *one* potential key while studying my mother’s grimoire. Roa, a witch who’d owned it before her, noted that Handmaiden witches are the most powerful during the total solar eclipse, as the moon blocks out the sun. This was likely the reason our ancestors gave the Lunar Lord his power all those centuries ago. But if Roa was right, Aurora witches, totally cut off from the sun, were equally at their weakest.

Maybe during those seven minutes, I could cast a spell that’d allow me to block or otherwise remove the death mark, though I had no way to know for sure.

As I looked for spells that worked to improve mental fortitude, I noticed many blank pages in the grimoire. Some were scattered in between, while others were in the back. At first, I found this odd, but realized I couldn’t see where people had added pages over the decades despite all the different handwriting styles. The grimoire must have always been this size, so past owners left blank spots for future ones to make their own notes or record more spells.

If I manage to outline this death mark, at least I’ll have that to look forward to.

It felt like the hours had dragged into days, but Walter was due back soon with Abi, Cody, and hopefully, Liana. Fenris and I were standing outside his home, and I was doing everything in my power to not bounce up and down in excitement like a little kid. I knew Fenris was watching me, but he only gave a smile.

“The twins should be back today as well,” Fenris said idly, giving my hand a squeeze.

I glanced up at him, grateful for the momentary distraction. “They were successful, then?”

Fenris smiled grimly. “They would not be my associates if I couldn’t trust them to get the job done, and get it done quickly.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know, Piers and Gilbert do an awful lot for you. Would it really be so bad to call them your buddies instead of your ‘associates?’”

Fenris looked back at me. “If the Lunar Lord started referring to ‘buddies,’ he’d lose what legitimacy he has left,” he said dryly, despite the amusement dancing in his bright amber eyes.

Suddenly, he glanced up. Abi came trotting down the dock and toward the house. Cody trailed behind her, then next to him was Liana, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she tried to pay attention to what he was saying while looking around. A big grin split my face as I waved, and Liana’s face lit up as she waved back, at last able to tear away from the talkative wolf shifter to join Abi and I on the patio.

“I’m so happy to see you!” I gushed, sweeping her up in a big hug. “Was the trip okay?”

“Celeste!” she exclaimed, holding me back so she could look me up and down. “I was starting to get really worried about you two, you know, with everything that happened. The dress.” She paused, biting her lip, and I was glad she didn’t say anything else about the almost-wedding.

I reached over and squeezed her elbow. “I’m sorry we practically disappeared on you,” I said. I really did feel bad

about that, even if most of it had been out of my control. “I’ll catch you up on everything. We have *so* much to talk about.”

Liana gave a nod. “I’m just happy you’re alright,” she said, pulling back from the hug. She’d just noticed Fenris and was barely able to keep from staring at him before looking away again. “Ah, hi. Nice to meet you,” she said to him quietly, giving an awkward little wave. “Thanks for having me here.”

“My pleasure,” he said coolly. His face was the picture of calm, but I could sense an undercurrent of aggravation underneath. It wasn’t directed at Liana as much as it was her *fear*, and by now I knew that was due to his wolf—she was clearly frightened of him, and at this point, he was ready to feed off that emotion. This, I recognized, was another reason he’d secluded himself for centuries.

“Walter,” he said as his assistant came up from the dock, “send the twins to my office once they arrive.”

“Of course,” Walter said, and Fenris turned to head back into his home.

Liana exhaled as the door closed behind him, her eyes wide as she glanced back at me and Abi. “That was him, right?” she whispered breathlessly. “Fenris? Abi said this was Fenris’s home.”

“Yes, that’s him,” I said, giving Abi a sideways look. I knew she’d have to have given Liana *some* details, but I hoped she hadn’t shared too much before we knew if Liana wanted to be involved in our paranormal world.

“And he’s Celeste’s fated mate-lover-husband. And he’s a wolf god, too!” Abi gave me a playful nudge with her elbow.

I frowned. “You shouldn’t blurt everything out at once,” I said, aware of the sharp gasp Liana tried to cover with cough. Abi at least looked sheepish before grabbing Liana’s hand. “Come on, let’s go inside,” she said to Liana.

“This is amazing,” Liana whispered as we walked down the hallway, Abi pointing out each room like she was giving a tour back in the Challenger Learning Center. “It’s like...an entire private resort.”

“Oh, it’s private alright,” Abi said, snickering. “Security here is no joke, but it’s not *technically* a resort, despite the stunning views. You’ll figure it out, don’t worry.”

Chapter 7

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 23 Days

Abi led us up to her guest room, where we pulled off our shoes and got comfortable on her bed.

“Am I going to stay with you?” Liana asked, pulling her knees up to her chest and tucking her chin over them. “Wow. This room is *huge*.”

“Nah,” Abi said, shaking her head. “I’m sure Walter is setting up another room all for you. Right, Celeste?”

I was well-aware that Abi wasn’t too excited about a girls’ sleepover because Gilbert would be back any minute now, and she’d truly missed him. I glanced back at Liana. “This place is huge,” I said. “I’m sure Walter will find you a room so you can have some private space.”

“Who’s Walter? The pilot from the private jet? Does he live here, too?”

I smiled. “Well, kind of. He’s more like Fenris’s personal assistant. He’s been working with him for a while. Piloting is just part of the job.”

Abi grinned. “He’s also an *amazing* cook.”

“Are you guys sure this isn’t a resort?” Liana asked, looking even more astonished than she had before. “This all sounds luxurious—*amazingly* luxurious. Like the vacation we always dreamed about in college, but never took.”

“It’s all real,” I promised. “I can give you the full tour in a bit, but we need to catch up first! I’m sure Abi caught you up a bit, but I have no idea what you’ve been doing.”

“Oh, well, you know. Just work,” Liana said, shrugging. “One of the women I hired to work at the bridal shop is an amazing seamstress, so it’s been nice to be able to take more time off for myself recently. I think I told you I was going to break up with Steve, right? Well, I did. I even did it in person, though I don’t think he deserved that much.”

My face fell. “Oh. So he *was* cheating on you, then?”

“Yeah,” she said, sighing. “I was going to break up with him regardless. He’d become an entirely different person from when we first met, you know? He stopped wanting to tell me anything, snapped at me randomly. Even if he was just having a hard time...I can’t love someone if they don’t treat me like a partner, you know? I guess, in a way, I’m relieved it’s over. I got the closure I went out there for.” She opened her mouth to say more, then seemed to think the better of it, her cheeks turning pink as she suddenly looked down.

A grin spread across Abi’s face as she caught the look. “What is it?” she asked. When Liana pretended to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, Abi nudged her knee. “C’mon, what is it? Liana, seriously. I told you about *wolf shifters*, okay? Anything you have to say can’t be that weird by comparison.”

“Well,” she said slowly, studying her hands, “I read tarot cards for myself, and before I went to Kansa to break up with Steve, I pulled the Death card, the Hermit card, and the Eight of Cups. They all signify new beginnings, in a way, but I assumed this all had to do with Steve. Breaking up with him would be a fresh start for me, never mind the fact that staffing changes at work were freeing up my time. But they meant

more than that.” She looked up. “I know you’re both scientists and don’t believe in this crap, but...I’m here now, right?”

You have no idea how much what I believe has changed, my friend, I thought. My life had taken such a sharp left turn, but I didn’t want to overwhelm Liana with all the details right away.

“Yeah, well, I can be wrong sometimes!” Abi laughed. “I mean, I don’t know exactly how astrology or tarot cards work, but after meeting witches and seeing what Celeste can do, I’m not willing to write anything off just because I don’t understand it.”

Liana’s expression softened, and her smile returned. “So, Abi gave me a bit of a rundown before we came, but...what exactly are we doing on this island?” she asked, looking between the two of us.

I paused, relieved that Abi had, at least, not spilled *all* the beans at once. I exchanged a quick look with my best friend. After tonight, Liana’s entire world was going to change. At least she wasn’t wrong about my skepticism. Even after meeting Fenris, Piers, and Gilbert, I’d still struggled for weeks to wrap my head around there being an entire paranormal world lurking in the shadows of the one I thought I knew. Some things in my life made more sense, like my “weird” Aunt Esme being an actual, literal witch, but other things were downright frightening, like the psychic vision I’d had at age five of my kindergarten teacher dying in a car crash.

This, of course, was to say nothing of fated mates. As grating as I’d first found Fenris, at least I’d been able to talk to him. Liana was fated to Lyka, and while I hoped her presence would help heal his mind and restore him, there was no guarantee. What Sabine and Sela did to him may have been irreversible. Besides, even if everything worked out perfectly and Lyka was a completely changed man, that didn’t guarantee Liana would like him.

I took a deep breath and decided not to let the silence between us drag on too long. “I’m going to show you,” I said. “Take a deep breath and close your eyes.”

Liana paused. “Wait, how can you show me if I close my eyes? Is this supposed to be some surprise? You guys know I don’t love those.”

I reached out to give her hand a squeeze. “I promise we aren’t going to spring that on you. Right, Abi?”

Abi nodded. “No surprises,” she said solemnly. “Promise.”

Liana studied both of us for a moment before nodding. She took a breath and closed her hazel eyes. As she did, I steadied myself, then I reached out, finding her mind easily. It reminded me of a pleasant garden gate, easy to swing open once I found the latch.

I was careful with my friend’s mind as I heard her inhale sharply, and I offered her a few memories: meeting Fenris, coming to Isla Lobo, meeting Piers and Gilbert, how Abi got involved. I carefully skirted around anything involving the Solar Sovereign or Sabine, at least for the moment, but allowed Liana to witness Fenris discuss some of the Celestial Pack’s history, as that would soon be relevant to her.

After a few minutes, I released the spell and retreated from Liana’s mind. She looked at me, awestruck, a tiny smile on her lips.

Abi glanced at me. “You just did some witchy shit, huh?”

Liana’s smile grew. “So you’re a witch *and* a werewolf,” she said to me breathlessly.

“Wolf shifter,” Abi and I replied simultaneously.

Abi looked at me and cackled as I rolled my eyes. ““Werewolf” is a derogatory term,” I said quickly. “It has to do with that curse. I can explain it to you in more detail later, if you want.” I didn’t want to overload her with minutia just yet.

After waiting for what felt like forever for Liana to say more, I spoke up again. “Are you alright?”

“It’s a lot to take in,” Liana acknowledged, nodding to herself. “But honestly, I’m just really glad to know I’m not crazy.”

I blinked, exchanging a quick glance with Abi before looking back at Liana. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“I think I told you guys my godfather healed my foot once, right?” she asked with a tremor in her voice. When we both nodded, she continued. “Well, I didn’t give you the full story. I usually don’t talk about it at all, but... anyway, when I was six, my mom lost her job, so she sent me to stay with my godfather for the summer while she tried to get a new gig. I was too young to be worried about it, and once I stopped feeling homesick, I had a *great* time.

“My godfather owned a lot of land, and I’d go play in the yard or the woods all the time. One day, while I was picking wildflowers, a bear cub wandered out of the woods. At first, I was frightened, but then she magically transformed into a girl about my age. She said her name was Alyssa. After that, I met her every day after lunch, and we’d explore the woods and the nearby creek. I tried to get her to come into the house, but she never would. If my godfather came outside to call me in for dinner, she’d always run away. She was so much faster than me, it was like she’d never been there at all.

“My godfather never seemed that surprised when I told him about Alyssa, but my mother never believed me. She started referring to her as my ‘imaginary friend,’ and the more I insisted she was real, the angrier my mother got. I’d ask to go back to my godfather’s to see Alyssa, but she never let me. I guess she got scared about the ‘imaginary friend’ thing at some point because she started taking me to doctors and specialists and stuff.” Liana paused, her expression growing wistful as she looked down at her hands. “I made friends at school, but when I told them about Alyssa, they made fun of me. Eventually, I learned not to talk about it. I wondered as I got older if I’d just had an active imagination as a kid. But it always seemed so *real* to me. It made me doubt myself, you know? Whenever anything out of the ordinary happened to me, I’d start wondering if I was overreacting or making it up.” She offered us a shaky smile.

Overcome with the urge to comfort her, I leaned over and pulled Liana into a hug. “I’m sorry we didn’t take you

seriously when you told us about your godfather,” I said, giving her a squeeze. “Even if we were drunk, I’m sure that didn’t help matters.”

Liana looked at me. “I’m sure the only reason I brought it up was because I was drunk,” she said. “It wasn’t something I thought about *that* much, and I didn’t talk about it. I do wonder what happened to him, though. If he’s still alive. How he is. My mother cut off all contact after that summer. I’m sure she blamed him for my ‘imaginary friend’ troubles.”

I took a breath, deeply relieved Liana was accepting this with far more grace than I had. “You know, I did meet a bear shifter recently,” I told her, thinking of the grizzly shifter who’d offered us his home in Alaska. “He was rather kind.”

“Did you show her your own big sexy immortal shifter? Not *too* much, right?” Abi asked me, a wicked gleam in her eye.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “I’m not going to send her running for the hills, Abi. Besides, Liana probably wants to get some rest after the trip here.”

“I didn’t see anything like *that*,” Liana said, giving Abi a stern look. “But...I did see him. Who *is* he, exactly? Beyond what Abi said earlier...” She paused, looking at me. “It’s not like I’m about to fall asleep after learning that vampires and witches and shifters are real, so don’t use that as an excuse.”

“Well...” I frowned. *How do I explain this?* I tapped my finger against my lips. “Fenris is currently the Lunar Lord, but he wasn’t always. Other wolf shifters in the Celestial Pack fought for the title, too. His brother was the Lunar Lord before him, and his father was the Lunar Lord before him, but that didn’t stop others from grasping for the title. His brother, Lyka, is still alive—the wolves of the Celestial Pack all have an immortal lifespan—but he’s...feral, for lack of a better word.” I paused, waiting to see how Liana took all of this.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “He was that one guy in one of your memories? In a jungle or a rain forest? He looked a lot like Fenris, but...more weathered, somehow.”

“Yes, that was Lyka.”

“Okay,” Liana said again, studying my face. “So, I understand why Fenris is so important to you, but what does Lyka have to do with this story?”

“Well, you did want to know why you were on this island...” I said. Liana raised her eyebrows as I sighed. “Remember Abi mentioning how Fenris was my fated mate, though just consider him a ‘partner’ for now. Anyway, Lyka has a fated mate, too. We thought for a long time he didn’t, and that’s why his wolf went mad, but...he does.”

“And...?”

“And that’s you,” I said.

Liana’s eyes could’ve jumped right out of their sockets. “Me?” she squeaked.

“We won’t force you to marry him or anything,” I said quickly. “In fact, if you want to, we’ll take you home right now—you never even have to meet him. The reason we asked you to come was because the presence of a wolf shifter’s fated mate provides them with some peace and, after everything Lyka’s been through, we thought that’d help him heal. But you aren’t under any obligation,” I repeated. “I want to make sure you know that.”

“How do you know this?” Liana asked, frowning. “I mean, that it’s me. How can you be sure?”

“I cast a spell that allowed me to...scry, I guess. That’s the only way I can describe it.” I paused. “When I saw it was you, I could hardly believe it, either. But there’s been so much going on, and I figured this could be the only chance I got to tell you about it, even if you don’t want to do anything with Lyka. I...well, they already targeted one of my friends, and I didn’t want that to happen to you, too, if I could help prevent that.”

Liana blinked, looking shocked before she glanced at Abi, who gave a brief nod in confirmation.

“I...wow...okay,” Liana said after a moment, clearly taken aback. “This...this is a lot to digest,” she said, chewing on her

lip. After a moment, she gave a nod, then met my gaze. “I can’t promise anything, but if it’s true that if just my presence would help soothe him, I can at least do that.”

My heart soared, and I squeezed Liana’s hand. Where Abi was always the friend with the fun ideas, I was the “mom” friend, making sure we didn’t get into *too* much trouble. Liana had always been the gentlest of the trio. I should’ve known she’d agree if she thought it’d help someone. After all, she’d flown all the way to Kansas to break up with a guy who hadn’t given her the time of day.

“So, is he here on the island? Lyka?” she asked.

“He is.” I tried not to appear too relieved. “You could meet him tonight, if you’d like, but he’s been through a *lot* and he may...well, he may not notice you at all. I don’t know. These days, he’s been extremely despondent.”

“That’s okay,” Liana said. “If it helps, it helps. It can’t hurt to try. Would it be okay if I had a few minutes to just, you know, clean up? And then we can head down?”

“Of course!” I stood, grabbing Abi’s arm to pull her off the bed. “Take all the time you need.”

After Liana had the chance to catch her breath, clean up, and have a quick meal, we reconvened in Abi’s bedroom. We’d need to find Fenris first, and I suspected he was in his office. The three of us were about to head down the stairs when a dark blur sped past.

Liana gave a jolt when she felt the cold breeze, turning with wide eyes as Abi giggled, wrapping her arms around Gilbert as he scooped her up off the ground, then spun her around like a heroine straight out of the sappiest romance. “Hello to you, too,” she said, cupping his face in her hands before giving him another kiss.

Liana shrank behind me as she stared at the happy couple. “How did he move so quickly?” she whispered, biting her lip. “I barely saw him!”

I shrugged. “It’s a vampire thing,” I said, not entirely sure about the mechanics of their superior speed. Now that I

thought about it, I wasn't sure if a wolf shifter or a vampire would win in a foot race.

Liana took another step closer to me. I didn't miss the way she swallowed. "Vampire?" she whispered. "What do they, um, eat?" she asked a moment later, giving me a concerned look.

I leaned over to give her elbow a reassuring squeeze. "For the most part, they drink from blood bags," I said quietly. "Gilbert and Piers are our friends."

Gilbert stopped murmuring to Abi and flashed Liana a smile, bowing his head. "It is a pleasure to meet any friend of Abigail's," he said as he set her back on the ground. "I will see you later?"

"Yeah, we're just giving Liana a quick tour," Abi said as I turned, leading Liana back towards the stairs and the first floor. We found Piers in Fenris's office, just finishing his report to the Lunar Lord.

"Once I got them talking," he drawled on, "the astronomers really weren't difficult to hypnotize. If time weren't of the essence, I wouldn't have needed to at all!"

"Mhm," Fenris said, his eyes already falling on me. "Are you ready to go see Lyka?" he asked, looking at Abi and Liana.

"If you don't mind," I said, grinning as Piers saw his exit and zipped away.

Fenris brought us down to the holding room. Even Abi got quiet as we approached the reinforced cell. I had to fight the urge to constantly check on Liana, not wanting to freak her out or make her feel like I didn't trust her.

"You can look in here," Fenris murmured, motioning to the stabilized glass. "He's..." He trailed off and sighed as he gazed at his listless brother, shaking his head. "Well, I suppose you can see for yourself."

As he stepped back to allow Liana her space, I walked over to join him, reaching down to tangle our fingers together.

I gave him a hopeful squeeze, trying not to hold my breath as Liana peered inside.

“I should try to get his attention,” Fenris whispered after a minute, when it seemed like Lyka hadn’t noticed any visitors.

I frowned, wondering if I should try another psychic spell, anything to get him to wake up, when Lyka suddenly blinked, exhaling, then inhaling a few times before he turned and approached the window. I could’ve sworn he was looking at Liana—legitimately *looking* at her.

My friend still looked intimidated, but at this point, Lyka was doing better than I could have imagined. I was simply happy Liana was willing to try at all.

Chapter 8

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 19 Days

It took a lot of willpower not to gasp when Lyka suddenly turned. Frankly, even that was a promising start. When Celeste had suggested that the presence of his fated mate might help my brother heal, I hadn't expected to be able to find her, much less bring her here and see the results. I was still wrapping my mind around how Sela had managed to trick us both.

Liana stood in front of the viewing window while Lyka watched. Abi watched from a few feet behind, while Celeste stood next to me, still holding my hand as her eyes went back and forth between her friend and my older brother. I had to hand it to her—the young woman had only been on my island for more than a few hours, and she was handling all of this quite well.

After a few minutes, Liana cleared her throat and offered my brother a wave. “Hello,” she said, putting on a brave face despite the timidity in her voice.

My brother's expression changed, though I couldn't exactly read what he was thinking. He hadn't spoken English when I'd talked to him a few weeks ago before Sabine's most recent attack, and I doubted that Liana was fluent in our first language, much less the old dialect we'd grown up with in the

Celestial Pack. Either way, Lyka didn't seem particularly interested in dialogue. He lifted his nose to scent the air again, though I wasn't sure how much scent got through to his containment cell.

“Do you think he's alright?” Celeste asked, her eyes never leaving the interaction a few feet in front of us.

I sighed and shrugged. “He's become incredibly difficult for me to read over the decades,” I said, rubbing my chin with my free hand. “At the moment, I'm simply glad he's paying attention.”

I saw Celeste frown out of the corner of my eye. “I wonder if he realizes she's his fated mate,” she said. “I think I might try to reach out to him—gently—and just sense what his frame of mind is. Nothing else.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” I asked. “He's been a bit...*touchy* when you've tried to reach out previously.”

Celeste pressed her lips together. “He has,” she said, watching as Lyka took a step back, stretching his arms up over his head. “But there's a difference between his being in a good place today and Liana's presence making an impact. What we do next depends on if he recognizes something in her and if my mother's notes apply here. I assume she was right. I can't imagine she ran into that many wolf shifters who'd had a witch pretend to be their fated mate.”

I scowled, but I had no argument. As far as I knew, Sela was the only being capable of tricking a wolf shifter into believing she was his fated mate, and Celeste raised a good point about her mother's notes and more “normal” connections.

While I rolled this thought over in my mind, Celeste took a deep breath, and I knew she was settling her thoughts and reaching out to him. I stayed quiet, not wanting to disturb her. I knew the moment she reached out to my brother. His amber eyes flashed as he reeled backwards, snarling loudly, and pulling his lips back to bare his teeth.

Liana gasped loudly and took several steps backwards, grabbing Abi's hands as she ducked.

I tried not to growl as my wolf pressed forward. Liana's fear was a new flavor for him, and he was keen to lap it up. Celeste, meanwhile, winced, clearly retreating from my brother's mind as he thrashed, but to my surprise, he went quiet as quickly as he'd lashed out, his eyes back on Liana as she retreated to stand next to her friend. For a moment, I thought he even looked contrite.

"I think that's enough for one night," I suggested to the small group. That had gone far better than I'd expected, but I didn't want to push our luck—especially with that little outburst. I wasn't interested in keeping Liana here against her will, either, but I also didn't have the time to ferry her back to Tallahassee and make sure her memory was appropriately altered. Fated mate or not, I couldn't risk anyone exposing the paranormal world, especially now. I simply did not have the resources to deal with all this so close to the solar eclipse.

She said nothing, yet Liana seemed relieved by my suggestion as she exhaled.

"He was actually okay, just so you know, though I wouldn't say I got a really deep read," Celeste whispered to me as I turned, ushering the three women out. She spoke to the group a minute later. "If everyone's up for it, we can try again tomorrow night?"

Liana nodded, looking thoughtful, and as I closed the second door, I realized my brother was watching us leave. He hadn't ever seemed terribly interested in our comings and goings since arriving on Isla Lobo. I considered exactly what that meant as we headed back toward the main wing of my home.

"What happened to him?" Liana asked, pressing her lips together as she looked back at us.

"The scars?" I said, assuming she meant his battered appearance. "Though wolf shifters have enhanced healing abilities, the talons and teeth of other immortal shifters leave permanent scars. When our father was the Lunar Lord, other

members of our pack would assault us in the hope that eliminating us would allow them to become the next Lunar Lord themselves.”

“And is that why he’s the way he is? Mentally? Because his pack kept attacking him?”

I frowned. “No. That is the result of two twisted witches attacking him and his mind,” I said, not wanting to get into too much detail—not yet, anyway. “He once bore the curse of the Lunar Lord himself, and the witches used that to drive him mad.”

“That’s awful,” Liana said quietly, pressing her lips together.

As uncomfortable as this topic was, I appreciated that she seemed genuinely empathetic toward what had happened to Lyka. If nothing else, Liana seemed like a kind person, though I supposed I wasn’t surprised, given Celeste’s own sense of empathy.

“That’s why you’re here,” Celeste said. “Your presence could be calming enough that he’ll start working through some of that damage.”

“Is it possible for you to heal him through magic?” Liana asked, giving Celeste a curious look.

She shook her head. “No. Even if he allowed me to meddle in there, I don’t know nearly enough, and I don’t think we know anyone who’s so adept in both psychic magic and healing magic that they’d be able to reverse everything without any input from Lyka.”

“Oh,” Liana said, looking away. “What was he like before the witches got to him?”

I sighed. “He was wise beyond his years,” I said. “My brother was both logical and empathetic, and as Lunar Lord, he was a just ruler. Much more empathetic than my father, especially where the ‘normal’ realm was concerned. He didn’t view humans as a nuisance but as an actual part of our world.” I smiled at the thought of my father. It’d been awhile since I’d really reflected on him.

As we headed back upstairs, I paused at one of the first guest rooms in the hallway. “This will be your room,” I told Liana as I opened the door for her. “Walter has brought your things in and made sure everything is ready for you, but if you need anything else, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Liana nodded, walking to the doorway, and hesitating there before looking back at the rest of us. “This...has all been a lot to take in, if I’m being honest,” she said, not meeting anyone’s eyes. “Would it be alright if I take the rest of the evening to just...think about everything?”

“Of course,” I said, unsurprised.

Celeste stepped over to give her friend a quick hug. “Have a good night,” she said. “And seriously, if you need anything, anything at all, just come get me, alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” Liana said, giving a quick smile before wishing everyone good night.

As her door closed, Abi leaned in to elbow Celeste on her way further down the hall. “If you don’t mind, I’m gonna go catch up with Gilbert,” she said with a wicked grin.

I rolled my eyes as Celeste laughed. Then it was just the two of us left standing in the hallway. “Let’s go to bed,” I murmured, grabbing Celeste by the wrist to lead her back to the master suite.

Once we were safely inside, I turned to my mate. “Why are you so invested in what happens between Lyka and Liana?” Of course, I was happy to see my brother responding to us, but that did nothing to sate my curiosity.

Celeste shrugged. “I promised you I would do whatever I could to help Lyka recover,” she said, giving me a sad smile. “I just want you to have your brother back. And this seemed like the most promising way to make that happen.”

I turned, strolling back over to where she stood. “I know you can’t shift right now,” I said, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her close to my chest. “But perhaps we can come up with another method to work out some of the tension in your shoulders? Help you sleep?”

Celeste tipped her head back against my bulk and smiled up at me, looking thoughtful. “You always want to chase me, huh?” she noted, giving me an amused grin. “I don’t need to be in a wolf’s skin to make that happen.”

Before I said anything else, she quickly wrenched herself free of my arms, darting around me further into the bedroom as she laughed. I grinned in response and then followed, scooping her up as she tried to speed into the master suite. She gave a playful little shriek, pretending to writhe as I toted her to the bed, tossing her against the mattress and pinning her to the sheets.

“Minx,” I said. Her smile was contagious, and I quickly found myself beaming right back at her. “Whatever am I going to do with you?”

Celeste’s silver eyes sparkled as she watched me. “I don’t know,” she said. “What *are* you going to do with me, *alpha*?” When I hesitated for just a moment, thinking over the possibilities, her eyes brightened. “Or you should ask yourself, what *I* am going to do to *you*?”

“Is that so?” I said, my interest piqued. I pulled her shoes off and tossed them onto the floor before removing my own. Hoisting myself up onto the bed, I crawled over to her as she propped herself back up onto her knees.

Celeste tried to move toward me, but I was faster, grabbing one hip and pulling her closer as she giggled. She leaned up to steal a kiss as I tipped my head to one side, nuzzling into the side of her neck instead. My mouth watered with her that close, so I just kissed the soft skin there instead.

She groaned and tipped her head to the side more. My eyes flashed. *You know what you’re doing*, I thought, and she sensed me, her lips curling upward in a grin.

Before I could counter, she turned again, pressing her mouth to mine. She nipped at my lower lip as I groaned. The moment I opened, she curled her tongue around mine, matching it to the undulation of her hips as she reorganized herself and pressed ever closer. I loved everything about Celeste, but especially when she was all wily like this.

As she pulled away for a breath, she grabbed at my shirt, already tugging at it. She was right—we were wearing entirely too much clothing for this. It fell away, and I slid my arms out as she reached down to unbutton my trousers. I growled softly, not about to be the only naked one. I grabbed the hem of her shirt, tugging it over her head, even though it stalled our progress on the pants.

It didn't stop her for long, and after a moment, she freed my thickening cock. I paused, groaning as she wrapped her fingers around my length, stroking me several times. She paused before letting go for just a moment, fumbling with her own pants and pushing them off. It gave me enough time to catch my breath, the cool air against my sensitive skin allowing me to regain some composure.

That didn't last long.

Once naked, Celeste pushed at my chest with a few fingers. As I rocked back to give her space, she climbed up onto my hips, grinding against me. I groaned at the feeling of her slick wetness sliding over my cock and leaned the rest of the way back, allowing my shoulders to hit the mattress.

Celeste grinned as she mounted me, her knees pressing into the sheets as she hovered just over my erection. Her silver eyes met mine, and I watched her, caught in the sheer affection I found there. But the moment lasted too long, and soon my rushing desire returned. I growled as I grabbed both of her hips, pulling her back toward me.

She groaned, reaching down between us to guide me in properly. She sighed, satisfied, as I slid inside, and I echoed the sound.

I squeezed my legs to support her as she rode me, watching every flex of her muscles as she tilted her hips. Every time my cock brushed against her just right, she groaned, her fingertips digging into my shoulders, her nails biting at my skin. The little hint of pain was perfect, and I found myself getting lost in the sensations as she rode her own desires, controlling the slowly quickening pace.

Suddenly, she squeezed, a wicked gleam in her eyes. My eyes flashed wide. I had no intention of climaxing before her, but she tilted her hips and squeezed again. I was powerless. I knew there was no magic between us, but it still felt as if she'd caught me in a spell. I groaned, squeezing her hips as I bucked upward, spilling myself within her.

Celeste groaned at the sensation, tipping her head back as she continued to ride me for another few moments. "Celeste," I groaned. And that was all it took.

Her eyes flashed back open, and she whimpered, her orgasm a trembling, growing thing as she clenched even tighter. If I hadn't just emptied myself, I would have done it then. Instead, I matched her soft noises with my own until we were both spent, breathless and smiling as she melted on top of me, sprawled contentedly over my chest.

Chapter 9

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 16 Days

The next three days passed in a blur as we settled into routines. During the day, I'd study, trying some gentle healing spells with Val's aid as we tried to ease my aunt's state of mind. She still wasn't terribly responsive, but at least I could take comfort in knowing she wasn't much worse off. I spent the afternoons with Liana and Abi, and after dinner, Liana, Fenris, and I would visit Lyka.

To my great relief, Lyka seemed interested in Liana's presence every time we visited. He'd even allowed me to practice some of the same gentle spells on him that I'd used on Esme earlier. He still bristled when *anyone* poked around in his mind space, yet his reactions were much more muted when Liana was present. I wasn't sure if she soothed him, or if he wanted to avoid scaring her again.

I sighed, leaning back in my chair as I reflected on my progress. I was still in Esme's room, reviewing a spell in the peace and quiet. Val had already left to meet Morgan; I just wanted to sit with my aunt longer. I was still upset with Esme, yet it felt wrong to leave her alone twenty-three hours out of the day.

I looked back down at the open page, pressing my lips together. I was reviewing the complex spell meant to tie my life force to Fenris's at the eclipse as his Lunar Bride, and it was way more involved than anything I'd attempted previously—even the teleportation I'd managed twice before. The spell combined several classes of magic into one advanced work. Hopefully, the power I'd channel through the eclipse itself would be enough to help me finish it.

That was to say nothing of the time limit or the immortal god in our way.

When Fenris had first brought up the notion that I'd become immortal on correctly executing this spell, I was taken aback. The idea of living forever at first frightened me. I could barely imagine the span of one hundred years, let alone centuries. Now, however, the idea of spending all those lifetimes with my fated mate filled me with longing. But once Zyanya had seared a death mark into my skin, I knew it was just a beautiful dream I'd never get to realize.

Even if our life forces were tied together, it'd kill me before the eclipse ended. Fenris wouldn't have any of his powers as Lunar Lord, and I wouldn't be the Lunar Bride.

I wonder what Lunar Bride I would be. Or would have been.

Fenris would still be the ruler. He was the god of the wolf shifters, and guardian of the line between the paranormal and normal worlds, but I would take on some of that responsibility with the title. There hadn't been an official title during Fenris's own lifetime, so he couldn't even fully explain what being a Lunar Bride meant. It was open to interpretation, which meant I'd be able to work as I saw fit, but that was still a lot of weight on my shoulders. No matter what it really meant, though, the most important thing would be helping Fenris. He deserved to have someone by his side.

A soft, snuffling noise brought me back to reality. I glanced over, blinking as I realized Esme's eyes were open.

"Auntie?" I said quietly, closing the grimoire and setting it to the side. The older witch had stirred a few times since I'd

rescued her from Egypt, but she'd either mumbled gibberish or remained silent.

This time, when she looked at me, her eyes were clear. "Celeste?" she croaked, her voice hoarse.

My heart jumped into my throat. *She recognizes me this time.* I reached out to take her hand in mine. "It's me," I said gently, giving her fingers a squeeze. "You're safe here. Do you remember anything?"

"I—" A cough cut her off as I frowned.

"Let me get you a drink," I said, excusing myself just long enough to hurry to the kitchen and back, offering her a glass of cool water.

As she drank, I took a few breaths to settle my thoughts. I reached out with a soft soothing spell, meant to heal the frayed edges of her mind and offer her a sense of peace. She was clearly still on edge, and I couldn't blame her. I had no idea how long she was trapped with Sabine before I'd had my psychic dream. She'd looked like she'd aged not months, but decades.

Esme set her glass down. When she spoke, her voice sounded more familiar. "Where are we?" she asked, her dark brown pupils searching the small room before falling back to me.

I paused, suddenly unsure how to answer. I'd made sure Sabine hadn't left any footholds in Esme's mind while Val and I tried to heal her, but I still didn't know if I could trust the witch I'd once thought to be my biological aunt. She'd been pledged to the Solar Sovereign at one point. How would she ever have gotten involved with me or my adopted parents otherwise? I didn't want to reveal anything about Fenris's haven if there was a possibility she could still report back to Zyanya.

"We're in a safe place," I said. "Don't worry."

"Ah," Esme said, sounding a bit distant. Though far more lucid than before, she was still a bit spacey, her attention and

mind wandering as she looked around. “You’re using your magic now,” she said abruptly.

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach. Esme had always known I had latent paranormal talent. She’d given me the anxiety medication intentionally then. I’d even been willing to believe she’d thought she was helping me, but I could no longer perform those mental gymnastics. My aunt had been silencing my magic since I was six years old.

Suddenly, my throat felt thick, and I tried to ignore the upswell of emotion that came with the revelation.

I sighed. “I just wish you’d told me what was going on,” I said.

Esme paused before reaching for the loose shirt Val had dressed her in. I held my breath when I realized a familiar shape was peeking over the hemline. Esme had a death mark seared over her heart. The only difference from mine was that the brand was clearly old, no longer red and shiny like a fresh wound.

“There are things I simply can’t talk about,” she finally said, her tone somber.

As quickly as my heart dropped, it jumped back up, fluttering anxiously as my mind whirled. “Do you know how to—”

“You are the spitting image of Enora,” Esme said.

I blinked, temporarily forgetting what I wanted to ask about the death mark. Curiosity about my mother surged to the forefront.

“You knew my mother?”

“I did,” Esme said simply.

“How did you know her?” I didn’t want to sound too eager, too desperate for any information, but I also couldn’t hide the edge in my voice.

Enora’s expression darkened. “I was the witch who was... sent,” she said carefully. I assumed Zyanya had given her similar instructions about what she could and couldn’t say

about the death mark. “Sent to get her.” She sighed heavily, unable to look me in the eye.

I bit my lip, not entirely sure I wanted to know what came next. My desire for the truth soon won out. “Then what happened?”

Esme gave me a sad smile. “She begged me to give her daughter a better life. She’d had a psychic vision that her unborn child was the one who was...the one sought after. The one in the Handmaiden prophecy. But Enora just wanted to protect her child. She wanted her daughter to have a good life. That was all.”

Even though my aunt couldn’t say “Solar Sovereign” or “Zyanya,” I knew who she was talking about. The woman had said the same thing to me when she’d caught me in Egypt. I sniffed, realizing my eyes were prickling with tears as I digested the emotional memory the older witch had just shared. I reached up to wipe my face. As much as I loved my adopted parents—as much as I still missed them, to this day—I still wished I could have met the woman who’d given birth to me.

Esme looked at me. “Enora’s begging, her sacrifice...they got to me. I thought that by hiding anything paranormal about you at all, no one would ever discover you. You would be able to have a good life, and no one would hurt you.”

I blinked, barely able to believe what I was hearing.

Esme swallowed, looking down at her frail hands. “Your adoptive parents really did love you. I made sure to find the most caring couple I could, and I—I came to love you, too, Celeste. I really felt as though you were my niece, and I cared for you as if we truly shared blood.”

I paused, biting my lower lip. “Ben didn’t care for me,” I said quietly. “You shouldn’t have tried to bewitch someone into marrying me.”

It was only a hunch, but I knew I hit the mark when Esme flinched. “He was a nice person,” she said, sighing. “Perfectly, totally, completely normal. I thought if you married an average

human and never met the Lunar Lord, no one would ever have a reason to suspect you as anything other than just another Floridian. And if, by random chance, you did ever meet him, you would reject him because you were with someone else, and he would move on.”

“I can see what you thought you were doing. And I forgive you for that,” I said slowly, realizing I truly did. Esme had clearly been doing what she thought would keep me safe. “But that isn’t how things turned out. I...I thought I hated Fenris when I first met him, but now I can’t imagine my life with anyone else. I would do anything to keep him safe and help free him from the curse. He’s been alone so long and...and no matter what else happens in the next few weeks, my heart belongs to him.”

Chapter 10

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 16 Days

I headed down the hallway toward the room Esme was recovering in. Val had informed me that Celeste was in there, watching over the older witch as she slept.

As I approached, I heard voices. I knew it was rude to eavesdrop, yet I paused several feet away, relying on my heightened senses as my mate spoke. It was clearly the tail end of a conversation, but the context didn't matter once I heard Celeste's words.

"...no matter what else happens in the next few weeks, my heart belongs to him."

I suddenly didn't care if Celeste knew I'd been listening. I was truly the luckiest wolf alive to have such a compassionate, kind-hearted mate, and I couldn't wait to spend the rest of eternity with her.

I opened the door and let myself inside, striding over to Celeste at once. I heard a sharp intake of breath that told me Esme was awake. I couldn't say I minded the fresh flood of fear rolling off the older witch. No matter how Celeste felt about her, I couldn't forgive the woman for all the harm she'd caused my fated mate by muting her magic for so long. Still, Esme was also the one who'd kept her safe and told her about

the Lunar Lord at all, even if her stories held some unflattering rumors.

I'd allow my wolf to sample her fear and call the rest a wash.

Choosing to ignore Esme, I turned my attention solely to Celeste. "I need to speak with you privately," I said, nodding toward the door.

"Of course," she said. "I'll come check on you in a bit," she added to Esme, and I had to physically restrain myself from pulling her out of the room.

Once she was in the hallway, however, all bets were off. Cupping her cheeks in my palms, I pulled her into a searing kiss, pouring everything into that single show of affection. Celeste gasped, her silver eyes flashing before fluttering shut. She parted her lips as she wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me down to return my ardor. She didn't even pause to ask what this was all about as I backed her up against the wall, kissing her until she had to pull her head back. The look in her eye told me everything I needed to know.

"Bedroom," she whispered, her gaze briefly flickering over my shoulder to the door to Esme's room.

If I felt rankled about that gesture, that was quickly replaced by the quick *zing* of excitement when I scooped her up. Celeste gasped at the show of strength and shifter speed as I hurried us up the stairs to the master bedroom. I could hear the way her pulse quickened and felt her arousal spreading. I stood in front of the door as she reached down, fumbling with the doorknob as she kept kissing me.

We'd barely gotten inside when a burst of cold air made my hair stand on end. I spun around, Celeste still in my arms as Delila Devins stepped through the open entryway. The witch was a sight, blood and soot streaked across her face and clothing.

Celeste gasped, her cheeks bright red.

"The Snowmass Pack is under attack," Delila said, breathless. "Warlocks." Her face morphed into an ugly sneer.

“I have no doubt that they’re working for the Solar Sovereign. The Order of the Stars have sent in some back up—” she motioned to herself “— but things aren’t good out there, Fenris. They need more help.”

“Of course,” I said, setting Celeste down. “I’ll go at once.”

“What?!” Celeste exclaimed. “Wait, I’ll go with you, too,” she said to me. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

I turned and shook my head. “You should stay on the island where it’s safe,” I argued. “I have dealt with unruly warlocks before. It’s irritating, but nothing I haven’t seen before. I will come back as quickly as possible.” I paused, giving Delila a wary look before leaning down to whisper privately to my mate. “And you cannot shift, Celeste. You’re even more vulnerable now.”

She scowled. “I still have magic,” she whispered back. “And for a while, I didn’t even have that. I can take care of myself.”

“Right now, you need to continue preparing for the eclipse,” I said. “And someone needs to be here for Esme and Lyka.”

After several moments, she took a step back, giving me a single nod. “Fine,” she said. “I guess I can’t stretch my magic too thin. I don’t have any margin for error.”

“Exactly,” I said, relieved she saw it my way.

Before I could say anything else, she stepped toward me and leaned in to press a fierce kiss to my lips. “Take care of yourself,” she said. “Try not to get hurt...or die.” Celeste made a face. “I hate it when that happens.”

“So do I,” I said, kissing her back. “I will see you soon.” I turned to Delila. “I’ll gather my associates. It sounds like the Snowmass Pack will need all the help they can get.”

The cold chill of Delila’s spell was nothing compared to the frigid anger spreading from the pit of my gut outward.

I didn’t need to say anything—Piers and Gilbert sprang into action at once, darting off to assist injured members of the

Snowmass Pack farther away from the fighting. Cody was only a few steps behind me as I unleashed my wolf, bounding through the snow further into the fray. I could hear the Snowmass alpha's howl as she encouraged her fellow shifters, but Keziah herself hadn't come into view yet.

If she was up and fighting, though, the pack had a chance. I answered her call with one of my own, rallying tiring wolves as several snarling lions came bursting out of the nearest pine stand, charging full speed toward the wolves.

I snarled as I dashed forward, giving into my wolf's feral rage, my fur bristling. A few steps behind me, Cody lunged at the smallest lion, leaving me to deal with the larger two. It wasn't ideal, but I hadn't survived for this long by skirting danger. The largest lion lunged straight at me while the second one tried to circle around from behind. Flattening my ears, I raced forward to slide beneath the other shifter. The snow reduced some of the friction, but I didn't get low enough, and the massive lion managed to rake his claws along my back, pulling up dark scraps of fluff.

Barely registering the pain, I whirled around, lunging at the shifter as he landed from his missed assault. His partner had to dodge around him, giving me a few precious seconds to grab him by the haunch. The lion roared as I sunk my fangs into his flank, clamping my jaws down like a vice grip, tearing and shaking. The blossom of blood on my tongue was like a jolt of electricity straight to my brain. No adrenaline rush could compare to the moment my wolf got his first taste of violence.

Forced to let go or be tackled by the second lion, I jumped sideways as the large cat yowled, slashing at my side. This one was a lioness, and I pivoted as quickly as I could, hoping to take advantage of her lack of mane. She swiped her claws across my chest, and I ignored the open wounds as I drove forward, grabbing her just beneath the chin. My boldness had clearly caught her off-guard, and soon her angry snarling turned into agitated, then panicked yowls. The air around us grew heavy with the stink of blood and fear. I closed my jaw

tight, with no time for my wolf to feed off her growing terror as we choked the life out of her.

In that moment, the second lion righted himself and came charging back at me, using his massive bulk to throw me off his companion. As I hit the snow and rolled, I could see from the corner of my vision that the lioness, though still alive, was barely moving.

Now able to give the larger lion all my attention, I righted myself and darted forward. He could tackle me, but I could outrun him, especially with his limp. I ducked lower, snapping at his softer belly as he tried to grab me by the shoulders. Bright silver splashed across the snow. It didn't matter—the large lion shifter was slowing down, and his fellows had already been dispatched.

Two Snowmass wolves suddenly came charging forth from the brush, tackling the lion in tandem. I was confident they'd finish the job, so I took off deeper into the woods, chasing the sharp ozone smell I'd come to recognize as magic. It looked like one warlock was well-surrounded, but a second one had managed to injure several wolves, throwing three through the air and into the surrounding trees before he turned his eyes on me. I howled defiantly and charged straight toward him, relishing the bright flash of fear in his eyes.

I'd nearly closed in on him before the warlock managed to ready his next spell. The warlocks had clearly been at this for some time before Delila had fetched us, and his exhaustion was showing. The dark magic blot smoldered as it hit me square in the chest. Though the spell burned and bit at me, it didn't knock me off my feet, and within another few seconds, I lunged, my front paws hitting the warlock squarely in the chest as he threw his hands up in front of his face. He only managed to scream for a moment or two more before I ripped out his throat, his blood splashing against my muzzle.

My wolf reveled in the miasma of gore and fear. His violence usually aggravated me, but today it was a boon. I only just managed to rein him in when Keziah appeared from deeper in the forest, two wolves and a warlock from the neighboring coven following. Her sides heaved as she panted,

blood splashing against her fur. I could see she was favoring one leg, but otherwise looked uninjured.

I loped over to her when I saw the warlock who'd followed her was drawing on a spell. I realized belatedly that he was using *dark* magic, only recognizing the signs after watching Celeste perform.

Instinct took over as I charged forward, but I couldn't get to the warlock fast enough, reaching Keziah only in enough time to throw my shoulder against her side, knocking the other alpha sideways. My entire body seized up as agony swept through me, my knees buckling as I fell into the snow just as Keziah scrambled back to her feet. I trembled, muscles screaming, close to an out-of-body experience as my body shook. I heard Keziah, now in human form, shouting to grab the warlock, but I couldn't see anything until several more moments passed, and the pain subsided again.

As I staggered back to my feet, I reverted to my human form, swearing under my breath as I glanced around. Several of Keziah's pack members were restraining the now bleeding warlock, already dragging him back toward the heart of the territory.

"Thank you," Keziah muttered to me quietly, briefly meeting my eyes before turning to her pack, shouting orders to patrol the borders and get the injured to Wuta, her healer.

As I looked around, I realized Cody had followed me deeper into the forest. Gilbert and Piers were not far behind, checking to ensure any hostiles had been dispatched, not just left wounded in the snow.

"Fenris!" Cody shouted, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glowing even brighter. "You were amazing! Two lion shifters at once, and you didn't even break a sweat. It felt like it was out of a dream...or a nightmare."

Gilbert sniffed, giving the young shifter a disdainful look. "With all due respect, I'd rather avoid any fight Fenris's wolf is involved in. Those teeth are just a bit close for comfort. It doesn't feel controlled." He sighed as he looked at me. "I'm

glad the only casualties were the enemy shifters and those warlocks, however. You did make quick work of that.”

“That’s because my wolf *isn’t* controlled,” I said coolly, ignoring the vampire’s sharp gasp. “Come. I want to speak to that ‘friendly’ warlock.” I sneered, leaving my trio of allies to trail after me as I hurried in the direction Keziah’s packmates had dragged him.

It didn’t take me long to catch up. The warlock, though restrained, was putting up quite a fight. “Drop him,” I commanded, putting all the weight of alpha authority into my voice.

Keziah’s shifters didn’t even think when they let go of the warlock. I grinned when he landed face-first in the snow, spluttering angrily as he rolled over and began pushing himself back up. He didn’t even get on his feet when I flashed my teeth, red eyes shining.

“Who do you work for?” I demanded.

“Keziah,” he sneered, baring his teeth back.

My wolf howled in rage, and I fought the urge to rip out his throat without delay. Dead men couldn’t speak. “Do not insult me,” I snarled. “Who are you working for?”

He ground his teeth and looked me up and down. “If you’re so smart, you figure it out.”

My patience snapped, and I stalked forward, saying nothing before I stomped down on one of his extended legs. The warlock screeched as bone crunched, crumpling forward as he grasped at his limb, moaning and howling as he shook.

“Are you going to speak, or are you going to have two broken legs?” I asked coolly.

“No!” he screeched, trembling and crouching. “No, no, fine, I work—”

His screaming intensified as a burst of flame flared up from the air around him. I took a step back, preparing for an attack before I realized the fire was consuming the man in front of me.

“Put it out!” I barked to the nearest shifters, but it was already too late.

A burning stench filled the air, and what soon remained was a dark pile of ash.

“Shit,” I swore under my breath, crouching down to pinch the ash between my fingers. I ignored the stares of Keziah’s pack members and my own allies as I grit my teeth, glancing around the forest, but I already knew it wasn’t an attack. I’d have felt someone else’s presence.

No, this man must have been cursed if he betrayed whoever he was working with. As I stood, turning back toward the others, another thought dawned on me.

If he’s cursed by an undoubted dark spell, Celeste is, too. Someone has dared hex my fated mate, and I still don’t know how.

Chapter II

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 15 Days

Fenris was gone overnight, and though the pain I felt through our shared bond peaked shortly after he'd taken off with the others, I was happy to practice magic under the moonlight for the evening. I could feel Fenris, and I'd know if he was in grievous harm, though I didn't particularly like how faint the bond felt sometimes. I wished I could share more with him—wanted to take his hurt away, or at least ease it. He'd shouldered it alone for so long, and any way I could be there for him, I wanted to be.

I wonder how different the bond would feel if we claimed one another.

I was afraid I'd never find out.

I sighed and took another bite of the salad Walter had made for my lunch, briefly drawn out of my ruminations by just how *good* it was. It always amazed me how Walter had the ability to take even meals I normally considered mundane—salads, sandwiches, pasta—and make them so interesting and unique. I ate because I needed to, apart from an occasional night out with friends, but I was starting to realize how little I'd explored the culinary world.

I wish I really could explore the world with Fenris.

The places I could see—the food we could try! Instead, I might only have fifteen days left to live. As much as I wanted to go with Fenris, I knew he was right—I needed every precious moment to keep honing my magic if I wanted to work around the alpha command Zyanya had set upon me.

“Do you mind if I sit with you?”

I blinked and looked up, smiling as I realized Liana had joined me on the patio behind Fenris’s home. “Not at all,” I said. “Too loud inside?” Abi, Morgan, and Grant were in the kitchen, involved in a lively discussion about faeries and how to deal with them. I appreciated the discourse, but I’d needed time alone with my thoughts.

“Yeah.” Liana’s smile was watery as she settled in the chair next to me. Instead of tucking into her meal, her gaze drifted out past the patio to the sand and the water beyond.

I took another bite of my salad and frowned. “Are you alright?” I asked after a few minutes. “I know we’ve shared a *lot* with you over the last couple of days. It’s okay if you aren’t, you know.”

Liana shook herself and looked back at me. Her smile was small, but more genuine this time. “It really is a lot,” she said, allowing herself a breathless chuckle. “And it’s overwhelming, but...it’s also confirming in a way. I loved my summer with my godfather and Alyssa. That was such a happy memory for me...then I spent the following years doubting it. And myself. I convinced myself I’d imagined it, and I was crazy, and I had to be careful what I told people. It’s...amazing that it’s *real*, and after all those years, it’s still hard for me to really believe I’m...I don’t know...living all of this.” Her smile grew. “Every morning, I wake up and have to make sure I’m not back in my one-bedroom apartment, you know?”

I laughed and nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, I know,” I said. “I still feel like I need to pinch myself. I was studying the stars and giving tours, you know? Sometimes, I feel like...I don’t know, I’m not qualified.”

It was Liana’s turn to laugh. “Qualified? Are there exams for witches? Do you have to carry a magic license?”

“I hope not. I’d be in big trouble!”

We both laughed at that, and as we quieted back down, Liana ate. I was glad I’d been able to relieve some of her tension, and though I couldn’t take credit for validating her, I was so happy for my friend. Having no one believe you, let alone your own parent, sounded like an awful experience, much less at age six.

“You know,” Liana said thoughtfully as she finished her salad, “as intimidating as this world is, I *am* happy to know about it. I just want to make sure you know that.”

“You’re handling it beautifully,” I said, smiling warmly. “Far more gracefully than I did.”

“Really?” My friend looked terribly intrigued, and I knew I wasn’t going to wiggle my way out of that. Honestly, I didn’t mind much. I felt like after not believing Liana’s shaman story, I owed her at least a few embarrassing truths.

“Yes, really,” I said, looking down at my empty bowl for a moment. “We had gone to Antarctica, and I was having a really hard time adjusting. There was a...*misunderstanding*,” I said, trying not to roll my eyes at the memory of Piers’s embellishments. “And I just freaked out. I tried to run away in the middle of an Antarctic storm!” Even now, it seemed like such a silly plan. *Even without Fenris out there, the chances of me freezing to death were wild.* I’d really been at one of my lowest points.

Liana gasped, looking horrified. “What happened? How did you get back?”

“Fenris found me,” I said, deciding not to go into the full details yet. “And I realized I liked him more than I admitted. Not like *that*, exactly, but enough to realize running away in a blizzard was foolish. I turned around and got back before anything too bad happened. No frostbite.”

Liana gave me a look and shook her head. “You’re normally so practical, Celeste! I don’t know I’d believe it if that story came from anyone other than you.”

“I know,” I said with a tiny grin. “I still have a hard time believing it was me making those choices.”

“I’m glad you turned around,” Liana said, looking at me, then back at the picturesque scenery. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course! Anything, Liana.”

She paused for a moment before speaking again. “Do you think Lyka is doing any better since I got here? I...I don’t really know what he was like before, so I can’t really judge.” She licked her lips. “I was wondering if we could go see him again soon? I...this sounds weird, but I feel drawn to him. I don’t really have a word for it, except I imagine it’s what a magnet feels like next to another magnet.”

I brightened. “Of course we can,” I said, confident that we would be fine to visit Fenris’s brother. He was safely held where he couldn’t accidentally hurt us or himself. “We can go tonight. My magic is the most potent then.” I paused. “And it’s not weird at all. I mean, it feels strange for me, too, since it’s new, but I feel the same way about Fenris—interested. Curious. Now that I know him, I want to be near him, be involved with what he’s doing and what he likes. The pull feels like it keeps getting stronger but...not in a scary way. It feels soothing. Grounding. It’s hard to put into words.”

Liana nodded. “I had another question about what Fenris said. Witches did this to Lyka? Messed with his mind, I mean. What did Fenris mean by that?”

My smile fell away, and I took a breath. “There’s a nasty witch named Sabine. I never met her older sister, Sela, but according to Fenris, everyone believed she was Lyka’s fated mate, including Lyka. Sabine is an extremely talented psychic witch, and she has no respect for life or for the suffering of others, so I can’t imagine her older sister was much different. Sela tormented Lyka, but she was so sly about it; she only did it in his mind. So it wasn’t unlike what happened to you after you met Alyssa and your mother didn’t believe you. But Sela kept at it until he snapped. He went completely feral and attacked Fenris. He killed her as well. Fenris had to...well,

‘trap’ sounds like a harsh word, but he had to trap him and keep him captive on a different island where he could live and be undisturbed without posing a threat to others.” I took a deep breath, then continued. “He was completely out of his mind until recently, when he started showing signs of improvement. He even seemed interested in connecting with Fenris, but Sabine used me to find him, and she attacked him in retribution for her sister’s death. That’s why Fenris brought him back here—to try and prevent any other attacks.”

“Oh my god,” Liana said, her mouth agape before she swallowed. “That is *horrible*. Why would anyone do that?”

I bit the inside of my mouth. “Sabine works for the Solar Sovereign, so I think it stands to reason that Sela did, too. The Solar Sovereign is the direct opposite of the Lunar Lord. Only one can rule at a time. My understanding is that while the Lunar Lord shoulders the curse for shifters, the Solar Sovereign wouldn’t. All shifters would get cursed again, which would result in absolute chaos. Think the witch trials and old wolf hunts, but times ten. That’s part of the reason Fenris is so protective of his brother—Fenris is the Lunar Lord now, not Lyka. If Sabine hurt Lyka badly enough, she could kill him. He wouldn’t be able to heal quickly enough to survive.”

“Could Sabine find Lyka here?” Liana asked quietly, suddenly looking around.

“I don’t think so.” Admittedly, I didn’t know all the inner workings of Fenris’s security system, and I was happy to keep it that way for now. “But Fenris has all kinds of security protocols in place, including magical defenses. Val is his house witch, but he has several others on call. We’re safe here.”

Liana exhaled, looking slightly less tense. “Well, I can’t blame Fenris for being so distrusting. It’s amazing he’s willing to deal with us at all, really.” She stood up. “Well, I think I’m going to go for a swim and get some exercise. I’ll meet you after dinner?”

“Sounds perfect.”

Once he'd checked on Lyka's wing, Walter agreed to come with us to keep an eye on things. While he didn't have any paranormal skills, I was still glad to have him there. I knew Walter would keep a calm head no matter what.

Lyka seemed interested as we approached him, though he scarcely paid me any attention when Liana came to stand in front of the viewing window. She greeted him, waving, and for the first time, he mirrored her movement, though he made no attempt to speak. I still wasn't sure if he understood her when she spoke, but he was clearly listening. I took a few more steps back, giving Liana what privacy I could as I closed my eyes and tried to focus my senses.

Early that morning, I found a spell that combined conjuring and psychic magic. In theory, it'd allow me to help untangle Sela's dark influence from Lyka's memories. I hadn't the chance to practice it before now, and I didn't think I would be able to really rehearse with Esme. She was much more lucid than Lyka, spending more time awake each day, but she hadn't endured years—or even decades—of psychological torture.

Regardless, I still wasn't sure if it'd work. The description of the case study, if you could call it that, was about a witch who'd been experimented on by her sister for a year. It had been a terrible situation, to be sure, and I didn't want to minimize that trauma, but...it still wasn't like the torment Lyka had endured.

But I wouldn't know if it'd be helpful for him until I tried.

As I rid myself of any lingering doubt, I reached out mentally until I approached the old wooden door, but sensed Lyka's resistance. Each day, he seemed more able to stand my presence, and more able to repel it, yet I could still breach the entryway with minimal pressure. He was too focused on Liana to put up much resistance.

I tried to gently wade through the tangled threads. It reminded me of traversing through a hoarder's home. There was a well-trodden path, but everything else threatened to topple over on me at any moment.

After my recent practice with dark magic, I was able to recognize its shadow after a moment of orientation. *As far as silver linings go, I'll take it.* This would be the tricky part: slowly picking at the magic keeping Lyka's memories in a hazy shadow. I couldn't even tell what was "real" and what was a result of Sabine's work, and I didn't want to cause any more harm. It was tiring, but I worked slowly, plucking at the dark magic in individual strands, unknotting and untangling them as I slowly pulled out the memories. The magic stuck more in some places than others, and I knew I was only just scratching the surface.

You aren't a bad person, Lyka. I hoped, more than anything, he would know that. Any sane wolf would loathe themselves for harming their mate, much less killing them. I needed him to know the witch he killed was not his mate, not his ally. I couldn't explain to Fenris exactly what was wrong and how I knew, but if I simply untied memories, Lyka would be able to follow the trail of breadcrumbs I left behind.

I had no idea how long I'd worked, but my body felt like Jell-O. Even opening my eyes felt strenuous. I leaned on the wall as I caught my breath, and to my surprise, when I looked over at Lyka and Liana, he appeared to be speaking to her. His eyes were bright, focused on her face, and whatever he was saying, it was with intent.

"Do you understand that?" I whispered to Walter. "Is he... speaking another language?"

"I believe so," Walter said. "I've heard Fenris speak the same language...but I'm afraid I don't know any of it myself. I suspect Lyka never learned English, given when he lost his mind."

My heart soared. "Fenris might be able to talk to him again!" I whispered excitedly, elated the work I'd done was proving useful so far.

Lyka recoiled suddenly, rubbing his eyes as if struck with a sudden migraine. Honestly, I wasn't feeling much better myself. "Sorry, but I think I need to turn in," I told Liana,

offering an apologetic smile. “That went well. We can come back down tomorrow night if you like.”

“Please,” she said, her eyes shining. “I...I think that went really well, too.”

Her smile stayed with me even as we said our good nights, and I tucked myself into bed, hoping Fenris would be back on the island soon.

When I opened my eyes, I was in a dense forest, but as I looked around at the greenery, I recognized it. I walked along the path and saw I was climbing upward, but didn't feel any strain. Higher and higher, I climbed, and in no time at all, I found myself in front of an ancient temple. I inhaled sharply as I stepped forward to brush my fingers over the old stone, sensing magical energy around it, when I caught motion out of the corner of my eye.

“Khuya?” a familiar voice said a moment later.

“Fenris!” I spun, a wide smile taking over my face. I'd recognized the dream state once I started walking, but I hadn't expected to see the Lunar Lord here, even if I was thinking of him until I fell asleep. I all but flung myself at him, and it was only then I realized I couldn't touch him. Not really. Not in a way that mattered. “Oh.”

“What are you doing here?” Fenris asked, a smile slowly spreading across his face. “It really is you, isn't it? How clever of you, joining my dream.”

I laughed. “Don't give me too much credit,” I said, wishing I could reach out and take him by the hand. “I was really just missing you.”

“And I, you,” he said. “I am glad to see my beautiful queen in any form.”

My cheeks warmed, and I felt frustrated that I blushed even in my dreams. Ah, well. I didn't let myself linger. “Hey,” I said. “What does that word mean, anyway? ‘Khuya?’”

“It is an old Quechua word,” Fenris said. “It does not translate directly to English, but...it is a word for a strong,

powerful affection. A great love.” His expression softened. “I could only ever imagine it applying to my fated mate.”

I paused, temporarily distracted by his tenderness. “Your brother tried speaking to us this evening,” I said. “But none of us understood what he was saying. Is that the language he used?”

Fenris’s eyes lit up. “Was he? That is excellent news,” he said, clearly pleased. “I look forward to speaking with him, though I will be away for at least another day or two. The Snowmass Pack still needs my assistance.”

I tried not to sigh. “I understand,” I said. “But I do miss you.”

A silence fell over us, and when I blinked, I realized the scenery had changed. It was a similar forest, but Fenris was looking in the distance. As I followed his gaze, I saw two massive wolves fighting each other in a clearing, their snarls and growls ringing through the trees. Further back were individuals watching, cheering and yelling as one wolf was knocked down, and the other leaped onto them and grabbed their muzzle with their teeth.

Grimacing at the violence, I glanced up at Fenris in question.

He swallowed hard. “My apologies,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “Thinking of my brother makes me remember....” He stopped himself and shook his head. “You don’t need to see this.”

I jolted awake before I could protest, realizing Fenris must have severed our shared dream. I wasn’t entirely sure what his intention was, but I found myself wanting to help his brother more than ever. That was a real memory of Fenris’s I’d just seen, not just a dream. Everything Fenris had withstood in the Celestial Pack, his brother had, too—and it might have even been worse for Lyka, as the older brother. That was to say nothing of what Sela had done to him.

A few minutes later, I’d gotten out of bed and was heading down to visit Lyka. It felt odd, leaving in the middle of the

night like this, but this was when my powers were strongest.

To my surprise, Lyka was awake when I reached him. I shouldn't have been surprised, though; he was a wolf shifter, and they ran at night. I approached carefully, not wanting to startle him. Liana wasn't here to keep him calm, so I knew I had to be more careful.

"I just want to help," I said quietly, hoping he understood. I decided to take a different approach when I opened my mind to reach for his. Though I wasn't tentative, I was careful not to seem forceful.

As I reached the overgrown garden of Lyka's innermost thoughts, I realized that it didn't seem as dark and swampy as before. The old wooden door was still in the center, but it seemed...greener here. More lively.

Instead of going inside, I paused, deciding to reach for one of the prickling vines. As I grabbed it, I felt something. Something warm. I took a deep breath and focused on the feeling.

Two wolves dashed through the snow. They were on a steep slope, but the wolves were not concerned. There was no fear. As one bumped into the other's shoulder, I realized that they were playing with each other, not fighting. They'd gone up into the mountains for fun—or if that wasn't the purpose, then fun was what they'd found.

I allowed joy to fill me as I thought of how I missed running as my wolf. Then I smiled when the wolf I recognized as Fenris leaned over to nip at the other's ear before darting away, initiating a game of tag.

I suddenly fell on my butt, realizing I still had the thorny weed in my hand. Surprised, I looked down at it, realizing the roots had shriveled up and died.

Are the good memories helping Lyka fight back?

It wasn't as if there was anyone I could ask. I glanced around, but the rest of the area still seemed calm, though overgrown. However, I didn't feel like Lyka was ejecting me. Curious, I got back to my feet and dusted myself off as I

glanced around for another vine. I didn't have to go that far to find one, which was crawling up the wall of the building.

I pursed my lips and grabbed it, wincing as it bit into my hands. I didn't pull, though—just waited. Sure enough, the same warm feeling bubbled up from my center again. I steadied my breath and closed my eyes.

Fenris was wrapping something over Lyka's arm. They were speaking in the same unknown language, but their words were quieter. I could still understand the tone even if I couldn't decipher the words. As Fenris made slow passes over the wound, he studied Lyka with his amber eyes, but beneath that concern was a feeling of...

Of...

Pride blossomed up through Lyka, and he hummed, inclining his head. He was proud of his younger brother, and whatever he'd been feeling moments before was gone. Fenris had licked it away as he bandaged up the minor wound.

Again, I suddenly fell backward, but I expected the vine to give this time and was able to catch myself before I stumbled to my feet. I smiled by the wall of the house.

He loves you, Lyka. If you don't know yet, I am sure you will. I am sure you will.

Chapter 12

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 12 Days

The first rays of sun were only just spilling through the window when I woke. I knew within moments I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep. Instead, I rolled onto my side, carefully propping myself up just enough to watch Celeste without disturbing her as she slept.

She was exhausted when I returned late last night, and I'd little doubt she'd been pushing herself as hard as possible in my absence. *I imagine she feels everything—the ritual, the eclipse, the safety of the paranormal world—hinges on her ability to pull it off.* I wished I could remove that burden from her shoulders, but she wasn't wrong. As the last known Handmaiden witch, she was the only one with the ability to carry out the ritual, and if she couldn't...there was no one to come to the rescue. I wouldn't be able to help, either.

I exhaled, banishing the thought. Even if Celeste wasn't fully confident in her talents, I was completely comfortable resting my fate in her capable hands. I didn't need her to sense even a single shred of doubt from me.

Instead, I thought of the psychic projects she'd shared with me days ago: images of us touring Europe. I'd been to several countries there, including some that no longer existed, when

conducting business both as the Lunar Lord and as “Mr. Nix.” With the help of Walter and his predecessor, I’d amassed a fortune. Mr. Nix had done quite well with his investments over the decades. I’d never have to worry about money, and if Celeste wanted to take a tour of Europe—or the entire world—I would be able to take her wherever she wanted to go. And stay however long she wanted.

We ought to start now.

The amount of pressure Celeste was putting on herself wasn’t healthy, no matter the stakes. The eclipse was just twelve days away, but a day away would be good to clear our minds after everything we’d been working on in preparation. It would have to be somewhere highly secure, but I didn’t imagine that’d be much of a problem. The trick would be getting Celeste to come with me. It was hard enough to get her to agree not to work herself to the bone.

If anything went wrong, I am sure she’d blame herself for it.

I sighed as I turned the problem over in my mind, wondering how to arrange something in a way that’d be relaxing and refreshing for my mate. I wanted to spend all my time with her, and even if that wasn’t possible right now, the least I could do was ensure her time was well-spent.

I sighed too loudly, and Celeste sighed in return, the muscles in her face fluttering before she stirred. My mate yawned as she stretched her arms out and rolled over, snuggling into me without opening her eyes. “Good morning,” she murmured, leaning into my chest. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” I murmured, craning my neck to kiss the top of her head. “Much better now that I’m next to you.”

She smiled. “I meant if you were still sore after the attack. How’s Snowmass Pack, anyway?”

“I knew what you meant,” I said. “The pack is still in some turmoil, but recovering. Keziah is a strong alpha, and she has always been calm under pressure. This attack was no different,” I said, frowning as I thought back on it. “A warlock

from the coven that works with the pack turned on Keziah. I tried to question him after we subdued him, but he must have had some instant death hex or spell. He burned to ash when he was about to answer me.”

Celeste’s eyes fluttered open, and she swallowed hard, looking out at the room. “Well, I’m glad you’re alright,” she said after a beat too long. “I could feel your pain, but only distantly. And I’m glad that Keziah and the others are alright, too.”

I frowned and tried not to tense while I watched her expression. I didn’t know if she had the same curse that the warlock did, but I knew the Solar Sovereign would stop at nothing to hurt my fated mate. As much as I wanted to question her, seeing what’d happened to the warlock made me second-guess pushing any further.

“You should see Lyka today,” Celeste said, interrupting my thoughts. “I’m...honestly, I’m surprised how much progress he’s shown, even over a few days. Liana being around seems to keep him calm—or at least calm enough that he allows me to use some psychic healing spells. He’s doing even better than Esme.”

I inhaled, suddenly overcome by what I could only describe as *hope*. “I’d like to do that,” I said, squeezing Celeste closer. Even a small improvement would be miraculous by my standards, and I knew none of this would have been possible without her intervention and persistence. “Are you ready to get up, or did you want to go back to sleep?”

Celeste laughed softly. “Even if I wanted to go back to sleep, I can basically feel you vibrating with excitement.”

“I am not,” I protested with a grin.

She smiled as she propped herself up, dropping a chaste kiss on my lips before pulling away and turning to slip out of bed. “Not literally,” she said. I paused as the sheets fell away, revealing her bare bottom before she walked away. She gave me a wry grin over her shoulder. “Stop staring, or we won’t be

going anywhere, and I know you'd like to see him. I can feel it."

I smiled back and admired her while she dressed, thinking how much I liked this new, confident smile. "Perhaps later," I said, hauling myself out of bed to do the same.

After breakfast with Walter and Val, we headed over to Lyka's containment room. To my surprise, Liana was already down there, and she didn't look worried at all—or even tense. She barely even registered our arrival, and it only took me a moment to figure out why.

Lyka was watching her. More than that, he was clearly interacting with her, as clear-eyed as I'd seen him in centuries.

"Hello," Liana was saying slowly to Lyka, waving at him in an exaggerated manner.

He mimicked her, mumbling what sounded like a greeting.

Celeste caught up with me, leaning against my side as she smiled. "Ever since he tried to speak to us, Liana's been teaching him English so they can actually communicate," she whispered. "I'm not sure how much luck she's had."

Lyka heard us even through the wall. I noticed a motion out of the corner of my eye as he approached the viewing window and craned his head.

"*Fenris, is that you? Come closer,*" he said. I could barely hear him scent the air over the sudden roar of blood in my ears.

Celeste nudged me toward the window, stepping further out of the way so Lyka could see me. She motioned with one hand for her friend to join her.

"*Lyka.*" I didn't entirely know what to say to him. After Sabine's attack, I wasn't sure I'd ever hear my brother's voice again, much less in such a reasonable tone.

"*Did I hurt you badly?*" Lyka asked after a beat.

I blinked, taken aback. Before I could ask him what he meant, he pointed to his own chest, and I knew at once that he

was referring to the episode centuries ago when he'd tried to claw my heart out from under my sternum.

My muscles clenched. *He remembers that?* He was completely out of his mind, never mind how long ago that was.

I must have worn my shock on my face because his expression fell. *"I did, didn't I? I'm glad to see you here, all the same,"* he said.

I took a moment to compose myself. *"I am glad to see you back to yourself,"* I said, and that was the whole truth. *"I have waited a long, long time."*

Lyka didn't seem as worried about hiding his emotions as I did. His relief was obvious, even through the glass.

"Liana and I are going to give you two more privacy," Celeste said before kissing my cheek and heading back down the hallway. Liana followed, though not without giving Lyka one last look as she left.

Lyka's eyes trailed after her before they fell back to me. *"Don't worry,"* I told him. *Your fated mate is safe with Celeste."*

He shook his head. *"My memories are coming back to me,"* he said, *"but some of them are still foggy. I have had a lot of time to think, though..."* He trailed off, motioning at the spartan room around him. *"I am grateful that you've kept me alive when I was the one who decimated most of our pack. Or whatever was left that the Solar Sovereign hadn't gotten to."*

I sighed. *"You were clearly not in your right mind."*

His frown deepened. *"I was not,"* he said. *"And I realize now Sela was not my fated mate, no matter how deeply I believed it at the time. She was clearly priming me so the Solar Sovereign could take complete control and finish off our pack. She nearly got her wish."*

I blinked. I knew that Sabine was working with the Solar Sovereign *now*, but I'd assumed she'd pledged to my rival because Lyka had killed her sister and she wanted revenge. *All those centuries...* I bristled at the thought that the pair of

psychic witches were playing with my brother like a toy for the Solar Sovereign's pleasure. Now Sabine and the Sovereign herself were using Celeste as a weapon against me.

"You deserve justice," I snapped, my skin prickling with anger. *"And I will get it for you."*

Lyka shook his head. *"I am not interested in justice or revenge. I just want peace. When I am near my fated mate, things are...I do not even know how to describe it. It is quieter. I feel calmer, more myself. My thoughts are cloudy, yet I'm not as bothered by it, even if I cannot find my way through the fog."* He sighed. *"I would like to be able to speak to her like this. I have no idea what she is saying, and I do not want to get any closer to her. After what I did to Sela..."*

"You did that because the witch was tormenting you," I snarled. *"I am sure you wouldn't do that to your actual mate."*

He shrugged. *"I was entirely convinced Sela was fated to me,"* he said. *"And that is not a risk I am willing to take with her."* He paused and gave me a look. *"Tell me how to say her name. She tried to spell it out for me, but I am afraid I did not get it right."*

I wanted to argue with him, but I did as he said, teaching him the syllables "Li-an-ah" until he could say her name smoothly. Once he could repeat it, I found myself still talking, explaining how different the world was now—where I lived, how different the Temple of the Moon looked. When I began explaining how we got to and from all these places, Lyka held up a hand and shook his head.

"That is enough for now," he said, chuckling wearily. *"My mind is spinning from meeting Liana alone, much less all these changes. But...I think the future looks good on you, my brother. You look well. I mean that. And your mate...I am glad to see you have accepted her. You seem happier than I have ever remembered."* His smile grew. *"I think ruling suits you, Fenris."*

I frowned, but did not argue his point. I didn't particularly *feel* like ruling suited me as it did Lyka in the decades before Sela began influencing his mind. I pressed my lips together

and decided I couldn't keep my brother in the dark, especially when everything might change. *"The eclipse is coming. It is just weeks away,"* I said. *"The Solar Sovereign has made her presence known, and I am confident she is going to try to attack during the eclipse and kill me without hope of rebirth."*

Lyka's smile fell away, a stern look replacing it as he stood up straighter. *"I know I am not in particularly good shape, but if there is anything I can do to help you, just say the word, and it is yours."* He gave a firm nod. *"I will do anything, as long as I am not in the Lunar Lord's way."*

I laughed. *"You were the Lunar Lord once. I think I liked it better when you were barking orders."*

"I did not bark," Lyka protested. *"But we see how well my reign ended. I will be happy to follow whatever orders you have to give, my brother. However you see fit to take on the Solar Sovereign, that is how we will do it. You are the rightful Lunar Lord, and you should see yourself as such."*

Chapter 13

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 12 Days

Liana had gone back to her room to take a shower and take time to herself after we'd excused ourselves from the brothers' reunion. I knew I was meeting with Abi and Grant in a few hours so we could train. We were working with faeries again, though if I was being honest, I hadn't paid too much attention when Grant had dismissed us yesterday. My mind was scattered already, and Fenris's absence had only made it worse.

I had some time for research before our meeting, so I went to the library to grab one of the large tomes with a hearty section on faefolk before heading back out of the patio to do some reading. Even if it was the moon that heightened my magical power, I was still a Florida girl at heart—I loved the sun, and there was something so relaxing about the smell of an old book, mingling with the fresh, gentle breeze rolling up from the ocean only a few yards away.

I was so engrossed in the chapter I was reading that I barely registered the sound of the patio door opening a moment later. I blinked, barely tearing my eyes away from the description of a specific type of nymph and how you'd be able to differentiate it from a human as it tried to disguise itself,

when Fenris suddenly swooped into my line of vision, sealing a kiss over my lips.

The gasp escaped without my say so, and I could feel him grin against my mouth before he pushed his tongue into mine, deepening the kiss. I gripped the chair's arm with one hand, barely remembering to grab the book before it fell off my lap. My mind reeled, heat flooding in my gut. Fenris had kept a close lid on his emotions when I'd left him to talk with Lyka, and now all of that pent-up feeling was bubbling out—not that I minded. I smiled back, crooning softly into the kiss before I drew back just enough to inhale, feeling breathless.

“Did everything go okay?” I asked, not wanting to assume. I'd done my best to ignore our bond entirely, not wanting to invade the sanctity of the moment.

Fenris offered a bright, open smile as he sat down. It was gone in a moment, replaced by his normal, if not smug expression, but even this was miles away from the man I'd first met in the Challenger Learning Center.

“Okay would be a severe understatement,” he said with a rumble and a cheeky expression. “I never dreamed I'd be able to speak to my brother again in any meaningful way, especially not after Sabine's attack a few weeks ago. To be able to truly speak to him...” He trailed off and shook his head. “I cannot begin to explain what a gift you've given me, *khuya*.”

I glanced down at the book I'd been reading. “He's not fully healed or anything,” I said sheepishly. “I really do think Liana's presence...gave him a jump start, for a lack of a more technical term. I'm not exactly a fully trained healer here. But he went through a lot of trauma, psychic and otherwise. Even with Liana's presence, I assume it will take a long time for Lyka to really heal.”

“You give yourself too little credit,” Fenris said, reaching out to grab my knee and give a comforting squeeze. “We would still believe that Sela was his fated mate if not for your investigation. Even then, I had no interest in finding anyone before the eclipse, and you proved me wrong yet again. Even

if Lyka isn't stable enough to leave his holding chamber, just having the ability to talk to my brother again before we must face the Solar Sovereign is....." He stopped himself, but his expression was undeniably fond. "When the eclipse is over, Celeste, I will give you the entire world."

My heart skipped a beat, and I swallowed hard. *If only*, I thought. *I would give anything for that...except for you, Fenris. I'll never give up on you.*

Instead, I said, "Hey, what time is it? I was supposed to meet Abi and Grant at 11 to train today."

Fenris glanced down at his understated watch. "You better get going, then," he said. "Do you think you can get yourself ready in fifteen minutes? Or were you planning on sparring in that cute set of shorts?"

I gave him a playful swat as I stood. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I added an extra swing to my step as I pivoted to take myself back inside. I didn't have the time to run back to the library, so the book came with me. I deposited it on the bed before I headed over to the walk-in closet. Fenris followed me the entire time, no more than a few steps behind.

I slipped out of my blouse and bra, reaching to grab a sports bra and a more practical tank top for my workout. Fenris grinned, moving with his shifter speed to grab me by the bare hip. His other hand cupped my breast, rolling my pert nipple between his finger and thumb as I gasped, already squirming from that stimulation.

"Fenris!" I squealed, pulling away—though I didn't exactly struggle—when he leaned in to kiss me. "I'm going to be late," I said against his lips.

"So, go," he said, offering a cheeky smile. "I'm just reminding you what will be waiting for you later."

"You are an absolute menace," I said, but I finished changing into a decent outfit for the occasion. "And I will pay you back later."

Thankfully, I wasn't late to my meeting, though Grant, Abi, and her entire entourage had already gathered in the clearing. I

bumped my shoulder against hers. “Are we putting on a show?” I asked, nodding at the vampire twins and Cody.

She nudged me right back. “Are you really one to talk? You brought Tall, Dark, and Brooding with you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Uh-huh, but I didn’t bring his brother and...I dunno, whatever we’re calling Cody. Wingman?”

Abi laughed. “For once, I am totally, happily *not* on the market. No wingman needed here.”

Before I could respond, Grant cleared his throat, demanding our attention. He didn’t talk that much; he was simply the man who demanded respect with his presence alone. He was tall, and more than that, bulky. He looked like he could have been a lumberjack or a bouncer in a past life, as he was usually dressed in denim and plaid, despite the tropical temperatures. His graying hair was pulled back in a short ponytail away from his face. Those muddy brown eyes always looked judgmental to me, but he never said anything particularly unkind.

“We’re going to review vampiric attacks today,” Grant announced, folding his arms over his chest. “Specifically, any type of attack they can use their enhanced speed for.”

“Hey, what?” I frowned. “I thought we were dealing with Unseelie stuff today.”

There was a twinkle in Grant’s dark eyes. “You think your enemies wait for you to study up, Celeste?” Leaving me taken aback, he glanced over at our audience. “Okay, peanut gallery. Who volunteers to spar?”

Gilbert was on his feet in a flash. “I will spar with Abi,” he said.

Piers gave a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Don’t you think that’s a bit unfair? You *spar* with her naked every night, brother.”

I glanced over at Fenris. Instead of watching the vampires, he was staring at me, his expression growing smug as my blush deepened. I was aware that Grant was speaking when Gilbert walked over, and that I should be listening, but it was

hard to stop thinking about how Fenris had teased my nipples only a few minutes earlier. The promise of attention later wouldn't give me any peace.

“You know, you talk an awful lot of smack,” Abi said loudly. I blinked and glanced back, only to see my friend put her hands on her hips. “If we're sparring, why don't you partner with me?”

A surprised laugh escaped me even as I tried to cover my mouth. “Isn't that a bit like the pot calling the kettle black, Abi?”

She wasn't paying attention as Grant gave a nod, taking several steps back. I exchanged a look with Gilbert, and we cleared the floor as well. As soon as everyone was safely out of the way, Piers lunged at Abi, sand spraying behind him. Abi deftly dodged to the right, her smile staying in place even as her expression grew far more intense. I was surprised to see that Piers wasn't pulling any punches. He didn't let up on the speed, and even threw Abi down into the sand.

She landed with a soft “oof,” and I had to stop myself from asking if she was okay. I knew Piers wouldn't really hurt her, even if he'd knocked the wind out of her. Abi wheezed, but she rolled back to her feet in a matter of moments, reaching for what I couldn't see. As Piers rushed her again, Abi feigned left before sliding right, grabbing Piers by one shoulder and shoving her other hand under his throat. Only when they stopped moving did I realize she was holding one of the false training stakes that Grant had given us for practice.

“Woo hoo!” I hollered, clapping for her as I bounced up and down on the balls of my feet. “Abi, that was awesome!”

“Abigail Murphy is the winner,” Grant proclaimed, and I was positive I detected pride in the ex-hunter's voice.

“I want a rematch,” Piers grumbled as he took a step back, dusting the sand off his slacks.

Abi just twirled away, flashing him a bright grin as she stuck a victory pose for his benefit. He scowled, and Cody

laughed. “Makes sense that a baby Dracula would be such a sore loser,” he said.

Piers gave him a dark look. “Would you like to go next, puppy?” he asked as he stood straighter.

“Oh, yeah!” Abi urged. “Fight, fight, fight, fight!”

Grant shook his head and rolled his eyes. That didn’t stop the pair as Cody and Abi exchanged places, leaving the young shifter and vampire to square up. “You’re a menace,” I whispered to Abi as she joined me again, having barely broken a sweat during her match.

She flashed another wild grin. “You love that about me,” she said.

I might have protested, but Piers and Cody had already begun. They were moving so quickly, both relying on their heightened sense of speed, it was difficult for me to track who was doing what and who landed which hit. The French cursing was all Piers, but the yelp was from Cody.

After what seemed like an eternity, the shifter stumbled backward, fighting not to trip over his own feet. Piers was on him in less than the span of a breath, grabbing Cody by his shoulder and his forehead, forcing his head back to expose his neck for a bite before stopping there.

“Piers Rolfe is the winner,” Grant announced with far less enthusiasm this time. “Are we done with the dick-swinging contests now?”

Piers rolled his eyes but let Cody go, turning around to face me and Abigail as he dusted his hands off. “You see? If—oof!”

All I saw in the second before he tackled him was a mischievous gleam in Cody’s bright blue eyes. Moments later, he had Piers face down in the sand, cackling as the vampire thrashed and spat out grit.

“Gilbert!” Piers squalled. “You’re supposed to have my back! What the hell is this?!”

“Hah!” Cody paused long enough to ruffle Piers’s dark hair before crawling off him. He did stop to offer the vampire a hand, chuckling again when Piers glowered at him and got himself up.

“I’m sure you and your big mouth can handle yourselves,” Gilbert said to his brother, standing next to Fenris once more. “Unless you plan to fight everyone on the island.”

I laughed, looking back at Grant while he cleared his throat, clearly ready for the next part of his lesson. I felt a lot more settled now, and the next few hours flew by.

The shadows were getting long in the sky when Val called us inside for dinner. Everyone filtered in, leaving for separate rooms to change and clean up. I paused, hanging back with Fenris until we were the last ones left on the patio.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “Do we think we could have Lyka join us? Would that be safe?”

Fenris sighed, looking toward the house pensively. I knew without a doubt he’d love to spend more time with his brother, but we both knew that just because the former Lunar Lord was doing better now didn’t mean he wouldn’t have regressions. Frankly, we still didn’t know if he had any triggers and what would happen if someone accidentally crossed one.

“As much as I wish to bring him to the table,” he said after a moment, “I’m not sure that’d be a good idea, for him or for us. But I think I’ll bring him dinner afterwards, and we can sit together.”

“That’d be nice,” I said, offering a smile. “Now, let me go rinse off before we sit down for dinner. The last thing I want is Cody King smelling all that sweat.”

Fenris growled softly at that idea, and I grinned, dashing inside before he could stop me.

The scene around the dinner table almost felt *normal*. At the end, closest to the kitchen, sat Walter with Val on his right. Morgan had come back to Isla Lobo after gathering supplies from her coven and was on her aunt’s other side. Naturally, Cody took up the parallel seat, like he’d simply die if he was

any further away from her. Liana was stuck between Cody and me, and Fenris sat at the head. Gilbert was on his other side, and Abi sat sandwiched between the twins.

That left Grant Oakley. While he hadn't seemed terribly thrilled to be next to Piers at first, the fact that Walter was on his other side, giving him first access to most of the things coming out of the kitchen, brightened his mood.

I enjoyed the chatter, as well as Walter and Val touching toes beneath the table when they thought no one was looking. Morgan was having an involved discussion with Grant, and he seemed impressed with her expansive knowledge of vampiric lore while Gilbert and Abi were involved in their own private conversation. The entire thing felt homey to me, and I suddenly felt a pang of melancholy despite being right here, in the middle of it all.

What if I don't ever get to do this again?

Before I could sink too much deeper into dark thoughts, Cody suddenly blurted, "You know, Morgan, I totally whomped Piers earlier. You don't need all those fancy tricks to break up a vampire."

I sighed.

"Well, no..." Morgan said slowly, glancing at Piers, who simply rolled his eyes. "I suppose not. But not all us can, um...*whomp*. It is good to understand the nature of who you're working against...or working with." She glanced over to where Abi and Gilbert sat and smiled shyly before looking down at her plate.

Cody's expression fell, but Piers's dark brown eyes gleamed as he studied Morgan and Cody. He leaned forward suddenly, offering Morgan one of his most charming smiles. "You are quite right, my dear," he crooned. "And our friend Cody here only got the better of me after the match was already called." He paused as Cody bristled. "I have met a few Thalassa witches over the years, and I must say, you are truly the most well-learned of them. I can't even imagine the dedication that must take."

“Oh!” Morgan said, pink spreading across her cheeks. “Well, thank you,” She shifted a little in her seat, but was smiling. “I just really like to learn...and I’m glad I’m able to apply myself in a way that’s useful to my coven. And the Lunar Lord, too,” she said as she looked over to Fenris. When he nodded to her, she didn’t jump this time.

I was glad she’d gotten used to Fenris’s presence, but I didn’t love the direction Piers was going in. Every other shifter in the room felt how aggravated Cody was watching Piers flirt shamelessly with Morgan. Hell, I bet even Abi and Grant could feel it, and they were human.

“To learn is a wonderful gift,” Piers said. “You know, we were in Romania not that long ago, and this charming faerie taught me such an interesting trick, you see, though it’s not one for the dinner table. We could—”

He didn’t get to finish his offer. Not only had Morgan turned beet-red, but a snarl ripped free from Cody. I tensed, half-expecting him to vault over the table and tear Piers apart.

“That’s enough,” Fenris said, looking more annoyed than truly aggravated. He looked between the two before settling on Piers. “Stop. The last thing I need is a fight between a vampire and a shifter in my home.”

“Why....?” Morgan began, but stopped herself and looked back to her dinner instead.

A strange mood blanketed the group before Walter stood. “I made brownies for dessert,” he said.

Everyone brightened at once, and I smiled as I watched him go. *I better clue Morgan in, or she’ll be the only one on the island missing out.* In a way, it was already true...and that wasn’t fair to the other witch at all.

I gathered Abi and Liana after dinner, and it wasn’t hard to track Morgan down. She was in the library, as usual, smiling when we joined her in the corner with some sitting chairs and tables.

“So!” Abi chirped. “What do you think of Cody?”

“W-what?” Morgan stuttered as she slammed her book shut.

I gave Abi a nudge. “I think we skipped a few steps here. Morgan, this is my friend, Liana Edgington. She’s staying on the island until the eclipse.” I stepped to the side so Liana and Morgan could shake hands, murmuring shy greetings. “Liana, this is Morgan Fletcher. She’s a Thalassa witch, and she’s Val’s niece. She’s also an expert researcher.”

“Wow,” Liana said, her eyes bright while she found a chair. “I used to think I was crazy for believing in magic, and now I’ve met, what, three witches already?” She shook her head. “I’d love to hear what you’re reading.”

“Of course!” Morgan said, grinning. “It’s actually a primer on—”

“Now, ladies,” Abi cut in, her hands on her hips. “I’m sure book club is interesting and all, but I’ve got a timetable here.” Her eyes trained on Morgan. “So...Cody King. Thoughts?”

Morgan blinked. “Well, the Carmel Valley Pack is respectable, and it’s obvious that the Lunar Lord trusts him. I’m sure he’s a capable shifter and a good ally.”

Abi rolled her eyes dramatically. “I’m not asking for a book report. What do you *really* think of him? Like, do you think he’s cute? Pretty eyes? Nice ass?”

Morgan drew a sharp breath, and I sighed before rephrasing Abi’s question. “Hypothetically, if you were to find the type of love everyone writes about in fairy tales and romance novels, does Cody fit the bill of the person in your story?”

The young witch blushed as deeply as when Piers had propositioned her earlier, then cleared her throat. “Celeste, are you performing a Handmaiden mind-reading spell right now?” she stammered, unable to look me in the eye. “Because it’s rather rude to pry into someone else’s fantasies.”

Abi laughed loudly even as my eyes went wide. “I am not...but now I definitely want to know!”

Abi nodded, crowding in.

Morgan looked even more flustered and glanced at Liana like she might be able to help, but the blonde just gave Morgan a sympathetic look. “Sorry,” Liana said with a giggle. “Abi has always been like this when she’s curious.”

After a deep sigh, Morgan regained her composure. “Cody seems like a well-meaning person,” she said. “He’s sweet and seems like he’d be a lot of fun...and I’ve never been this attracted to anyone else before...but he’s a hot shifter, and an alpha! I’m sure he has plenty to pick from in his home pack, or wherever else he goes. I’m just a nerdy witch. I don’t think this will ever go anywhere, especially once this is all over and he heads back to California. He’ll forget he ever met me.”

“Oh, I don’t think he’s ever going to forget you,” Abi said, shaking her head. “I think you should talk to poor Cody about how you feel. You might be pleasantly surprised.” Her grin widened. “And you’re right: wolf shifters are *hot*. All those muscles, and they’re so strong. They can hold you up against anything and go for hours. Or, you can hold them off for hours!”

Poor Morgan looked like she might melt on the spot, but I raised an eyebrow at my friend. “And how would you know what sex with a wolf shifter is like, Abi?”

She shrugged. “I have an imagination, Celeste,” she said. “Plus, I have good sex with a vampire. I can’t imagine it’s that different, just less hairy.”

Taking pity on Morgan, Liana reached over and patted her shoulder. “It can’t hurt to talk to him, right? From where I was sitting, he seemed like he really wanted to talk to you earlier today.”

“Really?” Morgan asked. When Liana nodded, Morgan pushed her lips together before nodding herself. “Well, okay. I suppose it can’t hurt. I’m not ready to...I don’t know, march over and kiss him. But if he wanted to speak, that’d be a good start.”

“That’s the spirit,” I said, grinning. “I think he went out for a run on the beach after dinner if you want to go see him?”

“Oh! You think?”

All three of us nodded and Morgan took a deep breath, hugging the book to her chest before she stood. “If I just put this away first...”

“I’ll take care of it,” Liana said, gently taking the book out of Morgan’s hands. “Go on, before he runs to the other side of the island!”

I offered Liana a grin of thanks as Morgan hurried out. Then Abi and I counted for several seconds before we snuck after the witch. I felt like we were silly teens again, sneaking around after school to see if someone had actually talked to the guy they liked. But as we peered around the patio wall, I saw Morgan approach Cody, waving shyly as she asked if he’d like to take a walk with her. He looked like he could’ve jumped over the moon.

I reached over to Abi, about to steer her away when Gilbert spoke from directly behind us. “About time,” he sighed, giving us both an exasperated look once we jumped. “You’d have heard me coming if you two weren’t eavesdropping. I wasn’t subtle about it.”

“What a pity,” Piers sighed, a few steps behind his twin. “I was falling for that lovely witch.”

Gilbert rolled his eyes. “You called her ‘Miranda’ the last time she was on the island, Piers.”

Piers shrugged. “I love a lot of people, Gil. You can’t—”

“Don’t call me that.”

Fenris rolled his eyes as he brought up the rear, saying nothing as he sidestepped the bickering vampires and took my hand. I bid Abi and the others good night, happy to get escorted to the bedroom for once. “You won’t have to worry about any fights,” I told Fenris quietly as we walked up the stairs.

“You’ve been meddling,” he said, but it wasn’t an accusation. “So long as you’re happy, I am happy.”

I laughed and leaned into his side, enjoying his strength. “You should just admit you like seeing your friends happy, too, Fenris.”

“If I admit it, I’ll only admit it to you,” he murmured, stopping to kiss me before opening the door to our room. “You’re the only one who needs to know how I really feel.”

Chapter 14

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 11 Days

The nighttime stars were only just starting to fade into the morning sunrise when I awoke rested and refreshed. It was a novel feeling, but I didn't take time to relish it. With only a gentle kiss to Celeste's arm before I rolled out of bed, I quietly crept around our room to dress myself and let myself out of the bedroom.

With each passing day, it seemed harder and harder to keep Celeste from working herself to the bone, and I knew that was because she worried about the eclipse. I couldn't change that, so the least I could do was let her rest while she could.

As I trotted down the stairs, I found Walter already pattering about the kitchen, the smell of fresh coffee tickling my nose as I rounded the corner. "Good morning," I said, helping myself to a pour.

"Good morning, Fenris," he said, looking up from the dishes he was putting away. "How are you?"

"Fairly well," I said, stirring cream and sugar into the mug. I took a sip and sighed. "How are the preparations proceeding this morning?"

“The report out of Snowmass Pack late last night said recovery was going well. The two healers we sent to assist have been helpful.” He paused. “The coven in Glasgow handled the selkie problem as well and resumed preparations.”

“Good.” I nodded. “And the vampire attacks in Rosario, were those resolved?”

Walter made a face as he tidied up. “Unfortunately not,” he said. “One vampire is down, yet three more are at large. Our most senior member of the Order believes they were all recently turned—one vampire on the other three. We don’t know who turned the first one, but I suspect this was the Solar Sovereign’s work. Cause a problem and leave you to clean up the mess.”

“Sounds about right,” I grumbled. “I’ll send Piers and Gilbert to take care of it. Please arrange their transportation.”

“Of course. Would you like breakfast?”

“Not yet. Thank you, Walter.”

After topping off my coffee, I headed to my office to check any messages that came in overnight from international allies. I’d gathered contacts in every corner of the globe over the centuries, and it was truly a big help in times like this.

I heard some chatter as I wrapped up, and as I headed back out of my office, I smiled when I saw the exact pair of vampires I was hoping to see. “Piers. Gilbert. I have a task for you.”

Gilbert said nothing, but Piers looked chagrined. “Oh, but I was just about to go to *sleep*, Fenris.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can sleep on the plane. There are three recently turned vampires causing havoc in Rosario, and I need them subdued.”

Piers’s expression brightened at once. “Well, you should have said you were sending us to Argentina! I love Argentina,” he gushed. “This will be fun.”

“There’s nothing fun about rogue vampires,” Gilbert intoned, looking much more serious. I knew he was loath to

leave the island when he'd only just gotten back, but putting out these little fires was vital in the lead-up to the eclipse.

"Mhm," I said. "Go see Walter. He has your transportation arranged."

"Delightful," Piers said, giving his brother a nudge. "Oh, do try not to bring me down, dear Gilbert! Absence makes the heart grow fonder, etcetera."

They made their way back down the hall while I returned to my office. Ever since Celeste had shared images of us touring the world, I couldn't stop thinking about how the only date I'd taken her on was right here on my own island. The picnic was nice, but I could do better. Celeste *deserved* better than that, and more crucially, I wanted to make sure she didn't become so stressed that she stunted her magic. Or worse, hurt herself.

I settled down to continue arranging things, but not before sending Walter a quick text message. My private jet was always ready for me to take a flight at a moment's notice, and on a whim, I decided to use it. While Celeste got up and did her morning training, I continued to organize preparations as well as a getaway.

It was selfish, yes, but it'd be short, and I wasn't going to deny myself time with Celeste when there was still a possibility we'd have to be kept apart and unable to complete the ritual. I wouldn't die with another regret.

It was before noon when I finished a call with a mountain lion shifter out of Alberta. Walter had sent me a message about thirty minutes prior that all arrangements were ready and all safety precautions taken. He'd already alerted the nearest members of the Order to do a quick patrol of the private airport we'd land in, though I'd chosen New York City because there'd been no news about the Solar Sovereign or any of her lackeys. We wouldn't be there long, in any case.

Hearing Celeste, Abi, and Grant come in for lunch, I got up from my desk, swallowing down my cold coffee as I hurried to the kitchen. "Celeste, could you come with me?" I asked, grinning as she excused herself. "Let's go outside."

“Sure,” she said, following me out to the patio. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing at all,” I said, motioning for her to keep following as we headed down towards the dock. “We are heading out for the rest of the day. A short trip is calling our name.”

Celeste blinked, balking slightly. “A trip? Like... somewhere else? On a boat? Are you sure we should be leaving Isla Lobo right now?”

“I’m sure,” I said, offering my hand. “Walter and I have arranged everything. Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” she said, reaching out to lace our fingers together. “Lead the way.”

Six hours later, we landed in a private airport right outside New York City. I didn’t have to tell Celeste where we were. She lit up as the skyline came into view. You didn’t need to have visited the city before recognizing some of the world’s most iconic buildings.

“Are we going to eat hot dogs on Coney Island?” she teased as we stood, disembarking the plane.

“No,” I said. Hot dogs were not my ideal meal, wolf shifter or no.

“Oh, I know. You’re taking me to the Statue of Liberty, aren’t you?”

I gave Celeste a look. “I would be happy to take you on any tour you would like another time, but I have a plan for today.”

She smiled at me. “Well, alright. Your last surprise was great, so lead the way!”

The private driver I’d chartered for the day was waiting for us on the tarmac, greeting us quietly before whisking us off toward our destination. It was hard for me to be as attentive to the conversation as I’d normally like, but I tried to remain more alert than usual. I refused to let anyone jump us and ruin this evening.

Thankfully, Celeste seemed content to gaze out the window as we rolled down the streets when something caught her eye. “Oh my...oh my *gosh*, Fenris! That’s the Hayden Planetarium!” she squealed, her eyes as bright as if she’d just seen a celebrity. She reached out and squeezed my hand, practically vibrating with excitement as the car slowed.

We’d barely come to a stop before Celeste whipped the door open, practically dragging me onto the sidewalk and up toward the building. “I can’t believe we’re actually here!”

I laughed, enamored by her enthusiasm as she all but ran up to the front door to go inside. Clearly, I was mistaken if I’d thought Celeste could merely take me on just a brief tour of the place she used to work. She took us from exhibit to exhibit, happily explaining each one to me. Listening to her was a delight in and of itself. She could’ve been explaining vacuum cleaners, and I’d still be delighted, but hearing the passion and joy in her voice was a special treat.

We stopped in front of an exhibit of the moon. Celeste paused. “Isn’t it amazing that people actually walked up there?” she asked dreamily. “To stand among the stars...I wonder what it was like.”

I watched her closely, more interested in her expression than the moonscape laid out before us. “Well, perhaps you’ll get the chance someday,” I whispered, glancing around to make sure no one could overhear us. “There’s a funny thing about living long enough to watch humanity advance.”

Celeste’s silver eyes widened as she looked back at me. “Do you think...?” She paused and shook her head. “I couldn’t even fathom.”

“Now, I hate to drag you away,” I murmured as I escorted her back toward the exit and our waiting car, “but Mr. Nix has a reservation for two at Consulate UWS, and I’d hate to be late. I’ll remember to allow for more time at the planetarium next time.”

Celeste beamed at me, her silver eyes sparkling like stars. “I’d say we could skip dinner and stay here, but I’m starving,”

she said. “For future reference, I could probably spend a week straight in a planetarium and be happy about it.”

“Noted,” I murmured, unable to take my eyes off her as she continued to chatter away, barely settling down once we got to the restaurant and took our seats.

“I’m glad you had a change of outfits for me on the jet,” she said quietly, glancing around the Consulate UWS. “Wearing workout clothes to the planetarium would be one thing, but I don’t think they’d even let me in here.”

I sighed. “You’re gorgeous no matter what you’re wearing, though that shade of blue does bring out your eyes.”

Celeste flushed, smoothing a hand over her dress before looking back at me. “I feel like I’ve been talking all day,” she said, taking a sip of her wine. “Have you been to New York City before?”

“I have,” I said, smiling. “But only for business. I haven’t taken much time to explore the city any more than necessary.”

“Is it somewhere you’d want to come back?”

“Certainly,” I said, smiling at her. “I’d spend a week at the planetarium with you if you’d like, though I think we’d be remiss not to visit the Met at least once.”

She brightened. “Well, yeah! Do you like to visit art museums?”

“When I can. I do enjoy seeing how expression of art and ideas change over time. Despite my lifetime, I didn’t get to see everything, and certainly not in different parts of the world. I find that interesting.”

Celeste’s smile was warm, her eyes never leaving me even as the waiter brought our first course. After a few bites, she continued her train of thought. “I’m sure you’ve seen a lot of places, but are there any places you’d like to travel? For the museums or the food...or even just because?”

“I want to go anywhere you want to go,” I said easily, because it was the truth. I *had* seen a lot, but Celeste hadn’t

had that opportunity in her lifetime. “Who I am going with is more important to me.”

“That’s sweet,” she said quietly, taking another bite, “but surely there’s a location you *want* to see. Being your partner means I want to know about you, too. What excites you the way the Hayden Planetarium excites me? Or what food do you want to try? What do you really miss?”

“Hm.” Well, when Celeste put it like that... “I’d like to tour the Asian Pacific someday. I regret not learning as much about those regions as I have Europe, for example—and I think it’d be different. Refreshing, even.” I paused. “I would also like to run the Tibetan Plateau as a wolf. There are native wolves in the area, and...” I shrugged. I didn’t have a reason, specifically, but that idea had always appealed to me.

“It can’t be any more rugged than Antarctica,” Celeste laughed, shaking her head. “I imagine it’s beautiful, though. And so much less populated. Imagine how many stars you could see there!”

I grinned back at her. As Celeste began talking about her own travel wish list, I made a mental note that a trip to the Tibetan Plateau would be good for us both. The perfect getaway once all this eclipse business was over.

After dinner, Celeste and I took the short walk to the Four Seasons hotel. Though Celeste seemed taken aback by the lobby, she was stunned into silence when we opened the door to the massive suite Mr. Nix had reserved for the night. The suite was larger than most apartments in the city. Celeste balked, however, as I tried to lead her inside.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, frowning.

“I... Fenris, this room must have cost a fortune!” she said quietly, as if speaking too loud might cause one of the paintings decorating the room to burst into flames. “We can’t stay here.”

I frowned and motioned for her to follow me as I walked through the sitting room. “Of course we can.” I gestured to the pair of handsome armchairs, placed where they comfortably

viewed the magnificent cityscape just outside. The lights of New York City twinkled back at us.

“No one has ever spent this much money on me,” Celeste said, continuing to protest.

I resisted the urge to frown. “Ah, well, you see, I am particular about my lodgings,” I said, wondering if I could do an impression of Piers. However, it was better to leave the put-upon drama to the vampire. “Most human residences weren’t made with a shifter’s heightened senses in mind. I simply must spring for the best, or I’ll find myself in discomfort all night.”

“Hmm...” Celeste said, walking inside and shutting the door behind her. Her smile was already returning as she wandered through the room, running a hand over the back of the armchair. “I must be one lucky witch to get to share it with you, then.”

“On the contrary,” I rumbled, swooping in to kiss her the way I’d imagined since we first arrived at the Hayden Planetarium. “I believe *I* am the shifter lucky enough to share it with an exquisite witch.”

She giggled gently, her face turning pink before she slipped away, walking from the sitting room into the large bedroom. Her expression morphed back into awe. “Fenris, look at the size of this bed. We could have an entire party in here if we felt like it,” she murmured, walking over to touch the sheets. “So soft...”

“I’d rather we keep it to ourselves,” I murmured, closing the French doors that separated the two spaces. Of course, there was no one else in the suite, but now the intimacy of a smaller space felt right. As I looked back at Celeste, she’d already wandered over to the bathroom, her jaw falling open.

“This is the size of my bedroom back in Tallahassee,” she squeaked. “Fenris, look at that bath!”

I grinned as I walked over, sliding my arm back around her. “It’s jetted,” I murmured, leaning down to nuzzle her ear. “I think we ought to try it out later.”

“I...yes. Later.” She turned, and the look in her eyes made me forget the bath even existed. Before I could catch her, she moved back around the bed to the other side of the room. She pushed the curtains to the side, leaning forward to inspect the city below. “Fenris, I can hardly believe this place. Even the *view* is amazing. It always feels like we’re sitting in the sky, above everything else.”

“Of course,” I said. I strode over, pressing my chest against her back as I settled my hands on hers. “I am the Lunar Lord. You are my Lunar Bride. Where else should we be but the sky?” I pressed kisses into her skin.

A full-body shiver ran through Celeste, and she sighed, leaning her weight back into mine. I snuck the tiniest smile before nipping at her ear, and she turned to press her lips against me. She didn’t pull away until she was breathless, her silver eyes bright and her skin hot. I could hear her pulse quickening.

I smoothed one hand down the length of her side until I found the hem of her dress, drawing my fingers underneath it.

“Fenris,” Celeste sighed, pushing her thighs together as she squirmed. “We shouldn’t. Not here.” The movement pressed her rear against my thickening cock, and I groaned, taking a breath before I spoke.

“Why not?” I asked, stroking her thigh.

“We’re in front of a window,” she protested.

I stilled the hand on her thigh and moved my other one instead, slowly tracing it upward to cup her breast. Celeste shuddered again, tilting her hips further back. I ground my teeth together.

“So?” I said, gently massaging her breast through the fabric. “We are in our private room. We can do whatever we want.”

“But...” She sighed, unable to stop herself from squirming.

“We’re in the sky,” I said, not moving any further.

After what seemed like ages, Celeste seemed to decide, spreading her legs as she rocked her hips back against mine with more intention. The swell of her ass rocked against my erection. She groaned, reaching a hand back to hold my hip. That was all she could reach at this angle.

“Good girl,” I murmured, the hand on her thigh back between her legs. As I found her lacy underwear and brushed my fingertips against it, I realized she was soaked. I rumbled as I pressed the fabric to one side, stroking two fingers against her lower lips. “Why should you deny yourself what you want, my *khuya*? You should have everything your heart desires.”

“Oh,” she whimpered, putting a hand forward to steady herself against the glass. “Oh—”

I stroked her a few times before pressing two fingers inside. She welcomed me easily, and I groaned, my cock twitching inside its confines. “Celeste, I want you,” I growled, biting the inside of my mouth as she tipped her head to one side and bared her neck. *Not now.*

The declaration alone made her pulse jump. She groaned and nodded, adjusting her stance as she leaned forward, bracing herself against the window as she pushed her hips back. “Fenris, please,” she whimpered. “Please.”

As if I could ever deny her anything, much less this. Lust raced through my veins as I dragged my hands back to her sides, pushing her dress up to her hips. Tugging her panties out of the way, I wasted no time in lining myself up, pushing my cock inside her with one slow, even motion. Celeste moaned, her eyes falling shut as her mouth fell open.

I paused there for a moment, reveling in the warmth before I realized I could see her reflection perfectly within the window glass. I settled my hands on her hips, starting to withdraw slowly before sliding back in.

“Open your eyes,” I said. What a sight my *khuya* was. “Open your eyes and look, love.”

“Hm?” Her lashes fluttered back open, and she lifted her head, expression dazed. “Look at—*oh.*”

“Ah, you got so tight around me just now, did you like that?” I said, smoothing my hand over her exposed rear. “Do you like what you see? I couldn’t imagine a prettier sight.” I gave her skin a smack, and Celeste whimpered, her pussy gripping my cock. “Do you want more?”

Before she could answer, I gave her another spank. Celeste cried out and rocked her hips back, practically riding my cock all on her own. It was unusual not to be in complete control, but her arousal intoxicated me.

“Ah, didn’t I just tell you to watch, Celeste?” I murmured, realizing she’d closed her eyes again. “Do not look away. You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on—and you should see that, too.”

I returned both hands to her hips, fingers digging into soft skin as I increased the speed of my thrusts. The quiet was punctured otherwise by the sound of flesh on flesh, our sharp pants, as our desire spiraled higher.

Her eyes, still open, were half-lidded as she leaned backward, meeting my thrusts. Just watching herself seemed to make her squeeze around me again, and I groaned, gritting my teeth as I had to fight back the urge to bite her neck again. “Ah, look at you, *khuya*. You must like it, too—you’re so wet right now. Even if I wasn’t a shifter, I could smell how badly you want me. How much you *need* me.”

“Fenris,” Celeste whimpered, pulling one hand from the window to touch herself. “Oh, fuck, Fenris, I’m *so* close.”

So was I.

“Then come,” I growled, leaning over her to bite her shoulder. It was as close as I’d risk, but Celeste shouted and clenched down on me, her entire body shaking. Wordless sounds tumbled free from both of us, and I followed her over the edge seconds later, emptying myself inside her.

We moved a bit longer until we stilled, panting as we caught our breath. When I pulled free, I made sure to hold a hand out to steady her, my smile slightly dazed as she straightened herself.

“Wow,” she whispered, her cheeks still flushed. She pushed her dark hair away from her face. “I...wow.”

“Indeed,” I said, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

“I need a shower,” she said, looking down at herself, then back at me with a smile. “A cleansing one.”

I allowed Celeste the first minute or two in the shower alone to properly rinse off, but I couldn't deny myself any longer than that. Slipping in next to her, I sighed as the scalding water hit my skin, enjoying the pleasant tingle as it ran down my sides.

“You know,” I murmured quietly as I lathered myself up. Celeste had her back to me, but she tipped her head. “I'd like to keep traveling with you once the eclipse is behind us. I always traveled for Lunar Lord business before, but I want to enjoy it now. We could even start with a world tour of planetariums if you'd like.”

To my surprise, Celeste burst into tears. The shift in mood was so abrupt that for a moment, I wondered if I was dreaming. But now, little sobs were shaking her body as she refused to look at me, even as I held her close.

“Are you alright? Celeste, did I hurt you?”

“N-no,” she managed, burying her face against my chest. “No. I-I-I'm not...h-hurt.”

“What's wrong?” I asked again. “What did I say?”

She sniffed and tried fiercely to wipe her eyes, but it wasn't working particularly well. After a few failed attempts, she slumped against me and whined. “I can't. I can't. I c-can't talk ab-bout it,” she said, refusing to meet my eyes.

Anger swiftly replaced concern as I thought of the warlock engulfed in flames. I held her close, knowing the hot water would never run out in a hotel like this. “That's okay,” I said, kissing her wet hair. The side of her face. “I...I trust that you can't talk about it.” I bit the side of my mouth to curb my frustration. “But if something happens to you, Celeste, I won't be able to keep myself together.”

Chapter 15

Celeste

The Four Seasons Hotel

New York City, New York

Time Until the Eclipse: 11 Days

Dammit. I do not want to just up and die eleven days from now!

I still hadn't found any more information about the death mark and how to remove it, or to just avoid triggering it when the eclipse rolled around. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I pressed my face against Fenris's chest, allowing the water to drum against my back.

This isn't fair. I took a deep breath and realized I was trembling, but I couldn't stop my racing thoughts. *First my biological mother. Then my adopted parents. Now this! Just one of those things is more than enough tragedy for a lifetime. This just...this isn't fair.*

I forced myself to inhale, aware that thoughts of "fair" and "unfair" were silly. Life wasn't fair. Things just *happened...* but the idea of traveling the world with Fenris was so alluring that part of me just wanted to say "screw it" and go through with the plan he'd originally pitched. One lifetime with him was better than less than a year. There was a lot we could see and do over the next five, six, seven decades, but...

What about everyone else?

There would still be a fight, even if we weren't at the Temple of the Moon ourselves, and our friends and allies would be hurt, even killed. I couldn't imagine abandoning Abi to fight paranormal creatures with little more than "good luck." And what would happen to Liana? Or Lyka? Or Cody?

That was to say nothing of what could happen if the Solar Sovereign found Fenris and killed him. Life in the paranormal world would be multitudes worse if she assumed all the power the Lunar Lord currently held. Even if this situation sucked, I couldn't just...I couldn't just *abandon* everyone and wish them luck. That just wasn't me.

I had a job to do, and if that included breaking Fenris's curse, all the better. As much as I wanted to spend the next ten days wrapped in his arms, I knew I just couldn't leave my friends.

I took a breath and wiped my face, then looked up at Fenris through dewy lashes and leaned up to gently kiss him. "Sorry. I'm just...there's a lot going on right now. It's all been a bit overwhelming," I said quietly, feeling poorly that I'd ruined the romantic mood he'd set for us. "Thank you, though, for bringing me here. I had a really good time, and I—"

Suddenly, Fenris's phone rang from elsewhere in the suite. He scowled. "Ignore that," he grumbled, leaning down to return my kiss. The call went to voicemail, then the phone rang again at once. He sighed. "The only one who would keep calling me is Walter," he said, stepping out of the shower and grabbing one of the fluffy white towels hanging in the hall. "I should take this."

"Of course," I said, ignoring the worry blossoming in my chest as I turned the shower off. I dried my hair with my own towel as Fenris answered the phone and switched it to speaker.

"Sorry to be bothering you, Fenris, but I'm afraid this is an emergency," Walter said. The somber tone in his voice made my blood run cold. "Piers and Gilbert did find the three rogue vampires in Rosario. Unfortunately, they weren't turned by an older vampire as we suspected, but were proven vampires

from other regions. They were driven mad by Sabine, then brought to the city and let loose on the human population.”

I swallowed hard as Fenris growled. “Was she there?”

“She was,” Walter said. “Piers has reported she got to Gilbert. He attacked and killed several humans before Piers was able to dispatch him. Piers sounded upset, to say the least. He’s returning to Isla Lobo with Gilbert at once, but wants him to be in the chamber we’re holding Lyka in.” He paused. “Given what Piers told me, I suspect this is a reasonable suggestion.”

“Shit,” Fenris cursed.

“Dispatched him?” I squeaked. “Does that mean...?”

“Piers had to kill him, yes,” Fenris said, wrinkling his nose. “But not with a stake. He will rise...but we have no idea if Sabine will still be in his head. We’ll return at once. Walter, get the plane ready and we’ll meet you at the airport. Please have Val and Liana escort Lyka out of the holding chamber. If Val has the time to purge it, she should.”

“Understood,” Walter said before hanging up. I was now scrambling to find my clothing, not caring how wrinkled my dress looked or the fact that my hair was still soaking wet, not to mention plastered against my face. All I wanted to do was get home and help Gilbert.

The trip back to Isla Lobo felt like the longest six hours of my life. No matter how hard I tried to center myself, I was consumed over what had happened to the twins.

I hadn’t brought my mother’s grimoire with me, but I wished I had. Instead, I was forced to rely on messaging back and forth with Morgan. I was relieved she was awake, and more than happy to hurry to the library while we worked out what we’d be dealing with when the vampires returned. Her aunt was preparing the holding chamber for Gilbert, and I assumed Morgan, or even Liana, would speak up if Lyka reacted badly.

I felt like I was jittering straight out of my skin by the time we set foot on Isla Lobo. We hadn’t even made it halfway to

Fenris's mansion when Abi came racing out, her face red and blotchy.

"Celeste!" she cried, hurtling herself towards me. I pulled her into a hug as she clung to me like I was her only lifeline. "Please help him. You helped me and Cody. Please, *please*, help him."

"I'll do everything I can," I promised, giving her a tight squeeze before urging her back towards the house. "Is he here?"

"Yes," she said, sounding breathless. "He looks horrible. They got here less than an hour ago."

"He is contained?" Fenris asked as he withheld a snarl. I could feel his anger just below the surface, albeit punctuated by our bond.

Abi didn't seem to notice, just nodded helplessly as she allowed me to lead her inside. "Yes, but...well, you'll see," she said quietly.

My stomach clenched, and an uncomfortable silence fell over us on our walk to the magical confinement room. I certainly heard Gilbert before I saw him. Snarls and crashes kept interrupting the sound of Piers's voice as the younger twin tried to calm him. I *felt* the intensity of Gilbert's thirst as I approached, and I knew Fenris did, too, as I sensed his proverbial hackles rise as we reached the room.

"I will calm him," he growled, his eyes already glowing red.

I reached out and grabbed his hand. "Let me try," I said softly. I turned to Abi. "I think I know what I want to do, but could you please go grab my grimoire from my room? It's on the nightstand next to the bed."

She sniffled and nodded, all but sprinting down the hallway to get it. I turned to approach the cell, nearly cringing when Gilbert whirled, throwing himself against the window at me.

Fenris growled outright and bared his teeth. The vampire hissed and snarled right back, clearly not recognizing me as a

friend or Fenris as Lunar Lord. He was a hollow shell, and as I reached out psychically, I struggled to even find his mind beneath the bloody haze Sabine had left him in.

This isn't going to be easy. I wasn't sure if I could pull Gilbert from this the same way I'd extracted Abi and Cody from Sabine's thorns.

When my best friend returned with my spell book, I turned to her and Piers. "I need to concentrate on this...I know you two are worried, but could you please go elsewhere? I don't mean to kick you out, but..."

"They'll give you whatever space you need," Fenris said firmly, "and I'll remain to keep you from harm."

Abi just nodded. For a moment, Piers looked like he might argue with me, but then his shoulders fell, and he grumbled in French before following her.

I took a deep breath, opened my book, and centered myself.

I'd no idea how many hours had passed by the time I untangled the dark magic Sabine had left inside Gilbert's mind, but my hands trembled as I exhaled and looked him over. I was certain I'd freed him of the witch's spell. If there was any upside, it was that she'd had to do this one fast, so her work wasn't as thorough as the attacks on Cody and Abi.

Fenris remained in the back corner out of the vampire's sight. It made him easier to work with, and when Gilbert looked at me this time, I could see the sorrow in his hazel eyes. "It wasn't a nightmare, was it?" he choked out, his accent far thicker than normal.

I pressed my lips together and sighed. "It wasn't," I said, wishing there was more I could do for him, wishing I could tell him he'd been dreaming—but that would dismiss the people who died, and neither of us could live with that. "But don't beat yourself up, Gilbert. You wouldn't have hurt anyone if it wasn't for Sabine."

The vampire sighed and shook his head, looking down at his hands, where the skin was still encrusted with blood. No

one had been able to get close to him in his madness, not even Piers. His shoulders sagged, and I bit my lip. “I killed innocent people,” he said, turning away. “A witch’s curse or no, it was *my* hands that ended their life.”

“Gilbert...” I didn’t know what else to *say*. He wasn’t wrong. At the end of the day, there was little I could do for the pain.

“I’d like to be alone if that’s alright,” he said while looking down at the floor. “Make sure there’s no lingering effect.”

I glanced over at Fenris as he approached. While I was confident Sabine’s influence was gone, I suspected Gilbert was reeling from guilt—and no magic spell was going to suddenly lift that away. “We will check on you tomorrow,” Fenris said simply, touching my shoulder as he nodded toward the door.

I gave Gilbert one last look, then left the vampire in silence as we returned to the main part of the house. I wasn’t surprised to see Piers and Abi waiting in the hallway. However, where Abi had almost worn a hole in the rug with her pacing, Piers stood as still as a statue, only his eyes following me.

“Well?” he said tersely.

“I’ve removed the spell or curse,” I sighed. It wasn’t exactly like I’d had the time to study it deeply before removing it. “But...he’s incredibly upset about what happened.”

“As is understandable,” Fenris added gravely.

Piers snarled as he looked toward the door. “Whatever else happens at the eclipse,” he hissed, “I am going to kill that bitch for hurting him.”

I was surprised to hear such a vehement declaration from the younger twin. Fenris simply eyed him for a moment before turning to me. “I need to leave for Argentina at once,” he said, frowning. He didn’t have to explain why. Given what had happened, damage control was in order, and he couldn’t leave it all to the human Orders of the Stars members. They’d need some paranormal help.

“Be safe,” I whispered, leaning up to give him a kiss before he headed further into the house, no doubt to find Walter.

As he walked away, Abi looked down the hallway leading to the containment room. “I’m going to see Gilbert.”

I shook my head. “He asked to be alone,” I said. “He’s concerned he might still be a risk.”

Abi grinned. “Well, that’s too damn bad,” she said. “You got all the bad magic out, right?”

“I did.”

“That’s what I thought. I’m not going to let him wallow and be miserable all by himself.”

I stepped to the side, fondly watching my friend as she marched down the hallway to go see Gilbert. When I looked to Piers to ask what he’d do, I realized the younger vampire had already disappeared, using my momentary distraction to spirit himself away.

The brunt of my exhaustion hit as I released a shuddering sigh. I felt cold all over, even though the house was anything but, and I knew the only thing I needed right now was sleep. *If I can fall asleep*, I thought grimly, trudging up the stairs to the master suite. Even my bones felt tired, but my mind still whirred away as I thought of Gilbert and Sabine and Fenris... and Zyanya.

This is just a taste of the misery she’d inflict if she got Fenris’s power. Earlier, I’d been tempted to follow through with Fenris’s plans and escape with him before the eclipse, yet what had happened to Gilbert only steeled my resolve. I wasn’t going to allow her to torment my friends like this. I’d go through with the ritual during the eclipse, no matter what.

I hope I’m doing enough to prepare. There was no one to tell me; I’d have no way of knowing until the moment came. As I changed out of my clothes and got ready for bed, I paused at the window, looking out at the waning moon. *I wish you were here, Enora.* She’d know what to do. Even if she couldn’t

do this ritual with me, she'd at least steer me in the right direction.

Time to shake off these morose thoughts. I walked across the room and slid into bed, wrapping my arms around Fenris's pillow as I inhaled, allowing the familiar scent of woodsmoke and cinnamon to comfort me. My eyelids grew heavy as I held it close. *Be safe,* I wished to Fenris again, and was pulled under.

Chapter 16

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 10 Days

Checking on Gilbert was my first course of action on returning to Isla Lobo the following afternoon. He still looked horrible despite the presence of Abigail and Piers outside the holding cell. I'd have never classified either of the twins as a saint, yet Piers had struggled harder to adjust after I'd inadvertently freed them from their lord. He'd had a few small blood binges over the first century, though none had ever needed my intervention.

Gilbert, meanwhile, was the more careful brother, even cleaning up after Piers if he needed to, and as far as I knew, he'd rarely killed anyone at all. In fact, the only one who came to memory was well over a century ago, when I'd sent the twins back to France to deal with a "monster" menacing small farms, enough to start making a few newspapers. I'd *assumed* it was a lynx shifter that had decided "fuck all" and to plague the normal world.

Instead, Gilbert and Piers had found a human man kidnapping children and terrorizing farmers all on his own. There was nothing paranormal about him, but he was certainly a monster. Gilbert was the one to dispatch him, and he'd shown no regret. Nor would I have expected him to.

“Did you find Sabine?” Piers asked.

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “I took care of the rumors rippling through the area and made sure no humans would investigate the matter any further. It’s resolved.” As always, Sabine had disappeared shortly after setting Gilbert loose.

Piers growled and stood straighter. “We can’t let her just get away with this.”

I swallowed the urge to growl back and fixed the vampire with a stern look. “We aren’t letting her get away with anything. She’s playing her cat and mouse game as she always does. This is nothing new.”

He sniffed and brushed his clothing. “If she wants to play, then I will play.”

“Piers,” I said firmly, “you will not go find anyone. She’s just luring us out so we’re weaker before the eclipse. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up in the shape Gilbert was in less than twenty-four hours ago.”

Piers stared me down before looking away, pressing his lips into a thin line. He couldn’t argue with that logic, so he found a different point instead. “Then we should help Gilbert. Surely Celeste can do some...some magic spell to wipe his memory of the last day.”

I stiffened and ran my tongue over my teeth. My wolf bristled at the casual way Piers spoke of our mate. “Celeste is a witch, not a magic fix-all dispenser,” I said coldly. “She’s already overworking herself, and you’re not going to push her further by asking her to do what may be impossible.”

“I do not want to forget,” Gilbert suddenly croaked. He leaned against the wall. “It was a terrible thing, but those people don’t deserve to be forgotten.”

I gave a small nod, but Piers scowled. “Now, Gilbert—” he began before his brother cut him off, holding up a hand and shaking his head.

“No,” Gilbert said. “No matter how excruciating the memory is, I do *not* want anyone else rooting around in my head, no matter how good the intent is.”

Abigail made a small noise. “I understand,” she said, looking at Piers. “It’s something you never forget. You wouldn’t get it.”

Piers looked hurt, but he took a step back. “Fine,” he said. “I need some space.”

That was all he said before storming out of the room.

I shook my head. “Let me know when you wish to leave the confinement chamber,” I told Gilbert, then I went down the hall myself to find Celeste.

It wasn’t difficult to trace her—she was sitting in the living room next to Liana. Across the table sat my brother, watching the pair of women with interest. I couldn’t see the spell my fated mate was doing, yet I felt the magic as I approached the room and took care not to creep up on Celeste as she worked.

“Do not overwork yourself,” I cautioned her quietly as I sat on the other side, ignoring the slightly awestruck look Liana gave me before glancing away. “I know helping Gilbert was taxing.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute, then Celeste took a shuddering breath as she blinked several times. The distant look faded away from her silver eyes, and she looked over at me with a smile. “You’re back,” she said, clearly pleased, and reached out to squeeze my knee. “Everything okay in Argentina?”

I nodded. “It’s all taken care of.”

“Good,” she said, looking back to Lyka.

He was clearly curious, but he hadn’t spoken up. He sat with his hands folded on top of the table, and he looked shockingly *refreshed*. Val had kept a close eye on him through the night, but my brother had clearly cleaned himself up and chosen clothes from everything Walter had left out for him. It didn’t surprise me that he’d chosen plain, loose-fitting pants and an equally plain white tee. I was happy to see a man who closely resembled the brother I remembered.

“I was thinking, would it be okay if Lyka went for a run?” Celeste asked me. “Could you ask him if he wants to?” She

nodded towards him. “Liana’s teaching him a few words in English, but I don’t think we can ask him anything that complex.”

I frowned. “Why?” My brother hadn’t shown any signs of snapping since Liana’s presence had allowed Celeste to untangle his mind. I wasn’t sure I wanted to mess with that.

“He hasn’t shifted since he...woke back up. I thought getting him on the same page as his wolf might help him a bit. I don’t think it’d do any harm.”

After turning this over in my mind, I turned to address my brother in the language of our youth. “*Would you like to head outside and go for a run with me?*”

He blinked, then looked more somber. “*My wolf and I were not on good terms when I was the Lunar Lord,*” he said warily. “*I am not sure what that would look like now. What if I lose control?*” He paused, his gaze staying on Liana. “*I do not want to hurt her.*”

I understood that concern all too well. “*Celeste has found some research—from her mother, in fact—and believes that a wolf shifter is not capable of harming their fated mate.*”

Lyka studied Celeste for a moment. “*That is just one witch’s research, though. What if she’s wrong?*”

I shook my head. He didn’t know Celeste as well as I did. “*The full moon didn’t occur long after I first met her. Celeste tried to run away after the vampire—never mind. Suffice to say, I thought I’d kill her. My wolf was completely feral. You understand what I mean.*” And only Lyka really knew what I meant by that. “*I threw myself over a cliff instead.*”

Lyka inhaled sharply, but eventually nodded. “*I suppose we can try. But if I seem dangerous, use your alpha command on me.*”

“*Lyka—*”

He gave me a stern glare. “*Promise me, Fenris.*”

I sighed. “*I promise,*” I relented.

We both stood up as I offered Celeste a hand. “We’ll run together,” I told her, allowing her to fall back and explain what that meant to Liana as my brother and I went out to the patio. Lyka watched me for a moment, and I could see tension in his shoulders. I honestly didn’t know how his wolf would respond to him now. Nevertheless, I’d support him however he needed.

When I looked again, a chocolate-brown wolf stood before me. He seemed uncertain, as if his paws were too large or his legs too unsteady, but nothing about him seemed dangerous. When his amber eyes turned to me, there was nothing cloudy in them. I recognized the wolf as well as I recognized the man who’d stood before me moments earlier. *Good.*

Once I’d determined Lyka was in sync enough with his wolf to pose no threat to Celeste or Liana, I shifted as well. For once, my wolf’s urges didn’t overrun my own. It was a pleasure to see my brother like this again, and my tail waved lazily over my spine as Celeste approached us to smooth her hands over my muzzle, whispering to me how handsome I was.

Rumbling happily, I gently butted Celeste’s hand away. Liana didn’t reach out to Lyka, but she didn’t look frightened of the large wolf at all; instead, she looked on in wonder. If my brother felt comfortable with his wolf after this run, I’d suggest she reach out to touch him next time. But today we’d run.

I turned and nipped at my brother’s ear, then took off before he could retaliate, my laughter a bark in the wind as the sand churned beneath my feet. As I heard my brother behind me, I flattened my ears against my skull and stretched out further, lengthening my stride over the sand as we flew over it, racing to the opposite side of the island. The trees whipped by us as Lyka drew up to my flank, but he couldn’t pass me.

We were running so hard, we went straight into the ocean on the other side of the island. The momentum carried us several feet into the water before we came to a stop. I looked over at the sound of Lyka’s laughter. He’d already shifted back, and was laughing and shaking his head, kicking at the

waves before walking back towards land. I followed suit, shifting once I was on dry terrain.

“You see? I knew you’d do fine.”

Lyka gave me a wry look. *“So you did,”* he said. *“You have changed, you know. It suits you.”*

“What suits me?” I asked. *“Shifting? That’d make sense, Lyka.”*

He laughed and shook his head. *“Do not be smart with me. Lunar Lordship. You handle the responsibility with grace and a level of calm. It’s good.”*

“Perhaps. I have kept myself...removed for a long time. An outside view to me was the best way to keep an objective opinion, but now I wonder. You were a much more compassionate leader, and sometimes I think you handled issues with more finesse than I do. Did.” I looked out at the ocean, aware my brother was still studying me.

“I did what was needed as Lunar Lord during my time. And you are doing what needs to be done as Lunar Lord now.”

“This will not last forever. Your...your more compassionate style is needed.”

“You’re right. This will not last forever, but you don’t give yourself enough credit. You have grown and changed, and I am sure your style has changed, too. Now you will have your mate by your side to even you out.” He shrugged. *“With the curse lifted, I imagine that will become even easier for you.”*

I frowned. *“You’re just being my brother.”*

Lyka rolled his eyes. *“I will always be your brother. But between the two of us, I always believed you felt things more deeply—so deeply that you struggled to express it sometimes. Sometimes, when we were young, I wondered if you were meant to be the Lunar Lord, not me.”*

The confession startled me. I pressed my lips together. *“Did you want to be Lunar Lord?”*

“No.” Lyka shook his head, and his expression fell. *“But someone had to be. I valued upholding the line between the*

normal and paranormal worlds. Some of the other wolves in our pack....” He trailed off and shook his head again. *“They would have been terrible for the world.”*

That I had to agree with. *“You did a good job,”* I said.

“I did the best I could.” Lyka looked back at me. *“Fenris, from everything you have told me, you’ve done what you could. You removed yourself from the public eye to defend those you cared about, reemerging when needed to protect the paranormal world from humans—or humans from the paranormal world. You are doing a good job, my brother. You have been putting others first for centuries, even if you cannot see that yourself.”*

I paused, tearing my gaze away from the ocean to stare at my brother. We’d never spoken so plainly about *this*, and I didn’t know how badly I’d needed to hear it.

I felt so soothed, and I smiled. *“Thank you,”* I said, feeling more content than I had in a long time.

Chapter 17

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 10 Days

Despite living close to the ocean most of my life, I'd never been a big fan of seafood. But living with Fenris on a private island was starting to change that. We were sitting at a small corner table in the master bedroom with a large plate of seared scallops between us, dressed with lemon-browned butter sauce, capers, and fresh greens. Walter never ceased to amaze me with his culinary talents, though he insisted this meal was quite simple. I didn't really believe him, but I wasn't about to argue.

We'd fallen silent as we ate, at least for the first few bites, then finally Fenris spoke up. "Are we feeding you enough?" he asked softly. "I know you've been using every moment to study, but I hope not at the expense of meals."

"No," I replied. "Val made it clear early on that neglecting self-care affected magic—both in the short and long-term. If you don't sleep, you become distracted, and magic takes the path of least resistance. If you don't feed yourself, you start to have less energy, and that means your work will be less powerful and drain you more. You get the idea."

Fenris nodded. "Good," he said simply as he took another bite.

“And what about you?” I asked. “You’ve been running around all over the world—literally. You’ll need your strength at the eclipse, too.” Fenris wasn’t studying like I was, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t working himself too hard. He just had the gift of rebirth if he worked himself to death, where I did not.

“Walter doesn’t allow me to go underfed,” he said, then paused. “I suppose that goes for you as well, doesn’t it?”

“Mhm.” I grinned around my mouthful. The longer I knew him, the more I believed Walter was the true force behind the Lunar Lord’s power. “I never even say anything. He just... *knows*.”

Fenris gave a sage nod. “I have had many, many assistants over the years, but Walter is truly one of the best.”

“Are you sure he’s not a warlock?” I sked, mostly joking. Mostly. “Sometimes, he’s so on point, I swear he uses psychic spells.”

Fenris chuckled and shook his head. “I am sure. I think he’s simply that good with people.”

“He’s a treasure,” I said, tipping my head to one side. “That man deserves a vacation after the eclipse. Val, too. You should send them somewhere to elope...if you can pry Walter away from this island.”

I got a full laugh out of Fenris then, and it felt so warm and deep that I felt it in my soul. I could have sung from the sheer joy of it. “I will do my best to survive without him,” he said, his amber eyes twinkling. “That reminds me, though...”

As I finished off the plate, he got up to grab something. When he returned, I saw he had a bottle of red wine and two glasses as he set them down. “I asked Walter to bring this up for us. I’d originally purchased this for our night in New York City, but that doesn’t mean we cannot enjoy it now.”

“Oh,” I said, watching as he cracked open the bottle. “Thank you, but I don’t want to drink too much. I need a clear mind. I haven’t seen Esme yet today. I don’t think alcohol and psychic magic go together.”

Fenris laughed as he poured two glasses, offering one to me. "I imagine they don't," he said, leaning back in his chair. He swirled the wine in the glass for a moment and took a sip before he looked at me. I'd grown used to the intensity in his eyes, but the way he was watching me just then left me uneasy.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Mhm," he said, taking another sip before setting the glass down on the table. "I have a question for you."

I took a sip of the wine myself. Of course it was the nicest wine I'd ever tasted, and part of me wished I could just say "forget it" and spend the rest of the evening with Fenris. But I didn't have enough time to put any of this off, not if Esme could explain the death mark tonight. "What's your question?" I asked.

"Are you taking care of Esme out of concern, or are you taking care of her because you want to avoid the Solar Sovereign's curse?"

I must have made a face, because he added, "Answer in whatever way you're able to."

I sighed and took a moment to think. The answer was, well, complicated. I was still upset with Esme, and my picture of her had changed, but I still viewed her as my aunt. I had questions for her about Enora and the Aurora witches. But most crucially, she had a death mark. She was the closest I had to an actual expert on the topic.

"It's both," I said, glancing down at the deep red wine. "I don't like watching people suffer, even if they've wronged me." I bit my lip and looked back up at him. "I'm struggling to come up with a solution...but I'm not going to let the Solar Sovereign use me. I refuse." I exhaled, feeling stronger in that moment. I knew there *must* be some way to survive or remove the death mark, and if Esme had lived this long already, I was confident she'd have at least some answers.

Feeling suddenly renewed, I quickly polished off my wine and gave Fenris a small smile. "Thank you for the meal. And

the wine,” I said, standing up. I paused and leaned over to kiss his forehead. “I’m going to go talk to her.”

Esme was awake when I entered her room, but her gaze was a bit vacant. She’d shown improvement, but she hadn’t had the same miraculous recovery as Lyka. Some days, she reminded me of the aunt who’d brought me trinkets from Mexico City, and other days, she was a shell of a woman I barely recognized.

I sat down next to her and squeezed her hand. “How’re you feeling?” I asked gently, not wanting to startle her.

She blinked a few times before she looked at me. “Oh. Hello, Celeste,” she said.

Okay, well...that’s a good start. At least she isn’t confusing me with Enora today.

I smiled and gave her hand another little squeeze. “Hi, Esme. Are you okay?”

She slowly nodded. “Yes,” she said, looking me up and down. “Tired, that’s all.”

Her speech still seemed slow, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. “I wanted to ask you a question,” I said, pulling my chair closer. I knew I had to choose my words carefully. “I was wondering, do you know of any way to get rid of the mark we both have?”

Esme blinked a few times. “The mark?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “We both have it.”

“This one?” she said as she pointed to the sunburst birthmark on her upper arm. She pressed her lips together. “Yours doesn’t look like that.”

“It doesn’t,” I said gently, tucking my hair behind the ear where the Handmaiden crescent moon peeked out. “I was talking about a different one, actually.” I leaned back and tugged down the neckline of my V-neck tee, revealing the outer border of my death mark. It still looked fresh and angry, but the mark was the same as the one I’d seen seared into my

aunt's skin. "This one. Do you know if there's any cure for this?"

She looked at my skin so long, I was starting to wonder if she'd fallen asleep with her eyes open. Then she shook her head and looked away. I waited longer, but Esme didn't say anything at all.

"Esme?" There was no response. I gave her hand another squeeze. "Auntie?"

But she still didn't say a word.

Crap. Crap! She is the only person who knows what this is. What am I supposed to do if she can't even answer me? How am I supposed to get rid of this thing? Is there no cure at all?

I took a deep breath so I wouldn't spiral. "Okay, Aunt Esme. I'm going to go to bed now. But if you need anything, just call, okay?"

She didn't respond.

I sighed and kept my swirling thoughts on anything but the death mark as I returned to the master bedroom. Unfortunately, Fenris wasn't in the room; he must've gone to speak to Walter or Lyka. Frustrated and out of ideas, I decided the best course of action right now was to get rest and try again tomorrow. I hoped Esme might be more lucid in the morning.

Night wasn't falling, but the world around me was rapidly darkening. I glanced at the temple and realized the moon was already blotting out the sun, the star a simple outline over the ancient temple. My heart leapt into my throat as I glanced back down, realizing I'd been covered in silver—no...it was silver blood.

I gagged as the realization struck me. I must have followed Zyanya's orders. I didn't even realize I'd done it, but I must've...

I twitched and retched, my eyes burning as I turned and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. "Fenris?!" I shouted, looking around for the man or the wolf. "Fenris! Please answer me!"

A tremendous roar shook my entire body, drowning out my shriek as I jumped. A massive golden dragon spread its wings from behind the temple and roared again, the entire world around me trembling with the power.

I backpedaled, but tripped on my own feet, falling back into the dirt as it turned its gaze upon me. Fear coursed through me as one great, golden eye looked me up and down. I knew that eye.

Zyanya was no witch. She was a dragon.

She must need the power of the eclipse to shift, I realized. What was it she'd said to me as she leveled me with an alpha command? "It hurts, doesn't it? Imagine spending centuries like that, unable to take your true form." When she'd trapped my wolf inside my human skin, this was what she meant—the dragon was trapped inside Zyanya's human form.

As the realization struck me, the dragon turned, her neck coiling like a snake before she opened her great jaws, breathing a plume of fire downward. I followed the jet of flames, frozen to my spot, and realized she was torching people. People.

Screams and cries erupted. I knew those voices. I knew them intimately. "Abi!" I tried to scream, but I couldn't make a sound. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

A tawny wolf howled in pain. Next to Keziah was Cody, whining and throwing his body to the ground as he tried to escape the onslaught. I wanted to get up, yet my hands felt cemented to the earth. I wanted to look away and couldn't. The twins hissed and screamed, and I screamed with them, but my sobs were silent.

Other wolves ran in other directions, but it wasn't fear plastered across their faces—they had the same feral look in their eyes I'd seen when I first came across Fenris's wolf during the full moon. Then I knew...

I screamed again, choking on the smoke as acrid clouds billowed toward me. Tears clouded my vision. I screamed again, crying out for anyone who could hear me. The horror

around me fell silent. I choked on a sob as I forced my eyes open, and though my tears still ran freely, I realized the air was free of smoke.

I blinked, and as my vision cleared, a woman stood before me. She motioned with one hand, smiling gently before she turned, slowly walking away from me.

Awestruck, I scrambled to my feet, suddenly able to move. "Wait!" I shouted, jogging after her. As she turned to look at me again, I noticed how similar our eyes were.

I almost tripped over my own feet. "Enora?" I asked, breathless. "Are you...is this real, or is it a dream?"

The woman didn't answer me, only smiling serenely before continuing to walk. I realized belatedly that night had fallen, and a blanket of stars hung overhead, twinkling merrily as if all was right with the world.

"No curse is unbreakable," the woman said, her voice so gentle, I barely heard it.

I glanced back at her. This must be Enora, I thought to myself. Nothing else made sense.

"Is this where witches go when they die?" I asked, glancing around again. If this was the place where I'd join her, I could find some peace in that.

The woman turned again, laughing as she tucked a dark strand of hair behind her ear. "You take after me, I see. Always bracing for the worst while working toward the best. So practical of you." She shook her head. "I can't say I know where every witch goes, but I've been graced with the honor of watching you grow from afar. I always knew you'd be a brilliant, wonderful person, and I haven't been disappointed." She looked downright playful. "The answers you seek will be found under the moon and stars."

"What?! Wait—"

Enora suddenly approached, carefully wrapping her arms around me. I forgot every question I'd ever wanted to ask her, tears welling up in my eyes all over again as I threw my arms around her in return, hugging the witch as tight as I could.

“I love you,” she said into my cheek, “but this is the only time I’ll be able to visit. The dead aren’t meant to influence the world of the living.”

A sob ripped from me despite my smile. This was the only moment together we’d ever have, yet I was so grateful to share it at all. “I don’t know how true that is,” I said, nearly weeping. “I know some terribly chatty vampires.”

Enora laughed. How beautiful the sound was. “Be well, Celeste.”

“I love you,” I said as the image faded, hoping she heard me. “Thank you!”

I woke up slowly, recognizing the soft cotton sheets beneath me and Fenris’s sturdy warmth by my side. I blinked as I tried to commit every moment of the dream to memory, from the way my mother’s voice had sounded to the exact shade of silver in her eyes.

“The answers you seek will be found under the moon and stars.”

What does that mean? Enora wanted to tell me something, but what?

I carefully got out of bed, grabbing the Handmaiden grimoire from the nightstand and retreating to the small armchair in the corner. There was no way I was going back to sleep after that dream, so the least I could do was leaf through the pages to see if I’d missed it somewhere.

As I scanned them, I came to an old script describing the origin of the Handmaiden lineage. *We’re drawn to the moon. The stars. The skies above. We are called to these things, by the blessing given to us by...*

I squinted at the handwriting, unable to parse out the messy scribble. It was hopefully nothing too important, but I picked it back up a few lines down.

...not the only ones with a predilection for the realm above. As we move with the moon and her stars, the Aurora witches go to the sun and her sky. Their history is just as long as ours.

I frowned, wondering what was in the middle, but I could try to decipher that later. Or I'd ask Morgan for some help. She'd surely learned how to decipher messy handwriting after all that research.

I turned the page, reading over the spell that'd allow me to tie the Lunar Lord to his fated mate and sighing. By now, I'd memorized it line by line, but I still felt like a little girl pretending to play at magic rather than a powerful witch. *I wonder how the Handmaidens felt when they gave the first Lunar Lord his power.*

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen anything about the spell that did as much. *Well, this book isn't that old. If it'd been written down, it wasn't in this grimoire.* If these were all Grant could recover when Fenris asked the ex-hunter to investigate my Handmaiden lineage, it might be lost to time.

I looked back at the book in my lap while following my mother's notes. I'd read them several times before, and this was the part of the grimoire that spoke most of the moon and the stars...but none of this made much sense in the context of my death mark, or the upcoming eclipse.

Am I just not understanding this? Am I looking in the right place? I sighed and looked out the window as dawn broke. *I'm running out of time.*

Chapter 18

Fenris

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 9 Days

I rubbed my temples as I walked, wondering how many other bizarre twists of fate would strike before the eclipse was upon us. It'd been twenty-four hours, yet Gilbert refused to leave the containment room. While I appreciated that the vampire wanted to be as safe as possible around our allies, if I needed him, I didn't know exactly what I'd do except to send Piers out alone.

I've never seen Piers this focused, and I'm not sure how that will translate in the field. Uncertainty is the last thing I need right now.

The Argentinean members of the Order of the Stars hadn't turned up any further information on Sabine, nor had anyone in neighboring countries. I hadn't expected them to, but I was still frustrated. With the eclipse over a week away, I knew we'd need to leave the safety of Isla Lobo for Peru soon, and the fact that Sabine had once more disappeared into the shadows didn't exactly fill me with confidence.

I paused as I passed the library before backtracking to peer inside, smiling when I spotted Celeste tucked in one of the overstuffed chairs, still poring over the Handmaiden grimoire.

“I’d be surprised if you haven’t read it twelve times over at this point,” I said quietly as I walked over.

She glanced up and smiled. “I could read it twelve times more and still find something new every time,” she said warmly.

“It’s a beautiful heirloom from your ancestors,” I said, taking the armchair next to hers. I sometimes wondered if I’d be as intrigued if I were to suddenly find a record from past Celestial Pack members. Though I’d lived several centuries, I hadn’t been around for our beginning.

“It is,” she said, closing the book and smoothing the cover. “Even if there was nothing written inside, I’d treasure knowing it had belonged to other Handmaiden witches.”

“Well, luckily for both of us, that isn’t the case.” I nodded at the tome. “Do you feel ready to perform the spell that’ll tie the two of us together? I imagine it isn’t usually meant for one witch on her own.” I didn’t doubt Celeste’s ability, but if it was a spell meant for several people, it was out of her hands. Never mind my suspicions that witches were supposed to perform this spell on the Lunar Lord *and* his Lunar Bride—the Lunar Bride shouldn’t cast it herself. I didn’t want Celeste to try if it ended up killing her.

Celeste sighed. “I do and I don’t,” she said, flipping the book back open. But instead of looking down at the pages, she looked at me. “I had a dream last night. About the eclipse, and my mother. My birth mother, I mean. Enora. I think I’m missing a clue here, and I just wanted to look through everything again.”

I nodded. “Have you eaten lately?”

She shrugged. “I’ll eat in a bit. I just want to get through this part first.”

I got back to my feet and gently took the book out of her lap. “Come eat with me,” I said, tucking the tome under my arm. “You can continue reading afterwards. Before you protest, consider that you’re doing me a favor so I don’t have to eat by myself.”

Celeste studied me for a beat, but I could see she was fighting back a smile. “Fine,” she said. “But no five-course meals.”

“No five-course meals,” I agreed, leading her to the kitchen. As she sat at the island, I handed the Handmaiden grimoire back to her and headed toward the stove, considering what pan I was going to need when I heard Celeste inhale sharply and felt a sudden spike of adrenaline through our bond.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded, whirling around.

Celeste was sitting rigidly, gripping the stone countertop as she stared ahead. “I don’t...I don’t know,” she said quietly. She took a breath and swallowed hard. I could *feel* her stress. It wasn’t pain, but a keen alarm, not unlike an animal sensing a predator in the woods. “I don’t know what’s wrong, but *something* is. I don’t...I don’t feel safe, Fenris.”

I focused on my own paranormal senses, but couldn’t find anything amiss on my island. Gilbert was still in the containment room across the mansion. Piers and Abigail were with him, sharing dinner. I could hear Val, Grant, and Walter having a discussion outside on the patio. Though I couldn’t hear them, I could sense Morgan not far beyond them, practicing some magic, with Cody nearly glued to her side. Lyka and Liana were outside as well.

It didn’t really matter what everyone was doing, only that I knew where they were. Everyone was all accounted for, and all doing what I’d expect of them.

The scrape of chair legs against the tile floor snapped me back to reality. Celeste jumped out of her seat, hurrying down the hallway in the direction of the containment cell as I followed her. She’d gone pallid, but there were beads of cold sweat at her temples by the time she reached the door, practically yanking it open. “You have to get out of here,” she blurted out.

“Celeste?” Abi said. “Are you okay?”

Piers glanced around, clearly not liking the look on Celeste's face, while Gilbert balked. "I am not sure if—" Gilbert began.

"Do what she says," I said, storming forward to release the lock on Gilbert's chamber. The attacks on Kal in Alaska wasn't far from my mind. "Quickly."

Gilbert didn't argue further, leaving the cell at once and grabbing Abi by the hand before leading her out the door. Piers gave me a look, but said nothing as he followed them.

As we turned to leave, Celeste touched my hand. "Can you please get Esme?" she asked breathlessly. "I don't know if she can leave under her own power."

"Of course," I said, leaving Celeste to exit with the others as I hurried to Val's healing room. The older witch was asleep when I entered, but she didn't protest when I quickly scooped her up, only giving me a dazed look as I hurried toward the patio. For once, I wasn't upset about the meddling in her mind, as it made her easy enough to evacuate.

"We need to get away from the mansion!" Celeste was shouting, motioning for Grant and Walter to follow her toward the forest.

Walter did as she asked, and Grant followed, albeit a bit slower. "What's going on?" he asked, looking back to the house. "Is there a fire?"

"No." I strode towards the group, still carrying Esme. "Listen to Celeste."

"Something's wrong," Celeste said. Her face looked sallow, and if I hadn't seen her premonitions before, I'd have thought she was ill.

"Where are we supposed to go?" Grant asked, motioning at the sand and the jungle. "That's the only—"

The massive crack of an explosion behind us cut him off, my ears ringing as I flinched. I whirled around to see the ex-hunter thrown into the sand, magic fire crackling against his clothing. Grant screamed fiercely, but I couldn't help him.

Behind him was my home—or what remained of it. An entire wing was engulfed in bright white flame.

When I glanced back at the hunter, he had stopped moving. I grimaced. Humans were particularly weak to a witch's flame.

I turned, about to share the news with Celeste, when a cold chill ran down my spine. My wolf suddenly bristled, all his senses screaming “danger!” Seconds later, a cold burst of air greeted me, sending all my senses into overdrive.

Sabine appeared moments later, her face split in a wide grin. “Found you!” she sang as another witch and a warlock materialized moments later.

I snarled, but the warlock began working dark magic at once to open a portal. Seconds later, a few vampires came spilling forward. I could sense their bloodlust at once, more victims of Sabine's meddling.

Lyka and Cody went charging past me, already in wolf form as they intercepted the first two vampires through the gate. I set Esme down and let my wolf free, stepping in front of Celeste and her aunt as I snarled. I could feel Celeste already starting to work up a spell behind me, but I didn't have time to look. I knew I needed to get to the warlock, or he'd keep releasing more vampires in our direction.

“Get to the boat!” Walter shouted, already at the dock.

Liana hurried after him. Morgan and Val, though retreating, summoned up wards as well. I felt the protective magic building, but it wouldn't be enough if we didn't deal with Sabine and her lackeys first.

I lunged forward, tackling the nearest vampire and grabbing him by the shoulder. He was so blood-crazed that he didn't notice the pain or the flesh I ripped apart, hissing and clawing at me until I shook him violently, snapping his neck.

Tossing the corpse to one side, I noticed Sabine's green eyes locked on Lyka's dark form. *Shit*. No matter her loyalty to the Solar Sovereign, I was certain her thirst for revenge would win out. She cradled her hands together, a purple flame starting to grow above them.

I barked for Lyka's attention, but another vampire threw itself at me.

Shit!

Sabine threw her baneful magic forward, and I couldn't look away as it hurdled toward Lyka. It crashed into an invisible wall seconds later, a bright blue briefly appearing before fading away.

"Lyka, watch out!" Celeste yelled. She didn't look away from Sabine as she swore under her breath.

This time, my brother bounded out of the way of the attack as he tackled another vampire to the earth. Celeste called a burst of wind, pushing Sabine back. The witch screamed, furious, but Celeste didn't shrink. I felt a surge of pride at how powerful she was under the moon. Not only that, but she was *confident* in her ability, and that translated into bigger spells and quicker actions. If not for the vampires and the warlock drawing them forward, I would have stopped and marveled at my mate.

"Piers, there's a shifter on your left!" Abigail yelled.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Celeste's friend shoulder to shoulder with Gilbert, holding her own as a vampire tried to close in. Gilbert seemed more concerned with defending her than himself.

Someone screamed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the shadow move, realizing belatedly that it was a panther—a shifter.

"Get BACK!" Val screamed, more emotional than I'd ever heard her before.

Suddenly, the ocean rose up next to her, a large wave slapping the cat down as Val rushed forward. I realized the cat had been standing over a now-bloodied Walter. The witch was quickly pulling him away from the water's edge as Morgan hurried over, finishing the spell as she pulled the panther shifter beneath the waves.

A nerve snapped inside me, and a haze of red took over my vision. I surged forward, then all I felt was the taste of copper

on my tongue and the foreign howl of a man I didn't know as I ripped the warlock limb from limb. It happened in the blink of an eye, and when I gained enough of my conscious thought to realize time had passed, only Sabine remained.

“DIE!” she screamed, looking as feral as the vampires she'd driven to madness. She seemed to have lost all sense of finesse, simply grabbing energy out of the air to hurl at me, at Lyka, at Cody. “Would you just DIE already?!”

Cody howled in defiance while his eyes flashed alpha-red. He lunged for her, but Sabine teleported and reappeared a few feet away. As soon as she was visible again, Lyka charged forward, but Sabine jumped again, leaving him to stumble forward. Celeste was only a few feet behind him, her silver eyes blazing as she tracked the witch, seeing what the rest of us couldn't.

My mate sent a quick blade of air toward the psychic witch. Sabine screeched again, her frustration reaching a fevered pitch as she ducked sideways with only a second to spare. As she regained her feet, a few scarlet droplets rolled down her cheek. She paused to wipe her skin, as if startled by the presence of her own blood, and looked up, her gaze meeting Celeste's.

“You fucking bitch!” she spat, calling a dark, bluish flame, then throwing it at my mate.

I howled, incensed that anyone would speak to her that way. As I charged the psychic witch, Celeste deftly sidestepped Sabine's assault, pushing the dark bolt of magic into the sand using the same wind power she'd used moments before.

“You're outmatched, Sabine,” Celeste called out, and as she stepped back, Morgan used the wind to kick up the sand and try to douse Sabine with it.

It distracted the witch just enough for me to get close, teeth tearing into her arm before she yanked back, throwing a blast of dark magic against my muzzle before disappearing in a clap of cold air. I snarled as pain raced through me, and I stumbled forward, my knees hitting the sand.

When Sabine reemerged this time, her sides were heaving, her pristine hair a mess. Blood ran down her arm, dripping on the sand as she turned and saw my forces now surrounding her.

I rocked my weight back on my haunches, about to spring when she suddenly screamed again, huge geysers of flame erupting all around her and shooting in every direction. Forced to shield my face, I stumbled back as Cody yelped and someone else screamed. The smell of singed fur filled my nose, masking any other scent even as the bright burst of fire fizzled and disappeared, leaving only scorch marks in their wake.

Sabine was calling up a portal.

I tried to pull myself to my feet, aware we only had seconds before the witch disappeared, likely not to be seen again before the eclipse. Celeste and Morgan were clearly thinking the same thing, each attempting to recover from the fiery blast quick enough to counter her spell.

Right then, Piers raced out of the forest, blood still dripping from his face where a shifter had clawed him. His clothing was blackened, and there were steaming burns on his hands, but he seemed oblivious to his injuries. He reached the psychic witch and grabbed her by the shoulder and hair. She screamed in wordless fury as he interrupted her spell, magic crackling between them like lightning.

She tried to force Piers back, but he wouldn't be deterred.

Sabine raised her hands, the purple flames licking at her skin. Piers dug his nails into her scalp and wrenched her head back before lurching forward, plunging his fangs into her neck. Her furious scream became one of agony as his vampiric venom took hold. Sabine's magic fizzled into nothing, and as she tried to claw at the vampire, it was with panic and pain rather than fury and power. Her voice became wet, her screams gurgled, and as Piers pulled back, blood dripped down his chin. He pushed her body down as Sabine took a single halting step before crumpling into a heap, not a single spark of magic bubbling out of her.

I released a ragged breath, tensing for the next attack, but nothing came.

Piers groaned and spat, as if disgusted by the taste of Sabine's blood. His hazel eyes lingered on her motionless frame before he turned away, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He gave a small smile when his eyes met mine.

"Ding dong, the witch is dead," he sang, his eyes alight with triumph.

Chapter 19

Celeste

Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Time Until the Eclipse: 9 Days

I fought to catch my breath as I reached up to rub my eyes, scarcely able to believe what I'd just seen. My fingertips were still tingling even as I released my hold on my magic, but even that didn't seem to register as I scanned the surrounding area for Fenris's familiar shape.

Then he was instantly by my side, a massive black wolf one moment, a man the next. His hands ran up and down my arms, clearly scanning me for any injuries. I'd felt the impact when Sabine had struck him earlier, but the echo of pain in our bond had already faded from my peripheral senses. After I recognized he didn't have any lasting injuries, I finally exhaled, stepping closer to pull him into a tight embrace.

"I'm okay," I whispered as he cradled me against his chest, cupping the back of my neck with his palm. "Fenris, I'm alright."

He exhaled, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "You were amazing," he murmured against my skin, his tone full of awe.

"I think I need help," Morgan croaked from a few feet away, sinking down into the sand.

As I glanced over at the other witch, I realized she'd gone pale, arms wrapped around her middle as she hunched forward. Cody was by her side in an instant, the large chestnut wolf turning and growling as I tried to get closer. I didn't approach, giving him a moment as I looked for other allies.

Despite the marks on his face, Piers seemed fine otherwise, falling back to regroup with his brother. Abi was panting by Gilbert's side. There was the start of a bruise on her jaw, but nothing else seemed to be wrong.

We couldn't say the same for Walter. Val hovered over him, her hands shaking as she tried to work up a spell. I could tell that she was already at the limits of her own energy, and I sucked in a sharp breath as I realized Grant lay close to where Fenris's home once stood, still unmoving. The witchfire had long since gone out.

"Is he...?" I began, afraid to finish the thought.

"He's dead," Fenris said. "It was quick."

As if that made it better. I grimaced and looked away, forcing myself to take a breath. Now was not the time to lose my head.

I glanced up at the house and sighed. The magical fire had died out, but flames still licked the building, crawling over the wood and material that hadn't been blown to smithereens. If I hadn't just fought a psychic witch, I'd have the energy, but not now—especially not with Val and Morgan down for the count. I certainly couldn't save the home on my own.

Piers followed my gaze and scowled, turning to spit again. "I said I'd kill that bitch, but now I wish I could kill Sabine all over again," he growled, shaking his head as the fires climbed the walls of Fenris's home.

I sighed but turned away, too tired to deal with the emotional impact of losing a home. We had more urgent issues. Turning back to the scattered group, I looked for where I'd be the most useful when I realized I couldn't see Esme. Or Liana. My pulse spiked, my heart jumped into my throat, and I

wrenched myself from Fenris's embrace. I whirled around to figure out where the two of them had gone.

"Fenris—"

Before I could finish my thought, Lyka suddenly jolted from where he'd been grooming one of his injuries. The dark wolf was like a midnight comet, streaking toward the burning building.

"Lyka!" Fenris called, tearing away after his brother. I ran after them both.

Even yards away, the heat from the fire was unbearable. "Fenris!" I cried, coughing then choking on the billowing smoke. My eyes watered fiercely, and I ducked my head to peer forward. I couldn't see either of the brothers. "Lyka! Fenris! Where are you?"

Someone coughed, and I stumbled back, squinting as I realized one of the men was walking back through the smoldering wreckage, the second not far behind. I sucked in a deep breath and regretted it at once, coughing and spluttering as I realized Fenris was carrying someone. As he got further out of the thick, acrid smoke, I recognized Esme, coughing and wheezing against his chest. Liana was faring better, able to stand as Lyka set her down.

"What were you thinking?" I said to Liana, hurrying over to check the pair of women.

Liana shrugged sheepishly. "I saw Esme run into the house. No one else seemed to notice, and I was afraid she was confused or trapped."

Lyka grumbled, displeased with how *Liana* could've gotten trapped or lost inside the smoky house, but I gave my friend a hug, touched by her concern for my aunt. As I turned to Esme, I realized she was clutching something. She held it out to me as a cold shiver ran down my spine.

"Your grimoire," she choked out, her voice hoarse as she coughed. "The Handmaiden grimoire. It was going to burn. I couldn't let it burn."

I lurched forward, doing my best to hug the woman. “Thank you,” I whispered, kissing her forehead as she wheezed. “This means more than you realize.”

“Look!” Piers pointed to a dark shape forming several feet away on the island.

Recognizing the portal seconds before it opened, I tensed, clutching my grimoire to my chest as I prepared to cast a shield around my friends. Then Delila Devins stepped out of the air, the cold breeze grabbing at her cloak. A few other folks followed behind her.

“April! Pearl!” Val exclaimed, clearly recognizing the two women. She paused as she spotted the man. “James—”

Delila’s eyes widened as she spotted Fenris’s mansion. “Come with me,” she said to the two women, the two of them hurrying as close as they could to the blaze. I watched as they called upon the power of the water.

As they worked on the house, James hurried towards Morgan. He crouched over her, and I realized at once how similar they looked.

“Move,” he snapped at Cody, reaching out to push the large chestnut wolf out of his way.

I cringed when Cody growled, but Morgan reached out before James could touch the shifter.

“It’s okay, Dad,” she said. “It’s okay. He didn’t hurt me.”

Cody huffed and flattened his ears against his head, but the word “Dad” seemed to sink in, and he took a few steps back, making room for the warlock to help her. As he worked, a few more Thalassa witches arrived, going to Val first while she directed them. I took a breath, relieved that the coven was close enough to come help in the aftermath.

“Are you alright?” Fenris asked, walking over to me. Esme was still in his arms, and I reached out to touch her. Her eyes remained closed, but her pulse seemed strong, and her breathing had evened out. I exhaled, deciding the older witch was simply exhausted. I couldn’t blame her for that.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Just...wow.” Part of me still couldn’t believe I’d held my own against Sabine, that her body lay only several yards away where Piers had dropped her. I barely even knew the spells and curses I’d been using to defend myself, but...

“I’m just tired,” I finally said.

“Of course,” Fenris said as he looked at the remains of his home. “We’ll have to leave the island. Obviously, Isla Lobo is compromised. We’ll go to Keziah’s territory for a few days before we head to Peru.”

I nodded. As I stood next to Fenris, simply taking comfort in his presence, I realized Lyka was murmuring nearby. I couldn’t understand anything he said, yet the concern on his face was obvious while he checked Liana, careful not to be too invasive while he ensured she was alright. My friend kept reassuring him, but the language barrier was clearly an issue. At least the injuries he’d sustained during the attack had faded away. I was confident that Lyka would recover in twenty-four hours at the most.

Suddenly, a thought struck me. *Sabine was here to kill Lyka—and I can’t imagine Zyanya would just let her do whatever she wanted. I don’t think Zyanya is all about free will. I shook my head. But that means the Solar Sovereign wanted Lyka dead, too. If she thinks she succeeded....*

I took a few steps back, motioning for Fenris to follow. I knew the Solar Sovereign had sources all over, and while it *seemed* like our allies were trustworthy, I didn’t want to take any chances. Sabine had found Isla Lobo—and I couldn’t even trust Esme.

Motioning for Fenris to set her down, I walked with him a few feet away once I was sure the older witch wasn’t going to wake up. Once we’d removed ourselves, I leaned in close and lowered my voice. “When we get to the Snowmass Pack’s territory,” I whispered, “I think we should hide Lyka’s presence.”

Fenris looked perplexed.

“Well, Sabine came to kill him, didn’t she? We should perpetuate the rumor that she was successful...even though she clearly isn’t returning to the Solar Sovereign’s side. If she doesn’t know your brother is alive, that’s just one extra trick up your sleeve, right?”

Fenris nodded. “Yes...yes, you are right. She’ll be expecting his death.”

“Yes, exactly! She won’t prepare for him, giving you the upper hand.” I offered him a smile. “We’ll have to properly mourn, though. We can’t tell anyone else the truth. And we’ll need to create a cover story for him when we get to Colorado.”

“I’ll think of something,” Fenris said. “Let me go talk to him and explain the plan.”

“Okay,” I said, unable to keep myself from giving him a hug before returning to the group. Cody was still hovering near Morgan, but James clearly had things under control. Several other Thalassa witches had joined Val, working to heal Walter so the older witch didn’t completely exhaust herself in the process.

I turned, looking for Abi, only to see she’d found Grant. She was kneeling next to his body, one of his hands in hers. Her head remained bowed, her auburn hair falling forward as Gilbert rested one hand on her shoulder.

I hurried over and crouched down next to my friend. “I’m sorry, Abi,” I whispered, giving her a squeeze. “He didn’t deserve that.”

“He didn’t,” she said, sniffing back a few tears. “I don’t...I don’t even know if he has family. He was so private.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said.

“We will,” Gilbert said. “I promise.”

I gave her one more hug before drawing back. I knew Fenris would want to leave Isla Lobo as soon as everyone healed enough. We had no idea who Sabine shared the location with, or if they’d be awaiting her return. And there was no way I’d wait around to find out. I’d gather what I could from the portions of the mansion that hadn’t burned, now that Delila

and the Thalassa witches had doused the flames, but I wasn't terribly hopeful there was much to salvage.

When we arrived in Colorado several hours later, I was surprised to see camps set up within the Snowmass Pack territory. At first, I thought they were meant for us, but quickly realized they were already occupied by shifters, witches, warlocks, faefolk, vampires...the list went on. I'd never met any of them, but they'd all answered the Lunar Lord's call. These were the reinforcements the Order of the Stars had been tasked with drumming up...and they were from the American West alone.

I can't believe how many people are here! There are so many paranormal folk. I had no idea.

It still struck me sometimes how, just a few months ago, I had no idea that the paranormal world even existed. And now, I was preparing to help Fenris in the fight of our lives.

As we walked, a hush fell over those gathered. Some hurried back to their tents, giving us furtive glances, while others feigned talking to their companions while watching us go by. Fenris was radiating aggravation, playing well the part of the furious Lunar Lord who'd lost the brother he'd only just found. But then I realized some of the eyes were tracking *me*, not him.

They must know I'm the Lunar Bride.

I looked down at my feet. I wasn't sure how fast word traveled, but I expected Keziah's pack members had figured that out. It was only a matter of time before the news traveled across the grapevine. I bit my lip, looking up at the sound of someone's voice, only to realize several wolf shifters at the camp to my left were kneeling, exposing their necks, while a few mountain lion shifters dipped their head in respect.

Oh my...what are they doing? Fenris is the wolf god, not me!

I was just his fated mate! For all they knew, I was just a pretty, incompetent face! Their submission gave me a shock, and, desperate to be out of the public eye, I wanted nothing

more than to dive inside Keziah's home the moment we got to her doorstep.

Fenris stepped up beside me, giving me a curious look. He'd clearly experienced the adulation a hundred times before. I knew he was acting more aloof than usual while "mourning" his brother, but he couldn't hide his obvious concern.

I took a breath, not wanting him to worry, as Keziah opened her door, ushering us inside. "I'll send my healers over right away," she told Fenris, motioning to another wolf running into the camp. "Come inside, come inside. I am glad to see you in one piece."

"You look much better yourself," Fenris remarked, looking the female alpha up and down. "I am glad the warlock didn't damage you too badly." His expression fell. "Our battle was not without casualties, however."

My heart leapt into my throat, aware this was the first real test of our little plan. Keziah gave him a keen look. "Oh?"

"Mhm. An ally on my island is dead, as is my..." He bared his teeth, his eyes flashing before he looked away from Keziah. "Sabine murdered my brother in her final act," he snarled.

If I hadn't seen Lyka moments before we'd stepped onto the Snowmass Pack lands, I'd have believed Fenris. I shuddered, wrapping my arms around myself, and looking down so I'd seem remorseful. Fenris rumbled and stepped closer, wrapping a protective arm around my shoulders.

Keziah inhaled. "I am most sorry to hear that, Lord Fenris," she said, suddenly taking on a formal tone. "I will my entire home to you so you may grieve in peace. I know this is in no way enough to deal with such a massive loss, but this is all I have."

Fenris rumbled. "It will do. Thank you." He paused, looking back at Keziah. "My allies will need shelter as well. I have also picked up a lone wolf; his name is Zeke. He has pledged his loyalty to me and fought against Sabine's attack.

While I would not usually ask you to home a loner, today I will ask for an exception.”

“Of course, of course,” Keziah said, nodding. “We’ll make sure he has his own tent. I know lone wolves can be a bit... touchy about other shifters after so long alone. But any ally of yours is welcome.”

“Good,” Fenris said, nodding.

I exhaled softly, glad our plan was working. “Zeke” was the name we’d given Lyka. The fact that Keziah would remove him from the others without our asking was good news as well. We’d already tried to provide Lyka with enough markings, as well as the same blurring talisman, so no one would recognize him if we were forced to shift into wolves.

Keziah paused by the door. “I would like nothing more than to give you your space,” she said carefully, “but several members of the Order of the Stars have gathered here, and I think you might like to hear their updates first.”

Fenris nodded. “I would,” he affirmed, nodding for Keziah to lead the way.

The other members were in a tent a short walk back toward the camp. Each one addressed me, but I was barely able to follow the updates they were giving Fenris. I hugged my arms against my chest, suddenly cold as I battled the heaviness in my eyelids.

Don't embarrass yourself.

Suddenly, Fenris was next to me again. I blinked. “I’m f ___”

“That’s enough for now,” Fenris announced to the group, then he scooped me off my feet like I was a blushing bride. It was all I could do not to yelp as I threw my arms around his neck. “We have been though much today, and I will not put Celeste through any more without some rest.”

“Of course,” Keziah said, moving quickly to push the tent flap to the side.

As we exited, the others gathered in the camp seemed to notice me again, but if I thought the stares were bad the first time, it was much worse now. My cheeks flushed, and I squirmed and kicked my legs. “Put me down,” I hissed to Fenris as I hid my face. “I can walk. I’m not hurt.”

Fenris ignored my complaints while carrying me all the way back to Keziah’s home. He didn’t even put me down once we were inside, bringing me all the way up the stairs and into the guest room, only to set me down on the bed. He knelt, starting to unlace my boots.

“I am so grateful for you, *khuya*,” he said softly. “Without your sixth sense, we wouldn’t have gotten out of my home in time. Without your strength, Sabine really could’ve killed my brother.” He put my boots to the side and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “You must be exhausted.”

I was about to argue when I realized he was right. “Yeah,” I said simply, struggling to speak.

“Do you need me to find you something to eat?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I just...would you just hold me for a while? Please?”

“Absolutely,” he said, kicking off his boots to crawl into bed, wrapping his arm around my middle and pulling me against his chest while I made myself comfortable in the sheets.

Then sleep came, just like that. I knew there was nowhere safer for me than in Fenris’s arms.

Chapter 20

Fenris

Snowmass Pack Lands

Snowmass, Colorado

Time Until the Eclipse: 8 Days

The first hint of light was beginning to creep over the horizon when I woke, my arm still looped over Celeste's middle. I froze at first, but after a few breaths, I decided she wouldn't stir. I smiled softly, allowing myself the softest kiss to her shoulder before I extracted myself from the covers. She moved then, and I froze, but she simply rolled over into the warm spot I'd left behind, nuzzling herself into the pillow.

I lingered in the room just long enough to close the curtains, allowing her as much sleep as possible before letting myself out of the room and down the stairs. When I walked into the small living room, I realized that someone had left out a change of clothing for both of us. I felt a burst of gratitude as I grabbed the jeans and flannel shirt. This wasn't my usual choice in clothing, but it was far better than the outfit I'd fallen asleep in, still smelling faintly of smoke and adrenaline.

Once I'd changed, I slipped out of the cabin and headed back to the camp. Keziah had shown me where the healers were working, and I was keen to see how Walter fared. As I pushed back the flap to his tent and stepped inside, I realized he was already awake and sitting up, chatting quietly to the healer at his bedside. Val was at his side as well.

As I approached, the young healer blushed and bowed her head deeply before quickly evacuating her seat, offering it to me without a word. “Thank you,” I said before she scurried away. I leaned toward Walter. “You look much better,” I said, relief coloring my tone.

Indeed, he did. Not only had they cleaned him up, but there were few indications at all that he’d been mauled by a panther shifter. Instead, Walter simply appeared like he’d had a poor night’s sleep.

I glanced at Val. “I would like to have a few minutes with him, if that’s alright.”

The witch, looking like she’d aged five years, studied me for a moment. “Of course,” she said quietly, reaching over to give Walter’s hand a squeeze. “I think I’ll go see Morgan.”

“Go get some rest,” Walter insisted quietly, placing his other hand over hers. “Morgan has her father, and Cody, and Haley. She’s been an attentive healer, and she needs the rest as much as you do.”

I could practically see the gears turning in Val’s head, but eventually, she nodded. “I suppose you’re right,” she said quietly, watching him for a moment longer before standing up. “You get some rest, too,” she said to him, then gave me a small nod and turned to leave the tent.

I watched Val leave before looking back at Walter. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” he sighed. “I’ll have some scars, but nothing more permanent than that.”

“Good,” I said, nodding firmly.

Walter met my gaze. “I apologize for not reacting sooner, Fenris,” he said solemnly, his green eyes searching my face. “I should have gotten back up there quicker. As soon as I can return, I will restore your home on Isla Lobo to its former glory by any means necessary.”

I shook my head. “There’s no need for that, Walter.”

Walter blinked, clearly confused. “Ah. Are you just planning on selling the entire island as is, then?”

“After the eclipse has passed, you will be relieved of your assistant duties and given substantial severance pay. Hopefully enough to make up for all the headaches I’ve caused you over the years,” I said, my smile wry. I watched Walter’s blank face for a moment and forced myself to continue. “You have been more of a friend to me than anyone else over the years, and you deserve to have a real life, not one confined to Isla Lobo. You deserve to spend your days with Val, if you’d like, living peacefully wherever and however you want.”

Walter blinked, then a warm smile replaced the blank expression. “You *are* my friend, Fenris. My deadly, immortal friend, but my friend, nonetheless—and I appreciate you saying as much.” He paused for a moment. “Even if I’m no longer working as your assistant, I expect to hear from you from time to time. I know you’ll be busy as the Lunar Lord—and I have full faith in you to act as such—but I’d still like to know how you’re doing.”

Despite my best attempts not to be emotional, I was touched. “Of course,” I said, clearing my throat. “I am sure Celeste would be unhappy if I did anything otherwise.”

Walter laughed and shook his head. “She’s a good influence on you, Fenris.”

“Indeed she is,” I said.

The flap to the tent opened back up to reveal Val. She walked back over and took her seat. “I brought breakfast for us to share, Walter,” she said, returning my gaze. “I realized neither of us have eaten since yesterday.”

I got up to stand, deciding Val knew what Walter needed better than anyone else. “I’ll see you in a bit,” I told them, giving them some privacy.

As I stepped outside the tent, I pulled aside the healer who’d been checking on Lyka when I first arrived. “Haley, is it?” I asked.

“Yes, Lord,” she said, once again bowing her head.

I resisted the urge to growl. “Please do not call me that,” I said. “I wanted to ask after Morgan Fletcher. She arrived with us last night. How is she?”

“Ah, the Thalassa witch?” Haley said, tucking a strand of light brown hair behind her ear. “She’s recovered completely. She’s resting with the other Thalassa witches who arrived in Snowmass territory late last night, after your party arrived.” She paused, pointing to a few blue tents off to one side of the gathering. “They’re over there, sir.”

Sir. I sighed, but I supposed it was better than *Lord*. “Thank you,” I said with a nod.

Aware that Morgan had never been entirely comfortable in my presence, I opted to leave her be with her family and coven. Though most of my allies were recovering, not all of us had escaped unscathed. I still had to investigate Grant Oakley’s extended family and inform any remaining members of his demise. If they wanted to hold a funeral for him, I’d send the money to pay for the service as well.

This was normally something I’d request of Walter, but I wouldn’t bother him now. Instead, I returned to Keziah’s cabin to fetch my phone. I paused when I found it on the nightstand, watching a still-sleeping Celeste. Her lashes barely kissed her face, and she looked so at peace. A strange wistfulness grew within me.

Before I could creep back out of the bedroom, she stirred, clearly sensing my presence. I cursed myself as her eyes fluttered open, and she gave me a soft smile before propping herself up, stretching her arms over her head. “Early bird gets the worm, huh?” she said gently. “Is there any coffee?”

“No,” I said, “but I’m happy to go make you some.”

“That’s okay,” she said, giving me a wink before pushing the covers off. “I’ll take a quick shower.” She paused, looking me up and down. “Where’d you get the outfit?”

“Keziah left us some clothing,” I said. “I’ll bring some up and leave it in the bathroom for you.”

“Thank you,” she said, walking around the bed to wrap her arms around me. “I’ll go check on Esme after I shower. I know she wasn’t in the fight, but she inhaled a lot of smoke. I’m surprised she was lucid enough to remember my grimoire. *I* wasn’t even thinking of it in that moment.” She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know why it’s been so much more difficult to help her compared to Abi or Cody.”

I dipped my head to press a soft kiss to her temple. “Don’t get too caught up worrying,” I said gently. “After what I saw you do yesterday, Celeste, I have full confidence you will be able to do whatever needs to be done.”

She paused, looking up at me with those bright silver eyes. “Thank you,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. She stood on her toes, pressing a kiss to my lips in return. “I... thank you, Fenris.” She kissed me again and slipped away toward the bathroom.

I watched her go, debating if I should give into the desire to follow her. But I suspected she needed some time alone with her thoughts, and I had some calls to make. It was best to get them over with.

The next three days went by in the blink of an eye. Cody and the other shifters supplied a continuous patrol of the Snowmass Pack’s borders while the covens assembled charms for protection. A smaller group of witches were preparing the transportation we’d need to teleport so many individuals to the Temple of the Moon. The other faefolk stood guard or lurked about in the more normal spheres, offering intel.

Word had spread that the Lunar Lord’s brother was killed in a surprise attack. No one questioned “Zeke’s” appearance since we’d arrived, and I was confident they didn’t suspect. It helped, I supposed, that no one except his guards had seen Lyka for several centuries—and those vampires had been killed the first time Sabine attacked. Everyone also expected a “lone wolf” to be skittish and avoid others, so the camp didn’t think it strange that Zeke preferred to be alone and wore hoodies that shielded most of his face from prying eyes.

The Order of the Stars were already beginning to transport some individuals to Peru, while other shifters had left days before to travel there in their animal forms. The goal was to move enough folk without catching too much of the Solar Sovereign's attention, but everyone had their limits.

Now, I was sitting with Keziah and several other members of the Order around her table, but found I was struggling to focus on the most recent report. My days felt like a blur of constant information input, and for the first time, I was struggling to retain new knowledge.

Instead, my mind wandered to Celeste. When the eclipse arrived, I'd be able to bite her, able to *claim* her, completing our bond as fated mates. Our connection would become so much stronger. I'd never known anyone who'd claimed their fated mate, but the Celestial Pack had long shared such lore. This sacred bond would be so deep, we'd be able to communicate telepathically, not simply sharing our emotion or pain. Our wolves would find harmony, and more balance and peace than we'd ever known before.

Even a wolf shifter whose fated mate was a half-shifter—or not a shifter at all—would feel like they'd been made whole in claiming their mate, even if the claiming wasn't reciprocated. Their fated mate, too, would receive some stability and an internal sense of calm.

“Does anyone have anything else to add?” Keziah asked, looking around the table.

I cleared my throat when no one spoke, hoping my expression hadn't seemed too glazed over. “Good,” I said. “But if anything changes, please alert me at once.”

Everyone said their goodbyes, but as I left the alpha's home, Piers pulled me aside, flashing me a brilliant smile. “There you are, Fenris!” he exclaimed, as if I was difficult to track down here. “Now, I have some good news and some bad news for you. Which would you like first?”

Behind him, Gilbert rolled his eyes. I sighed and gave the younger twin a flat look. “Just spit it out, Piers.”

He sighed dramatically and clucked his tongue at me. “Well, the good news is I have met the most *gorgeous* skinwalker while we’ve been here. Absolutely exquisite creature. I...”

“*Piers*,” his brother said sternly.

“The bad news is that there’s been some...tension, shall we say, between your allies. Most of it centers on the covens that have gathered here in Snowmass territory.”

I was surprised to hear this was more than gossip. “Oh? What’s happened?”

“Well, I’m not pointing any fingers, but the crux of it appears to be members of the Thalassa coven and the Vitalis coven. Some fundamental differences, I suppose. It started with some cross words, but I fear it’ll escalate.”

Escalate? Are they forgetting what we’re about to do? I grunted and shook my head. “Is that all?”

“I’m afraid not,” Piers sighed. “The worst of it involves Aurora witches. I’m not sure if they’re fighting with anyone *specifically*, but it does seem to me that everyone eyes them with some...suspicion. And given how tense everyone is with the upcoming eclipse, *suspicion* is quickly turning into outright hostility.”

I exhaled heavily through my nose, reaching up to rub one of my temples. *Of course*. “I hope that’s it, then.”

“It is,” Piers said. “Now, I didn’t want to bother you with petty gossip, but...”

“I felt it was important to share,” Gilbert finished for his brother. “Everyone is on their best behavior whenever the Lunar Lord is around...if they allow themselves to be seen at all.”

Gilbert was correct. I’d been called “lord,” “sir,” even “your highness,” which was a particularly odd one. “No, it is best to share everything,” I said, nodding to the brothers. “Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I’ll figure out how to best address this before we leave for Peru.”

Unity and cooperation would be vital when this confrontation reached a fever pitch, and I'd need all these witches and warlocks to be able to work together. While I could use an alpha command on them, I suspected it wouldn't go over well with those under command or their fellow coven mates.

I had better find Celeste. Unfortunately, we had no time for politics or to take this slow, and I suspected the witches would be more amenable to working with her than me. If not for my status, than because she was their fellow witch.

Fortunately, my mate wasn't difficult to find. Celeste was within the camp, sitting with Kal and a few other bear shifters I did not recognize. They all sensed me approaching, each tensing and bowing their heads once I got close enough. It took much willpower for me not to sigh outwardly at the display.

Celeste didn't turn, however, and kept talking. After a moment, I realized that she was explaining the solar eclipse.

"They actually happen roughly every eighteen months," she was telling the young man sitting next to Kal. "But they happen all over the world, and they aren't always total eclipses."

The young man frowned. "What's the difference between an eclipse and a total eclipse, then?"

Celeste just smiled. "A total solar eclipse occurs when the moon blocks out the sun in its entirety. A partial eclipse means it glances over the sun and shields part of it, but part of the sun remains totally visible through the entire event."

"Oh. Okay." He still looked confused. "So why is this one so important, then?"

"Because the eclipses happen in different places," Celeste explained. "And while they happen every year and a half, it takes four centuries before they recur in the same location. If we were to miss the upcoming eclipse over the Moon Temple, we would have to wait another four hundred years, give or

take a decade on either side, for the same event to occur again.”

The young man’s eyes went wide. “Oh man,” he said, leaning forward. “You know, it’s amazing they ever happen in the same place at all.”

“It is!” Celeste said excitedly. “In fact, there’s a specific reason why that happens.”

As she went into the more in-depth scientific explanation, I found a tree trunk to lean against, content to listen to my fated mate explain her expertise. Her enthusiasm for the celestial bodies above us was so infectious that the other shifters had already forgotten my approach, all hanging on to her every word as she gestured with her hands.

For once, I am eager for the eclipse, I thought as I watched Celeste. I’d be able to briefly shed my powers as Lunar Lord and claim her as mine. I couldn’t imagine my life without her in it.

Chapter 21

Celeste

Snowmass Pack Lands

Snowmass, Colorado

Time Until the Eclipse: 5 Days

I paused after I finished explaining the eclipses. Beau, the young grizzly shifter Kal had introduced me to, grinned—but suddenly, that grin fell away. He stood abruptly, mumbling stray words as a few of the other shifters followed suit. I could feel Fenris’s presence, even before Kal offered his condolences regarding his fallen brother, and then we were alone.

I stood slowly, giving my back a stretch as I turned to face Fenris, a smile tugging at my lips. “You scared away my audience. Everyone is all afraid the grieving Lunar Lord might snap for any perceived insult,” I complained, biting the inside of my mouth to keep from smiling as he approached. “Now I’m just going to have to tell *you* all about eclipses.”

He wrapped his arms around me. “You act as if I don’t like listening to you,” he said. “But I believe that’s exactly how we met.”

A laugh bubbled up, and I allowed him to reel me in, giving him a butterfly kiss. “Did you know the earliest total solar eclipse we have a record of occurred in 1223 BCE over the city of Ugarit? That’s part of modern-day Syria. Of course, there *were* eclipses before that, but they were never recorded.”

Fenris's amber eyes sparkled. "You never cease to amaze me," he murmured, leaning the rest of the way in to seal our lips together. I made a quiet noise, but he only deepened the kiss. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, scratching my fingernails against his shoulders.

"We're in the middle of the camp," I murmured into his lips.

He growled in response, and a huge thrill zipped through me. My gut tightened, and I felt warmer all over as I leaned into his chest. Even my wolf stirred. A large part of me simply wanted to give in to the desire practically radiating through our bond. I could *feel* his possessive urge, and it tugged on a part of my soul I'd neglected before.

Fenris *wanted* me. More than that, he *wanted* people to know I was his—and that thought made me squirm. My wolf stirred again, starting to push back. As much as I enjoyed the feeling of Fenris's lips, I took a deep breath and took a step back, placing my hands on his firm chest.

"Take it easy, alpha," I said quietly. The last thing I wanted was for my restless wolf to be dragged forward, only to slam against the invisible magical wall Zyanya had put in place when she'd commanded me not to shift until given permission.

He growled softly, but did not try to kiss me again. "Normally, I'd ask you to go for a run with me," he said, nodding toward the woods that surrounded us in all directions. "There is little I'd like more, and I am certain it'd calm my wolf. That it isn't a possibility for us right now only makes him more aggravated."

I sighed, pressing my lips together. "Sorry," I said. "I know it gets worse for you the closer the new moon gets."

Fenris scowled. "Do not apologize for that," he snapped, his nose wrinkling. "You didn't do it to yourself. You have nothing to apologize for."

No, I thought, but I did rush right into a trap, even though you warned me that's exactly what it could be.

“Is there anything I can do to help you shift? I could use an alpha command to help draw your wolf out if you—”

“No,” I said, cutting him off. I didn’t really like to talk over other people, but I knew there was nothing he could do. Any attempts would just leave us both frustrated and tired—it was a total waste of energy and emotion. “Hey, how did your meeting go with the Order of the Stars? Any updates?”

Fenris made a face, wrinkling his nose. “The meeting was fine, but Piers approached me afterwards. There’ve been some...issues between some of the covens gathered here.”

“Really?” I’d spent most of my time darting between tents, checking in on Esme, making sure Lyka was still undercover as “Zeke,” helping Liana find a place where she was comfortable, visiting Walter and Morgan as they recovered, making sure Abi was doing okay after Grant’s death—and that was to say nothing of making time to see Fenris. I’d hardly seen hide nor hair of Cody, and had exchanged three words total with Piers and Gilbert. I barely had time to think in between. “What’s going on?”

Fenris shrugged. “Piers did not go into much more detail. At first, I was going to write it off as gossip, but Gilbert said he was the one who insisted Piers share with me at all.”

“I agree,” I said. If nothing else, it gave me a reason to check in on the witches and warlocks. “I’ll look into it...unless you wanted to?”

“I think you’re far better suited to this task than I am,” Fenris said playfully.

I smiled. “I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Good.” He leaned in to kiss the top of my head before releasing me. “I think I will go check in with *Zeke* to see how he’s faring.” Fenris gave me a pointed look.

“Well, if he needs anything, you know where to find me,” I said, giving Fenris one last smile before heading toward the tents belonging to the Thalassa coven.

I hadn’t walked far when the staring began. A part of me wanted to turn around and hurry back to the secluded corner

I'd found with the bear shifters when someone called my name. I flinched, a spike of adrenaline surging through me.

I'd barely registered the voice by the time someone threw an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. Only then did I recognize her.

"Hi, Abi," I said, a smile winning out.

"Where're you off to?" she asked, falling into step with me.

I nodded in the direction of the nearest coven. "I wanted to check in on the witches and warlocks here," I said. "I've barely even seen *you*. These people are going to be fighting beside us, you know? The least I could do is know their names."

"I'll come with you," Abi announced. When I gave her a sideways look, she shrugged. "Look, I like vampires, but you can only hang around them for so long before things get morbid."

"Well, yes. They're already dead, Abi." I shook my head. "Piers getting on your nerves?"

"Nah. Gilbert and Piers have been organizing vampires in the region as part of Fenris's forces, which is great for Fenris, but a few of them have a tendency for the *dramatique*, as Piers would say." Abi rolled her eyes. "If they were all like Gilbert, it wouldn't be so bad, but I need space!"

"Are they all talking about who's the prettiest?" I asked, grinning.

"Oh, sometimes." She grunted. "Other times, it's which blood type tastes best—which is apparently worth arguing over—or how era *insert your choice here* was better than era *the vampire next to me prefers for choose the silliest reason you can imagine*." Abi tossed up her hands. "Honestly, some of these guys make Piers look downright normal."

That I had a hard time imagining. I snickered and bumped into my best friend playfully. "Well, we'll see how that compares to grumpy witches. And warlocks," I said. "Piers

said things were getting tense, so I want to make sure it's nothing too major."

"Ugh," Abi complained. "Does no one get the eclipse is, you know, important? And it's only a few days away. It's not like we're cooped up here forever! Let's act like adults here."

She had a point, but I was certain that saying as much would make some folks mad, especially those with a few decades—or centuries—on me. "How's Gilbert doing?" I asked instead. "I know a lot has gone on in the past few days, and he was pretty concerned about lingering effects..." At least with Sabine gone now, I hoped some of his fears were alleviated.

Abi frowned, looking at the path for a moment as we walked. "For a guy who's been around several centuries, he feels everything so deeply. No matter how many times Piers or I insist it was Sabine who fucked up his brain, he still feels *guilty* about the fact that he killed people." She sighed and shook her head. "I think talking to us has helped, but it's going to take a while."

I pressed my lips together. "I mean, I can't blame him for that. Not really."

"No, me neither," Abi said, then she chuckled. "Piers keeps tooting his own horn about killing Sabine himself. Normally, I'd be annoyed—but I'm just glad that bitch is dead." She paused. "Honestly, I think it would weird Gilbert out if his brother suddenly changed. Just one more thing to feel guilty about, you know? So, I guess I'm glad he's still being the same old Piers in a way."

I nodded. "Piers has more emotions than he wants to admit. He knows there's only so much he can do to help Gilbert through this—and now Gilbert has you. It used to always be Piers and Gilbert, and that's not the case anymore." I shrugged. Somehow, I'd come to be fond of the more flamboyant twin, even if he ground my gears sometimes.

Abi hummed thoughtfully. "Yeah," she said. "You're right. Piers suddenly becoming thoughtful would weird anyone out."

We laughed as we arrived at the Thalassa camp. The tension Piers had mentioned to Fenris was obvious right away. It felt like the entire coven was on a knife's edge, though I couldn't quite put my finger on *why*. Several witches were mingling, but fell quiet as we approached, watching us cautiously.

Abi was surely about to make some comment when I spied a familiar face. "Morgan!" I greeted the witch, pleased to see our friend in much better shape. "I'm so happy to see you."

Though she smiled, her joy looked forced as she hurried over. "I'm happy to see you. Um, do you mind if we talk privately?"

"Of course!" I said, allowing her to steer us away to a quiet area of the woods, several yards away from the furthest blue tent.

After looking around three or four times, Morgan leaned in and whispered. "We can't be overheard," she said, biting her lip. The witch was usually a bit shy, yet I'd never seen her this antsy before. "So if you see anything, stop talking, okay?"

I nodded, and Abi flashed her a thumbs up.

Morgan took a deep breath before continuing. "I've been stuck in the Thalassa camp with my father keeping an eye over me. Seeing me like that really freaked him out, you know?" She shook her head. "I've been unable to leave and go find Cody, but I really need to speak to him."

Abi frowned. "Why can't you go talk to him?"

The witch sighed. "I was so afraid Cody and my dad were going to get in a fight before he stepped aside. I know Cody was just coming down off the fight, with all that adrenaline, but my father was *extremely* testy about it." She paused for a moment and bit her lip. When she continued, her voice was even softer. "He must have thought I was unconscious when my dad was healing me, before we got here...he told my dad he was my fated mate."

Abi and I sucked in sharp breaths. I'd warned Cody not to take it too fast, and for Morgan to hear it from Cody like *that*

instead of him telling her directly? *Oh, Cody...*

I pressed my lips together. “Are you okay?” I asked after a moment. I couldn’t imagine how freaked out I’d have been to accidentally overhear Fenris telling Walter that.

“I...a lot of things about the way I feel made more sense,” Morgan said after a moment. “I’m...excited? Is that weird?”

“That’s not weird,” I assured her. “It’s also not weird to feel scared or unsure. I felt a *lot* of different things about Fenris for some time.”

“Sometimes, you still do,” Abi remarked.

I rolled my eyes, but Morgan exhaled, looking slightly relieved. “I still want to talk to Cody about it,” she said, “but, uh, my dad did not take that announcement well. At all.” She sighed. “Cody’s lucky I was hurt, or my dad really might have blown his top. My dad was more focused on helping me than anything else, thank goodness.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “Cody hasn’t been back since, though.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she looked between me and Abi, and she sniffled. I felt a pang in my chest and stepped closer, wrapping my arms around her and squeezing. “It will work out,” I promised. “Everyone is tense with the eclipse, and I’m sure that’s bubbling over into everything else. Besides, your dad just saw his daughter hurt on the ground. He wasn’t in the best frame of mind.”

Morgan nodded and sniffled again as I stepped back. Abi offered her a warm smile. “We’ll kick the Solar Sovereign’s ass at the eclipse, everything will settle back down to normal, and we’ll make a game plan,” Abi said. “Cody is, like, aggravatingly charming, so I’m sure with time, your dad will come to see that, if that’s what you want.” She gave me a look, and I nodded. “In the meantime, we can go check on him and see if we can’t find a place the two of you can talk in private.”

“That would be really nice,” Morgan said. Though her smile was watery, this time, it was earnest.

“Speaking of tension...” I sighed. “There are rumors that the covens are getting really, um, short with each other. Have

you noticed any of that?”

“Yes,” Morgan said with a grimace. “There are only a handful of Aurora witches in the encampment, and they haven’t exactly been friendly. And they’re gossip hounds.”

“Do tell,” Abi urged.

Morgan glanced around before continuing. “I’ve seen one of them in particular keep walking into our camp, and I swear every time she leaves, three of the Thalassa witches start railing about how the Vitalis coven is undermining their authority. Which makes no sense! But some of the oldest members of my coven are starting to listen to them, which, in turn, makes everyone else suspicious. Given there was an actual shouting match in the middle of camp yesterday with some Vitalis witch, I’d bet money that she’s also talking shit about us with some members of that coven.”

Oh, great. “Can we head back to camp, and you can point out the upset individuals to me?” I asked.

Morgan gave me an incredulous look. “Are you sure you want to play mediator right now?”

“I don’t see a good way around it,” I said.

She shrugged and nodded, leading us back to the heart of the Thalassa camp. As we returned, several witches were watching us openly. Before Morgan could point out the more restless individuals, two young women walked up to us.

“It’s true,” the first one whispered to me, her blue eyes shining like the sea. “You have the crescent birthmark!”

I blinked, reaching up to touch my neck. I often forgot the mark was there, and much more visible when I pulled my hair up in a ponytail.

“I heard a rumor there was still a Handmaiden witch,” the blue-eyed witch continued. “I’m so happy to see that rumor is *true!*”

Before I could say anything, Morgan’s father noticed us and strode over in long steps. The dark-haired man put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “I have heard a lot about you,

Celeste,” he said, looking intrigued. “Especially about your fight with the infamous Sabine.” His lips curled like he’d just gotten a foul taste in his mouth. “I never thought that witch would meet her match, but I stand corrected.”

“It’s true, then?” Another witch I didn’t recognize asked as she approached us.

All four Thalassa members tensed, even James, and Morgan gave me a near-frantic look. *This must be a Vitalis witch.* I braced myself for some insult, but instead, she simply asked, “If you’re a Handmaiden witch, do you get premonitions? Visions?”

“Everything you’ve heard? Completely true,” Abi said, stepping in with a smug look. “Celeste was able to sense Sabine coming before she even arrived and got us all to safety.”

As the Vitalis witch murmured in wonderment, Morgan gave me a nudge, glancing in the direction of two more approaching witches. As they neared, my pulse skyrocketed. I didn’t recognize either of the women, but something *insisted* I’d run into them before. I took a breath, trying to keep my astonishment to myself, but the pair of witches suddenly noticed me.

They exchanged looks before quickly doing a U-turn, walking in the other direction. *What the hell was that about?*

They’d made my sixth sense go bananas, and I couldn’t just ignore that. I nudged Abi and nodded after the department witches before turning back to the group. “I am so sorry,” I said, “but I just remembered the Lunar Lord needed me to grab something for him.” I offered a sheepish smile before trotting after the pair of women quickly walking away.

As Abi hurried after me, the witches turned left, disappearing behind a tent. I exchanged a look with her before we walked as quickly as we could without looking *too* weird, but when I made the same left turn, I realized the women had disappeared.

“Where’d they go?” Abi whispered, looking around.

I shrugged, aware we'd attracted the attention of a few shifters in nearby tents. I gave a subtle nod, and Abi seemed to catch my drift. That sixth sense was still yelling at me, insisting on a premonition.

Deciding to trust my gut, I took a breath and called upon my magic, summoning up a wall of air around Abi and myself. Only seconds later, a burst of flame shattered against it, and I heard a woman swear to herself. I whirled about as one of the women Morgan had pointed out to me tried to dodge behind a tree.

"Bitch!" Abi snapped, throwing herself to the ground as the woman hurled another bolt of fire at us.

The nearby shifters yelled in surprise, overturning a folding table as they scrambled to get away. I didn't have time to feel bad about scaring them, swatting the flaming attacks away as I racked my mind for a way to stop this witch without killing her. I needed to act fast, lest she be able to use teleportation magic herself. I needed *answers*.

Damn Aurora witches. Can't we all just get along?

An image of my Aunt Esme sprang to mind alongside an idea. Sprinting toward the witch, I focused on a sleeping spell I'd used to help ease my aunt into sleep shortly after we'd rescued her from Sabine's torture. Startled that I was rushing her, the witch backpedaled, briefly panicking before flinging another flame at me. Just like Grant had taught me, I dodged while staying on my feet, lunging to grab the woman in the next motion.

In one breath, I was able to cast the relaxation spell and forced the witch into slumber. As she slumped over, I saw the sunburst mark on her neck.

Abi caught up to me a moment later, a knife in her hand. "Where's the other one?" No sooner had the words left her mouth than a bolt of witchfire shoved her face first into the ground. She screamed in pain while rolling to smother the fire.

I gasped, barely able to process the attack as I doused the fire. I knew I was leaving myself open in those seconds, but it

was all happening so fast. I braced myself for another magical attack when a terrifying snarl cut through the air.

A massive black wolf streaked by me moments later, and I knew without a doubt it was Fenris. I looked away, ensuring Abi was no longer in danger as I heard the second witch screaming before she hit the ground. It only took seconds before I heard the wet sounds of flesh, and the tang of copper filled my nose.

I sighed. *She really shouldn't have tested the Lunar Lord's protective side.*

Chapter 22

Celeste

Snowmass Pack Lands

Snowmass, Colorado

Time Until the Eclipse: 5 Days

Though Fenris killed the second Aurora witch within seconds, he still stood over her body, snarling and snapping his jaws as if he expected her to rise from the dead and strike again. Several of the shifters, witches, and warlocks from nearby tents had heard the commotion and come over to see what was going on. Some of them had even run to help, but stopped dead in their tracks when they saw it was the Lunar Lord himself, snarling and growling like a rabid beast.

Even Abi had pushed herself back on her feet and hurried away to give me some space, eyeing Fenris uneasily. I took a deep breath, settling my magic back down before I approached him, making sure I never left his line of sight. “I’m alright, Fenris,” I said calmly, holding my hands out to him. I tried to share that reassurance through our bond, too. Though I’d been startled by the assault, but I wasn’t hurt at all. At worst, I was just out of breath.

The dark wolf still stared at me like he expected me to spontaneously burst into flame, so I motioned for him to approach me. At last, he stepped away from the fallen witch and leaned forward to sniff my hands. I smiled warmly, giving him a moment before smoothing my palms over his muzzle and across his face. I stroked his ears and pushed his fur back

into place, waiting patiently for him to catch his breath. I would have waited until tomorrow, if that's what it took, but Fenris managed to settle down enough to return to human form.

He growled softly, pulling me close. "What the hell was that?" he hissed, giving the witch's body a dark look. Moments later, he barked, "Someone dispose of this body at once. Burn it if you must."

I watched as two wolf shifters quickly scurried over to pick the body up and hoist it away. "I don't know," I said to Fenris. "Morgan had mentioned they were some of the witches stirring up drama in her camp, but when they saw me looking at them, they took off. Something just felt *off*, so I followed them."

I frowned. *I swear I've met these two before.* I hadn't recognized either of their faces, but then a cold chill had run down my spine as I realized there'd been several Aurora witches who'd joined Sabine and Zyanya when they cursed me with the death mark. However, I couldn't tell Fenris any of this.

"I knocked the other one out," I said, pointing to the crumpled body a few feet away. "I want to ask her some questions."

Fenris grunted and ground his teeth. "Of course," he sneered, giving the fallen witch a dark look. He took a step back, trailing his hands up and down my sides before deciding I really was all right, and then he marched over to the unconscious witch. Scooping her up without ceremony, he said nothing else as he turned, striding quickly toward Keziah's home as the surrounding onlookers scattered like mice.

Before I chased after him, I turned to Abi. "I'm going to see what she knows. Can you see if you can find Cody?"

"Of course," Abi said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I said, nearly grimacing as I turned and jogged off in the direction Fenris had gone.

Keziah was standing on her porch when I reached her house, her arms folded over her broad chest. As I trotted up the few steps and went to open the door, she reached out a hand and stopped me. “You’re going to need to wait,” she said, her green eyes apologetic. “The Lunar Lord requested the first few minutes of the interrogation to himself.”

“What?” I asked, surprised. *I hope he doesn’t kill her...*

Keziah squeezed my shoulder but didn’t move away from her door. “He said he didn’t want anyone in there with him—especially his mate.” Her smile turned wry. “If the witch tried to attack you again, he said he didn’t trust himself not to dispatch her then and there.”

I sighed. “Can I at least go inside the house?”

The female alpha looked thoughtful. “Alright,” she said, and finally opened the door for me. After I stepped inside, she followed me in, and I sat awkwardly on her couch for about five minutes before Fenris came up the stairs from the basement, his expression still murderous. “You may go speak to her now,” he said.

I stood, starting to walk towards the basement door, but I paused. “What did you do?” I looked him up and down.

“I woke her up and fed off of her fear,” he said smoothly. “She will be more cooperative now. She even answered a few of my questions.” He paused and looked a bit thoughtful. “She didn’t even burst into flames.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” I said, wondering if that meant this individual didn’t have a death mark, or if she was just smarter about suppling answers than the first warlock Fenris had questioned.

He shrugged, and I sighed before heading down the stairs. Fenris was close behind me, and I glanced over his shoulder as we reached the small containment room taking up half of Keziah’s basement. “Are you coming with me?”

“Yes,” Fenris said. “Given that she just tried to kill you, I’m not leaving you alone with her. However, you’re free to question her as you wish.”

“Alright,” I said, pressing my lips together. As I opened the door, the witch was still sitting at the table, looking haggard. If Fenris hadn’t just told me he’d allowed his wolf to feed on her fear, I’d have wondered how she’d aged so much in so little time.

I sat down across from her. Fenris closed the door behind us and remained there. The witch in front of me looked at her hands.

“What’s your name?” I asked, deciding to start with an easy question.

“Naomi,” she said, studying her nails.

“How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-seven.”

“Are you an Aurora witch?”

She gave me a look like I was dense. “You know that already.”

Fenris growled behind me. “Answer whatever she asks you,” he barked.

A tiny squeak escaped the woman. “Yes,” she said, her voice tiny. “I’m an Aurora witch.”

I took a deep breath as I reached up to undo the first two buttons on the red and white flannel Keziah had lent me. I knew I had to be careful with what I said, but there had to be workarounds. I stood up, baring enough of my chest to show Naomi the first half of the angry brand. “Do you have a mark like this that’ll prevent you from answering my questions?”

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes briefly moving to where Fenris stood before she shook her head. “No. I don’t.”

“Good.” I sat back down. “How do I get rid of this mark?”

Naomi looked me up and down before pressing her lips together.

“Naomi, how do I get rid of this mark?” I tried again.

Still, the Aurora witch said nothing, choosing to stare down at the table instead of making eye contact. Suddenly, a growl so savage that it made the hairs on the back of my neck rise echoed through the room. I knew Fenris would never hurt me, but the sound still gave me goosebumps.

Naomi gasped, wrapping her arms around her torso as she blinked rapidly, a few tears falling down her cheeks. “I...” She choked on her own breath, sputtering for a few moments. “I’ve never seen it happen, but the spell will cease to work if all its casters are dead.”

Elation surged through me as I realized there *was* a way out, but a cold, nauseous feeling then followed. I didn’t want to have to kill *anyone*, even Zyanya...and that was assuming I *could*. Fenris hadn’t said anything to the effect of the Solar Sovereign having rebirth abilities like the Lunar Lord, but I didn’t know the first thing about dragon shifters.

“Are you going to kill me?” Naomi asked, her voice trembling.

Right. I looked at her for a moment before I stood back up, my chair lurching behind me. I couldn’t just murder someone sitting in front of me. “No,” I said, hurrying out of the room and back up the basement stairs before my emotions caught up with me.

Fenris paused only long enough to lock the room before following, but I’d already made it through the house and out the front door by the time he caught up, gently grabbing me by the wrist.

“What would happen if we don’t reverse the mark on you?” he asked, his voice significantly softer as he tried to draw me in.

I refused to look him in the eye, chewing on my lower lip instead.

Fenris sighed. “I just want to know how much danger you’re in, Celeste.”

I took a deep breath. *All I want to do is fix this stupid mistake,* I thought desperately. I shook my head and took

another breath, refusing to let my emotions get the best of me. “I can’t talk about it,” I said. “But please trust me when I tell you I’m working on it.”

He studied me for a moment before he nodded, leaning in to press a kiss to my crown. “Very well,” he said.

“Let’s go back to the Thalassa coven,” I said, eager to get away from Keziah’s house and Naomi. “Make sure everything’s okay.”

We were about halfway across the encampment when Abi found me, quickly dragging me off to the side. “Hey, so, I found Cody,” she said quietly, glancing at Fenris. “He hasn’t been avoiding Morgan. Not on purpose, anyway.”

I frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I guess Morgan’s dad cast some ward that physically won’t let him near the Thalassa camp,” she said. “He’s tried, but he can’t.”

“Is he okay?”

“Just come talk to him,” Abi said, motioning for me to follow her. “He’s not far.”

“Not far” meant half a mile, but the walk did help settle the roiling emotions in my gut before we found Cody, waiting in the woods surrounding the encampments. I was glad to see he wasn’t alone, either—there were several wolf shifters darting through the trees, stalking one another as they pounced and skirmished, clearly preparing themselves for the upcoming fight.

I paused as I watched a light gray wolf chase after a black wolf, grabbing him by the tail before tackling him to the ground. I felt a pang of longing as I observed the two wolves tussling, snarling and snapping at one another. Part of me wished that could be me and Fenris. I’d only just uncovered that I was a wolf shifter, too, yet I felt like it was a muscle I wasn’t stretching. I wished I could shift and just *run*.

I took a deep breath. *No use wishing for these things. You’re only going to discourage yourself, and we don’t have time for that now.*

Someone barked, and someone else yelped in response. A dark brown wolf got shoved into the dirt as a large chestnut one pounced on it before he turned, trotting over to us with his tongue lolling out of his mouth. When he was only a few strides in front of us, he shifted, and Cody gave us a goofy grin as he caught his breath. “Came to watch the show?” he asked, expression brightening as he realized Fenris was watching him. “Not bad, huh?”

“Abi said you were dealing with a ward?” I said.

Cody’s smile dropped. “Um, yeah. I don’t even know what Morgan’s dad *did*, exactly, but I feel like I’m grabbing an electric fence every time I get near the Thalassa camp.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “That sure sounds like a protective ward.”

“Can you fix it?” Cody asked. Even though he was standing in front of me as a human, I could still see a hopeful puppy in my mind’s eye. “I would love you forever if you could.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that simple, but I’ll see what I can do,” I said, taking a moment to close my eyes settle myself. As I focused and concentrated more on the subtle feelings of magic, I suddenly realized that Cody felt *different*. That was all I could say, though, at least for now. I opened my eyes again, grimacing. “There’s something there, but I’m not familiar with it. Val will know.”

“I’ll go get her,” Abi volunteered.

As she trotted off, I looked at Fenris and Cody. “I’ll go chat with James. I’m sure that was...a shock to him,” I said, giving Cody a stern look. “Hopefully, the shock will wear off, though.”

“I’ll come with you,” Fenris offered.

I gave him a look. “You asked me to talk to the witches because they were tense, remember? That still applies here.” I paused and looked around. “Also, you just killed a witch...and not everyone might realize she was a spy. At least, not right away.”

He scowled, but didn't argue my point. "Fine," he said.

"Go for a run," I suggested. "Burn off some steam."

As I'd expected, there were several small groups of witches and warlocks chattering away within the Thalassa camp when I returned. You could practically hear the record scratch when I walked in to join the camp, everyone stopping and staring at me. At least this time, it was because of the chaos I'd just been part of.

"The witches who've been stirring up rumors were members of the Aurora coven," I said loudly, hopeful that most individuals within the camp could hear me. "When I tried to confront them, they attacked me."

Someone gasped. "It's true!" Morgan suddenly piped up, stepping forward from where she'd been talking with her father. "They took off as soon as Celeste even looked at them. They wouldn't answer her calls."

It was like a switch had flipped, and the chattering started up again, with one witch telling another she'd "told her so" while a warlock insisted that he'd just *known* something was off there.

Satisfied, I turned back to Morgan, smiling. "Thanks," I said, walking over to her. I looked at James, standing beside her. "Could I please talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

James gave his daughter a look before giving me a slow nod. "We can talk in my tent," he said, waving a hand over. He seemed pleased but wary. Once we sat inside the canvas, he looked me up and down. "And what can I do for the last Handmaiden witch?"

Oh, boy. I took a deep breath. "It's James, right?"

He nodded, looking embarrassed for not properly introducing himself.

"You can just think of me as Celeste," I said. "I wanted to talk to you because Cody King was giving you a hard time when you first arrived to help us on Isla Lobo, and he claimed Morgan as his fated mate. I know that was a tense moment..."

and I also know you've used a ward to keep Cody away from your camp."

"I did," he said. *At least he's being honest with me—that's a start.* "Keeping me away from my daughter when she clearly needed a healer was out of line. I did it with her best interest in mind."

"Cody shouldn't have done that," I said, "but I'm sure he was also concerned about her and didn't realize you were her father right away."

James gave me a flat look. "I don't just mean that. Thalassa witches should find warlocks to be with—or other witches, if they prefer. They don't need to be within our coven, but they should still be magical folk, or they risk diluting their power. There are plenty of witches and warlocks in the world. Nice, kind, smart—or brave and foolhardy, if that's what Morgan has her heart set on."

I nearly laughed at the apt description of Cody. "I know you're worried about her," I said. "I can't even imagine what it must have been like to answer the Lunar Lord's call for help, only to find your daughter injured." James's breathing faltered, and I paused, but I knew I couldn't stop. "I know you want to protect her, and I know this isn't really my place, but isn't it important for Morgan to feel loved and cared for by her partner? Before I met Fenris, I was just...*making do* with someone because he was perfectly nice and suitable, but I wasn't happy. I jumped through mental hoops to convince myself I didn't need anything else, but looking back, he really didn't love me at all. I was just convenient for him...and if I'd just tried to be 'safe,' I never would have met Fenris at all. I might still be in that unhappy relationship."

"Hmm." I waited for a few more moments, but James said nothing else.

I sighed. "Look, Morgan is an adult. She will love who she loves, whether that's Cody or someone else entirely." I strongly suspected it'd be Cody, but I wasn't about to put words in Morgan's mouth. "Standing between her and that

choice is only going to sour her relationship, and...I really don't want that for her, as her friend."

James wrinkled his nose, but he didn't look *angry* with me—though he certainly didn't look pleased, either. "You make a good point," he allowed. "I'll think about it."

Aware that was the best I could do for now, I thanked him for his time and left his tent. Unsurprisingly, Morgan wasn't far away, practically rocking back and forth on her heels. "I asked Val to lift the ward on Cody," I told her quietly. "So don't be too surprised when he shows up."

"Thank you, Celeste," she whispered back, her cheeks already turning pink. "I...I really want to see him. Thank you." She paused and bit her lower lip.

"Is everything okay?" I asked when she didn't say anything.

"Cody's known we've been fated mates for a while, hasn't he?" she asked. "He just...he seemed so sure when he told my father. Like he hadn't just realized that."

I shook my head and smiled. "A wolf shifter knows when he—or she—first meets her fated mate. It's the smell, I guess."

"The smell?" She looked mortified. "I hope I smell okay. New fear unlocked."

I laughed. "To Cody? He smelled nothing better. But seriously, yes. He's known. He just didn't want to pressure you into anything."

Morgan's smile grew. "I...I'm glad to hear that. He'll want to go for another walk tonight."

"I'm sure he will." I shook my head. "And don't get too stressed out. I'm sure your dad will come around. I'm going to find Fenris. Have a good time tonight, okay?"

"I will. And thank you again, Celeste."

Waving back at her, I turned and headed out of the camp, pleased to hear the suspicious whispers were giving way to productive chatter and the sounds of witches gathering supplies and preparing potions.

Chapter 23

Fenris

Snowmass Pack Lands

Snowmass, Colorado

Time Until the Eclipse: 5 Days

While Celeste went to speak with the Thalassa witches and warlocks, I went to see how my brother fared. He'd been a bit removed from the rest of the encampment as a "lone wolf," though I knew Liana was visiting him several times a day. I hadn't seen him out with Cody and some of the other wolf shifters preparing themselves, so I wanted to make sure he was still doing all right. It hadn't been long since he'd returned to himself, and this was a high-stress situation. If my brother was slipping back, I wanted to make sure I knew before it got too difficult to reverse.

I pushed open the tent, only to see the back of Liana's head. She turned and gasped as she mumbled some apology.

I sighed. *How many couples am I going to walk in on?*

"Excuse me," I muttered, about to retreat from the tent when Liana stood, brushing her clothing off even though there was nothing there.

"I was just leaving," she squeaked, refusing to meet my gaze. "I was getting dinner for Esme." Without another word, she slipped past me and hurried out of the tent, leaving my brother and me to stare at one another.

I watched him watch her leave as I seated myself across from him. *"I am surprised you have taken it this slow,"* I said with a drawl, feeling pleased. *"Part of me thought you'd try to bite her at the first chance."*

Lyka gave me a reproachful look. *"Of course I have thought about it,"* he said, shaking his head, *"but she is not a shifter. The last thing I want to do is frighten her because I have moved too fast."* He sighed and shook his head. *"Besides, I do not want to hurt her. I have felt far more myself than I have in...forever, but what if that changes? It is too soon to really know."*

I couldn't argue with that, not when I was on the lookout for any sign of the feral creature that had been my brother for centuries. *"We have time,"* I said simply.

He shrugged. *"I can barely communicate with her. We kissed. That's all we have done."*

I gave him a wry look. *"I swear you two are kissing every time I see you, brother,"* I grumbled. *"I think you can at least assume she is interested in you."* I shook my head, not wanting to tease Lyka too much about his blossoming love life. After everything that had happened to him before, he deserved happiness, and if he wanted to take his time to get there, far be it from me to rush him. *"Many of the shifters who've gathered to support us have left for Peru on foot in the past few days,"* I informed him, changing topics. *"We'll need to leave soon as well."*

Lyka glanced at me. *"They've gathered to support you, Fenris,"* he said. *"You are the Lunar Lord. I am a ghost."* He looked amused. *"Would you like me to head out on foot and meet you at the ancient moon temple? I am sure I could find my way."*

I paused, studying him for a moment. He was so much more confident, so much more the brother I remembered growing up with than the listless shell of a shifter who'd been living on Isla Caida. Despite the mounting stress, he still seemed clear-eyed—he still seemed like *Lyka*. I knew Celeste

was still checking in on him, and clearly, Liana's presence hadn't hurt, either.

"Not yet," I said. "*I would prefer to have you here to bounce ideas off. Celeste is much more empathetic than I am, but she has not had to fight before. Not like this.*" I grimaced. "*You are the only one who really understands.*"

Lyka rumbled, nodding slowly. "*I do understand,*" he said, sounding a bit far away, but his mind didn't wander as I shared what the Order of the Stars had reported, detailing how we planned to move individuals to the ancient temple and the surrounding jungle as the eclipse loomed ever closer.

As I finished, he hummed. "*This is a solid plan,*" he said. "*If you want me to stay behind, I will, but I'd prefer to fight by my brother's side, if you felt comfortable with that.*"

"Are you sure you're up to it?" I said, wrinkling my nose. "*A mad witch attacked you not once, but twice in the past month. That's to say nothing of how they tortured you before that.*" The last thing I wanted to do was cause an otherwise preventable relapse by exposing Lyka to more attacks. I was confident that Sabine was not the only psychic witch the Solar Sovereign employed.

Lyka grunted. "*Is anyone really up for a war?*" he asked. "*But truly, Fenris, I would not offer if I felt I'd be more of a bane than a boon to you. I am confident that if you wanted my help, I'd be able to provide it to you.*"

I sighed. "*I appreciate that. Truly,*" I said, pressing my lips together. "*But I don't have an answer yet. I've only just gotten you back, and I do not actually want to mourn my brother if the worst was to pass.*"

Lyka studied me, and for a moment, I was afraid he'd try to argue with me. Instead, he reached over the table to give my arm a pat. "*I understand,*" he said, nodding. "*If I were in your position and you were in mine, I am sure I would feel the same. Whatever you decide, I will abide by.*" He paused for a moment. "*I suggest you remember, though, that I have a few more centuries on you, little brother. And for all the loss and*

triumph we experienced in the Celestial Pack, I experienced that much more.”

For some reason, that reminder just made me chuckle. *“I will keep that in mind,”* I said, keenly aware of how savage Lyka could be when pressed. *“I’ll at least give it serious consideration. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to see how Celeste fared speaking with the witches.”*

Lyka nodded and motioned toward the exit, wishing me well as I went. Once I was outside, I lifted my head and scented the air, realizing that Celeste wasn’t too far from my current location. Following the smell of orange blossoms, I found her also searching for me. She turned, her expression lighting up, and there was a swell of warmth in my chest as she regarded me with such open joy. It meant everything that my *khuya* was so *happy* to see me, especially when we’d gotten off to such a poor start. I knew our first meeting had been less than ideal, and I wouldn’t have blamed her if she’d written me off altogether for it.

I was glad that instead, she’d been able to look past it. *Though I suppose she did stab me with a silver earring,* I recalled, snorting at the memory. *Neither of us were at our best.*

Celeste reached me and smiled. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” I sighed happily, leaning down to kiss her instead. “What is the situation among the covens?”

“Well, they seemed pretty relieved to realize the witch you killed was a traitor.” She smiled. “Though, it seemed once everyone started talking to each other again, they were all starting to realize what the Aurora witches were saying differed every time.” Celeste paused, licking her lips nervously. “What...what are we going to do with Naomi? The one in Keziah’s safe room?”

I sighed. On the one hand, my first instinct was to make an example out of the witch who’d thought she could infiltrate my camp and sow dissent on the Solar Sovereign’s behalf. On the other hand, I suspected that many individuals who’d “sided” with the Solar Sovereign were under duress. I had no

way of knowing if Naomi had willingly pledged herself to the Solar Sovereign. After all, the Solar Sovereign had even managed to twist Celeste's own agency. If she could do that...

I shook my head, not wanting to dwell on that topic, lest I get too angry to think straight. "For now, we let her live," I said. "We'll take her to the temple. If she becomes our ally, good. If she tries to stand against us, I'll kill her. If she decides to leave and take neither side, then I will simply let her leave."

"Oh," Celeste said. When she said nothing else, I frowned. I'd have thought her relieved we weren't going to outright execute the Aurora witch, but she simply looked as concerned as ever.

I suppose Lyka is right—no one really looks forward to war. I cannot imagine Celeste is.

I leaned down to give her another kiss. "Whatever happens, we will face it together," I said.

Celeste wrapped her arms around me in a hug.

As night fell, I found Keziah in a gathering, speaking with several other alphas. She'd even allowed other packs on her land during this time, and that was to say nothing of the other species of shifters, the witches and warlocks, skinwalkers, faefolk...the list went on. I was starting to think I owed the woman much more than a "thank you" when this was all said and done, though I'd have to percolate on that. Celeste would have a good idea on how we could recognize Keziah Palm for her efforts.

Now, the alphas were discussing travel plans. I motioned for Keziah to join me with one hand. As she excused herself from the others, she dipped her head, the crow's feet by her eyes crinkling as she smiled.

"How's the mood?" I asked, tipping my head in the other alphas' direction. They could all hear us with their enhanced senses, but at least everyone had the good manners to pretend to talk amongst themselves.

"A bit tense," Keziah said. "Folks are worried for themselves and their loved ones, of course. But I think they

feel resolved—and hopeful, too. They know this will be hard, but it isn't impossible. I think that's a good way to approach this."

I nodded and exhaled. I wouldn't want anyone rushing in, thinking this was a cake walk—that was a quick way to get themselves killed. To believe the Solar Sovereign had spent anything less than a century planning this attack would be foolish, and we'd only become certain that it was her moving in the shadows weeks ago. "Well, good. Let's make sure it stays that way," I said.

"I'll do my best," Keziah said. "Are the other groups ready to go?"

"Mhm. The covens are prepared, and they are aiding any of the fae who can't readily transport themselves." I paused to give her a hard look. "And you will continue to coordinate with any of the folk who can take animal forms. I don't want any humans suddenly wondering why they see bears, horses, and coyotes all running together." As far as I was concerned, a kelpie didn't look anything like a horse, but I didn't trust a human to know the difference.

Keziah shot an equally hard stare in my direction. "You think I'd let that happen, Fenris?" She folded her arms over her chest. "Everyone will get where they need to be, and we won't be causing any news reports of 'strange animal behavior,' either. You make sure everyone else is all set."

I nearly smiled. "Understood. Safe travels, Keziah."

She dipped her head. "Safe travels, Fenris."

As she returned to the group of alphas, I decided to check in with Piers and Gilbert next. Gilbert had done much of the coordinating, though I supposed I shouldn't write off his twin entirely. After all, Piers was the one who'd been suspicious of the covens.

Gilbert looked up as I arrived, then dipped his head in my direction. "Fenris," he said, straightening up.

"Is everyone ready?" I asked, glancing around at the small group of tents.

“Indeed we are,” Piers said as he swanned over from who knew where.

“Good. Time for you to escort the rest of the vampires to the temple in Peru,” I said.

To my surprise, the younger of the twins seemed to brighten, even smiling at me. “Brilliant,” Piers said, dusting himself off. “I was starting to get antsy. A change of scenery will do me some good.” He waved a hand at the surrounding camp. “I suspect some of these folks are restless as well. It will be good to give them a task.”

Gilbert nodded. “And it’ll be better to have feedings spread out over an area instead of draining too many animals in this one region.”

I nodded. “Good. Get everyone ready and head out at once.”

Gilbert seemed to visibly deflate, and I paused. I knew the vampire wasn’t one to shirk orders. Usually, that was Piers, who was already flitting away to start spreading the word. Still, if I had to go ahead of Celeste, I knew I’d feel distracted by concern for my mate.

I cleared my throat, but feigned casual disinterest. “You may bring Abigail with you as well if she’s able to keep up. I’d rather not have to deal with her pining if she’s left behind.”

Gilbert’s eyes flashed, and he cleared his throat, giving a small nod. “I would not want that, either,” he said, looking off toward the camp. “I am sure she will be able to keep up with everyone.”

I clapped a hand over his shoulder. “See to it,” I said. “I’m going to check on the others.”

As I finished making my rounds, I returned to the cabin, pleased that Celeste was already inside. She smiled, sitting up on the couch as she leaned over the back of it, watching me. “I saw Liana sneaking out of Esme’s tent after I saw you head to the vampires’ encampment,” she said, chuckling and shaking her head. “I’m glad she’s taking this whole fated mate thing so well and not fighting it tooth and nail.”

“The way you did?” I asked wryly, closing the door and walking over to her.

Celeste laughed again. “The way I did,” she affirmed, scooching sideways to make room for me on the couch.

I dropped down next to her, pressing my leg against hers. “You did not *always* fight me,” I said. “You did seem to like *something* about me, even when you were convinced you hated me. If I recall, it was *you* who made the first move.”

“Me?” she squeaked, making a face.

I leaned in to kiss her cheek. “You were the one who sent me a *very* saucy idea inside the planetarium,” I said, feeling her pulse jump. “I seem to recall you suggesting that I take you ri—”

“Fenris!” Celeste exclaimed, but she was smiling as she turned to face me, pressing her lips against mine. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“But you were thinking it,” I said. I gave her one more kiss before leaning back, sliding my arm over her shoulders to pull her closer to my chest. “Truly, though, I don’t mind that we got off on the wrong foot. We are together now, and I don’t plan on it ever being otherwise.”

As I gazed down at her, her smile seemed to dim. “I want that, too,” she said, but the laughter had left her voice. “More than anything.”

I frowned. I knew she couldn’t tell me every part of her plan for the eclipse, but that reaction didn’t exactly leave me brimming with hope.

Before I could ask what was wrong, she snuggled up closer, putting her hand on my knee. “Hold still,” she murmured quietly, closing her eyes.

I did as she said, and moments later, a shared thought was my reward: Celeste was imagining a beautiful night sky, the surrounding area so dark, it felt like I could see the entire universe when I looked skyward.

Allowing my eyes to fall shut, I joined her completely in the vision, the tension leaving my shoulders as I basked in the future sights we might soon share.

Chapter 24

Celeste

The Wilderness

Andes Mountains, Peru

Time Until the Eclipse: 1 Day

I stood in the dark jungle, the air so thick I felt like I could swim through it. The air buzzed with life, but I felt smothered all the same as I stared out into the distance, only able to make out the big rocky hills blotting out the stars. Those loyal to the Lunar Lord had hidden throughout the landscape leading up to the ancient temple, and I wondered if the witches who'd enchanted it all those centuries ago had planned for this event.

Did they know someone might try to kill the Lunar Lord during an eclipse? Or did they just think everyone would respect it?

I had no way of knowing for sure, but thus far, I hadn't sensed anything in the area that felt like baneful magic. If there were any traps, their power might have faded away by now—or they were so well-hidden, I wouldn't know until they'd sprung.

I sighed as I licked my lips, still staring up at the temple. Fenris's forces had grown over the past several days, but I noticed this looked exactly like how the temple had appeared to me in my dream—or rather, nightmare—when Zyanya turned into a monstrous metallic dragon. Just the thought sent a chill down my spine despite the warmth of the jungle draped

over me like a cloak. I could smell the awful, acrid stench of the burning forest, but when I glanced down, there was nothing on my hands. I took a shaking breath and closed my eyes to calm myself.

Someone put a hand on my shoulder, and I nearly jumped straight out of my skin.

“I’m so sorry,” Val said as I whirled around, my heart thundering in my chest. “I didn’t mean to sneak up on you.”

“It’s okay,” I said, breathless. “I was just, uh…” I trailed off, not sure what to say.

Val offered me a tired smile. “I know,” she said, reaching out to give my elbow a squeeze. “Everyone is on edge. It’s natural to be worried about the prospect of any fight, much less one of this nature.”

If only you knew. I tried to shake off the feeling of impending doom—or shake it off enough that Val stopped giving me such a worried look. “How are you doing?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m alright, all things considered,” Val said, clasping her hands in front of herself. She sighed, glancing at the temple I’d been studying moments before. “I’ve been working with several other senior witches and warlocks to lay down the protective wards. A separate group is working on traps further into the jungle to hopefully slow down any of the Solar Sovereign’s allies who try to approach.” She sighed again and shook her head, looking back at me. “Many hands do make light work. I’m glad so many covens have joined us. This would be exhausting otherwise.”

That, at least, I could agree with whole-heartedly. The turnout had allowed me to focus solely on preparing for the ritual. “How’s Morgan doing?”

“She’s well,” Val said. “She crafted the amulet that is allowing Abigail to remain within the area.” She offered a rare, playful grin. “Locals will find themselves with only dim memories if they get too close—and if they push past that, they’ll be struck by an awful, crippling fear. At least we can be

confident that no one in the normal world will accidentally stumble across us.”

I nodded. “That’s good.” Just one thing Fenris wouldn’t have to worry about. I sighed and looked back in the direction of the ancient building.

Val reached over and touched my elbow again. “Everything will work out the way it is meant to, Celeste,” she said quietly. “Despite everything, we are well-prepared. They won’t take us by surprise.” She gave my arm another squeeze, then coaxed me into following her. “Come with me. Loitering out here will only give your doubts space to grow.”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. Val was right. While being busy wasn’t what I needed, being with the others was.

As we rejoined the small encampment, it looked like dinner was wrapping up. A general quiet had fallen over most of the tents, and none of the late-night hubbub that had occurred in days before was present now. *Everyone figures they’ll need their sleep—and they aren’t wrong.*

Even if we were ready for Zyanya’s attack, I was certain she’d be coming for us with everything she had. This was her only shot to kill Fenris. It didn’t make sense for her to leave anything to chance.

The thought left me feeling itchy. Despite the wards and traps and charms Val and the others were preparing, I knew we weren’t alone in the forest. My sixth sense was like a constant, uncomfortable hum, unable to pinpoint anything specific, but still active. I felt like I’d been sleepwalking for the past several hours, even days, noticing everything and not sure I was taking anything in at all. We were reaching the precipice, and it was *me* who would decide if everything would work...or fail.

If I didn’t complete the ritual, if I followed Zyanya’s command to kill Fenris despite my efforts to disobey her will...

And I might die tomorrow.

Just thinking it still felt bizarre, but the death mark seared into my chest was all too real. I swore I felt it tingle when I thought about it too long, and if I did find a way to disobey Zyanya's order tomorrow, then the price would be my life.

Forcing myself to move, I joined Abi and Gilbert at their camp as they chatted quietly with Cody and Morgan. Val followed me, giving her niece a warm look. Morgan was shoulder to shoulder with Cody, and neither the witch nor the shifter seemed to even notice us sitting down to join them.

Abi rolled her eyes when I caught her gaze, making a fake gagging motion. I giggled—as if she'd never given Gilbert bedroom eyes in public. She made a face, and I shook my head, looking back at our friends.

Walter had remained behind in Colorado. The Snowmass Pack healers had damn near worked miracles for him, but Fenris wasn't comfortable risking his health here in Peru. It worked out, I supposed, to have someone Fenris trusted so dearly back in Keziah's territory while she was here with us.

Liana and Esme had stayed behind with Walter as well. Saying goodbye to them was hard, knowing very well this could be my final farewell, but I nearly lost it when my aunt gave me a tearful embrace. She made a point of making sure I packed the Handmaiden grimoire with me, and though I'd already memorized the spells needed for the ritual, I didn't argue. If nothing else, having the heirloom in our tent felt comforting, like some part of my mother was here with me. It was tucked safely under my sleeping bag, and I was sure I'd find myself reading it again when I couldn't fall asleep.

"Hey, what's with the face?" Abi asked, walking over to sit next to me. "No need to look so down! I'm sure Fenris will be back any second now to whisk you away for Lunar Lord lovin'." But her smile seemed tenser than usual.

Fenris had gone off to patrol the wards again alongside Keziah and Piers, and while I knew my unease had heightened with his absence, it wasn't the real source of my poor appetite and mood. "I'm just really tired," I told Abi, offering her a smile. I knew it wasn't convincing, but I couldn't bring myself

to try harder. “I think I might just go lay down until he gets back.”

Abi studied me for a minute. “Would it help if I went with you?” she asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “I know sometimes for me, being alone just makes me feel worse.”

I reached over and bumped our knees together. This time, my smile was honest, even if it was small. “I think I just need some sleep,” I said, barely stifling a yawn. Each night, my sleep felt like it was getting worse. I was certain it was the stress weighing down on me. “But I appreciate it.”

“Well, just holler if you change your mind and want some best friend cuddles until your man gets back,” Abi said, her smarmy grin returning. “I’m never more than a shout away!”

I laughed. “I know,” I said, standing slowly and bidding the rest of the camp good night. Though I couldn’t say I felt *better*, I did feel just a bit lighter, buoyed by Abi’s infallible sense of humor.

When I reached the tent Fenris and I shared, I crawled into the roll and laid down. For a moment, I considered parsing through the grimoire, but even the cover looked blurry to my tired eyes.

I just need to rest.

If I couldn’t fall asleep, then just closing my eyes until Fenris returned would do.

The jungle air droned around me, energy crackling and insects buzzing. The leaves rustled, and the brilliant stars glowed like diamonds overhead. In the distance stood the ancient Moon Temple, blocking out some of the starlight.

I held my grimoire in front of me, and as I inhaled, I could feel the power flow through my veins. I took one more breath, settling my fluttering pulse, and recited the words to a spell.

Wait.

I couldn’t stop the spell now that I’d begun, but I didn’t recognize the words.

How do I know this?

I couldn't look down. I barely had the time to try and categorize the feeling of the magic surrounding me as the world shifted. It felt like time sped up, and suddenly, the sun was behind the temple, but I wasn't moving at all. I stood in the same spot, still reciting a spell I didn't know, but had memorized perfectly. Zyanya screamed in rage as the moon blotted out the sun, and the magnificent bronze dragon spread its wings as it clawed at the sky like it could pull the moon down and eat it.

She screamed again, and as she turned, her massive golden eye found me. I set my jaw and kept speaking.

Suddenly, a horrifying pain ripped through me, starting in my spine and spreading outward like wildfire. I screamed, but my own voice sounded so far away. I screamed again, but I couldn't stop—I couldn't make myself say any words. I couldn't use any spells to call the wind or summon water to me.

As I looked down, flames licked up over my skin, consuming me from the inside...

I jolted violently. The only reason I didn't fling myself off the roll was the fact that Fenris's arms were around me as he cradled me against his chest, rocking back and forth. I groaned, aware that I was shaking like a leaf as I crumpled back against him, my eyes wide as I stared blankly at the panel of our tent. Fenris murmured to me wordlessly, dropping little kisses against my hair as my trembling quieted.

Was that another nightmare? Or was that a premonition?

I'd dreamed of the eclipse twice now, and though both dreams had started the same, the ending of this most recent one was entirely different. Neither option was exactly desirable, though I refused to kill Fenris.

Even if the cost was burning alive.

I took another shaky breath as the surge of adrenaline receded again, the taste of fear becoming more of a memory as the dream kept fading away. Fenris kissed me again, and I twisted in his arms, pulling myself more upright as I tangled my hands in his dark hair, anchoring him closer. This might be

the last time I could do this—to kiss him. To hold him. To see him, raw and caring and—

I pressed our mouths together to stop my racing thoughts, or I knew I'd begin to cry. And I couldn't waste this moment on tears.

That was the last thing he let me say for a long, long while, kissing the tears from my cheeks as if we had all the time in the world. He rolled on top of me, bracing himself on his hands and knees as he continued to press gentle kisses to my exposed skin. I didn't try to hurry him. Instead, I savored every touch, breathing through each tremble so I'd relax back into the cot. I kept my hand at his elbow as though he were my anchor point, and to keep it from wandering any further.

This was not so unusual. Sometimes, lately, he would growl at me to hold still, insisting that he make me feel good. I would feel the threat of teeth against my throat, and oh, I ached for the moment he could bite me there.

I must've gotten lost in my head, because Fenris grabbed me by my wrists and slowly repositioned my hands over the muscled planes of his chest. It took a second for my brain to catch up with the rest of my body, and I slowly slid my arms over his shoulders, curling my fingers carefully against the nape of his neck. I suddenly felt shy, like we'd never done this before.

Fenris's amber eyes gleamed, and his muscles tensed beneath my arms. A protective expression came over his face as he towered over me. He must have found some restraint somewhere, though, and the tension slowly drained again as he leaned down to give me one last kiss upon my lips.

Moving one hand, he gently stroked my dark hair, tucking a loose strand behind my ear. Then he traced the line of a tendon down my neck, finding that sensitive spot where neck and shoulder met. I gasped, and the corner of his mouth hitched up. Generally, our lovemaking was more frantic, more passionate, but this felt different. This wasn't the product of Fenris's absence or a return to safety after a run-in with one of his enemies.

This could be the end.

Fenris still hadn't said anything, but I could tell he was determined to be thorough. He kissed my skin inch by inch, and I remembered how to move again, sliding my hands up to cup his cheeks and drag his face back toward mine, kissing his lips fiercely before I released him, sliding my hands back down his torso. I reached for the hem of the pants he was sleeping in.

"Fenris," I whispered, watching his face.

He hummed some affirmative as he reached for the hem of my t-shirt, pushing it up. He didn't pull it all the way off, instead pausing as he revealed my breasts. After a moment, he leaned in, kissing the space between them like it was a direct connection to my heart. I shivered, momentarily forgetting what I was doing until I brushed my knuckles against his bare hipbone. He gave a shiver in return, pressing his eager length against my thigh, only two thin layers of fabric between them.

Somehow, I laughed, unable to stop myself from beaming at him. Even now, he warmed me from the inside out.

"I love you, my Celeste," he murmured as I laid back against the cot, releasing my hold on the hem of his pants. He rearranged himself, sliding one arm beneath me as if to cradle me close while the other supported us both. He mouthed at my breasts, nipping and kissing and licking creamy skin and tender, pebbled nipples. I whimpered and writhed, as powerless as if he'd cast a spell over me.

He lapped at me with his tongue, nipped with sharp teeth, and explored with eager fingers. I felt like I'd forgotten what to do entirely, settling on tangling my fingers in his dark hair as he worshipped my skin. He tugged down my panties, leaving them at my knees as he continued to kiss and touch until the white heat of pleasure suddenly flashed through me. I gasped, choking on the intensity as my entire body went rigid.

I was still whimpering as he stopped and glanced up at me. I could barely meet his twinkling eyes. "Did you just...?"

"Ah..." I cleared my throat and bit my lower lip. "Yes."

“Good,” Fenris said, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

I laughed, feeling as light as I did sheepish, but the noise died off when he returned to his work, dragging his fingers over my skin. I felt warm all over, and he threw the remnants of our blanket off to the floor of our tent, kicking articles of clothing away while he was at it. He moved lower, pulling away from my grasp as he repositioned himself. Trailing his hands down my thighs, he rearranged my legs, bending my knees and smoothing his hands over my calves.

He paused for a moment, tracing the lines of my limbs in wonder as I propped myself up on my elbows, watching him as he worked. I tipped my head to look at him as he glanced back up at me.

“You are radiant.”

“Fenris,” I said, failing not to blush.

“Lovely.” He slid his hand back up my leg and lifted it over one of his shoulders. I found it hard to focus on what he was saying, just watched him as he turned to kiss one ankle. One calf. “You must know I love you.”

“I...” Suddenly, I found myself choked up. I couldn’t meet his eyes, instead looking up at the tent’s fabric, still dark in the night.

“Celeste. My *khuya*.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

I remembered how to breathe as I looked back at him. “I love you, too,” I whispered, feeling all the sorrow, the joy, the passion that knowledge gave me.

He rocked backward to get rid of the last of his clothing. *I love you*, I thought as he positioned himself over me, allowing me to feel all his weight. All his strength.

I love you, I thought as he nuzzled me, kissing my jawline before he aligned us. *I love you*, I thought again, even as the penetration made me take a sharp breath. He exhaled slowly in

response, and for a moment, neither of us moved. I wondered if we could stay like this forever.

Then he raised himself back up over me and started to move. I lifted my legs, wrapping them around his waist and crossing my ankles behind the small of his back. He smiled at me before he leaned down and kissed me again.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

“Fenris,” I whispered quietly, when we had both finished and caught our breath. I felt boneless, sated, but I couldn’t fall back asleep. I reached over to touch his hair. “Are you awake?”

“Mhm.” His amber eyes fluttered back open and met mine.

“Fenris,” I said again.

“Celeste.”

“I love you.”

“I know,” he said, and rolled onto his side to give me a kiss that said everything I needed to hear.

Chapter 25

Celeste

The Wilderness

Andes Mountains, Peru

Time Until the Eclipse: 1 Day

Fenris held me as I caught my breath, and for a time, I was able to pretend this was any other night. I imagined that we were back at his home on Isla Lobo, but it wasn't the gentle waves I could hear; it was the trees rustling overhead. There was no salty scent of the sea, but the heavy, earthy smell of the jungle's floor. The stiller I was, the more I became aware of the life all around us—not just the insects and birds sleeping in their homes, but our friends and allies in the tents around ours.

Deeper in the forest were those loyal to the Solar Sovereign, hiding and waiting for their moment.

I swallowed hard and tried to cling to my last remaining sense of calm. I wasn't doing a great job.

Fenris stirred and stroked his hand up and down the length of my spine. "I know you have to be careful with what you say," he said quietly, "but if there is anything you *are* able to say to assure me that you'll be safe by the end of tomorrow, no matter what happens, I need to hear it." He paused. "I will be protecting you with my life, and while I'll do whatever I can to prevent the Solar Sovereign from killing me by using you, I'm more concerned about losing you in some way." Fenris sighed.

“I know you haven’t told me everything. That you’re not able to tell me.”

I said nothing, running my tongue over my teeth as I racked my brain for what I *could* say. Of course I didn’t want to trigger the death mark when we were so close to the eclipse, but I didn’t want to lie, either.

Fenris exhaled heavily when I didn’t answer right away. “I get the feeling you are expecting a different outcome than I am in terms of what tomorrow brings,” he said, his hand stilling on my skin. “I just...I need you to be okay, Celeste. I am trusting you with more than my own life. I’m trusting you with *your* life, which is infinitely more important to me.”

It was all I could do not to burst into tears in that moment. As if the stress of the eclipse weren’t enough, that was one of the kindest, most heartfelt things anyone had ever said to me.

I took a deep breath, pressing my face into his chest. “I just...I just wish I was able to figure out what my mother was telling me in my dream,” I whispered. It wasn’t the whole truth, but it *was* true. Enora had clearly been communicating with me, but I still hadn’t solved the riddle. I kept having dreams about Zyanya as a dragon and the eclipse and...

My grimoire!

I bolted upright as I remembered how I’d opened my grimoire in the dream. I fumbled it off the bedside table, clutching it against my chest.

‘The answers you seek will be found under the moon and stars, you realize.’

Was that more literal than I’d thought?

I turned to Fenris, ignoring that he was looking at me like I’d just grown a second head. “Is there somewhere we can go where the jungle canopy isn’t so thick?” I asked. “I need a clearing.”

He stared for a second. “Right now?”

“Yes. Right now.” I looked at the book in my hands. “I want to look at the pages under the moonlight.”

He paused. “But there’s so little left. Tomorrow is the new moon.”

I inhaled. “I know,” I whispered, wishing I’d caught on earlier. “But I have to try.” If it were too late, at least I’d have less than twenty-four hours to beat myself up over it. I grimaced at my own sense of dark humor, but Fenris nodded, rolling out of our cot to pull on some clothes. I did the same.

In a matter of minutes, we were walking briskly through the jungle. Our footsteps sounded loud in the otherwise sleeping forest. Despite the quiet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were being watched, and I suspected it wasn’t just the nocturnal creatures or the vampires Fenris had guard the camp on night shift.

Fenris said nothing, but I could sense his unease through our bond as he led me further into the jungle. “What are we looking for?” he asked after several minutes, glancing over his shoulder at me.

I sighed, holding the book closer. Part of me was even embarrassed to admit this. *What if it doesn’t work out?* I took another breath. *But what if it does? This is all I’ve got to work on.*

“In my dream, I was casting a spell,” I began. “It was a strange dream. I didn’t recognize what I was doing, but I couldn’t stop. It was like being a passenger in my own body.” I paused and shook my head, realizing those weren’t the important details. “I didn’t actually recognize the spell I was casting, but I was holding my grimoire open.”

Fenris frowned as he looked ahead again. “And you think this will help?”

I gave a weak shrug. “I have a hunch,” I sighed, and that was all I had. “But this makes the most sense when I think about what my mother said in the dream. Nothing else has... fit. I just want to read the grimoire under the stars. It may click then.”

“I see,” Fenris said. He whirled around suddenly and scooped me up in his arms in the space of a breath. It was all I

could do not to yelp, clapping my hand over my mouth to keep from alerting anyone else in the thick brush.

Holding me against his chest, he dashed through the dense foliage, doing his best to shield me from stray limbs before the forest suddenly gave way to the sharp, steep angles of the hillsides surrounding the ancient temple. As we reached the pinnacle, he set me down. “Is this enough starlight?” he asked, glancing around.

I shrugged. Truthfully, his guess was as good as mine. “It’s clearer than anywhere else,” I said, forcing myself to sound hopeful. As I looked up, I smiled, marveling at how clear the sky was—and how many stars I could see. If I weren’t on the precipice of a battle, I could have easily spent all night up here, just admiring the view.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to settle my nerves, but my fingers still trembled as I opened the cover of the Handmaiden grimoire. At first, nothing looked any different. The first few pages looked just like they had in the light of day, or when I’d read them under the lamp in the library on sleepless nights. My heart raced as I flicked through pages, looking for *anything* that’d changed, anything at all—

A flash of silver caught my eye, and my heart skipped a beat. Then it skipped several beats as I hurried back and nearly missed the page. I realized these were the pages that were blank, the ones I’d assumed were for me or other future Handmaiden witches to add their own notes.

But they weren’t blank at all.

This spell is meant only for those of the Handmaiden lineage, the flowing script detailed. While this grimoire’s already protected from prying eyes, we’ve ensured an extra layer of protection for the most potent of spells. You’ll have realized by now that to read this spell, you must be under the Pleiades constellation.

I kept reading the page, realizing the witch was detailing how to craft this celestial ink and add any other spells that could only read by starlight. As interesting as that was, it

wouldn't help me right now. I kept flipping pages, trying to find the next place, but only finding blanks.

Sure enough, silver ink was present there as well. This handwriting was less elegant but perfectly legible.

“Did you find it?” Fenris asked, peering over my shoulder.

“Yes,” I said, unable to believe I'd solved the riddle. “There are spells written here in some magic ink. My mother must have been referring to one of these.”

My eyes fell on a spell, and my heart stopped as I choked on my own breath. *To Rise After Death*, the title said. *This spell is integral to crowning a new Lunar Lord should the need arise. This will allow his rebirth in the Moon Temple should he meet a mortal demise.*

I traced my hands over the page. *Does this...does this spell only apply to a Lunar Lord, or can I cast it on myself, too?* My pulse roared in my ears as I scanned the page, looking for any limitations on who it'd been cast on, when I realized there was a note off to the side in Enora's handwriting.

I keep seeing this spell in my dreams, but I do not know why. I cannot cast it alone, but there are none of my sisters left to aid me. If you find this, we are meant to meet—but I do not suspect this is the case. I fear I am alone.

My heart dropped to my feet. *I need a second Handmaiden witch?* As far as anyone knew, I was the last one. I took a deep breath. *I can find a way for Morgan or Val to help me. Or Delila. She's truly powerful.*

I scanned the text again, realizing this complex spell combined a lot of elements. It needed the total solar eclipse, and the magic could only work with the innate power of the ancient Moon Temple. Of course, just like the binding ritual, this had to be done in a short period of time—that was simply the nature of an eclipse. I swallowed.

The Handmaiden leading the spell must spill their blood within the temple at the apex of the total solar eclipse to complete the spell and grant the Lunar Lord the ability to return from death. If the location is wrong, he will not rise. If

the apex of the eclipse is missed, the Handmaiden may well lose their own life.

I bit my lip, reading over the spell again. *But what if I only want to come back from death once?* I wouldn't need as much magic, and the spell wouldn't need to be eternal. If I could just find a way to survive death once, I *should* become the Lunar Bride and tied to Fenris's life force. I wouldn't need this protection.

"What is it?" Fenris asked.

I cleared my throat, realizing I'd stopped in the middle of a sentence when I'd stumbled across this spell. "There's an old spell in here, related to the Lunar Lord, but if I alter it a bit, I think I can—" I gasped, clapping a hand over my mouth. *I can't believe I nearly told him!* Telling him I'd found a way to get around the death mark was still too close to the truth. I couldn't risk setting it off, not when we were this close to the total solar eclipse, not when I was so close to finding a way to survive.

I took a deep breath. "I think I found something," I said instead, offering a small smile.

Of course, I still need to find another Handmaiden witch—and the only ones I know of are beyond the veil. There were some dark magic spells that did allow a witch to communicate with the dead, but...

The thought of my last experience with dark magic made me shudder. Not only had it been terrifying, but I'd been energetically *drained*. It had taken me days to recover from it, and I didn't have days right now. I had *hours*...and that was assuming I cast the spell correctly the first time. That was assuming nothing backfired.

But what other options do I even have? I want to live.

"What?" Fenris burst out.

I cleared my throat. I could tell he wanted to be patient with me, but his aggravation was spreading through our bond. "It's an extremely complicated spell. I think I'd like to practice it before the eclipse, but...in private. Just in case."

Fenris sighed heavily, stepping closer to wrap his arms around me and pull me into an embrace. “You need to rest,” he argued, resting his chin on top of my head. “We’re only hours away from the eclipse, and we will have to fight for our lives. We will all need to be at the top of our game for this.”

He wasn’t wrong, but... “I really think this will help with that,” I said, squirming out of his arms. “I can’t...look, I can’t really explain it. But I have a good feeling about this.”

Fenris paused, but he didn’t struggle to hold me in place. He pressed his lips together, but when I glanced up at him, he looked more puzzled than anything else. “Celeste...”

“Fenris, please.” I bit the inside of my mouth. “I need to do this.”

He studied me for a moment before he nodded. “Okay. Okay.” He took another step back. “I trust you. But be careful, Celeste. I...I need you to be safe.” He took a deep breath. “I am going to go patrol the wards, but if you need anything at all...”

“You’re only a shout away,” I finished for him, offering him an earnest smile. “I know, Fenris. I do. I’ll be as safe as I can.”

Fenris nodded, lingering long enough to press a kiss to my cheek before he shifted, disappearing into the darkness as he headed back down the slope.

I waited in silence for several minutes, and once I was sure he was long gone, I held the book out in front of me. I knew this wasn’t going to be particularly easy, mentally or physically. Calling upon the dead was a difficult spell to find, and more than that, it had elements of dark magic. Just the thought of using it sent a shiver through my spine, but it seemed no matter how many times I swore I’d stop using it, even to myself, dark magic kept cropping back up.

I can see why Fenris was freaked out by it.

After this, it might not even matter anymore. If I was dead...

I can't afford to think like that right now. I must focus right now.

I took another breath and glanced back to where Fenris had gone. I wanted to apologize, but...he was gone. This was all on me.

Smoothing my hand over the page, I thought of all the names I'd read in the book, the witches who'd come before me. What I needed to do relied on the strength of several Handmaidens, but I couldn't imagine any of them would've thought it'd come to this.

I hope this works. I hope they want to help.

Despite my fear as I recited the words in a whisper, another part of me knew that they *would* want to help. I didn't know how I knew, but it helped steady the shake in my voice even as I felt the telltale chill of dark magic creeping up my fingertips. My heart hammered in my chest, but I couldn't stop. I needed their help.

"Please, lend me your voices," I said as I pried my eyes open. I blinked a few times, feeling like I was looking through a smoky lens. Everything seemed darker, more difficult to see, but—

"We are here," a voice said.

"We are with you," another added.

"My Celeste," Enora said, stepping in front of the ghostly figures.

I gasped, fighting back the tears threatening to spill. My mother didn't look the same as in my dream. She'd seemed so whole, I could physically see her. Now, she was a shade, just the shape of a woman. It was like looking at a movement out of the corner of your eye, but when you looked at it head-on, you couldn't make it out.

My heart clenched, and I just *knew* that was the effect of the dark influences of this spell. *Am I hurting them?* I resolved to hold the spirits of my ancestors for as little time as possible, which meant I had to work quickly.

I turned my head, looking back down at my grimoire—*our* grimoire—and cleared my throat.

“Sisters. Mothers,” I addressed them, blinking rapidly as tears stung my eyes. “The Lunar Lord is in danger.” *And it’s all my fault.* “I will protect him by whatever means necessary, no matter the cost to me, but I need your help. I cannot do this alone.” I looked back up at the ghastly blue glow, the faceless forms that gently bobbed and wavered in the air. “I need your help,” I repeated. “Please. Help me.”

The spirits murmured amongst themselves before my mother’s voice rang out again. “Tell us what to do.”

Chapter 26

Fenris

The Wilderness

Andes Mountains, Peru

Time Until the Eclipse: Hours

I woke up slowly without feeling particularly rested. Celeste lay against me, quiet in her slumber. She'd been on the hilltop for over three hours under the night sky until I convinced her to come back to the camp and get *some* amount of rest. Still, I suspected neither of us had gotten much actual rest, despite closing our eyes, then pretending we were asleep to convince the other to do the same.

I sighed as I watched her. *What am I missing?* There were so many little things she couldn't tell me, and it was getting harder and harder to live with that knowledge—even if it'd just be for a few more hours. Yet, I still felt a growing knot of fear deep in my gut.

What if she doesn't survive this?

I'd never forgive myself.

No. Do not think like that. I cannot afford to.

I took a breath and steeled myself. If all went as it should today, I would have my Lunar Bride by noon. I'd be able to claim Celeste as my mate, and we'd watch over the paranormal world together. No matter what else happened, I

would have her by my side. There was nothing that would compare to that.

Despite everything, I found myself smiling. *That* was a future I could look forward to.

All at once, Celeste threw the blanket back, practically bolting upright. She got to her feet, robotic in her motions as she grabbed her clothing and started pulling it on. I was coming to recognize the rigidity in her actions and the expression on her face—Celeste’s sixth sense was active. My mouth formed a grim line as I stood, starting to dress myself once she looked at me with a hollow expression. Her senses were telling her what I already knew.

The Battle of the Eclipse will begin soon.

And it would be painful. Not just for us, but for everyone involved.

I finished dressing and left the tent, stalking through the encampment to make sure everyone was getting prepared. Senior members of the Order of the Stars were already wide awake, organizing the groups, when a magical blast erupted on the far side of the camp.

Uneasy silence exploded into action. Shifters blurred past, rushing into the woods as a sudden volley of magical fire flew over the canopy, raining down in a hail of explosions. Someone howled. Elsewhere, several members of the Thalassa coven hurried forward to start forming magical barriers overhead. The flower faeries scampered up into the treetops, shouting down locations to the witches and warlocks below as they prepared a counter-offensive.

No sooner did the volley of witchfire start than it abruptly stopped. “Hold!” an old warlock shouted to his coven, giving me a knowing look. “We’ve only just begun! They aren’t giving up so soon!”

The words had barely left his mouth when dozens of vampires appeared from the forest’s murky shadows, streaking into the camp. Piers hissed as Gilbert sounded an alarm,

sending the vampires loyal to me to meet them. A witch or warlock couldn't match a vampire's speed.

While the vampires held off the ground assault, I signaled for the covens to continue the return fire. We couldn't simply react to whatever the Solar Sovereign was throwing at us, or we'd always be on the back paw.

I need to get Celeste to the temple safely. She needs to prepare the spell to bind us together.

If I couldn't do that, then everything else was for naught.

I took a deep breath and allowed my wolf to surge forward, knowing I'd be faster on four paws than on two feet. As I lunged for a vampire who'd broken past the front line, I realized the encroaching eclipse was already affecting me. Whereas my wolf's weakened strength meant it was harder for him to override my will, it also meant I was slower than I'd expected to be.

Shit. I wasn't as slow as a human, but I knew this would only get worse the closer we were to the eclipse.

There was another magical blast from the far side of camp. I could hear shouting, snarling, and the occasional roar. I realized enemy shifters must have breached some of the wards, but I couldn't go rushing over. I had faith in Keziah and the other alphas. And more importantly, I had to help Celeste.

Smashing the vampire into the forest floor, I pinned him under my massive paws as he hissed and scratched at my forelimbs. It stung, but the pain only enlivened my wolf more. With a snarl, I bent down and grabbed the creature by the throat, clamping down to end its existence as quickly as possible. I didn't have time for anything else.

I turned, about to bolt back to the tents when I saw Cody out of the corner of my eye. I snarled, jerking sideways as I caught a black panther shifter by the back leg while it leapt towards him. I'd barely gotten there in time, but the large cat yowled and hissed as it hit the dirt instead of grappling with Cody. The young wolf managed to slip out of the way as the cat twisted, grabbing me with its massive claws when I

dragged it by its back leg. Its tail thrashed, smacking me in the face before it started kicking with its free limb, ripping my nose and muzzle with its claws.

Cody came barreling back toward us, grabbing the panther shifter by the scruff. It yowled in anger, but stopped kicking me, clearly forgetting I existed when its life was in much more imminent danger.

Now that the young alpha had the enemy shifter under control, I turned back to the tents, scanning the area for Delila. We'd planned for the witch to transport us to the ancient temple to eliminate some of the possible danger to Celeste, but I soon spotted her warding off a pair of vampires. As I galloped over, a blast of cold air slammed into the back of one of the vampires, throwing her into a nearby tree.

“On your left!” Celeste called to Delila, just in time for the older witch to duck down, narrowly missing the male vampire lunging for her. As he stumbled past, she formed a dark ball of flame in her hands, pushing it into his back as he screamed.

The female vampire had pushed herself off the tree, and I pounced, not wanting her to get to Celeste or Delila. I snapped at her arm, wrenching her sideways as she hissed and tried to punch and kick at my face, anything to get me away. She grabbed one of my ears, trying to wrench my head sideways to get to my neck, but I had a thick ruff to defend me.

She made a frustrated noise, her clawing becoming more frantic before I wrenched her sideways again, slamming her into the dirt. Before I could do anything else, Delila appeared next to us, silencing the vampire with a dark spell I didn't recognize.

Delila sneered and glanced up at Celeste. “We must hurry!”

Celeste nodded, looking like she was about to join us when her silver eyes went almost comically wide. Her entire body went rigid, and she suddenly turned, racing off in a different direction.

“Celeste!” Delila shouted.

“I have to get to Abi!” she shouted back.

I sprinted after her, recognizing the look on her face. She must have seen her friend in some vision. Abigail had been left with a group of Thalassa witches. More than that, Celeste’s best friend had been given explicit orders to stay with them for her own safety.

We don’t have time for distractions! I growled under my breath as I caught up to Celeste, about to try and redirect her when I spotted Abigail between two tents, her back pressed against a massive grizzly.

Kal snarled as he swatted a vampire away, leaving its face a wrecked mess. I barked to Celeste, but her eyes were already on the duo.

“Shit!” she yelped and hurried forward. I rarely heard my fated mate curse, but as I followed her gaze, I realized what she’d seen.

Naomi, the witch who’d attacked her and Abigail in the Snowmass Pack encampment, had kept her loyalty to the Solar Sovereign. She was racing through the tents, pausing just long enough to light each one on fire before hurrying to the next. No one was sleeping through this battle, but she was creating a hazard and might even be able to push my forces forward into the Solar Sovereign’s if the fire were ignored for too long.

Abigail threw a knife at the witch, missing her by a few inches, but it was enough to get the woman’s attention. She whirled around, her dark hair a messy web around her face. She looked half-mad as she stood next to the smoldering tent, cupping her hands to call another flame. Abigail grabbed another knife from her belt, rushing forward, but I knew she wouldn’t be faster than a witch’s spell.

Bolting past Celeste and Abi, I jumped toward Naomi. Startled, she released her spell too soon, and it crested forward, the bolt of heat exploding against my chest. As I fell backward, my nose filling with the smell of my burning pelt, I groaned, rolling sideways to try and keep myself away from the flames. It hurt, but it wouldn’t kill me.

The ground shook as Kal thundered by, taking advantage of Naomi's distraction to grab the witch. She screamed in terror as the grizzly raked his claws down her frame, and I could hear the crack and sizzle of magic as she started and stopped several spells, clearly struggling to hold her power for any length of time in her panic. Abruptly, the screaming stopped, and as I got to my feet, I saw the mangled remains of the witch tossed into one of the burning tents, Kal already lumbering away as another vampire broke through the front lines.

Panting, Celeste reached my side about the same time Abigail did. Celeste reached out to touch my smoldering chest, and I forced my wolf back, shifting into my human form.

"Save your strength," I said, ignoring how hoarse I sounded. "I will heal fine." I got to my feet. "We need to get to Delila. *Now.*"

"I'll help you get there," Abigail said, grabbing Celeste by the elbow to urge her onward. "Let's go."

By the time we reached Delila, Piers, Keziah, and Lyka had also returned. My brother had remained in hiding since we'd arrived in the jungle, and despite the land's call to him, he'd remained with Val so she'd ensure no one would notice him until the time was right. Now, it seemed, was that exact moment. A vampire was on top of Delila, and two lynx shifters were harassing Keziah. With my waning speed, I wasn't sure I'd get to her in time, but Lyka had no such issue.

With a terrifying snarl, my brother slammed his large frame into the vampire, sending him sprawling several feet away. Piers finished the job, and my brother started with a shout. Piers drove a stake into the opposing vampire's chest before wrenching it free again.

"Ugh," he muttered, grimacing. "I do so hate doing that. No way around it, though." He glanced over to Delila and offered her a hand up. "Are we ready?" he asked the group at large.

As Celeste and I hurried over, Keziah and Lyka were able to dispatch the lynxes now that they no longer had the element

of surprise. They stayed in their wolf forms and were the last to join us. I handed a piece of the temple stone to Delila so she'd complete the transportation spell. I didn't even have time to think about how much I disliked the cold burst of air, or the way I felt like I couldn't breathe in the seconds it took to get from one place to the next. I didn't have time to wonder *where* we were, in this strange, in-between place. One moment, we were in the jungle, and the next, within the stone chamber of the temple.

I exhaled as I looked around, blinking as my eyes rapidly adjusted to the dim lighting. Before Celeste could so much as take a step forward, there was a crackle. I braced myself, allowing my wolf to take over again as a second portal opened only feet away.

They were watching us!

I should've known the Solar Sovereign would find some way to get around this, but I didn't have time to wonder how. Several lion shifters spilled out of the rip in the fabric of space and time, followed by a pair of witches—and a siren. She hissed as she clawed and slithered forward, her slippery tail leaving a trail of moisture on the stone. Her eerie silver eyes looked half-feral, as if she were already in pain, but one of the witches yelled at her, and the siren hissed again, her expression morphing into terrifying rage.

I howled, using my bulk to block Celeste from the streak of flame one of the witches threw at her while Lyka and Keziah charged forward to meet the trio of lions.

Delila cursed as she closed the portal, keeping close to Celeste. I couldn't look behind me, but I could feel the prickles of magic as the two of them called up a protective ward.

“Of course they have a siren!” Piers spat, now on my other side. “Whatever you do, don't let her—”

He couldn't finish his thought before the siren opened her mouth and sang out the first note. For a moment, time slowed down. My heart skipped a beat as her voice rang deep in my chest.

No! I gave myself a violent shake and charged forward, my claws clicking on the stone as I lunged at the nearest witch. She shouted and threw a burst of hot wind at me. I slammed back into the ground, my ears ringing, head cracking against the floor.

The siren continued her wordless song, her voice rising while my vision swam. I didn't think I'd hit my head that hard, but as I got back to my feet, I felt like I was moving in slow motion. *Is this the eclipse?* I felt like someone had slurped all my energy out of my body with a straw, leaving me a hollow husk. My own bulk felt too heavy for me. *Or is this the siren?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Piers looking stunned, like he'd never seen anything as beautiful as the creature in the center of the room, her tangled hair still dripping. She stank of river weed and muck, but none of that seemed to matter. Even my trembling limbs seemed less pressing than this siren.

“Get! Out!” Celeste shouted, managing to throw one of the witches into the back wall. Her neck snapped back, and her skull made a wet *thunk* before she crumpled, sliding to the floor in a heap. For a moment, the siren faltered, and time sped back up. I got a few steps closer before she began again, pointing one gnarled finger at me. One of the lions tackled Lyka to the ground, raking her claws across his side, but he didn't cry out. He seemed paralyzed by the same song.

What am I doing? I need to help him!

I urged my legs to *move*, but they felt heavier by the second.

Suddenly, Keziah came hurtling across the room, tackling the siren from the side. The creature erupted into pained screams, rabidly tearing and biting at the auburn wolf. Keziah snarled and snapped back, the two of them tangled in a mess of limbs, claws, and teeth.

I forced myself back to my feet, racing over to aid my brother as he managed to kick the lioness off his side. There was a hitch in his gait as he lurched sideways to dodge another bite.

Delila snarled, throwing the same dark witchfire I'd seen Sabine hurl only days before, but now I didn't care. The eccentric witch had pledged her loyalty decades ago, and if dark magic was what it took to dispatch all these damn shifters, so be it.

Celeste went running in the other direction. After Keziah tossed the siren to the side, Celeste was there to finish the job, calling upon the strength of the wind to paralyze the siren and steal the air from her lungs, preventing her from starting another song. Springing forward, Keziah grabbed the gagging siren by the neck, splashing her blood across the stone.

"Is that everyone?" Piers asked, sounding slightly breathless as he dropped the second witch to the floor. I looked over a few moments later once I was certain the third lion shifter was dead, realizing he'd bitten her. Taking a ragged breath, I resumed my human form and staggered to one side, surprised by how weak I felt.

"Take it easy, Fenris," Lyka said, taking his human form next to me. He caught me by the elbow. *"It's only minutes away now."*

"I feel..." I scowled as I looked across the room, realizing it was, in fact, darkening. I looked up at the ceiling and the hole there. It was meant to let in the light of the moon, but all I could see now was another way for more of the Solar Sovereign's followers to get in. *"Forget me. Make sure no one else gets in,"* I said, pushing Lyka away.

He growled at me, wiping at a streak of silver blood dripping down his temple. *"Don't be foolish."*

Celeste and Delila had reconvened in the center of the room, the older witch having used another summoning spell to retrieve the small bag of ingredients Celeste needed from our tent. The two of them were working quickly to lay items out, but I realized I could scarcely perceive anything as the world around me wobbled. Or it was *me* who was swaying. Lyka spoke, his grip tightening on my arm, but I struggled to understand.

The roaring in my ears had grown deafening, and I felt a familiar tug on my wolf. He howled and writhed in agony, but unlike all the other times he was in pain, he didn't force himself forward. Instead, it felt like he was trying to retreat further within. Pain wracked through me, and I trembled violently. If Lyka hadn't been there to steady me, I would've fallen to the floor, gasping and clawing at the stone. His expression had morphed from concern to...

To...

Fear?

For the first time in hundreds of years, I was truly vulnerable. I could die, and I wouldn't be reborn. And I *felt* like I might die, like the moon's shadow had somehow sucked all the vitality out of me, and I was only held together by Celeste's presence in the corner of my mind. It was the only anchor point I had left. I had no idea what she was doing anymore, but her certainty, her determination, was what I could focus on.

Just a few minutes, I tried to tell myself. The eclipse would only last seven minutes. I only had to survive for seven minutes.

Suddenly, Celeste gasped, and I finally forced myself to move, still on my hands and knees. I craned my neck enough to look for my fated mate and realized she was grabbing at the strange mark on her chest. My concern gave me a brief burst of adrenaline as I dragged myself closer to her. She was clearly in pain, but it seemed to pass after several ragged breaths, and she straightened up before glancing at me. "It's okay, Fenris," she said, sounding breathless.

"What is it?" I finally managed to ask.

She offered me a fleeting smile, her attention already back on the spell. "It's all right. That was just a reminder." Whatever *it* was, she wasn't saying, but I could sense it through our bond. Her determination wasn't wavering. If anything, her resolve had only hardened a bit more.

I frowned, about to press the issue when realization struck. *She's resisting the order to kill me.*

Whatever she was thinking about, Celeste didn't waste a moment as she called upon the power of the total eclipse. I felt a shudder ripple through me, and I realized she must be casting the spell to tie our life forces together. When I felt the tug of magic this time, it wasn't painful; it was simply a strange sensation.

She turned to me. "I need a drop of your blood, Fenris," she said, crouching close to me.

I pushed myself up into a sitting position and held out my hand. She took the knife and pricked one of my fingers before placing my hand over a bowl. Giving my fingertip a gentle squeeze, she dropped the shimmering liquid into the bowl of water below. Without a word, she did the same to herself, pricking a fingertip and squeezing out a drop of red blood.

I couldn't look away, feeling as though I was staring into the universe between us. Celeste murmured as I felt a soft wave of magic growing before it crested. I paused and glanced at her, about to ask if it was working when I caught sight of her expression. Celeste looked exhausted, like she felt as hollow as I did, even though the eclipse was supposed to lend her magic strength, not take it away. Before I could say anything, a large explosion rocked the building, the stone groaning and cracking as screams erupted outside.

I forced myself to my feet, hurrying toward the door to try and keep anyone from getting inside to Celeste. The others had already left; they must have gone out while Celeste was completing the ritual. Piers was grappling with another vampire while Lyka tangled with an enemy wolf shifter. I could see he was badly favoring one of his hind legs, and his dark pelt shimmered with silver blood as he snarled and bit. As soon as he fought off the first wolf shifter, another took its place.

I couldn't even see Keziah or Delila, but I didn't have the time to hope they were all right or search them out among the

fray. Other shifters had come up from the jungle to help defend the temple from the Solar Sovereign.

No sooner had I thought of her than another fierce cry erupted from the jungle, followed by another explosion. I realized the magic I sensed wasn't from the explosions—or the witches who'd caused them—but a singular being. *It's her.*

I shuddered as the intensity of her anger reached me. She was the antithesis of everything I was. She'd destroy the world as we knew it to reach her apex.

I couldn't let that happen.

I turned, staggering back inside to reach Celeste. The apex of the eclipse was upon us, and she was weaving another spell, looking fraught as she worked. “What are you doing?” I asked, hurrying to her side. “What is this?”

It looked like dark magic. It *smelled* like dark magic. As far as I knew, the ritual to bind us together was the only spell she needed to do, and that ritual certainly didn't involve any dark magic. *Unless it didn't work? But—*

“You promised to trust me, Fenris,” Celeste said, not looking away from the magical working. “And I need you to do that for just a little longer. I'm almost done preparing this ceremony.” She gave me a sideways look. “Remember. You need to bite me at the apex of the eclipse. I'll give you the signal.” I could feel Celeste's tension growing as she held onto several different spells. I knew she felt overwhelmed, and there was nothing I could do to help.

Lowering her hands, she stepped over to me, pressing a fierce kiss to my lips. I responded in kind, feeling the energy transferring through us. “You are so beautiful like this,” I whispered. We were both covered in dirt and sweat and blood, but she looked so fierce and so brave. I had never seen anyone like her, and within moments, I would be able to bite her. I could claim her, and she could claim me in return. We'd be tied together for eternity.

“It's—”

Celeste was not able to finish giving me her signal as another magical explosion rocked the temple, throwing us both backward. I wheezed, struggling to catch my breath as I tried to get back to my feet to check on Celeste, but a pair of witches dropped through the opening overhead.

Shit.

I whirled around as Delila rushed back inside, gathering up energy to strike one of them. The witch closer to the door snarled, and a bolt of dark magic cracked through the air.

Seconds later, Delila dropped dead. I hadn't even seen the magic strike her, only felt the sensation that her life had suddenly disappeared.

Without a second thought, I shifted, racing toward the closer witch. *I need to protect Celeste.*

More than anything, I needed her to survive.

Chapter 27

Celeste

The Wilderness

Andes Mountains, Peru

The Eclipse

My vision swam as I struggled to catch my breath. The side of my face felt wet when I pulled myself away from the stone. It felt like every bone in my body hurt, but I knew I couldn't stop now. As I sat upright, I realized my hands were bleeding, too, and I tried to give myself a shake. Still, it felt like I couldn't get all the cotton out of my mind.

How hard did I get hit?

I couldn't worry about that right now. I wasn't sure if the death immunity spell had taken hold, and I felt beyond exhausted from all the work I'd already done. My chest felt uncomfortable and itchy, like something hot had pressed against my skin.

The eclipse is almost over. I looked up at the stone ceiling. Zyanya's command was tied to the length of the eclipse, and my time was running out.

I might have five minutes left to live.

For some reason, this thought didn't strike me as hard as I expected it to. It may have been the adrenaline flooding through, but I managed to get to my feet. *I need to get to Fenris. I need...he needs to bite me.* If he didn't complete the

bond, he'd never be free of his curse, and I wouldn't be around to help him try again in the next four hundred years. I didn't care so much if I lived or died tonight, but I wanted to ensure Fenris would be all right after this.

That meant resisting Zyanya's alpha command to kill him. *Just five more minutes*, I reminded myself, resisting the urge to scratch at the burning sensation on my skin. Swallowing hard, I tried to get my brain back online when I realized that the shouting wasn't far away at all, but from inside the temple.

A blast narrowly missed my head, and I yelped, scrambling to my feet so I wasn't such a sitting duck. Another flaming bolt soared toward me, and Fenris appeared from my side, shoving me out of the way to take the blow. He groaned and staggered sideways, his fur smoldering. He shook himself hard and circled back. Lyka had joined him and was protecting my other side.

Before I could figure out what to do next, Zyanya stormed through the door, her footsteps burning behind her. A cold spike of fear formed in the pit of my gut. The Solar Sovereign was just as terrifying now as when I'd first seen her.

She scowled when she spotted Lyka, clearly recognizing him as another wolf of the Celestial Pack. She didn't linger on him for long, though, her golden eyes finding me quickly as she sneered.

I won't do what you want, I thought desperately, taking a step backward.

Zyanya didn't give us any more time than that. With an unholy shriek, she called up wave after wave of fire, sending them hurtling toward us. Reflexively, I pulled on my own magic again, just barely able to call up a protective shield before the flames smashed into us. My hands trembled, and I felt like my grip on my magic was already starting to slip. I'd already used so much of my energy reserve with the spells I'd cast. I didn't know how much longer I could hold out like this.

Zyanya screamed again, speaking in a language I didn't understand, but I didn't need to. Her rage was so palpable, I swore the entire chamber got hotter. Time seemed to slow as

she turned, focusing her wrath solely on Fenris as she called up another geyser of white-hot fire.

No!

I had to finish this ritual. I *had* to. I coughed as I glanced around, racking my mind for what to do. Delila's body lay still, and I knew we wouldn't be able to just teleport out of here. Even though there was a hole in the roof to view the moon at night, the chamber was still filling with smoke and Zyanya's fire. If nothing else, we'd all choke to death before Fenris regained his powers.

Gathering my energy, I braced myself, waiting for Zyanya to start her next assault before I struck, slamming her backward with a gust of wind. As it cut through the smoke and flame, buying us a few precious seconds, I put one hand on Fenris's pelt and the other on Lyka's, using all my strength to use the same teleportation spell I'd used back on Isla Lobo.

Thank goodness I'm covered in dirt from the jungle, I thought, whisking us quickly back to the encampment below the hillside.

As I opened my eyes, I gasped. The world around me seemed to swirl, and for a moment, I could have sworn I'd transported us straight into the vision of my nightmares. The outside of the temple looked just like my dreams, the raging fires casting eerie shadows over the old stone temple. The only difference was the stark lack of a dragon towering over the scenery.

There were still screams and howls of pain all around me, and I shivered. I felt...I felt...*I felt good.* The realization struck me seconds later, and I doubled over, sick with the realization that, even for the briefest of seconds, I'd enjoyed feeling someone else's fear, someone else's *pain*. It wasn't so different than the visions I'd had of myself torturing Abi when I'd...

No! I just need to survive a few more minutes. I cannot give in to the dark magic now.

A frustrated scream escaped me as I shook my head to get my thoughts straight, but my vision was still blurred. I could practically hear Zyanya's command in my head.

Celeste, I order you to kill Fenris, Lunar Lord, before the end of the total solar eclipse, or the mark over your heart shall burn you to ash from the inside out.

"No!" I took a staggering step and clapped my hands down over my ears, but I kept hearing her voice, saying the same thing over and over. "No—"

None of these people would be dying if it weren't for the Lunar Lord, the voice said, and suddenly, I realized I couldn't tell if it was Zyanya's or Sabine's. But Sabine is dead. You're dead! I tried to think back, but the harder I thought, the more that fear returned. I could taste it, and it tasted so, so sweet. Refreshing. Like it could wash away all my pain, and I could be made whole again if I just had more.

I could do anything, I just needed a bit more.

My sixth sense felt like it was in the furthest reaches of my mind, blaring away like a five-alarm fire, but it felt muffled. I could ignore it if I really wanted to, and for a moment, I wondered if I should. Nothing felt real.

Celeste, get a grip! Do not lose yourself!

I didn't know if it was dark magic or Zyanya's compulsion, but I couldn't slip into those desires. Not now.

Celeste, I order you to kill Fenris, Lunar Lord, before the end of the total solar eclipse, or the mark over your heart shall burn you to ash from the inside out. You must kill him, Celeste. Kill Fenris. Kill the Lunar Lord. Kill Fenris. You must kill him. You must kill Fenris. Kill the Lunar Lord. Kill him.

I couldn't hear my own thoughts as I dropped to my knees. Fenris's face suddenly appeared in my swimming vision, and I gasped. I realized, all at once, it was not *Sabine* who was speaking to me.

I was saying those things.

Cold horror ran through me as I gasped, struggling to breathe as Fenris tried to scoop me up in his arms. I screamed, pushing and shoving as I tried to scramble away, terrified I might actually kill him. I couldn't stop seeing the shine of silver blood on my hands like I'd had in my nightmare.

I pushed him away again, and when I looked down, I realized there *was* silver all over me. I gagged at the sight. *What have I done?* An awful keening escaped me, but I couldn't stop myself.

“What have I done?”

“Nothing!” Fenris shouted, trying to get closer. “You grabbed Lyka and me. We were both bleeding.” He motioned to himself and his brother. Lyka was still in his wolf form, fighting off a shifter who'd made its way back into the encampment.

I...I grabbed them? I blinked and looked back down. *Is this what I saw in my dream?*

Before I could form the next thought, Zyanya's voice echoed through my skull again. *Celeste, I order you to kill Fenris, Lunar Lord, before the end of the total solar eclipse.*

My body moved itself, pushing me up onto my feet. My eyes widened, and I tried to gasp, but I couldn't even do that. I felt like I was watching myself as I raised my hands, staring directly at Fenris.

He realized what was happening and lunged forward before tackling me to the ground. I didn't stop—I didn't even flinch. His shoulder hit my stomach in the middle of the spell, and, interrupted, the spell exploded between us. He groaned as he rolled over, and I could see at once how I'd scorched his side. He did not get up as he gasped, an awful, wheezing noise rattling his body. I whimpered, realizing what I'd done.

The moon was starting to creep away from the sun overhead. My time was running out.

Celeste, I order you to kill Fenris, Lunar Lord, before the end of the total solar eclipse, or the mark over your heart shall burn you to ash from the inside out.

“No!” I screamed, shaking my head. *I can't stay here.* Each time I heard Zyanya's command echo around my skull, it felt stronger. I'd already tried to attack Fenris. I couldn't trust myself to stay around him any longer.

I turned and ran blindly back into the jungle. I didn't care where I went if it was away from Fenris and Lyka and anyone else here.

Again, I realized this was just like my dream, but my chest felt even worse now. It felt like my lungs were burning, too, like I'd been standing over a campfire and breathing in all the smoke and blistering air. I had no idea how far I'd gotten, only that it wasn't far enough, when the edges of my vision darkened again. I tripped, and the forest floor raced up to meet me.

I yelped as I hit the ground, wheezing as I tried to catch my breath. I could hear Fenris calling for me in the distance, but I realized everything else sounded...quiet. *Is this just in my head, or is the battle slowing?* I couldn't trust anything anymore. It didn't matter to me if the battle was won or lost. I had less than a minute before the death mark burned me up from inside out. I just had to stay away for another sixty seconds, and Fenris would be safe.

“Celeste!” I realized he was now closer.

No, no, no!

Panic surged through me again as I tried to pull myself to my feet, only to stumble and fall back down. My wolf, still trapped and weakened, at last tugged on me, wanting nothing more than to answer our fated mate's call. He still hadn't claimed me and completed the bond. My desire to go to him was as strong as my need to keep him safe. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I tried to push myself up again, only for someone to grab me by the elbows and pull me upward.

I gasped, able to recognize Fenris's face even through my swimming vision and brimming tears. He was panting, pain written all over his features as he looked me up and down. “How do I fix this?” he begged, his fingertips digging into my

elbows. “Celeste, I will do anything. Just tell me how I can help you.”

Before I could answer, several trees crashed down, flames licking their trunks. Zyanya stepped over the detritus, murder written all over her face.

Fenris let go of me, assuming his wolf form as he stood between me and the Solar Sovereign, but I knew he couldn’t win. He’d been fighting the entire duration of the eclipse with no chance to recover, and I’d just hurt him myself.

I tried to catch my breath, but each time I inhaled, the burning pain inside grew worse. *I don’t have much time left, but I can’t let her have Fenris. I need to do this one more time.*

Summoning up all the strength I had left, I threw everything I had at Zyanya. I didn’t know what it was—it didn’t matter. I was so dizzy, I couldn’t even see what happened the moment I released the spell to strike at her, only aware that Fenris was about to leave my side.

“No!” I cried out. “Come back to me!”

He had to bite me. He *had* to, or he’d never be free of his curse.

With one leap, he was back by my side, towering over me as I sank back to the earth. I barely felt the sting of his teeth on my neck as he leaned down to bite me. All I could feel was the awful, horrible burning as someone screamed. My throat was hoarse, and I realized it was *me*. All I could hear was the sound of my own voice as the fire crackled upward, and everything went black.

I woke up with a gasp, shaking as I realized how cold I was. Smoke filled the air, and I coughed as I sat up, regretting what a deep breath I’d taken. As I shivered and looked around, I realized I was sitting in the moon temple, or what was left of it. Sun shone down through the hole—or holes, I realized grimly—in the roof.

The eclipse is over.

I blinked and looked around.

The eclipse is over.

Reality dawned slowly as I realized I was still whole, and as I glanced down at my chest, I realized my skin was clear. The death mark was gone.

My gambit paid off.

I took another breath, more conscious of the smoke this time. I had no idea how much time had passed, but as I stood, I realized there was someone howling outside. I closed my eyes and reached for my wolf. Zyanya's command had been so crushing for her...

Her presence surged forward, and when I opened my eyes, I was standing on four paws again. She practically vibrated with energy, bolting out of the door and down the hill. I realized I could still feel Fenris—his pain. His *agony*. I howled back to him, and I realized he must have really believed I'd died. *I'm here!* I thought frantically to him, willing my paws to carry me faster back to the jungle.

Celeste?!

The shock of hearing Fenris's voice in my head made me trip. My jaw smarted when I hit the ground, but I scrambled back to my feet within seconds, galloping onward.

Moments later, his dark form burst out of the jungle foliage, and he nearly slammed into me as his tail wagged furiously. He nuzzled into me, and I licked at his muzzle, elated to see him in one piece. I shifted back to my human form without thinking about it, forgetting I was naked as Fenris shifted as well, wrapping his strong arms against me to pull me against his chest.

"Celeste," he whispered, as if he couldn't believe I was here. "Celeste. My Celeste."

My hands were shaking when I reached up and cupped his jaw, pulling him close. In truth, I could scarcely believe that I was here, either. That I'd done it. "Fenris," I said, laughing at the sound of my own voice. "You're here. I'm here!"

"You are," he said, squeezing me.

The trees rustled nearby, and I jumped, suddenly remembering exactly what had led up to this. I clutched Fenris's mangled shirt. "Where's Zyanya?" I whispered. It was only then that I realized I couldn't hear her voice in my mind.

"I killed her," he growled. "I thought...you burst into flames, Celeste," he murmured, clutching me so close it was hard to breathe. "I thought I'd lost you. I thought..." He shook his head, seeming to realize just how tightly he was holding me, and relaxed his grip. "She's gone."

I shuddered, clinging to him, anyway. "I can barely believe it," I said, pressing my lips together. "She's really gone."

"She's really gone," Fenris repeated. After a moment, he stood, scooping me into his arms and cradling me against his chest. Around us, the entire forest seemed to echo in cheers and hollering, a sense of freedom surging through me as I realized those sounds were from our allies. I was so euphoric that I could have floated away, and I was glad for Fenris's strength as he carried me back toward the camp, the racket only growing louder.

Zyanya's remaining forces had surrendered and were at the farthest edge of the encampment. My heart leapt as I saw Lyka there, directing Fenris's forces. Abi, Gilbert, and Piers were nearby organizing. Cody and Keziah, as well as several other shifters, were back in their human forms. Morgan and Val were with several other witches, already helping the injured.

Someone seemed to notice we'd arrived, and they cheered and clapped. Suddenly, the entire camp followed suit. All eyes were on us as we walked toward our friends, people I didn't know calling out to us and applauding. For once, I didn't feel the need to disappear—though I was glad I'd magically summoned the last thing I'd been wearing before I'd burst into flames.

The applause abruptly halted as Lyka stalked over to us, his expression dour while he looked us up and down. I tensed, briefly fearing the fighting had been too much for him to handle. Even Fenris paused, his expression unreadable as he eyed his brother. When he was only a few feet away, Lyka

stopped and got down on one knee, baring his neck to his brother in the ultimate sign of submission.

“I pledge my loyalty to you, the Lunar Lord,” he rumbled. When he looked back up at us, his eyes shone proudly.

Fenris beamed. “I accept your loyalty, Lyka, my brother,” he said, motioning for his brother to stand.

Lyka got back to his feet and turned to the rest of the gathering crowd. “The Solar Sovereign is dead!” he announced. Cheers burst forth again. “The Lunar Lord has his Lunar Bride! We are entering an age of peace and prosperity, and we should rejoice!”

Everyone whooped and laughed, hugging one another as they celebrated. I beamed as I watched them, elated by the joy surrounding us. Then I shivered, my wolf suddenly pressing on me. For a moment, I thought she was simply glad to be free of Zyanya’s command, but as I gazed at Fenris’s profile, I realized I hadn’t claimed him back; I hadn’t had the time earlier.

In a fit of impulsivity, I shifted in his grip, leaning over to place a firm bite to the side of his neck. Fenris stiffened, but then made a relieved, happy noise.

A righteous energy settled over me as my wolf seemed to thrum, a warmth rushing through me as I realized it wasn’t just a wholeness, but *Fenris* I felt.

It was Fenris’s *love* I was feeling.

I let out a girlish giggle, overwhelmed with how *happy* he made me. Our bond was complete, and I would never be without him. Not even time could tear us apart.

Chapter 28

Celeste

La Palais de la Découverte

Paris, France

Three Months Later

I smiled up at the shifting skies as the guide explained the constellations we saw in French. I knew she'd switch back to English soon, but I already knew those constellations.

Going to France had always been on my bucket list, specifically *for* La Palais de la Découverte. But of course, I'd devoured any material about the skies over western Europe when Abi and I had planned our ultimate vacations back in college. I just hadn't expected to fulfill my dreams when I'd sketched it out. Not like this.

And here I am.

I glanced at Fenris out of the corner of my eye, unable to keep myself from smiling as I moved my hand to join his on the armrest between us. I saw him tip his head, though he kept his eyes on the show while I studied him. I knew planetariums weren't his thing, but he found such an interest in them, anyway.

It warmed my heart, knowing he did that for *me*. Once upon a time, I'd dated the type of man who'd feign an interest just to get me to stop talking. But Fenris? Even without our shared bond, I knew he was enjoying the show, that he took pleasure in learning something new.

My heart soared as I pored over this revelation for at least the sixteenth time since Fenris and I had embarked on our world tour. Then I blinked before tearing up from the pure joy he filled me with. *Never did I believe I'd ever feel like this.* We could've been anywhere at that moment, even on the couch in my old apartment back in Tallahassee, and it wouldn't have mattered. Fenris cared about *me*, and he made a point to show it. Sometimes, it was hard to believe he was real.

Trying to keep myself from getting too carried away, I gave his fingers a gentle squeeze before I looked back up at the night sky. Despite my interest in the show, my mind kept wandering to the wolf shifter sitting beside me. I only lasted a few minutes before I squeezed his hand again, moving just enough so I could lace our fingers together. I could sense his amusement through our bond without even looking at him.

A few minutes later, I closed my eyes and bit my lower lip as I reached my mind out to his through our shared bond, imagining a specific scenario from our first meeting. This was nothing and everything like that time back in Florida, but if you'd told me then I'd fall in love with the handsome man who'd just happened to be on my last tour, I'd never have believed you. And yet...

The Challenger Learning Center didn't have the brightest lighting right now—the perfect setting, then, for a private tour. Private tours weren't something I did often, but how could I say no when a man as handsome as Fenris was standing in front of me?

The Lunar Lord looked stunning in well-fitting black pants and a light blue button-down with the sleeves rolled up. His amber eyes met mine, and I smiled, waving my hand for him to join me as I led him farther down the dark hall.

“And if you look here...” I said as I cleared my throat, trying not to get caught up in Fenris's charm. He was watching me, aware this was a shared vision, but I was still going to have my fun. I wasn't about to let him distract me from this. Not just yet. “This is Gemini. Did you know the ancient Romans saw these twins as Romulus and Re—”

I grinned when he appeared next to me, soundless despite his great speed. My eyes met his again, and my pulse quickened. I knew he'd never hurt me, but the displays of Fenris's power always lit a fire inside me. That burning used to frighten me, but not anymore.

I leaned closer to him and inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent of my mate, the comforting smell of woodsmoke and cinnamon. My whole body relaxed as if trained to that scent alone. If I could wrap myself up like a blanket in that smell, I would. I always knew I was safe when I was with him.

"I did know that," Fenris all but growled, interrupting my train of thought as he closed in on me with a wicked smirk.

Part of me knew I shouldn't be doing this here, but I didn't want to stop. The rest of me delighted in the way he stared at me like I was the only thing on this planet that could bring him any respite. Like I was an oasis for a dying man in the desert. Like I was an island to a drowning man.

"I'm going to kiss you now, Fenris," I whispered, leaning in to close the space between us. I pressed my lips against his, smiling at the way he met me eagerly...

Fenris squeezed my fingers, and I opened my eyes again. He didn't make a sound, but I could feel the warning through our bond, and as much as I enjoyed teasing him, I didn't want to make a scene at the show. We could finish playing out that little scene later in the privacy of our hotel room.

Even so, I found myself squirming, all too aware of how close my mate was. Fortunately, there were only a few minutes left, and as soon as the lights turned back on, Fenris had me by the hand again, practically dragging me up the stairs and out of the theater.

"I'm sure this planetarium has an empty room somewhere," he muttered, shooting me a heated look over his shoulder.

I chuckled. "We're supposed to be meeting our friends, Fenris." I shouldn't have teased him like that, but...how could I resist in a place like this? With him next to me?

“They won’t care if we’re late,” he said, downright smoldering.

I rolled my eyes. “Piers would never let us hear the end of it.”

That made Fenris chuckle, but he slowed down, no longer looking at each door we passed by. “I’ll pay you back later, then,” he said after a moment, allowing me to take the lead.

I smiled, slowing our pace even further as I guided us back toward the planetarium’s grand entrance. It was still warm outside, even though the sun had started its descent, casting long shadows over the city streets.

We’d been traveling all summer, visiting the planetariums of Europe as Fenris’s—or, rather, *our*—new home came together on the private island he’d bought to replace Isla Caida. The place was being designed with both of us in mind. I didn’t know a thing about home design or interior decorating, but Fenris insisted I have as much say in its development as he did. That meant, of course, with all the details we added, construction would take some time.

So, we traveled. And I did love the fact that we had the ability to go wherever we wanted, to see whatever sights struck our fancy, but...with all this traveling, we really hadn’t seen much of our friends. I was looking forward to seeing everyone, and more importantly, I was happy that Fenris seemed to be looking forward to it, too.

I’d barely rounded the corner when I heard Abi squeal, hurtling toward me to scoop me up in a hug. I laughed, hardly having time to let go of Fenris’s hand before she squeezed me, spinning me around in a circle before setting me back down on the sidewalk.

“There you are!” she gushed, her eyes bright. “Looking fabulous, I see.”

I beamed, allowing her to drag me to the restaurant patio, where the others were already sitting. Piers and Gilbert lounged in the shade of an umbrella, locked in a deep discussion about the virtues of French wine with Walter while

Val looked on fondly. They all paused to greet us as we sat down, and Abi gave me a bright look, practically bouncing in her seat. “I have a surprise for you,” she said as soon as my butt hit the chair.

“This isn’t a pregnancy announcement, is it?” I asked warily as I looked briefly at Gilbert.

Abi laughed. “You and I both know that isn’t how vampires work.” She rolled her eyes. “I got in touch with Liana. Her and Lyka will be joining us any minute. Surprise!”

As if on cue, a black car rolled up and stopped on the other side of the street. The door opened, and Liana stepped out, followed by Lyka moments later. They crossed behind the car, and I watched them in minor amazement, though Lyka looked unsure. If I hadn’t known him, I’d simply think he was someone who didn’t go to cities often. I certainly wouldn’t have imagined him as someone who’d spent centuries enduring psychological torture.

Fenris, who hadn’t yet taken his seat, turned to greet his brother, beaming as they embraced. My chest nearly burst as I watched them, unable to take my eyes off the way Fenris smiled so warmly as he and his brother caught up.

After a moment, I waved Liana over, and Abi moved one chair down, making room for our friend to sit between us. “I’m so happy to see you!” I told her, wondering if I could smile any bigger. Surrounded by our friends and family, I couldn’t imagine a much better place to be in that moment.

Liana giggled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s not often I get an invitation to visit Paris,” she responded, flashing Abi a grin. “How could I say no?”

I laughed and shook my head, looking back at Abi. “Are Cody and Morgan about to appear on a scooter?”

“I did ask,” Abi said, “but they’re back with Cody’s pack in California. Morgan went to visit his family, and I thought that was a good sign. We’ll just have to catch up with them somewhere else fancy. If you go to Greece on this world tour...”

“Hmm, I think we can manage that,” I said, nearly giggling at Abi’s not-so-subtle hints.

As I looked around the table, I felt overwhelming warmth as couples and friends exchanged stories, catching up after a few months apart. I felt like I truly belonged somewhere, and it wasn’t because of the place; it was because of the people I was with. I had found where I belonged. Who I belonged to.

Fenris took his seat, then settled his hand over mine and squeezed it. As I glanced over to meet his eyes, I felt a blossoming sense of affection spreading through our bond in both directions. For a moment, I wondered who’d started it, but quickly realized it didn’t matter—I didn’t care. I moved my hand so I could squeeze his in return, hoping he could sense the overwhelming sense of belonging and peace he’d brought to me.

“I love you,” he murmured, his smile growing. He didn’t have to say anything else. I knew the rest.

My heart felt full to bursting. I loved this life. I loved who I’d become—and I had a whole eternity in front of me to love him.

I took an unsteady breath, aware of the emotion in my voice. “I love you, too,” I murmured, leaning in to kiss his lips.

As I did, the rest of the world seemed to fade for a moment. I’d finally found my home.

[Have you checked out Royally Cursed yet?](#)

* * *

I curse the day I ever met Kai DeLune. Literally.

In my defense, I put a curse on the gorgeous, domineering alpha for his own protection. Because if he somehow figures out we’re fated, neither of us will live to see the end of this shifter war.

It’s just my luck I’ve been assigned as his troop’s healer. Watching him from a distance is torture for me, and if he finds

out the truth, he's headstrong enough to think he can save the world, including me.

Except I'm past saving. I was already cursed long before I met Kai, and no one can ever find out.

But I can still save Kai. Or at least I thought I could until our military base was attacked and Kai was seriously injured. His only hope of survival is for me to lift his curse so I can get close enough to heal him.

Either way, the consequences could be deadly...

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Claimed By The Wolf Lord

Lunar Bride: Book 3

Skye Wilson

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