

KELLY ST. CLARE



LAST  
GIFT

SUPERNATURAL BATTLE: COVEN CAVES

# LAST GIFT

---

SUPERNATURAL BATTLE: COVEN CAVES

KELLY ST. CLARE



# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Crave Arena](#)

[While You Wait](#)

[Books By Kelly St. Clare](#)

[Join the Book Barracks!](#)

Last Gift

by Kelly St. Clare

Copyright © January, 2024

All rights reserved

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, media, and incidents are either products of the authors' imagination, or are used fictitiously.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the author.

Edited by Hot Tree Editing

Cover design by Covers by Christian

*The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of a copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by fines and federal imprisonment*



I rolled off the panting male, breathing just as heavily.

Inhaling through my nose, I smirked at the ceiling of my esteemed rooms. “Now *that* was a *Wild* time.”

Wild snorted. “I had ground to recover after you called me Tame in front of the entire coven.”

He’d recovered that ground too many times to count this week. Since the last step in the ritual, we’d... Well, rabbits would be scared of the frequency of our bedroom activities. I was filing it under *Stress Relief*, because to say that life had imploded was an understatement.

I stretched on the bed, dreading pulling on my clothes. My attire felt like more of a uniform these days. “Please tell me we have a few more hours.”

Wild kissed my temple. “We have a few more hours.”

The green strand in our four-part tether panged. I could only describe the sensation as a slight ugliness or murkiness reaching to me from his direction. He’d lied. “No, we don’t.”

“No, we don’t,” he agreed.

I groaned. “Remind me why I’m doing this again.”

A portal opened midway through my question. Huxley stepped out, followed by Corentin and Sven.

Wild’s snarl sounded in my left ear. A blanket was thrown over me, concealing my nudity from Wild’s three best friends.

Huxley answered, “Because we don’t want the demons to eat us.”

I pursed my lips. “Demons don’t eat people.” Though, according to Endex’s journals, their diet was protein-heavy—and the creatures they ate weren’t found on Earth.

“Metaphorically eat us,” he snapped.

Corentin patted Huxley’s back, while Sven rolled his eyes and strode to the only seat in the room, a hard, wooden chair in the corner.

Wild murmured in my ear, “He’s had another fight with Spyne.”

“Yes, I have,” Huxley spat. “He’s being totally unreasonable.”

The rest of us stood or sat in quiet disbelief after that ballsy statement.

“He *is*,” Huxley said louder.

I chose my words with care. “He *might* be. But Spyne is who I want to be when I’m older, so if you fuck this up, and he doesn’t want to be my friend anymore, I’ll be pissed.”

Huxley glared. “Thanks. That helps.”

“Did you do something along the lines of keeping him at an emotional distance or rejecting his importance to you around other coven members?” I asked.

Huxley’s defiant demeanor cracked.

Corentin patted his back again. “You’ll find your way, friend.”

Sven choked back laughter, and I could feel Wild shaking beside me. Since I’d sorted out the mess of Corey’s magic, he’d been... different.

We called him Positive Patrick behind his back.

Huxley wrinkled his nose. “Leave me with my negativity. Enough fucking patting.”

Corentin pulled back his hand, humming in sympathy.



I needed that sympathy. The coronation was soon. *My* coronation. Though the coven called the process an *accession*, the result was the same. My ass would end up on the magus equivalent of a throne.

I scowled at the floor at the four relics I'd discarded there. They'd chosen me during the battle against the demons. Turned out that Varden, my old friend, was right. The mating ritual between me and Wild had been integral to saving the coven. When we gained the fourth strand to our tether, and I was gifted with a grimoire affinity, Ryzika's relics decided I was leadership material. One pendant, gemstone, robe, and dagger later, and a centuries-old game was suddenly over, and everyone was gaping at me like a beam of sunshine out of a unicorn's butt.

I swallowed, closing my eyes. "I don't want this."

Wild could feel what I felt. Our power was like a dam we could open at any time, and our bodies were so in tune. The last step in the ritual had fused us tightly, and hiding anything from him was pointless—and not at all a desire of mine any longer.

He rolled to face me on the bed. "I wish you didn't need to."

*Need.*

That was the issue. Without a leader, the coven would resume Caves. If they resumed Caves, they wouldn't give the demon army on their doorstep the total attention it required. Which may sound so bizarre because they'd seen the threat with their own eyes, but this game—man, was it under people's skins. You'd think a hundred demons on their doorstep would band magus together and make them rethink their priorities, but a three-hundred-year-old tradition and routine was hard to erase overnight, and the demons' magic was designed to keep the divide between Vero and Fertim wide and deep.

With a leader, the game was done. With a leader, this coven may survive.

*I wanted a leader.*

I just didn't want that to be *me*. How about Varden or Winona or Delta? I'd take Barrow or maybe Opal. Wild would be the perfect candidate.

"Stop being selfish," Huxley told me.

*Ass.*

"Even though we see her potential clearly, Tempest may feel backed into a corner," Corentin gently rebuked him.

I'd known from the start that the quad would kill me one day, and Positive Patrick may be the guy to finally do it. "I'll do what's needed. Don't worry."

*Until the war is won.*

I felt Wild's gaze on me, then received his understanding through our green strand a second later. This queen of the coven shit wasn't me. I'd stand in during the danger, but this gal?

She had secrets. And I didn't mind having secrets, as such. Wasn't like I'd asked to be half demon and never have knowledge of it. What I didn't like were hypocrites. Standing before the coven, wearing precious relics, and telling them what to do to kill demons when they had no idea I *was* one just didn't sit right.

"What's the plan?" I asked Sven.

Kind of surprising to see him away from my cousin's side. Maybe that was why he was so quiet, though he otherwise appeared normal. Still hulking and tall. Still dressed in his token button-up shirt. Perhaps with less of a playful glint in his eyes than when we'd first met, but that was true of us all. "My whispers are working around the clock on damage control."

During the fight with the demons, our group and Varden had revealed a curious lack of surprise and more than was usual knowledge on how to protect the coven against the demons. That didn't go unnoticed. "Are they managing things?"

“My parents are using their power against me.” He sighed and ran his hands through his short hair. “I don’t believe they’re trying to prevent your accession. More like they want to know what’s happened. They’re digging when I want to smooth the soil over.”

“It’s taking a lot from you?” Wild asked his friend.

Sven lifted a shoulder. “Nothing I can’t handle. It’s important to play the accession right, though. That will help my magic. Tempest, I considered going with the open and smiling route. The welcoming, nurturing path. But that’s just not you.”

Huxley laughed, and I pondered whether to be insulted.

Was Sven right?

*Yes.*

Not that I had a resting bitch face as such. I gave off a slight maiming vibe. People didn’t always like that.

“So we’re going with the untouchable route,” Sven continued. “You’re a mystery. You’re someone people want to emulate—like copying you with dawn walks. You *know stuff* because you’re from the outside. Your connection to the Mother is something the rest of us can only dream of. She struck you with lightning and *gave* you grimoire to defeat the demons. Un-touch-able.”

Pretty sure Wild sexed grimoire into me—though he’d conversed with the Mother while she held him in a deep sleep. She’d told him that his waking needed to occur at the right time. What else she may have said, Wild hadn’t yet shared.

“The lightning holder,” Sven boomed, then nodded. “The Mother’s Chosen. Magus Elite. Possessor of All Affinities.”

My nausea mounted with every title. Talk about blowing smoke up my ass.

“That’s a better fit,” Wild said, finding my hand under the blanket.

We were still naked, and it struck me that I’d been naked so many times around the quad, that conversations undertaken

in this manner weren't unusual. If a woman couldn't go through the storm, she went around it, and that was how I viewed this band of males. Best to get the conversation done and over while naked, and then I'd be dressed sooner. Every friendship had a compromise.

"Do I call myself those things?" I wrinkled my nose. "I don't know if I can pull off calling myself Possessor of All Affinities." What kind of jackass announced themselves as the Mother's Chosen or Magus Elite?

Probably Frond. Maybe Bedwyr.

Sven shook his head. "No, not you. None of it can come from you. I'll set more whispers, and I'll loop Varden in before the accession. All you need to do is play the part. Be yourself."

I fixed him with a dry look. "None of those things are me."

"Every damn one of those things is you," he said in such a serious manner that I didn't scoff. "Just be you."

"A half demon."

He grimaced. "As much as you shouldn't feel ashamed of that, we need to keep your heritage under wraps at all costs."

Nothing I didn't know. "I hate double standards."

Huxley pushed up his thick-rimmed glasses. "You saved the coven a week ago. And me. You took on the leader of the demon army in one-on-one battle and figured out how to kill her. Then you were struck with lightning, gained an affinity through Wild's penis, *and* forced an entire army back to their realm. Pretty sure you don't owe this coven an explanation. They can take you as you are or fuck off."

I appreciated that coming from Huxley. He and Corentin were two coven members who'd contended with being different in the Buried Knolls. Not something easily done in an isolated and tight-knit community. They'd developed thick skins in the process.

I didn't often let people's comments bother me, but I hadn't processed my demon heritage yet, so the uncertainty

and insecurity tied to what I was remained an opening in my armor. One that I had to eventually close. If that was possible.

“I’ll just be myself,” I said, trying the comment out for size.

Sven grimaced. “Try saying that again *without* looking constipated.”

I smiled brightly. “I’ll just be myself!”

The three quad members stared at me, and I felt Wild’s internal grimace.

I dropped my smile faster than a burning bag of shit. “We’re fucked.”



Ever walk into a room and the conversation cuts off like the two people were just talking about you? Multiply that by three hundred and twenty coven members and you'd get the current vibe. A sweeping hush fell as I entered the chamber where magus gathered for meals and coven meetings.

My mother and grandmother had raised me in their ilk, but damn if the abrupt change in volume didn't get to me.

At my side, Wild uttered, "Chin up."

I listened. Sven said I needed to be one badass bitch. That was how I'd chosen to interpret his words anyway. I steeled myself and clung to Huxley's words. I didn't owe anyone an explanation for what I was. They could take me as I was—and what I had to offer—or fuck off.

To my right, a stage remained from the three-hundred-year anniversary. The council stood on it in a line. Frond at one end, and Varden at the other. Sage, Delta, and Winona were in the middle of the twelve members. The thirteenth member walked beside me.

One week ago, they were a council of seven Fertim members and six Vero members. Yet, now *I* was here. The council was no longer necessary with a leader, and they had to feel the curiousness of that. To be held in the highest status as the governing body in the coven, to then wake up a normal coven member. Would that rankle?

I cast my gaze over their row. In some, I saw relief. In some, I saw uncertainty. In some, a stiffness implied they

didn't like what was happening. Frond was downright hostile. Then again, he'd been that way since I refused to acknowledge his status at the anniversary celebration. I had no time for the lapdog of Wild's parents.

I stopped before the stage. "Greetings to the council."

Winona's focus tore from my long-sleeved white gown to settle on my face. She stepped forward. "Tempest Bronte Corentine, you have been chosen by the relics of our beloved Ryzika, this coven's last leader."

Varden stepped forward next. "The Mother's lightning chose you. Your possession of grimoire and divination, of battle and apothecary, denotes you as the most elite of maguskind."

Sven had clearly spoken with him as I'd prepared. I tried not to show any discomfort at his words.

Barrow was next to speak. "This coven must now pave the way for your accession to leadership. Are you prepared?"

No amount of purification and centering could counter the tension of this situation, but I'd done my best in the hour left to me after the quad's surprise visit. "Yes, sir."

His face softened. I no longer had to call him sir, but I did respect Barrow after spending more time in his company. He'd witnessed my deal with the Astars over Wild's near-lifeless body a week ago when he could've done nothing. That move would have secured the Astars' disapproval, pretty much ensuring he'd never get an invite to join their midst—something he'd wanted for a long time. That took guts. Life had taught me not everyone had guts. In fact, precious few possessed that quality.

Delta enhanced her voice with battle magic to push her words to the far corners of the chamber. "Stand, coven of the Buried Knolls. Join hands. We welcome our long-awaited leader. Though uncertainty resides on our doorstep, this moment is ours. We rejoice together. Stand."

The coven did as requested. Too quietly in my opinion. Shouldn't there be more noise?

“Calm,” Wild murmured.

I focused on my breathing as he left my side to join the council.

From the corner of my eye, I watched as the coven joined hands. Ruby with Berry. Bedwyr with Josie—guess they were back on again. Rooke with Sven. Huxley with Spyne. Did they make up already?

Wild’s voice filled the chamber. “Open your magic.”

I felt the *whoosh* as the coven obeyed him. When was the last time they’d done this together? Certainly not at esbat or at other celebrations for the Mother. Perhaps the last time was during my initiation months ago. The power level in the chamber was incredible. Warmth and hope filled the space, and I took my first full breath in a week. Though the children in the chamber may not know how to release their magic yet, even they could feel the effect of it judging by their wide-eyed expressions.

I was meant to be here. Maybe not in this spot, but I belonged in this coven. I’d protect this place and the people here with my life. They knew that I would.

That meant something.

“Center,” Wild said in a softer tone.

His calm floated to me through our green strand. He accompanied this with a soothing push through our purple strand—what I’d dubbed the *body* strand. My shoulders relaxed at his magical touch. I stood taller and felt my heartbeat slow. My eyes were closed, but I sent him thanks through our connection.

I opened my four affinities and heard the gasps as a robe blurred out of nowhere to cling to my back. The pendant weighed around my neck, and a gemstone weighed in my hand. The hilt of a dagger thumped into my right hand. I’d purposefully left the relics off at Sven’s suggestion. *More dramatic*, he’d said. He should’ve been a ringmaster. Having been an intuit in the circus, I could appreciate such antics.



I started the process of drawing my magic to the space under my ribs. Centering was easy today—easier than ever if truth were told. I hadn't noticed, but I felt so together. I *never* felt together. I'd struggled with chaos since my family's murder. Then I'd discovered my demon, and I'd assumed that struggling with chaos was the price of holding her in my divination affinity. I had to wonder if gaining the fourth affinity had helped to align the rest of my magic.

Corentin had once remarked that his affinities behaved like they couldn't find north. With me, it was as though north wasn't where it should be—like I always set a little east or west of the real center.

This was what it felt like to be *truly* centered.

I inhaled and exhaled long and slow. A smile touched my lips, and joy spread fast through the room as others found their connection with the origin of their gifts. The cave was abuzz with it. We reveled together in shared energy.

This had to become a more regular occurrence after my accession. We were missing out on so much.

“The time has come for our leader to ascend.” Opal broke the humming in the chamber.

I opened my eyes as she descended the three stairs from the stage. Her magic glowed at her fingertips, and she hovered her hand over my face and head, not quite touching me.

I accepted the heat and welcome of her power.

The rest of the Fertim members of the council followed her, and it seemed purposeful that they accepted me first and foremost. Vero—my team—had been on the path to winning Caves. Ryzika's relics choosing a new leader should have made the end of the game a simple matter, but with a lot of long-held division involved, Fertim could choose to take exception.

Wild took his time hovering his hand over my face. His question vibrated to me, and I pushed my resolve in his direction.

Fronnd descended the stage as the last council member of Fertim. His magic was at his fingers, and he hovered his hand over my head as the others had done. *Cold. Rejection.*

I smirked.

He was outvoted and furious about it. I couldn't give a shit when it came to this magus. Where Barrow had been put to the test and won, Fronnd went through the same test and failed magnificently. I'd learned that some people were redeemable—that I shouldn't always trust my first impressions while also learning that some people weren't worth my time and effort and *entirely* deserved my first impression.

The Vero council members were next. Straightaway, I could feel the difference in the openness of their magic. In comparison to those I'd received from Fertim council members, their welcome was absolute.

The council now stood at my back. I sheathed the dagger in a white-leather holster Rooke surprised me with a few days prior. One that had belonged to our grandfather.

The gemstone, I placed in an inner pocket Ryzika must've fashioned in the robes long ago.

I swept the robes back. The council had cleared the stage, and I blinked, seeing what their row of bodies had concealed.

A throne.

Though, just as this coronation was termed an accession, the throne was called an *authority* in magus culture. Not solely in this coven. Wild's father and mother occupied authorities in the original coven. High Esteemed Rguc occupied an authority in her coven across the seas.

I took a breath. All I had to do was sit my ass down on what appeared to be a very hard stone surface. This authority would get a cushion. That I could say with certainty.

I walked up the three steps in the swirling cocoon of my coven's centered magic. As I arrived before the throne, the novices started to chant, much as they'd done during my initiation into their midst.

The proven joined at a deeper pitch.

I turned to face them, and the esteemed added their voices to the chant at a higher pitch. The harmony was powerful.

It filled me.

Music swelled in my chest, and I lent my voice to the beautiful chant at a higher harmony again. I mimicked their words, feeling a lulling calm enter me as we continued through the chant, around and around.

Was I meant to be on this authority? I couldn't say. This coven needed me here right now, and my friends needed me here too. I'd sit on this seat, and I would be what they needed me to be.

I'd fight for them.

I would piece this puzzle together the best I could. All I asked was their patience as I figured it out.

There were smiles, and I frowned, realizing I'd said those words aloud. Or maybe I hadn't. Maybe my intent had been felt on a deeper level.

My knees bent.

I lowered and settled onto the authority.

Magic retreated from the chamber into its individual vessels. The lulling calm remained after, and I was loath to break it.

Fronde wasn't so loath. "The accession is complete."

Varden approached the bottom of the stage and dipped his head, a hand over his heart. "Might I have the honor of being the first to greet High Esteemed Bronte?"

I tilted my head. There were too many other lies. I could fix this one. "High Esteemed Tempest," I responded. "Thank you for your support, sir."

His blue eyes said so much that others wouldn't interpret. In his eyes, we'd won the fight—we'd finished Caves. I had to wonder if we were in another battle, but his happiness made me happy.

The council made up the first of those to greet me—I chose to think of this part as a greeting and not homage or sovereignty or something gross. Wild was last and walked up the steps to kiss the back of my hand. My cousin was next, and my closest friends. The esteemed after.

Ty, the divination mentor, stopped at the base of the stage. His rich brown eyes possessed a milky hue, and I waited for whatever his magic was pressing him to say.

“You are in the right seat,” he announced.

I stilled, having forgotten his prophecy from a couple of weeks earlier. “You did say the next seat wouldn’t be as comfortable as my purple beanbag.”

His lips curved, but then the ghost of a smile faded away. “You must accept it.”

I patted the authority. “I’m sitting here, aren’t I?”

Ty paused. “You are sitting there, yes.”

*But I haven’t accepted it?* He was bang on the money there. “I hear you.”

He bowed. “Welcome, High Esteemed Tempest.”

After the esteemed, the proven greeted me, then the novices, and the children last of all. The greetings were mixed. Some, like Josie, I’d had personal run-ins with. She’d warned me off Bedwyr, and still harbored a dislike of me though Wild and I were together. Then again, she’d told me once that if Wild was a romantic option, then Bedwyr shouldn’t be, so maybe she was jealous of my love life? Who knew.

A trend quickly became obvious.

Fertim was more closed off to me in general. Not everyone—not Huxley and Rooke, or Wild and Varden. A number of the younger Fertim players had also accepted my leadership without any resentment. A few of the older magus as well, which surprised me. Had they grown tired of Caves and been happy for its end, perhaps?

In any case, the majority of Fertim members weren’t totally happy with the turn of events.

I took in all their reactions, trying my best to catalogue the happiest and least happy of the magus here to enter into my quipu later. When I'd said this was a new battle, I'd meant it. I had work to do.

So much work that my mind boggled, and my only chance at figuring out what to do resided in my quipu. Until I entered enough information in the quipu for it to work though... I puffed out an exhale. I hardly knew a thing about being a leader. Scratch that. I knew *nothing* about what this role demanded.

Yet my grandmother's voice was in my ear, and in the vivid memory that rose up in my mind, my mother winked at me from the driver's seat.

*We were parked in front of the gates to the high school on our first day.*

*Syera had flung open the car door and sauntered in without a backward glance.*

*Grandmother watched me from the front passenger seat.*

*The high school was a new place. So many rules to figure out. Each attached to a different person. The threads were overwhelming. They demanded to be braided and knotted, and yet I had to somehow not do that and get through the day without looking like a freak. I didn't do so well with that at my last school. I'd figured everything out eventually, and the other children quickly forgot how weird I'd acted in the beginning, but we'd been young—five and six years old. Teenagers would remember.*

*The strands outside weaved around my mind, choking me. Closing in.*

*“Just fucking fake it,” Grandmother said, interrupting my mounting panic.*

*I blinked at her. “What?”*

*“Fucking fake it. People are full of shit anyway. If you should be braiding anything, it's a steaming pile of crap with flies buzzing around it.”*

*“Mother,” sighed her daughter from the driver’s seat.*

*“Just telling it how it is,” her mother said, facing forward.*

*I glanced to the gates and at the kids my age visible beyond. I just had to smile and move my legs. Flip my hair sometimes. Answer with single words. Watch the teacher and then look at my books for a while. Eat my food, drink my water. Move my legs some more. Get home.*

*Then I could figure this place out on my quipu.*

*Taking a breath, I pushed the braids and threads to the back of my mind as deeply as I could. I’ll get to you, I promised them, but I’ll collect information first.*

*Fucking fake it.*

*Grandmother was always full of great advice.*

*My mother’s soft voice reached me. “Love you, Tempy. I’ll be here to pick you up after school.”*

*And my mother never doubted that I’d rise to the occasion, no matter how long it took.*

I walked through the high school gates in my mind, and in the very real here and now, I stood from my authority to face upward of three hundred magus. I pushed battle into my voice and spread my hands wide. “I am honored to be welcomed as the leader of the Buried Knolls coven. We will work together to find our new normal. I look to our future and know that change must come before we get where we need to be.” I lowered my arms. “Those changes start today. I summon the council to the meeting chamber.”

There was no longer a need for a council.

Tempest Corentine was about to fucking fake it.



The council was seated at the large stone table in the meeting chamber when I swept into the room. There were thirteen seats for the thirteen members, and this table was designed to tally and toll their decisions. I'd seen it in operation on my first night here.

There wasn't a seat for me here.

*Yet.*

I summoned the authority from the eating chamber and set the huge throne between Winona and Delta, noting Delta's slight grin at the move. She enjoyed shows of arrogance—most battle affinities did.

Wild's intrigue floated through our tether. He wondered what the hell I was about to do.

I smiled at the council. "We're in a position none of us expected two weeks ago."

Some murmured their agreement at that.

"Caves is over," I continued. "Ryzika's relics chose me. The coven has accepted my accession, and there's no longer a need for this council."

A few shifted in their seats at that. Varden grinned. Then again, grimoires enjoyed direct conveyance of information.

"There can't be any confusion on leadership," I said. "I've only seen problems arise from that." Could I base that off my time in the circus? Why not. A circus community was probably as close to a coven as you could get.

I set my hand on the stone table and felt it warm to my touch. The magic in the caves already recognized me as leader—an unsettling thought for another time, which also made my next move easier. I pushed magic through my four affinities and pulled the thirteen channels within the table to me. I tied the thirteen channels together to form one massive channel.

The table was now coded to my decisions.

I ignored the shuffling of council members on their seats. I didn't need to explain what I'd done. They'd watched it, and the meaning was clear. "You've expected this, and I can see uncertainty. You've dedicated hours and hours of your time to nurturing this coven. You climbed into this position and, rightly so, take great pride in it. In my time in these caves, I've had the pleasure of watching how this council operates, and how each of you operate too. It would be beyond foolish to move forward without utilizing that experience and skill."

Sage and Opal exchanged a look. *Surprise?*

One of them would be surprised.

"I'm forming a team of advisors," I announced. "Most will be pulled from this group."

"What power will advisors have?" Varden asked with a glance around the table.

I nodded. "I have veto power always. However, on many issues, I'll ask for a voting show before making any decision. Open discussion will be a constant. I want all opinions and feedback and criticisms spoken in this room. There's a threat on our doorstep, and that will require many viewpoints to evaluate the best approach."

"What status will advisors have?" Barrow asked.

With Barrow, position did mean something. That mentality wasn't me, and yet I'd seen status was important to him and others. If position made him happy, then whatever. He'd shown me his ambition was in regulation. "You'll retain your black robes and council pendant. You'll retain your standing in the coven. I consider advisors as ranked above esteemed."



I scanned their midst, noting the slight uptick of Wild's lips. There was a purr down our purple and green tethers, a promise of later. He liked me in charge.

Maybe I'd play around with that.

*Now for the hard part.* "The following will move forward with me as advisors; Varden, Wild, Winona, Delta, Opal, and Barrow. Two coven members outside of the council will receive an invitation to join us. The rest of you will return to esteemed status, aside from Sage."

Her eyes widened. "You're changing my power status?"

Sage proved difficult to decide on. She was beloved by the coven, but I'd seen that she operated within policies and procedures *always*, at the cost of exploring new avenues that may work better. We were no longer playing Caves, and I perceived she was the most uncertain council member with the recent upheaval. We didn't have clear policies and procedures about battling demons, and I needed those who could look outside the norm. *But* she was beloved. That I'd selected even numbers of Vero and Fertim members to become advisors may not matter. Insulting Sage was like insulting a person's mother. She had to be repurposed and distinguished. "Your power status, no. You'll remain esteemed, of course. I would like to invite you to the position of lead strategist in addition to that. We have a lot of work to do against the demons, and I believe you have the most to offer in this area."

Sage wasn't great at *selecting* strategies. She was great at gathering them from our coven members and sparking discussion. My advisors and myself could then select the strategies from her lists.

She paused. "Similar to what I did as a team leader?"

"The exact same, with a change of direction to a real enemy."

Sage paled. Many did when remembering the army of demons. If there was any reason to feel fear, then demons were a pretty good one.

"Can I take time to consider it?" she asked.

“Yes, until the end of the day. The sooner our leadership is clear, the clearer our coven is on where they stand.”

At the accession today, I’d witnessed how discomfort trickled down the ranks. “The rest of you... as said, you’ve given so much to this coven. That your position as a council member may have ended at any moment along with the game is poor consolation. This coven needs you as much as ever, and your legacy as the last council of Caves will never be taken away. That legacy is something to be proud of, and though I realize this is a change that demands grace and humility, I believe each of you capable of that.”

*Except one.*

Sage was the first to slip her council pendant over her head and place it on the stone table. She bowed her head in my direction, then left the room. The other four council members followed her actions, leaving with a gesture of respect in my direction.

Fronde stood last, tossing his pendant on the table. He regarded me through cold, calculating eyes.

I wanted to laugh in his stupid face. But appearances and all. “I meant what I said, Frond. This coven needs what you have to offer. No matter your personal feelings toward me, we face an external threat that will require you to do the best for those in this cave.”

Without a nod, bow, or any response, he left the chamber.

The door was slammed shut. I quite liked slamming doors when angry, so I couldn’t be too mad.

“Good riddance,” Wild said.

I didn’t reply, but there was a nod from Winona.

“Welcome to my advisory team,” I said to them. “We have a lot of work to do.”

Delta raised her dagger. “Who are the remaining two members?”

“Huxley and Ruby.” *Fertim and Vero*. I looked forward to the day when I didn’t need to think of people in terms of what

team they'd been on.

She hummed. "I expected your cousin and Corentin."

My cousin had value elsewhere—though I was worried my decision may hurt her feelings. As for Corentin, he had the ingredients to hold a seat here but not the drive. Even now, as Positive Patrick, his focus was elsewhere. He should be exploring his new power, and was, which didn't leave space for what I needed from him. "Huxley will dedicate himself fully to this role, and I trust he won't hold back in regard for my feelings."

Opal laughed. "No, not Huxley."

As for Sven, he was my incognito whisper guy. Like Rooke, he'd operate behind the scenes.

I said, "Ruby is respected by old and young coven members alike. Her insight and skill set her apart. I'd like to foster her into a position she has ample potential for. I'll speak to them today, and we'll meet after breakfast tomorrow. You can expect daily meetings until a plan is in place for the defense of our coven."

Winona cleared her throat, meeting my gaze. "Something to consider..."

I arched a brow. "You were chosen for your ability not to hold back, Winona."

Her eyes twinkled, but then she grew serious. "The coven has many questions. Questions they've relayed to us in the last week. We, of course, have been unable to answer." Her gaze slid to Varden, then to me again. "They wish to know how you gained an affinity or if this was concealed from the coven. They want to know why the relics didn't immediately choose you, and—" She paused. "—how you knew so much about demons—where they would come from, and how to kill them. Why the demons seemed afraid of the dagger you carried. Not Ryzika's dagger, the one you held before that."

My stomach dropped. *Fuck*. This was the stuff Sven's magic had struggled to contain. How many coven members

had ventured to ask them? A few or a torrent? The answers to those questions either led to the mating ritual or my heritage.

Wild answered, "I agree that a response to some of these questions is warranted. As for others, High Esteemed Tempest herself may not have them either."

An out. I latched on with both hands. "I'll answer what I can, and I'm happy to profess my ignorance in the matters I am ignorant in."

Winona didn't say anything further. I couldn't tell if she'd heard the bullshit in that reply.

"Let's end things there today," I said, my heart beating hard.

My advisors filed out. Varden squeezed my shoulder and whispered, "Well done" as he did so.

Wild circled the table. "That went as well as could be expected. Power is hard to relinquish."

I tapped my bottom lip. "Is it? I'll enjoy taking it from you then."

Wild's drowning eyes darkened further. "But you so love giving yours to *me*, my queen. Can you be satisfied any other way?"

I smirked and rested a hand on his chest, trailing my finger down until encountering his pendants. I wrapped them tightly in my grip to pull his head lower. "How can I know if I don't try it out for size?"

In the next instant, I found myself wedged between the stone table and his body. He brushed his lips against my ear. "My love, you've already tried out my size. As memory serves, you fit like a glove."

"I have a five-pronged vagina?"

He shook against me, and then his lips curved against my cheek. "Mmm, maybe I should check again."

My body tightened. "Maybe you should."

Our blue strand pulsed once, and then Wild's magic slipped beneath my robes and white gown. The tendril brushed up my thigh, and I widened my stance.

His magic entered me a beat later.

He plunged his power inside, probing with every push, and I clutched at the table edge to remain upright. The thing about this connection between us? Our magics were a catalyst for each other. My body responded hard and fast. We fed off each other.

"That white gown makes me so fucking hard," Wild growled as he watched me come undone.

He parted my robes and fixed his mouth around my nipple through the thin material and slip beneath.

My hips rocked against his magic. I jerked as his thumb brushed over my other nipple. "Wild."

"I thought you were taking my power, my queen," he purred against my flesh.

I moaned. "You just wait."

He chuckled darkly, then sank to his knees, disappearing under my white gown and robe. His mouth moved against my core a second later, and there was something about him being under my dress that undid me even faster.

Wild groaned against me, clutching my ass to hold me tightly against his face. And then, between his mouth and rhythmic probes of his magic, I couldn't hold in the scream any longer.

I trembled my way through the release, and as I came to sometime later, panting hard, Wild's mouth was still softly moving between my thighs.

His magic retreated.

Wild kissed my core one more time. "I'll see you later."

I pulled up my gown and quirked a brow. "Is your conversation down there all done?"

"For now."

I took in the wet patches over my nipples. “Guess I’ll change before doing anything else.”

“What do you need me to do?” he asked, still on his knees.

For whatever reason, Wild had always been so sure that he existed to nurture my power. That I was *meant* to be queen. That drive had to be a demon thing, and one I wasn’t comfortable with. Sure, I sat on the authority this morning. But in my mind, Wild was on a seat beside me.

I exhaled. “I don’t want to tell you what to do.”

“I’m your advisor and companion. You have the only right to tell me what to do.”

“We can decide what to do together—”

Wild rose and stood close, gripping my elbows. “Tempest, I’m clear on my path. I’m free of my parents’ control, and there’s no doubt in my mind on my purpose. *You* are my purpose. To protect you at every step. To be worthy of that task, and for you to let me do it, is all I want and need.”

I swallowed at the devotion in his dark eyes.

He smiled. “That doesn’t sit right with you. You don’t want me to feel inferior.”

I rested a hand on his cheek. “I want you alongside me. I don’t need a security guard.”

“Can you sense any resentment in me?”

I already knew the answer. *No*.

“I can think of no greater purpose,” he whispered, kissing my forehead.

I couldn’t fathom it. Maybe because I couldn’t believe Wild was mine. That we may exist together for our lifetimes made sense of so many of the hardships I’d been through, and I felt the crushing need to prove my worthiness to him too. I harbored no doubt this gift between us had to be earned daily. If I chose not to do that, we could take a dangerous turn into the chaos territory we’d already been to once.

Degrading him to the role of bodyguard didn't seem respectful of our bond. Yet disregarding his belief in his purpose was also disrespectful.

All I could do was trust he knew what he felt. "If you ever change your mind, please let me know. I don't want a wedge between us."

"I won't change my mind" was the answer. "But if I did, you'd be the first to know."

I blew out a breath. "Fine then."

He waited.

I said, "You're in charge of forming a sentry duty to watch the demon gates. What's in place isn't structured enough. You and Delta can train the sentries in demon-specific combat a few times a week. Only sentries will receive training for the moment, then we'll open it to the wider coven. Collaborate with Sage if she decides to take the position of lead strategist, and help her form a strategy team of the best minds we have."

"I'm on the job, my queen."

I lifted the back of his hand to my lips and pressed a kiss to his skin. "There's no one else I'd trust with it."

That satisfied something in him. Wild flipped his hand to cup my cheek. "You know this will work out, don't you?"

I met his dark, drowning gaze and didn't reply. Uttering my honest opinion aloud seemed like bad luck.

The reality was I had no fucking idea if we'd be alive tomorrow, let alone in a week's time.



Her feelings were hurt.

Rooke forced a smile. “I didn’t expect to be one of your advisors.”

Our tether told me otherwise. I watched as she crossed my quarters to study the quipu hanging on the far wall. “The coven sees you as one of them. They speak freely around you, and they won’t around the guys, or me, or anyone of advisor status. I need your ears.”

“I’m normal in other words?” She touched her braid on the quipu. Funny how people instinctively did that.

I winced, and she felt it through our bond.

Rooke turned. “I’m joking. I get what you mean.”

“Good,” I said. “Because you’re anything but normal.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean—”

My cousin laughed, and I glared.

“You’re messing with me,” I stated.

“Keeping you humble.”

“Whatever. I had a surprise ready, but maybe I won’t give it to you. Wouldn’t want you to become conceited about life.”

She slid me a glance. “What surprise?”

“It involves a Greenhouse of Fun, but don’t worry.”



Rooke's eyes widened as she fully faced me. "No way."

I waved a hand. "Not important."

She crossed the space to whack me. "No more jokes."

*Ouch.* I rubbed the spot. Being a Corentine—though she went by her mother's last name in the coven—Rooke would secretly enjoy inflicting pain now and again. And she was the nicest Corentine I'd met. Her usual medium was poisons and illicit substances and setting ghosts on people, though, not physical violence.

"No more jokes," I promised. "Your talents in apothecary are wasted learning the properties of calendula. You should be in the Greenhouse of Fun, and now that I'm Queen Tempest, I can put you there."

Her eyes gleamed in a concerning type of way. "What will people say?"

"Do you care?"

Rooke's gaze flickered. "Yes."

I didn't downplay the insecurity. She really did struggle with what people said about her. "You're developing weapons against the demons. Poisons. And also studying my blood."

"That's dark magic," she hushed.

"My blood was able to permeate the scales of the powerful demons to kill them—and that will hold true with the weaker ones, I'm assuming. I want you working with Huxley to figure that out."

"I won't be doing any blood magic," she clarified.

"I'd never ask that. I want to understand what properties within my blood could be replicated for use against the demons. Or combined with other weapons to make them more potent. Obviously I don't trust anyone else with my blood except a person *of* my blood."

Rooke's eyes gleamed again. "I don't know what's possible, but I'm excited to try."

“People may say that you’re only in there because you’re my cousin,” I warned her.

“I’m sure they will,” she said, blowing out a breath. “I’ll prove that I’m worthy.”

*There she is.* “Yes, you will. Wild’s in charge of demogate sentry measures. We’ll also have a lead strategist appointed soon. You’ll work with both of them directly on anything you and Huxley develop. I’ll need you to keep the blood aspect of what you’re doing under wraps. If you need another space to test that out, then you’re welcome to use the second floor of my quarters here.”

“Got it.” She glanced at the door.

I followed her focus. “You want to go to the Greenhouse of Fun now, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

I snorted and passed her a sealed letter. “To hand to Selene when she tries to bar your access.”

Rooke snatched the letter from my hand and boosted out the door. I should have been scared of what I’d unleashed. But I was a Corentine, too, so I laughed in a sinister kind of way instead.

*What next?*

I’d already spoken with Ruby, who’d been totally shocked by my request and stammered through her thanks and acceptance of the position of advisor. I’d passed her Sage’s old pendant and summoned black robes for her. I had a good feeling about her.

Huxley was next.

I opted to walk to his proven rooms, making sure to acknowledge any coven members I passed. I wasn’t meant to smile, according to Sven. And to be fair, smiling for the sake of it wasn’t really me. I settled for a slight dip of my head.

All I got in return were a few half bows and wide-eyed expressions.

*Yikes.*

I raised a hand to knock at Huxley's door. Unlike him, I still had manners. The door was cracked open, and Spyne's voice floated out, halting my movement.

"There's something more going on," Spyne was saying. "Why won't you tell me?"

"There isn't. How many times do I need to say it?" Huxley answered.

"Always one more," Spyne said in his cool voice. "I can feel you're struggling with something."

Mother be, he was so fucking cool.

Huxley didn't answer.

Maybe I wasn't as polite as I liked to think because I didn't let them know I'd arrived.

Spyne sighed. "When I saw you in that demon's arms... I didn't lose you that night, miraculously, and I refuse to lose you another way. I won't allow you to push me away either. Not when I can see you want to do the opposite. I see you, Hux, and I want to help you. Please talk to me."

Huxley replied after a beat, "I'm sorry for being such an asshole. I don't want to be an asshole, and then I go and act like one anyway."

"I'm not disputing that. I'm more interested in the reason behind that behavior."

I was learning to appreciate the grimoire tendency to go to the heart of the matter more and more.

"I nearly lost the coven for all of us," Huxley blurted. "I was arrogant. I shouldn't have gone to the other gate. Then I wouldn't have been used against you all. We would have been in a more powerful position."

"A one-on-one battle was the best position we could have been in," Spyne said quietly. "You could look at what happened from many different perspectives."

Huxley was silent.

Okay, at this arbitrary point, I felt bad about listening in.

I knocked.

There was a hushed silence, and then Spyne swung the door wide.

His smile disappeared at the sight of me. “High Esteemed Tempest.”

“Spyne, how are you?”

He tilted his head, and his ink-black curtain of hair swayed with the action. “Curious.”

*Curious about you*, he seemed to be saying.

Couldn't blame the guy. He'd been privy to some interesting conversations between our group, and so far Huxley had opted to keep him on the outs. In short, Spyne was aware there was more going on. I could feel he was as suspicious as he was grateful about what had happened with me saving Huxley. I appreciated him settling for curiosity in the meantime instead of distrust.

“Naturally,” I answered. “I hope to assuage that curiosity one day.”

He crossed his arms. “I look forward to it.”

I peered past him to the person sitting with a slumped posture on the bed. “Hux, stop feeling sorry for yourself. It wasn't your fault you got jumped.”

Huxley scowled. “Eavesdropping is rude.”

“Not if I tell you I was eavesdropping.”

Spyne shot me a glance. “That doesn't make sense.”

*Maybe not.* “Your decision to go to the other gate could have worked. It's only because it failed that you feel this way. This is about failure, isn't it. Why?”

“Because I failed, obviously,” he snapped. “The rest of the coven is standing there, ready to wage war. You're probably looking like a warrior queen from the pits of hell, and then there's helpless Huxley on the ground, out for the count.”

Spyne's mouth formed an *O*. "You didn't like appearing powerless."

"That's not what I'm saying" came the withering reply.

It was. Spyne could work on that. I wasn't paid enough to deal with Huxley's issues.

I said, "Can I ask what spurred your decision to go to the other gate? We knew the demons had come out of there."

Huxley's angry expression disappeared. He considered me, then said, "Nothing."

I refrained from rolling my eyes. He'd work out his shit and tell me eventually. "Then I need you to do stuff for me."

"Just because you're our coven leader, doesn't mean I'll listen to you."

Spyne sucked in a horrified breath.

But I grinned. "And that's why I'm appointing you as an advisor." I summoned Frond's pendant. "This used to belong to Frond. You're more deserving to wear it. He's out. You're in." I summoned a set of black robes next. "Wear these. If you have some hang up about what happened during the battle with the demons, consider this your chance to make up for it. I want your mind at my table. I want your honesty and dedication. I don't want any of your bad faults, though."

He narrowed his eyes. "Which are?"

"We don't have long enough for that. Be at the advisory chamber tomorrow after breakfast."

Huxley, for maybe the first time in our friendship, appeared speechless. He'd had more to say after finding out I was half demon. "You're sure?"

"Your potential is clear to me. In the meantime, find Rooke at the Greenhouse of Fun. You'll be working with her on another project. She'll bring you up to speed. Any questions?"

I didn't wait for any. I winked at Spyne on the way out.

Who was next?

I walked to Corentin's rooms and didn't find him there. A few inquiries led me to the battle learning center.

"Corey," I said in greeting, after walking over the fighting mats.

"No," he answered, uncrossing his legs. He'd been meditating. The guy was wearing linen pants. Where were his ripped jeans?

Who was this man?

Positive Patrick, that's who.

I surveyed him. "You doing okay?"

"I feel very centered."

He seemed drugged on it. Guess I'd felt that way this morning when centering with the coven too. "Cool. What were you saying no to?"

"Becoming an advisor. I have too much to explore in my power. I won't relinquish this freedom from feeling so oppressed. Before I can help others, I must help myself."

"Good, I wasn't going to ask you."

His smile had a goofy edge. "This is good news. I just want to be centered."

I pressed my lips firmly together against a smile. "Do I have more work to do on you?" I'd spent a few sessions untangling his magic, but from memory, there had been a few last stragglers.

"Some. Minor only. I'm content to exist in this state until you have the space to complete the process."

Ty, the divination mentor, was the most centered person I'd ever met. Corentin may rival him for that title soon enough. "No problem. I'll, uh, leave you to it then."

*Linen pants.* I couldn't believe it. I had to tell Wild.

Delta broke away from a small group of novices to meet me at the entrance.

"Need something?" I asked her.

“A better punching bag,” she said.

I followed her gaze to what remained of one at the back of the huge chamber. “No kidding.”

“Just a heads-up that Sage is looking to turn down the position of lead strategist.”

*Damn.* “Reason?”

“I can’t decide if she’s hurt about not being invited to the table as an advisor or if the size of the task and that the enemy is a real one has shaken her confidence.”

I clapped Delta’s shoulder. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Now to locate Sage. So far this high-esteemed gig was just talking, walking, talking, then walking some more. I released a pent-up breath, pausing on my way to Sage’s quarters to watch the trickle of magus flocking to the eating chamber for lunch.

Maybe Sage could wait until I ate...

“High Esteemed?”

*Or maybe not.* I turned toward Barrow. “How can I help?”

He held up a stack of sealed letters. “These arrived.”

I took the stack and looked at the top one.

*High Esteemed Tempest*

“What are these for?”

“I would never presume to open your letters,” Barrow said in shock.

“I know. Just surprised to see these when my accession was this morning.”

I flipped the first letter.

*Sender: The High Esteemed*

*Original Coven*

The Astars had sent me a letter, and I suspected this one wasn’t a warm welcome.



Wild's face hovered over me.

I diverted my unfocused gaze from the ceiling of my quarters to look at him. I managed to summon a single word. "Hello."

"Hello. You okay?"

*Depends.* My mind and energy were gone. Was that an issue? I couldn't even be bothered downloading my day into the quipu. "Big day."

"You were busy. How did the talk with Sage go?"

"I convinced her to a trial of the job. Told her it would be the same process and procedure. That she'd be supported in the role. That the coven needed her." *All true.*

I gestured to the letter on my stomach. "A little something from your parents."

Wild picked up the parchment, reading aloud, "High Esteemed Tempest, we congratulate you on your accession. Per our agreement, the original coven upholds their obligations of the contract held between our covens with the enclosed." He glanced up. "What was enclosed?"

"A box of novice charms."

He growled, crumbling the letter. "That doesn't uphold their responsibilities in our alliance."

I'd negotiated their support against the demons and future threats while standing over Wild's body. They'd apparently



decided not to uphold that in good will. “It does uphold it at the bare minimum. It’s a message of what we can expect from them.”

He ran a hand through his brown hair. “Shouldn’t have expected any different.”

“No.” I sat up, folding my legs on the couch.

Wild sat next to me.

“Unfortunately,” I said, “what the original coven does is important to how other covens perceive us. I received a stack of letters. The original coven has whispered in the ears of other high esteemed already. There were several congratulatory notes that also conveyed the unfortunate inability of such-and-such coven to risk their members to our cause.”

Wild stilled. “How many?”

“The majority. A few have voiced their support and resources. Seven.”

“That’s something.”

Until they learned what I was.

“You know what you need to do then,” he said.

I nodded. “Yes. The coven won’t like it.”

“No, and I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

I rested my head on his shoulder.

We sat there for a time.

“Any luck speaking to your demon again?” he asked softly.

I shook my head. “I think speaking through me to the other demon and adding her magic to the barrier over the gate in Varden’s room wore her out. Her smoke is still in my divination affinity, but she’s tucked away inside and hasn’t come out.”

Wild didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to.

“That worries you,” I stated.

He forced a smile. “I like to worry about you. What’s she doing now?”

I closed my eyes and traveled up my divination affinity. There was a time when I only had to step into the affinity to find her mist of black smoke. Now, I drifted for a time until stopping before her nest. “Anyone home?”

The black smoke swirled lazily. No red eyes, no hissing. No demon smile that I was growing to like. “If you’re hurt, then I’d like to help. Just tell me how.”

Her absence hadn’t concerned me to this point, but a week had passed, and I felt a twinge in my gut. “I really hope you’re okay in there.”

I waited.

*Nothing.*

After another minute, I retreated from my magic and pulled a face at Wild. “She’s not answering. She’s been gone for a while...”

His expression was smooth. “She could be recovering, as you say. What other reason could there be?”

He was holding back on something. I went along with his questions for the moment. “That my magus side has become too strong for her to occupy a space within me.”

Wild nodded. “You were worried about that a while ago—when she retreated farther up your affinity.”

I had been. “I don’t feel different.” I broke off.

“What?”

*Dang.* “I do feel better.”

“In what way?”

“More centered. I’ve never felt anything like when I centered this morning before my accession. Maybe the group setting was the reason for that. I’d thought maybe the fourth affinity had affected me too. Like that might have aligned the rest of my magic.”

Wild leaned back on the couch, one of his arms resting behind me. “You believe your demon was the cause of struggling with chaos.”

“Perhaps. I’d only struggled with that since my family’s murder, so I always expected that was the cause. Since being here, I’ve wondered if my demon was always the one *saving* me from chaos, not causing it—as though she would put herself in the driver’s seat when I was on the brink.”

“You’re speaking human.”

I rephrased. “Put herself in charge when I was giving up.”

Wild was quiet.

“You have a theory,” I said eventually.

“Not a theory. More... an observation. Two of them.”

Of course he did, or he wouldn’t be a grimoire. “Shoot then.”

“You recently dove right into chaos to save my life.”

I shuddered at the memory. I could safely say that I’d only felt that terrified once in my life—when I knew my grandmother, mother, and sister were lost to me. “Are you saying our capacity for chaos altered after going through that? Like we’ve experienced the worst it can be, and now the day-to-day stuff doesn’t feel as bad?”

He hummed. “You think our resilience has grown and our perspective has changed? That could have merit. I’ve wondered whether there may not be some latent effect of surviving that. Some scar that wasn’t immediately obvious.”

I definitely had a scar from it. So did Wild. There was a reason we’d thrown ourselves into a week of bedroom antics. Several reasons, but forgetting that hell was one of them. “You think there was a price to pay, and that price was my demon?”

“There are signs of her there still.” He shook his head. “More that maybe she couldn’t follow you into that space. We made the chaos pact, but perhaps she couldn’t fulfill it.”

“Your creature is around?”

“Yes, but my creature is a mimic only, not a true demon.” Wild lifted a shoulder. “I don’t see that my theory changes what you’ve already decided. If the connection has been harmed, then time should heal it. If she’s recharging from too much magical expenditure, then time will heal her too.”

*And if it didn’t?* “You said you had two observations. What’s the other one?” I felt his reluctance swim to the surface. “I can handle it, Wild.”

“I’ve worried you enough already.”

“Not knowing what may worry me further will only worry me more than it should.”

Wild’s lips quirked. “An excellent point. We’ve had a busy week.”

*Had we ever.*

He continued, “When we gained this bond, we decided to wait until we could wrap our heads around the new changes. I assumed that was the case this time.”

Did I need time to acclimatize to four affinities? Yes. Although, grimoire didn’t pop out of the ground to slap me in the face one morning. The affinity had come on in increments. First with more curiosity, then with the ability to borrow Wild’s grimoire magic to weave it into my barriers. I’d read more books in the last month than I had in my adult life. The magic was new to me, but also not. Unlike the bond we’d gained, the affinity felt more natural and like something that I could explore and understand over time. “That’s an issue for you?”

“Since the last step in the ritual, your chest has started glowing,” Wild said, watching my reaction.

My brows shot up. “What?”

“The glowing grows brighter every day. It’s hard to focus on your face through it now.”

“Can anyone else see it?”

“I asked Sven. The glowing is just for me.”

I blinked. “That’s why you’re always looking at my boobs.”

“No. That’s because you have fantastic breasts, and I’d like to spend my time rubbing my face between them.”

That’s what I’d assumed actually.

Wild paused, then said, “You haven’t noticed the same about me?”

“That you’re some kind of sexy Care Bear?” That was something I might’ve picked up.

“What’s a Care Bear?”

“A toy that shoots a beam of love out of its chest, or something like that. Good stuff.”

“Right. I don’t look like a Care Bear, then?”

I frowned. “No. Why do you think only you can see it?”

His expression was smooth again. “Unsure.”

“Maybe this step in the ritual is different.” Wild usually felt the press of the mating ritual more strongly than me. He’d also stepped into his role and purpose with total confidence since our night in the cave. When I hadn’t felt anything in the last week, I’d wondered if the mating ritual was over. Apparently not.

Was this thing one-sided from here?

I didn’t like that. “Not like we have a book to read on the topic. All we can do is wait.” *Just like the wait for my demon to reappear.*

Wild pulled me against his side. “And I’m content to do so. It’s nothing to worry about.”

There was that word again.

I rested a hand on his chest over his pendants, feeling the warmth of his body through his token black tunic. “No. Nothing to worry about.”



I sat in my authority, nerves tightening my chest. This conversation would be hard to navigate to say the least. I'd spouted some bullshit in my time, but this would take the prize. "A warm welcome to Ruby and Huxley, who have accepted the position of advisor to join our team."

The others threw them smiles and murmured hellos.

I'd donned the relic robes again today as a symbol. The advisors had their black robes, and it seemed important that I distinguish myself. Sven would be proud of me.

I surveyed their ranks. "We have a lot to do, and first I'd like to hear where you believe we should start."

Opal said immediately, "Demon defense. They're the immediate threat."

Barrow voiced his agreement.

Varden countered. "Coven unity. A demon's magic feeds off division."

The other advisors, barring Wild and Huxley, turned to look at him.

"How do you know that?" Winona asked.

"There's reference to this in texts that our project team has come across," Huxley replied.

There was likely no such thing, but I was glad Varden and he had ripped that bandage off. "This project team has put together information that will prove invaluable in the coming

weeks. We know that any division—having different teams within a coven, for instance—feeds a demon, along with negative emotion. A strong demon can leave their realm to enter this realm.”

“You’re implying that Caves has strengthened the demons’ magic?” Delta said. Her doubt was evident. “For how long? We’d been playing for three hundred years.”

“I don’t know if the demons were there at the origin or if they came later,” I hedged. I did. When Ryzika died, the demons had *carpe diem*ed the shit out of the uncertainty in the leaderless coven.

“Surely later,” Ruby spoke for the first time.

I regarded them. “What’s the motive of a demon?”

“To gain territory,” Wild answered.

I nodded, then waved my hand, sending a burst of energy down my apothecary affinity. A map rolled out on the table. I cast forth four bobbing balls of blue magic. “We occupy the south, here, in the Buried Knolls. Vissimo—”

“What’s a Vissimo?” Ruby asked.

“A vampire,” Varden told her.

She colored, but I’d imagine others sitting at this table hadn’t recalled that either.

“The Vissimo occupy the west territory in Bluff City. Luthers—werewolves—occupy the eastern land in Deception Valley.” My focus shifted. “And then the demon territory is in the north mountains.”

“How do you know this?” Winona asked. “We know they’re out there, but not specifically where.”

In this, I didn’t need to lie. “I was raised outside of the coven. The whereabouts and turfs of supernaturals is common knowledge beyond the confines of the Buried Knolls.”

Opal made a sound of surprise.

“Beyond the north mountains,” I continued, “is the ocean. If a demon’s motive is territory—in that claiming a territory

and enslaving the people in it creates a constant food source for their magic—then heading farther north isn't an option, and the only territories to claim—”

“—are the territories of other supernatural species,” Wild finished.

We were so in sync. *Cute.*

I rested back on my authority. *Must get a fucking cushion.* “What would you think if I told you that two other games like Caves had existed, each lasting a century or longer? That one of the games was played by Vissimo, and another by Luthers?”

A deep silence followed my words.

“I would say that too much coincidence is no coincidence at all,” Delta said. I was glad Wild, Huxley, and Varden hadn't been the first to break that quiet.

“You're implying that demons have infiltrated each species via a game. But,” she added, “that's impossible. How would everyone fail to notice?”

Winona replied, “Demons attacked our coven a week ago, walking out of an entrance *within* our barrier, Delta. Most of us had no idea.”

And even if their gate had been outside our barrier, they would have marched through it. Only a four-affinity barrier seemed to make them pause, and I was willing to bet the stronger demons could get through that too.

Eyes turned to me again.

Barrow was the one to voice the question. “You knew there were gates.”

How did I answer?

I'd known there were gates because I'd followed an echo of my mother into a ravine and happened to discover the truth. But how did I reveal this without revealing all? If my mother discovered the gates, then how did she do so when a magus couldn't see them? And why would she never have passed that on to the council? Why had she run? *That* line of questioning



led to what she'd had to hide, and the only answer to that was *her children*.

I was taking too long to reply. I had to say something.

In his mild voice, Varden said, "I knew there were gates."

The attention cut from me to the old grimoire across the table. He met their regard. "I was first to greet the demons at the battle, as you know. Keeping this knowledge was a betrayal of the council's trust, I'm aware, and I have known about the demons for some time, since the grandfather of our high esteemed suddenly died."

"Caradoc?" Opal blurted. "That was *years* ago."

Ruby glanced around the table. "What happened to him?"

"The reason we gave the coven for his death," Varden said, ignoring a sharp look from Barrow, "was that he'd undertaken an experiment which drew too much of his magic at once. The truth is that we had no idea. For all intents and purposes, it appeared as though Caradoc had been murdered."

Ruby gasped.

"Not long after Caradoc's death, his son came to me. What he had to say was extraordinary. He said that his father had a theory that demons were infiltrating our coven. That there was a gate to their realm in his father's old room, the room his son now occupied." Varden paused. "His words were hard to believe, and yet... I had seen Caradoc's body with my own eyes. When I assessed the room later, I could detect no demon presence, but Fyre was adamant. He showed me a map that his father had developed. One that showed the surrounding ravines where Caradoc believed other gates to exist. Fyre told me that the gates weren't stationary. That they moved closer to the knolls as the demons' power grew."

"How did Caradoc locate the gates?" Opal asked.

"He'd come across a weapon that warmed when demons were near."

*Varden. You. Genius.* "The dagger I held at the start of the battle," I told her. "I don't know when my uncle banished the

blade to my grandmother for safekeeping, but she gave it to me shortly before she died.”

“If Rowaness and Hazeluna knew of this, why did they leave?” Winona was watching me closely.

“I don’t believe they did know of it. To them, this may just have been a blade.” I’d have to make sure no one ever touched it. The demon blade would burn them. Or I’d have to figure out Grandmother’s trick and attempt to coat the hilt in a charm.

Winona shifted her focus to Varden. “Why did Fyre not give the blade to you? You moved into the same room after his death.” She tilted her head. “You were attacked recently in the room. It was demons too.”

The mood in the room turned accusatory. Varden had known about the demons and never said a thing. We’d been attacked. In the eyes of Winona and the others, things could have ended much differently. The only reason Varden might survive this was because no one had died a week ago. I appreciated him taking the heat for this, even if I wished there was another alternative where I could admit my part.

“The blade burns most who touch it,” Huxley said. “Out of our group, only Corentines can touch it unscathed.”

Varden didn’t so much as flicker an eyelid before running with that. “I couldn’t wield it. If I was the next to die guarding that gate, we had to ensure the blade wouldn’t be lost.”

“If you had died, then no one would have known the gate was there,” Delta exploded.

I’d sensed it coming.

She pounded the stone table with a closed fist. “That was foolhardy to say the least, Varden. Why would you make light of such a threat?”

The old grimoire took in her anger. “What could I do with such information, Delta? Should I have told Fertim or Vero?”

“The council,” she snarled.

“The Fertim members of council or the Vero members of council?” he asked her next.

“Just the council.” Delta’s gaze sparked with her fury, and she wasn’t alone in it.

Varden lowered his voice. “You know as well as I that the council has not operated as a unified council in a long time. Not just us, but those before us, and those before them. The game had been allowed to permeate our decision-making. Would we, for instance, have halted the game to face the threat of the demons? Who would have decided the best approach? If Fertim had suggested an idea, Vero would have countered it, and vice versa. You know this as well as I. My decisions may not have been perfect—I am not arrogant enough as to believe that so—but I was sure of the coven’s inability to unite. I feared, as Caradoc and Fyre had before me, that revealing what I knew would secure the coven’s *demise* rather than their survival.”

Delta’s shoulders were taut to snapping point, but she didn’t say anything further.

Opal slid him a look. “That’s why you hated Caves all of a sudden.”

Ruby’s eyes were wide. She was getting a crash course on how much went on behind the scenes.

“Yes,” Varden replied. “Particularly after Fyre’s death, I couldn’t ignore the importance of that room. Or what may be within. With that admission came everything else. The demons were spreading through our midst. Yet I was incapacitated by the game and by my inability to find the gates too. Had they moved closer as the division in our coven worsened? When might they attack? Was any of this true? I hoped not.”

Wild glanced at him. “When I proposed the group project on supernaturals, you were particularly vocal in your approval.”

Varden dipped his head. “I saw the benefit of that, yes. And then Miss Tempest Corentine joined us, and with her, the

blade returned. Though she did not understand its importance.”

That much was true.

“Why didn’t Fyre give the blade to Rooke?” Barrow interrupted.

“I cannot say for certain. His wife was dead, and I wonder if he wanted to protect Rooke. Or did Rowaness know the truth of the blade? Being safe outside of the coven, she could divulge everything to our high esteemed at the right time, whereas Fyre could not be sure how long he’d live to pass on the truth to his daughter. I only have theories.”

I blew out a breath. “If Grandmother knew anything, she didn’t get a chance to tell me. Not long after I joined the coven, Varden told me all.”

Winona’s eyes narrowed. “And yet he voted against you joining the coven.”

*Shit.* I dipped my head. “And off the back of that, for a time, Varden was the only member of the council I trusted. None of you told me about Caves, if you recollect. Varden had been the only one who seemed to feel the subterfuge wasn’t right, even if he had his own agenda too.”

I couldn’t say if that was true or if Varden was upholding my grandmother’s wishes of removing me from the coven.

Ruby looked at me. “When you were told the truth, you found the gates again.”

“And they were much closer,” Huxley said.

“The four of you knew also,” Opal said, referring to the quad.

“Yes,” Wild said, and the answer was echoed by Huxley. Wild added, “Tempest convinced Varden that more coven members should be told—Rooke definitely, as she may be able to touch the blade, if anything happened to Tempest. And myself and my three friends due to our deeper knowledge about other supernaturals.”

We were managing to get through this conversation with our mix of truth and lies. Yet... I really had drawn close to the best people to figure all this out. Or been pushed toward them.

I said, “The gates were closer as Huxley says. I—and the others—agreed with Varden’s assessment. That telling the council and coven was as likely to hinder as help. The game was in the way.”

“And so you won the game,” Ruby said in awe.

“We intended to.”

Opal glanced at Varden and Wild. “*We?*”

“Our high esteemed had no help from Fertim,” Varden stated.

“I have a rather unusual outlet for my magic,” I told her. “One that the Vero team leaders are aware of. I call it a quipu. It’s a method of storing information. My magic shows me connections and pathways between the information in a way I don’t understand, but I used this to place Vero in a winning position on the gameboard. If I’d joined Fertim, I would have done the same for that team. I wasn’t interested in who won, just that Caves ended, so we could focus on the real threat.”

Opal looked to Winona, Delta, and Barrow, who nodded.

“I’d like to see this quipu sometime.”

“Of course,” I said. “As it turned out, the game was ended through other means. I gained a fourth affinity on the night of the battle against the demons. And while I’m still trying to understand how and why this happened, I am grateful for what it has given the coven.”

“An end to Caves?” Winona prompted.

“Yes, and protection from the demons we didn’t have.” I glanced at my robes. “The four relics proved more effective than any measure.”

“As did the blade you’d wielded prior,” she noted.

“And that’s another mystery to be solved.” Did Winona and the others believe me? Enough to keep quiet for now.

“Now you have more information, we must decide upon a starting point.”

Opal slumped in her chair, looking frazzled. “Part of me doesn’t believe what I’ve been told, and yet—like Varden long ago—I can’t deny some things. Demons did attack. Caradoc and Fyre *were* lost in that room where Varden was attacked also. The army came out of nowhere one week ago. The relics seemed to choose you in a moment of peril—as though you were needed to save us.” She exhaled long and hard. “This will take time for me to fathom, but at the heart of the matter, I see that we have division fueling the demons’ strength. The answer is to work on unity. On giving the coven new direction. On healing old wounds.”

“We can’t leave the gates without defense,” Delta said. It was the first time she’d spoken since Varden’s confession. She was still pissed.

“We need to develop the best defenses before we can put them in place,” Wild said. “That should be an area of focus.”

Huxley said, “We already have a lot to go on.”

To me, the way had been clear. I’d just needed everyone on a similar page. “The answer seems to be both. I agree with Opal. There should be efforts with the coven itself. We are in a position to start this immediately while other information is gathered on defenses. Huxley, I’m placing you and Spyne in charge of that information process. Get together a team of grimoires and find everything you can on demons.”

Huxley nodded.

“Wild,” I said next. “You and Ruby are to organize the sentry schedule.”

Wild was a great teacher, and Ruby would do well under his wing.

“Of course,” he replied for show, having accepted the role yesterday.

“Delta,” I said next. “Once Huxley’s team has gathered information, we’ll begin training for demon-specific combat. You’ll be in charge of this. Barrow, Opal, and Winona, we

need to assess our stores and external support from other covens. I have received a stack of letters that I will pass into your care. I'd like you to be our representatives with the covens who have voiced their support to see what they can offer against the demons. I'd like you to open dialogue with covens who don't wish to support us too. We need all the help we can get. Support from others may include further knowledge on the demons, so make sure to press for this, too, and please loop in Huxley and Spyne with that side of the process."

The trio nodded.

"Varden," I said. "Now the game is over, I am able to swap rooms with you. I'm moving in tonight."

"I've told you that an old man doesn't have as much to lose."

I didn't smile. "That is an order as your high esteemed."

His lips curved. "Then, of course, I will vacate the quarters."

Wild didn't like my decision, but I was the best defense against the demons. The gate had to be well guarded.

"I'm also placing you in charge of rolling out strategies for establishing the new norm in this coven," I told him. Then said to the others, "And that is where we turn our minds to next. Our magus identify as Vero or Fertim, not as members of the Buried Knolls coven. They have been split for three hundred years."

I paused to allow my words to sink in because that was a long, long time. "How do we change that?"



“I like it,” Corey said. “Mmm, feels right.”

I, along with the guys and Rooke, listened to him without comment. The expressions ranged from bemused to amused. Varden had filled Corentin in on his new task as the leader of morning, afternoon, and evening centering circles.

This task vibrated at the same frequency as Positive Patrick.

“Good, good,” I said after clearing my throat. “Because we’ll need to be unified with the threats on our doorstep. That starts with us being one with ourselves.”

Corey lobbed me a grin. “Don’t consider the threats, Tempest. Be without that. Let your worries flow in and out.”

He was broken. I tried to look under the table to see what material his pants were today.

“Linen,” Wild muttered under his breath. “Already checked.”

Sven growled, no longer paying attention to the conversation.

Corey frowned at him. “That sound is off-putting.”

“So is your goofy fucking smile, Patrick,” came his reply.

“Patrick?” Corey repeated, glancing at the rest of us.

I answered, “It’s what we call the new you behind your back.”



He nodded. “Right. Cool. I dig it.”

Wild shook his head, then focused on Sven. “What is it?”

“You haven’t noticed?” Sven said darkly, jerking his head to something behind me.

I pivoted on the bench, then turned back, smirking. “I did see that.”

Fronde had set up a table that included Josie, a few of the magus he was chummy with, and some of those I remembered from the accession as being wary of my new position. Bedwyr’s presence there was a surprise, but then again, if he and Josie were an item again, then he may’ve been dragged.

I wrinkled my nose. “Don’t you guys think it’s hypocritical that my relationship with Wild got so much attention for being off and on, but that Josie and Bedwyr are constantly off and on and no one says a thing?”

Huxley sipped at his tea. “No one cares about them; that’s why.”

Huxley. Master of the brutal truth.

“They’re serious,” Sven said to me.

“This time is for good? How can you tell?”

“I don’t give a fuck about Bedwyr and Josie. I’m talking about Fronde’s group. They’re focused.”

I could take that to mean his magic wasn’t having its usual effect. “Counter efforts?” *Are your parents working on them?*

“Nope. Just their determination.”

I pulled a face. “This was bound to happen.” After the advisor meeting yesterday, the coven had new direction. Teams would be put in place over the next couple of days, and the work would begin. Fronde’s band of merry dissenters wouldn’t have the time or energy to spread hate then. And if they did, then whatever—they were welcome to their opinions. My intentions were pure.

My gut churned at the thought of my secrets. Could I really blame those magus for obeying their instincts? With

Fronde, it was personal. With his friends, they might be supporting him—or be interested in joining the original coven also. The others at that table... they weren't really wrong. They were trusting their guts, which told them that I was concealing parts of the truth.

And I was. The meeting yesterday had confirmed how much. And I was meant to keep track of all the lies too. Eventually, they'd catch up with me. Eventually I'd be free of them. But we had things to get done first.

Wild looped his arm around my shoulders, looking across at his friend. "As long as it doesn't grow, right?"

Sven folded his muscular arms. "I'll watch it."

"Thanks," I said. Wild was right. As long as Frond's supporters didn't amass, then we were good. "I'm off to divination."

"Joining the centering circle?" Corey said in a dreamy voice.

"Nah, more work with the staves." Divination was the area I needed the most work in. With grimoire, I didn't sense the same resistance. I'd come into the fourth affinity out of love shared with Wild. My divination was born of pain and loss, and maybe I'd never given its origins enough credit.

I tipped my head back to look at Wild. "I wouldn't mind getting together with you, Huxley, and Spyne one time to work on grimoire."

"I'm busy. Get in line," Huxley said, standing. He glared at Rooke. "Have you purified the greenhouse?"

I glanced between them. "Uh, why?"

Rooke smiled. "Sven and I had a lot of sex in there yesterday."

"Amongst all the poisons?"

"Some things excite me."

Huxley snapped, "I'm not putting my notebooks where you've put your ass, or where Sven has slapped his balls."

Wild laughed quietly as Rooke and Huxley walked away, bickering.

Sven's smirk was smug. "It happened. Woman has a thing for danger, what can I say? Turned me on, too, after a bit."

I needed to vacate this conversation. I stood.

"Your attention," I boomed in a magically enhanced voice.

The quiet was immediate aside from a few comments from Frond's table.

"You will note changes being made in the coven today," I called. "Please go about affinity practice and your projects as normal. These changes will be explained during a coven gathering tomorrow morning after breakfast. For now, I'd like to announce that Positive—I mean, uh, Corentin—will hold daily centering circles in the divination center from now on. These will commence after breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I encourage you to attend as often as possible. I will reveal the reasoning behind this tomorrow also. Have a good day, everyone."

Conversation gradually resumed, and I turned to say goodbye to Wild, who'd be with his sentries all day. He was staring at my chest.

"Need sunglasses?" I asked him.

He blinked a few times, squinting to peer at my face. "It's bright."

I tried to push my magic down some. I used to always keep it concealed, but now tendrils floated about. "Better?"

Wild rubbed his chest. "For my eyes, not the rest of me."

I let it go again.

He sighed. "That's better."

"Just look at me sideways." I winked and joined Ty on his way to mentor our divination affinity magus.

"Have you accepted the seat?" he asked me once we'd exited into a main tunnel.

I glanced up at him. “I’ve accepted that it’s a very hard seat and needs a cushion.”

He didn’t answer as we entered the divination center. I summoned my purple beanbag, and Ty settled onto a low cushion as I summoned the set of Ogham Staves he’d given me a couple of weeks ago.

“I recall beith, luis, ferm, and sail, and their properties. I’ve started my reading on Celtic ancients.” I relayed what I remembered of that, which was nearly everything, thanks to being a grimoire. *Perks.*

Ty listened, adding in information here and there that I hadn’t come across. “And did you explore the history of the staves?”

“Not yet, sir. I will.” There had been a bit to do, okay.

He summoned a stave from my pouch. “Today, we move on to duir. Tell me of this stave.”

At some point between novice and proven, a magus’s magic started to operate on an instinctual level. This increased through the proven journey. Rooke, for instance, could pick up this stave and just *know* things about it. She’d sense its nature and purpose without having prior experience with it. I wasn’t close to that with divination, but I was there in battle and apothecary, which helped me somewhat.

I took the stave, pushing my apothecary magic to test it. “Oak. I would say strength. Protection.”

Ty’s deep voice washed over me. “Open your divination affinity to the stave.”

I exhaled and closed my eyes, drifting up the affinity. I pushed energy through the channel to my fingertips holding the stave. I let the magic wash over the carved piece of oak. “Strength,” I repeated. “Protection. Something... unknown. Ahead of me?”

I opened one eyelid.

Ty nodded. “You are sensing that duir has the ability to open new doors and paths. That it will protect you while you

walk both. Remember that the staves convey relationships between person, the spiritual and physical tree properties, and then the staff meaning itself. If you were to scatter the staves, you may be particularly responsive if you are divining something about yourself—about a choice you had to make. Oak can be a symbol of leadership. It could be present in combination with other staves to let you know that a new door must be opened during your rule, but that you would be protected when walking through it.”

I wouldn't mind that reassurance. “Can we scatter the staves?”

Ty murmured, “First we learn the meanings of the twenty staves. Then we begin to understand how they interact.” He paused. “There is something in your divination affinity.”

I nearly closed the affinity in panic. My chest barely confined my thumping heart. “Yeah.”

“What trauma caused it?”

He didn't know what he was looking at. I released a quiet exhale. “The death of my family.”

“Such damage does not come from quiet deaths.”

Rich brown eyes were focused on me.

“No,” I admitted. The council was under the illusion that a car accident killed my family. I doubted they'd believed the lie. They'd also never questioned me further, and now I'd disbanded them, they couldn't do anything about it anyway. “I gained my divination affinity upon their murders.”

Ty stiffened at the last word. “I'm very sorry, High Esteemed. I can feel what it has done.”

I swallowed. “I believe exploring this affinity is the answer to healing.”

“Have you considered a journey?”

I pursed my lips. “I have undertaken several journeys back. Each ended in chaos. Chaos that got worse rather than better.”

He was quiet. “I see. There is much to respect about the power of chaos.”

I met his gaze. “Yes, there is, sir. I’ve spent an eternity there.”

The divination mentor flinched at whatever he saw in my eyes, though he didn’t lower his focus from my face. “I can see it,” he hushed. “You walked there for a lifetime.”

I’d watched Wild die in thousands of ways, unable to do a thing. “Perhaps the meaning of the experience will find me one day.”

“I believe so.” He took a breath and swallowed. “We shall continue here. The next stave is *gort*.”

We worked through eight more of the staves, giving me knowledge of twelve of the twenty. I may never use these things to divine my choices or the paths of others, and yet being active in an area of magic that had haunted me for years did feel empowering.

I rose after and watched the group who’d gathered for centering this morning. More than expected. We were all in need of extra healing after last week. “Sir, I wondered about something.”

“And that wonder has led to a question.”

“Naturally. Could you summon an echo of the past for the entire coven to see? There have been comments about how far this coven has drifted from its former self and unity. Seeing this with our own eyes may be important.”

Ty considered that. “It would be possible. I would need to search through time for such a moment you describe.”

“Could you?”

He bowed. “I would be happy to, High Esteemed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I walked to join the centering circle, sliding between Berry and Genti. They were two people who wanted to be with each other but feared damaging their friendship. Couldn’t say I’d

ever had that issue. There was something to be said about not having many friends.

They didn't stir from their meditation as I slipped into my affinities. I may not feel the need to center today, but I had to lead by example, and it didn't hurt to give myself ten minutes of self-care in this insanity.

After I'd centered, I did feel clear about my path for the day. There was a task I'd put off. Now that the covens had drawn their lines in the sand, and I'd seen how paltry the level of magus support was, I had to act.

Opening my eyes, I looked straight across the circle. Josie, sitting opposite me, wasn't quick enough to hide her hate, and my thoughts weren't quick enough to stop my reflex wink either.

She smoothed her expression, and I got to my feet, seeing that Berry and Gentry had left at some point. A stream of happy magus were leaving the learning center. I had a good feeling about these circles.

The next stop was the advisor chamber, where I summoned parchment and a quill. I set my pointer finger to the bottom of the quill to fill it with black ink.

After staring at the blank page for some time, I set the tip to the paper.

*To Crown Prince Kyros Atagio and Princess Basilia Atagio of Clan Sundulus, and to Pack Alpha Sascha Greyson and Tribe Leader/Pack Leader Andie Greyson,*

*I am pleased to have the opportunity to reply to your missive sent some weeks ago. I am further pleased to inform you that the previous response from the Buried Knolls council can be dismissed. I spoke, in very brief terms, to some of your people recently of an imminent threat from demonkind. This threat has become more urgent, and as I am now in a position to act as the High Esteemed leader of this coven, I invite you to our caves at your first convenience to deliver the warning in full. I would see that you are armed with knowledge at the minimum, and another alliance at the optimum.*

*You will be under my protection upon entering this coven and can be assured that no harm will befall any of you during this time.*

*Sincerely,*

*High Esteemed Tempest Corentine*

The letter wasn't long, but by the time I'd squeezed my brain to form each sentence, my neck and fingers were stiff, and the light in the caves had dimmed. I read over the letter anew. Would it be enough? Did it give enough assurance, or was it too open that they may distrust my motive and not accept the invitation? I blew on the ink to be sure it was dry, then folded and sealed the letter.

Rubbing my neck, I left the chamber, encountering Bedwyr outside. His gaze dropped to the letter in my hand.

"Bedwyr, can I help you?"

"No, High Esteemed. Just walking to dinner."

"I'll join you. Congratulations to yourself and Josie. I'm sure you'll be very happy together."

"Thanks," he replied, not offering more.

Maybe he was thinking about the time Wild got possessive and turned him to rock for asking me on a date? Such things may be hard to forget.

My last encounter with Bedwyr was of fighting by his side in the last game against Fertim. We had history, but things weren't usually this awkward. "Something's on your mind, Bedwyr. I can almost hear it."

His fearful expression made me laugh.

"Not really," I told him. "It's just an expression."

His expression cleared, and he smiled. "Right. Sorry, we're all on edge."

"It's to be expected. The place we believed ourselves safe was proved unsafe. That's not a thought that inspires deep, healing sleep."



“No,” he agreed. “It’s not. You feel that too? You seem so... unsurprised.”

“Knowledge is some consolation. Which is why I’ll share what I’ve put together with the help of others at tomorrow’s coven gathering. You also know that I grew up outside of the coven.”

His brow cleared. “Yeah, I guess it’s really different out there. Why did your mother and grandmother leave the coven? Why did half of your family stay here?”

Pointed questions. Either a result of the coven’s talk or Frond’s whispers.

*It involved a demon king, an unheard-of love affair, and an impossible pregnancy.* I could only imagine his face if I’d had the vagina to say that aloud. “I can’t say why they left, Bedwyr, and that ignorance made me angry for a long, long time. It felt like a betrayal that I didn’t know such important things about my family’s past. Yet since then, I have realized that there are things parents and older magus don’t believe a young woman should be told. Perhaps they hope to keep her a child for longer, or maybe they don’t know how to voice hard things. Or maybe, they’d planned to tell me everything the week after they were stolen. I can’t be angry at those sentiments, but I do wish I could tell you.”

“I’m sorry you lost your family.”

“So am I.” Their deaths had come up a couple of times today, and I felt a familiar sadness crush my chest. My twin. My mother. My grandmother. How life would be different. My grandfather, my uncle, Rooke’s mother. Our family had lost a lot because of the love my mother had shared with the previous demon king. She’d died before my grandfather and uncle, but I had to wonder if guilt might not have crushed her if she’d lived. I was glad she hadn’t been witness to my life since losing her. I was glad she only saw the happiest and most content of me. I’d get to that happiness and contentedness again with Wild, I could tell, but there were years in the middle I wanted to forget. That I didn’t want anyone to see.

I left Bedwyr at the entrance as I beelined for the food tables, then after, took my loaded tray to my usual table. Maybe I should sit at a special table now, but I couldn't be bothered. I wanted to eat like a normal person, not a spectacle.

"What did you say to him?" Sven leaned closer to ask.

I glanced at Bedwyr, who had turned from Frond's table and the closely watching Josie to join a table of his friends. "Nothing much. Answered his questions."

"It did good. Try it with the others."

"Only if Rooke knows antidotes to every poison in the world," I said, thinking of Josie and her hateful look that morning.

Sven didn't laugh. He really was concerned about Frond's group.

"You doing okay?"

"It's a lot," he said. "I could use a drink."

"Did someone say drink?" Rooke sat next to Sven, kissing him on the cheek. Playfulness returned to his eyes.

She looked at him, and her voice gained a hypnotic quality. "Whiskey. On the rocks. Smokey."

I shoved a zucchini and eggplant fritter into my mouth, along with crispy bacon and salsa dressing. *Mmm*. Chewing and swallowing first, I then said, "You're in luck then."

"Dare I ask why?" my cousin replied.

I swallowed another bite. "Because we need to go out tonight."

"Can't," Corey said from across the table. "Circle."

*True*. "The rest of us—"

"Can't," Huxley said. "Spyne and I are meeting with our chosen grimoires."

"Can't," Wild echoed, grimacing. "I'm on sentry duty." He was torn. "I don't want you to go by yourself."

Sven laughed. “Do you realize who you’re talking to? She got hit by fucking lightning, and was like ‘Woo! That felt incredible. I’m so pumped!’ You have nothing to worry about.”

Wild’s mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Perhaps.”

I sent a pulse of warmth through our bond. “I’ll be fine.”

“And we’ll go too,” Rooke told him, linking arms with Sven, then to me said, “We’ll meet you outside in an hour?” She hauled Sven away from the table.

Huxley screwed up his face, glaring at me. “You need to lay down some ground rules with her. It’s out of hand.”

“You’re telling me that Spyne and you don’t get freaky in the library?” I retorted.

Huxley colored.

*Exactly.* Some people liked poisons. Others probably did kinky Scrabble stuff. I didn’t want to know.

I shoveled in the remainder of my food and stood. I had to get dressed for the bar. I may have an agenda to find Rhona—the human rep of the Deception Valley Luther pack—tonight, but the idea of a drink or two outside of the coven excited me too. No wonder Wild used to escape there from time to time.

He fell into step beside me. “I’ve got time before I need to head out.”

“I haven’t seen you all day. How did you get on?”

“Well enough. There are a lot of questions. People are looking forward to tomorrow. They want something solid.”

Bedwyr had conveyed as much. “I can understand that. I’m calling an early meeting tomorrow—before breakfast. I’d like updates on everything before I speak to our magus.”

“Your magus,” he corrected. “Our coven.”

*Yuck.*

Wild snorted. “It will feel normal one day.”

“You sound like Ty.”

“What’s he been saying?”

“That I haven’t accepted the seat.”

“Have you?”

We entered my new quarters—the one with handy access to the demon realm. Just what every magus wanted. “You know the answer.”

“You see it as a temporary thing.”

*Yes.* I walked into the bathroom and turned on the faucets to fill the tub. “This can only be a temporary thing.”

He didn’t need to disagree aloud. I felt it. I just felt strongly that my days as leader were numbered.

I stripped off my clothing, and Wild groaned as I tossed a few minerals into the water, followed by a few herbs and plants from my purification kit. “Like what you see?”

Wild’s hand wrapped around a fistful of my long, white hair. He pulled my back against him, so I was looking in the mirror, arched.

My lips curved. “Is that a yes?”

With his other hand, he reached down, and then his erection was pushing between my thighs. I widened my stance, tilting further, and my groan not long after was half despair and half elation as he sank all the way inside.

Too much sensation at once, and yet I knew the deliciousness he would deliver.

“That’s a yes, my temptress,” Wild said in my ear. He held me still, one hand in my hair, and one hand hooked around my hip, and I watched him work in and out of me, my breath quickening at the rhythmic tightening of his abs and arm muscles. He was peering down my back, watching his length enter me, but eventually, he lifted his gaze to mine in the mirror.

Wild moaned low, releasing my hip to deliver a sharp slap to my ass.

I cried out, and Wild pressed me forward on the vanity, lifting one of my knees onto the bench surface.

Impossibly, he filled me even more, and I shrieked, pressing a hand against the mirror in order to shove back with his drives forward.

“Fucking exquisite,” he said harshly, pulling my head to one side to half kiss and half bite my exposed neck.

I panted, no longer able to meet him in movement as well as before with my head held in such a way.

“You want what only I can give you,” he told me.

“Give it all to me,” I whispered, watching him in the mirror. My gaze was scorching, and all for him. His fire was mine. All fucking mine.

He worked his thumb into my mouth, and I sucked on it, gently biting it too. Wild pulled it out, and his thumb pressed on the tight entrance to my ass a second later.

He sustained pressure there, never entering, but the possibility of him doing so was enough to make me crazy.

“Wild,” I hushed.

“Show me,” he demanded.

I detonated around him, and though he held on initially, I watched the moment he couldn't deny the pulsing temptation of my body around his erection any longer. I got a show of my own as a speechless release left him shaking.

That made two of us.

I was spent.

Wild set me on the vanity, still breathing hard. “I could fuck you over and over again. That's all I want to do.”

“That's all I *want* you to do,” I replied, looping my arms around his neck and drawing him in for a kiss.

I pulled back after, distracted by information through our bond. “That's a relief?”

He searched my face. “Of course.”

My eyes narrowed. “It’s more than that.”

“Nothing to feel concerned over.”

“I’ll let you know if I don’t want to be concerned about something. How about that?”

His amusement floated between us. “Noted and understood. I feel unsettled that you aren’t feeling any urge to continue our ritual. I’m struggling to deny its call, and... Is there any change in your demon?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry.”

He kissed me hard and fast. “Nothing to be sorry about. Just ignore this insecure mate.”

*Mate.* I smiled. “I like that. *Mate* fits better than boyfriend.”

“I’d hope so.”

No matter what he said, Wild really was worried about my inability to see magic glowing from his chest. “You don’t think we should do more to figure out what happened to her?”

“What can we do?”

A good question. One I didn’t have an answer to.

He kissed me again. “I meant what I said. Ignore me. I trust that everything has a time and place.”

“Why?”

“Because of what the Mother said to me in the cave.”

I waited.

He kissed my nose and started to dress.

“You cannot be leaving on that cliffhanger,” I said in outrage.

Wild left the bathroom.

“Unbelievable,” I shouted after him.

“Be careful tonight, my love.”

I pouted, alone in the bathroom.

He called, "I'll wake you later on. Nice and slow."

I lost my pout. The man was forgiven.

But I'd squeeze the truth out of him. The Mother blasted me with lightning, but I'd never had an actual conversation with her. I wanted to know what she'd said on a personal level outside of my relationship too.

But all of that could wait until I was done conspiring with Vissimo and Luthers.



“Nice,” Rooke said as I joined them outside.

She was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. Both black. Sven couldn’t take his eyes off her, and with good reason.

My pastel-haired and blue-eyed cousin *rocked* black. It made her look funky. When I wore it, I looked like the third and most devious wife of Lucifer. She was my mother and grandfather, and I’d been passed our grandmother’s genetics. So had Syera.

Okay, I was half demon too. That may contribute.

“Thanks,” I replied, striding across the meadow in my towering heels—spelled to feel as soft as a cloud. I wasn’t stupid about life.

I wore a jumpsuit that covered my runes, but the outfit had a plunging neckline. My position as coven leader had made me think twice about my attire tonight. I wanted to wear pub attire, and anything I wore should also be classy. Ditching the classy part was my natural setting. The outfit had taken thought.

We exited the barrier, and I made a mental note to check what fueled it now Corentin no longer had to release energy each day. Then again, if we had an alliance with the Vissimo and Luthers, and the demons could get through our current barrier, did we need to expend energy that way?

Sven looked around with interest as we walked through the forest toward the only business establishment for miles. A pub



—The Buried Knolls Pub, in fact. Someone had gone for the logical business name approach.

“What’s our plan?” Rooke asked. “Will Rhona be there?”

The others had snuck out not long ago to get a message to the supernatural leaders. One that warned the Vissimo and Luthers not to send anything further before we made contact again.

“Hopefully. I wrote a letter to give her. Just saying—hey, let’s catch up.”

Sven glanced at me.

“Obviously in more leadery terms,” I told him. “Chill.”

“I’ll chill when I don’t have to work around the clock to keep the coven from imploding.”

“That bad?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer.

Rooke did. “Yes. Tenuous.”

I nodded. “I didn’t want to make this move with the other species straight away, but only seven covens have voiced their support. With training and time to get defenses in place, we can survive an attack of the last size, as long as the demons don’t have any new tricks. But if the demon king sends more...”

“Vissimo and Luthers would be great to have around,” Sven finished.

“Each of our races will have information on the demons, not to mention the differences in our individual powers. We need many strengths and every bit of knowledge to finish this for good.”

“For good,” Rooke repeated.

“We can’t live our lives defending the coven against constant threat.” Bedwyr made that clear. I had powers the other magus didn’t, and that gave me some certainty. They didn’t have any of that. Varden had slept in the quarters I’d just taken over. He’d told me how that job affected him. I’d

seen the physical signs—the ulcers on his body—that told me how demon magic could eat at a magus. “We need to ensure the demons won’t attack every week—or year—or decade. We need a permanent solution.” Otherwise, perhaps the solution was to *give* the demons the territory they wanted and seek refuge in another area.

Which would mean fighting other supernaturals for their territory, thereby doing the same thing to them that the demons were doing to us.

“You’re right,” Sven said. “We can’t live under that threat year after year.”

We fell quiet as the bar came into sight.

I hadn’t been back to this dusty, greasy place since Rooke and I snuck out, and it was a strange feeling to have been here last as someone without knowledge of her true heritage. Without the addition of four relics. Without a bond to Wild.

That woman felt like a child to me now.

I entered the bar, opting to sit in the keg shadows Wild had once occupied. The others sat either side of me, and Rooke ordered our drinks.

I accepted the absinthe shot, casting her a questioning look.

She shrugged. “That’s what I’m being told you need.”

“I’m surprised I don’t need gasoline.” Absinthe was a win.

No longer than a minute passed before a human joined us.

“You took your time,” the red-haired woman said to me.

I looked up at Rhona. “You spend all your nights here?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “And it’s fucking boring.”

I bet it was. “Your leaders will be glad you persevered.”

Something flickered over her expression. Regret? Determination? Rhona tilted her chin. “I hope so.”

I sipped at my absinthe. “You have something to prove.”

She met my gaze without flinching. “A mistake to rectify. Trust to repair.”

The human red-headed woman was prickly as fuck, but I could appreciate the amount of work it might have taken her to make such an admission to herself and me too. Some people volleyed between pride and denial like a fucking beach ball at spring break. From pride to denial and denial to pride, one reinforcing the other until a stunted person who couldn't admit failure, and therefore never progressed, was all that remained.

“Let's grab a table,” I said.

“We'll go to my table. No one comes near it anymore,” she answered.

*I wonder why.*

We sat at her corner table, and she glanced at Sven and Rooke. “They're not coming?”

“No, not this time.” I clasped my hands together atop the table. “Things have changed since my friends delivered the last message.”

“The one who told me to wait some more.” Rhona scowled.

I didn't smirk. Just. “I can deal with your leaders, and those of the Vissimo clan in Bluff City, directly as the leader of The Buried Knolls coven.”

Rhona blinked. “The first time I saw you, you were joining the coven, weren't you?”

I hadn't told her as much, but... “Yes.”

She snorted. “You fuckers work fast.”

“You know other fuckers like me?”

“Yeah. Basilia, and my sister, Andie. When you guys enter the scene, you're sitting on the throne five minutes later.”

I lowered my shot glass. “You have a sister?” *Who's the Deception Valley leader.* Who was a Luther, too, or so I'd assumed. *Interesting.*

“Didn’t know about her for most of my life, but yep.” She searched my face. “Only a year between us. Everyone thinks we’re twins.”

I smiled sadly. “I had a twin.”

Pain flickered in her eyes. “What happened?”

“She was killed by a demon five years ago.”

I didn’t know if Rhona could truly imagine the pain. I’d been raised with Syera from day one. We’d existed in the same womb. Invisible parts of us were shared as though we were one person at times.

“Is that what started this demon war for you?” she asked.

“No. I didn’t know which supernatural was responsible for my family’s murder for a long time.”

“But demons were involved, and they are now?”

“They are.” I slid over my letter. “This is for Princess Basilia and Pack Leader Andie.”

“Just call her Andie. She hates that proper shit.”

I liked her more already. “And Basilia?”

“Call her princess because that’s what she is. She owns it somehow. You never manage to forget her sharp teeth and claws despite it.”

Spoiled? Or with a thirst for power as well as blood? I wasn’t sure what to make of Rhona’s remark. “I’d like to meet with them both. Their mates are welcome also.”

“Good luck otherwise.”

I tapped the table, wondering how much to tell the human. “There was a demon attack on the coven not many days past. We have reason to believe the demon king’s efforts are not restricted to maguskind.”

Her eyes rounded. “There’s a demon king?”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Unthinking gremlins. Savage hellhounds.”

I hid my smile behind my glass as I finished the absinthe. “How long will it take to get this message to your sister?”

Rhona’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “I’ll leave immediately. I’ll go directly to her, and no one will rip this fucking letter from my hands.”

She was a human, and I didn’t doubt her intent. Just her ability to ensure it. I hovered a hand over the letter and coated the parchment and ink with apothecary and battle. “If that does happen, however, then the letter will appear blank to anyone other than the four leaders it’s addressed to.”

“But then I’d need to come back and sit in this fucking bar for another fucking month. Not happening,” she replied.

I studied her. “What mistake did you make?”

She didn’t want to answer, and if she hadn’t been alone for the last two months, Rhona likely wouldn’t have replied. “I put my faith in the wrong person, and then didn’t put my pride aside until too late.”

“You’ve been trusted with this task,” I pointed out.

“Only because my sister is the person who deserved my faith from the get-go. She decided not to give up on me.” Rhona held up the letter. “Thank you.”

I glanced around the dimly lit bar that smelled of stale cooking oil and wet carpet. “Don’t thank me. You earned it.” I rose. “If you need to return, come straight to the barrier through the forest. You’ll be safe, and you’ve spent enough time in this place.” I joined the others.

“Is it done?” Sven asked, watching as Rhona strode out of the bar, slipping into her leather jacket on the way.

I’d invited Vissimo and Luthers to the coven for what I’d expect was the first time in the coven’s history.

I nodded. “Sure is.”

*For better, or for worse.*



*Supernaturals, various teams and efforts, Frond's table of dissenters, the ritual with Wild, and my demon's disappearance.* My mind was filled and frantic, a sure sign that I'd neglected downloading information into my quipu for too long.

And a coven of over three hundred magus waited for me to talk, watching as I tried to order my thoughts after the quick meeting I'd just had.

*You look crazy.*

Wild sent me courage, and I held on tight. This moment was the same as many others in my life where I'd felt stuck.

*"Where do I start?" I asked my mother, standing in the middle of the magical trap she'd formed to help me practice.*

*She smiled, blue eyes glinting. "At the start, Tempy. Always at the start."*

Ryzika's robes settled around me as I stood from the table of my advisors up on the stage. "Mother," I said, closing my eyes and raising my palms to Varden and Winona, who sat either side of me. I felt their palms against mine as they stood also, and after a brief lull of surprise, I heard the shift as the entire coven mimicked me. "From your energy are we born. From your lessons are we taught. By your mercy do we live. By your hammer do we fall. Into your open arms do we slip unto our end. Peer into our hearts and ambitions and guide us from falseness to truth, to oneness, and to prosperity in your world. Mother be."

“Mother be,” echoed the coven.

In control of myself once more, I looked at the magus. “You have been very patient while waiting to gain understanding of what happened last week. I thank you for that. I thank you because there were things I had to understand first with help from my advisors.” I gestured to the six magus at the table, three either side. “While I cannot answer everything, I will impart what we have made sense of.”

No one spoke. Not even Frond’s gang who liked to fall silent after everyone else. He wanted more ammo, that was all, and he’d get it from this speech. I wasn’t fooled into believing what I said next would change *his* mind.

“Firstly, you are aware that the council is disbanded and an advisory team is formed. I would like to acknowledge the huge efforts of the council in their work while Caves was being played. That is not something I take lightly, that anyone should take lightly, and our history books will reflect as much. Thank you to all of those magus.

“Onward to coven matters, there are several new teams that are forming this week. Esteemed Advisor Astar”—I gestured to Wild—“is working with our sentries to ensure our defenses there are honed. He will work with our lead strategist, Sage, who is putting together a team of the best minds this coven has to offer. Esteemed Advisor Cyderh”—I gestured at Delta—“will soon be organizing training sessions geared toward defense and offense against demons. This will trickle across the affinities as we gather information. Esteemed Advisor Leif”—I nodded at Huxley—“has formed a team of grimoires with this need for information in mind. Thank you to everyone who has joined one or more of those teams already. This is where we start in order to make our coven safe.”

I paused to let them absorb that. “To that end, if you are *not* part of those teams, then you are crucial to our future safety. One week ago, demons attacked this coven. That the demons were able to leave their realm showed that they had amassed considerable strength. We have put together that a demon feeds on negative emotion—things like anger and pain and sadness and hurt. Demons feed on this for as long as is

needed to gain strength and eventually step out of their realm. A demon is driven by the need to expand territory and make any new territory—and the creatures within—a part of their realm and therefore a constant food source.”

More than a few looks were exchanged.

“Yes,” I said. “I can see many of you understand what that means. The demons seek to claim the knolls. And use *us* as their permanent food source. That is the danger that stares us in the face. But how did an army of demons enter so close to our realm without our knowledge? *That* is where our minds need to be. The answer seems clear, to me and to my advisors, and maybe to some of you who were relieved to see the end of our three-hundred-year-old game. I believe the answer was Caves.”

Loud conversation broke out, and I listened closely to the general emotions through the chamber. Some disagreed, some felt shocked, and some didn’t dismiss it out of the gate. I heard their fear and nerves.

I let the conversation come to a natural end. “Whether or not that’s the case, we can say with certainty that a demon grows strength via feeding on negative emotion. To that end, you are aware by now that we have started a centering circle initiative to operate three times daily. For those in a team, or not, our objective is to limit those negative emotions to what is normal. For too long our coven has existed in two teams. That ends now. That *must* end if we are to avoid the fate the demons have in store for us. I want no one under the illusion that this threat is something to make light of. You do so at the risk of your life and of those around you.”

The mood was solemn. Good.

This was no joke.

Now to lay some groundwork.

“For three hundred years, our rooms have depicted our position on a gameboard. Tomorrow, the esteemed will adjust to new quarters based on their power ranking alone. The strongest will room closest to the entrance of our cave and to



my quarters—which contains the only internal demon gate. The day after, proven will do the same. The day after that, novices will rearrange also. We are no longer Fertim or Vero. We are the Buried Knolls coven. Esteemed Advisor Hyatte”—I settled a hand on Varden’s shoulder—“is in charge of rolling out incentives to counter the demons’ influence within the coven. Until then, be aware that if you’re feeling high levels of negative emotion, then this could be our enemy’s influence. Demon magic is at play in the coven, trying to push us toward that which makes them stronger and us weaker.

“I’m not telling you that you can’t feel. Many of us feel afraid of what happened and what may happen. We all feel a lot in this moment, and the last week. But let us hone these emotions into a weapon that can’t be used against us. Tell someone you trust if you feel that the level of what you feel is unusual. Ask for perspective. If you notice someone is acting out of sorts, then please open that conversation with them. If you have questions or concerns, then please come to me or my advisors. I will answer any that I can, and I hope to answer any I *can’t* in time.”

The lull in the wake of my words wasn’t contemplative as such. More like I’d overwhelmed the coven with information they’d need time to process.

I took a breath. “Now it’s time to join the centering circle if you wish to, or to attend scheduled team meetings. Otherwise, I wish you well in your affinities or projects today.”

I sat, my heart thumping, and magus broke out into murmurs and whispers—some exiting the chamber to do as I’d asked.

I hoped.

Varden murmured, “Nicely done.”

I’d managed to circumvent the subject of the demon gates, my father’s dagger, and a million other incriminating things. *Today*. What tomorrow would bring was tomorrow’s problem. Corey would be proud of me letting it all flow over me, or whatever.

For now, I had some reading to do on the history of Ogham Staves. I kissed Wild's cheek on the way. "See you later."

He squeezed my hand. "You will."

Huxley hooked my arm as I passed his seat at the table. "I need to speak to you."

"Can't," I answered. "Busy."

He scoffed. "Make time. I'm important."

"Has anyone ever commented that you're arrogant?"

"They describe ancient gods that way too. What's your point?"

I laughed. "In private?"

He pushed up his thick-rimmed glasses. "Yeah. Probably best."

We walked to my quarters, and once inside, Huxley cast a nervous glance at the invisible demon gate on the far wall before sitting on the couch opposite me.

"So what happened?" I asked.

He narrowed his green eyes. "You know why I'm here."

"You gave me a bogus answer the other day when I asked why you went to the other demon gate despite knowing an army had come out of it."

The grimoire scowled.

I waited, then said, "I have other things to do if you're going to waste my time."

"I'm getting there," he snapped. Huxley shifted on the couch, then opened his mouth. Then closed it.

I stood. "I'm going."

"There was a woman inside the gate," he blurted.

*That* made me pause. I lowered back down. "The woman wasn't a demon?"

"She was, but most of her caste scales were covered. At least I thought so at the time."

Demons operated in a hierarchy that seemed to have a lot to do with the color of their scales—and how much of their bodies the scales covered. “What gate was this?”

“The one I visited first. She was standing there, waiting. When she saw me, she was—” He paused as though searching for the right word. “Frantic.”

“In what way?”

He murmured, “At first I thought she wanted to get out of the demon realm. But then, why couldn’t she just walk out like the army? It was as though she was trapped.”

My insides froze at that word in particular. “What did she look like?”

“Like I said, she was mostly covered. Scarf around the head, neck, and chest. Long sleeves and pants. Boots. She was tall and moved like a fighter.” His green focus burned into me. “Why did your expression change just now?”

“My demon told me that she was trapped, remember?” Figuring out what *fostbwyke* meant had taken forever. “She made it clear her trap wasn’t my divination affinity—that she was somehow here while being trapped elsewhere too.”

Huxley blinked. “You think that was her?”

I didn’t know what to think. “How could my demon be a person of her own, though?” I pursed my lips. “The woman you saw seemed corporeal?”

“I believe so. When she hit at the demon gate, it rippled.”

I released a pent-up breath. There went that theory. Plus, if my demon were stuck in the other realm, I wouldn’t be alive by now. The demon king would use her against me. “I’m grasping at straws. Forget it. What did the woman do next?”

“It’s like she heard someone coming,” he continued. “She stopped hitting at the barrier and sank into a crouch. She held a finger to her lips, and then pointed to the next gate—the one where the other army had come from.”

“So you went there.”

He glowered. “Well, I expected she might have something helpful to say. She didn’t seem... vicious. Or like she wanted to fight. She wanted to help. You would have gone too.”

“I wasn’t criticizing you, Huxley. I was making a statement.”

He lost the glower. Most of it.

“What stopped you from telling me this earlier?” I asked.

Huxley glanced away. “When I said the words aloud, they seemed so foolish. I went to the other gate because a demon told me to do it.”

It really did. And yet— “Anything can sound stupid if you put it in ridiculous terms. There are things you might’ve done differently in this whole situation. Have you reflected on those?”

“I should have told Sven or Corentin I was going to the other gate.”

I dipped my head. They—and Wild—shared a powerful charm where they could exchange thoughts. Alerting Sven and Corey would have taken a few seconds. “I don’t consider your decision as stupid. Going to the other gate was a risk, but you calculated that based on what you interpreted from her behavior at the time. Now, you may make a different choice.”

“I don’t believe she was trying to trick me,” he said in a curious voice. “I think she was discovered on her way to the other gate, but why was she trying to escape? Who *is* she?”

“We may never know.” I was curious too. Damn grimoire magic. “I do know that you should have told me or someone else about her immediately. This is valuable information.”

“How so?”

“Because it shows there’s a chance not all demons agree. As we know with our coven, division is weakness. We could use that against them. The demons seemed so subservient to the higher castes. Clearly, they can act independently too.”

Huxley colored. “Right.”

“Thank you for telling me now,” I said. “It may be worth reflecting on what beliefs about yourself led to the delay in doing so.”

He colored further. “I will. Sorry, Tempest. I’ll make up for it.”

“I know you will. What color were her scales, by the way?”

“I could only see the ones on her hands. They were black.”

*Black.* We hadn’t encountered a demon with black scales yet. “I wonder if that’s powerful or weak.” Black and white could probably be either.

The magus hummed. “Powerful, I think. Based on how she moved.”

Another mystery for another day. “How are you and Spyne?”

Huxley smiled. “Good. I’m not sure why he puts up with me.”

“Me neither.”

The quad member rolled his eyes, and we walked out of my quarters together, chatting. Rooke was on her way to my quarters.

“Huxley, there you are,” she said.

He glared.

“Yes,” she said in exasperation. “The greenhouse is purified. Hurry up, I’ve had a thought.” She peered past him to me. “Thought you may wish to know...” My cousin checked the tunnel was clear. “I heard a few comments after the gathering today.”

I braced myself. “Like?”

“Like how you’ve been chosen, and some of them knew it from the start. You just understood the game so well. You were so powerful that the quad accepted you as one of them.”

Huxley snorted as I wrinkled my nose.

Pretty sure the quad acted like assholes toward me for most of that time.

Rooke recited, “You always did dawn walks, and are so old-fashioned at esbat. Plus you talk to council members and elders like you’re their equal, and always have. That kind of stuff. They’re saying that even though you don’t look like you want to be leader, you’re doing what’s best for the coven, and they appreciate you dedicating yourself to it regardless.”

Not bad. I’d expected far worse. “Thanks, Rooke.”

“So Rooke listens to whispers, and Sven speaks them?” Huxley asked.

That about summed it up.

My bond with Rooke was shining, and I glanced at her in question.

“I was butthurt about not being an advisor,” she admitted. “Not that I want you to feel bad about that. I can see your point now. You need ears too.”

Our bond swelled further—our *normal* magus bond. The only normal magus bond I possessed. The one with Wild was otherworldly. Then there were the three withered bonds I’d shared with Syera, Grandmother, and Mother that told me they were gone. Then there was—I stopped in my tracks, staring at the remaining tether. I hadn’t looked at it in so long.

Huxley banged into me. “What—”

I spun on the spot and walked double-time back to my quarters. “I’ve never been able to follow it before.”

“Follow what?” Rooke asked, hurrying to keep up. Huxley wasn’t far behind her.

“My mystery tether,” I said, barging into my room. “The one that doesn’t make sense. I’ve never been able to follow it.”

I stood before the demon gate and gazed within at the thin tether that connected me to another. “It *does* connect me to a demon, then. The bond travels into that realm. Can I only see it now because the gate has been opened so much?”

“Or maybe because the demons’ power has grown,” Huxley chimed in.

If the other person was in the demon realm, then that could explain why the tether was so weak and thin. Or did me being magus and the other person being a demon screw with things?

“We knew the person on the other end was a demon, right?” my cousin said. “That’s why you decided to stop looking for them.”

Huxley glanced at me, and I could tell his thoughts echoed mine.

“Tempest,” he said. “The demon woman I saw. What if she was looking for you.”

I stared at the rock wall that concealed the demon gate. “Maybe the tether belongs to *my* demon. And maybe my demon is trapped in that realm.”

And yet so many things in that didn’t make sense, including that the woman Huxley encountered had been corporeal. I said, “Plus, the bond only appeared before I came here. I was born half demon. I’ve always had her, so I always should have had a bond to her.”

“Demons come into maturity at around sixteen,” he answered. “Maybe yours came in later because the strength of your magus power kept her locked away in your divination affinity. The affinity you didn’t want to explore.”

The larger concept seemed impossible—not to know an entire facet of yourself until twenty-one—but I really hadn’t known about her until recently. And I kept coming back to the fact that my demon told me she was trapped elsewhere. “I don’t know what to think.”

The three of us stood before the gate in silence.

Eventually, I sighed. “Gazing at a rock won’t give any answers. Just another question for the pile in the meantime.”

But figuring this out could solve so many mysteries in my life. Had my demon managed to keep a foothold in me all this time while trapped in the demon realm? Had her magic

expenditure during the battle with the demons made it impossible to keep that foothold any longer?

If she was trapped in the demon realm, how the hell did I reach her? And what if the demon king found her first?

Right now I felt cold fear at the idea that my demon was on the other end of this third tether, caged somewhere I couldn't reach her, and life had taught me that I often felt fear when faced with a truth I didn't want to admit.





I dropped the last braid of my quipu. I'd left the task too long, but *boy* did emptying my thoughts into the artwork feel good. Not so good for my fingers, but if I kept up with this, then I could begin to consult the quipu while making coven decisions. If Huxley and Spyne managed to dig up useful demon information, I hoped the quipu could piece together some of the demons' plans too.

*That* would be of real value.

I turned to Wild, who sat on the couch reading. "Anything good?" I asked.

"Just brushing up on my Vissimo and Luther knowledge. All done?"

"Even if I wasn't, my fingers are."

He put his book aside, and I took the invitation offered, curling up on his lap. He took my hands in his, and soothing, cooling magic licked away the throbbing rawness in them. He placed his arms around me after.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Your mind is quieter now."

"Always gets busy if I neglect my quipu. I don't like to think how life may've been different without the gift. I had trouble ignoring the threads and braids everywhere as a young child. Pretty sure humans considered me majorly weird."

"You are what you are."

I looked at him. “Did you just call me weird in a roundabout way?”

His dark eyes danced, then he said, “Huxley told me about today.”

Through all manner of meetings, the curiosity of what happened this morning had been on my mind. I finally understood the impossibility of denying curiosity as a grimoire. I’d be driven to find the answer to this mystery tether always now. I blew out a breath. “I need to figure the tether out. Even though I decided not to care about the person on the other end, now I have to, and I don’t know where to start.”

“Have you tried communicating through the bond?”

Not in a long time. Not since it first arrived.

“I’ll give it a go.” I dove within, quickly locating the thin tether to another being in the demon realm. I knocked a few times, then waited. *Nothing*. I plucked it harder, but the bond was so thin, I didn’t dare risk anything more.

I checked my divination affinity for any sign of my demon after.

Nothing aside from black smoke. *Nothing, nothing*.

Were the two linked? Huxley had mentioned the woman had black scales.

I opened my eyes. “No response. And no sign of my demon either.”

Wild didn’t reply. He was working through something akin to fear, and I understood that fear. I’d felt it since realizing the deeper ramifications of the possibility my demon was trapped in another realm.

“Tempest, what if your demon can’t come back by herself?” he asked in a calm voice.

Wild was anything but calm.

My chest tightened. “And what if the only reason we were going through the ritual was because she had a foothold in me?”

Now that she's gone, what does that mean for us?"

Wild started to shake. He hadn't done so in a long time, but I wasted no time resting a hand on the *V* of skin visible at the neck of his tunic.

His words came in a rush, "The glow of your power is brighter each day. I'm struggling to see through it. Your magic puts me in a trance. I can shake it off for now."

*For now.*

He hadn't mentioned a trance before. "What do you think that means? What is the ritual telling you to do?"

"To devour your magic."

I pulled my hand away. "The ritual wants you to eat my power?"

He dragged his gaze to mine. "Yes. Every bit of it."

What did one do with such news? "O-kay."

Wild's throat worked. "I won't, obviously, but..."

Denying the ritual was really fucking hard, and it got harder every day. I said that from *my* side of the fence too. I'd never experienced the same strength of urges as Wild. "We're going to figure it out."

"I won't let you go into that realm," he snapped.

My brows drew together at his abrupt shift. "I'm not going into the demon realm, Wild."

His embrace was crushing, nearly painful. "*Promise me.*"

"I've already promised you that. To never go without telling you first."

"Promise me you won't go in at all," he snarled.

Wild wasn't home. I rested my hand on his chest again. "You know that I can't promise such a thing. We may need to enter the realm for a number of reasons."

Denial burned in his gaze as he waged for control over his fear and possessiveness. If I could be tied down with rope and

chains, he would have done so already. “I want to try something else to trigger our mating ritual again.”

“What?” he forced out.

“I wonder if we can spark it,” I said. “Like lighting a fire. What do you think?”

I watched as he clawed his way back to the semblance of control. I hadn’t realized he was struggling this much.

Wild loosened his hold at last. “How do you propose we do that?”

“Just enter into our bond and see what happens?”

A corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. “Just see what happens?”

“Not like we have a book on this, right?” I quipped.

He acknowledged that with a small nod. “Not like we do. I’ll see you there.”

I closed my eyes, resting my cheek against his chest, and I found my way to our four-strand bond. The thing was monstrous. Permanent. There was no withering with this bond, unlike the bonds I shared with deceased family members. If this bond was severed—if one of us died or betrayed the other to such lengths that the bond snapped—then I understood death awaited both of us. More than death, though, I feared another eternity in chaos. An *endless* eternity in chaos this time.

I’d barely survived the loss of my family, and I had more than enough respect for the pain and suffering a lost bond could cause. I would be nothing more than a wraith in half death without the bond I shared with Wild.

There were four colors. Gold—which denoted the grimoire gift the Mother gave me after the last step in the ritual. I was assuming she’d channeled the gift through Wild’s grimoire affinity, and again I was reminded of the concept of grafting. The Mother used my demon heritage as a grafting point to allow me and Wild to go through the mating ritual. Demons possessed mates, like Vissimo and Luthers, but magus had

never possessed them until Wild and me. It couldn't be coincidence that I was half demon, and Wild had gained an echo of a demon in the process.

She'd used Wild's grimoire affinity and our connection as a graft to give me a fourth affinity too.

The remaining three strands, purple, blue, and green, tied our bodies, magics, and emotions together.

I opened my center to the spiraling bond and took a spiritual step onto it. I could sense Wild at the other end. I felt the vibrating through the bond as he took the same step.

I kept walking, moving from one strand to another.

Languidness spread through my body and mind like a soft, heavy blanket, and a humming overtook my very soul as I moved toward Wild's energy.

The center. I stopped there, sensing I should go no further.

He was here too.

We were at the center of our centers, the middle of our bond where we were in the calmest and most aligned state of magic. I'd never been to this place with anyone. I hadn't known such a state or place existed.

This was... certain.

I didn't want to disturb the lulling security, but we'd come here for a reason.

With no other idea, I sent out a pulse of intention—of my yearning for the mating ritual I'd loathed until recent weeks to restart. To spark.

I felt the intention ripple outward and disappear into the abyss surrounding us. Wild sent out a ripple, too, which disappeared.

We remained there for a time before I stepped back the way I'd come. Never turning from Wild, I drew into myself once more. There was a coldness to it—a return of uncertainty. At the center of centers, things were simple.

There, only we had existed.

I opened my eyes and lifted my head to find Wild watching me. Waiting.

“Anything?” he asked.

I glanced down at his chest. Not glowing. “No. No change.”

Sorrow whispered through me at his disappointment, but he forced a smile. “A nice place to discover, though.”

I smiled back. “Nice isn’t the word I’d choose. But yes, I’m glad we found it.”

I was fresh out of ideas, and I could tell that Wild had made the same decision as me to drop the matter until another time. And yet Wild was losing control to the urge of the mating ritual. The glow of my magic had started to send him into a trance. And his growing desire was to devour my magic.

To not consider what might happen to our bond, or to Wild, if I wasn’t able to get my demon back was impossible.

How ironic that the very things I’d wanted gone since this began were all I wanted back.



I was starving, more so than usual, and I had a feeling the trip down Bond Land with Wild and my time with the quipu were to blame.

“High Esteemed.”

*Barrow.* I paused and waited for him to catch up. “Good morning, Barrow. Did you enjoy the dawn walk?”

I’d been pleased to see the advisors here this morning, aside from Wild, who was on sentry duty. The coven numbers at the dawn walk had increased since my talk. Even if we hadn’t been under threat from the demons, the sight of so many magus walking as the light of the moon and sun met would elate me. That was when the Mother’s presence was strongest, and I always felt better for it myself.

“I did. I haven’t done them in so long.” His watery eyes were serious. “Maybe there’s something in what you say. If demon magic wants us divided, then maybe that’s what we were becoming, more and more. I can’t fathom why I stopped walking at dawn in the first place.” He frowned. “I can’t fathom why I stopped purifying before esbat and important events. Why my gems have remained untouched for decades.” He glanced at me. “Maybe there’s truth to this, no matter how impossible it seems.”

I smiled. “If there’s truth to it, then you’re doing the right things to counter the effects of the demons’ magic.”

Barrow nodded, then held up a letter. “This just arrived.”

I'd come to realize that Barrow was my postman. For some reason, letters went to him first. When I'd joked about calling him Postman Barrow, he'd been entirely confused. I'd spent half an hour trying to explain the human postal system to him.

A mistake I wouldn't make again.

The letter was thin. A seal of black wax secured the contents. Not that Barrow couldn't have magicked it open, but such magic would leave a trace unless the person was very, very good at the job.

In this case, Barrow hadn't needed to.

The letter was addressed to me, and on the back, it detailed the names of the Vissimo and Luthers I'd contacted.

Barrow's gaze was heavy on me.

*Caught red-handed.* Better own it. "Good, I've been waiting for this."

"The letter the vampires and werewolves last sent *was* addressed to you." His eyes widened. "The warning it spoke of in their letter... You were trying to tell them about the demons."

No point denying it now. "Yes. Like I said, the Vissimo and Luthers have also been embroiled in games of their own. I thought it best to send them word. Alas, our council wasn't in the mindset to open communications with them at the time. We could be in a better position now otherwise."

"We had no idea about the demons," he replied, spots of color appearing on his cheeks.

I squeezed his arm. "No, you didn't. You operated on what information you had at the time. I'm just happy it can all be out in the open."

He exhaled, nodding, and I lowered my arm.

"Do you seek an alliance?" Barrow asked.

I caught sight of Josie leaning against a tree nearby. "I seek a meeting with my advisors where we'll discuss such things in private." I gripped one of the pendants left by previous council



members. I'd altered it so I could summon all my advisors and also individual advisors. That would save me some searching time. I'd need to ask Winona and Sage how to do their head portal trick that allowed them to seek out an individual in the coven too. I had an idea of how, but I also didn't want to portal *inside* a person by accident. Grandmother had said I should only use that against someone I wanted to kill in a glorious, gory fashion.

I'd keep it on the back burner.

Barrow left ahead of me, and I followed at a slower pace, slitting my finger under the seal to open the message.

I read the contents and released a breath.

In the advisory chamber not long after, I sat at my authority and waited until Wild and Delta arrived and got themselves seated.

"Could I please get an update on our communication with other covens so far," I said.

Barrow, Winona, and Opal were on that job.

Winona answered, "There remain seven covens who have openly declared their support of our coven against the demons. We are in discussion with three other covens who seem half-willing, but are concerned of giving the wrong impression."

Opal added, "Which means they don't want to incur the wrath of the original coven."

She summoned a piece of parchment and slid it across the table to me.

I ran my eyes over the names of the seven covens and associated leaders. "Rguc."

"She predicts great things of you," Barrow explained in a vague voice. He was thinking about the letter I'd received.

I tapped on another name. "Nightlock. She was the old high esteemed. The outspoken one?"

Winona smiled. "She's known for speaking her mind. I gather she rather likes that quality in you too. She certainly

isn't cowed by the original coven."

I recognized two of the other names. One of the men, Bartemus, was my biggest fan during the three-hundred-year fight in Caves. I was glad for his offer of help. "What do they offer as support?"

"Four of them offer weapons and charms only," Barrow stated. "The others offer any willing magus, along with weapons and charms. All offer knowledge."

Huxley put in, "My team of grimoires are nearly through cataloguing the information we hold on the subject of demons. Next week, we'll approach the other covens and add any further information they hold to our knowledge bank."

They were that far already? That explained the dark rings around his eyes. "Please ensure your team is taking care of themselves too," I remarked.

Varden and Wild chuckled. As did Barrow.

Huxley cocked a brow. "I've told a group of voracious readers that their job for the foreseeable future is reading. That they have no commitments other than this. They don't want to sleep. They've been unleashed."

If someone told me all I had to do was read? The thought of curling up in bed for a few days with a pile of books wasn't off-putting in the slightest, and I was nowhere near the level of grimoire power his team possessed. "I see."

"We'll need somewhere to store the charms and weapons," Opal said.

I'd already considered that last night while working with my quipu. "Please convert the Vero and Fertim charm and weapon storerooms to coven storerooms. Lay the weapons and charms out the same—everyone is familiar with those systems—but remove all protections except a simple barrier that a novice can break. I want everyone able to access them." With how the Caves gameboard had been laid out, there was a weapon and charm storeroom in every wing of the caves.

Opal murmured, "Consider it done."

I held up the letter in my hand. “I received this today.”

All eyes shifted to the letter.

“The level of coven support we’ve received doesn’t inspire much confidence,” I said. “Ninety-seven covens, and only seven who will stand against the disapproval of the strongest coven to back us. Three covens that offer their magus—and only the willing magus from their midst at that. Weapons and charms are great, but only if we have the numbers to wield them.”

“We’ve asked for a list of magus and their power level from the three covens who have offered that level of support,” Winona said.

*Good.* “The more information we have the better.”

“You’re putting all this information into your quipu?” Delta asked.

I nodded. “I hope to use the quipu against the demons in the same way I used it in Caves. I don’t need the quipu to see that we need more power on our side.” I lowered the letter to the table. “The demon king would be an idiot to send a force of the same size. I believe his prior scouting missions—those where my grandfather, uncle, and Varden were attacked—had led him to think magus would be easily taken. He won’t make that mistake again. He’ll send a larger and more powerful force. We know very little of demon warfare—most of it we’ve gained from my one-on-one battle with the woman leading their army against us. We need help.”

“Is there a way to diminish the original coven’s hold over the other covens to convince more to our side?” Ruby asked.

I tilted my head. “Perhaps. I’m open to any ideas. We shouldn’t accept their meddling in this, nor their paltry show of upholding their contractual alliance with our coven. Their actions could result in the deaths of our friends and family. Are there any ideas in that direction as of this time?”

No one spoke.

“Something to consider, however.” I glanced across the stone table. “Wild, you may have more insight into the tactics

they use against other covens.”

His reply was dry. “I do know a thing or two about that, yes, and their hold won’t be easily shaken. They’ve had nearly one thousand years in the position of power. Their tree is well rooted.”

I’d fathomed as much. “That’s not where our time is best spent then. We need support now, not in ten or twenty years.” I patted the letter lying flat on the table. “Prior to the council ending, they’d received multiple letters from other supernatural species. The council chose not to open communication with those supernaturals.”

Most eyes riveted to the letter under my palm again.

*Confession time.* “I delivered a small warning to the other supernaturals about a threat of demons that I believed they should have knowledge of. I’d planned to give them the warning in full at a later date, so they might protect themselves and their people. Unfortunately, before that happened, they sent a message to the coven that resulted in a tracker being clasped around my ankle. I was unable to complete the warning.” I wouldn’t mention the letter the others sent in my stead.

Varden replied, “You sent them another message.”

“I did. Two days ago, through their human representative at the bar. In that letter, I invited them to this coven for discussion of possible alliance.”

Winona’s eyes rounded. I’d never seen such a reaction from her.

Barrow appeared defeated. He’d had more warning than the others and had likely guessed where this was going.

“What?” Delta gasped. “Vampires and werewolves here in the coven? That hasn’t been done in... in....”

“Ever?” Wild supplied. “We’ve never been attacked by demons either.”

She wasn’t the only one shocked or spluttering, but Varden appeared positively gleeful at the idea of a few fangs and

wolfies around. Huxley was excited, likely at the prospect of putting all his supernatural knowledge into practice. Wild felt determined and slightly amused. Ruby looked much like Winona, while Opal was white-lipped. I could guess that she'd been steadfastly against communication with other supernaturals.

Delta returned fire at Wild. "So we invite them here and give them a map to defeating us? If they sense our weakness against the fight with the demon, they could simply wait for the demons to beat us, then claim our territory for themselves."

"Remember they extended the idea of alliance first," I said. "And we could as easily be setting a trap to slaughter the leaders of the other races. An alliance must start with some risk. On both sides."

Opal's nostrils flared. "There's a good reason other supernaturals have never been here."

"Why is that, Opal?" Varden asked in his mild voice.

"Because a coven doesn't *need* outsiders to survive," she lashed back. "They have no respect for the Mother. They have no reverence in them. No celebration of life. No—"

Varden's lips quirked. "You have never met them, Opal. How do you know so much about them?"

"Vampires are the creatures of *death*. I know what my ancestors told me."

"And had they met Vissimo and Luthers for more than five minutes?" he asked her.

She narrowed her gaze. "A coven doesn't need the help of outsiders."

Humans did a similar thing—passed down racism like it was a family heirloom to guard and protect. Such a mentality worked best in small communities with limited outside exposure—like a coven. These ideals held little basis in logic and fact. And as a result, logic and fact weren't effective in convincing these people that they sounded like idiots.

“Are there any other ideas on how to gather a large amount of support in a short time?” I asked, not directing my question at Opal in particular.

Silence.

A shame. I wouldn't mind another avenue to pursue. Not that I'd give up on this one. “I'm all ears if anyone should think of something. Until that time, this is an opportunity we won't turn from despite the way things have always been done. We proceed with caution. The alliance may not be for us. This alliance may also be the only thing that saves our coven and prevents unnecessary loss of life.” I glanced at Opal. “Your grandchildren included. This will be uncomfortable for some coven members—you won't be alone in that. We're backed into a corner, Opal. You don't need to like it, but I do ask that you open yourself to the possibility it may be the difference between life and death. If you believe Vissimo to be the creatures of death, then who better to kill the demon king?”

Opal was white-lipped again, but she dipped her head.

Winona, having gained her composure, asked, “They've already replied?”

“Faster than expected. The human in the bar is the sister of the Deception Valley leader.”

Wild felt my pang of hurt at the mention of a sister. He sent a sorrowful acknowledgment back down the line.

I read the letter aloud,

*High Esteemed Tempest Corentine of the Buried Knolls Coven,  
We are pleased to accept your invitation at a time and date of  
your choosing. We look forward to hearing your warning in  
full at this meeting.*

I read the four names listed at the end.

“The vampire princess and crown prince,” Ruby said. “Why not the king and queen, assuming they have those?”

“No idea.” I lifted a shoulder. “But a fairy in Frankton Gorge told me the princess and crown prince were better to

deal with.”

I could see that the mention of fairies was too much for Opal today. I should stick with Luthers and Vissimo.

“Andie and Sasha,” Barrow echoed. “Which one is which?”

“Andie is the sister of the human I spoke with. Sascha is the pack alpha. He and Andie, and Basilia and Kyros, are mated, I believe. The human, Rhona, seemed very certain that one wouldn’t come here without the other.”

“Mated,” Delta said. “That means they’re stronger and have more powers.”

If they were anything like me and Wild, then yes.

I leaned back on the hard authority. *Must get a cushion for the fucking chair.* “I’d like to invite them here in three days’ time. They will be offered the option of staying overnight. The Buried Knolls is out of the way, and they do not possess the kind of magic we do to easily return home.”

“The coven will be in an uproar,” Barrow said warily. “They’ve already had to deal with so much. Perhaps this should occur at a later date?”

Varden shook his head. “We can’t delay. Demons could attack again tomorrow.”

“I agree with Varden. I’d hold the meeting tomorrow if I thought I could get them a reply and enough time to get here. With that said, I see your point, Barrow. This coven has had exposure to one type of supernatural in centuries—and the demons were anything but friendly. I’m about to invite two other races, and I wish to be transparent with what’s going on instead of sneaking the leaders in and out. What are the ideas on how best to present this to the coven?”

There was almost a collective exhale by all of us—a derisive one from Opal.

Maybe I shouldn’t worry about being leader for too long.

I may not be leading this coven tomorrow.



My stomach churned, but I forced myself through the motions of eating lunch. *Bite. Chew. Swallow. Drink.* I was about to release the Kraken on the coven, so to speak. The mood in the coven was cheerful, but I expected that may end in about—oh, ten minutes.

Huxley was grinning. “You’re screwed.”

Corentin smiled at me, or through me to something only he could see... I wasn’t sure.

Wild joined us, shrugging out of a thick set of robes.

“Good shift?” I asked.

“If good means no sign of activity at the demon gates, then yes.” He snagged a piece of toast off my plate. “We’ll need you to come out to the gates when you have time today. We’re tracking the speed the gates move at in the hopes of setting up defenses in advance so we’re always covered.”

Smart. Sexy too. “If I’m still leader in an hour, you got it.”

“If not?”

“I’ll be outrunning the pitchforks.”

Huxley grumbled, “I hate when you speak human.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I don’t like not knowing stuff, and I don’t know much human,” he snapped.

I looked closer. “You and Spyne are fighting again.”



“He’s being unreasonable!”

*Mother save me from this bespectacled pain in the ass.*

Sven sat, saving me from the need to reply. He leaned close. “We have a problem. The coven knows about the announcement.”

*What?* I peered around again. They’d been happy enough before, but now heads were bowed together in hushed conversation. Wide eyes. Shaking heads. “Fuck.”

My gaze swept to Opal, who sat eating her breakfast not far away. She was oblivious to the spread of gossip around her. If she didn’t spill the beans, then who did? I checked Winona, and then Ruby. Ruby sat with some friends from Vero, and she was shaking her head, lips pressed tight together. They were asking her for the truth, and she wasn’t giving it. *Good.*

I looked at Frond’s table. His numbers had diminished further overnight, but one person hadn’t shifted her butt from a chair. *Josie.* Bedwyr was back there, too, and looking pissed.

I had my culprit. “Josie was nearby when Barrow delivered the letter to me. She must’ve overheard parts of our conversation.” I pursed my lips. And Bedwyr had been waiting outside the advisory chamber when I’d exited the other day. He’d glanced at the letter in my hand. I was pretty sure he didn’t see anything, but I was beginning to suspect Frond had set spies on me.

Sven was sweating. “I’m barely holding this together, Tempest. You need to address the matter now.”

I rested a hand on his arm. “Done.”

I stood, opting not to use the stage still set up at one end of the eating chamber. I needed to appear as one of the coven. To be with them. Because I was. I didn’t want to be set apart and making these choices. I also didn’t want people to die because I wasn’t brave enough to venture beyond what had always been.

We needed help.

“Your attention,” I called.

Conversation was slower to cease today, and I tried not to let that bother me. Eventually, quiet reigned.

“A quick announcement this morning,” I said, sending battle to my voice so it reached everyone. “But one that may come as a shock to some. My advisory team has been hard at work this week, and one of the many things we’ve had to consider is the constant threat of demon attack. As you know, we share a contractual alliance with the original coven. The original coven responded to our call this week by sending a box of novice-level charms to use against the demons.”

I saw a few jaws drop at that.

“Not what we’d expected, I agree,” I said. “Not only that, they’ve been busy amongst the other covens, letting them know their stance against us. Out of ninety-seven covens, we have the support of seven.”

There was a collective low hum that was part sorrow and part fear. Frond was smirking, and I *longed* to wipe the fucking smile off his dial with my fist. *One day.*

“We must proceed as though a larger and more powerful demon force will be sent against us next time,” I continued. “I don’t say that to make you afraid or to keep you up at night. I say that because I wish to be transparent with the real danger that surrounds us. We cannot let pride or tradition get in the way of our survival. The lives of our families and friends, and of our young ones are in our hands. The demons will come and go, but this coven will remain. *That* I am determined to see through.”

And I fucking was.

“As many of you suspect or are aware, I have invited the leaders of the nearby Vissimo clan and Luther pack to a meeting to discuss alliance against the threat that faces our three species.”

I’d expected an uproar, but the opposite happened. Some people weren’t shocked at the news, but they *were* shocked the rumors had been correct. They hadn’t expected I’d do such a

thing. I'd just toppled off a pedestal in the minds of some coven members.

“High Esteemed, what threat? Do you expect the demons to go for vampires and werewolves next?” a Vero magus called out.

“I believe we are the demons' starting point to expand their territory. This coven knows I was raised outside in the human world, and I had more interaction with supernaturals as a result. I'd heard of the game played by the warring Bluff City Vissimo clans. I'd also heard of the game played between the human tribe and Luther pack in Deception Valley. I didn't think much about these until coming here. Even then, the coincidence of this coven playing a game, too, didn't strike me as odd. I told you that I think demons have used Caves as a means of getting a foothold of power within our walls. I've told you that they thrive on division and negative emotion. I suspect that the demons have used the same tactic against the Vissimo and Luthers through their games, Ingenium and Grids.

“Why do I believe the demons have attacked us first? Myriad reasons. We are more isolated than the other races, and known for shunning outsiders. We do not possess mates, and therefore may be perceived as weaker in that we don't gain extra powers from that process. The Vissimo and Luthers are already in alliance together, and this may be knowledge available to the demon king. There's also potential that the other races have strong intraspecies alliances that the demon king thinks shouldn't yet be challenged. No, from what I can predict, the demon king plans to take us in the south, and then collapse from the north and south upon the other races in the west and east. This is what I foresee will happen unless we find more friends in this fight. We only have the support of seven covens, and while there will be a continuous effort to grow that number and to hold the original coven accountable for their pettiness and cowardice, we cannot rely on magus help alone.”

I'd been wandering aimlessly between the tables while talking, and Berry spoke from beside me, “But why have the

original coven abandoned us?”

I considered putting Frond on the spot, but I didn't want to acknowledge him in the slightest. “Because Wild and I didn't obey them in joining the original coven. You may know that Spyne and Esteemed Advisor Lief came across a passage in their laws that forbids dealing in magus lives. The contract they held with this coven was null and void and illegal per their own coven laws. I forged another contract with them soon after to protect this coven, but they've decided not to uphold that in good will. While that is regrettable, I cannot regret that Wild and I are here with our coven during this time, and not forced to be elsewhere and unable to help you.”

Her eyes flashed. “Don't they realize we could all die?”

I rested a hand on her shoulder. “Actions speak louder than words, Berry, so look closely at the actions of the original coven. Reflect on them. Question why they feel such comfort in behaving this way.” I lifted my head. “There will be no unnecessary loss of life in this coven. I hope there will be none. To that end, I will explore every avenue available to us. I give you my solemn word that I'll explore everything with the utmost care. In two days, a small group of Vissimo and Luthers will arrive at the coven. They may opt to remain overnight after traveling here. They are our guests, and they are under my personal protection. I realize this will be a first for many of you, and I welcome you to the opportunity of experiencing two other supernatural races and cultures that exist freely outside of these walls.”

The murmurs were back, and they were an odd comfort. I preferred them to the leaden silence before.

I held up a hand for quiet. “Many of you have grown up on horror stories of these races from your ancestors. To that, I can only say that one encounter does not provide a good looking glass to observe an entire people. Think of the variety we see amongst magus, for instance. Be assured that I have ample experience of Vissimo and Luthers from my time outside. You will be safe, and I hope that by opening this communication, we will ensure our safety.”

Fronde's voice rang out across the eating chamber. "And what of the fact that you had contacted vampires and werewolves prior to the attack by the demons to warn them of the danger? What of that, *High Esteemed?*"

My focus landed on Josie, and despite her bizarre loathing of me, she quickly found another place to look. She was the culprit all right. I shifted my attention back to the real asshole. "Fronde, what's your motive behind such a question?"

"Is that a yes?"

I waited, and when he didn't answer, "I take it you can't think of any motive that would promote unity against demonkind."

"My motive is transparency for the coven," he answered.

I nodded. "*That* is a worthy motive. Are you certain it's your only one? To answer your question—for the sake of transparency, as you profess to want—my aim, and that of those who surround me, is to keep everyone in this cave alive. That means that we are addressing the crucial matters at this time. Because there is much to do. Did I deliver an earlier warning to the other supernaturals? That story includes an ancient blade, the chance findings of a coven elder, and a few books, and I look forward to telling that story at a time when we have the space to enjoy such stories."

"We deserve to know everything now."

"I thank you for your time spent helping to govern the decisions of this coven as part of the council, Fronde. If the relics had chosen you, then you would be in my shoes. I wonder if you would be so vocal about transparency, then, with the strength of your ties and loyalties to the original coven who has willfully failed to uphold their contractual obligations."

Fronde was the smirking and sneering type. The kind that swaggered with a more powerful opponent at their back. This was the first time I'd seen wisps of his power sneak out with the force of his rage.

I opened my hands, fully facing him. “I have no wish to quarrel with you or any coven member, Frond. What we must remember is that division only fuels the power of our enemy. I hope you and others”—I scanned the occupants of his table—“are able to recollect that and act in the best interest of the coven.”

I turned my back on him then. “That is the news. There will be no upset to the order of things with the arrival of our guests. Go about your day as usual. Once there is an outcome, I’ll share it with you.”

I’d ventured across the eating chamber, and I backtracked to join my friends again through the movement of magus leaving for the learning centers or various meetings.

The others watched me as I sat.

Sven was glaring daggers at Josie. “It was her, all right.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“She’ll regret it.” He cracked his knuckles.

I shook my head. “Keep your energy for what’s most useful.”

“She’s a problem,” Sven growled.

“And she’s allowed to be a problem. I neither need nor want everyone to agree with me. There needs to be room for dissent if there’s to be room for growth. I may not agree with everything she or Frond’s group says, but I may agree with the odd statement, and that may alter my thinking. Other coven members may find the same, and may then raise points with me in the future that alter the way our coven works. I don’t want to smother or silence anyone, Sven.”

“Then what the hell am I doing every day?” He banished his tray and stormed off.

“Hissy fit,” Huxley stated.

Rooke had joined the table during my announcement. “He’s tired. I get what you were trying to say. There’s a difference between managing fear and division and covering every leak. There’s got to be room for open discussion.”

My cousin had a way of putting hard things into simple words. “Could you speak to him?”

“Physical outlets work best,” she mused.

Huxley groaned, then brightened. “Everyone will be in the apothecary learning center! You can’t have sex in the greenhouse.”

Rooke rolled her eyes. “Like that would stop me.”

Huxley shot me a look as she departed. “It would, wouldn’t it?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Don’t ask me.”

Wild drew me in to his side, murmuring in my ear, “Well managed. That was a tough question, and in front of everyone. As planned.”

Fronde had ensured that was as public as possible, and though I’d navigated that round, he’d won it. The coven would sweep up that tidbit. Sven couldn’t waste time on the likes of Josie when he had to mitigate *that* damage. “What was your feel of the reactions to the news?”

“Grimoires were intrigued. Battles had their hackles up but could also see the logic of your strategy. Apothecaries seemed shocked but without anger, though they’re most likely to be curious about living things. Divinations were the angriest.”

I frowned. “Reason?”

“Because they have the strongest connection to our ancestors, and they have the most respect for the lessons of the past. That’s also why the elders here appeared more resistant than the younger magus too.”

The coven hadn’t marched me out of here naked, though. “Guess that went about as well as expected.”

“It did,” Varden said, sitting with a weary sigh.

I gave him a once-over. “How are the new quarters suiting you, sir?”

“I feel more tired than ever,” he admitted. “Every sleep is a deep one, and I have rather a lot of it to catch up on. A week

or two, and I'll be back to normal."

He seemed older. "Is the team working out okay?"

"They've come up with quite a list of ways to promote unity. We'll give the coven time to settle into the centering circles and aim to release one new incentive weekly."

I waited to see if he'd offer more. "Something's bothering you, Varden. Out with it."

A twinkle entered his blue eyes. "Am I morose? I did not intend to be."

"You are."

He grinned as he tended to do when I reminded him of my grandmother. His grin trailed away. "I'm suffering the effects of foolish hopes unrealized."

That was super grimoire.

Varden continued, "For many years, I pinned my dreams of more at the end of Caves. Then, division would end. We would unite against the foe. All would be well. The reality is different. Slower, and"—he lifted a shoulder—"as I said, I formed a series of foolish hopes that got me through each day and night when I felt hopeless. I feel somewhat disappointed, and only I am to blame for building up the end of Caves to such a degree. I will be well again soon."

I set my hand on his. "We'll get there, sir. I promise you. This coven will return to its day as a coven of old. I know it."

Varden's eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "Yes. All will be well."

He rose and walked away, and I noted the slight limp to his gait that wasn't there yesterday.

"I never know what to do when old people get upset," I admitted.

Wild had remained silent through the conversation. "You treat them like you'd treat anyone else who was upset."

"No, not in that sense. I find the whole experience bizarre. My grandmother only cried when people got hurt. Except she



cried tears of laughter. I guess my concept of the elderly is skewed from that.”

Wild’s shoulders were shaking. “I wish I’d met Rowaness.”

“She would have loved you, after ensuring you knew the one hundred most painful ways to inflict damage on an opponent.”

Wild’s grin widened. “And your mother?”

“She would have made you a meal and welcomed you, all the while probing your weaknesses to exploit them if you ever harmed me. She would have appeared neat as a pin during the day, but would’ve spent all night with her eyes open, staring into the darkness as she formed the perfect trap to contain you for eternity. That kind of thing.”

He wasn’t grinning anymore.

“Too much?” I asked.

Wild didn’t answer the question. “And Syera?”

“She would have hated you, treated you like crap, and then when things reached a head, she would’ve attacked you with the intent of seriously hurting you. After that, if you fought back halfway decently, then you’d be part of the family in her books.”

Laughter startled from him. “It doesn’t make much sense, but I still regret that I’ll never know them.”

They would’ve chewed Wild up and spat him out when they realized he was made of the good stuff. “So am I.” I wished so badly that could be different.

Wild took my hand in his, and soothing calm filled me. “I need you to check the gates, but how about we let off some steam first?”

I quirked a brow. “Again?” There had been some raucous bedsheet activity before his early-morning shift.

“Always. But how about we play around with your grimoire magic this morning? I know divination is your focus,

but bringing characters out of books to life is kind of fun.”

One of Huxley’s favorite fighting tricks too. I wouldn’t mind learning that one. “I can think of a few characters I’d bring to life.” Wasn’t it every paranormal romance reader’s dream to bring the male love interest into the world?

Wild growled low, “Who?”

“Uh, Humpty Dumpty.”

“You’re lying, but who’s that?”

“He’s an egg that fell. Couldn’t be put back together.”

I felt Wild’s urge to question me further, and then he forced it back. Didn’t blame him.

We walked to the library, and I jogged ahead to open the door to the grimoire learning center, ignoring Wild’s snicker. I’d never done this before—for certain, anyway. Now I had grimoire magic and could get inside. Cheap thrills would get me through this shitshow.

We entered the far cubby that belonged to the quad, and Wild wasted no time sending out a silence charm so no one could eavesdrop.

“Probably for the best,” I said. “Pretty sure Frond is setting spies on me.”

Wild’s chest rumbled. That was new.

“He’s close to going too far,” Wild said darkly.

I pulled a title off the shelf in Corentin’s section. He hadn’t returned the divination titles to the library yet. He’d been busy doing... linen pants. “We can’t take his bait, Wild. It’s frustrating, and I’m most likely going to sink my fist into his face one day. For now, that would achieve the opposite of what we’ve told everyone to do. There must be an effort toward harmony and room for natural negative emotions. From us too. Even if Frond is the mouthpiece of the original coven. He’ll get what’s coming to him in time.”

When Wild didn’t respond, I turned to find him regarding me with a small smile. I’d like to have that mouth on mine. Or

on my body. I wasn't picky. "What?"

"You won't want to hear it, but you're a leader, Tempest. There hasn't been time for anything but meetings and letters and speeches, but I hope you're proud of the way you've taken this in your stride."

"More like in a crawl."

"If you're still moving forward, then you're doing what most magus could never do. Think of how your life has changed in a week. Most would crumble under that. You're incredible."

Blood warmed my cheeks. "Thanks. My life has changed in worse ways in the past. I suppose that made me different from a lot of people."

"*You* are different to a lot of people. I love you, Tempest Corentine."

Maybe I hadn't thought about myself lately, because I had the surprising urge to shed a few tears right now. "I love you, too, Wild Astar."

"When we have our union, I'm taking your name."

I opened the book on Ogham Staves. "Did you just casually mention tying yourself to me forever?"

Wild approached, tilting my chin. "We're already tied, my love. A union would be so everyone else knew it, and I do want them to know."

Learning grimoire magic was becoming less important by the second. His musician fingers had that effect.

Wild took the book from my hands. "Why this one?"

"So I can complete my homework from Ty and learn grimoire magic at the same time."

"Multitasker."

"You knew that from last night."

He flashed me a grin from where he flicked through the pages.

I perched on the table, making sure to do so on Huxley's side so I could tell him where my ass had been. No reason why the rest of us shouldn't mimic Rooke's efforts in the greenhouse. Not when Huxley had reacted so brilliantly. "Your regret about not meeting my family gave me an idea."

"Mmm?"

"You *could* technically meet them." It wasn't often that magus spoke with their deceased loved ones. When we died, we moved on. To hold back from what was next was a choice the dead rarely made because once the choice was made, there was no moving on *ever*. As magus, we didn't fear a return to the Mother. We expected to meet our family and friends in whatever was next by embracing the full journey of death when it arrived. In saying that, a spirit did sometimes decide not to keep going. When a mother was ripped from a child, for instance, or when one lover died before another and couldn't face leaving them alone.

He shot me a sharp look. "Your family didn't move on?"

"They did." Thank the Mother. "That doesn't mean you can't see them in a memory of mine."

Wild set the book down. "I thought you'd set yourself against further divination journeys."

And here was my real idea. "I had. Mostly still have. I can't stop thinking that my other half may be trapped in the demon realm, though." I checked the silence barrier was still in place around our cubby. "I'm not content to wait on her return. What if she doesn't?"

What would happen to Wild?

"There's one instance where she has *always* come out of her hiding spot," I added.

"Whenever you return to the memory of your family's murder."

"Exactly." My voice was grim because, really, I didn't want to do this again. Each time I woke up at the north mountains, naked and covered in dirt, and the victim of chaos.

“Maybe that would give my demon a door to return to my divination affinity. Once she’s back, our ritual will restart.”

Wild’s focus didn’t falter from my face. He wanted to do it, and also didn’t.

“No,” he eventually forced out. “We can’t risk it yet. There’s too much that could go wrong if you’re harmed in any way on a journey. This coven needs you.” He added in a drier tone, “I can hold it together as long as needed.”

Could he though?

I had Vissimo and Luthers arriving in two days, and any number of other tasks to see through. “Not right now, no. But it’s an idea in case things get worse.”

“One that holds merit.” He held up the book on Ogham Staves. “In the meantime, how about we bring a memory to life in another way? Care to chat to the first diviner of the staves about how they came to be?”

My lips curved. “Call me a book dork, but the answer is *yes*.”



Dressed in Ryzika's relics, with my six advisors cloaked in black surrounding me, I waited at the exit of our cave. The knolls were far busier than usual with magus pretending they weren't here to catch a glimpse of fang or fur.

How would the Vissimo and Luthers arrive? Rhona's description of Princess Basilia had me imagining her in high heels. High heels were more like high *hells* when walking in the forest.

"What *was* powering the barrier?" Varden asked me.

The barrier around the coven that I'd dropped twenty minutes ago? "The last of Corentin's stored power. I don't see any reason to keep using a barrier of the same grunt. Really, all we need and all that would be effective now is a deterrent against humans entering the knolls. The centering circles will provide enough residual energy to power that, so I believe we'll link the barrier to this source."

"Smart," Varden answered.

I had my moments.

"You're sure you want me in the room?" Huxley asked for the tenth time.

From my right side, Wild snorted.

"Huxley, you and Wild have the most knowledge of supernaturals out of the advisors. Yes, I'd like you there." Winona would be there also. I'd felt it prudent not just to have

my friends in the room, and Winona was ever-composed, regardless of her personal views.

I hadn't wanted Opal in the room, and Ruby was new to concealing her emotions and needed more time. In the interest of keeping a presence of advisors in the caves, I'd left them Varden, and kept Barrow out of this first meeting. Varden because he looked so damn exhausted.

I exhaled. I was grossly underprepared for this meeting. Then again, could a person feel prepared for meeting this group of leaders?

A thumping beat overtook the sky, and my gaze shot upward, seeking out the source. *Ah.*

"Dark magic," someone screamed from across the meadow, and I laughed.

"What is it?" Wild asked.

"A human flying contraption called a helicopter. Harmless." Planes and helicopters never flew over the knolls due to the deterring charm woven into the barrier. When they hit it, the pilots suddenly decided to fly elsewhere.

Casting my magic out, I located the flattest piece of ground and scorched an X onto the grass.

The frightened magus fell quiet at my actions, and the cries of dark magic faded. We were about to open to the outside world for the first time in coven history. These magus were in for a shock if they thought *this* was dark magic.

The helicopter landed, and as the blades slowed in their rotation, I started forward, my six advisors a few steps behind.

The door was pushed open, and an enormous green-eyed Vissimo exited first. His eyes were cold, and he swept his focus over the surroundings with a practiced eye, taking in the gawking coven magus, the six advisors at my back, and then me.

"Is it muddy outside?" someone called from within.

He answered in a voice that chilled me on the spot. "No, my beauty. Soft grass, however."

The woman sighed. “I guess that’s doable. A red carpet would’ve been nice.”

Dare I say it, but the expression of the green-eyed male softened in some semblance of a grin.

A drop-dead gorgeous woman exited the helicopter, shoving gently at the Vissimo’s back, who—apparently on purpose—was blocking her from leaving the vehicle.

The woman strode toward me, her hand outstretched, and the male growled, matching her strides to hover over us as I shook her hand.

*Strong grip. Cold skin.*

The Vissimo male lifted his gaze from our clasped hands to the person who’d suddenly appeared on my other side. A low growl vibrated from Wild.

*Uh.*

“Oh,” Princess Basilia said, glancing at Wild. “You’ve got a growly man too. I’m Princess Basilia of Clan Sundulus. My mate, Crown Prince Kyros, and I are here representing the king and queen.”

I sent Wild a pulse of warning. “Princess Basilia, I am High Esteemed Tempest. Welcome to the Buried Knolls coven.” I shifted my focus to the giant casting a shadow over us.

Where Wild was lean power, the prince was far more the body type of Corentin and Sven—hulking power. But the Vissimo was of a height that simply wasn’t seen in magus—and not ideal to walk through our cave system either. “Crown Prince Kyros.” I dipped my head instead of offering my hand.

Basilia was an anomaly. I’d never met a Vissimo who shook hands. That was a human thing. Which meant, she’d either grown up around humans or had been one herself.

“They don’t see many helicopters around?” Princess Basilia asked, jerking her head at the watching magus.

I smiled. “Try any. Human technologies do not exist within the coven.”



“Not even Snake?”

It took me a while to fathom what she meant. “The game on old cell phones? No. Nothing. We have magic for everything we need.” I wagged my fingers. “Including making it easy to walk on grass in high heels.”

Kyros’s growling ramped up, but Basilia’s eyes sparkled. “I accept.”

I sent a bolt of magic to her shoes, and the princess grinned, taking a few steps to test them.

“If you could bottle that and sell it, you’d be a billionaire.” She winked. “Trust me, I’d know.”

She was a billionaire? Fuck me. I couldn’t imagine that amount of money. Not that a magus living in the human world didn’t have other means to get by, but *man*. The princess was filthy rich.

“Yes, I have a golf cart even though I don’t play golf,” she added.

I was beginning to understand what Rhona had meant about Basilia pulling off the princess vibe. She was disarming, and I could only be grateful that two Vissimo like Kyros hadn’t shown up on the coven doorstep. She made him seem more approachable.

I peered over her shoulder at the helicopter. “I expected the pack leaders to be with you.”

“They decided to run,” Basilia answered.

Her mate hadn’t stopped his stare off with Wild, and I could feel Wild’s ire mounting by the second. I had no idea what to do about that. Wild hadn’t acted in a possessive way in so long, and never to this degree.

The Vissimo prince grunted, “They’re close.”

No sooner had he said the words than two Luthers loped into the meadow below. If the magus there hadn’t been so fixated on this conversation, there would have been more screaming. As it was, the magus just startled away as the huge wolves trotted toward us.

There was a ripple in the air, and a series of sickening cracks, and then a stunning red-haired woman and a huge man were straightening in their human form. I heard Opal's gasp at my back.

Because they'd just changed forms? Or because they were buck-naked?

I'd guess the former as nudity wasn't a biggie to magus. In fact, Kyros appeared to be the only one bothered, though I noticed Basilia fixed her sights on Andie. Probably because her mate was growling again.

Basilia hugged the woman and smiled at the pack alpha who was crowding his mate and surveying the scene in much the same way Kyros had.

"Kyros," the male Luther grunted at the male Vissimo.

"Sascha," the male Vissimo grunted at the male Luther.

Sascha's gaze snapped to Wild, and then he growled.

Wild growled right back.

Why didn't they see who could piss the farthest and sort this out once and for all?

Until that time, I didn't dare move from between Kyros and Wild. And I'd remain close enough to Wild to intervene in anything between him and Sascha too.

Andie strode forward, and Sascha didn't hover *quite* as much as Kyros had over Basilia and me.

"I'm Andie," she said, an easy smile on her face.

The woman was about as opposite as could be from her sister. "Andie, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm High Esteemed Tempest. Welcome to the Buried Knolls coven."

It seemed pointless not to acknowledge the male magus growling up a storm beside me. "This is one of my esteemed advisors, Wild."

I looked at him for the first time. I didn't strictly need to because I was receiving all his emotions and intent loud and clear through our bond.

Wild was one misplaced look from losing his shit. The guy was shaking. I slipped my hand up the sleeve of his tunic and felt him return somewhat to himself. He was on edge with the mating ritual. The demon in him must perceive the others as massive threats—which they were.

Wild exhaled, and his shaking receded.

I glanced at our guests and wasn't sure what to make of the curious glint in Kyros's gaze. "You'll see my other advisors behind me. A few will join us in this morning's meeting."

Andie, still naked, glanced toward the meadow. "Your people seem... surprised."

"They've never seen another supernatural before," I replied. "Other than those who attacked us a week ago."

That brought the attention of all Vissimo and Luthers to me. "To that end," I said, "let's head somewhere more private so I can tell you all. Huxley, Wild, Winona."

Huxley and Winona stepped forward of the others and walked behind me and Wild as we entered the Caves.

I paused before entering. "Varden?"

"Yes, High Esteemed."

"Please ensure no magus touches the helicopter. Our magus can interfere with the humans', uh, magic."

"Humans have magic?" Barrow blurted, unable to help himself despite the present company.

I felt the eyes of our guests on me. "Of a sort. Not from the Mother. A small lightning magic of their own design."

That was as good as I could do in a few sentences on the subject.

Basilias's lips curved.

Varden half bowed. "It will be done."

I entered, noting that Wild walked behind me, while Sascha walked behind Huxley and Winona and in front of his mate. Kyros brought up the rear behind Basilias. I'd admitted to

being underprepared, but the clashing male egos were *not* something I'd remotely expected.

Wild would be furious with himself later.

I led them to the advisory chamber and took my authority. Wild usually sat opposite me, and Winona went so far as to flicker an eyelid when he took the seat on my right, shifting it closer. His behavior hadn't been missed, and I could only hope she didn't see more before the end of this visit. We'd have a tough enough time explaining this much.

"Hold on," Basilia announced. "You guys need clothes."

Andie and Sascha glanced down.

"Forgot about that." Andie looked to me. "You don't seem to mind."

"It's the way we are born. It's the way we die," I answered. "Who are we to judge what the Mother has gifted us?"

"Huh, I guess so."

Wild growled again, and I turned to find his narrowed eyes on me. *Oh, come on.* I hadn't even looked at Sascha. Shit, I'd been avoiding him exactly like Basilia was to help Kyros keep a grip.

I sent Wild a warm promise of later, and his growling abated. I sent him more lustful thoughts, and he started growling for an entirely different reason. *Oops.* Too much.

I exchanged a look with Huxley. *Yep,* too late to realize that Wild shouldn't be present. Then again, I wasn't sure anything would get him out of the room now he'd spotted Kyros and Sascha.

Basilia tossed Andie a backpack, and she and her mate dressed quickly, then sat at the stone table once more.

Kyros seemed like the type who never stopped taking in his surroundings. I preferred the way his gaze roamed to when it focused on me. Then it was like looking through time itself. "The cave is spelled to replicate the outside?" he asked.

"It is."

The princess wasn't too enthused by her rocky surroundings, and there was an edge to the Luthers that made me suspect they may not love being underground. "Might I introduce you to Winona and Huxley, two more of my esteemed advisors."

Winona dipped her head and murmured a greeting.

"Hello," Huxley said to them loudly and *very* slowly. "Welcome to our coven. I. Am. Esteemed. Advisor. Huxley. Lief."

*Mother be.* What was he doing? Vissimo could hear a fucking pin drop half a mile away, and Luthers had far better hearing than a magus not using their battle affinity to enhance the sense. Huxley knew all this too.

Amusement swept to me from Wild's direction, and I quickly covered my grin. Nerves were getting the better of Huxley big time.

The Vissimo watched him like an animal in the zoo. Sascha appeared to feel much as Wild did, but Andie smiled kindly at the grimoire on my left.

"Nice to meet you, Huxley," she replied.

"You too," he replied loudly. Then repeated, "Welcome."

I schooled the smile from my face by the skin of my teeth, then cleared my throat. "Thank you, Huxley."

Wild's soft laughter reached me, and I made a strangled sound before latching onto control again.

This was *not* the time for laughing, and unfortunately, it was all I wanted to do now.

I took a breath. "Thank you for coming here on such short notice."

"We've waited some time to do so," Basilia answered, shifting her bemused focus from Huxley. "We were glad to come."

"Your patience was appreciated." I tapped a finger on the stone table. "It's hard to know where to begin." I gathered my

thoughts. It was crucial to minimize any lies. The Vissimo may pick up any changes in heartbeat. I could regulate my heartbeat, but best to play it safe. I didn't plan to mislead them in any dangerous way. Winona's presence had to be accounted for, however. I couldn't risk telling the supernaturals something damaging that may be repeated to another magus here. "Some time ago, a group of us became aware that demons had infiltrated this coven. They'd been doing so for some time, shifting themselves—via gates in ravines—into our midst without a trace. Or much of one."

"This is of concern to maguskind, not Vissimo or Luthers," the crown prince remarked. "How does it affect us?"

A rumble started in Wild's chest.

I rested a hand on his thigh. "Do you know much of demons, Prince Kyros?"

"Only what is in our archives. Which is much."

Vissimo had archives, and he'd been quick to let me know they were vast. That could be huge, and his comment seemed to imply that they were a bargaining chip on the table in any alliance between us.

My eyes shifted to the Luthers. "And yourselves?"

Sascha answered, "We do not keep archives in the pack. We track our history through storytelling and song. We have lost Luthers to demonkind. Then again, we've lost Luthers to magus too."

There was an accusation in his words. The Luthers had been attacked by this coven? I glanced at Winona.

"Not to my knowledge," she replied to my unspoken question. "I will investigate the matter."

I returned my attention to the others. "Here is what we have gleaned. A demon feeds on anarchy and despair to gain power. Anything negative—anger or sorrow or uncertainty—will help to fuel that power. Once strong enough, a demon is able to begin inserting itself beyond the confines of its realm until it can bodily leave for increasing amounts of time. A demon's motive is to expand territory and enslave the

occupants inside that territory to use as a permanent food source.”

I let that sink in. In answer to Basilia’s questioning look, Kyros nodded. Vissimo had ample knowledge of demons then. At least as much as us, and I was willing to bet even more.

“For three-hundred years, this coven was split into two sides.” And here was the real kicker. “And they were split in half because they were playing a game.”

The Luthers and Vissimo exchanged a long glance.

I took a breath. “Sound familiar?”



At least most of the coven were trying not to stare.

I sat on the stage with my guests and Wild. Wild was on my right again, though I'd planned to place Andie there. Sascha had inserted himself next to Wild, between him and Andie on the end. Basilia was on my left, and Kyros on her other side.

Wild had yet to feel anything but rage and violent intent since their arrival, aside from the brief flash of humor at Huxley's expense.

So things were going super well.

We'd gotten through the conversation about Ingenium and Grids with surprising ease. The other supernaturals had listened at least, and I felt the coincidence of these games was something they saw was too large to ignore. Really, talking it over with the other supernaturals had been easier than discussing matters with my coven.

"So describe your magic to me," Princess Basilia said. "Parts of what Vissimo can do would appear like magic to most humans, but you *can* control certain elements, is that right?"

I cast my eyes over the coven to make sure Frond's group was still behaving. "That's right. There are four affinities of magic that a magus may possess. Some of us have more than one affinity. The affinities are divination, grimoire, apothecary, and battle."



Basilia's gray eyes were on me. She wasn't cold like Kyros, but the woman was just as calculating. Her disarming rich-woman vibe was a good distractor from how dangerous that mind might be. "How many do you possess?"

"Four," I answered.

"All of them, then." She glanced at Kyros.

Food was brought out on platters and set before us. "Wait, please," I said as Sascha reached for a chicken drumstick.

I cast my four affinities over the food. Nothing had been tampered with. Maybe it was paranoia to check, but nothing could be allowed to upset the relationships forming here. To cover the moment, I stood after.

"Mother," I called, closing my eyes.

I raised my palm to Wild, who also stood. The coven followed suit. I felt this display of our customs was important. We wouldn't downplay who we were for the sake of others, and I didn't expect the Vissimo or Luthers to do so either. "From your energy are we born. From your lessons are we taught. By your mercy do we live. By your hammer do we fall. Into your open arms do we slip unto our end. Peer into our hearts and ambitions and guide us from falseness to truth, to oneness, and to prosperity in your world. Mother be."

"Mother be," they said solemnly.

The air felt lighter after. The coven was surer of themselves.

"Please." I gestured to the food. "Prince Kyros and Princess Basilia, we can summon blood for you, if needed."

Basilia smiled. "Thank you. We brought our own." She tapped a finger against a goblet.

I loaded my plate and dug in, aware of Sascha and Andie subtly checking their food for anything amiss. Couldn't blame them. They'd taken a big risk coming here—especially if Sascha's people had been hurt by magus in the past.

Basilia sipped at her blood. "So you all possess magic, but what do magus *do* all day?"

I swallowed a bite of potato. “A magus lives to better their coven and hone the magic inherited from their ancestors. This is considered a way to respect what we have been given by the Mother. We spend our days furthering our crafts and adding what we can to our collective knowledge and skill base. We celebrate the passing of the moon and occurrences of special events such as the shifting of seasons or the passing of our ancestors.”

“No one ever leaves?”

I could tell from her tone that magus life sounded completely and utterly boring to the princess. “Yes, but that number is few. Mostly grimoires might venture to answer a curiosity plaguing them. Battle affinities like to stick close to those who need their protection. Apothecary magus are usually content, but may venture afield in pursuit of new species to study. Divination affinities are more driven than most to respect our past and the wishes of our predecessors by fulfilling coven obligations and sticking to home.”

“You have all of those desires pulling at you then? Being the bearer of four affinities?” Kyros asked.

*They used to pull.* I didn’t feel that anymore, and I got the sinking feeling that my demon’s absence was to thank for that, more so than gaining grimoire. “Our magic does pull at us. A magus must center regularly—what you may see as meditation. This aligns our magic with our mind, body, and spirit.”

Andie spoke from the other end, “A Luther must find and maintain the same kind of unity between their forms, and the spirits of both forms.”

“Your wolf form has a spirit of its own?” Wild asked, his grimoire curiosity overriding his mating weirdness.

That was news to me too.

“Yes, and like any relationship, things can work out or not.” She frowned, and Sascha grabbed her hand.

He said to me after, “How did your meetings with Rhona go?”

*Ah*, Andie wasn't solely speaking of her relationship with her wolf. Maybe Rhona's eagerness to regain trust with Andie and recent success with our coven had caused the leader more confusion than anything else.

"She's a fierce spirit who is desperate to regain what she's lost," I stated. "She has done the hardest part of admitting that she was wrong. I have a feeling her determination could work in her favor, though it has clearly worked against her in the past."

Andie blinked a few times. "She told you everything?"

"No. Not in such terms. Just that she had a mistake to make up for, and that she hadn't seen you were the one to deserve her faith, not another."

The Luther's throat worked, and she locked gazes with Sascha again. A hum filled the air, and I tilted my head.

"Yeah, they're talking to each other in their minds. So rude, right?" Basilia said. She glanced at Kyros, who cocked a brow, then passed over his cup. She'd already finished hers.

The Luthers weren't the only ones in possession of mind speak.

"A mate is a great gift," I answered, then said to Andie, "As is having a sister. I lost my twin sister five years ago. If there's something to salvage with Rhona, then salvage it. If there's not, then I'm certain the situation she put you through was enormous. I hope it works out for you either way."

Andie was horrified. "You lost your twin?"

I couldn't immediately answer.

Wild did for me. "Yes, she lost Syera. And her grandmother and mother in the same day."

They'd cropped up so much lately. I was tired and strung out—that was part of the problem with the strength of my reaction to her words. But my family's passing hit me at the most unexpected times too.

"Your grandmother," Basilia echoed, and there was real sorrow in her voice. "I lost my grandmother. She was killed."

I looked at her. “I’m sorry.”

“So was I for a while. But Grandmother always said that the best time to get a good deal is when people felt sorry for themselves.”

My lips curved. “My grandmother would have tried to bottle the emotion, so she could relax in the midst of other’s misery at her leisure.”

Basilia laughed, and the sound was like chimes. *Beautiful.* “She sounds delightful.”

That the princess thought so was very telling.

Was it possible that Princess Basilia was as twisted as me?

“I think we’ll do well together,” she announced. “And we have Andie to keep us level. Can you manage both of us, my friend?”

Andie winced. “There’s only room for one princess in this team.”

“Obviously. I’m the judge. You’re the jury.” The Vissimo’s topaz gaze landed on me. “I have a feeling we’ve met our executioner.”

Wild hummed, sipping at his water. “An apt description for my queen.”

I froze, and he froze a second later, realizing his blunder.

None of the other leaders seemed to think much of the comment, but who the hell else just heard? There were definitely magus ears on our conversation.

The Luthers were done inhaling food, and Wild had me on edge. We needed to go. “How about we take this to a more private location?”

“As long as there’s alcohol” was Basilia’s reply.

I smirked. “I can do one better than that.”

“I don’t do drugs that much.”

*That much.* I grinned. “Not drugs, no. Rooke,” I called.

My cousin looked my way.

“Could we borrow your magic in my quarters soon?”

She dipped her head.

“This way,” I said, and led them from the eating chamber. I was glad to be out of there, if truth be told. Though that went as smoothly as possible from a coven perspective.

I released a breath.

Wild walked beside me, and I cast him a searching look. His contrition floated to me through our bond, and I sent him a reassuring warmth. He was being overtaken in his own body. I knew this wasn't “him” as much as an uncontrollable response to the threat of the other males. Not that it hadn't complicated matters today.

We entered my quarters not long after, and Basilia turned in slow circles as she followed me in. “Now this is a better size. Only three levels, though.”

Kyros circled the room in a different way—as a tiger might—then returned partway along the far wall. He cocked his head. “What is here?”

Sascha approached it, too, and sniffed. “There's something.”

“You can sense the demon gate?” I quickly joined the two males. Wild stuck close by.

Kyros answered, “There is a hum. An ugly pulse.”

“And an ugly smell. Pain and decay,” Sascha added quietly. “There's a gate in your quarters?”

“The only gate in our caves.”

“And there's no one else to guard it?” Sascha watched me closely.

“There is. And I won't put another at risk when I'm the best equipped for such a job.”

“Why are you best equipped?” Andie said next.

“Because she is the most powerful,” Wild answered. “And the only magus here to possess four affinities, one of just a few

in the world. Barriers woven of four affinities proved effective against the demons during our recent battle with them.”

Andie hummed. “Barrier?”

I let magic float from my hands toward the demon gate where I formed a shining barrier of four affinities. “There are many jobs a barrier can fulfill. This one is a physical barrier and also a silence barrier. We usually have a physical barrier around our coven territory, for instance, to protect us from attack.”

Kyros was inspecting my magic.

“For some reason, I didn’t think I’d be able to see your magic,” Basilia mused.

“Humans can’t,” I replied. “Supernaturals can. Unless I decide to use a concealing charm.”

Rooke entered as I took an armchair by the fire, then summoned more for my guests.

“So you can make anything you want appear out of thin air?” the princess demanded of me.

“Things I’m familiar with—or things that are close by are easiest. But in essence, yes,” I answered.

She flopped onto the couch. “I wish my staff could do that. They’re so slow sometimes.”

Andie laughed. “You’re super fast. Why don’t you get things for yourself?”

“Image must be upheld” came the reply, followed by a smirk.

“Drinks?” Rooke asked.

“This is my cousin, Rooke,” I announced to my guests. “Her magic is unique, and she is able to detect a person’s perfect drink.”

Basilia gasped. “No way.”

Andie sat next to Basilia. “Cool.”

Rooke shrugged a shoulder. “It’s a nice trick.”

“What’s my perfect drink?” Basilia asked her.

Rooke’s voice gained a hypnotic quality. “A mojito. Today, passionfruit. But I feel some days you may be more aligned with a strawberry mojito.”

Basilia sat back. “That’s incredible. I have a bar in Bluff City. You’re hired.”

Rooke smiled. “Thank you, ma’am. I’m happy here.”

“Divination affinity?” the Vissimo asked her.

“That’s my main affinity, yes.”

Andie leaned forward. “What’s my perfect drink then?”

Rooke regarded her. “Gin cocktail. Lemon and raspberry.”

Sascha grunted. “That’s her favorite. What’s mine?”

“You like Johnnie Walker on the rocks. Tonight, though, you should drink Cragganmore 12. On the rocks also.”

Sascha took a chair close to Andie. He didn’t seem to mind her proximity to Basilia or myself—just to the other males. “I’m willing to try it on for size.”

Kyros was waiting expectantly.

Rooke blinked at him. “You need more blood.”

*That was a first.*

His lips curved. “I do. Someone drank the rest of mine at dinner.”

Basilia appeared stricken. “You do?”

“You are younger, my beauty. You need it more than I. I can get more later.” He circled away from my barrier and the demon gate to stand behind her.

Rooke summoned our drinks and handed them out. Wild accepted the offered water from her without question.

“Want to hang out?” I asked my cousin.

She tore her focus from Wild to me. “Nah, the greenhouse is free.”

My brows rose.

“For actual project purposes,” she clarified.

*Oh.* “Good luck.”

“When it comes to poisons, I don’t need luck.”

Andie held up her glass once my cousin had departed. “Should I be worried to drink this?”

“No, my cousin’s apothecary magic tends toward illicit substances. Alcohol falls under that.”

Basilia sipped at hers and groaned. “This might be the best one I’ve ever had. How much for her, seriously?”

“If Rooke wishes to go, she would go for free,” I answered.

The Vissimo pulled a face. “I’ll woo her over in time. Hey, what did she give you?”

“A gunpowder gimlet.” I held the glass up. “Cheers, everyone. Thank you for coming.”

All of us drank, except Kyros.

Andie asked quietly, “You weren’t born in this coven, were you? You have the apartment in Frankton Gorge, but you’re too comfortable with our ways to have been raised here.”

“Rhona may have mentioned that I joined the coven just over two months ago.”

“And now you lead it,” Kyros stated.

I dipped my head. “Our ancestor’s relics chose me—as the new bearer of four affinities—to lead the coven.”

“New bearer,” Sascha prompted.

“I was struck by lightning in the battle against the demons and gained the fourth affinity.”

Basilia’s brows shot up. “Fuck me. Love the drama of that. I just gained an obsessive mate and became a Vissimo to get where I am.”



Andie snorted. “And I realized half of my family were alive and pretty soon I could turn furry.” She glanced at Sascha. “But the obsessive mate part happened to me too.”

Sascha raised his glass to her.

“It would appear you are gaining an obsessive mate too,” Kyros said, looking at Wild.

Wild lifted his head to regard the prince. “Magus don’t have mates.”

“Magus *haven’t* had mates,” the Vissimo replied. “There was a time when my kind didn’t have mates and Luthers didn’t mate in the same fashion they now do.”

Seemed pointless not to admit the truth when Wild had been acting like an obsessive mate all damn day. “We are in a mating ritual,” I said.

Wild glanced my way, pulsing a warning.

I smiled, then added, “It is not common knowledge to the coven, and we’d prefer it to stay that way for now.”

The other supernaturals nodded.

“It is not yet complete,” Sascha said, then to Wild, “You’re in the worst of it. Don’t beat yourself up. It’s hard to control all that.”

Wild seemed to relax somewhat at the words. “It is. I’m unused to the lack of control.”

Kyros and Sascha both laughed quietly at that.

“And you have *nothing* on Kyros’s control issues,” Basilia remarked. “He had big tantrums about that.”

Reaching forward, Kyros lightly flicked her ear.

“That’s my good ear,” she complained, rubbing it.

“What happened?” I asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “I was tortured. I was a new Vissimo and didn’t know how to protect my ears from the abuse.”

That was news to Andie and Sascha too.

“I didn’t know,” Andie said sadly. “Who did that?”

“The deceased,” Basilia replied, a savage look upon her beautiful face.

Sascha lifted his glass. “Good.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Wild added. “Even though Rooke only gave me water.”

I shot him a grin. “For the best?”

“Definitely,” he muttered into his glass.

“Do you mind if I take a look at your ear?” I said to the princess. “Magically.”

Kyros narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth.

“Go for it,” she answered.

“I won’t hurt her,” I said to her mate, who closed his mouth. “You may feel a buzzing.” I cast forth my apothecary magic and extended the tendrils to her affected ear. I inhaled as my magic painted a picture of rupture and scarring and pain. My gaze shifted to hers. “There’s a lot of damage.”

She heaved a sigh. “I know, I—”

“Would you like me to fix it?”

Kyros jerked, and Basilia stilled.

“You can do that?” she asked woodenly.

I shifted my focus to her ear again. “Some of the scar damage may prove stubborn, but if not all, then I can heal most of it.” I looked at her and her mate. “It will hurt.”

Basilia poured what remained of her drink down her throat. When the glass filled with another passionfruit mojito, she drank that too, then one more before Kyros confiscated the glass.

“Can’t hurt as much as when it happened,” she slurred slightly. “Are those drinks human strength?”

Kyros sniffed the glass. “No, my beauty.”

“That bitch needs to work at my bar.” Basilia rested back on the couch. “Hit me with it, witchy.”

Wild chuckled.

I knocked three times on our bond. *Can I take magic?*

Wild knocked back twice. *Yes.*

Maybe I wouldn't need it. But Wild worked as a catalyst for my magic—and mine for his—so I'd expend less magic by being open to his power anyway. “Ready?” I looked up at Kyros, who dipped his head.

“Andie, come here, please,” Sascha asked.

She didn't deny him, instead walking over to sit on his lap.

“Here goes,” I said calmly and extended my apothecary magic to her again. This job required battle, too, because of the manner in which the injury had been sustained. “This part will hurt the most,” I murmured. “Emotionally.” I had to *draw out the torture* so to speak.

I latched on to the horror and darkness in her canal and didn't fuck around trying to ease it out. I ripped it out in one burst.

Basilia screamed. Not in physical pain. She screamed out the brutality of what they'd done to her. There was fear in her scream, and hopelessness, regret. The sound trailed off into acceptance, and it was easy to put together that Basilia had believed she'd die the day this happened.

She'd fallen to her hands and knees on the ground, and Kyros was crouched over her.

He snarled up at me, and I didn't move and had the sudden inkling not to look him directly in the eyes.

“It's already fading,” Basilia panted, grabbing his arm. To stop him attacking me? She wiped at her brow and pushed back up onto the couch. “Please tell me that was the only time that happens?”

“It is,” I answered. “I could not heal you physically without removing that.”

“I think you pulled the PTSD out of my ear or something.” She shook her head. “It feels different. Keep going.”

I glanced at Kyros, who straightened and returned to his post behind Basilia.

“This next part will hurt physically.”

“Can’t wait,” she answered. “Don’t hold back.”

I sent my apothecary magic alone this time and started at the outer ear, whispering new beginnings to the scar tissue encountered. In some areas, I had to shove with force to reshape her inner ear to what it had once been. With most of my mind on smoothing out the progressively more stubborn scar tissue, the rest of me was marveling at how little magic I was using.

Wild’s awe reached me too.

This was... the power was *insane*. We hadn’t tested this part of our connection since Wild helped me to force the demons back through their gate. I was negotiating this alliance with Vissimo and Luthers, and wouldn’t stop negotiating magus help, either, but I’d underestimated *our* importance in the battle. We were a queen on a chessboard.

I centered my thoughts on the healing, pausing at intervals to give Basilia a chance to recover before the next round.

The eardrum was a pulpy mess, and once I’d pushed and stretched and whispered it back to smoothness, then called my magic back, fury filled me.

I opened my eyes. “I hope they died very painfully.”

Kyros replied with a slight purr, “They did.”

“Basil? You okay?” Andie asked.

*Basil*. The princess didn’t react strangely to it, so it had to be a nickname. One that suited her not a bit, and so suited her perfectly.

The female Vissimo tilted her head left and right. “This will take a while to get used to.”

“Your balance may be off in the meantime,” I said.

She nodded. “I can feel that.”

Basilia got up and wavered. Kyros hooked his arm around hers as she wobbled over to me. The Vissimo leaned down and hugged me with one arm. “Thank you.”

I returned her hug, feeling an odd connection to the woman. I felt it with Andie, too, for different reasons. “You’re welcome. I hope you are without pain now.”

On all levels.

Her gray eyes were solemn. “I think I will be. And I think it’s best for me to turn in for the night also. Kyros, we planned to return to Bluff City, but perhaps we could stay the night here?”

I had a feeling Kyros would be up all night expecting attack. I didn’t take it personally—the guy just always seemed to expect it. Not a bad quality in an ally.

“Yes, my beauty,” he said.

“We will too,” Andie announced, standing and setting her glass down. “That drink *was* incredible. Your cousin is talented.”

I smiled. “I think so. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I did,” she said, a wrinkle between her brows. “And I have a good feeling about you, too, High Esteemed.”

“Me too,” Basilia called from the tunnel.

A knot in my chest loosened, and I observed the sensation like the strange, rare thing it was. I simply didn’t make instant connections with people. Rooke was one of very, very few. Even my relationships with the quad took time to root.

Yet somehow, I had a good feeling about these women too.



Kyros dipped his head. “You will hear from us once I have discussed the matter with my father.”

I returned his gesture. “I look forward to it.”

The prince paused, then added, “My father hates your kind.”

“I look forward to changing his mind.”

“Good luck with that. Not that his hate is personal. You are our most formidable foe out of the main supernatural species.”

“Not demons?” They had magic also. Where magus and Luthers shared a link with nature at their roots, Vissimo and demons were similar in many ways too.

“He hates demons also.”

Then the Vissimo king would love dealing with a half magus and half demon supernatural. I’d keep that to myself.

The prince continued, “I anticipate my father will want the gates found immediately. He may wish for magus to search Bluff City for demon activity.”

There were magus around on the knolls again and ears on the conversation. Maybe it would be good for the coven to see how easily the supernaturals had accepted the possibility of demon infiltration via their games. “You can hear them, Prince Kyros. You do not require our help. Though if a map is supplied, we will happily give you our knowledge on where the gates could be.”

I was the only one who could sense demon gates in the coven. I couldn't leave the coven unprotected.

Sascha joined us. "I should be able to locate any in Deception Valley. Can we send you a map too?"

"Of course." I hesitated. "I suspect that there will be more gates around your territory. If I were the demon king, once I'd claimed the territory to the south, then I'd go after yours next."

"As would I," the Vissimo prince agreed.

Andie exhaled, hugging Sascha's middle. "Thank you for the warning, High Esteemed. We've just got through one war. I don't feel ready to face another so soon, but a surprise invasion would have been a worse fate by far."

"We can figure it out," Wild answered.

There was confidence to his words, and the sentiment echoed in me too. Vissimo, Luthers, and magus together.... If that didn't save us, then nothing would.

"Pack Leader," I addressed Sascha.

"Just Sascha, thanks," he replied with an easy smile on his face.

I nodded. "I had Winona look into the deaths of the Luthers of your pack. She found a record of their discovery in our archives. Two Luthers were found, murdered, at the edges of our territory. The markings and wounds on them were unusual."

"Like they'd been melted from within," he said, his easiness gone.

"Yes," I acknowledged, pulling a face. "Though possible for a magus to do, theoretically, it is not how we deal with a threat."

"You don't believe your people did it," Andie said.

"My gut says no. The bodies were located in a ravine that is the location of a demon gate. This could be interference from demons to prevent any meeting between Luther and magus. However, there is a simple way for us to find out. I

have instructed my strongest divination magus to undergo a retelling in the area. This will replay the past and allow us to see what occurred. If our ancestors were to blame for the deaths of your people, then you will receive a formal apology from this coven. If it wasn't us, then watching the repeat may be confirmation for you that the demons have a more widespread plan than simply claiming magus territory."

Sascha searched my face. "Thank you, High Esteemed. Knowing either way will bring my people closure. We do not lose many, and we always remember those we have."

"In this, our people are the same." I straightened. "I did not expect to feel such connection to any of you. For whatever reason that be due to, I am grateful for it. The coven looks forward to welcoming you again soon."

Basilia hugged me first, and I heard the slight shock from the magus onlookers.

"Bit of culture never hurt anyone," the princess said, pulling back. She touched her ear. "Thank you."

Andie hugged me also.

I just never expected this. I returned her hug.

"We'll talk soon," she said to me, winking.

Kyros glanced after Basilia, who was wobbling to the waiting helicopter. "She was formidable either way," he said to me after a beat. "But I am glad to see it gone."

*Her pain.* "I was glad to do it."

The Vissimo prince entered the helicopter after her.

Andie was stripping off, and Sascha shot me a quick look. "The repeat you mentioned. Can Luthers see it?"

"They can. And you're welcome to watch it for yourself when you next return."

The pack leader extended a hand. "Like the others, I have a good feeling."

His hand was warm, and his grip purposefully kept loose enough not to crush my hand. Sascha's power didn't leak out



everywhere as Kyros's did, but the Luther had it in ample quantities. "Travel safe."

Soon after, the helicopter was taking flight, and two Luthers were sprinting across the meadow toward the east.

There was a strange hollowness at their departure.

"I feel it too," Wild said.

We'd never met others who had gone through a mating process. Perhaps that was to blame. But there seemed more to it. Rhona had said that fuckers like us worked fast, and I had to give the comment some credit. The six of us shared so many parallels. Each of us had been almost propelled into our current situations at the forefront of our peoples.

The stares and whispers of the watching magus snagged my attention. How many of the coven felt differently after sharing a meal with Vissimo and Luthers and seeing how open they could be? I smiled at the surrounding magus, truly proud of how the coven kept their shit together. That meeting could've gone wrong in a lot of ways, but we'd managed to pull it off.

I lifted a hand to the advisor pendant around my neck. "Better get everyone up to speed."

We headed inside, walking slowly to the advisory chamber. Like me, I could tell Wild was deep in thought about where life could head next.

I'd known an alliance would be pivotal in the battle against the demons, but I'd underestimated how strong the potential shift for the culture of our coven could be. This could be momentous.

A person grabbed my arm, and I was hauled unceremoniously into an empty guest quarters.

I looked at Rooke. "Good morning."

At her look, Wild cast a silence charm.

"We have a problem," she said.

“A bigger one than the coven imploding or being slaughtered by demons?”

“I’d file it under coven implosion.”

I cast my mind back over the last day. What the hell happened? “Tell me.”

“People noticed Wild’s behavior yesterday. On the knolls and at dinner.”

Wild grimaced. “Fuck.”

“Everyone’s talking about the queen comment, but they’re drawing some serious parallels between you, the prince, and the pack alpha.”

“He’s not actually an alpha, did you know?” I asked her. “He’s a sigma. It’s like an alpha on steroids, but without a lot of the narcissistic shit of an alpha.”

Rooke stared.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just found that interesting.”

My cousin took a breath. “Tempest, they’re talking about dark magic use.”

Now *that* was a problem. “I see.”

“They’re wondering what hold you have over Wild,” she continued. “He hasn’t been himself since you arrived. He turned Bedwyr to stone. And then the way you healed him too. Maybe that wasn’t from the relics; maybe that was dark magic too.”

It had been chaos, which could have catapulted me into the use of dark magic along with Wild, but we’d found our ways back to ourselves. “How many?”

“Everyone is talking about it, aside from those who know you best—or your advisors. Although, Opal isn’t herself.”

Wild put in, “That could be because of the other supernaturals here, not my behavior.”

*Could be.*

“At the minimum, some members think you have some kinky queen-king bedroom fantasy going on. At the maximum, you’ve used dark magic to gain the relics, your position, an end to Caves, and Wild’s enslaved to you.”

My eyebrows had steadily risen. “That’s... a lot.”

And were they all that far off the mark? I knew more than I was letting on and hiding so much. They’d put everything together in the most logical way possible. A magus *could* embrace dark magic.

In place of that, I had a demon. A demon that allowed me to go through a mating ritual with Wild, which had led to gaining a fourth affinity.

Rooke swallowed. “Look, I’m only telling you this next part because I don’t want you to be blindsided by it. It’s fucking sick, what they’re saying, and you have no idea how much poison I want to use on Frond’s people.”

“There were more of them this morning,” Wild said quietly.

I’d noticed too. Kyros had been watching them also. “What are they saying?”

“They’re wondering if it’s a coincidence that you gained the divination affinity when your family died. They’ve heard that a car crash didn’t kill them. That you lied about that, but told Ty the truth the other day. Some are saying you might have killed your family to gain their magic.”

That was fucking preposterous. “How did they go from worrying about other supernaturals to thinking I’m some dark magic overbitch in twenty-four hours?”

Wild rubbed a hand through his brown hair. “It’s my fault.”

“You couldn’t do anything about it.”

Even he couldn’t argue with that.

“We need to decide how to approach this,” I thought aloud. “There must be another explanation for your behavior.”

I faced Rooke.

She looked back blankly. “Drug use?”

I couldn’t see them swallowing that one. Then again, they’d accepted I’d sold out to darkness pretty quickly. Wild was on a different pedestal to me, however. They’d known him longer. He was an Astar. I was a Corentine.

“What if you told them the truth,” Rooke offered.

Both Wild and I looked at her.

“The part you can. That you believe you might be in a mating ritual. That this mating ritual is what might have given you the fourth affinity.”

I sank into the nearest seat. “That could lead to a lot of uncomfortable questions.”

“Not doing so may lead to coven division worse than we saw in Caves,” she replied.

There was another problem. “Getting caught out like this is becoming a pattern. Me only offering them information when I get caught or put on the spot. I don’t want them to lose trust in me by coming out and acknowledging something *else* I’ve concealed.”

“Then let it come from me,” Wild said. “I was the one to screw this up. Why don’t I take some of the heat for a change?”

“Because they’ll think I forced you to do it because you’re my sex slave,” I said sarcastically.

Wild didn’t laugh. “This is something I’d like to handle, my queen.”

“For a start, less of the *my queen* would be good,” my cousin said. “But I’m with Wild here. Let him do this, Tempest. And maybe you could consider whether the coven should know the truth about how your family died.”

I immediately shook my head.

“You shouldn’t have to share anything you don’t want to,” she hurried to add. “But this could be an opportunity to counter that pattern you see forming in their minds—the one

where you only tell them things when you're caught out. Why not tell them that a demon killed your family? Why not tell them *that's* why you know more about demons?"

My reply was dry. "Use some truth to tell another lie?"

"It's not completely untrue. You learned what you were because of the journeys back to that memory and finding yourself by the north mountains. That unlocked knowledge of your heritage and everything else too."

It was a stretch but not untrue. "That may do more harm than good. Frond could twist it."

"He could, but the emotion when you speak of your family can't be mistaken as being anything other than genuine."

I rose, already weary at the thought of the day ahead. "We have a meeting to get to." The other advisors would be waiting. "Rooke, thank you. That was hard for you to repeat, but I'm relieved I wasn't hit with that unexpectedly."

She hugged me tightly. "You don't deserve to be spoken about like that."

I half did. I couldn't expect people to ignore their instincts. "Don't poison anyone. We'll do damage control best we can."

"Sven is on the job too," she said, and a frown marred her expression.

I said, "Tell him not to exhaust himself controlling the outbreak. We can help, too, and if the coven decides I shouldn't sit where I am, then that's their choice to make."

"Helped by the demons' magic," she countered.

I'm sure it was, and I felt guilty for being the source of division when I was aware of the effect it would have against us in the end. "Wild, we need to run this by the advisors too. You know what to say?"

Wild had been part of the council for years. He also grew up in the lion's den with his asshole parents. I had no qualms in him divulging too much or letting something slip. He was well-versed in reading the room. "I do. Will you tell them about your family too?"

He dropped the silence charm, and we left the room, Rooke hurrying the other way.

Would I relive the most painful memory I had to convince others I wasn't a threat to them? Would I let them into my private emotions when they hadn't earned the right to see them? People like Frond and Josie and Bedwyr included?

I sighed. "Some things should just be mine. Is that a bad decision?"

"There is no good or bad decision. There's just your decision."

"That's something a slave would say."

Wild laughed under his breath. "Do what feels right to you."

Neither choice felt right.

That was the problem.



I closed the book on Celtic ancients when the quad entered with Rooke and Spyne. Wild was on sentry duty again.

“Want company?” Huxley said, pulling Spyne down onto the couch with him.

“If I said no?”

Huxley looked at the title of my book. “I read that when I was four.”

I shook my head. “How is everyone?”

At dinner, I’d simply given the coven an update on how the meetings with the other supernaturals went. I’d encouraged them to ask questions about Vissimo and Luthers, and had welcomed the opportunity to speak openly on a subject where I had no secrets.

Wild would address them tomorrow, and I’d decided that no one could force their way into the painful memories of my past.

My family’s deaths were mine to share as I wished.

Sven sank into an armchair and pulled Rooke down onto his lap. “Swimmingly.”

Dark circles smudged the areas under his eyes. The guy had done what I’d asked him not to—exhausted himself. “Thank you, Sven.”

He forced a smile. “You got it.”

Spyne watched the exchange, then said, “Huxley was saying that we may gain access to the archives of the other supernaturals as part of an alliance.”

“The Luthers’ knowledge will be trickier to get our hands on,” I answered. “But I have high hopes for what the Vissimo may possess. The prince knew as much as us about demons, and ample amounts on us—though our race is so insular.”

Spyne tucked his hair behind his ear. “He seemed really old.”

“I think he is. Which means his father is older again.” And the king hated demons and magus. *Yikes.*

The grimoire paused. “There’s something you should know, High Esteemed. The coven is talking.”

Spyne was about to warn me about the rumors too? I felt a surge of warmth for the magus. He wasn’t sure what to make of me—like others, he sensed more was afoot. He’d decided to withhold judgment for the time being, and so I appreciated that he was going as far as to do me a solid. “I’m aware. Thank you, though.”

He cleared his throat. “They’re saying you do dark magic.”

“What?” Corentin blurted.

He was the only one who hadn’t been brought up to date. Huxley heard everything in the advisory chamber. “I’ve embraced the dark ways,” I told him pleasantly. “Were you not aware?”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” he exploded.

So much for breathing my worries in and out. “I’m glad you think so.” I set my book on the floor and regarded Spyne. Then Huxley.

Huxley was head over heels and was about as prickly as Andie’s sister—though in a learned way. He’d been treated like crap, but something about Spyne had called to him. In this battle against the demons, I’d been thrown toward those who could help me. The quad. My cousin. Varden. The other supernaturals. Spyne. I may have felt the coven was one thread



away from falling apart, but I needed to trust in the Mother's plan for me. Surely she didn't strike me with lightning for no reason. "Wild and I are in a mating ritual," I said to Spyne.

Huxley's eyes widened, and he fixed them on me.

He might as well have asked the question aloud. *Are you certain?*

Divulging this to Spyne ahead of the coven extended trust that had only existed between the six of us—and Varden in more recent times. It told Spyne that we accepted him as an important part of Huxley's life.

I was opening the door to divulging more to him too. Things that would really test his trust and his relationship with Huxley.

"What do you mean?" Spyne said, scanning the others, who'd all reacted to my words.

I exhaled in a rush. *Here goes.* "When my magic met Wild's at my coven initiation, something happened to us. Something was triggered, a connection and a drive that was impossible to explain and ignore. When it became clear that the situation was worsening instead of resolving, Wild and I united with the interest of figuring out how to end whatever was going on."

"That was *your* goal," Sven said, snorting. "Wild had already decided to have you."

Spyne's mouth was ajar. "You mean a *mating* ritual like Vissimo, Luthers, and demons go through? That's..."

"Impossible?" Huxley supplied. "We thought so too. And yet each step in the ritual was a romantic one. We were able to divine that it was a mating ritual, and that the process would grant Wild and Tempest with gifts along the way."

"There have been six steps thus far," I said. "And each has unified us more closely, marked by the passage of twin runes that appear on us."

I lifted my T-shirt and showed him the three runes on my stomach, and then the two runes on my upper arm—though the

gateway rune had altered after another step in the ritual to reflect the forming of the initial three-strand bond.

Spyne was shaking his head.

“It’s a lot,” Huxley murmured.

“It is.” The grimoire cut off, then said, “Magus have never had mates before. Why now?”

Corey answered, “We only have theories. The chief one being that magus are the only race amongst the strongest supernatural species that do not possess the mating gift. We know that mated Vissimo and Luthers are stronger. We believe the Mother may be ensuring balance amongst the top four by granting us the phenomenon too.”

“Which could mean that more magus may follow suit,” Spyne mused.

I lifted a shoulder. “We can’t know for sure. But the Mother appeared to Wild during the last step in our ritual. Wild and I share a bond unlike usual magus bonds. We believe this connection is what enabled the Mother to grant me a fourth affinity during the battle with the demons, almost as if she used Wild’s grimoire affinity to graft one onto me.”

Spyne sat back. “The Mother’s hand is in this, that’s for certain. We can only guess at her design, but that you are here and in this with Wild is her design too.” His focus lifted to my face. “You are not involved with darkness.”

“I am not.”

“But why not tell the coven the truth from the start?” he asked. “Why let it reach this state?”

*Because I’m a demon*, I wanted to say. But I wasn’t about to tell Spyne everything. We’d wait and see how he managed knowing this much. “Because we weren’t sure what it was for a long time. There was just Wild struggling to control himself, and then runes being carved into us. There was just an undeniable push for us to continue through the ritual that I wasn’t sure I wanted. There was... a lot, Spyne, I won’t lie. On a personal level, there were many hurdles to get over, and every step was plagued by uncertainty.”

“Being in the situation while things unfold is different from hearing about it when most of the puzzle has been figured out,” the grimoire replied.

*Yes.* It really was. “The prince and pack leader elicited a strong response in Wild that wasn’t missed,” I said next. “Coven members are putting together their own version of the truth. They have no idea a mating ritual could be possible. I understand how they’ve reached their verdict.”

Spyne pursed his lips. “Their verdict has been helped along by their motives. Fear, spite, nefarious purpose, and uncertainty too. I would not be too understanding in this matter. You are guilty of no crime in regard to the mating ritual. I believe it’s something to celebrate, and something to learn from.”

I didn’t want anyone to look at my life under a lens.

“And does the black smoke come with it?” Spyne queried.

Rooke froze, and it took everything in me not to do the same. “Black smoke?”

“It’s part of what people are saying. That your skin was smoking during that fight you had with Corentin in the battle learning center.”

The one where I’d scorched the ceiling.

“And I saw it myself when you started to heal Wild after the battle with the demons,” he added. Spyne seemed to notice the silence.

I answered a beat too late. “If the smoke is to do with the mating ritual, then Wild hasn’t yet experienced the same.”

Spyne nodded and seemed to sense he shouldn’t ask more.

Huxley drew him in, and Spyne flashed him an open smile. My guilt only increased at the sight of their new closeness. My secrets weren’t just a wedge in the coven, they were a wedge in my friends’ relationship. I did my daily best to keep everything in perspective, but my mind kept reminding me that my secrets were biting me in the ass, one after another after another.

“What’s that?” Spyne broke the quiet not long after. “I’ve always wanted to ask. I sense knowledge in it.”

Sven was half asleep from the ministrations of Rooke playing with his hair. Corey was meditating after his outburst.

*Oh, why not.* “That’s my quipu. It’s how I store my knowledge to make connections and links.”

The grimoire’s ink-black curtain of hair swung forward as he untangled from Huxley to peer closer. “You do?”

“Yes, it’s how my magic likes to organize itself. When I arrived here and started to play Caves, I realized that I could use the quipu to help make decisions on strategy.”

Spyne whipped his head to gape at me. “That’s why you were so good at the game.”

He’d been in Vero too.

“Yes. I plan to use it now to make decisions about the demons too.” I blew out a breath. “It’s going to get much bigger if we ally with the Vissimo and Luthers.” I’d already added multiple strands for the other supernaturals after dinner, downloading the last couple of days into it. This quipu would circle the perimeter of the first level of my quarters in time. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the braids spiraled up to the top level.

“You’re chosen,” Spyne said. “There’s no other explanation for the things you can do, and what you’re going through with Wild.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“She doesn’t like people having expectations of her,” Huxley said lazily.

My mouth opened in outrage. “That’s not true.”

“Is too. *I don’t want to be a leader. I don’t want to be mated to Wild. I don’t want to do this, that, and everything that I’m obviously meant to do.*”

“I don’t sound like that,” I shot back. *Did I?*

Spyne said, “You were placed in a ritual that allowed you to gain an affinity right as the coven needed you. Gaining that earned you the relics, which ended Caves. Your magic tends toward a unique outlet that gives you the perfect tool to make decisions with an impossible amount of considerations to weigh. How can you deny that you’re meant to wear Ryzika’s relics?”

Maybe I had a *teensy-weensy* issue about others’ expectations.

Huxley was smirking.

“I’m glad I wasn’t wrong about you,” Spyne said suddenly. “I didn’t feel I was. I should have trusted the reason my grimoire magic wanted me to pass you Endex’s journals. Thank you for being patient with me, High Esteemed.”

“Thank you for asking questions and reserving judgment,” I countered. “You’re one in a million. That’s why—when Huxley is an asshole, which he will be until he sorts his issues out—I will always take your side.”

Spyne smiled, and the return of openness between us was a gift in itself.

One that boosted my confidence for what may come in the morning.



I wasn't nervous.

I wasn't a wreck.

*Nope.*

None of Grandmother's "fucking fake it" advice was helping. The confidence boost from Spyne was long gone. Frond's group now occupied two tables. Wild and I were on an unofficial trial. I could feel the coven's dissent like the minuscule injections of three hundred mosquito bites. The one positive was that the supernaturals' visit had taken second stage to me being the Mistress of Dark Magic.

The *only* positive.

Wild was all calmness beside me, and I'd clung to that for the last twenty minutes, unable to touch my food. I hardly ever lost my appetite. My mother would have been frantic.

"It's time," Wild told me, taking a sip of water after.

My heartbeat took off triple time, and sensing my panic, he gripped my hand tightly under the table. His earlier words before we'd braved the eating chamber returned to me. *We've done nothing wrong. This is something for celebration by maguskind.*

Except he wasn't half demon. *He* wasn't the newcomer to the coven turned leader turned dark magic user. In the story the coven had carved, Wild was the victim.

He sent me pulse after pulse of courage, and eventually his effort helped to center me. I had to hold it together and not

give Frond more ammunition. I *wasn't* guilty.

Maybe I'd keep telling myself that and believe it one day.

I inhaled. "You got it, handsome."

Wild didn't need to be distracted during what was ahead. I'd keep my shit together for him and us.

He walked to the stage. Attention snagged on him and was dragged to the stage by my magus. The coven quietened of their own accord, and by the time Wild faced them, I could feel the expectation in the air.

They knew what was coming.

I felt relief to be sitting here, in all honesty, though I was sure magus would check my reaction throughout Wild's speech.

He spoke, "I've become aware of a series of rumors circulating the coven. Dangerous rumors of potentially vicious origin. I will address them now, so they don't inflict damage on this coven, myself, or on our high esteemed, who has worked tirelessly to ensure our survival, only to receive this treatment in thanks."

More than a few heads dropped at that. Mostly on the part of past-Vero members. I hadn't considered the rumors in that light—that I'd been working so hard for them only to have this happen. I'd seen it more in the light that my secrets were bound to get out.

Wild let his admonishing words sink in. "With that said, I can see that some of you have connected information in the only way that makes sense to you. You all witnessed my behavior in the presence of the Vissimo prince and Luther pack leader—"

A loud whining erupted in the caves, and I—along with every battle affinity—was on my feet in an instant.

"The alarms at the gates," I blurted, then boomed over the panicked cries, "Delta, Sage, Wild, to me."

The magus were at my side in seconds and followed me as I strode to the exit. "What's the response plan?"

Wild replied, “We have teams of all four affinities formed from the strongest of us. They are to gather at the demon gates when the alarms sound.”

“Give the order,” I told him. He peeled away. “Delta, gather the remaining battles for extra support at the gates. Sage, do you have strategies ready for us?”

“The sentries have been training with some already,” she answered, and her eyes were wide. “Any others are still being developed.”

“Thank you. Please find Varden and instruct him to move the vulnerable to our safe zone. Then gather any magus who remain to stand ready to fight at the exit to our cave. I’ll meet you there.”

I broke into a run, diving into the portal I’d opened. I only paused to release my magic down my arms, ready for use, before kicking open the door to my quarters.

*Fuck.*

The demon gate was wide open. I listened intently for any sound from the demon realm, any footsteps. *Nothing yet.* They may have chosen to come through another, though. They could be standing in the darkness, too, waiting for me to depart.

I wove a four-affinity barrier over the demon gate and set an extra alarm that only I would feel.

I portaled to the cave exit in the middle of gathering sentries and extra battle magus disappearing into portals of their own. I sent a pulse to Wild as he made to step into a portal with Huxley, Corentin, and Sven.

He paused, and I jogged over. “The demon gate in our room is open,” I said quickly. “Nothing through it yet. Spread the word that there could be demons waiting to ambush at other gates.”

Wild jerked his head, gripping one of his pendants and muttering into it. He fixed me with a burning look after. “Be careful, my love.”



Sentries were gone to their respective gates, and novices and weaker provens were exiting the caves to set up a defensive ring in varying states of fear.

Sage hurried over. “Varden has the others in the safe zone.”

“Thank you, Sage. One of the demon gates is open. I’ve placed a barrier over it. Sentries and battle magus have gone to guard it. I’m going to check the other gates now.”

She held up a pendant around her neck. “Wild just gave us an update.”

“Good. He’ll let you know if anything is amiss.”

Why didn’t I have a sentry pendant? That’s what I wanted to know.

Keeping my magic at the ready, I portaled to the next closest demon door. The magus there shied back in alarm at my sudden appearance, but most were warily regarding the open demon gate. One that they could all see. In the past, even when the gate was open, my friends weren’t able to see it—only the demons once they were in our realm.

“No activity?” I asked.

Ruby answered from the front. “No, High Esteemed. Only the movement alarm was set off, no charms or defenses. I believe the opening of the gate triggered it.”

I wove a four-affinity barrier over the gate. “Stay here until we know more.”

“Yes, High Esteemed.”

I portaled to the next gate, finding Winona and Delta there. “No demons here either?”

“Not that we can tell,” Delta answered, then shook her head. “That’s one hell of a gate.”

The entrances to the demon realm inspired what they were meant to—a fearful respect of what may walk out, and a fearful respect of walking through. The obsidian door sat in the middle of a ravine, closer to the coven than it used to be.

The heavy entrance with the carved demon holding crossed verdun blades was swung wide open. Two enormous horns curved above the gaping entrance. “It can look however it likes as long as nothing comes out,” I replied to Delta, then gave them the same orders.

Weaving my barrier over the entrance, I then portaled to the next gate, and then the next, finding the same verdict at each.

Finally, I portaled to the farthest and fifth gate.

Wild walked to join me. “The other gates are open too.”

“They are. All covered with a four-affinity barrier now. No signs of other demon activity.”

The fifth was no different.

The demon king had opened all the demon gates. “Why?”

Wild glanced over his shoulder. “That’s the question of the hour. Is it to inspire fear? That would help to fuel their power.”

And he’d achieve it with the simple act. The thought of sleeping tonight would be far-fetched for any of the magus here. The demon gate in my room could have opened at any time, but the visual of having it open was different somehow. “Or he wants to send something out once we let our guard down.”

“Magic or his people?”

*Exactly.* We had little knowledge of how a demon’s magic worked. The demon I’d fought had based her magic in blood—which I would consider dark magic. Was that usual though or just the most potent form of their power?

They could have any number of weapons at their disposal that we were ignorant to. “Set new alarms,” I told Wild. “And further up and down the ravines, too, in case they can get around one alarm. Put a silence barrier over the gates as well. I don’t know if they can hear through these things. Actually, let’s place barriers to cover all the senses. One that prevents them sensing our magic too.”

“I’d like to double sentry numbers.”

“I agree,” I replied. “I’ll instruct Delta to begin demon training with the coven tomorrow. We’ll hold a meeting with the advisors now.”

“I’ll remain here. We should keep a force at each demon gate until we’re sure nothing is coming through in the immediate future.”

*Agreed.* “I’ll give you an update when I can.” About to call Huxley to join me, I paused. “Why don’t I have a sentry pendant?”

Wild grimaced.

My eyes narrowed. “Spill.”

He lowered his head to mine. “Because you already have a coven pendant around your neck.”

The one that allowed me to call the advisors. “And?”

“I don’t want mine to be outnumbered.”

I absorbed his words. He referred to the ruby foundation pendant he’d given me. He... “You don’t want yours outnumbered... like having more coven pendants than Wild pendants means you’re less important?”

Wild clenched his jaw.

I kept my words slow. “I need to communicate with you and those at the gates.” I refrained from telling him he shouldn’t have purposefully kept me away from the sentry pendant. That wasn’t his choice to make. Others could be listening in, though. Even if they seemed pretty focused on the gaping demon gate.

“If you wear another one of mine, then I’d feel better about it,” he eventually relented.

I gripped either side of his face. “If it makes you happy, then I accept.”

Wild selected another of his foundation pendants with care and placed it over my neck. A purr rumbled in his chest after, and I coughed to cover the sound.

“I like the way that looks on you,” he said, heat radiating in his dark eyes. “I’ll get a sentry pendant to you tomorrow morning.”

I arched a brow. “Thanks.”

I wasn’t sure he picked up on the sarcasm there.

Wild turned to convey orders to his team, and I grabbed Huxley, then portaled back to the cave entrance. Several of the novices startled at our arrival.

“You heard Wild’s report?” I asked Sage and Opal.

They nodded.

“I’m calling a meeting for advisors. Wild will remain at the gates with the sentries for now.” I clasped the advisor pendant and trickled magic into it. Delta, Winona, and Varden would feel it. I raised my voice for the benefit of the surrounding magus. “Please be ready to respond and return to this location if further alarms are raised. For now, you may return to the caves. Thank you for your fast reaction to the alarm tonight. I’ll update you once we’ve collected all information.”

I didn’t wait for their response, instead portaling to the safe zone.

“Varden, it’s me,” I called through the door. “All is well for now.”

The barriers on the door dropped, and the esteemed swung the entrance wide. I caught sight of the pale and frightened faces inside. High above us was a pinprick of light where Varden had formed an escape hatch to exit up onto the knolls. I sincerely hoped we never had to use it. If we did, it would be with the knowledge that our home now belonged to demons.

I strode inside. “All five demon gates are open,” I informed those within. “Nothing has come through, and our sentries will remain in force at the gates to ensure we are not without defenses and advanced warning if that changes. Please return to your quarters or evening activities. If you hear another alarm—or an alarm at any point in the future—then reconvene here without delay. The advisors will meet now, and

an update will be provided in the morning. Rest may not come easy for you tonight, but be assured that we are taking every measure to ensure your protection.”

Varden joined me, and we walked toward the advisory chamber.

“What purpose can be achieved by opening the demon doors?” he asked, almost as if to himself.

“That’s what we need to figure out,” I said.

The others were in similar discussion when we joined them not long after.

I took my authority. “We can be proud of our response tonight. That was the first test since the demon battle, and we rose to the occasion. It served as a reminder of the real danger facing us.”

We couldn’t grow complacent. And was I relieved the demon gates interrupted Wild telling everyone about our mating ritual? Absolutely.

“Delta,” I said. “This seems a good time to begin demon training for our battle magus. Winona, I’d like you to form a new team and leave your current tasks to Barrow and Opal to continue. You will collaborate with Sage chiefly, and also the mentors of each learning center, Delta being one of them.” Ty, Serene, and a shriveled, old grimoire named Chistyr made up the other three. “Battles alone will not win this fight, and all affinities must develop and train in strategies that may benefit us against the demons. Once all affinities have some individual skills to enlist, we will unite the affinities to see what strategies we can create together.”

Winona replied, “I will see it done, High Esteemed.”

“Wild is doubling sentry duties while the gates remain open. His sentries are setting additional alarms in the ravines. A larger force will remain at all gates overnight. *Our* task is to make sense of what happened.” I scanned their pinched faces. “Any ideas?”

Varden’s voice held a hypnotic quality. Magus often gained it when deep in their main affinity. “The demon king’s choice

must further his desire to expand his territory. Opening the gates is an attack in some way, shape, or form.”

Huxley nodded. “Is it to set us on edge? That negative energy will make them stronger.”

We’d been generating enough negativity without the tactic. If anything, the demon king opening the gates may have realigned the coven once more.

“Is something going in, or is something going out?” Opal posed the question.

Or is something going in *more*? “Do you suppose that the gates muted how much the demons could feed on us? Maybe the flow of our negative energy will increase?”

Varden’s gaze snapped to me. “Now that we’re aware of their presence, there’s no reason to remain hidden. The demon king might as well gain as much from us as possible—speed up the process to limit the time we have to defend ourselves.”

*Ah, fuck.* That made too much sense not to be a possibility.

“There’s also the matter of what comes out of the demon gates,” he said.

Barrow replied, “You believe something comes out other than demons?”

“Do you recall the wounds on Caradoc’s body?” Varden tugged at the sleeve of his thick robes. “The ulcers?”

Barrow shuddered along with Opal. “Yes. They weren’t on Fyre’s body.”

“No,” Varden said. “Fyre didn’t spend much time guarding the demon gate. I did, however.” The esteemed drew up one sleeve.

For a time after meeting him, I’d marveled that Varden could stand to wear such thick robes in summer. Then I’d seen the ulcers covering his body.

Winona gasped, and Ruby covered her mouth at the sight.

“Sir,” she exclaimed. “Your skin.”

“They appeared after eighteen months guarding the demon gate,” he said. “They have worsened from there. I am certain that a type of decaying magic from the demon realm is able to pass through the gates, in answer to your question, Barrow.”

I’d known it, too, but I hadn’t worried overly much because Varden had been very close to the gate for a long time.

Except now the gates were open.

“The damage,” Winona said to him, “is it fading now you’re farther from the gate?”

Varden paused, then shook his head. “It’s not unreasonable to guess that the wounds will take as long to heal as they took to inflict. I’m not worried about my wounds.”

“I would like Serene to access them,” Winona pressed. “The coven may need such information.”

She’d artfully backed him into a corner.

“I would be grateful for her expertise,” he stated, his eyes twinkling at her skilled maneuver.

“The question then is what’s the new rate that they’re feasting on us,” Huxley said, “and how quickly will we now be hurt by this ulcerating, decaying magic of theirs?”

Delta added, “And will they send an army through without warning?”

Eventually an army would come through. That seemed to be a given. I had a feeling the demon king wanted to weaken us first.

Ruby spoke, “Perhaps this provides an opportunity to learn about their power. Our magus can practice forming four-affinity barriers over the gates, and perhaps there are ways we can collect and analyze the demon magic coming through.”

There was logic in what she said. If this benefited the demon king, it had to benefit us in some way. “The apothecaries are best to handle that,” I said vaguely, then blinked. “Rooke.”

Huxley caught on straightaway, blurting, “She has an affinity for harmful substances. She may detect something around the gates that we haven’t.”

“Worth a shot.” I sent a pulse through my bond with her. We didn’t call each other often, but she’d know what it meant and could feel where I was.

We hadn’t gotten much further in ways to investigate the demon’s magic at the gates when she arrived, out of breath.

“High Esteemed,” she panted. “What’s up?”

“We’ve had a thought,” I told her, knowing she’d probably hate this. “I need you to visit each of the gates with Delta. We suspect the gates have been opened so the demons can better feast on us, and so the effects of their magic will work faster on us too. You’re aware of the damage to Varden.”

Rooke glanced at him. “You think it’s poison?”

“Poison, or poisonous to magus—and maybe other supernaturals outside the demon realm.”

She didn’t appear very confident. “I’ll see what I can pick up, of course. May I?” she asked Varden, lifting a hand.

He dipped his head and lifted his sleeve once more.

Rooke approached him and hovered her fingers over the largest ulcer there. I felt the hum of her magic, and then she was hissing, jerking her fingers back. “Oh yeah, that’s a nasty one.” She glanced at me. “I won’t miss that if it’s coming out of the gates.”

Delta rose and extended an arm to Rooke, who couldn’t portal.

“We’ll reconvene in the morning to hear your findings,” I told them. “We all need rest while we can.”

Huxley replied, “Until we know what damage is coming through those gates, you shouldn’t return to your quarters.”

I was half demon, but I had to operate as if I were simply a magus. Wild really *was* a full-blooded magus. He might get hurt despite his bond with me. “Good point. I’ll shift to a guest



quarter for the time being. Let's move any other magus close to the internal gate away too. In the morning. I don't wish to rob anyone of sleep if they've managed to find it."

"I hope you manage to find it." Winona touched my shoulder on the way out.

I summoned a smile. "And you, Winona. Thank you all for your aid tonight."

The response of the coven had restored hope that all might be well.

Delta and Rooke were gone by the time I'd taken my next breath, and all the advisors barring Huxley were gone in the one after that.

"Was it the Mother's intervention?" he asked wryly.

I cocked a brow, thinking of the timely interruption to Wild's speech about our mating ritual. "Felt like it at the time. I'd been convincing myself that I just had to surrender to her design for me."

"You sound like Positive Patrick."

"Maybe he's onto something. I can't decide."

"Linen does look comfortable." Huxley stood. "Hey, thanks for telling Spyne something personal. It's difficult to keep things from him."

I joined him by the door. "I don't want to cause problems in your relationship. I realize that I come with a lot of..."

"Junk in the trunk."

I stared.

"You have a lot of problems attached to you," he clarified at my look.

"Wow, that means something else in human."

"What?"

"I'm not telling. You'll use it against me."

Huxley smirked. "I'll find out."

“I come with problems attached, yes, and I hope we can fill in Spyne completely one day. I’d hate for you guys to suffer for all the secrecy.”

“I look forward to that day, but you’re not that important.”

Huxley walked out.

“He really is an asshole,” I told the empty room.

I followed him at a slower pace.

The soft voices of small groups of magus trickled through open doorways as I ambled through the caves. People were too wired to sleep, and I couldn’t blame them. I wanted to return to the gates, as if that could help matters.

What I needed was to be ready for tomorrow.

I opened the door to a guest chamber, and humor found me. This was the room I’d first stayed in when I arrived at the coven.

*Full circle.* Or did that mean I’d gone backward?

I summoned my purification kit and entered the bathroom to turn on the bath taps. I needed sleep. I also didn’t want to toss and turn for the next five hours. If stronger demon magic was drifting through the caves, then we’d all need to counter it with extra measures like this.

If stronger demon magic was drifting through the caves... then it didn’t matter that the demon king might be accelerating his plans.

We had to as well.



I winced as a proven slammed Sven against the mats. *Ouch.* Demon training began this morning, and there was a determination in the battle magus after last night that told me they refused to go down without a fight.

I dragged a hand over my face.

“Get any sleep?” Delta asked, joining me.

“A few hours. You?”

“Slept like a baby. There’s something comforting about fear.”

There was? “Does that mean you usually don’t get a wink of sleep?”

“Yes. I feel like a new person after the last week.”

At least someone was getting shut-eye. “What’s your plan?” I jerked my head at the sparring magus.

“We broke down your fight against the demon, and Huxley has provided us with what attack and defense information he’s been able to gather on them thus far. I’ve worked with Wild’s sentries already to get an idea of how to structure the training, and now I’ll run the battle magus through it. We’ll have more strategies coming in from Sage, and Wild and I will train the sentries in them first, then the others here.”

The battle magus were in pairs, taking turns to rush the others at full speed. The other had to defend or evade. I recalled the leader of the demon army rushing me in such a way. “Good. I’ll join in where and when I can.”

Delta barked feedback at a pair across the center, then folded her arms. “I’m not worried. You have great instincts in battle. Not many of us would’ve made it through that fight. What made you realize that using your blood would help to penetrate the demon’s scales?”

I tried not to stiffen. I’d quickly realized that the demon’s own blood could penetrate her skin. Later, I’d realized that *my* blood worked in the same manner—and more effectively because I was stronger than her. “Just chance. Some landed on her. I rolled with it.”

“I suppose demon and magus are poisonous to one another. If we are hurt by darkness, then they will be hurt by light.”

I hadn’t considered that could be the case. I also didn’t feel that was what really happened. More like my demon daddy’s blood packed a serious punch. Delta’s musings did give me another idea. “We are opposite, aren’t we.”

“Idea?”

“Maybe.”

Leaving Delta, I followed my bond to Rooke in the apothecary learning center. She was inside the Greenhouse of Fun and alone. I eyed the bench surfaces within, opting not to touch them. There was room enough for a few books to sprawl out between the array of poisonous species and for an array of vials and tubes to be displayed, but very few places for a naked ass. I wouldn’t touch anything, just in case. “Anything new?” I asked.

“Not since we went to the gates after breakfast,” she murmured.

At breakfast, she’d told me demons were definitely sending something poisonous through the entrances. We’d gone up to the ravines after to test whether my four-affinity barrier slowed the poison down.

The rate did slow. Some.

We’d moved our sentries farther away to account for the torrent of poison still getting through, and per Ruby’s

suggestion last night, our magus could practice the effectiveness of their four-affinity barriers on the open gates.

We had to figure out how to combat the poison. “I had an idea.”

“Hmm?”

“If demons are sending through decaying magic, perhaps we should counter with the opposite.”

My cousin nodded. “Yes. An antidote.” She squeezed a dropper of amber liquid into a glass test tube filled with black fluid. The concoction hissed, then faded from black to gray. “Higher dose.”

My brows rose. “I see that you’re on the job.”

Rooke spun on her seat. “I can neutralize some of what’s coming through the gates. The scale is the issue. I’ve done my best to replicate the poison, and I believe this antidote will work; however, we’ll need a huge amount of the ingredients to keep it up.”

“Give a list to Serene,” I said. “Give one to Barrow and Opal as well. They can ask other covens for them. If the alliance with the other supernaturals goes ahead, then we’ll do the same with them.”

Rooke glanced at the vial of gray fluid. “Even then, we should focus efforts on the gates closest to the coven. We have no idea how long we’ll need to keep this up for, and my version of the poison will differ from the actual demon poison coming through. My antidote may not be as effective.”

She’d figured out an antidote to the bad juju coming through in less than three hours. “Your apothecary affinity is incredible, you know that?”

I bet she hadn’t stopped to consider that she might’ve prevented us from looking like Varden in less than a week.

“It wasn’t difficult.”

“For *you*. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be, and now everyone will know it.”

Rooke's cheeks colored. "You think?"

"Absolutely."

A small smile graced her face, and she wiped it away too soon. "How are things going otherwise?"

"Battle magus are training. Winona is meeting with the other affinity mentors soon to form a plan for the other affinities. Sentries are practicing four-affinity barriers at the gates over the top of mine. The night shift are sleeping."

She nodded. "Busy. People want an outlet for their fear. And you need an outlet too. Corentin's next circle is starting soon."

Lunch was underway now, so I *could* make the next one. I felt more like pounding my fists into something, but I didn't want to overextend myself when we could be under attack at any second. "Maybe I will. Let me know if you need anything."

She lifted a hand in farewell, already back to work.

I walked through the main tunnels, mind whirling with the new details that arrived overnight. So many teams, and so many initiatives to track. After the centering circle, I needed to spend some time with my quipu to clear my head and see if other pathways were available to us—and to keep my sanity.

I walked into the divination room. Ty wasn't around—probably in the meeting with Winona. Magus were trickling in from lunch, and I sat beside Corentin, who was already there.

When a circle had formed, he announced, "Let's begin."

Centering took me longer than it had all week as my mind tried to intrude on the process. Pushing out my worries and the demands on me seemed to take an eternity, but eventually I clawed in my four affinities and allowed them to find unity at my magical core before releasing them again.

My pressing thoughts returned immediately, but they didn't occupy the same space in me. I could breathe somewhat.

Most of the magus were still here, and a second ring of the coven had formed around the first. I was glad that those who weren't busy had opted to do something productive.

"Corentin?" someone asked from across the circle, breaking the peaceful quiet we'd been sitting in.

Most magus were finished centering and were enjoying the aftermath.

Corey replied in his dream-state voice, "Yes, Josie."

"I haven't noticed before now," she said. "You used to have four affinities. Now you have three."

*Ah, shit.*

The answer to that question led to my unique magical outlet, and seeing as rumors of my dark magic use circulated just yesterday, I wasn't sure Corentin should give her the truth. Except I'd told him on a previous occasion that I didn't care if he told the coven.

My gut churned as Positive Patrick answered, "The High Esteemed fixed me."

I could see how someone like Josie may hear a *little* Stockholm Syndrome in his reply.

Focus of those who'd finished centering landed on me.

"What do you mean by fixed?" Josie demanded. "She took your magic?"

"High Esteemed," I corrected her. "And no, I didn't."

Corey said, in a more coherent tone, "You all knew what I was before. I had four affinities but couldn't center. I never understood why until Tempest took a look at my magic. She said it was a mess, and her magic knew how to unravel it."

*Damn*, I was sounding more Mistress of Darkness by the second.

*Shut up, Corey.*

"In the process, you lost an affinity, and then she *happened* to gain one," Josie said next.

There was a shocked intake of breath.

I was left blinking too. Of all the ways to put things together, that one had never occurred to me. Then again, I was well aware of what truly happened. “Josie, if you have questions, then Corentin and I are happy to answer them, but you’d do well to lose the accusatory tone in the process.”

“Just trying to make sense of things,” she said after a beat.

“Are you just,” I replied, holding her gaze until she dropped hers.

“Some of you know that our high esteemed’s magic has a special way of taking form,” Corey said, and I could tell he was back in the driver’s seat and well aware this conversation wasn’t turning out great. “Her magic knots and braids information together using thin rope to form something she calls a quipu.”

“I’ve done this since I was young,” I put in. “It’s how I analyze a lot of information at once.”

“I’ve seen the quipu,” Spyne said from a few magus to my left. “It’s incredible.”

I hadn’t realized he was there.

Ruby was in the second centering ring and off to my right. “It’s how our high esteemed was able to put Caves together so easily too.”

There was a subtle shift. Not one in my favor.

“You used the quipu to win Caves?” another magus asked. One from Fertim. Another regular at Frond’s tables.

I said drily, “You didn’t use your magic to win Caves, Grove? Using magic isn’t cheating, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“We don’t have magic like that,” he said, bursts of color appearing on his cheeks.

I lifted a shoulder. “And I don’t possess your magic, or that of any other magus. In any case, Vero didn’t need to win Caves. The game ended when the relics chose me.”



“How *did* you gain a fourth affinity to end the game?” Josie called out.

The volume in the learning center had increased. This was getting out of hand.

“I gained a fourth affinity,” I replied calmly. “I didn’t seek it out; it sought me. As I can see you’d like to believe I had some kind of agenda with all of this, I’ll let you know that Corentin had already lost his divination affinity prior to that.”

“It’s true,” he quickly confirmed. “I tested my magic on the affinity vials earlier that night.”

Spyne asked him—*genuinely* asked, unlike Frond’s lapdogs, “You’re okay with losing an affinity?”

“Tempest told me in advance what the cost of fixing the mess of my magic would be. She didn’t want to do it, but I got the truth out of her. She thought I would blame her, even though she understood how much agony my soul was in—and has been in my entire life. I couldn’t live that way anymore. If there was no end to the pain, then my thoughts had become set on ending my pain in other ways.”

He took my hand in the subdued response to his words. “I could feel her working on me. It wasn’t painless, but I marveled the entire time at the way her magic weaved mine together. What she has is a gift—one that this coven and others can benefit from if one like me is born in the future. I have never felt lighter or more at one with myself. I don’t see myself as having lost anything because I gained my life.”

I swallowed real emotion at his words.

That seemed to do the trick for most of the others too. At least enough that Josie felt pushing further would work against her.

The mood had taken a dive, however, and many of the magus were deep in thought.

*Great.*

Corey squeezed my hand, muttering, “Sorry.”

I withheld a sigh. I'd hoped my secrets would come out, so I didn't need to bear them. I just hadn't considered what happened with Corey to be one of them, and I hadn't expected the coven would make such nefarious connections between that healing, how I'd gained the relics, and how Caves ended. "It's fine."

Here I'd been celebrating the coven uniting after last night.

I left the circle, spotting a grim-faced Sven near the doorway. *Uh-oh.*

Ruby caught my arm. "Did I make that worse just now? I was trying to help. It's unfair of Fertim to label you a cheater for using your magic."

She was speaking more as a Vero team member than an advisor.

I answered with care. "Fertim took a big hit when the game ended. Caves finished, and they'll always wonder if they might have claimed victory. Vero, on the other hand, can be almost certain they would have won. Considering the game was three centuries old, the ending was sudden and anticlimactic, and has left many without resolution. As well as upheaving the routine they've always known. I can understand how Fertim may grip onto my quipu magic to strengthen their argument that they might have won Caves."

She regarded me. "I didn't look at it that way."

"There's no harm done," I reassured her. "And it turns out that your idea to study the demon's magic was a great one. Thank you. Rooke is fine-tuning an antidote as we speak."

Ruby smiled. "Happy to help, High Esteemed."

"I know you are." Odd to think that Ruby and I were a similar age. I felt disconnected from her worries and ambitions—ancient in a way.

I couldn't avoid Sven. "Good afternoon."

"No it's not," he snapped.

*EEK.* "Stub your toe?"

He glared. “I was drawn from the depths of sleep by what you created here. How did you make matters *worse* than yesterday? It’s like you want the coven to collapse.”

*Whoa.* I tilted my chin. “I understand you’re working around the clock to help matters, Sven. I get that you’re exhausted, and I’m grateful for all you’re doing. I’m also doing the best that I can. Coven members will think and make connections however they wish. I have no control over others, nor do I *want* control over others.”

“It shows,” he replied.

I pressed my lips together. “You’re out of line.”

With that said, I walked away. Sven was beyond exhausted. In that state, our conversation wasn’t going anywhere, even if I was super pissed. Doubly so because a show of support would’ve been nice after Josie’s public interrogation.

I wouldn’t tell Rooke this time, but if it happened again, the gloves were coming off.

Barrow the Postman hurried toward me.

I accepted the thick, sealed document from him. “This is?”

“Judging by the thickness, I’d say a contract,” he said, then stage whispered, “From the other supernaturals.”

“They moved fast.” Finally, some good news. “You got the warning off to them about the open gates?”

“I did. No reply yet.”

We could banish letters to the other supernaturals, but they had to reply by normal means. “We need a faster way to talk.”

“With the other covens, we use portals. But that requires magus magic on both ends.”

How to get around that? Portals wouldn’t work. Could we rig an alarm charm somehow?

I rolled my eyes. *Of course.* “Don’t worry. I’ve got it handled. I just remembered that phones exist.”

“Phones?”

“Human thing. I don’t love them, but sometimes they’re a necessary evil. I’ll summon some later. Could you send another message to the supernaturals asking for their phone contact details?”

Barrow nodded. “Of course. That’s spelled F-O-H-N?”

“P-H-O-N-E,” I replied, trying not to laugh. “Rooke got in touch with you about sourcing ingredients from other covens?”

“On the job, High Esteemed,” he answered.

I smiled. “Thank you, Barrow.”

He paused. “Thank *you* for all you’re doing. You’re the leader we needed.”

That made one supporter in the coven.

Maybe even two. Speaking of the second person, I had an idea to grab thirty minutes of cuddling time with him.

I managed to make it to my temporary guest chamber without further interruption. Wild was lying awake on the bed.

“Looks like you slept as well as me,” I murmured, snuggling into his side.

His arms wrapped around me, and he pulled me close.

“There’s a lot to fine-tune,” Wild said.

“There was always going to be after their next attack. At least this one was just doors opening.”

A real attack could have done us in.

“How’s everything else going?”

I filled him in on the various updates, then mentioned what happened at the centering circle.

“Fronde has to be dealt with,” he said tightly. “His group is going too far.”

“I don’t place much importance on what the likes of Josie says, but there are genuine concerns and feelings from others.

Fertim players are naturally going to feel robbed, and oppressing that isn't fair."

"Them accusing you of cheating isn't fair."

"No," I agreed. "They know that deep down—and those who can't admit that to themselves right now might be able to one day. Or maybe never. I don't need everyone to like me. I just don't want us to be divided and helping the demons. Except that's all I'm doing."

"*You're* not doing any of that."

"Who I am and what I've done are doing that." Every aspect of my life was biting me in the ass. "Corey felt terrible."

"Good," Wild half snarled. "He should've known better than to say that at this time."

"Josie caught him with his linens down. He'd just finished centering."

"He's always finishing centering these days."

I didn't want Wild angry at his friends. "You know he didn't mean any harm. He apologized after. My quipu would have been common knowledge eventually—I've already told people. Probably better to have that out in the open and have the opportunity to answer questions. My quipu is the one thing I don't feel I have to hide."

Wild was simmering, and while the demons' magic could be influencing him—as he'd been at the gates all night—I had a feeling our halted mating ritual was getting to him more each day. He hadn't looked at me once since I arrived, and it wasn't out of anger.

"Is my magic really bright?" I asked him.

"Blinding," he admitted.

I sighed. Nothing was moving anywhere. The coven, me, and Wild were stuck taking one step forward and the same damn step back again. Something had to give or break or be loosened so we could get out of this rut.

I believed now that nearly every facet of my life was linked to this battle against the demons. My past and my present, my demon, and the mating ritual. My leadership and magus magic too. If something had to give for us to make progress, then I couldn't see anywhere to achieve that except one place.

"We decided a divination journey was too risky," I said in the quiet. "I think we need to reconsider."

He shook his head. "It's not the time. There's too much that could go wrong."

"You're saying that from the viewpoint of my protector."

Wild sat abruptly, turning from me to sit on the bed's edge. "Of course that's where it's coming from. *Someone's* got to protect you against all the fools in here."

I sat in bed. Slower. "That can't be the only viewpoint, though. We can't go through this only thinking of defense."

He surged to his feet and faced me, expression thunderous. "Right now, that's all there *is*. There are any number of threats against you, Tempest—from the demons and the fucking coven. And I can't protect you from any of it. No wonder the mating ritual has stopped, when I'm useless at the single job I have in our connection."

*Mother be*. Where was this coming from?

"You were at the demon gates all night protecting me," I said quietly. "Yesterday, you were ready to defend me against the coven by telling them about our mating ritual. Wild, protecting me is *all* you're doing. You aren't failing at anything."

"I'm not doing enough."

"You're doing *everything* you can."

"Then why has the mating ritual stopped?" he roared.

We'd already figured this out—or figured out a theory. Which Wild couldn't access while in this state. I stood and started to circle the bed toward him. "Because my demon is gone."

“She left because I’m not a strong enough mate.”

We’d never left this long between steps in the ritual. I was seeing what happened when the ritual wasn’t respected and nurtured. I’d felt the danger of disregarding what was between us several times. What we shared was powerful, but we could share it in darkness or in light—harmony or chaos.

Things had taken a turn with Wild.

There was a knock at the door.

Wild blurred to it, nearly ripping the iron and wood off the hinges.

Sven was on the other side. He glanced at Wild, who was clearly furious, then decided that wasn’t a big deal.

He said to me, “Tempest, I’m really sorry for earlier.”

Wild growled, “What. Happened?”

Sven blew out a breath. “I had a go at her for making things worse. It was a shitty thing to do. This isn’t—”

Exactly what it wasn’t, I never got a chance to hear as Wild ripped Sven into the room and slammed him against the wall, a hand clawed about his friend’s throat.

“Wild,” I shouted, rushing forward to grip one of his arms.

*Fuck.* I was powerful, but something was possessing Wild right now. I couldn’t budge him. “Wild, stop!”

Sven’s eyes bugged out.

“This isn’t protecting me,” I said in a rush. “Sven is your best friend. He’s on our side.” What else could I say to break the hold over him? “If we’re to make it through this, then we need all the help we can get.”

He blinked once.

“We need Sven,” I whispered. “Let him go. Come on, loosen your hand.”

The fury left Wild in a rush. He was left staring at his friend in horror.

Sven edged out from between him and the wall, rubbing his throat. “What was that?”

The question was for me, but he didn’t take his eyes off Wild.

“A new development,” I answered, suddenly aware that we’d garnered attention through the open doorway. Just what I fucking needed. “Nothing to see,” I barked at the few magus there and slammed the door in their faces, checking that the silence charm always on the room was in place.

Wild remained facing the wall as Sven watched him warily. I circled my fingertips on my temples.

“We need to do a divination journey,” I said.

Sven said hoarsely, “Why?”

“Because my demon has gone, and without it, the mating ritual has ground to a halt. It’s getting to Wild, as you can see.”

Sven swore, then said, “You think a journey will help your demon return?”

“She’s always come to help me through chaos when I go back to the day my family was murdered. I can’t think of anything else to try. We already attempted to trigger the ritual by exploring our bond.”

Wild hadn’t turned from the wall yet, and I could feel his self-loathing. He did feel useless. He didn’t feel worthy. He believed my demon was right to stay away.

All of that was so... *wrong*, and I felt truly afraid for the first time since noticing the mating ritual wasn’t pushing at me. What if I couldn’t reach him through this mess?

How did I pull Wild back to me? And how long could I manage to hold him close until I was pulled to the same place?

Wild spoke for the first time. His voice was hollow. “Let’s do the journey.”

Attacking Sven had convinced him when I’d been unable to.



I said, “We shouldn’t delay. Sven, could you tell Rooke to prepare? I know she’s busy, but I don’t trust anyone else to guide us to the past.” Corey wasn’t an option any longer.

“I’ll go now.”

“I’m calling a meeting with the advisors to look over the contract with the Vissimo and Luthers, and then we’ll purify and meet her in the moss forest.”

Each time I’d gone to this moment in my past, I’d entered chaos. With Wild in his own version of it, this journey could solve a big problem or make an even bigger one.

If this did make things worse, then I had to ensure an alliance for the coven was in the works. And I could only hope to the full extent I was capable of that the coven would hold things together if I was out of commission for a time.

Wild had been right earlier. This really wasn’t the time to take such a risk.

It was just all the time we had.



I'd grown accustomed to leaning on Wild sometimes, and him on me. In this moment, we weren't of any use to one another. I was a nervous wreck, and Wild was in full guilt mode that was only strengthened by *my* nerves and reluctance to go back to my past.

Yep, I was reluctant. Watching your family get murdered again could have that effect on a person.

We were a mess.

Everything was a mess.

"Ready?" Rooke murmured.

She held one of my hands and one of Wild's. Wild and I held hands too. Though Corentin no longer had a divination affinity, he had ample knowledge about journeys and Rooke had wanted him here in case she had a question on the way. He sat cross-legged atop a moss-covered boulder.

"Tell me of your grandmother," Rooke said to me, her hypnotic tone telling me she was deep in her divination affinity already.

I closed my eyes. "My grandmother didn't fit well in the human world. She was too *other*. But she was old, so humans explained her behavior away as an age thing." I smirked. "She got away with a lot."

"Hold to your memory of her while you hold to us, and step inside your divination affinity," Rooke instructed.

I seized onto memories of my grandmother and wrapped an imaginary hand around my bonds with Wild and Rooke. I heard Wild grunt as I drifted up my divination affinity to where my demon used to be. Passing through her uninhabited black smoke to continue further into my magic was strange to say the least. Who would've thought I'd miss her hisses and glowing red glares?

I really did.

I blinked as black smoke rose ahead to form a wrought-iron gate. "High school."

"You have mixed memories of high school."

"Yes," I murmured to the voice in my head. "I wanted to know more of humans. I wanted friends. But I could never have real friends with what I hid from them. Syera made school bearable, and I enjoyed learning humans' ways, though some of their teachings are ridiculous."

I walked out the school gates toward Grandmother, who stood leaning against our car of the week. She couldn't drive, but she could use her magic to move the *metal box* where she liked.

The voice asked, "How did Syera find school?"

"She liked to think of humans as little pets. She doted on those who displayed good behavior. Was admonishing to any who stepped out of line. She ruled the school openly."

"*Openly?*"

"I ruled it, really," I said, my lips curving. "But no one knew. I didn't want them to know."

"*It must've been hard to never grow close to anyone.*"

My heart panged. "Secrets have a way of keeping people apart." My current life was further reinforcement of *that* life lesson.

My grandmother snapped at me, "About time."

"I always finish at the same time, Grandmother." I kissed her cheek. "Good afternoon."

“Yeah, yeah. Where’s the other one?”

“With her human chauffeur of the day.”

Grandmother cocked a white-gray brow. “Too cool for her grandmother, is she?”

“She has a reputation to uphold.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I just need her to uphold hers in order for my plans to go ahead.”

She cracked a grin, and the wrinkles beside her mouth deepened. Her gaze shifted over my shoulder. “You part of those plans, boy?”

Wild answered from behind me. “I’d like to be.”

“You are or you’re not,” she spat. “Decide.”

“I am,” he said firmly.

She glared. “Next time lead with honesty instead of wasting my time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Grandmother maintained her glare, then was in the car in the next instant. I was on the middle seat, and Wild sat to my left. Though... I couldn’t recall climbing in nor opening the car door.

“Where are we off to?” asked my mother from the front seat.

I shook my head. Had she been here the whole time?

My mother turned in the driver’s seat to stare at Wild. “Who’s this? He’s magus.”

“This is Wild, Mother. He’s part of my plans.”

“Is he?” she mused, and I could see the gears shifting in her mind. She plastered a welcoming smile across her face. “Welcome, Wild. How great to meet you. I look forward to knowing you better.”

*I look forward to finding your weaknesses to drive wedges into them.*

“Thank you, ma’am,” he replied.

The car was moving in the next second. When did we start driving? And these roads weren’t anywhere close to the high school. I shook my head again.

Grandmother yelled at someone out the window, and Mother shushed her.

Syera linked our pinkies, and I gaped at her in the seat to my right. “Syera.”

“I need to tell you something, T.” She peered past me to Wild.

I could feel Wild’s focus on her too.

“He’s with me, S,” I told her. “He’s family.”

She dragged her attention to me again, and though part of me was aware that I’d come here for a reason, and that Wild wasn’t usually here—and that this car was driving to somewhere I hated and feared—the majority of me was a teenager in this car next to my twin sister.

I waggled my brows, and my mouth moved of its own accord. “Is this about why you’ve been sneaking out?”

Mother and Grandmother were arguing in the front. Without heat. That was their love language, or so Mother said. Grandmother said it was because her daughter was a pain in her vagina at birth, and a pain in the ass since.

“Yeah,” Syera said. She was nervous.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s something happening to me, T. Something... I thought my magic was coming in more. Finally. But—”

*Bang.*

Metal screeched as the roof was ripped off in one sheet. My head crashed against the seat belt holder, then against something else hard. Syera’s head?

I heard a distant roar. *Wild.*

White-gold power erupted. Grandmother's. *Attack.*

Periwinkle blue. Mother's magic. *Defense.*

Black power. Liquid black. Unknown. *Enemy.*

"Fight, fight," I slurred, gripping my head. "Syera?"

"Tempest!"

Something didn't feel right. I was hurt. Power was pouring into me. *Mother's.*

"Take from me," Syera screamed. "Mother, take from me." Grandmother was fighting someone outside. I must be in bad shape for Mother not to be fighting with her.

I stared at the blood on my lap and coating my hands. I lifted my head and glimpsed the frozen, terrified expressions of Syera and Mother.

I looked out the car window in a daze. "Why is it dark outside?" Where had the sunlight gone?

The power outside hit me then. The *foreign* power. *Demon.* There was a distinct flavor to the magic that I could identify now. This magic belonged to a demon, one stronger than the red-scaled woman I'd killed.

Mother's blue eyes were filled with pain. Pain for me. Pain for what might happen. Fear. So much fear.

"No," I whispered as Grandmother's white-gold power began to fade. From outside the car, she stared directly at me. Her hard, gray gaze then shifted to where Mother's magic was fading as she gave too much to me. What little Syera possessed was fading too.

Black magic shattered the windows and poured into the car, covering Syera.

I screamed her name.

There was no answer.

Grandmother whisked her power back from her attack on the demon outside and redirected her magic into me. Every bit

of it. Directly into my chest.

Mother was gripped by the dark power outside. She clawed at the frame of the car door, losing the fight to remain by my side.

“Goodbye.” I moved my lips as she moved hers, speaking her silent farewell to me. Why was she protecting *me* from the blackness when Syera was covered in the stuff?

“Why not Syera?” I sobbed.

Why not? Because Syera was already gone. I could feel the emptiness within already.

“Tempest!” Wild roared.

*Wild.* I sucked in air. He wasn't in the car. Where was he? I had to get to him. He was the only one left.

Mother was screaming outside. “You won't have them!”

I dragged myself over shattered glass, but my crawl stopped as abruptly as my mother's scream as I was seized around the throat and lifted.

I stared into a face edged with red scales, scales that seemed ten different hues of red the color was so rich. This supernatural was powerful.

The demon king.

*Why?* I thought at him.

His magic poured into my throat, and I couldn't think or say or do anything then. His scalding magic squeezed around my heart, poison to me, but something else demanded my attention.

Within me, deep inside a channel of magic I'd never noticed before, swirled a fury of black smoke. A woman stood in the midst, and she and I locked gazes. I knew so much about this woman, and nothing too, as though someone close to me had spoken about her for years, but we were only just meeting.

I gasped as the woman shoved a dagger under her ribs, and an unfathomable sorrow filled me at the loss of knowing her. Her blood spilled into the new channel of magic, filling it.

She bent her knees and jumped.

The demon king's magic was forced out of my body and throat. His hand was loosened, and I fell through the air, powerless to stop my descent. Looking up as I hurtled downward, I saw the demon king's hand was now wrapped around the throat of another.

Around the throat of the woman who'd been inside me. Now she was outside of my body, and I could see that she was a demon too. Her black scales were a stark contrast to his scales of myriad red.

Strong arms caught me, and Wild's soothing magic filled me.

"You're safe, my love," he whispered.

We looked up at the demon king, who seemed distracted beyond reason. He looked at the demon woman in his grip, then down at us, and then to the swirl of black magic surrounding the car where my family had been minutes before.

The demon king regarded us again, and then his lips curled.

Inclining his head to us, he dragged my limp demon through a dark doorway I hadn't noticed. As he went, he yanked every bit of his black magic, car and all, through it and into his evil realm after him.

I jerked, my eyes opening wide. A scream built inside my lips.

"You're in the moss forest at the Buried Knolls coven," Rooke said rapidly. "You're safe. You just journeyed to your past. The past is where it should be, and you're in the present."

I sought Wild as he opened his eyes. There wasn't any trace of panic, just contemplation.

"I'm here," I blurted.

Wild squeezed my hand. "You're here, my love."

I'd always ended up at the north mountains looking like a mad woman. "Why am I still here?"



My stomach dropped in the next instant. *Because my demon hadn't returned.*

“Any trace of her?” Rooke asked in a soft voice.

I sighed. “She’s still not here.” I frowned. “I wonder if that’s why the journey back was different. I’ve never gone that far through the memory. It was as if Wild and I changed the past somehow. I always black out when the darkness pours down my throat because that’s what happened. This time, I crawled out of the car and interacted with the demon king and witnessed what happened after.”

Corentin startled. “The *demon king* killed your family?”

Perhaps I’d put that together on some level already, because the knowledge didn’t shock me as it should. Or maybe I was in a state of shock and couldn’t feel anything. “He didn’t kill me because my demon sacrificed herself so he’d leave me alive. He took her into the demon realm, but she left some of her heart blood within me before leaving.”

“So she’s been in you from the day your family were killed?” Rooke asked.

Something niggled at me. “Longer. I knew her, and didn’t too. As though we’d just met, but I knew everything about her somehow.”

Wild looked at me. “Since you’d turned sixteen or younger?”

“I’d guess my entire life, but I can’t recall if I felt any different at sixteen. Why’s that?”

Corentin answered, “Because demon power awakens at sixteen. In a full-blooded demon anyway.”

Wild spoke low, “Syera was trying to tell you something before we were hit with his magic. She said something was happening to her. She’d thought her magic was coming in finally, but it wasn’t that.”

My mouth dried. He was right. I could hear her words as clearly as if she was speaking in my ear, and yet with everything else that happened that day, I’d never paused to

reflect on what she'd been trying to tell me. "She felt different. And the change happened recently. We turned sixteen a few months prior."

"You've said that she had less magus magic than you," Rooke said. "What if her demon power was more evident because of that?"

I had a theory that the force of my magus power had kept my demon locked away in my affinity. "It's possible. But apparently my demon hasn't truly been present in me because the demon king took her to his realm that day, so that theory could be out."

"We have confirmation that she's in the demon realm and has been for some time," Wild said grimly.

I felt his despair. "Exactly, so what happened to pull her all the way there?" I answered myself in the next beat. "She used up her reserves of blood in me to help us survive the recent attack."

Without repeating the same process of stabbing herself in the chest, she couldn't return.

Dread filled me, only heightened by Wild's determination to keep his reaction together for my sake. What would happen to him? To us?

"I hate putting you through that," Rooke admitted.

I hated *going* through it. "This time was different. I feel like I've seen the whole thing. I blacked out on the day, and each time I visited the past, there were so many questions left over. Why did the murderer leave me alive? Who attacked us and why? Having those answers means a lot."

He left me alive because my demon sacrificed herself to become a slave in his realm. Without her in me, maybe I wasn't a threat to his rule. Why hadn't he killed her afterward, though? I wasn't sure, but perhaps the blood in me had acted as a safeguard for her somehow.

He'd killed my family because Syera and I held the blood of the previous king. Because my mother had fallen in love with his enemy.

“I guess I have another reason to kill him,” I said mildly.

Wild said, “At the end, he looked at us and seemed to see us. Did you notice that?”

I shivered. “Yeah. Do you think he *was* there?”

“Seemed that way to me.”

“Impossible,” Rooke said.

“Not for a magus,” Corey chimed in. “Tempest took Wild into her memory, after all. What’s to say the demon king couldn’t have joined, especially now the gates are open?”

I released my exhale in a rush. “He’s powerful, guys. Red caste and the most powerful of that caste if the depth of color in his scales is an indication. I guess he must be the most powerful demon to be king.”

My grandmother, mother, and sister were obliterated by him in minutes.

And I was meant to fight this guy and win. Rooke wanted to talk of impossible? *That* was the impossible part.

“Thank you,” I said to her. “That’s a lot for you to witness as well.”

“I’m glad you gained something from going back other than pain.” She leaned forward to hug me. “Just so you know, it took everything I had to stop the echoes of Rowaness, Hazeluna, and Syera from attacking Wild. They were not happy to have him in the car.”

I chuckled. “I know.”

“I received their messages loud and clear,” Wild said, a trace of humor finding him despite everything. “They only let me tag along because of their love for Tempest.”

My vision blurred, and I blinked the tears back. “I didn’t have that day in mind when I suggested you could meet them in a memory. Let’s visit a happier one next time.” Even then, their acceptance of him as mere memories meant something.

“I look forward to it, my love.” Wild pulled me from Rooke and kissed the top of my head.



I stared up at the ceiling. For some reason, I'd held hope that my demon would miraculously appear overnight.

She hadn't.

"Nothing?" Wild grunted.

He was turned from me in bed. I'd thought he was asleep.

"Not yet." I rested a hand on his back. "How did you sleep?"

"Great."

*Great.* I had a feeling that meant *I didn't sleep at all.* "There's time for some frisky business before breakfast. I could do with the stress relief."

"I'm due at a sentry meeting," he answered.

Wild was sick. He just said no to sex. I swallowed disappointment, trying to push it down within, too, so Wild didn't get the memo through our bond. If he felt my reaction, he didn't respond. "Maybe later then. Do you need help with anything today?"

"No."

I drew my hand away. "Let me know if that changes."

"Okay."

"Wild?"

"Yeah?"

I kissed between his shoulder blades. “I love you. We’ll figure this out because that’s the only option. You know how good I am when backed into a corner.”

“You’re a one-woman army.”

The words held bitterness that took me aback. Yet none of this was him in the same way that chaos wasn’t really any of us. Chaos was an ugly pit that seemed impossible to extract ourselves from. “Who I am is Tempest, and you are Wild, and you are mine forever.”

He didn’t reply, and I rolled out of bed to get ready for the day. If Wild wasn’t able to function, then I’d keep the ball rolling. We’d find a pinprick of light to follow eventually.

*One step at a time.* I had to walk for both of us for the time being.

I strode toward the smaller set of tunnels that led to my actual esteemed quarters. I missed them and the space they provided. Having my own area in the cave hadn’t been an issue when I was regular ol’ Tempest Corentine. Now I valued time away from the list of things to do and people who wanted me. I’d lost the easy access to my quipu too. I’d need to schedule in time for the sentries to leave their posts so I could work with it. I could feel the room pulling me toward it, and I should listen to that call. More than ever, I had to keep my mind and magic united and clear. Wild’s happiness depended on it.

The quipu really was pulling me.

Maybe I should work with it instead of having breakfast. I paused at the fork to my esteemed quarters.

Life should have taught me not to hesitate.

“High Esteemed?”

There went my quipu time. The person wasn’t Postman Barrow. Opal hurried down the main tunnel toward me. “We’ve received news from other covens. I believe an advisor meeting is needed.”

Her expression told me the news wasn't good. "You got it."

I gripped my advisor pendant and excluded Wild from the summons. He needed to be with himself this morning. "Let's head there now."

Barrow was already in the chamber, and he was aware of the news, judging by the solemn set to his face. I waited for the others to arrive, resisting the urge to tap my finger on the stone slab when they took longer than two minutes.

"Opal and Barrow have received news from the other covens," I said when Huxley's ass touched his seat.

Opal fretted, "I don't know how they found out."

"Who? The covens?" I asked her.

Barrow sighed. "We received word from three of the seven covens who had offered us support. They've heard of our imminent alliance with Vissimo and Luthers and will not mix with other species. We've lost all support from two covens who'd offered us magus, and the remaining coven who had offered us their magus have altered their offer to weapons, charms, and knowledge."

*Fuck.* "How did they find out?"

Not that I'd planned to keep it a secret, but the alliance wasn't even signed for fuck's sake.

I held up a hand. "Don't tell me. Frond."

Opal frowned. "You suspect Frond?"

Varden said drily, "You've somehow missed the mob he's accruing, Opal?"

"No, but this is a serious accusation. Discussion of coven matters outside of the coven is in breach of our laws."

Yes, it was. "Frond is in communication with the original coven and has been for some time. He alerted them, and they approached our supporters. Which covens have dropped their support?"

"Timmo, Nafia, and Rguc."

*Rguc.* I didn't see that coming. She'd been friends with my mother and had taken a liking to me. She seemed so certain in general. "I'd like to speak with High Esteemed Nightlock now."

Barrow and Opal exchanged a look.

"Could you arrange that?" I prompted.

"I can try, High Esteemed," he answered. "She's hard to get hold of."

Opal walked to the far wall and swept her hand across the blank stone. Symbols appeared, and I didn't need to count to know there would be ninety-six of them, one to represent each foreign coven. A sole symbol was larger than the others—the symbol for the original coven, no doubt.

I'd change that.

Opal set her fingers to a jagged symbol in the top right corner, then waited. The symbol glowed a few seconds later, and Opal spoke, "This is an esteemed advisor of the High Esteemed Corentine. Our leader would appreciate a few words with High Esteemed Nightlock."

"What time and date, please?" a voice floated back.

"Now, if possible."

There was a silence on the other end. "Unlikely, but I will inquire."

Opal returned to the table, and the glow of the symbol faded.

Varden hummed. "What does the original coven hope to achieve?"

"Other than revenge?" Ruby asked.

"Their only son resides in this coven. To leave us powerless against a foe that could kill him is something they won't do."

Ruby pulled a face. "They didn't seem to care much about him."

“They don’t,” I told her. “They care about who he is—the heir to the original coven. They won’t risk his life.”

Winona hummed. “There have been instances where the original coven—and other covens—have offered much-needed aid at a steep price.”

“The price being?”

“Ah, yes,” Varden said. “Well surmised, Winona. The price would be the coven, of course. Fertim did not win, and therefore Wild is not ruling this coven. They seek to secure the coven another way. They wish to make us desperate first, so we’ll accept.”

“But our leader is in a relationship with Wild,” Ruby said. “Surely that’s almost the same as Wild being leader.”

“She proved herself immune to their control while they were visiting,” Huxley answered. “She’s an unpredictable factor, and they don’t like it.”

Ruby tilted her chin. “Our leader *shouldn’t* be under any other coven’s control.”

“Fronde doesn’t feel the same way,” I said.

The jagged symbol glowed again.

Opal hurried over and touched it. “You’re speaking with an esteemed advisor of High Esteemed Corentine.”

“High Esteemed Nightlock will speak with your leader. Her available time is limited.”

“Our thanks,” Opal replied, then appeared to pinch at the symbol on the wall before drawing her hand back. A portal was opened, and I rose from my authority as High Esteemed Nightlock came into view.

“Thank you for speaking with me on short notice, High Esteemed,” I greeted the old woman.

“I usually delay these things because I hate waffling on. What do you want?”

This woman reminded me of my grandmother. I didn’t fear her. I also wasn’t her granddaughter and couldn’t forget that.



She owed me nothing. We just liked how the other held herself. “Who told you of our pending alliance with Vissimo and Luthers?”

“Oh, I heard it from Bartemus, who heard it from that sorry excuse for a magus leader in the backcountry of France, who heard it from someone she *couldn't quite recall*.” The old woman snorted. “The original coven, of course. Who else would we hear it from?”

I nodded. “I suspected as much. The alliance doesn't seem to deter you despite the possible partnership with other supernaturals.”

“No. It's smart. If you've only got shit to throw at your enemy, you throw it.”

Princess Basilia might have something to say about that description.

“Any other information you're able to offer?”

Her green eyes glinted. “Only something the French coven leader let slip to Bartemus after a few too many drinks. The original coven has selected a new leader for your magus for when you come begging to them for help. Any guesses who?”

“Fronde,” I replied, my chest tightening with anger.

“Knew you weren't dumb. You're up against a lot, High Esteemed, and from what I hear, you're holding it together. You have my support—my *full* support. I should have given it to you from the start, but I'd only met you the one time. I like what you've done since, and the original coven has too much power over our race. I'll stand in their way wherever and whenever I can. I'll get details of numbers and power levels to your minions.”

I wasn't sure whether making that statement about the original coven to myself and the occupants of this room was smart or stupid. She'd been leader this long, so I was inclined toward the smart option, and regardless, I respected that she showed strength and moral caliber even when outnumbered.

I inclined my head. “My deepest thanks, High Esteemed. If your people are called upon, we will do our utmost to keep

them safe. We are holding training sessions geared toward demon combat. If they are interested in joining those, please let us know.”

“They will be. I’ll have my minions speak to yours.”

I smiled at Barrow’s muffled grunt behind me. “A pleasure, High Esteemed.”

“The same to you.” She sounded surprised.

Nightlock closed the portal, and I faced my advisors. “We have Frond’s motive.”

Ruby was about as furious as I’d ever seen her. “I can’t believe it. You should hear him talking—all indignant about how you’re doing this, that, and the other, while he makes deals with another coven to take over leadership.” Her face colored. “We won’t accept him. Everyone should know about this betrayal.”

“I’d like that too.” I walked back to my authority. “Varden, what are our options?”

“You only have hearsay,” he confirmed my direction of thought. “Your options would be to search Frond’s quarters, place him under a truth charm or serum, or to place him on trial. The latter two options require some strong evidence of guilt to be set in motion. The first is possible, and yet if you find nothing in his quarters, then Frond will use the encounter to further his cause. Frond is many detestable things, but he is not a fool.”

No, he’d be keeping anything incriminating in the rooms of his magus mob.

“So we do nothing?” Delta said, her hand curling to a fist.

Fronde had more traction than I was comfortable with. Too late to regret not dealing with Frond from the outset. Like the others, I hadn’t expected him to betray us to this extent. If I had, then I might’ve felt less lenient about allowing him a voice in the coven. “We watch the situation for now. An opportunity will appear to bring our accusations forward.”

Huxley scoffed. “That’s it? He’s trying to usurp you, and that’s the reaction?”

“I’m open to other suggestions.”

“Kick him the fuck out.”

It was tempting. “Without hard evidence and a firm belief in a magus’s lack of remorse and lack of intent to make amends to the coven or injured party, then I won’t exile any coven member.” Frond may like to form mobs. I did not. Everyone was treated fairly—even those I couldn’t stand.

“Then you’re giving him far more than he’s giving you, and it’s going to kick you in the ass when you least expect it.” Huxley ignored the shocked looks from some of the others.

Huxley hated Frond for reasons beyond this betrayal.

“That could happen,” I agreed. “If it does, then I’ll be consoled by knowing that I didn’t sink to Frond’s level. I don’t wish to set a precedent in the coven that I can’t continue if another coven member were to break a law in the future. I won’t kick out magus based on how I feel or what the situation *appears* to be. There must be proof and no possibility of a solution.”

Huxley didn’t reply, just shook his head.

Was I making the right choice? I didn’t know. “Barrow, Opal, please extend our sincere apologies to the covens who rescinded their support. Let them know that subterfuge wasn’t our goal, and we will always appreciate their initial offer of aid.”

“You mean that?” Delta asked.

“When you only have shit to throw...,” I replied, my lips curving. “I understand that magus prefer to be closed off, and that’s a hard mindset to challenge.”

I’d expected more of Rguc, but there was no point crying over it.

However tempting.

There was a knock at the door. *Good*. I was about done with bad news today. I waved a hand to admit the person.

Rooke was on the other side with her hand still raised.

“Could I have a word, High Esteemed?” She skirted a look at the others.

“You can. Please keep me updated,” I told Barrow and Opal.

The advisors trickled out, all except Huxley, who believed himself better than the rest.

Rooke closed the door after Varden. “Bad news.”

*For fuck’s sake*. “Go ahead.”

“There’s a massive rumor that three covens have dropped their support since the Vissimo and Luther negotiations.”

I thumped my head back against my stupid, uncomfortable damned authority. “Not a rumor. It’s true, and Frond’s spreading it.”

“People aren’t happy,” she added, wincing because she hated bringing me this stuff.

“If you poisoned Frond, could anyone trace it back to you?” Huxley asked her.

She frowned. “Yes.”

“Is that a no?”

“Yes, Huxley. That’s a no. And what did you do to Spyne?”

“He’s being unreasonable!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Rooke, I need you to pass on something to Sven, please.”

So far, he’d operated on his own. I felt odd about using his powers for my gain, like it blurred a line on my moral compass. Frond had focused that line when he betrayed this coven. The gloves were off. “Ask Sven to counter the rumors with news that High Esteemed Nightlock has just offered her

full support. Her magus will join us for sparring sessions soon.”

“I’ll tell him straightaway.”

Might as well fight fire with fire. “And ask him to start rumors that Frond has been dealing with the original coven and working to betray us all to their rule.”

Rooke’s eyes rounded. “He has?”

“If the original coven has its way, Frond will sit where I am sooner rather than later.”

It wasn’t often that my cousin got fiery, but her eyes narrowed. “Then I’ll be finding a new fucking coven.”

So would I.

And not by choice.



The demon braid was enormous. I'd realized tonight that the braid was actually a spine for *another* quipu joined to this one. My quipu was so big it had its own quipu. One for the coven, Caves, and then this huge demon mothership.

I'd asked the sentries to leave me a few hours ago to do my work, and my fingers throbbed after downloading the recent information about the demon king murdering my family, the open gates, the original coven, and my coven's restlessness. Otherwise, I felt better. I hadn't solved any problems, but I felt more capable of doing so.

I hadn't had it in me to face the coven at dinner tonight. Call me a coward if you like, but exhausted would be a better word for how I felt. I'd decided to give myself a break for the first time since the demons attacked.

I walked around the quipu hung in my esteemed quarters to locate Rooke's braid. I wove new antidote developments onto that, then moved to Delta's, Ty's, Christyr's, and Serene's. I added information to the braids for my advisors and then more to the braids I'd started for the other covens. I had a feeling that would turn into a quipu of its own in time too. Magus politics was an entire world that I was yet to fully enter.

I stood in the middle of my quarters to look at the full quipu. The thing was massive and complicated and only getting more so.

A knock.

"Come in," I called.

The quad, minus Wild, filed in behind Rooke.

I took one look at their faces and general dejection. “There can’t be more bad shit today. I’ve filled the quota for that. Tell me something good.”

“People are whispering about Nightlock’s coven joining us for sparring,” Sven said. “They’re excited and reassured by the news.”

I released a breath. “Good.”

“Varden announced there will be a group healing at the next esbat,” Rooke offered. “And from now on.”

My brows rose. “Also good.”

“Wild heard about Frond’s deal with the original coven from Delta at dinner,” Huxley blurted. “He attacked Frond.”

I stared.

“Just went for him, no magic and all fists. Frond fought back—tried at least. But he did manage to tear Wild’s tunic.”

“His tunic?” I asked in confusion.

Huxley grimaced. “The one covering his runes.”

My jaw dropped. *Shit*. “What did the coven say?”

“FronD started shouting about dark magic use. That set off Wild big time, and it took most of us to get him out of there.”

I threaded my hands through my white hair. “Fuck!” I just needed one single thing to go right.

A coven member attacking Frond was one thing. More than a few people wanted to do so even though an attack would undermine the harmony and unity we were trying to achieve. That Wild had been the one to do so was worse. Wild attacking Frond came across as *me* attacking Frond.

The runes were another matter. “If the coven knew about our mating ritual, the runes wouldn’t have given Frond a foothold.”

Rooke closed the gap to wrap an arm around my shoulders. “There was nothing to be done about the demon gates delaying

Wild's explanation."

"We could have told everyone the morning after." I'd seized onto the excuse of trainings and meetings to delay the subject further. I'd celebrated the timely intervention of the opening demon gates. Now, I regretted it tenfold. "What happened after everyone saw the runes?"

"Varden intervened," Sven said.

Both my brows rose. "Everyone listened to him?" I'd pictured anarchy without possibility of order.

"No, they didn't even listen to the entire team of advisors. Everyone stopped talking when Varden collapsed."

I blinked. "What?"

"He's okay. He seemed more embarrassed than anything, but when he fell to the ground, the coven stopped for a crucial second and realized they were acting crazy. The other advisors got a handle on things then."

Sven didn't seem worried about the old esteemed, but I was. Varden wasn't someone who just collapsed. "Serene is with him?"

"Yeah," Rooke said. "We wanted you to know what went down. And didn't too. It's not fair that you're getting hit with all this bullshit. I'm so sorry, Tempest."

I felt a little sorry for myself too, but the words of Basilia's grandmother came to me. The ones about getting great bargains from people who felt sorry for themselves. This is what the original coven wanted.

"The Astars are being systematic about tearing me down, I'll give them that." Squeezing Rooke in a return hug, I released her to approach the gaping demon gate—something I'd managed to forget about while I braided and knotted. Quipu work put me in a deep trance. No doubt that was why I'd missed the surge of Wild's emotions when he went for Frond. "The demons will be loving this upheaval."

I gazed into the darkness of the demon realm for a beat, taking inward stock of the bond I shared with Wild. I didn't



need a translation for the agony radiating from him. He was beating himself up about what happened. “How was Wild when you left him?”

“He took a while to calm down,” Corey said. “When he did... he took it hard.”

“I don’t know where to start with all this,” I admitted. My quipu didn’t have enough information yet to begin showing me new pathways. I was on the brink of coven collapse. And Wild was walking one dark path that I didn’t know how to pull him from.

“There’s only one thing *to* do,” Sven replied. “Own your runes. Tell the coven the truth.”

If Sven was recommending the truth, then these were desperate times. I wanted to confess all, as much out of sheer exhaustion from this pattern the coven and I had fallen into as genuinely not wanting to hide so much. I understood that secrets limited a person from forming real connections—I’d experienced that through high school.

I didn’t want to be the Mistress of Dark Magic or feel so fucking guilty all the time.

That was the hard part of this. I didn’t feel indignant about the coven’s reaction or like their treatment of me was unfair. I felt utterly deserving of most of what they were saying. I didn’t feel worthy to be leading them. Because at the end of the day, I wouldn’t be their leader—relics or not—if they knew my darkest secret.

Tied up in that emotional paradigm was the fact I felt bereft at my demon’s absence.

Was I even half demon any longer? If not, I had nothing more to hide. Yet I wanted her back, even if that made my life difficult.

Still standing before the demon gate and feeling lonely for the first time since bonding to Wild, I opened myself to the tether connecting me to my demon. I still had no idea why the tether only appeared a month prior to joining this coven, even

though my demon had existed in me since birth, but if I ever got her back, maybe she'd tell me.

I focused on the tether. "That's odd."

"What?" Corey walked over.

"The tether to my demon, it's thicker."

"Is it?" Rooke said, joining me.

A thicker bond was a stronger bond. A stronger bond meant greater connection. This was the first change in the tether, and the first change since my demon disappeared too. "Maybe the journey *did* do something to help her."

"Can you feel anything different through it?" Huxley asked, standing beside Corey. Sven stood on Rooke's other side.

I took a breath and stepped closer to the demon gate. A low moan left me, and I staggered forward, nearly toppling into the other realm. "Pain."

I dropped to my knees. "She's in pain."

*So much hurt.* I couldn't sense or feel the tether through the agony.

What was the demon king doing to her? I fell to all fours as wave after wave of torture battered at me from the demon realm. I didn't know how to close myself to the anguish and torment.

I screamed, curling on the ground.

"What's happening to her?" I heard Wild's roar.

"She opened the bond to her demon," Sven shouted over my screams.

I writhed on the ground, white heat stabbing behind my eyes and in my temples. Then Wild's hands were on me, and the pain cut off abruptly as though severed.

Yet it wasn't. I just couldn't feel the agony through his protection.

My head lolled to the side, and I stared through the protective barrier after the tether.

I blinked several times when I found myself staring into a face on the other side. There was a person less than two hand widths away through the barrier. The woman's face was edged with black scales, and then dark clothing she wore camouflaged her from view. Nearly completely. I'd been in the room for hours, and sentries were here prior to that. None of us had noticed the unconscious female.

And this woman... I knew her though we'd never met. *I know you.* A force took hold of me, and I lifted my arm closest to the demon gate.

I reached through my barrier to touch the woman.

"No," Wild yelled.

He latched onto me, dragging me away, and I screamed wordlessly, latching onto the woman for sheer life.

I couldn't lose her. I couldn't lose her again!

Alarms sang in my ears and through the caves. I'd disturbed the barrier over the gate and set them off for the whole coven to hear.

I didn't care. I *couldn't* care.

I wanted her back.

Such was Wild's panic that he didn't immediately notice that he'd dragged another woman out of the demon realm with me. When his grip loosened in shock, I shook him off and scrambled to the demon.

*My demon.*

"That's the woman I saw at the gate," Huxley blurted.

She'd been trying to escape that day, and she'd managed to do so again. This time, she'd made it.

Thank the Mother I'd found her.

I clutched her face in my hands, and her eyes flew open. My demon sucked in a ragged breath as though I'd restarted

her heart, and as her gaze found mine, something in both of us stilled like an impossible lull in a furious windstorm.

We were the same.

She smiled, and I smiled back.

A bright light erupted in my quarters. Panic found me again as the feel of my demon's hand faded in my hold. "She's disappearing!"

Light ate at her until all that remained of her body was a glowing orb hovering in front of my face. My voice—along with my uncertainty—cut off as the glowing orb shot directly into my chest.

As she returned home.

Glass shards sliced at my insides.

Darkness hooked its way into me, warring with the light that made up the other half of who I was.

We'd been born together. She'd woken in me at sixteen only to be dragged to the demon realm soon after. My demon was reclaiming her space within me. I knew this. I understood it had to happen—that we had to become one again. That she'd only had a body while separated from me in another realm and now had to take her place in mine.

I understood all that as black spots appeared in my vision.

I understood all that as I knew no more.



“You’re awake,” Sven said.

I was. “How did you know?”

“You stopped emitting black smoke and your black demon scales are gone.”

That’d do it. “How long was I out?” I couldn’t remember a thing after the glowing orb shot into my chest.

“Three days.”

That was a long time. And I’d left things in a dire position. “How did the coven hold up?”

“We told the advisors that you fought off a demon attack single-handedly. They passed that to the coven, who were understandably appreciative. Enough to keep a handle on things while you recovered. How do you feel?”

I took stock.

I was different. Warmer, for one. My blood was hot in my veins. For a while now, my demon had been identifiable as a smokey, red block in my divination affinity. She wasn’t there any longer. She was everywhere. We really were one.

New strength rippled in my body. My senses were different. I couldn’t pick up any alteration to my magic—or the presence of new magic in me, other than my blood, which felt like a protection or guard, like it would hurt anyone who spilled or touched it. “I feel great.”

“Cool. I feel like ass because I’ve sat here for three hours listening to you snore.”

“Where’s Wild?”

“Playing the part. We had to capitalize on the coven’s change of mood while you were out. He apologized to Frond and has joined the centering circles three times daily.”

I looked at Sven then. “He apologized to Frond?” Even I didn’t feel capable of that.

“Yeah, well, you found your demon again. Wild’s one happy bloke.”

I’d found my demon. Relief coursed through me, a protection as strong as that my demon blood now provided. Wild would be okay. We’d both be okay. “I can’t believe she was lying right there inside the demon gate.”

“How long do you think she was there for?”

“I plan to find out when she wakes.”

“You can speak to her then? Or do you just have access to all her memories and thoughts? I wondered if your minds would merge like your bodies have.”

I frowned. “I can feel her inside. She’s sleeping, and not in any one place. Just like there’s something sentient and healing inside me. I can’t access her thoughts or anything.”

Sven nodded. “Maybe you’ll merge over time like Wild and his demon echo.”

“Maybe. For now, I’m happy to have her back. It’s weird, you know—”

“Nice. I’m pretty hungry, and breakfast is underway, so...”

I rolled my eyes. “This could be the only conversation you have with a legit half-demon magus. You should be filled with awe.”

“Another time. I’ll see you there?”

Breakfast with the coven. “You think that’s wise?”

“As long as you’re sure black smoke and scales won’t appear at the drop of a hat, then yes, you need to make an appearance.”

I had a feeling the demon parts of me were linked to emotion or threat or near death, but I’d play around with that before leaving my quarters. Black scales were all we needed the coven to see.

Sven stood, groaning as he stretched tall. “Can I make a suggestion?”

“No.”

“Wear something revealing.”

My brows rose.

He snorted. “Something that shows your runes.”

“That feels like the worst idea I’ve ever heard.”

Sven was already halfway to the stairs. He called back, “Show a little skin. Trust me.”

I pulled a face and shoved the blankets off.

I used the walk to the bathroom to study the new way my body moved. The improvements to my senses and strength were there, for sure, as was a new speed. I’d have to counter the speed and strength, so no one picked up on anything odd.

Standing in front of the mirror, I dredged up my worst and best memories to try to bring the scales forth, but only managed a wisp of black smoke. I either wasn’t getting enough emotion through the door, or the demon attributes showed in response to a threat. In the past, I’d emitted smoke when in the throes of a fight or when the demons attacked. Or when I’d healed Wild that one time.

Nerves bunched in my stomach. I’d need to figure this out as a priority. The coven knew what scales meant. I was on very shaky ground with the other magus, and even if I talked my way through the runes, they couldn’t know the full truth of my demon yet.

We needed more time.

I dressed in a crop top that exposed the two runes of my stomach, and the two on my arm. I paired the crop top with a silky sleeve skirt. I felt kind of great in the outfit. I'd covered my runes since receiving them, and—not that I walked around in nipple tassels and underwear all the time—but I wasn't shy about showing skin. Or hadn't been.

This felt more like *me*. If the coven decided to condemn me as a mistress of darkness, then I'd be condemned in style.

Tossing my white hair back, I gave myself a dazzling smile and left my quarters.

The tunnels were empty, unusually so, and I wondered if Wild's presence in the eating chamber could be thanked for everyone staying glued to their seats—or was it that Sven had told them I'd be along?

My nerves mounted as I drew closer to the coven.

*Ugh*, where should Wild and I start with this mess? After making the mistake of putting off an explanation, I knew we had to fill them in immediately. I may not want to be leader, but I refused to let the original coven place *their* leader of choice on the authority, especially when that person was Frond. If the coven decided I wasn't good enough, then they should get to decide who replaced me.

There was no way the coven would elect Frond as their leader. Surely. They'd be more likely to start up Caves again. I'd been awake less than thirty minutes, and despite the rightness flowing through me, I also felt the returning clamor of my responsibilities. What had happened in the last three days? There was so much to catch up on.

*Focus, Tempest.*

I had to narrow things down. One step at a time. Breakfast first. Then maybe Wild could deliver that speech about our mating ritual. And then?

I'd think about the rest of the long, long list later.

Outside the eating chamber, I paused to take a much-needed breath. I exhaled, hearing the shake as I did so. Wild sent me a reassuring pulse that brought tears to my eyes.



Despite all of this, I was so fucking grateful his agony was gone, his feelings of uselessness and worthlessness gone with it. Guilt remained in him over how he'd acted and the effect of those actions on my position, but I couldn't harbor any grudges over that. He really hadn't been himself.

Something was going right for us. That was worth so much.

I straightened, tilted my chin, and channeled the energies of my grandmother, mother, and twin as I walked into the chamber.

The volume briefly surged as magus elbowed and nudged each other to pass news of my arrival. And then the volume died down.

Down.

Down.

*Silence.*

I cast my eyes over the magus, reading relief, a lot of suspicion, and some outright distrust. There was much to be fixed. The demons were only to blame for some of what I could see. Though looking back, the feeling in the coven took a massive dive after the demon gates opened. We had to get Rooke's antidote launched at the gates, if she hadn't already.

Most of the advisors sat at their usual table, and I turned to join them when I spotted Varden. I'd forgotten about him with everything else.

"Are you well, sir?" I asked. "I was told you collapsed three nights ago."

He rested a hand over mine. Did he seem older? There was a sadness in his gaze that could be giving the illusion of it. "I am well, High Esteemed. I was sorry to cause such a fuss."

"Serene has checked you over?"

His gaze shifted to the apothecary mentor. "Yes, she has. She has done what she can for me."

“I’m glad. If your duties are too much for your recovery, please let me know. The rest of us can help until you are well again.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know. And how are you faring after fighting off four demons?” he asked.

*Four, huh?* I would’ve gone with seven, but whatever. “I’m alive and recovered.”

Varden glanced at my upper arm, no doubt at the two runes there that I’d gained over three steps in the mating ritual. “Good. You have been missed.”

By Frond the most, I’d wager a guess. “Thank you, sir.” To the entire table, I said, “There will be a meeting this morning to bring me up to speed.”

Now I’d walked into the eating chamber, I could feel that this was the moment to speak some hard words. I had to address the coven after breakfast.

I didn’t want to. I feared having the truth out there. Hard questions could come from it—*how* a mating ritual existed between me and Wild being one of them. My fear of this coven, however, was less than my fear of what may happen to the coven if we continued down this divisive path.

*Here goes.*

I sent battle magic to my throat. “Good morning, everyone. I’m happy to see you again. As you might expect, I’m rather hungry after three days in bed, but there will be a coven gathering afterward.”

Their focus prickled. They didn’t know what to make of my display. If I had something to hide, then wouldn’t I? To show them had been to make them pause and wonder if they’d been too quick to assume dark magic.

*Sven, you’re a genius.*

For the moment, I just wanted to be in Wild’s arms for a minute or two before facing the next battle.

I looked up at our usual table, my attention roaming over the quad, Spyne, and my cousin too.

Then it landed on a magus with brown hair and dark eyes. One with musician's fingers, a black tunic, and black jeans to match. I could almost hear the rattle of his pendants in my ears, and I longed to see that tunic off, so I could trace the runes that told everyone he was mine and mine alone.

With the messages I was sending him, it was no wonder when Wild glanced up.

My feet locked on the spot as our gazes connected.

A roaring filled my ears, and Wild rose in a burst.

A heat built from the space under my ribs. My runes were on *fire*. Light was building in his chest, too, seeping out and about to explode. I could barely look at him through the light, and the magus closest to him were crying out and shielding their eyes too.

I didn't care about them.

I didn't care about anything except one fact.

That I was about to devour every fucking bit of Wild's power and lick my fingers after.



I opened my eyes. My back was so damn cold.

Because I was naked, and...

I glanced left, then right. I was sprawled out on a table in the eating chamber.

*That* got me upright. Covering my mouth, I then spotted a naked Wild beside me. *Phew*, if there were two of us, then this situation wasn't as totally and completely fucking weird.

Or was it?

My body was stiff, and the eating chamber was empty—the four double doorways shut. “How long have we been here?”

*Oh, fuck.* I whacked Wild's thigh.

He grunted, and I whacked him again.

“What?” he grumbled, rolling over on the table like it was a bed of clouds.

“We just completed the next step of the mating ritual in front of the coven,” I announced, pretty sure that was the case.

I groaned, covering my face.

I'd wanted to eat Wild's magic. And so I had. He'd eaten mine too. We'd celebrated devouring the other's power with a lot, and I mean a *lot*, of sex. On the tables where everyone ate their food.

I searched my body for a new rune.

Wild had decided the situation warranted waking up. “You won’t find it.”

“It’s in my vagina or butt?” I demanded.

His lips curled. “No.”

I gasped, “I fucking got horns, didn’t I?”

“It’s up the side of your neck. And beautiful.”

My fingertips rose to touch the left side of my neck where he was staring. I summoned a mirror. The new rune was similar to the tier of three flowers low on my stomach. The one on my neck was a single flower, though, and rested over my pulse. Vines extended out from it like delicate blood vessels. “What does it mean?”

“Judging by the way I can feel your magic as if it were my own, I’d say it means we’ve merged on almost every level.”

Rooke and Corentin might know more too.

I banished the mirror, then blinked at the base of Wild’s neck. “Whoa, yours are different to mine this time.”

That had never happened.

I turned the mirror to him. “And the color is different.”

“Yours too,” he told me.

Wild was right. We’d swapped.

“Must be because we share one magic now,” Wild mused.

I smiled again. “*We* feel right.”

His sigh was all deep relief. “It does. Tempest...”

“Don’t say sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

I glared. “You did the best you could, far better than I or anyone else could have done. You kept a level of control with the mating ritual tearing at you.”

“I’ve made things so much worse.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know. I think the truth was meant to come out. I mean, look at what we just did. Talk about dramatic revelation to the coven.” I laughed nervously. “Do you think me eating your magic looked a little Mistress of Darkness?”

He smirked. “If it did, then I’m the Master of Darkness. Pretty sure that went both ways.”

I’d literally breathed in his magic through my mouth and nose at some points. At others, I’d just grabbed handfuls of it like a kid in a candy store. How weird to think of watching that.

I grimaced. “I don’t want to open the doors.”

“Me neither. Except my ass is cold.”

“Mine too.” I chafed at my arms, then said, “Hey, my arm runes are different.”

Wild sat up. “The three prongs on this one are gone.”

They’d been replaced by a straight line that cut across the top. “Does that mean the ritual is over?”

“Too soon to tell.”

Symptoms of the next step usually took a day or so to arrive. “What do you think our magical union means then? Aside from me knowing exactly how much magic I can take from you, and you from me?”

“I think that’s what it was meant to do. Us not knowing if the other person was near their limit when drawing from them was a serious vulnerability. By having direct access to one another’s magic, we know exactly how the other person is at all times.”

Guess we could get rid of our knocking system. I had a feeling our influence over one another would be better too. If one of us got into a state as Wild recently had, maybe the other person could use the stronger connection to better help.

“My ass really is cold.” I sighed.

I mean, I was a magus and could summon any number of things to help my situation, but deep down, I knew a cold ass meant I had to move.

Wild held a hand out. “Guess there’s nothing for it, my queen.”

I stood beside him and took a moment to wrap my arms around him and rest my head against his chest. “Guess not. If all heads south, I have an apartment in Frankton Gorge. We can both find work. I know plenty about humans. You’ll stick out, but you’re hot enough to pull that off.”

Wild kissed the back of the hand he still held. “I love you, Tempest.”

The full force of his love hit me inside and out. Emotion choked my voice. “I love you, Wild.”

I summoned some clothes, and he did the same. We’d both opted to keep our runes—and the new ones—on display.

“Ready?” he asked me.

“Nope.”

Wild opened the doors.

I pushed battle into my voice, enough to echo my words through the entire cave. “There will be a coven gathering immediately for all except those on sentry duty.” I glanced around the eating chamber, trying to recall all the places my butt or Wild’s had been. “The gathering will be held out in the meadow.”

Wild grinned.

I called my magic back. “What’s so funny?”

“You were trying to figure out how many tables we’d been naked on.”

“We’ll need to purify this place. Huxley will have a fit.”

Wild winced. “Good point.” He held out his arm, and I looped mine around it.

Together, we walked from the eating chamber and out into the main tunnels. The magus we passed were wide-eyed and fell back into rooms or smaller tunnels to let us pass. They fell into step behind us.

I exchanged a look with Wild, who appeared as bemused as me.

There was a definite *you practice dark magic for a living* wariness to their actions, but I'd expected that to be accompanied by mob anger.

When we exited the caves onto the knolls, the crowds there parted like a curtain to allow us passage. *No big deal.*

My pulse hammered as we walked down to the meadow where I'd been initiated and where the demons last attacked us.

Wild and I stopped by the pedestal I'd once sat upon, and the coven surrounded us. Rooke broke away from the others and first hugged Wild, then me.

I tried to read something from her expression, but she was well aware of everyone watching. Sven hugged us, too, then Huxley and Spyne. Corey followed. They stood closest of everyone, my advisors just behind them.

Where to start? *I ate Wild's magic.* No. *You know how Vissimo and Luthers have that thing?* No.

Wild took my hand and lifted it to his lips.

There was an outbreak of murmurs at the gesture, and I saw both of our runes were glowing. Wild called his magic forth to his hand, and though his magic glowed gold in his palm, his runes glowed pink.

I did the same. The magic hovering in my palm was pink, and my runes gold.

Wild said, "Never in magus history has the Mother granted us the gift of a mate. Until now."

There was a frantic uproar at his words, but what confused me was that it wasn't angry. It was... jubilant.



What was going on? Where were the pitchforks?

The coven pressed forward.

“How?” one called over the din.

There were furious hushes from those who’d heard his question.

Wild wrapped an arm around me. “We don’t know. Our theory is that the Mother wishes to ensure maguskind are able to hold their own as one of the four main supernatural species over time. If we’re right, then in years to come, more magus may find a mate.”

The coven surged forward again.

“When did it start?” another magus shouted.

More hushing.

I answered this time. “When I joined the coven and my magic met Wild’s at the initiation. We didn’t know what it was for a while, only that there was a series of steps in the process. After each step, we gained a rune, and from there—with help—we managed to put together some of what was happening.”

Another uproar. That confession had surprised many. Maybe they’d assumed what they saw recently was the first encounter between us.

A battle-strengthened voice boomed. “Might I suggest that if you all want answers from our high esteemed and esteemed advisor, Astar, that you take a seat where you stand?”

I almost laughed at the promptness with which Winona’s suggestion was taken up.

The volume died down, and I glanced up at Wild, who smiled. His smile told me everything would be all right.

He scanned the coven. “Firstly, we’ll start with an apology to the coven. I understand that my behavior in the last few days has alarmed many of you. My excuse is that the mating ritual has a way of making an animal out of the male involved—this step in the ritual was the worst it’s ever been in that regard. I also would like to invite you to imagine what it’s like

to be the first—to our knowledge—mated magus. Tempest and I needed to figure out what was going on, what might happen next, and where this would all end up. At every turn. And that only came *after* we realized this might be a mating ritual—” He paused and cocked a brow. “—and that we weren’t the victims of dark magic.”

There were a few chuckles at that, and some winces.

“What was happening did feel private,” he admitted. “I’m sorry you felt we were lying to you or hiding something important.”

“It *is* important,” Opal said. “Not just for our coven but *all* maguskind.”

Wild nodded. “I can understand that. I know that Tempest feels as I do in that it’s an odd feeling to be chosen for such a gift. We don’t wish to be treated in any special way because of it.”

Yet I wondered, as I surveyed the upturned faces, if that wouldn’t be the case. I fought back a grimace.

“In saying that,” Wild said, “it is important to maguskind, particularly if more of us are gifted a mate. With each step in the ritual, Tempest and I grow stronger and more connected.”

“We saw your bond in the eating chamber,” Ruby said in awe. “There are four strands to it. We saw the way you took each other’s magic into yourselves.”

“We saw your ass, too, Wild,” Sven said.

More chuckles.

Was this really going to work out okay? I didn’t want to believe it. And yet if it did, I could only kick myself for not doing it sooner, though I could also see that our light display had been important for the other magus to witness.

“It’s a bond unlike any other known to magus,” Wild answered her after rolling his eyes at Sven’s comment. “At first, I could only feel Tempest’s emotions, and then we gained a three-strand bond. The night the demons attacked, Tempest and I had just completed the latest step in the ritual. The

Mother held me in a deep slumber, allowing Tempest to wake. She joined the three-hundred-year anniversary celebration and then fought the leader of the demon army. When the army attacked, the Mother woke me, and at that moment, Tempest was struck by her lightning and the fourth, gold strand in our bond appeared. That's also when Tempest was given a fourth affinity."

Understanding dawned on many faces.

"But you don't possess four affinities?" Winona asked him.

Wild shook his head. "The mating, for us at least, has cast us in two clear roles. Tempest is the ruler, and I am her protector. This is why, when the ritual has gotten the better of me, you might have heard me refer to her as queen."

I pulled a face, and he flashed a grin, adding, "Which she hates."

"And is that why you attacked Frond? To protect her?" a young magus asked, perhaps not thinking through his question to the full extent.

I smiled. "Control was hard for Wild as the mating ritual pressed more urgently at him every day. We'd put things off for too long, and yes, with the way Frond has been acting lately, Wild's mating instincts were telling him to protect me against the danger."

Some looked taken aback by that.

Fron's eyes had narrowed at my words, but he didn't say anything though magus checked him for a reaction. Right now, the coven wasn't with him. He'd wait.

"It may be hard to grasp the lack of control in a mating ritual with this being a first for our species. From what I can fathom after meeting with Vissimo and Luthers, however, it is much the same for them. We can look to their species to gauge how similar our mating ritual is."

Wild kissed my temple. "We also plan to record the mating ritual in the near future so that any other magus going through this have *some* warning of what's ahead."

*Boy*, would that have made a difference to our journey. Though being the first, I wasn't sure I would've believed it until later in the piece.

"Is that the mating ritual done then?" Sage spoke.

"No idea," Wild admitted. "The next few days will tell."

"And can we ask why you put it off?" she replied. "If the urgency gets worse each day, then why didn't you just fulfill the next step?"

Serene answered, "Because we were attacked by demons and the high esteemed was so busy protecting us."

The coven murmured and nodded at her answer.

*Uh... sure.*

I was glad neither of us had to lie our way out of that one. Yet I was sorely tempted to get everything in the open, my demon nature included. The vibe felt welcoming. More than that, now we'd shared our mating with the coven, concealing more felt disrespectful. I was torn. My life was my own. Also, if magus mating could only occur between a woman who was half demon and a male magus, then Wild and I were creating false hope of other magus finding their mate.

"How long were we in the eating chamber?" Wild asked in the general murmur of conversation that had broken out.

"Try two days," Corey told him.

Combined with the time spent reuniting with my demon, I'd been out for *five* days. Nearly half the time I'd been leader. *My bad.*

"That's why I'm hungry." Wild glanced at me. "You must be starving."

I fucking was too. "Let's eat."

"Be nice not to have our meals outside," Barrow said wryly. Moving over, he hugged me and then Wild. "You two have been dealing with a lot. I wish the coven could have helped you, and I understand this came at you like a hurricane

too.” He was almost blinking back tears. “The first mated magus in our coven. What an honor.”

My stomach churned at his words, and Wild’s hand slipped into mine, calming my discomfort.

“Thank you, Barrow.”

He’d broken the charm on the other magus, and a flood of our coven members pushed forward to congratulate us.

Ty clasped both of my hands in his. His eyes roamed my runes. “Fascinating. Close to Nordic runes, but not quite the same.” His perusal was clinical, and his gaze locked on the lowest rune on my stomach. “Fertility.”

The word was passed back like a drunk crowd surfer at a concert.

*Nope.* None of that.

Ty released my hands. “Perhaps now you will accept your new seat.”

Had this stood in the way of accepting my authority? I’d dismissed Ty’s word at first, but I could feel what he meant now. I was holding back. My *secrets* had held me back.

Would I accept the authority in truth?

“They’re acting like we’ve had a union,” I said under my breath in a brief lull between hugs.

Wild hummed, sending me a surge of desire at my words. I staggered back as an image of me in a short black, tulle dress—my legs long and smooth and my feet bare—hit me in the forehead. In the vision, Wild was waiting, all his pendants and runes on display.

My new view of the sky was obstructed by Wild.

I was on my back in the meadow and concerned coven members edged in my periphery.

“Tempest, what happened?” Wild half growled, cradling me to his chest.

My frown deepened. “I... What were you just thinking of?”

“What do you mean? I’m wondering why you just collapsed.”

I looked up at him. “Because I got a vision of me in a black dress walking toward a man dressed in black jeans.”

Wild’s cheeks colored. “Oh. Yeah, that was from me.”

“What was it?”

He muttered, “Just an idea of how our union might be.”

My jaw dropped. He’d already planned that down to my outfit? Did he have the guest list and seating arrangement done too? “Wild...”

“I know. It’s just something that’s been in my head. Nothing to worry about.”

I wasn’t worried. I couldn’t believe his mind had the capacity to think that far ahead. Meanwhile, my mind was shouting that I may not make twenty-two, let alone get married to a hottie.

I didn’t know what to say, really, but Wild was mega-embarrassed I’d seen his fantasy. Resting my hand on his jaw, I said, “Your dream is beautiful. That’s exactly how I’d like our union to be.”

How ideal that I didn’t need to put any thought into the day.

Wild’s color deepened.

The other magus had caught the gist of our exchange, and chuckles were interrupted by the repeating sound of *aww*.

“So we can see images from each other now,” he said drily. “Good to know.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re cute when you’re embarrassed?”

“Only you would dare, my love,” he said, then rose to his feet with me in tow. He addressed the crowd. “A new

development. One that showed Tempest how enamored I am with her.”

I wasn't sure the coven had ever seen a mortified Wild.

He was fucking irresistible like this.

*Hmm.* I wondered if the vision thing went both ways. Not all our gains did. I focused on an image of his erection slowly sliding into me.

Wild jerked and a loud growl ripped from his chest.

His dark eyes burned into mine, his grip like iron around my shoulders and thighs. “That was a dangerous thing to do, my queen.”

“Was it?” My lips curled.

“Fuck this,” Huxley said. “Everyone to the eating chamber. We need to cleanse it like we've never cleansed it before. They've claimed the meadow for the next few hours.”

*Yes.*

Yes, we had.



I leaned back in my authority like a racoon who'd just gorged themselves on food to the point of immobility. Wild and I managed to make dinner, and I'd had some catching up to do in the eating department.

"I meant to speak with you all this morning, obviously," I said to the advisors. "What's been happening?"

"Fronde was hard at work while you were recovering from the demon attack," Winona said. "But I don't foresee that he's a big problem now."

Time would tell. "I don't think he's done. He'll try a new approach once the original coven gives him direction. Any luck finding evidence of his betrayal?"

Everyone shook their heads.

Fronde had to be taken in hand while we had the good will of the coven, yet there was no way to achieve that yet. Sven would need to continue his work in the meantime.

"The Vissimo and Luthers agreed to the changes we put forward," Barrow said, summoning a contract to land in front of me. "They've already signed. Varden and I have checked the contents and ensured all changes were satisfactory and no other changes were entered."

I summoned a pen and planted my initials and signature beside those of Kyros's father, King Julius, and those of Andie.

There were a lot of pages.



I sat back in my authority after, reflecting that I'd formed the first alliance between magus and other supernaturals ever—to my knowledge at least. Would it be a mistake? “I feel only good will come from this.”

Opal gathered the contract and slipped it into a large document bag. “I wasn't behind the move at first, High Esteemed, but I can see the wisdom behind the alliance even if I don't yet share your hope that it will work.”

That did mean something. Long-held grudges were hard to change. Opal had been the most vocal in her disapproval.

The wall opposite me glowed, and I focused on the flashing symbol at the bottom-left corner.

Barrow rushed to answer, touching his fingers to the symbol. “You're speaking with an esteemed advisor of High Esteemed Corentine.”

A monotone voice replied, “Please be advised that High Esteemed Mydnight has reevaluated our position with regard to the threat facing the Buried Knolls coven. Correspondence to follow.”

Barrow glanced over his shoulder at me. “I shall alert our leader to expect it.”

No sooner had the connection severed than another symbol glowed close to the large symbol in the center.

A conversation in the same stream followed, and by the time Barrow finished speaking with the second coven, Wild's suspicion had sparked mine.

“Who told the other covens about our mating ritual?” Wild asked the occupants.

Opal and Barrow exchanged a guilty look.

Barrow drew himself tall. “You tasked us with a job, High Esteemed. This was a powerful bargaining chip to negotiate support from the other covens. We have the first mated magus here, and they are under threat. They must be protected.” He drew out a stack of letters. “We've already received more offers of support since.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Ten so far.”

Ten was more than we’d ever had. Seven more since most of our supporters ditched after hearing of the alliance with other supernaturals. I sighed. I didn’t like that the other covens knew something so personal about me. I also knew that sometimes being close to a solution made it impossible to see. “If this works out, then I’ll thank you for it,” I told them. “If it causes a headache or heartache for me and Wild, then I’ll make sure you both feel our pain in equal measure because that was the risk you took when you made the details of our lives general knowledge without consulting us first.”

They looked grim at that.

“Apologies, High Esteemed,” Opal murmured, inclining her head.

Barrow echoed the same.

Wild said, “For what it’s worth, High Esteemed, Frond would’ve told the original coven by now. By making the announcement ourselves, we’ve stolen their thunder. I wonder if we could use an important announcement in the future to catch Frond in the act of conveying information to my parents.”

“I like it,” Huxley said.

Ruby nodded. “Smart. A trap.”

I did rather like a trap.

“I like it. Let’s keep it in mind. So we have a stack of coven letters to get through, and the coven seems to be in a better place,” I said. “What of the demon gates? Any change there?”

“High Esteemed Nightlock’s magus are due in two days for training,” Winona answered. “We believed a celebration of our alliance was in order, and their arrival coincides with esbat and our first group healing. The coven will want to show the visiting magus their best face, so Frond’s group is more likely to partake in the group healing without any displays.”

*Also smart.* I'd picked the right people to be in this room.

"I'm organizing that," Ruby spoke. "Perhaps we should take the opportunity to invite magus from other covens who have just offered support. The more unity and harmony from our end, the less food for the demons, right?"

I nodded. "Good idea. In saying that, we'll need to share our suspicions on any adverse effects from demon magic with visiting magus. They should know what they're getting into."

My gaze swept to Varden.

His expression was smooth. "We've collected enough ingredients for Miss Rooke's antidote that she feels confident we'll achieve a steady stream at two of the demon gates."

"I'll rotate my sentries on and off those gates," Wild put in. "Some, particularly males, are showing increased anger and aggression without clear cause. They could do with a regular break from the influence of demon magic. I'll monitor it."

Delta was twirling her dagger. "While you were out, the sentries picked up on something unusual happening at the demon gates. It's like their magic is eating at one of the charms."

"Which one?" I asked her.

"Along with the charms that limit the demon king's ability to hear, see, smell, and feel anything we do on this side, you asked for a charm that would prevent him sensing anything about our magic. That's the charm that's degrading."

"Or being eaten," I repeated her earlier words. *Interesting.*

Huxley looked at Wild. "Light and dark magic eroding one another?"

"Or the demon king has revealed his motive," Winona stated.

I had to agree with her summation. "The demon king wants to know as much about us as possible. Which means we could be as much a mystery to him as demons are to us. He's just had longer to roll out scouting missions and gather information, but if he's doing this, he may still not feel like

there's enough to launch a full attack. We need to keep that charm strong at all the gates. Winona, could you handle a team for that, please?"

I'd met the demon king in my memories. He'd nearly killed me at sixteen before I had any idea who or what he was. The supernatural was powerful. Terrifyingly so. Even if he'd discovered my demon's absence from his realm, he couldn't be worried about who would win a fight between us. I wouldn't help him seize our territory and lives whatsoever. "Give Rooke the go-ahead with the antidote at the two closest gates. Ask the new covens joining us for the same ingredients too. Ideally, we get enough to cover all five gates. Delta and Winona, what are the updates from your teams?"

I listened to both women as they detailed progress being made.

"I think it best to start with trainings between two affinities and work up to trainings with all four affinities over a couple of weeks," Delta said once Winona was finished.

We were under a time crunch. "We've had a lot of demon activity already. I see your point. I also hope we have a month of training time. We need to act as though that won't happen."

We went back and forth on details, the other advisors chiming in until a plan was formed. The other coven members would be working hard to get us in a good position to fight for our homes and lives.

"You need to attend too," Delta said. "You won't have a team like the others, but it's clear you and Wild are powerful together. We'll need to work with you as a pair."

Wild's gaze met mine.

"We'll schedule it in," I replied to her. "Varden, what about your unity incentives?"

"Going as per our plan. Not having the effect I would like to see, nor in the timeframe I would like, but the incentives are being put in place."

I wasn't the only one who heard the sadness in his voice.

Varden was taking the state of the coven really hard. Or more that the end of Caves hadn't seen us band together in an instant. I'd need to speak with him one-on-one. He couldn't put so much pressure on things. I mean, I'd love if the coven was one big happy family already. Also, if someone asked me five days ago how the coven was doing, I might've burst into tears. Things could change overnight. We were dealing with people with a range of beliefs and opinions and priorities and ideas, after all.

Returning to a unified coven would take time, and there would be ebbs and flows on the way.

Opal slid the document case with the alliance contract across the stone table toward me. "You have a lot to do, High Esteemed, but the Vissimo and Luthers asked that you deliver the signed contract to them in person in Bluff City. They've provided an address. The king would like to meet you."

*King Julius.*

I'd only met the son of the ancient Vissimo. Kyros was powerful and scary enough to make me wonder what his parents were like. "Then that's where I'll start." I glanced to where Wild was warring with himself not to make demands about coming.

I sent him an image of us both stepping into a portal. I sent the image *gently*, so I wouldn't knock him flat on his back. We'd been practicing since discovering the new development in our bond.

"Wild, how long until your next shift?" I asked.

His relief floated to me, and gratefulness. I was leader, and while I didn't see our relationship that way, he didn't want to make demands of me as the high esteemed. As far as I was concerned, where I went, he went, and vice versa.

"I've got time," he replied.

I stood, the contract in hand. "Huxley, tell Spyne he's needed and please gather everything we have on the subject of demons. The contract allows us access to their information on demons and their access to what we have. Delta, you're in

charge of alerting me if the demon alarms go off. I want to know immediately.”

Barrow shifted on his seat. “High Esteemed, shouldn’t we send you with more protection?”

Wild stiffened. *Yikes*, Barrow was stepping on his protector toes.

“Why do you say that?” I asked the advisor.

“You and Wild are the first mated magus. You must be cared for.”

*Cared for*. I struggled not to shudder. “Let’s be clear, Barrow. Nothing will change now you’re all aware of the mating ritual. I wouldn’t have taken extra magus last week, and I won’t today. I’m certain that the Vissimo king could kill me and anyone else I took if he so chose, and I’m better to take fewer magus in an attempt to invoke trust in the new relationship than take an army with me. Thank you for your concern, though.”

A symbol on the wall glowed, then another and another, and he was a step behind Opal and Winona in answering the next round of calls.

I wrinkled my nose. The other covens hadn’t wanted anything to do with us until now—not when this coven had looked down the gun barrel at the demon king and his army. They’d just obeyed the original coven until the mating ritual was on the table to dissect and discuss.

I’d remember who my original supporters were.

“We better get going,” I muttered to Wild and Huxley. “I have a lot to catch up on.”

And I looked forward to doing that. When the coven seemed one rumor away from turning on me, I’d held out for a pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel. I’d spotted that pinprick now.

Maybe. *Maybe* things were about to start working with me instead of against me.



I stepped through the portal, Wild by my side, with the address provided by King Julius tight in my grip. Written addresses were harder to portal to. Better to have a clear memory of the destination in mind, so you wouldn't end up stuck in your magic for a few weeks or in the middle of a crowd of shocked humans.

“I think this is the place,” I murmured.

Wild whistled low. “No kidding.”

We'd arrived in front of an enormous mansion on the outskirts of Bluff City. The skyscrapers of the metropolis were visible in the distance past the large theme park closer to the water. But this mansion... I could pick the building up and pop it in the medieval Mediterranean. Or maybe ancient Egypt was a better fit.

“You're good to come through,” I called back through the portal.

Huxley and Spyne arrived first, each holding a thick leather-bound book to their chests. Behind them, Andie and Sascha stepped through with a human I'd just met named Wade—a human—and another Luther named Hairy. He was next in order to Sascha and Andie in the pack from what I'd gathered.

“You can walk with me, handsome.” Wade stepped closer to Spyne, dazzling him with a white smile.

Huxley glared and snatched Spyne's hand in his.

Andie shot Wade a look. “What happened to Gina?”

“It was hot and fun and now we’re both single and ready to mingle. I’m feeling like sausage instead of the bun now, you know?” Wade looked at Spyne again. “Are you with Mr. Warlock there? And is it a good thing going, or weak enough for me to lure you away?”

Spyne was entertained.

Huxley was not. He could join Sascha, who hadn’t cracked a smile whatsoever, and Wild, who didn’t appear to be listening to the exchange either. Both males were 1000 percent occupied by where and *who* we were approaching, judging by the tension in their bodies.

“Thanks for picking us up,” Andie said, walking beside me on my left. “We wouldn’t have gotten here this quick, and it’s right that we’re all here to commemorate the first alliance between our races.”

She was also my safeguard. I hadn’t brought more magus along, but having the Luthers present could deter King Julius from jeopardizing the deal. “You got it.”

“Wish I could portal,” she said.

“Wish I could turn into a wolf,” I answered, flashing her a smile, which she returned.

We approached the closed gates, and all of us slowed when they swung open ahead of us. In the middle of the driveway stood a woman dressed in tiny underwear, nipple tassels, and a see-through, gaping gown.

“Maybe I’m back to the bun,” Wade gasped in awe.

The Vissimo woman moved forward with a floating grace that told me the supernatural was old as dirt. She laughed in delight—at what I wasn’t sure—and the corners of my mouth lifted at the sound. It was as though I’d had wings for a second. The woman was ethereal. Blonde tresses to her waist, and milky skin. Her boobs were fucking remarkable.

“Queen Titania, what a pleasure to see you again.” Andie stepped forward, and Sascha shadowed her closely.



*Queen.*

“Andie, the pleasure is mine. You are more beautiful than ever, my dear.”

If those words had come out of my grandmother’s mouth, I would’ve said she was luring someone in for the kill. I couldn’t detect anything other than genuine welcome from the Vissimo queen. This woman shared DNA with Kyros... I just couldn’t see the link at first glance. Though—I peered closer—Kyros might’ve inherited the set of her features.

“This is High Esteemed Tempest of the Buried Knolls coven,” Andie said, gesturing to me.

I walked forward with my own man shadow. I inclined my head. “Queen Titania. I welcome the union between our races.”

“As do I, High Esteemed. Demons will not claim the territory we have worked so hard to keep.” Her expression turned savage, and alarm filled me at the shift before I saw her focus shift to a couple walking our way.

Her son and his mate.

Queen Titania was a mother, and she would protect her children from danger at all costs. Good to know.

Kyros bent to kiss his mother’s cheek, either resigned to or unbothered by her attire. Considering he’d avoided looking at the naked Andie and Sascha during the coven visit, I’d guess at the former. “Mother, does Father know you’re greeting our guests?”

A roar shook the mansion in the distance.

“He did not,” she admitted. “We are coming now, my king.”

The roaring trailed off, but Basilia grimaced at her mate. The gesture didn’t exactly inspire confidence in me. I didn’t want to deal with a pissed-off mate who was also an ancient supernatural.

Was I going to turn around, though?

No.

The queen led us into the mansion, and soon we were crossing an expansive courtyard toward a set of double doors that I could picture as the doors to a mystical tomb. Hopefully not my own. Wild was growling, and Hairy—who'd largely been quiet until now—sent him a sympathetic look. The beta Luther must've witnessed all of this before during Sascha and Andie's mating.

I gathered Wild's lashing magic and drew his three affinities in to our magical center.

His growling cut off, and he arched a brow my way after. "Thanks."

"You got it, handsome." A new trick, and a handy one. We could center each other, apparently. That was huge. Chaos was one of the biggest issues maguskind faced. Especially the powerful ones. This could strengthen our race *hugely*, even without all the other power gains from a mating ritual.

Kyros pushed open the double doors, and cold power poured out from within.

Wade dropped to the floor without preamble at the crushing force of the Vissimo's power. Huxley and Spyne froze on the spot, their spines struggling to remain straight. Hairy's teeth were gritted tight against joining Wade on the floor.

Spyne unfroze enough to reach down and help Wade up—much to Huxley's annoyance. They, along with Hairy, remained behind as the rest of us trailed after the queen.

King Julius sat in an enormous stone throne at the top of a tower of wide stairs. What was more, he filled the throne. The guy was of astronomical, muscular size, and formed like an Egyptian god. That visual was only reinforced by his goatee and the sarong he wore.

"Titan," he stated.

Chills rippled down my spine.

She blurred up the stairs to her king and perched on his lap. “I was curious, my king.”

His gaze was on her breasts, and I couldn't blame him. I wanted to look at them, too, and I wasn't even that way inclined.

“I know, right?” Basilia said to me under her breath, sending a knowing look with it.

There were some things that even a potentially deadly exchange between three races of supernaturals couldn't distract from. Queen Titania's boobs were one of them.

I watched the king interact with his queen. He trailed his nose between her breasts, and I heard *and* saw Kyros's revolted shudder. Basilia's teeth were bared in a grin, and I had a feeling that the prince's soul-deep distaste of his parents' public display was a source of great delight to her.

The king turned his head and looked down the stairs at me.

I met his gaze and saw an eternity in them. I had experienced eternity for a few days, but this creature had walked it. He was in eternity and had found peace there too.

“You hold much power,” he announced just when the silence was growing stifling. “You are older than your years. Yet you linger at the bottom of the stairs as though you are not a queen in your own right.” His ancient gaze swept to Andie on the other side of Wild. “The Luther queen opts not to meet me at the top of the stairs because she does not see power in such displays. That, ironically, *is* her power. But you, Magus Queen, why do you linger at the bottom as though you were not my equal?”

No discussions about the weather with this one. “It doesn't matter where I am now, King Julius. It matters where I could be when I desire it so.”

“You underplay your hand,” he mused, then smiled. I wish he hadn't.

He appeared before me in a blink.

Furious snarls ripped from Wild, but I didn't look away from Julius's challenging gaze as he peered down at me, less than a hand's width away.

"I favor such a method myself," the king murmured.

He surveyed the barrier between us that I'd flung up in instinct, not even noticing it until now. My magic had my back.

"Fast," King Julius said, and the acknowledgment seemed an unwilling one. "But are you fast enough to face the demon king?" He shifted his focus to Wild, then Kyros. "You were right, Heir To My Throne. They are mating." Back to me. "How?"

"A good question," I replied, keeping my heartbeat steady.

His attention snapped to Huxley over my shoulder. Had he heard something suspect there? "Indeed. A mating bodes well for the future of maguskind. Better that I deal with you now than to allow a potential threat to my clan in the future."

"Such a move would secure a future threat. If maguskind's ability to mate does not begin with us, then others will be favored with the mating gift in time. All supernaturals are powerless to the design of higher forces, King Julius."

The king hummed, turning to walk up the stairs to his queen who he'd had time to drape on his throne like art before coming to test my reactions and response to intimidation. If he came straight for me in the future, could I erect a barrier in time?

The queen vacated, trailing her fingers over the back of his throne as she circled to perch on an armrest. How odd that Wild's mother had vacated her chair for his father, but that was a far cry from the dynamic between the king and queen as they did almost the same. The king treasured his queen openly. I could see that she was collecting information on us in a different way to him, and that he was demanding focus to allow her freedom to do so. He may be the authority, but she was the authority when it came to their family and home. They held power of different measures.

“Perhaps,” the king answered after sitting. “I once did not respect that such higher forces existed, yet I have spent many hundreds of years in the world. There is such that you describe that supernaturals are powerless to. You are correct that grudges between species run deep. I have no wish to have my heir inherit a war with his throne.”

Julius ran his gaze over the six of us, ignoring the groaning Wade and silent Huxley, Hairy, and Spyne behind us. “There are many parallels before me. Too many parallels to ignore. Such occurrences are signs, and each of you would do well to remember this in what lies ahead. Lessons serve us only if we recall them. I had to recall this lesson recently while deciding whether to partner with maguskind.” He looked at Wild, then me. “I have no love for magus. So caught up in their tiny woes are they, that they have failed to see that extinction has had its eye on them for some time. Yet magus are capable of change, as we have seen with you, High Esteemed Corentine. A demon, by contrast, will always be a demon. I have watched their leaders come and go, and each has been driven by the same insatiable thirst for more territory.” His fist curled on the armrest not occupied by his queen. “Magus did not rob my family of nearly one hundred and fifty years of peace as we played for our very lives against another Vissimo clan who would not have merely killed us but broken us and kept my family for their entertainment.”

Caves had run double that amount of time, but our game had never been life and death, just about appointing leadership. Perhaps we would have ended up there in time, though, if the demons had chosen to delay their attack for another hundred years or so.

“Whatever the motive,” I said to the king, “I am glad to partner with Luthers and Vissimo in what lies ahead. Have you had any luck in finding demon gates here?”

The king dipped his head. “My children have located ten.”

*Double our number.*

Kyros said, “Unlike the coven, we had two enemy clans playing Ingenium and there was no love lost between us. We

have not played a game for as long as your coven, but we have been a larger food source for the demons, so it would seem.”

Sascha added, “We’ve found three gates in Deception Valley, but with where the gates are placed, the demons don’t need more. We’ll be hard-pressed to guard the three gates on our own.”

“You heard that the demon gates in our territory opened?” I asked. When they nodded, I added, “We’re testing our defenses against the increased demon magic coming through. We have formed an antidote to the poisonous effect of it, but sourcing the ingredients is limiting our progress there.”

“They send this to weaken you ahead of an attack,” King Julius stated. “A tactic you will find detailed in our personal records. Kyros.”

Kyros bowed and left the room.

“Vissimo share records freely with each other,” the king continued. “But permission must be granted for magus to set their eyes upon the collective knowledge of our brother and sister clans. However, I am confident that I have read everything available on the subject of demons and have seen that transferred to our personal archives. We will ensure this is the case if allowed access to the stores of other Vissimo clans.”

I’d only expected to receive this clan’s information. If we could get access to the archives of *all* the clans, that would be incredible. “Thank you, King Julius.”

Andie cast me an apologetic look. “We don’t have much to add, sorry. Just some notes of their physical powers that you’ve already mentioned. We do know that the blood of demons doesn’t affect Luthers, though.”

“Indeed?” the king remarked.

My brows shot up. “That’s a large advantage.”

“It is?” Andie said.

Wild answered, “They use their blood in battle to work magic. We’ve guessed that their blood is used for the strongest

of their spells or when they feel the match is too even for guaranteed success.”

The Luthers’ strength could be huge for our alliance if demon magic failed to work on them. If we could harness that, then we could neutralize and weaken the demons considerably. Though building enough trust with the Luthers for them to donate their blood—which a magus could use in any manner of ways—would take time. Or might never happen.

“Huxley, Spyne,” I said. “Bring forward our findings, please.”

By the time they’d inched to my side, both magus were sweating. Either my bond with Wild made me impervious to the king’s power, or I possessed the power needed to remain upright. Each of the grimoires couldn’t wait to be out of there. Wade was on the ground again, and Hairy wasn’t in a state to help, though he was still standing.

Andie smiled as she glanced back at Wade. “He keeps demanding to come in here. He’s sure exposure is the key to beating the effect on him.”

Basiliasnorted and glanced back. “It’s hard for humans to be around my father-in-law. I remember it well.”

She was still human when she’d first met King Julius, then. I’d have to tell her about meeting Wild’s parents one day.

I floated one of the black, leather-bound tomes up to the king, who took it carefully, and then I passed the other copy to Andie. “These books will automatically update as we add to the Mother copy.”

“Handy trick,” Princess Basiliasaid, craning to see inside Andie’s copy.

“Invaluable to our clan, and our kind,” stated the king. “This is a gift.” He lowered the book. “I have not been into battle for some time, Magus Queen. I hunger for victory, yet I am too old not to respect the cost. Much thought must be given to how Luther, Vissimo, and magus will fight alongside each other. This has never been done, and we will see it done right.”

He scanned the six of us as Kyros returned ahead of ten other Vissimo, all carrying stacks of books.

The king regarded the six of us again. “Yes, you will all see it done right.”

If he knew something about the six of us, he wasn’t sharing.

Huxley and Spyne had almost run to the Vissimo carrying the books. Their grimoire magic glowed brightly as they hovered their hands over the tomes.

“There’s more here than we have,” Huxley said excitedly.

“A lot more,” Spyne agreed.

The king’s brows rose ever so slightly. “I would gather these men are the affinity you call grimoire.”

“Yes, King Julius. We usually don’t let them out, for obvious reasons.”

“He is very beautiful,” Queen Titania remarked, looking at Spyne.

The king regarded Spyne. “Are you in the mood for company in our bed, my queen?”

That reached Huxley through his excitement. He paled, looking up at the king, and I heard Wild’s low laughter in my other ear.

Huxley didn’t fear much competition from a human, but a king and queen were another deal.

Spyne’s cheeks colored, and even I felt jealous at others looking at him. If I didn’t have his approval, who was I? What if he liked the queen better than me?

Wild’s curious gaze was on me, and I tried to refocus.

“I propose that we form a strategy team for the alliance,” Princess Basilia said. “Once a plan is formed, we can train together.”

“I second this.”

Andie nodded. “I’m in.”



“We need a better way to get in touch,” I said. Portals weren’t an option as only a magus could operate one. *Human tech to save the day*. With some magus alterations of course. I summoned an old phone and floated it to Basilia. “If you lift this from the cradle, I will answer.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Just an old black phone? Couldn’t you make it better?”

King Julius frowned, but his queen and Kyros exchanged an amused glance.

I arched a brow, then turned it gold, encrusting the phone with diamonds too.

“Improved,” Basilia said. “Then set the call tone to ‘Dancing in the Moonlight’ for Andie—because werewolf, and ‘Voodoo’ by Godsmack for you—because witch.”

I neither practiced voodoo, nor was I a witch.

I calmly did so and hovered the bejeweled monstrosity over to her. “It’s all yours.”

Basilia squealed.

“Any changes to yours?” I asked Andie, holding up another black phone.

She lifted a shoulder. “Nah, a phone is a phone.”

I cracked a grin. These women were polar opposites. “We could at least make it more comfortable.”

I edged the handset in gray faux fur and lined the cradle in a light gray leather. *Classy and a bit furry*. “Song requests?”

“Now those I have. ‘I Put a Spell on You’ for you, please,” she replied. “And ‘Blues for a Princess’ for Basilia.”

“Jazz and blues fan?” Basilia was clearly a ’90s woman. I would’ve pegged Andie as an acoustic gal.

Sascha smiled at his mate. “She’s a terrific saxophone player.”

“I’d love to hear one time,” I announced, passing her the phone.

Basilia was staring at me. “What about yours?”

“I don’t need one. Lift your handset.”

She did so, and the air around me rang with storm clouds.

I pulsed magic, and it took the path of my grimoire affinity. “Hello?”

Basilia blinked at her phone where my voice just spoke out her earpiece. She held it to her mouth. “Can you hear me?”

Her voice rang in my head. “Yes.”

“Yes, through the phone, or yes in your brain?”

“In my brain.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Your phone is cooler than mine. I don’t like that.”

“Creator’s rights,” I responded. “Just set your mind on Andie to call her.”

The Vissimo glanced at Andie, then picked up the handset again.

“Blues for a Princess” rang out, and Andie lifted her handset, replacing it immediately.

“Hey, you can’t hang up on me,” Basilia said.

Andie smirked. “Just did.”

The princess was glancing between her phone and Andie’s, clearly wondering which she preferred more.

“Now that the most important parts of the alliance have been set,” King Julius said drily.

The three of us jumped.

My focus expanded, and I recalled that the king, queen, various mates, and Vissimo and magus were in the chamber too.

He continued with, “I suggest that we all part ways with new information and time to analyze it. A meeting shall be set for a few days’ time. We have much to do.”

“Agreed,” I said.

Andie murmured her agreement too.

I dipped my head to the king, then queen. “A pleasure to meet you, King Julius.”

His lips curved. “It is not many who say so and mean it, but I believe you might. Until we meet again, Magus Queen.”

When our group exited the chamber and the double doors were shut once again, I took my first full breath in an hour.

“We need to get these books back,” Huxley said to me.

“Go ahead.”

He and Spyne disappeared through a portal.

Wade staggered beside Andie, who supported him around the waist.

The human stared where the portal had been. “Not a great first impression. Do you think he noticed me on the floor?”

“No,” Andie said.

“Don’t lie to me, bitch.”

“Then yes.”

“Don’t tell me the truth! Are you crazy?”

I cracked a grin. Wade was different from anyone I’d met, and I could see the draw. In fact, everyone in this room was so different. Kyros and Sascha were hardest to read, and simplest at the same time. They existed for their mates. Every decision they made was done for her, or with her in mind. She, in return, was acutely aware of not trampling on his urge to treasure her.

What they had was beautiful.

That was how Wild saw me.

That was how I saw him.

I tucked my hand into Wild’s. “We’ll see you in three days, then.” I opened a portal for the Luthers. Their pack lands were visible through the gateway.

I opened a second portal back to the coven.

As Sascha and Andie prepared to step through, and Wild and I prepared to do the same, Basilia's voice stopped everyone in their tracks.

"I have a good feeling about this," she told us, glancing up at Kyros.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Andie's face. "Me too."

King Julius had spoken about parallels, and that was the feeling I'd gotten upon first meeting these women. Like our alliance was preordained and part of a plan.

Wild squeezed my hand, but it wasn't needed to sense his agreement through our bond.

"We were meant to meet in this time and place," I replied to the waiting supernaturals.

The question was what we were meant to *do*. Why had three mated couples in ruling positions been thrust together against all odds?

I could only think of one answer.

To kill the demon king.



“Surely there are quieter places to read,” I said to Spyne, who sat cross-legged on a tower of practice mats, one of the Vissimo books on demons balanced on his lap.

“Yes,” he agreed. The magus tucked his ink-black hair behind one ear. “I thought my presence may help Huxley after yesterday.”

“Yesterday when every supernatural in Bluff City flirted with you?”

“Three of them, but yes. Huxley has been irritated since but maintains that there’s nothing wrong.” Spyne sighed. “He often needs a cool-down period before he’s able to admit the truth. Maybe battle training will help, and then we can talk it out. Again.”

*Again.* That was the first weary word from Spyne when it came to Huxley’s moods. “How are you doing with it all?”

Not like Spyne asked to be super cool and make Huxley feel insecure.

His brows drew together. “I’ve seen that there’s an entire world beyond the confines of the coven. Multiple worlds, really. I find myself wondering if I’m meant to spend my whole life on coven lands.” He watched as Huxley blurred at Wild.

I’d already had my turn with that drill.

“Like Endex?” I asked him. “You feel drawn to study the outside too.”

“Perhaps. Or is it that I feel... discontented? I had an idea that Hux and I would’ve found our rhythm by now. We still fight most days, and the pattern is repetitive. For all Huxley’s intelligence, he cannot see it.”

*Oh shit.* Spyne was having big doubts. Could I blame him? How many times had Huxley snapped about Spyne being unreasonable? Huxley was kind of incredible, and he’d had a tough time of things. He could also be a complete ass.

“He doesn’t feel worthy of you,” I said after a beat.

“I’m starting to understand that only he can convince himself otherwise. I haven’t been able to. There’s his past in the coven, and then what happened with the demon attack embarrassed him a great deal... He has things to work through, and I’ve begun to wonder if the time isn’t right for us. If I push this relationship to be what I want now, will things go too far and erase the possibility of a second chance later? If we take a break and walk our own paths for a time, maybe we could find that real connection in years to come.”

Spyne wanted to be with Huxley. He didn’t feel Huxley was ready.

Huxley was going to lose the guy he absolutely fucking adored. “That’s heavy stuff, Spyne, and it’s worth discussing everything with Huxley. That could be what he needs to sort his shit out.”

“I don’t want him to do it for me. I want him to do it for *him*.”

“Yeah, I get that too.” I leaned forward and hugged the grimoire, who patted me awkwardly after a time.

“If you’re done,” Huxley called our way. “We’re here to help *you* train, not the other way around.”

I winked at Spyne, then replied over my shoulder, “I’m your high esteemed. You’ll do what you’re told.”

Huxley glared and opened his mouth.

Corey and Sven took positions either side of him, and Sven spoke over Huxley. “Most of this is a waste of time for you

two. You're both incredible battle magus. Your advantages are what the mating ritual has given you. Let's focus on those. Name one."

Wild shot me a look. "We're catalysts for each other's magic."

When Wild opened his magic to me, and then I used *my* magic, it was the difference between speaking normally and speaking through a megaphone. Every charm or attack or defensive move was so much easier. "We should explore the limits of that."

"And how it may have changed with the latest step in the ritual," Wild added.

Our magic was one now. We each had a magical identity still, but I could see Wild's power as I could see mine—how much he had left, and whether he was centered and healthy.

Sven circled to stand behind Wild. "How about you both go through your affinities one at a time and launch some of your usual moves to gauge the difference?"

"Want to start?" I asked the hunk-on-legs beside me.

Wild sank into a crouch. "Sure thing, gorgeous."

I had a moment to regret that I wasn't in Spyne's spot watching this fight unravel. Wild was glorious to behold in battle—he preferred a flowing type of defense and attack that used his opponent's strength and power against them. He made fighting seem effortless, and that daunted those who faced him, and also frustrated them into making costly mistakes as the fight continued.

Sven lunged at Wild, who immediately tapped into his battle magic to inject speed into a dodge.

My magic was always open to Wild now, and as I spun out of Corey's reach, I marveled at how little magic he'd used for the evasive maneuver—just a speck. Barely noticeable.

I danced back from Corey's swing and saw that Wild was circling away from me too. I'd expected us to remain together, but we were naturally placing our opponents between us.

Wild rippled the ground with his battle magic to throw Huxley high and then blew a stream of ice toward Sven.

Usually a battle magus with high proven ability—like Wild—would have around seven to ten such attacks available before their magic stores were on the empty side. That was in addition to increasing their speed and strength during a fight too. Yet Wild could have continued this level of attack for hours. Maybe he'd have a better idea of the exact amount, but I was guessing in the high one hundred range, maybe even in the two hundred vicinity.

He moved onto his grimoire affinity, and I earned a ringing blow to the jaw from Huxley as Wild sent a flow of magic to Corey, who froze.

Wild tightened his hands to fists.

Everyone paused for a moment as Corey shouted in pain. Words began to appear on his skin. *Wounds. Uncertain past. Hope. Regret. Pain.*

“He’s drawing words from Corey’s mind,” Huxley said in awe. He sounded equal parts horrified and excited.

That was kind of horrific to watch. *Nicely done.* The attack had also drained the largest chunk of magic from us so far.

Wild dropped the magic squeezing Corey’s mind and portaled across the mats, reciting quickly, “And so it was that the Mother birthed her first children, the original magus, to care for the Earth and teach its ways.”

The sentence strung into an oily, black rope that whipped toward Sven and wrapped tight around his body.

“Whoa,” Huxley said.

He wasn’t paying attention to the fight at all.

I punched him in the face.

The grimoire snarled and threw his broken glasses away. “That was fucking low.”

“I’m helping you to be a survivor.” I raised my fists.



Wild had moved to his apothecary affinity, of which he possessed novice levels. He blew a concoction of mine at Huxley as the magus made to charge me.

Huxley sent a gust of magic out, which only managed to blast the liquid nightmare into Corey's face. He started screaming again. The guy wasn't faring too well in this fight.

"You've been in my kits," I called to Wild.

"Perhaps." He tossed out a series of vines to act as a wall between us and the guys. "Are you feeling what I am?"

"Lust?"

He snorted. "Always, my queen. I meant with our magic."

I listened to Corey's groans on the other side of the vines. "The volume on our megaphone turns down as we draw from our pool of power?" As magic was used, our amplifying abilities grew less. Instead of having the ability to dial up to ten, we were only able to reach nine, then eight, and so on.

Wild arched a brow. "The walls grow closer."

I liked my megaphone analogy better. "My turn?"

Portaling behind the guys, who were now on their feet, I was struck again by the fact that Wild and I were naturally opting to divide and conquer. Against the demons, we'd held hands, and I'd expected that to be how our magic wanted us to stand in battle.

Not so.

I tapped into my divination affinity, which I couldn't recall ever using in battle. What to do with it? Rooke sometimes enlisted the help of her ghosts in a fight, but I hadn't formed meaningful relationships with any yet.

At a loss, I cast out my divination magic to see what I could sense.

I blinked as the entire room filled with threads attaching to one or more people here. They connected the guys and then individuals to things I couldn't see. I shook my head, trying to dispel the double vision. *What the fuck?*

I cut off the energy supply to my divination and then fell on my ass as a cage dropped around me, clanging loudly.

A dark rage rose in me like a cornered animal. I roared, seized by a force that flung me at the bars in its desire to escape the prison. I shook at the cage, and the very walls of the learning center shook.

I'd bring every one of them down to get out of here.

Harsh words streamed out of my mouth that was twisted in rage. I was going to kill and hurt. I was going to *destroy*.

A roar of war and deadly promises tore from me again.

The cage disappeared, and Wild was suddenly there, crowding over me. The hand I'd raised to plunge into his chest and rip his heart out lowered. Shock warred with rage. If anyone but him had tried that while I was in this state, I might've killed them.

Wild gripped my chin and sent me a vision. One of me. Black smoke poured from my skin, and black scales edged my face and the backs of my hands.

*Fuck.*

I'd just roared words in demon tongue too.

"The cage is gone," he whispered quickly. "You're not trapped. No one is going to trap you again. You're free. You escaped that place."

He wasn't talking to me.

He was speaking to my demon—the one who'd been trapped for years and nearly died trying to return to me. My mouth dried. The cage just set her off *big time*. She'd slumbered since returning to me, and her panic was forceful enough to drag her from that healing sleep.

She'd just freaked out.

I took a deep breath, then another, feeling her curl into a ball within me.

I received another vision of myself from Wild. My scales were gone, as was the black smoke, but soot was smeared

across the ceiling of the battle center. I crouched with Wild in a crater I'd carved in the stone.

I took one last breath and plucked up the courage to glance over Wild's shoulder at the one person who'd seen too much.

Spyne's eyes were wide. His pulse was rapid and breaths shallow.

As I met his gaze, his focus dropped to the book on his lap. Then, the grimoire lifted his attention to me once more before staring at the ceiling above me. He'd just seen me with scales and black smoke. He'd heard me speak in demon.

"Spyne," Huxley said quietly from where he stood between us.

"No," the grimoire replied.

He set the book down, then walked out of the battle center.

I closed my eyes. "Fuck."

"Whose brilliant idea was it to cage her?" Wild spat, whirling on his friends.

Sven lifted his hands. "I didn't know that would happen. Better to know now than in the middle of a real battle."

That was of poor consolation right now.

Huxley ran his hands through his hair, repeating my expletive. "Spyne saw all that. He'll figure it out."

There was no future tense about it. Spyne had already done the figuring.

I walked over to the book he'd left. An illustration took up one full page. A picture of a monstrous demon arched back in full roar with smoke pouring from it.

A strange urge to laugh nearly took over my senses. That was as obvious as things could get. My life was a mess again. "Huxley, do you think he'll tell others?"

The green-eyed magus was still without glasses. He exhaled. "I have no idea. He's already angry at me, too, which won't help matters."

My experience of Spyne made me feel he'd reserve judgment, but this was huge. He'd seen I was a *demon*. He probably thought I was working with them. This revelation wasn't about something trivial like my quipu. This was the real deal.

"We need to speak with him," Corey said. "Now. He's most likely to blurt the news in this shocked state. Once he settles down, he'll be less likely to."

Huxley nodded. "I'll find him."

"*We* need to speak with him," Sven repeated. "You find him and let us know where to be."

I collected the Vissimo book on demons and shut the tome gently.

Corey joined me. "How are you so calm about this? The coven could turn on you by nightfall."

"Yes," I replied.

"I don't understand. You need to do something. You always do something, Tempest."

For a while now, I'd existed with the feeling of a noose around my neck. That noose just got tighter, and it felt right that it had. There was relief in it. "Truth will prevail," I told him.

He mouthed my words, then blinked. "I can't make you out. Do you want people to know, or do you feel unworthy of their understanding because of what you are?"

Before Corey started wearing linen pants, he'd been unnervingly insightful. Now he could center, that insight had grown stronger.

I tilted my chin to meet his gaze and didn't answer aloud.

"I see," he replied.

What did he see? That guilt over what I was started crushing me the second I heard my mother's words in the ravine? That when the relics chose me, the guilt got one hundred times worse and now entered into my every thought

and decision? I wanted people to know the truth because then they'd force me out of leadership.

And I wanted that because I knew I shouldn't be where I was.

That I wasn't worthy of the authority.

Ty was right. I'd never accepted that seat, and I never would because one day that noose around my neck would tighten all the way. As it should.

"Huxley found him," Sven said, interrupting the tension between me and Corey. "We gotta go."

"Where to?" Wild asked.

Sven stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Sorry, man. Just me and Corey this time. Spyne doesn't want everyone there."

*Everyone.* Spyne didn't want *me* there and Sven was sparing my feelings by including Wild in my camp. I truly did think Spyne was one of the coolest people I'd ever met. I'd been struck by the grimoire's calm acceptance of who he was the first time we'd met. His disapproval hit me hard.

I forced a nod through my shame. "Let me know what happens. Wild and I will clean up here."

Wild rested a hand on my arm. "I've got this, my love. You go take care of yourself."

He knew I was one sympathetic comment away from crying. I nodded, a lump rising in my throat.

Turning away from the sight of soot and cracked stone, I walked out of the battle center alone.



“Your mind is in your past today,” Ty stated in his deep voice.

The last of the Ogham Staves were laid out on the low table between us. I remembered not a single one. “It is, sir.”

“The past can be helpful.”

*And not.* I heard his unspoken advice. “It’s not helping me today, but I can’t seem to return to the present.”

“Would speaking of your past help?”

Cold humor found me as I imagined doing so. “No, sir. Thank you, though. There’s something else I’d like to ask you about my divination affinity.”

Ty placed his hands in his lap and waited.

“I was exploring the attacking abilities of my divination magic yesterday. When I opened the channel with that intent, I was nearly blinded by threads attaching the people in the room to each other, and to others out of sight.”

The mentor nodded. “What was the nature of the threads?”

I pulled a face, thinking back. “I have no idea. They glistened like a spider’s webs. I guess they varied in thickness, but I didn’t have time to pay attention.”

“Perhaps we could explore that now. There have been instances of divination magic taking such a form in our history, but threads can mean different things.”

I was mostly sure that the cage had triggered my demon’s panic attack, but I wouldn’t risk drawing forth that magic

again in company. I glanced around the center, hoping to see Rooke, who'd gone to find Spyne after he'd missed his *third* meal. He wasn't at dinner last night, or breakfast and lunch today. The quad had tried to place the conversation they'd shared with him in a positive light, but the verdict was that Spyne didn't want to see me. That he felt betrayed—and like I was betraying the coven. He no longer trusted me, and what I was doing was wrong.

He was right on every count.

“I'm going to explore it more in private,” I said.

Ty didn't reply as I gathered my staves and left the center.

Instead of going to my temporary guest quarters where Wild was sleeping after a night shift, I walked to Wild's room that he never used anymore. He hadn't needed to move rooms when we mixed Fertim and Vero magus together, and the familiar bed and walls and lack of decoration were a comfort.

I perched on the edge of the bed. “Fuck, Corentine. You're in some shit.”

My demon uncurled in my chest. She'd been awake since the cage incident but hadn't spoken to me yet.

*Sorry.* Her single word rang within me.

She'd spoken in demon tongue I realized after a second, and I could understand the dialect as easily as if she'd spoken my language. Which meant when we'd reunited, I'd gained knowledge of demon language. Cultural intricacies, too, because I also knew that the demon meaning of “sorry” differed from our version of the word. She was apologizing for weakness, and the demon version of “sorry” could only be applied this way. She wouldn't apologize for betrayal, for example, because *my* weakness would have allowed her to betray me. In that situation—bizarrely—I would apologize to *her*.

I shook my head to clear it as the new information barraged my senses.

*You were trapped for a long time,* I replied to her in my mind.

Yes, she answered. *The pain was testing.*

Torture's more like it. I'd felt part of that pain prior to finding her inside the demon realm. *The cage reminded you of that pain.*

*Sorry.*

If a magus apologized for panicking after trauma like hers, I'd bend over backward to reassure them. That would insult my demon. *How do we free you from the cage around your mind?*

*You don't. Another does.*

She had to save herself. *Let me know if you need help. Your cage is my cage.*

*Sorry,* my demon repeated. She was pissed off with herself.

*Do you feel ready for battle?* I asked in the demon version of *how are you doing?*

She flexed within me, and our muscles tensed in response. She could control my body. Though I'd experience that during the cage incident. She'd taken over then too.

*Nearly,* my demon hissed. Her black smoke swirled in my chest.

*Why are our scales and smoke black? I haven't seen another black-scaled demon yet.*

*Our father was of the crimson caste,* she replied. *But demon blood mixes with light blood.*

My magus heritage had turned the color black. *How do you know?*

She replied after a beat, *I know.*

And didn't want to tell me how. I shrugged. *What happens from here?*

*That depends on your weakness.*

*Which one?* I laughed after.



She didn't. The topic of possessing weakness was not a funny one for her. Good to know. Good to know.

*The one where you don't accept me as part of you,* she stated.

I swallowed, and fresh guilt swamped me, though she seemed factual rather than hurt or angry. My demon was inside me and had witnessed the problems arising from her presence here. *I feel right with you in me.*

*Yet me being here makes everything else wrong.*

Not everything else. *You being here makes things with Wild right.* That was no word of a lie. I'd started to feel another urge this morning in the mating ritual. *The mating ritual is still going.*

*You are about to enter the final and most important phase.*

We were? *It's the last one?*

I couldn't deny feeling relief. I also couldn't deny the trickle of fear that accompanied it. The final step in our ritual? The most important, apparently. How would Wild and I change this time? I couldn't fathom being any closer to him. With so much uncertainty in our lives and future, this added uncertainty wasn't totally welcome, even though I'd learned our mating ritual couldn't come after all the other factors in our lives.

*I wanted to put us first.*

*The last,* she repeated. *Same number as demon mating.*

*Do you believe the Mother used the demon's ability to mate to allow me to mate with Wild?*

*Perhaps. Your mating is different, though. Weak.*

Weak? *Not* how I'd describe the process that damn well drove me near insanity at every turn. *What's a demon mating like then?*

*More violence. More pain. More snapping and gnawing.*

*I'm gonna be grateful for the magus version, weakness and all.*

We were silent for a time.

*Please tell me that you're here for good,* I begged her in the quiet.

She smiled inside, and I smiled back.

*I am here, lightness. I will stay with you until death. I will not sacrifice myself again. He would not allow a second escape, and once the mating ritual is complete, my absence would destroy us and our mate.*

Her words chilled me.

After feeling her panic at the cage and seeing her crumpled in a heap inside the demon realm, I would never, *never* expect her to go back there in a bid to save us. *I'm stronger now. We can make it through this together.*

No reply came, and that seemed an answer in itself.

*Have you seen the demon king?* she seemed to ask with it.

Yep. Sure had.

“How do all the problems go away?” I asked the quiet room. The demon king was one of those problems, but the more pressing issue was whether Spyne would reveal what he knew.

I'd thought my demon was asleep again and curled up, but she answered, “With more resilience.”

*More* resilience.

She spoke of it like I possessed an endless source, and I liked to think I had a lot more of the stuff than most.

But even this gal was nearly tapped dry.



Esbat was upon us, and if my mind hadn't been occupied by myriad issues, then I might have appreciated that our magus had spent most of the afternoon purifying for the Mother's healing at the full moon.

In my white esbat gown, and as centered as I'd get, I walked with the masses of coven members and visiting magus who'd joined us for the full moon celebration. Tomorrow, they'd train with us too.

This esbat was important. Tonight, the coven did their first group healing since my grandmother and mother's time. Yet Spyne's response to my demon heritage had hit harder than expected. Clearly, I'd hoped beyond reason that my nature was something the coven might accept because being shunned by Spyne felt... terrible. I couldn't change who I was. I didn't want to live without my demon, either, because I felt right with her as part of me. Shouldn't Spyne understand my dilemma more than most?

His reaction made me want to retreat into myself, and I felt disconnected from the coven tonight.

"High Esteemed." A magus dressed in royal blue bowed before me. "Regards from High Esteemed Turoc. Your mating is a cause for much jubilation in our coven."

I could switch the word *mating* for *ovaries* in that sentence, and the meaning would remain true. The visiting magus hadn't stopped staring at me and Wild since arriving. If there was one thing I loathed about this leadership gig, it was

the constant attention and loss of emotional privacy. I couldn't lock myself in my room for a few days as I had at points in my time here. If I was hurting or angry or sad, then I could expect to be masking those emotions from dawn until I closed the door to my quarters at night. That felt stifling, and part of me wanted to go through an esbat alone instead of in a group.

I didn't want to hold hands and force a smile and dance to fucking lute music with people who'd probably tear me to shreds.

"Send High Esteemed Turoc my regards," I replied to our guest. "May the Mother's healing find you this esbat."

The magus stammered his thanks, and I walked on, growing progressively edgier at the lack of privacy amongst the crowd. Wild strode toward me from across the knolls, and I sighed as he gathered my magic in his and bundled it inward.

My shoulders relaxed as he joined me. "I needed that."

"I know." Wild hesitated but didn't say anything more. We were surrounded, and whatever he wanted to say wasn't the stuff to speak in front of others. "Our first esbat together."

I leaned into his side. "That's right. I didn't realize. You were snubbing me at the last one."

"And trying to burn your dress off with my eyes alone at the one before that."

I chuckled. "Really?"

"If I could've thought of a way to do it without being caught, I would have. That white dress makes me crazy."

"Everything about me makes you crazy. My weenus probably turns you on too."

"A weenus better not be what I think it is."

I smirked. "It's the loose skin on the back of the elbow."

His brows rose. "Really?"

"Yep." I held my arm up for him. "See?"

He touched my elbow. “Yeah, that works. I’m hard. I wonder why. Has anyone else touched your weenus?”

“You’re the first, handsome. The last too. I was saving it for someone special.”

“This is one of the weirdest fucking conversations I’ve ever heard,” Corey muttered.

He stood between Sven and Rooke, watching our exchange.

Wild stopped touching my weenus, and I lowered my arm. Maybe that interaction was... unusual.

Sven clapped Corey between the shoulder blades. “That might be the first time you’ve sworn since becoming Positive Patrick, man. I feel like I have my friend back.”

“You don’t. It takes two to be friends.”

Sven’s grin widened. “He’s still wearing linen pants,” he confided to the rest of us. “But he’s getting there.”

Rooke moved forward to hug me. “I’m sorry about everything.”

“How did the chat go?”

She drew back, and her expression was sad. “He’s pretty closed off about it. He’ll come around.”

After that, there were only hundreds of other coven members to go through the same process with. Then magus from other covens when Frond told the original coven. Then the supernaturals I was in alliance with.

Everything could fall apart because of what I was. This coven could be slaughtered or enslaved because of my secret.

Varden’s voice floated across the knolls. “Please meet in the meadow for our group healing.”

Wild took my hand, and we walked down the slope to where the coven and our guests had congregated. Once there, Rooke took my other hand, and peace trickled through me. I shared bonds with these magus, and I was touching them both. If anything could settle my discomfort, this was it.

“High Esteemed,” Varden said from the opposite side of the circle. “Might you do us the honor of selecting minerals for this healing?”

I wasn’t picking moss agate again, that was for fucking sure. That mineral did shit all for my negative energy last esbat.

Summoning salt, I surrounded the entire coven in a ring of it; then I placed a Howlite to the north, chosen for its ability to calm the mind and bring clarity, comfort, and balance. A black tourmaline went to the south—*protection of our home*. Rose quartz went to the east for instilling loving energy in the coven.

On a whim, I called forth one of my four relics—the unidentified gem. The gem hummed at my touch, calling to my magic, and I realized anew how much there could be to explore with Ryzika’s relics. For instance, I felt certain on an untapped level that using the divination gem tonight would help to shift the energy in the coven from stagnant and chaotic to harmonious. The relics could probably do a whole bunch of stuff.

When I found time—*if that ever happened*—then I needed to play around with these things.

I set the gem at my feet on the west side of the circle.

There were murmurs at my choice.

“Let us begin,” Varden said.

The coven and our guests were joined together. We were one, and I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the positive of that occurrence. A lot of people in this coven didn’t agree with me, but even Spyne had attended tonight.

I started the process of drawing my magic into my center. *Our* center.

Once that was achieved, I found doing that much wasn’t enough. Looking to my bond with Wild, I discovered him waiting on the other end for me to join him. We began the walk to center our mating bond too.

Existing in that space didn't come with a sense of passing time, and when I retreated to myself again and opened my eyes, it was to find Wild and me bathed in the moon's light. The rest of the coven and our guests had finished some time ago, by the looks, but everyone continued holding hands, watching our display. Unlike before the Mother's healing, I didn't feel bothered by their perusal. If the first mated magus couple was standing in front of me, I'd look too.

I should be more understanding of their interest.

The coven remained still in the light of the Mother and her moon for a while longer before Varden's soft words filtered across the meadow. "A beautiful esbat. One to remember. And now, we celebrate who we are and what we have been gifted with, our treasured guests alongside us. Let us eat, drink, and be merry."

Rooke squeezed my hand before leaving for the food tables with Sven. Most here wouldn't have eaten all day as part of purification.

"You feel better," Wild stated.

"I shouldn't have doubted the power of the Mother's healing to help me," I answered.

Corey was on Wild's other side. "You guys were sending out some serious love during the healing. Everyone could feel it. Big-hug energy, guys."

He left, linen pants swishing with every step.

"I'm glad Sven left before he heard that," Wild mused.

Positive Patrick was back. "Must be weird to have known yourself one way, then need to discover who you are all over again."

Wild kissed my hand. "You and Corey share that, my love."

"I need to find the time. Believe me, I want to know myself better. My magic, and Ryzika's relics too." My demon had only just returned to me, though, so maybe I couldn't have gotten to know my new self any earlier.

“You’ll get there. Once everyone settles into training and we feel more prepared, you’ll find the time.”

Wild was far more optimistic than I on that front.

The following hours of small talk, food, and drink weren’t as horrible as I’d expected. The coven had taken to the group healing well, and those who’d doubted Varden’s new push appeared convinced after experiencing it for themselves.

The drinking had ramped up, though not to usual levels—everyone was still sorely aware of the threat surrounding us and didn’t want to make themselves vulnerable.

“The sentries just switched?” I asked Wild as a group appeared in the meadow and set about completing their own group healing.

“Yes, and that’s my cue,” he said. “Are you sticking around tonight?”

Part of me wanted to, and part of me wanted to keep my distance and lick my wounds. Wild’s hand in mine had made tonight bearable. “I’m going to head in.”

I watched him walk away, then started my round of goodbyes for the evening. Rooke was waving off a drink from the laughing Sven. Corey was dancing with a magus about twenty years older than him. *Interesting.*

Huxley was with Spyne across the meadow. They looked miserable. In part because of me. Or mostly. I kept getting between them, and I really hoped Huxley didn’t come to blame me in time.

I walked up the slope and entered the caves. As soon as I descended the few steps at the entrance, the smell of smoke hit me.

Something was burning. I picked up my pace, and soon the smoke was visible where it clung to the roof of the tunnels. *Shit.* I broke into a run, and a sick feeling settled in my gut as I entered the set of smaller lanes that led to my quarters. Whatever was burning was in my esteemed rooms.

The demon gate was there.



But the alarm hadn't gone off. Why hadn't the alarm gone off?

I lifted the sentry pendant to my lips, panting, "Wild, possible fire at the inside demon gate."

His sentries should already be there. Why hadn't they raised the alarm? We'd come this far without losing any coven members.

What if I was about to enter a room filled with slaughtered magus? What if they'd been dragged to the demon realm, and we never saw them again?

And as I skidded into the room, I saw that the sentries *were* in the room. Alive.

"Thank fuck," I gasped.

Only then did I realize that all of them were staring at the wall, and *not* the one with the demon gate.

They stared at the walls where my quipu hung. My *burning* quipu.

*No.*

The piece was done for; even I could tell that at first glance. Bits of it were falling to the stone floor. Horror drove me to my knees, and the smack of my kneecaps on the hard ground didn't hurt me through the numbness overtaking every bit of me.

My quipu was burning. My hours and hours and *hours* of time entering details. All the information we needed to give us an advantage.

My magic.

Someone had set it alight. They hated me that much.

Tears slipped down my cheeks. I didn't care who saw them.

Wild's arrival was like a cool breeze. He strode to the fire and extinguished it with a crushing motion of his hand. Steam and black smoke continued to rise up, the perfect cover,

because if there was a time to expect my demon to show from emotion, it would be now.

“I will stay hidden,” she whispered to me. “Do not fear my smoke and scales.”

It wasn't her I feared.

“What happened?” Wild snarled, and I could feel the restraint in his anger. “Who did this?”

Someone stammered, “I-It was burning when we arrived, sir.”

I lifted my head, then pushed to my feet and turned. “And why did no one put it out?”

I saw the answer on their faces as soon as I faced them.

Like me, horror had struck them immobile. Or they'd seen that the quipu was too far gone when they got here too.

“I'm so sorry, High Esteemed,” one of them whispered. “Who could do such a thing?”

Most magus in this coven might not understand why my magic chose this form, but all magus could sense magic. Magic was a gift from the Mother and often presented itself in unique ways. To burn magic was to spurn *her* gift.

“It's an abhorrent act,” another said in equal shock. “Surely not one of our own.”

I had an exact idea of who—or who gave the order to others anyway. When I'd made my quipu general knowledge, I'd inadvertently given Frond an idea of how to weaken me. One he hadn't taken until the coven decided to favor me again.

Wild planted himself between me and the sentries. “They took advantage of the sentry change—knowledge our coven has access to. The alarms didn't go off, so this wasn't done by demons. I don't believe your quipu was known to our guests either.”

Unless the original coven sent them. But no. My gut told me Frond was behind this. He'd just taken our ploy for the

coven to the next level. He was willing to hurt me to get what he wanted. He'd hurt my magic. The *Mother's* magic.

I'd never expected an attack of this kind.

"What do you want to do?" Wild said low, stroking the back of his hand across my cheek to dislodge a tear.

The easiest course would be to summon a recount in the room. Unfortunately, while the deceased were fair game for such things, this coven had laws that protected the privacy of its members. If I wanted to summon a recount of this evening, then I'd need permission from the entire coven. Which could be an option—in that those who refused would clearly be to blame. "Get rid of the smoke. Until our guests are gone, this remains a confidential matter between those in this room." Our new supporters couldn't guess at the real level of division in the coven. We may lose their support if they believed the situation had become dangerous from a demon *and* magus perspective. "Once they've departed, we'll find the culprit."

Wild dipped his head, then faced his sentries. "News of what happened doesn't leave this room. The high esteemed will handle this attack on her magic in her own time and way. Respect that."

"Yes, sir," they murmured.

"This is her pain," another added. "We wouldn't dream of it."

I wouldn't have dreamed of this happening, though, and from one of our own. Frond had gone too far. The urge not to storm to his quarters and demand the truth was hard to cage.

"We will slip a dagger in his spine when he least expects it," my demon purred within.

I was usually a stab from the front kind of gal, but for Frond I was willing to make an exception. Between the shoulder blades sounded fine to me.

For now, I stared at the smoldering remains of myself on the wall.

Wild wrapped an arm around me. “The person who did this will feel pain.”

“Get in line,” I murmured.

“I was already on my way here, after the sentries called me in. They didn’t say what was burning, but then I felt your pain.” He sucked in a harsh breath, then said in my ear, “I’m going to squeeze the life from him.”

I didn’t tell Wild to get in line again. His murderous intentions were exactly what I wanted to hear right now. That’s all I felt. So much fucking anger.

And despair.

“I was nearly there,” I said hollowly. “Soon, the quipu would’ve started linking paths for us. It would have helped against the demons.”

A passing sentry heard and stopped in her tracks. “Would it really have, High Esteemed?”

“Yes. Getting to that stage again....” Time was a precious commodity, and in time, I was a pauper. Replicating the quipu would take months and months. Could that even be done? I’d never tried before, and there was no itching in my fingers at the idea. Rather it felt a pointless endeavor, like each quipu piece was unique to the point of being impossible to redo.

I swallowed hard. “What do we do now?”

“You’ve been leader so far without the help of the quipu,” Wild said low. “You’ll continue to do so and do great at it. Trust yourself.”

I wouldn’t describe the last couple of weeks as having gone *great*. I was barely holding on. I’d needed the help of my quipu, and part of me had expected that once the quipu kicked into gear, everything else... all my problems would fade.

The loss of that seemed like a symbol of my end.

The end of this coven.

I closed my eyes and started to walk from the room.

“Tempest,” Wild called after me. “I’ll make sure this works out okay.”

I believed he’d break his back trying to do that. I forced the corners of my mouth up. “I love you.”

Seemed like I spent these days walking out of rooms alone, and tonight was no different.



I didn't go to breakfast.

I couldn't face the coven. Not until I knew who was involved. I couldn't lie by being in their company. Yet wasn't I a lie as well? Wasn't I doing that to them?

"Eat," Rooke said, shoving an apple toward me.

I'd felt bereft since last night. I could reason that the quipu had been a lot of lengths of cord knotted and braids strung together, but the quipu was almost a person to me, a guiding light that had helped me through the toughest moments of my life.

The betrayal of having it burned ran deep.

I picked up the apple and started to eat.

"Talk to me, Tempest," she said.

"Should I even be angry at the people who did this when I'm keeping a secret that would hurt them?"

My cousin didn't immediately answer. I could tell through our bond that she didn't like my admission. "Fronde's group went out of their way to hurt you, your magic, and a gift from the Mother. By contrast, Tempest, you were just born part demon. Since discovering that, you've made some very logical and reasoned assumptions about how the coven would react to knowledge of your heritage. You and Fronde cannot be compared. Why do you put so much expectation on yourself? What you are *may* become general knowledge one day, yes, but it's not up to you to make excuses or amends for being

born. Your heart, your soul, and your magic—those are pure gold and that makes your intent to do good crystal clear. You're here for this coven and part of it. Your privacy and fears *will be* respected as if you were an everyday coven member. We don't get to peer at every part of you because you're leading us. Against your wishes, I might add."

My cousin's words made some kind of sense. She felt deep anger on my behalf, and I'd wager that she wanted to unleash her most painful poisons on the quipu culprit before using her ghosts to torture the person in endless agony.

"Thank you for being on my side," I told her.

"Thank you for being on mine, and on the side of people who I don't believe deserve you. I swear, if I had it my way..."

Her eyes glazed over, and I was tempted to ask what terrible fates she was imagining upon Frond.

But they'd interfere with my own twisted fantasies.

A knock. The person didn't barge in after, so it wasn't someone I liked.

I groaned. Except Varden. He wouldn't barge in. I waved a hand to open the door and stared at Spyne standing in the tunnel.

He drew himself tall. "High Esteemed, I've come to inform you that I'm requesting a transfer from this coven. I cannot abide by living under a leadership based on lies."

"Then fill out the damn application, you ink-haired fuck," Rooke snarled. Moving past me, she slammed the door in his face.

I started laughing as she turned to me, a furious expression on her face.

She folded her arms and cocked a brow. "Something funny?"

"Ink-haired fuck." I snorted, then wiped tears of laughter from my eyes. Though they weren't all from amusement. "Thanks for the defense."

“I can’t believe we were so wrong about him.”

“We weren’t. He just feels alone and burdened with a truth that he’s torn over telling and keeping to himself. He’s lashing out in a way.”

“You’re too understanding of people.”

*Or not understanding enough.* “I wonder if he’ll really leave. Huxley will be gutted.”

“He will,” Rooke said in a hushed voice. “Maybe I shouldn’t have slammed the door in his face. He’s still with one of our friends.”

Just another complicated mess to add to the heap.

“I need to leave my room, but I don’t know if I can face the coven and keep up the charade that I’m okay.”

“The guests will be gone by now. Does that help?”

“Yes.” I hadn’t shown my face to thank them for coming, and I felt crappy about that too. “I’ll come to lunch.”

Rooke heard the tone of my voice and opened the door she’d slammed. “I’ll be there. Please don’t be too hard on yourself. You deserve a fucking break, whether that comes from you or someone else.”

Once she’d closed the door, I opened myself to my magic in a bid to center. There was a slight *whoosh* as the four relics joined me. I barely noticed their arrival these days, but today another thought occurred to me.

How had Ryzika felt in moments like these? Did she ever have them? Had coven members ever turned on her and attacked her magic? Had she sat on a couch in her quarters, cloaked in this robe, holding this dagger, and with a pendant around her neck? Had her other hand held this same gem?

Had she felt terribly alone in those times?

Another woman set apart from those around her had worn and held these relics. She’d *formed* them and didn’t gain her position from simply acquiring them as I had. She’d staked her claim and climbed to leadership.



Maybe there was a lesson in that.

I stood in the cloak and sheathed the dagger before placing the gem in the pocket of my black jeans. *Time to leave.*

Partway down the main tunnel, I spotted Wild striding toward me from the eating chamber.

“I felt you move.” He didn’t ask how I was, and I’d need to impart the new demon greeting of *Are you ready for battle* between us. There were times when that suited me better. “How are the gates?”

“No change, my love.”

Then this situation could be worse. I should take heart in that. “Thank you for handling everything last night.”

“Naturally. None of the sentries have spoken of it.”

That was also something to take heart in. The magus who’d witnessed the destruction of my magic were broken for me. They felt my pain. I had to remember that the actions of a few shouldn’t force me to hide away and expect the worst of everyone. “Please make sure to thank them for that.”

Wild held the back of my hand to his lips. “People shouldn’t be thanked for being decent to others. It lowers the bar and makes a person believe that’s the best of who they should be, not the minimum.”

We entered the eating hall, and there wasn’t any drop in volume. I could see some subdued faces and vaguely recognized a few sentries from last night in the crowd. I couldn’t look at Frond’s table yet. I’d either cry or get super violent, and crying would be the worse fate for me.

I sat at our usual table next to Rooke. No one reached out to squeeze my hand or murmur a few words of sympathy. Because they knew me.

I lifted my gaze to Huxley’s. Did I need to warn him about Spyne’s transfer?

“I know,” he said simply. “Good riddance.”

My chest tightened like a vise. Spyne had hurt him. And Spyne *was* hurt. Everyone was hurt.

I didn't tell Huxley I was sorry. I didn't hug him.

Because I knew him too.

"Want anything to eat?" Wild asked hopefully.

"I ate an apple." I couldn't eat more until I had a few things off my chest. I felt sick to my stomach.

*Just get it over with.*

Rising, I added battle to my voice. "Your attention, please."

The coven quietened; perhaps they could hear my sadness.

"I apologize for the interruption to your meal," I continued. "I need to make you aware of an incident that occurred in this coven, and in my quarters, last night."

*Demons.* I could see the fear on their faces. They knew a gate was in my room.

"There have been no further attacks from the demons; let me make that clear first and foremost. This attack occurred within the cave from one of our own."

For the first time, I let my gaze settle on the two tables occupied by Frond's group. There were fewer members there since the coven learned of my mating ritual, but the same original members all remained—Bedwyr included.

"Last night, during the sentry change and shortly after we'd completed our group healing at esbat, a coven member—or several of them—entered my quarters and set my quipu on fire."

A wave of gasps filled the room. I saw horror. I saw confusion. I saw denial. The faces of Frond's group ranged from smooth to defiant to smirking. I steeled myself against them, dreaming of their demise in my heart of hearts.

"That quipu was the work of many months. As you know by now, the quipu is the form my magic chooses to take. And when I say *my* magic, of course I mean the Mother's magic.

Like you, like all magus, I simply hold her gift for the timeframe she chooses.”

My words were too wooden. Anger vibrated in them for the coven to hear. They could hear that my heart had cracks in it after last night, and that, while a demon battle didn’t manage to hurt me, someone in this coven did.

I took a breath. “That quipu was close to providing this coven with a clearer plan on how to approach the threat of demons facing us. While I feel the loss of the quipu sorely for myself—and feel as though part of me burned with it—I feel the new uncertainty in our future just as sorely.” My voice cut off, and I sucked in the courage Wild was sending my way against the sea of sympathetic faces watching me.

“I never expected an attack from one of our own,” I admitted. “I can’t lie and say that I’m not filled with doubt in the wake of this hate-filled action.”

I glimpsed the jubilation on Frond’s face at the admission.

“With doubt comes reflection,” I told them. “I have reflected that, unlike the last woman to wear this cloak and hold these relics, this coven never chose to have me here. On top of that, I never wanted to wear the relics in the first place. I *will* wear them for as long as this coven chooses to have me here. However, I want to hear from you now... What do you wish had been different about the last two weeks?”

Maybe I was opening a gigantic can of demon worms with the question. My question was born of despair, I knew. I was at a loss within myself.

“There will be no reprimand for those who speak,” I said in the silence. “Clearly someone in this coven loathes me enough to attack the Mother herself through me. While I am well aware of the external influences on some inside these walls, I would like to know if there’s anything else that eats at you—regrets or grudges or fears, or even a belief that I slipped into this position without your permission.”

The silence extended for so long that I nearly walked back to my seat.

“Caves just *ended*,” Serene said. She glanced at those who surrounded her. “Our way of life stopped.” She snapped her fingers.

Another Fertim player spoke, “We never know what to expect now. With caves, we always knew.”

Monday, mission announcement.

Tuesday and Wednesday, meetings.

Thursday, game day.

Saturday, make a move.

Gentri said, “The game ended overnight. Then there were demons. Then we all had to move rooms. Then more demons. Other covens coming. Vissimo and Luthers. A mating ritual. When does it all stop?”

“There’s a lot,” another Fertim member agreed.

And I was seeing a trend. No one from Vero had spoken. “Is there a bad feeling from the players who were in Fertim in general?” I asked.

Another silence. The telling kind.

“Caves was used by the demons to get to us,” Serene spoke again. “We understand that. Also, the way things ended doesn’t sit right. There was no end, and there’s only been uncertainty since. Not that you’re to blame for the demons attacking.”

“I hope this coven will feel more certain as we get a better grasp of our position against the demons. And if you’ve thought of a way to bring Fertim and Vero closure, then I’m open to ideas.”

“Start the game again,” Bedwyr called from Frond’s tables.

His suggestion was met with a dumbfounded outbreak of stares. Bedwyr colored, but someone else in the coven agreed.

“Not weekly like before, but maybe monthly,” a Vero member said this time.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. They wanted to play that fucking game again? Were they utter idiots?

"The game was a large part of who we were," Sage called. "You feel like you've lost part of yourself since your quipu was burned. I feel that to a lesser extent from the loss of the game. I know not everyone does, and that some are relieved the game is over, but not all of us think that way. Caves was part of our identity, and I *do* feel a small bitterness that the game was taken from us without ending or our choice."

I may not feel as they did about losing the game, but I could tell *they* felt what they did. I struggled to put my opinions aside as I said, "Considering the demons use the game to feast on us and grow stronger, aside from making the game less regular, what are the ideas on how to counter that effect?"

"Mix up the teams," said Ruby.

There was an outcry at her words, though they made perfect sense to me.

She met the gazes of those around her. "If your argument is that you've lost the routine of Caves and therefore part of who you were, then the return of the game in any capacity should be enough. If you disagree with the teams being mixed, then you admit that it's *more* than the game that you wish to have back. You want to go back to *us versus them* despite how it threatens the entire coven."

Sage had a ready reply. "The closure of the game meant something to me too. I want to know who *would've* won."

*Vero*, I wanted to say.

The volume increased as discussion truly opened, and I contemplated the two defined sides in the coven. Not Vero vs. Fertim, really. The new teams were game versus no game. Some magus wished to regain the semblance of normalcy without giving new normalcy a chance first. They wished to cling to the only life they'd ever known. There had been a lot of change, and the last two weeks had been hard on everyone.

Yet to restart that which gave the demons more power? That was pure idiocy, and it wasn't just me who felt that way.

The two opinions were on extreme ends of the spectrum. How to find a respectful solution for all that didn't endanger us?

The back and forth between coven members came to a natural lull.

"I see two very different opinions from magus here," I told them. "I feel we can find a solution that's fair to both sides, but it will take thought. While I intend to explore solutions with my advisors as a matter of importance, I wish to be clear that there's an immediate threat this coven faces that comes above any desire to restart Caves. In time, once we feel prepared—which I hope comes sooner rather than later—we'll revisit this topic."

That might give those clinging to old routine incentive to relax into our new ways. Maybe those feelings of uncertainty would fade enough for them to see the dangers of the game.

The coven mostly seemed accepting of my words.

"Thank you for your honesty," I said, hit with a sudden pang of guilt again at my lengthy list of secrets.

Berry shot to her feet. "High Esteemed?"

"Yes, Berry."

"I'm sorry about your quipu. No one in this coven, no *magus*, had the right to do that to you."

I nearly did the very thing I'd managed to avoid thus far. I nearly cried. My voice was hoarse. "Thank you. Your shared sorrow means a lot."

Wild was waiting as I joined him again.

He sent me a querying pulse, but I shook my head against leaving the eating chamber, instead opting to sit down and go through the motions of eating. Being here would be difficult until the culprit was caught. I couldn't starve myself in the meantime, nor hide away.

“Mmm,” Wild said suddenly.

Sven glanced at him. “Yes, Wild?”

Wild blinked at him. “What?”

“You’re looking at Tempest like she’s food.”

His lips curved, and I dared him with my eyes to make some comment about eating me. Wild’s lips curved further as he met my challenging look.

“You *are* looking at her like she’s delectable,” Rooke said.

Wild looped an arm around my shoulders. “Because she is. And she bared her soul for all to see.”

“That turns you on?” I sipped at a mango smoothie he’d procured for me during my chat with the coven.

“Yes, but I’m happier now it’s tucked away. No one else should get to see your soul but me.”

Corey murmured, “Sounds healthy.”

Huxley looked between us. “Next step in the mating ritual?”

*Oh.* I looked at Wild. “What’s the urge?”

“To peel back your metaphorical skin and magic and see what’s underneath so I can trap it to enjoy at my leisure and *for my pleasure*,” he purred the last words.

I pursed my lips, then nodded. “That has a mating ritual ring to it. Must be the last step.”

“Last?” Wild was staring at my stomach—at the area under my ribs.

“Yeah, apparently. And the most important.” If the peeling of skin was involved, then things had escalated slightly. “What *do* you think is under there?”

“Your soul?” Huxley offered.

Sven shook his head. “She and Wild don’t have those.”

The others laughed.

Did the last step of the ritual involve souls, though? “Well, keep the skin peeling under control,” I told Wild, who was now staring at the middle of my forehead. *Mother be*, did my soul move around my body like a worm?

The way this worked, I was sure to feel some of what Wild felt by tomorrow or the next day. Now he’d voiced his urge, I could connect that I’d felt a surge of lust every time he spoke his emotions and desires and fears aloud. I wanted to possess them in a different way to how I’d chomped up his magic. I wanted to wrap his soul to mine in chains. What did Wild say about enjoying it at his leisure and for his pleasure?

Same here.

*Super healthy.* Nothing toxic about this situation.

I tucked my hand into Wild’s. “My soul’s in my ass now?”

He blinked twice. “I can’t quite tell.”

“Bet it is,” Huxley muttered. “That would explain her shitty attitude.” The others laughed again, and I rolled my eyes. But I was happy that Huxley felt okay enough to have some fun, even if his heart wasn’t in it.

“That’s my cue to leave,” I said. “I have letters to answer and battles to prepare for.”

Wild’s gaze shot up to my boobs, then between my thighs. He was like a cat tracking a red laser. “I’ll come,” Wild said breathlessly.

No doubt he would too. “I’d like to join you in that, but not today.”

The sentry pendant around my neck warmed, and I glanced at Wild as he listened intently, his focus shifting off my body for the first time.

His jaw clenched, and he glanced up to where I stood ready to leave.

The alarms hadn’t gone off.

No sooner had the thought struck me than a high-pitched noise pierced the eating chamber.



“They’re here,” Wild said quickly. “Demons are through the gates.”



I peered down into the ravine that I didn't dare enter.

Red smoke filled it yesterday, and the sluggish swirling medium hadn't budged overnight, nor as I'd lingered here.

"The other supernaturals are here, High Esteemed," Barrow told me quietly.

I nodded. "Please bring them up." They might be able to glean something unique from the red smoke.

As I had. The sight made my demon furious and fearful. The smoke made her want to stake a claim and also sprint from the possibility of another cage. That's how I knew the smoke was *his*. In the same way I could understand and speak in the demon tongue, I knew that demons emitted a smoke display prior to violent intent. This display was the equivalent of a war dance on the brink of battle, and a warning that we should fear what came next.

I felt the chilling presence of Kyros and Basilia behind me and smelled the earthy scent of Andie and Sascha there too. The Vissimo stood on my right, and the Luthers on my left. Wild didn't like not being here, but he and Delta were swamped while rearranging lines and talking with Sage about shifts in strategy too.

"Your advisor told us of the development," the Vissimo prince said in his cold voice. "All four ravines are this way?"

"Yes. We've sealed the chamber containing the fifth gate. The room is filled with red smoke too."

“This will make defense harder,” Andie muttered.

We had four ravines to guard now, not just four gates. We’d pulled our sentries farther away, which meant less warning. The red smoke was a visual cover for the demons too. “The best course will be to push the demon king back to his realm once we’ve discovered what we can. And a way to safely manage that,” I told them.

Sascha asked, “What have your magus found so far?”

I glanced at the four-affinity teams working up and down the ravine ledges, each trying to sense something from the red smoke. “The smoke is poisonous to touch and ulcerates the skin. There’s an element of the past in the demon king’s power. His magic is not just of him. Something ancient clings to this smoke.”

“What do you mean?” Basilia glanced at me.

“Magus magic is inherited from our ancestors and divided amongst living relatives of that line. There’s potential that demon magic is passed in a similar way, or there’s something more unique about the demon king to explore. He has access to something ancient that has infused or augmented his magic.”

“Father will be intrigued by this theory,” the crown prince mused. He peered into the smoke. “There is shifting beneath the surface. Shapes I cannot make out.”

“I smell decay and individual scents,” Sascha said.

Andie hummed. “As do I. A lot of them. Too many to pick out.”

The demons were gathering in the ravine?

Basilia bent down and tossed a rock over the edge. All of us looked at her, but she listened hard after.

She looked at Kyros after a minute. “The rock never landed.”

“So is there a protective force over the smoke other than the poison that hurts us,” I pondered aloud.

Sascha cocked his head. “Or did the rock go elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere like the demon realm.” Andie followed his train of thought.

Kyros straightened. “The demon king has expanded his realm into the ravine, not simply taken up space in ours.”

*Shit.* That hadn’t occurred to me. If Sascha was right, we had a few patches of demon realm *in* our knolls.

“This is market research, for sure,” the princess put in. “For us too. So, shall we start planning? I have a mani-pedi with Tommy this evening.”

The surrounding magus had listened to every word we’d said, and they seemed impressed by what the other supernaturals had put together. If they knew what a mani-pedi was, they may be less impressed.

I led the others down the alpine slope, sending a jet of magic at Basilia’s high heels when I noticed them.

She winked at me after.

“Who’s Tommy?” I asked.

“My bestie. You’ll meet her soon enough. She wants your cousin to do the drink magic on her.”

*Drink magic.* “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

We gathered in the advisory chamber, and I took my authority while the others spread out in the available seats.

Wild entered the chamber in a burst and swooped to kiss my cheek. “My love.”

“Anything new?”

“We’ve placed groups at key points along each ravine. Our numbers are more spread out, which is an obvious disadvantage. Alarms are being set along the ravines and below the surfaces as well as surrounding your quarters on all sides. We’ve set a range of masking spells in case any demons in the ravine are attempting to gather intel.”

*Good.* “We have suspicions that the demons have expanded their realm into the ravines and my quarters.”

“I agree,” he surprised me by saying.

Wild took the seat on my right.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I fear you entering the smoke as I fear you entering the demon realm.”

Kyros and Sascha both riveted their focus on him.

“You can’t follow her there?” Sascha asked.

He and Kyros both looked at their mates after.

Wild shook his head. “I suspect not. I’m not willing to test the theory.”

New tension rippled through the males in the room.

“Any updates from your territories?” I asked the other supernaturals.

Kyros was the only one who hadn’t sat. “The gates remain closed. No more have been found. Defenses have been formed at the sites. Are you able to set alarms on our gates and key them to alert us of any change?”

“We can. And we can ensure that the alarms reach the rest of us too.” I looked at the Luthers.

“No change for us either. You were right. This is where the demon king plans to begin,” Andie said. “What about here? Anything else new?”

Coven business was coven business, and yet I did feel these supernaturals should know somewhat of the difficulties within the coven. “There’s dissent from a group within our caves that worsens with outside influence from another coven who would see a leader of their choice on our authority. Also from the effects of the demon magic to some degree. I must tread carefully until the internal threat is managed or I fear we will be too divided or distracted to fight as we should.”

“That’s the hardest kind of threat to manage,” Andie said. “When I was leading the tribe, they found out I’d become a Luther. Let’s just say they weren’t happy, my sister included.”

So that’s what happened between them.

My heart rose in my throat. “How did you bring the tribe around?”

“By showing them that I wasn’t—that *Luthers* weren’t—something to fear. That we were real, too, and held similar hopes and dreams and fears to them. That we could be one side and that the fighting could stop.”

My heart splattered on the floor. There went my hope of following a set of guidelines to tell the coven I was a demon. I didn’t think I’d have much success selling them on the hopes and dreams and fears of demons.

“This news affects you,” Kyros said to me.

He’d been listening to my heartbeat. “Unlike your games, ours was never won. I simply came into a fourth affinity, gained the position of leader, and the game ended as a result. Some are happy about that, and others are not. The issue will work out one way or another, but I wished you to know as coven allies that you could be dealing with another leader at some point.”

“Our alliance is with you,” the Vissimo prince said. “My father will not deal with just any magus. He sees potential in you. Much potential, I might add. I have never seen him treat someone as an equal before. You must hold great power.”

I dabbled. “I would not wish to place your father in that position. Hopefully the situation doesn’t come to that. For now, we must continue moving forward. We meet today to discuss how best to unite our forces and various strengths, weaknesses, and unquities to battle demonkind. Shall we set our attention there now?”

Princess Basilia interlocked her hands on the stone table. “While King Julius is unwilling to provide you with details of individual Vissimo power levels, he is willing to provide you with numbers.”

“Which are?” Wild asked.

“Five hundred and seventy of our strongest will be at your disposal,” she answered. “The rest will remain behind to guard our gates and territory.”

Nearly six hundred. I hadn’t expected *half* that number. “We thank King Julius for his generosity.”

“We do not operate like your coven,” the prince told me. “We cannot. A Vissimo is not wired the same as a magus. My father is ruler, and those in his territory are his subjects. If he tells them to go to battle, they do. If someone in his clan rises against him, he crushes that Vissimo.”

I’d like to apply those rules to Frond, but I didn’t connect with that setup of complete power in general. Then again, Vissimo *were* wired differently to magus. I felt there was a need for disagreement. What I had to figure out was how to *manage* disagreement.

Sascha leaned back on his chair. “Our numbers are not so sizeable. We can offer you one hundred and twenty of our people. A lesser amount will remain behind with the sick and vulnerable and to guard the gates. We don’t have enough numbers to guard our gates well anyway, so what we ask is that, if the alarms you set go off, a small number of Vissimo and magus can split away with our Luthers to protect our lands.”

If we got split in two or three, then the demons did too. “I see no harm in that.”

“We’re also happy to provide you with the power levels of those in our pack and tribe,” Andie said. “If you ever misuse that information, then I hope you understand what you would lose.”

I dipped my head. “That is information that only I and Wild will know. You can be assured we are fully aware of the honor you bestow with such knowledge. In return, I will offer you the details of our magus. It’s only fair.”

“The details of your magus,” Kyros murmured. “Perhaps Father would reconsider if that’s on the table.”

Did I want King Julius to know the exact force he'd need to crush our coven? *No*.

"Training forces of this size will take thought," Wild said. "I believe we're best to initially work with groups of the most powerful fighters. They can take back what we figure out together to their respective territories to train the larger group."

That made sense. "We'll need to practice on a larger scale periodically."

The Vissimo prince nodded. "That should take place outside of your territory. We can't know the extent to which the demon king is able to spy on what we do here."

*True*. "You each have a force in mind?" I asked the supernaturals.

Sascha and Andie looked at each other. A minute went by before she answered, "Yes. A group of ten including us."

"My eight siblings will attend," Kyros announced. "In addition to Basilia and myself."

King Julius and Queen Titania had been busy.

"I suggest we rotate the location of trainings to limit the inconvenience to our rule," Andie said. "It may be good for each of our peoples to see the others at work too. That held value for me in the past."

I rested back. Decision and discussion just came easy with this group.

"And what of your mating?" Basilia asked me, glancing at Wild.

A quick look told me he was staring a hole in my forehead again.

"What about it?" I murmured.

"He's got it bad," Sascha said, smirking.

"I do have it bad," Wild admitted. "We're at the final step."



There was a communal *ahh* and dawning comprehension from the other supernaturals.

Andie was beaming. “The best step.”

“And most intense,” Basilia added. “Good luck with that.”

“You’ll be less vulnerable and will gain new power when the mating is complete,” Kyros stated.

By now, I respected that our mating ritual was linked to everything happening. I’d also woken this morning very curious about Wild’s insides and using them how and when I liked, so I wasn’t sure we could go much longer before completing the ritual even if we wanted to.

And I certainly *didn’t* want to wait much more than a second.

Wild took my hand. “We’ll receive the last gift when we’re meant to.”

*The last gift.*

I suppose it would be.



“Is it a bad time?” Varden asked, nevertheless stepping into the advisory chamber.

“Yes, go away.” I dotted an *I* on the last outstanding letter. Well, second to last letter. I’d saved one. I banished the letters to Postman Barrow. “That took a while.”

The old esteemed sat a few seats away. “This means good support?”

“More support.” We were up to twenty covens, and half of those had offered magus. With their help with ingredients, Rooke believed we could change our approach and release her antidote in an enormous dome over the smoke-filled ravines. “These caves get busier each week.”

Foreign magus were becoming a constant. If the Vissimo and Luthers weren’t training here, then a force of our magus was training in their vicinities for the day.

“Things are coming together,” he noted.

“Feels like bits are everywhere, but we’re in a better place than we were two and a half weeks ago.”

His face softened. “Just think where this coven will be in another two and a half weeks, High Esteemed.”

“Just Tempest when we’re alone, sir.”

“Tempest,” Varden echoed. “So young to deal with so much. You’re doing a spectacular job, and I am deeply sorry the coven cannot always see that, and sorry Frond attacked

your magic. I hope that you never doubt that this coven is worth fighting for.”

“One person doesn’t symbolize an entire group. Frond will get what’s coming to him eventually, whether it’s from me, the coven, or the Mother.”

The crease between Varden’s brow cleared. “You are wise and bold.”

“You believed that I would turn my back on the coven?”

“Not believed, no.” He paused, then said, “Worry has a way of not being grounded in logic. I’ve always rather detested it for that reason. Yet worry I have had over how much adversity our fierce leader would choose to accept.”

*Ah.* This linked into his sadness that the coven hadn’t united after the ending of Caves. “Like I said a few days ago, I will wear these relics until the coven decides I shouldn’t.”

“I’m not sure they get in the choice of relics, but you refer to that which you sit upon.”

This hard fucking authority. “I do.”

“It is your seat, Tempest. No one else deserves to sit there. Do not place the choice in the hands of magus under the influence of demon magic, nor those who cling to what has been out of fear of change or attack.”

True anger tainted his last words, and I could’ve expected that the views of the likes of Serene and Sage who wanted a return of Caves would inspire strong frustration in him. “I don’t seek to rule as a demon king does, sir. Not even a Vissimo or Luther. The community here will have a voice, even in times of sickness and war. I will never take that from anyone who has the best interest of the coven as their motivation.”

“Then what will you do with Frond? His numbers have grown.”

I witnessed as much this morning. “Why is that, do you suppose? The coven seems more peaceful in general.”

Yet Frond had filled another table of supporters.

Varden tapped his ear. “You have more than one person with ears on the coven. Use them.”

*Rooke. Sven.* “My friends grow weary of bringing me only bad news.”

“Understandable. I feel the same way. A person should not have to keep taking this treatment just because they *can* weather it.”

“You’re in knots about the future of this coven, sir,” I said after a beat.

He shifted his blue eyes from mine. “My concerns have nothing to do with your leadership. My frustrations center around the coven not seeing the gift that has been bestowed upon them. I struggle not to act in bitterness, especially when I hear talk of Caves resuming in any way, shape, or form. Please tell me you will not allow that to happen.”

I countered with a smile. “You have no concerns over my leadership, right?”

A sigh left him before long. “I do not, you are right. And I understand that my role is to seal the divide in this coven however I can.” His voice lowered. “There is much to do.”

“You can only take so much upon yourself. Magus are responsible for their own actions when all is said and done.”

“Yes, but the old become very aware of the time they have to undo the damage they never saw until too late—the damage that they were part of dealing out. I will do all that I can.”

I preferred his determination to frustration, worry, and bitterness, even if I wished he was content to let things naturally unfold. Perhaps I shouldn’t deter my esteemed cheerleader from his work. Varden was well respected, and *I* couldn’t take everything upon myself. “I’m glad for your help. Please don’t exhaust yourself in the process.”

He didn’t seem as exhausted as when he’d first moved to new quarters, but there was a heavy hang to his shoulders. Then again, he was in turmoil. My own shoulders had hung that way since my quipu burned.

“Have you seen Serene again?” I asked.

“Yes, I see her regularly for treatment and to change the dressings on my wounds.”

“And how—”

*Knock, knock.*

Something I was realizing about leadership? There was far more knocking. That knocking usually preempted the words *High Esteemed, could I have a moment?*

Spyne stood in the doorway. “High Esteemed, could I have a moment?”

*Ha!* Some things could still entertain me.

I glanced at Varden, who was already rising. “I’ll see you at the meeting this afternoon.”

“Of course,” he replied, then bowed slightly. “High Esteemed, an honor as always.”

My smile was real, and that felt like a win in itself. “The honor is mine.”

Spyne lingered in the doorway, and I gestured him to a seat.

He walked across the room, and I noticed the parchment clutched in his grip. Once he’d sat, I waved a hand to close the door. His eyes widened.

“I’m not going to eat you, Spyne,” I told him. “I only eat small children.”

Spyne was a pale guy. He somehow lost *more* blood from his face.

Did I need to say the words? Apparently so. “I’m joking.” *Man*, maybe the red smoke from the demon king ulcerated this guy’s sense of humor. “How can I help?”

The grimoire laid the piece of parchment on the stone table. “I’ve filled out my transfer application, but I want to talk to you first.”

“About me being half demon or your future?”

He flinched. “My future. And the other part, too, maybe.”

This was the first time he’d dared approach me for open conversation. I wanted to be sarcastic and dismissive, but that was because Spyne had managed to hurt my feelings. He was also with Huxley. Did I want to recover easiness with this grimoire? Yes. Could I understand that he’d discovered something that put him in a tricky moral position?

*Yes.*

I’d store my sarcasm and dismissiveness for the person who really deserved them—Fronde. “Then speak. What’s your decision regarding your transfer?”

Spyne took a breath. “I’d already spoken to you about the call I experienced to leave the coven for a time. When I discovered the extent of Huxley’s lies, that seemed like a clear sign to pursue the call.”

*My lies, not Huxley’s,* I silently corrected him. I didn’t interrupt, though. People liked to be listened to—including me.

“Transferring to another coven doesn’t feel right,” he continued. “It’s not magus I wish to study further—it’s other supernaturals. I wanted to speak with you about the possibility of a transfer to a Vissimo clan.”

My brows rose. “Sundulus?”

“Yes.”

“What would you do there?”

“I’d hope to have access or earn access to their archives in time. Barring that, I’d be happy to observe *them* in their environment and perhaps strengthen the bonds between our races.”

“Like an ambassador,” I supplied.

“I suppose so.”

“Yet you’ve acknowledged that you’re leaving the coven because of what I’ve kept from you. An ambassador is a representative of where they come from. Your feelings about

the coven, its leader, and some of its members would be obvious to some of the Vissimo. If you seek to strengthen the bonds between our races, then your presence there while holding these feelings could ensure the reverse.”

Spyne could tell King Julius what I was. He could even reveal the truth without intending to. King Julius was clever and powerful. If he caught wind of something amiss, then I had no doubt that Spyne would find himself speaking words he'd never meant to.

“You wish to keep me here because you fear what I could say.” Spyne had seen to the truth of the matter.

I studied the magus, trying to decide how open to be. “Do you understand why I fear it?”

“Because you're part demon.”

“That's the instrument that would lead to what I fear, but not *what* I fear.” The words rang in me in a bizarre type of epiphany. I didn't fear what I was. I feared what *came* of it. I accepted my demon, just not what may happen as a result.

The thoughts were those I'd had before, but I hadn't heard them with clarity. I accepted who I was. I didn't accept that there had to be war and pain and suffering due to that. “I fear the limits of others' acceptance. I fear that they will choose the easy path of denial and mob mentality over the harder road of challenging the so-called *truths* they may have known. I have seen the world, Spyne, and I have seen that not many possess that ability. My concerns are real and based in experiences of how people react to fear and change and new concepts and challenge to what they've known.”

A hardness entered his dark eyes. “You fear that all that leads to danger for *you*.”

“If things became that dangerous from the coven, then I am confident in my ability to get free. No, I don't fear danger directly. I fear not being in a position to do what's needed for the survival and well-being of this coven. I feel the pressure of time and the threat of failure. I can hear their screams in my ears.”

“If they’re screaming because they were not able to accept what you are, then some may say that would be the consequence of their actions.”

I hadn’t expected such coldness from the grimoire. “We aren’t talking of a consequence where someone stubs their toe or loses a trinket. The consequence here is death and slavery. I couldn’t stand by and let that happen, no matter what mistakes the coven had made. We’re creatures of the Mother, Spyne, and while I’ll never understand that a person can choose to bury their head in the sand as though the outside world isn’t real and happening, I *can* choose to accept that they’re there, and that they *are*. That perhaps there are reasons I can fathom as to why such a mentality needs to exist.”

“And so you fight for people who don’t deserve to be fought for,” Spyne said with a curious edge to his voice.

“I fight for this coven, even those who may turn on me, because I know what I can live with. I could allow myself to be disappointed by others’ choices over and over again. Far better to decide what I will do. Better to rejoice in those who have the strength to ask questions and open their eyes to something new or hard. Better to live and die in a way that befits who I am and what I believe in.”

Spyne sat watching me in the wake of my words.

The thoughts were mine, yet I’d never vocalized them in such a way. I could see that Varden had triggered the deeper thoughts during a conversation months prior. My answer then was different.

*For how can we trust, he’d said, when we are unsure of a being’s capacity for kindness and decency? Once we become aware that one’s capacity for kindness is different to ours, is there any going back to what those two people might have been? Or do those two people merely trust each other in things up to that place where their decency and kindness differ? If so, is there any point in maintaining a trust with such a person or shall we abandon that relationship to seek out people with a closer capacity to ours?*



I'd answered that I'd rather experience full trust with a handful of people. Varden had wished me luck—he'd known two such people in his life.

Existing in a community was a tricky, complex business. An existence I could choose to reject.

Now I chose not to.

Yet I couldn't allow disappointment and bitterness and guilt to overtake me in time. I wanted to truly honor the need for diversity of thought and action in this coven and be free of cynicism. That meant my self-validation had to become a potent elixir against the limitations of people because they were *people*.

What I did had to mean most to my well-being, far more than the actions—or lack of action—of others. That didn't mean that I wouldn't have a select few that I depended upon on a deeper level, and who I would treasure in the knowledge and hope they treasured me too. But if I wanted a community—a coven—then my mindset had to shift, or I'd be the one left hurt and lonely.

I smiled, and for the first time in months, since discovering what I was, I felt the hard casing of guilt around my heart crack and start to crumble.

I was a demon, and my heart was true.

"I don't have an issue with what you are," Spyne said, breaking into my soul-deep thoughts.

I pulled myself out of my head. "That's a surprise given your reaction."

"My issue," he said carefully, "is that I thought I knew you, only to find you'd shown me one part. My issue isn't that you haven't got your heart in the right place; it's that I disagree with the subterfuge. In saying that, I've been on the receiving end of these people you describe. As has the man I was with. If you don't feel able to trust me or others with what you are, then perhaps that's our failing and not yours. Or perhaps you're guilty of the limitations you accuse others of by assuming this coven would react in a certain way to what

you are. Regardless, the issue remains that you're concealing something that, given your position and what we face, I believe there's a duty to disclose. Not just for the health of the coven, but for *your* health and continued participation in this community."

Rooke gave me a different outlook the other day—one that suggested people didn't get to see every bit of my life because of the position I held. Spyne disagreed.

"I wonder," I mused, "if I was not a demon, would there be another part of me that people felt I should disclose? If not that, then another. At what point would I cease to be a person and become an object?"

"You're a servant of this coven. More so than anyone else," he countered.

"A servant, yes. A slave, never. The difference being that I retain the right of choice over my fate."

"You made the choice to become leader of this coven."

"Yes, but not at the loss of all other choices. Did you decide to date Huxley at the loss of all of *your* other choices?"

Rather than provoke anger, I sensed we'd provoked deeper thought in each other.

"For what it's worth," the grimoire said, "I'm sorry your position is a tricky one. I'm sorry that someone attacked your magic. I'm guessing it was Frond and his group."

Spyne had been privy to our thoughts on Frond while with Huxley.

"I wish things were easier too. I'm sorry that you found out about my heritage in a way that left you feeling betrayed, and also that this seems to have secured your decision about a break in your relationship with Huxley."

Spyne swallowed hard. "Thanks."

I held up his application. "I'll give this some thought. An interspecies transfer has never been done, and that doesn't make things impossible. It just means we'll need to navigate

new ground with the other supernaturals to ensure you and this coven will be safe.”

Another quiet, “Thank you,” followed, and soon I was alone again. The conversations with Spyne and Varden had left me unsettled. I could feel the revelations they’d invoked churning inside, and I understood that those had to be latched onto and nurtured to help me in time. I had some self-doubts and beliefs to break through. That never felt comfortable.

First though, I set Spyne’s application aside and picked up the letter I’d set aside earlier.

Advisors flocked in the open doorway, and I blinked at them.

“It’s that time already?” I asked.

Huxley slid a tray of food in front of me. “This is the last tray of food I’ll ever get you.”

He was a liar. Trays of food were our thing. “Thank you, Esteemed Advisor Leif.”

Bit of flattering never went astray with Huxley.

He forced a smile, but the grimoire was currently minus the man he’d pined over for years, and a grimness sat upon the firm press of his mouth and the bruised areas under his eyes. Instead of lashing out or being loud about his anger, the quad member had turned inward.

That was real pain right there.

I picked up a ham and cheese sandwich off the tray and took a bite. Around the mouthful, I said, “You’re just in time for the fun part.”

I slid the letter to Ruby. “Could you do the honors while I eat?”

She turned the message over. “It’s from the original coven.” When I didn’t say anything more, Ruby broke the seal and spread the single page of parchment flat.

“High Esteemed Corentine,” Ruby read aloud.

Wild entered the room and took his seat, casting me a searching look. I smiled and nodded toward Ruby.

She kept reading. “We are troubled beyond measure to hear of the upset within the Buried Knoll coven of late that is a response to the way you have chosen to lead. Our upset originates not only from this reported turmoil and division but also over the vicious attack on your magic. It is no wonder you and our son made the decision to hide your mating from your coven and the wider magus community, only revealing this when backed into a corner by those who should be nearest and dearest to you but are not.”

Ruby’s nostrils flared, and she looked at me.

My smile widened. “Keep reading, please.”

She did so, clear anger in her voice. “Perhaps most troubling of all is the threat from demonkind that the Buried Knolls coven faces largely alone and without support from our loving and fierce magus network. That you have chosen to align with baser supernaturals speaks of your awareness of the direness of the coven’s defensive position, of their impaired ability to fight back, and—apologies if this appears coldly critical—your awareness of the grievous errors you have made during your very brief reign as leader. We are not all meant for this role, as I am sure you can now attest.”

Ruby dropped the letter. “I can’t read more of that shit.”

Huxley snatched it up. I should’ve given the job to the grimoire in the first place, knowing curiosity would overwhelm his other feelings.

He read rapidly, “The original coven feels, as the homeplace of the originals of our race, a particular fatherly duty toward caring for the flock of magus covens as a whole. We have a Mother, but our coven operates to fill the paternal role and offer a complete, nurturing upbringing to maguskind.”

“That is fucking sick,” Winona said.

Winona just swore! That made up for a lot of things in life.

I grinned.

Huxley said, “As such, recognizing a child in need, we extend help to you despite the great risk to ourselves from the state of your coven and the threat of demon attack. Though we believe your alliance with the lesser supernatural races to be disrespectful to the Mother’s grand design, we accept that such contracts cannot be easily dissolved, and will uphold any dealings you have embroiled the coven in already. In return for the full aid of the original coven and any sister and brother covens loyal to us—numbering seventy-seven at the time of this letter—we would require you to step down from the authority immediately, to renounce your leadership and ill-begotten relics, and to agree that the Buried Knoll coven would henceforth be known as a long-distance extension of the original coven itself. The coven will thrive under our experienced and cherished rule—as the length of occupation of *our* authority can serve as a witness. Furthermore, we acknowledge that distance does complicate matters, and as such we agree to appoint a regent to act in our stead. This regent will act in accordance with our laws and ways in full effect. Appointing a regent will be at our discretion, and while our son may appear to be the natural choice here, his relationship and mating with yourself has tainted him by association. Therefore, rest easy that he will not be offered the position of regency. Better yet, we are happy, despite mistreatment from yourself in the past, to reopen our doors to you and our son and to offer a fresh start from the mistakes you have made. You might still be able to attain a semblance of respect in the magus world if you can see this for the gift it is.” Huxley lifted his head. “It’s signed by the Astars.”

I licked crumbs off my fingers. “That truly exceeded my every expectation. Bravo to them. Bravo.”

Wild was simmering in fury across the table and didn’t trust himself to say a single word. He loathed his parents. There was no question of that.

“I can’t believe the level of manipulation in that letter.” Ruby was plain ol’ shocked. “I can’t believe the way they’re tearing you down to get what they want, and acting like they’re doing you a favor too.”

“If I accept, they want me to be aware that I’ll be crawling to them for help,” I said. “They want this to be personal.”

Like me, Varden appeared amused. “Ill-begotten relics.”

I laughed. “That was my favorite part too.”

Delta appeared grim. “They want this coven, the alliance with Vissimo and Luthers, and the first mated magus couple in their home. They want all those things badly despite how they’ve turned all that into an *offer*.”

That was about the size of it. “They don’t wish to lose their self-appointed father image to the other covens. They have to appear to help us, but they want the same as the demons, really. In essence, but using different strategy.”

Winona’s face twisted. “The audacity to place themselves as equals to the Mother.”

“They don’t see themselves as her equals,” Wild told her. “They see themselves above her.”

That earned a horrified silence from the others.

Wild ran a hand through his hair. “Tempest, I’m so sorry.”

As though their actions were his fault. “They don’t want to appoint you as regent because they need you to rule their coven,” I said drily.

“And they hope to break you into the mold of a proper wife in the meantime,” he said.

Opal and Barrow shot him a look but didn’t comment.

I lifted a shoulder. “They would be unpleasantly surprised in that regard.”

I didn’t just refer to what my general reaction to that would be. The Astars had invited a magus-demon to stand by their heir’s side one day and rule their coven. I almost wanted to take them up on the offer only to whisper the truth to them on their death beds. “Don’t beat yourself up about the decisions of your parents. Being so perfect yourself was always going to mean your family were egomaniacal rulers. Life doesn’t come without downsides.”

His mouth quirked up in a wry smile.

My words appeared to have melted Ruby and Opal's hearts.

"Please tell me you aren't considering this," Winona said. "Their offer is misplaced to the extreme, and this coven won't accept their high-handed decision of who should rule us, nor their written attack on your self-esteem."

She was *pissed*. I wanted her to swear again. "I'm not considering it. I've expected the letter since admitting the quipu attack hurt me. Frond's expression as I spoke those words was akin to the joy a mother experiences welcoming her baby into the world."

Winona's eyes narrowed. "Frond."

There was a general grumble from the other advisors. Pure murder shined from Wild's dark gaze. I was feeling quite partial to Frond on the other hand. He'd made my damn day by triggering this message. "Frond indeed. Wild, you mentioned setting a trap for our favorite coven member. I would imagine Frond is very eager to know my response to this letter. I also know that his group takes turns watching me."

"They spy on you?" Ruby said in outrage.

"They do."

Opal snorted. "You're suggesting a ploy?"

Like in Caves... I hadn't thought of it that way. "A ploy, yes. The tricky part would be figuring out how to witness anything he conveys to the original coven."

A calculating gleam had entered Wild's eyes. "Leave it with me, High Esteemed."

I would. "Then we'll delay my response for now. However, a symbolic response is needed for those in this chamber."

I summoned a stone bowl, then some tinder. Next, sticks and a bag of fluffy, cloudlike candies.

“What are these?” Huxley picked up the bag. “What’s this slippery material over the top?”

“That’s plastic. You’re better off without it. Inside is a human treat called marshmallows.”

I set the Astars’ letter alight with my magic, lowering the flaming letter into the stone bowl to set the tinder on fire. I opened the bag of marshmallows, then picked up a stick and slid the soft candy onto the end.

I gestured to the bag and other sticks as I hovered the marshmallow over the dancing flames. “Go for it. You’ll only be missing out. Toasted marshmallows are a human custom we definitely need to acquire here.”

And marshmallows toasted over the burning remains of the Astars’ cold-blooded excuse of an offer would be tastier still.





Wild entered our temporary room that wasn't seeming so temporary.

“What are you doing?” He shrugged out of his heavy cloak.

I cracked open an eyelid. “Following the threads in my mind.”

“Nice.”

I closed the eyelid, then opened it again. “You don't think that sounds crazy?”

“You're a magus and a queen.” He kicked off his boots and walked into the bathroom.

I closed my eyelid again. “I ate too many marshmallows.”

“The taste of rebellion was hard to resist,” he called out.

No one resisted it. Every advisor partook of our contract-burning food fest. “I think all these intense decisions are making me delirious. The letter should piss me off, not make me laugh.”

He reentered, and I cracked an eyelid again. Wild was minus a tunic and plus sweatpants. His pendants rattled, and I dragged my gaze over his delectable body to his musician fingers.

“Is my soul in my fingertips?” he asked, standing before me on the bed.

I hummed and whipped out a hand. I sucked one of his fingers into my mouth.

Wild banished his sweatpants.

Laughter burst from me around his finger. “Is that a hint to check if your soul is somewhere else using the same method?”

More specifically, the piece of anatomy bobbing in my face.

He answered, “If we start that, it will end in the last step of the ritual. I’m barely holding it together.”

Truth be told, I’d sat here for an hour fantasizing about using the divination threads in my mind to bind Wild’s helpless self to me for eternity. So there were cracks on both sides. Probably minor and nothing to worry about.

I placed my hands in his. “Wild, the other rulers got me to thinking. I don’t want to wait another minute before we’re mated. Will you take me to our cave so we can have a sex fight over who gets to chain whose soul to who?”

He studied my face. “What about the covenant?”

“What about the covenant?”

“What about my parents and Frond?”

“What about your parents and Frond?”

“What about the foreign magus and supernaturals that will be here for training while we could potentially be out of commission for days?”

I squeezed his hands. “I care about respecting what’s between us. Others will be happy *because* we’re happy. Or they can fuck off.”

Wild’s chest rose as he inhaled. “How are you saying all this with my cock right in your face?”

“It’s a distraction, I’ll admit.” I sensed his next intent like a coming storm. “Do *not* smack me in the face with it.”

He grinned but managed to restrain the impulse. “Just seems like the natural thing to do.”

I shoved him back, then opened a portal to Sven.

The rest of the quad was in the room. Rooke wasn't there.

"Hey," he said, then glanced around. "That's Wild's dick! Why the fuck would you do that to us?"

"I didn't think you'd turn and look around the room," I retorted. "Don't be nosy."

"Don't call when you or Wild is naked. How about that? What am I supposed to do with that visual?"

I smirked. "I can only tell you what I'd do with it. You may decide that's not the path for you."

Sven glared, and Corey budged him over, careful to look only at me. "What's up?"

"Me and Wild are going to make this mating official."

"Cool. Good to hear."

"Thanks. Could you let everyone know?" I asked. "Just when they ask. I don't know how long we'll be out."

Sven grimaced. "Is that wise? What if you're out for a week?"

My demon rose in me, and it was she who answered through our mouth, "There are power gains to be considered, whispering magus. An unfinished mating ritual makes us vulnerable. We do not have much time before the demon king makes his move, but he is not ready yet. First, the gates open. Then the smoke spreads. Battle is close, but not here. The mating ritual is now or never."

Everyone seemed to understand that they'd spoken to my demon. And that explained why she'd curled back up again after her fury and fear of seeing the smoke arrive. She knew the demon king wasn't ready yet.

"She's right," Huxley spoke. "We found as much in the Vissimo's archives. The scouting attacks are followed by a larger attack, but when the demon king truly intends to wage war, he opens the gates and sends out the smoke ahead of time."

How handy would those Vissimo archives have been a month ago...

Sven's worry was plain, but he pushed it back. "Then have a blast, lovebirds. We'll do our best here while you're gone."

"Thanks, Sven."

"Whatever. No thanks for the fucking dick in the face."

"Join the club, my friend." I closed the portal. "There. Sorted."

Wild pushed me flat on the bed, then crawled over me. To my surprise, he didn't banish my black underwear or white tee.

He moved his mouth to my ear. "Hold your breath, my queen."

"What?"

A portal opened under me, and I was submerged in warm water the next second. I plunged downward, my back quickly finding the bottom of the spring, and I clutched at Wild above.

He dragged us to the surface, and I was pressed against the wall in our cave, a spluttering mess.

Wild's mouth was hot on my body. Scorching.

"You couldn't have set us on solid ground?" I choked, rivulets of water running down my face and from my hair.

"Not with my goal in mind," he murmured against my neck.

I sucked in more air. "What goal would that be?"

In answer, his dark gaze met mine. He rolled my wet, white T-shirt up just below my boobs. He gathered the excess in two handfuls and crossed them over the front as I would if forming a crop top. "On your knees, Tempest."

He had something delicious in store for us. I'd follow temptation for now. I sank down to chest height in the water, kneeling on a shelf that was either part of the cave, or provided by Wild's magic.

Wild pushed his hard length through the hole formed by the crossed ends of my tee and settled between my breasts. Once he'd done that, he pulled the ends of my gathered T-shirt tight, forcing my breasts firm either side of his erection.

I peered down, seeing that my nipples were totally visible through the soaking material and straining with the need for his touch.

He hissed, and the sound echoed through the entire cave. "I'm going to fuck this part of you now. You're going to take it all."

And get something out of it too—as I already was. The urge to have him inside was almost painful, and that only made me anticipate what was ahead. "Do your worst, handsome."

Wild slid up and down the valley of my tightly pressed breasts, loosening his hold on my T-shirt to accommodate his girth and increasing speed. The tee held my boobs high, and I bowed my head, putting out my tongue, and relished in his deep groan at the warm sensation offered for the height of each thrust.

He placed the gathered fabric in one hand, his burning eyes on my nipples, and I moaned as he rubbed a thumb over one.

When he pinched it, I cried out. "More, Wild."

Under the surface, my hips circled against nothing. His snatched growling became more erratic, and then I was hauled upward to standing.

Wild sliced a hole in my wet tee, and I sighed as cooler air whispered over my nipple an instant before he took it in his mouth and sucked *hard*.

I clasped his head to my chest and hooked my legs around his hips, desperate to be closer.

His snarls were as wild as his name described him to be. He ripped tendrils of pleasure from deep within me. My magic, too, I realized through the growing haze. I could feel my magic entering him, responding to his ministrations. I was being parted from my power?

He sliced a hole in the fabric over my other nipple, and I thumped my head back against the cave wall in something akin to agony at the intensity of such fucking bliss.

Wild wanted my magic? If he kept doing this, he could take it.

Water swished against my back as Wild walked us through the pool. He growled and fire erupted in a circle of stones I hadn't seen since the night of our last ritual. Another burst of magic and I was dry, my drenched white tee gone.

Only my black underwear remained.

Wild set me on my feet on the ledge at the entrance of the smaller cave. He didn't move to push up after me, and I peered down the flat of my stomach to meet his glittering gaze. His head was in front of my hips, and he raised a musician finger to trace down the front of my underwear. I felt the fabric slit and give way. I felt the cooler temperature skim between my thighs.

And then the heat of his tongue replaced it.

Wild held my hands by my side and moved hungrily against my throbbing core. I pressed my pelvis against him to the maximum extent I could manage while perched precariously on the ledge. He kept me from parting my legs wider with his hold on my arms, and I knew his mouth could offer me deeper pleasure.

He knew it too.

His intent was to draw this out. Draw my magic out.

And it was working.

The tendrils of power he pulled out were still available to me, I could feel, but they felt more distant. Wild was peeling my magic back to sink through that layer of me. He'd confessed to a desire to explore what resided beneath, and he was doing just that.

Two could play at that game.

I smiled in the flickering firelight and reached my magic down to circle his length. Then I started to stroke.

My lips parted on a silent gasp as Wild's magic trickled into me. His magic was mine to access already, but this was different. His magic surrounded me like the water in this spring had moments prior. As I continued to stroke and squeeze his erection, I could feel myself begin to swim in *his* power.

I sank into a part of him I'd never known existed. That I'd never dreamed to explore.

*This* was what he felt right now, and that we could each feel and confirm that the other was sharing in the experience only spurred us faster to frantic levels. I was aware of his mouth moving furiously against my clit. I was aware of my magic surrounding him.

That pleasure started to grow more distant. I was cognizant of it happening and not as I became increasingly certain that we both floated on our backs in a *different* pool.

A white one.

We sank under the surface, side by side.

I couldn't say what the place was. I could only exist in a tranquil peace at odds with the very distant fevered and frantic actions of my body and his that existed outside of this white pool. I *could* tell that this space was very, very special. Something most would never experience.

*More* couldn't be possible with this man, my mate, surely. Yet I sensed whatever happened next would gift us more than love or physical pleasure.

My back struck the bottom of the pool.

Wild moved to hover over me and stared into my eyes. He was beautiful, glowing, and parts of him were different in this pool to what I'd known outside.

Gray tinged his hair at the temples. I understood this denoted his wisdom.

Light flared from his fingers. I understood this conveyed his ability to nurture and teach.

Iron plated his chest. *My protector.*

Half of his face was deadly promise, while the other was joy. These were the sides of himself inspired by me. One that I would receive, and one that I could invoke.

Breath wasn't necessary in this place, but my chest rose at all that was revealed before me.

This was him.

This was Wild's innermost self.

His soul.

His hand drifted through the white pool to my head where I intrinsically knew two curled and black horns peeked through my white hair. *My crown.*

Wild stroked over my shoulders, and I felt the weight of an entire race upon them. *My task.*

His palm rested over my heart that had been beating for far longer than I'd been alive. *My wisdom.*

Wild peered down, and I already somehow knew that there was a reason my back had touched the bottom of the pool and not his.

I was attached to a rocky pillar that extended into infinity beyond this pool. *My strength.*

Wild's iron chest plate and the glow from his hands united and stretched out in every direction. As I watched, the elements of his soul created a shell around our space, our pool. They lined it and created a barrier.

I formed the roots of our mating.

He was the trunk and branches that would protect me at all costs.

We could not survive without the other.

My smile could've come from me or him. I'd never be sure again who might control whom, or if such control even existed for us any longer. His joy was my joy. His deadly promise was mine, and I would use it to crush whoever may threaten this pure-white space that was ours and to be revered.



We rose to the surface of the pool, and the pillar extending from my back into infinity rose with us. The floating sensation receded. Weight returned to my body.

My eyes opened, and the white pool was gone. We were by the fire in the cave, and Wild hovered over me here too.

He drew his length out of me, then pushed all the way in. His movements were impossibly slow, as were mine as I pushed to meet his thrust. Our pace had *been* slowed to give us time in that impossible white place. We'd slowed to an almost robotic speed to allow for our experience there. The fire was now flickering embers.

We'd spent *hours* in that white pool.

Wild pushed in, and I pushed up. We didn't increase our speed. We didn't need to.

Our gazes were locked. Our magic was locked. Our souls were locked.

He drew out.

While sexual pleasure was almost insignificant against what we'd just experienced, I could see that this physical union was a symbol of our whole mating.

"Mate," I whispered, my breath catching.

"Mate," he said hoarsely.

Wild sank deep into me, and as he shuddered his release, I did the same.

The shuddering echoed through all the levels of *us*. All the way to the bottom of that white pool.

All the way through the pillar and into infinity.



My mate and I sat at our usual table. What was *unusual* were the stares aimed at my forehead.

It was as if I'd drawn a big penis there.

Maybe I'd drawn the magus mating ritual equivalent.

The rune low on my stomach was a tier of flowers. The rune over the pulse on my neck was a flower with vines. The new rune that ran across my forehead was a tiara of flowers and vines.

A tiara *did* give a certain queen vibe.

“Arrogant,” Huxley stated—the first to break the stunned silence.

He was one to talk. It wasn't like I'd chosen the damn rune or appointed myself as magus queen. Huxley would've placed a crown on his head after the first step in this ritual. In fact, he probably had a crown that he used in his room.

“Feel free to take a look at Wild's new rune,” I muttered.

Wild didn't get a man tiara. No, the Mother decided to give *him* something more subtle that his tunic almost covered. His rune was much bigger than mine, a huge and intricate piece of joining symbols and swirls that spanned his chest and dipped into a point that ended beneath his ribs. The pattern glowed with a combination of the colors of our magics whenever I touched him.

“It's covered with pendants,” Sven said, not budging his gaze from my forehead.

Wild hummed. “Good point.”

He reached up and took the strands of his pendants in one handful before lifting them overhead. Wild pulled out the sentry and advisor pendants and wrapped one around each of his wrists.

My eyes widened. “Wild, what are you doing?”

“It’s more important that everyone sees who I’m tied to,” he answered. “Yours is out for all to see, and I like that.”

I had to admit that I liked seeing more of his symbol. “Maybe you could walk around without a tunic too?”

His lips curved. “If you command it.”

Tempting... except then everyone else could look at his hot bod. Maybe I’d settle for seeing half the rune while outside of our private quarters.

“What about your foundation pendants?” Corey asked him.

Wild lifted a shoulder. “Maybe I’ll summon them for use as females do with their minerals.”

Rooke leaned across the bench. “So that’s you guys done and mated.”

I smiled at Wild and took his hand. “Yes. We’re mates now.”

“Gains?” Huxley demanded. His notebook appeared, and he thumbed through the pages to the end. He could’ve just opened it from the back to save time, but whatever. Maybe he liked riffling like that. *Book dork.*

*Should we tell them about the last gift?* I thought at Wild.

He glanced at me, and I received his answer loud and clear. *We could fuck with them first.*

“You’re speaking to him,” Rooke gasped. “In your head.”

“Nothing you guys can’t do, right?” I said to the table.

The four males chuckled.

Sven said, “Not telepathy.”

“You guys can send thoughts.” They’d done it plenty of times in my company.

“We have a charm on our vision that only the four of us can see. We send projections of symbols—a rudimentary language we formed two years ago. Because only we can read the symbols that arrive, it appears that we’re using telepathy.”

*Ohh*, that made so much sense. The magic required to grant a four-way telepathy really would demand impossible levels of power. Their solution was as ingenious as I’d come to expect from these four magus.

“Your charm is based in Belladonna,” Rooke said.

Wild shot her a look. “It is. You noticed?”

“I always notice a poison, and I particularly like when the amounts around me are nearly untraceable.” She shivered. “There’s something exciting about it.”

Sven nuzzled her neck. “Yeah?”

“Mmm, yeah.”

“Concentrate,” Huxley snapped. “What have you figured out?”

Rooke cocked a brow. “The language wasn’t hard to decipher. I kept quiet because it served my purposes to spy on your group.”

The four magus exchanged looks. Just what *did* they say to each other? Clearly things they hadn’t expected Rooke to know about.

“I agree,” she said to Corey. “Those jeans do make my ass look great. Thanks for letting Sven know so he could pretend to need me for something and spend the entire time checking me out. That suited my goal.”

I grinned around the rim of my mug.

The guys were ingenious. My cousin was smarter.

“Sorry,” Corey said to her. “Positive Patrick isn’t like that.”

Huxley sent him a scathing glare. “There isn’t enough linen in the world to cover that lie. You were telling us all about the hidden attributes of your latest conquest last night.”

“Felt like I have my friend back,” Sven put in.

“A lapse,” Corey muttered, a dark red tinging his jaw.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed about walking the line between different versions of yourself,” I told him.

There had to be room for the old in the new.

I frowned at the thought. Could that be applied to the coven too? For the first time, I was able to grasp how the surrounding magus had embroiled their identity in the game. By stopping all aspects of the game I’d forced them to live in a way they weren’t prepared for, nor wanted. That wasn’t fair.

Though that train of thought led to the same place, really. The game couldn’t be resumed for other reasons.

“I’m not embarrassed, really,” Corey said to me. “The change just came with a lot to rummage through and understand. I can tell getting to know who I am is necessary, though. You know the last of my magic that you’d offered to work on? That’s naturally unwinding and finding its new place in me as I get to know myself again.”

It was. “That’s great news, Corey.”

“There are only a few remaining, so I don’t believe I’ll need your help anymore, but I’ll let you know.”

I smiled. “Of course. You know where I am if you change your mind.” I pushed away my empty mug that had contained lemongrass and vanilla tea. “And now it’s time to get shit done.” First up, I wanted to sit in on one of Sage’s sessions to get a grasp on what strategies were in the works and if the team was up to scratch. The smoke was still in the same position, and Rooke’s ravine domes were operational, but the clock was ticking, and everyone had to be working at their best.

“Could I have a word on the way?” Rooke asked.

She fell into step beside me as I tried to ignore the gaping looks at the rune tiara on my forehead on the way out.

“Private?” I glanced at her.

“Yeah.”

I put up a silence bubble around us. “What’s up?”

“Now the antidote is fine-tuned, and I have esteemed apothecaries working on a range of other weapons containing potent mixes of the antidote, I’ve been looking into the other project you set me.”

*The one about using my blood as a weapon.*

“And?”

“And nothing. I can’t detect any use for it as a weapon, with *my* magic anyway. But then it occurred to me... I have a sample from you from before she returned to you. I don’t have a current sample.”

“Of course,” I said, then held out my arm. “That makes total sense. Take one.”

Rooke summoned a vial, then set it to the prominent vein in the crook of my elbow. The vial filled with black blood.

*Shit.* My blood wasn’t red anymore.

We exchanged a quick grimace, and she banished the vial just as a group of young magus walked by, all of them gaping at my forehead.

Had they never seen a magus queen before?

After they’d moved past, Rooke said, “I can already feel something different in your blood now.”

“You think we can use it?”

“Yes. I need to see whether potency is affected over time. If we can store it easily enough, then we could make any number of weapons with it. I quite like the idea of stabbing a demon with needles filled with your blood.”

I was sure she did.

I glanced back at the magus who'd walked by. One of them was looking back, though he wouldn't hear anything through our silence charm.

"Do me a favor?" I asked her.

"Poisoning Frond?"

I considered that. "No. Not yet. Thanks, though."

"I love you."

"I love you too. Do you still have the old samples of my blood?"

She nodded. "Under lock and key."

I smirked. "Let's not do that today. Leave the old sample out for any ol' someone to find, would you?"



“Have you accepted your seat?” Ty asked as I sat on my purple beanbag across the low table from him.

“Getting there,” I replied honestly.

He dipped his head, and his deep voice was warm. “I am glad. We continue with the staves. What do you recall from our last session?”

I’d recalled very little, so I’d read a book on the subject before bed last night so as not to waste Ty’s time.

I rattled off a summary of the last staves we’d gone through, then went through the remainder of the twenty staves after, adding bits and pieces of questions and theories I’d formed along the way as to how they might interact.

Ty was smiling by the end. “You are opening to your divination magic, High Esteemed. This is nice to see.”

“Thank you, sir.” His smile had made me realize how few others were smiling in the divination center. “What’s up with everyone today?”

There was a tension I hadn’t noticed. Even the centering circle on the other side wasn’t a hum of peace and love like usual. Corey was looking my way.

*Shit.* Something was up.

*Have you heard anything amiss today?* I asked Wild.

His response was sluggish. *No, my love.*



Crap, he'd been resting. *Sorry, go back to sleep. Probably nothing.*

I cut Ty a glance. "Have you heard anything?"

"Just foolish rumors, High Esteemed," he answered after a beat, lowering his voice. "I would be sorry to repeat them."

Like many of my other friends, Ty didn't want to put more on my shoulders. I smiled at him. "I know you would be. And I thank you for that. Even still, I do need to know if something is affecting the coven."

"We know who's affecting the coven," he answered.

*Fron'd.* I waited.

Ty sighed. "There are rumors that your blood is black. That was the start. Then rumors of black smoke started to circulate. There was a fight with Corentin a while back? I'm unsure of the details, but the ceiling was smeared with soot after. Recently, someone said they saw the same black on the battle center roof and Esteemed Advisor Astar was cleaning it up. Another close to the center earlier on is telling of words shouted in another language, and of roaring. The coven assumed you spoke the demon language because of your upbringing outside the coven. Now there's a resurgence of the dark magic rumors and there are some questioning your runes again, despite what is clear to the vast majority of us."

I peered around. The vast majority in *here* appeared to be giving some room to the rumors. Divination affinities weren't my biggest fans, if I had to generalize an entire affinity. They didn't like that I was doing things our ancestors never did. They wanted to exist as we always had, and I valued that part within them that sought to uphold traditions. In part. "I do not practice dark magic."

"No, High Esteemed. Like I said, I'm sorry to repeat such foolish rumors."

Misguided rumor, but not foolish. They'd returned to the secret that could be the end of my leadership. They'd just labelled it wrong.

The label they needed was *demon magic*.

“Shall we focus on something productive?” the divination mentor asked, gesturing to the staves.

I nodded. “Let’s do that. Where do we go from here?”

“We practice interpreting a reading of the staves.”

Finally the exciting part, though... “I’m scared of what they may say.”

He didn’t laugh off my worry. “Readings should be undertaken with great respect of the knowledge they may impart. You should know that the future isn’t set, however. Some choose to look at a reading that way—as a fate that may be cheated if they should wish.”

“How easy is that?”

Ty gathered up the staves. “Not impossible.”

I took that to mean nearly impossible. “I can direct the staves, right? I could ask them what I’m having for dinner.”

“You could, though the staves are better applied to a collision of nature and person.”

*Of course.* “So asking a question about the coven would be better?”

“It is the perfect tool to ask questions of a magus, as we are a species closely linked to nature. Luthers would give strong readings with their connection to nature as well.”

I racked my brain. “Why don’t we ask the staves about my seat and whether I’ll accept it?”

“If you wish to know the answer,” he said.

I did, actually. I felt I already knew the answer. “Yes, let’s do that.”

Ty passed over the pouch containing the carved staves. I took them, and he said, “Open your affinity.”

Divination magic poured through me in a wave that I’d never experienced. The flood stole my breath, and I was left staring at Ty in the wake. “That’s new.”

“Since the mating?”

“Must be.” That was the first time the affinity had even responded with the same enthusiasm as my other affinities. “It’s happier.” I soaked in the sensation for a while longer, then straightened on the beanbag. “Okay, what’s next?”

“Focus on your intent—the question you wish to answer. Direct your intent and magic into the staves.”

*Will I accept the authority?* I directed magic into the staves, picturing each of the twenty small pieces of wood within the leather pouch. *Will I accept the authority?*

“Open the pouch,” Ty directed. “Push more magic into the staves until you recognize the moment is here to find your answer.”

I pulsed divination magic into the pouch, loosening the tie. My eyes were closed, and I poured more and more magic into the staves. When I was nearly ready to crack an eyelid and ask if I was doing this thing wrong, I felt a switch.

A vibrating hum filled my ears. My fingertips warmed. A heat built in the pouch in my hands.

The answer wanted *out*.

I held my magic and intent steady—something I knew from practice in my other infinities. Then I scattered the staves.

Ty gasped.

I pulled back my magic and opened my eyes.

The twenty staves were smoldering and smoking. A sigh escaped me. They’d also turned black and twisted. *Fuck*. “Here I was thinking that I may just need to add a cushion to it.”

Ty was horrified as he gaped at the staves.

“What does it mean?” I dared to ask. I could hardly *not*. The magus pretending not to watch before were craning to see the charred remains.

Though I already understood what happened somehow. *My fate can’t be contained in these staves*. The sudden thought

belonged to my demon. I wavered on my beanbag, shaking my head a few times. My demon uncurled from my chest to stretch throughout my body.

I gasped as my head and mind *squeezed*, and a torrent of information and images flooded in. The information was distant and inaccessible in a strange way—like an extra wing had been built in a library, but the books could only be found as the right question or situation arose. The books in that library were filled with everything known by my demon.

We'd merged further?

The question no sooner crossed my mind than the answer arrived from my new library. We'd merged after the conversation with Spyne—the conversation where I'd realized that *who* and *what* I was had nothing to do with my fears of the coven's future. The one where I'd relieved myself of the guilt plaguing me since discovering what I was.

My breaths came quick.

“High Esteemed?”

I blinked across at the divination mentor. Twenty charred staves smoked on the table before me. Ty was torn between concern, horror, and shock. Whispers filled the center.

What a time to assimilate more deeply with my demon.

I tried to get a grip. “Sir, what does it mean?”

“Darkness,” Ty whispered.

He had a deep voice that carried, and I appreciated that he'd attempted to quieten it on my behalf. The closest to us still overheard, and his earlier gasp was replicated and spread through the center.

The mentor lowered his voice further. “The staves do not accept your nature.”

“My gut tells me that the staves can't hold my fate,” I answered as calmly as possible.

I'd perhaps really, really reinforced the dark magic vibe just now. *Fuck.*

Ty was shaking his head.

“High Esteemed?” Corey interrupted. “You’re needed in the advisory chamber.”

I glanced up. I wasn’t needed anywhere. Corey was doing me a solid.

Rising, I glanced at Ty, then banished the staves. “I’ll think on your words, sir. Thank you for the lesson.”

What else was a gal to say when her insides were just put on display?

I kept my steps measured and my head held high as I left beside Corentin.

We entered the tunnel, and he portaled us to my chamber.

Wild jerked upright. “What is it?”

Corey’s hands gripped my upper arms. “Fuck.”

“Fuck,” I replied.

Wild was up, clad in sweatpants and totally disorientated. “What’s fuck?”

Corey answered, “There’s a group of young magus who are adamant they saw Rooke pull black blood out of Tempest. They’re talking about black smoke, dark magic, and then Tempest went and reduced her Ogham Staves to a black, smoking mess in the divination center just now.”

Rooke burst into the room. “We have a problem.”

She slammed the door behind her. “I just got baled up in apothecary by some proven. They wanted to know if your blood is black. I know you wanted to set a trap for Frond’s group, but I had to show them the old vial of blood to calm them down. Except one of them saw some of my notes on your blood before I banished them. They want to know why your blood is important.”

I sat on the bed. “It begins.”

A curious amusement found me. A relief.

I laughed.

Sven burst into the room. “We—” He glanced around. “You know.” He peered my way. “Is she broken?”

Corey nodded.

Rooke sat on the bed next to me. “What now?”

“It’s in the hands of the Mother,” I replied, then stood. “I have a training session to get to. Wild?”

“We need to leave,” he told me.

I shook my head. “No. We won’t abandon our home.”

“Our home is about to collapse,” he answered.

Then it would crush us alongside everyone else. I had no power in what lay ahead. I didn’t want it. I wanted those around me to choose. Perhaps that was idiotic with the demonic magic plaguing and dividing us.

But that was all I could do by refusing to run with Wild.

*We must trust in the Mother.*

*I can’t trust anyone else when it comes to you,* he told me. *It’s impossible for me.*

*What about me?* I asked him.

*Yes,* he reluctantly replied. *I trust you with us.*

*Then trust me when I say that the Mother has guided us this far, and that nothing we’ve gone through has been easy. We will overcome this.*

*And if the coven can’t overcome themselves?*

*Then we won’t have to leave,* I told him. *We’ll be marched out.*

Wild pulled me up and into his arms. “I want to be so angry at them for treating you this way. I can’t promise to act in the way you wish me to.”

“I don’t want you to act in any way other than what your instincts tell you,” I said up to him. “You think the way you do, and I think the way I do, and both are necessary.”

I peered around the others, who had been silent through our exchange. “We go about our days. Please pass the word to Huxley also, and Varden. When the moment comes, none of you are to interfere. This is between me and the coven.”

Wild may be part of me now, but ultimately it came down to leader and coven, to demon and magus.

Rooke wiped her face. “They’re acting like they don’t know you.”

I smiled, then walked to the door. “They don’t, really. I never gave them the chance.”



A few of my advisors entered with Frond and a few of his die-hard supporters in tow.

Wild stood across the training mats from me. *Calm*, I sent him as fury flashed across his face.

The advisors approached, and I whipped a hand up, feeling and seeing Wild's hand raise in unison. A gold beam sliced between us, erecting a barrier of magic. The advisors and Frond shied back.

Yeah, I knew where today was heading. And no, I wasn't above reminding the coven—including the advisors, Frond, and all the other training battle magus in here—of my power.

“How can I help?” I asked Delta, whose hand rested on the hilt of her dagger. Not in response to me. I had a feeling she was contemplating sinking the blade into Frond's thigh.

Varden replied, “High Esteemed, we are embarrassed to bring you the news that one of our own has sought to usurp your authority. Frond has invoked a trial against you and says that he has evidence of your practice of dark magic.”

I struggled not to grin. “I see. Is it to be a witch trial then?”

The advisors appeared confused.

“A human thing,” I explained.

“Over 50 percent of the coven agree with me,” Frond said, a wide smile upon his face.



Varden was white-lipped with anger but managed to say in a mild enough tone, “Fronde’s push for a trial would be disregarded if he hadn’t managed to coerce signatures from over half the coven to support such a challenge, yes.”

*Over half.*

I’d felt the coven’s suspicion against me building since the demons first attacked. I’d known and dreaded this moment for what felt like an age.

Now, I wanted it done.

“We will hold the trial with chosen representatives from the coven along with an equal number chosen by yourself,” Winona told me.

I’d do this trial on my terms. “This trial won’t occur behind closed doors.”

“It’s in your best interest,” Fronde sneered.

“Or yours, Fronde? I don’t fear the truth being known.” I walked to stand in front of him. “Do you?”

He searched my expression, and I could perceive his sudden worry that as many of his secrets would be revealed as mine in the coming hours.

“The meeting will be held in the eating chamber,” I announced. “Varden, please summon the coven to gather aside from our forces at the gates. Barrow, please contact the other covens and let them know that the late morning training here has been canceled, and training will resume this afternoon if they wish to join us then.” The other supernaturals weren’t due here until tomorrow.

“Would you like a chance to bathe?” Opal came close to whisper the words.

I glanced down at my training attire. I returned to my fighting clothes of old now there was no reason to hide my runes. I was dressed in a black training bra with matching shorts. Sweat covered me. “This is fine.”

Her expression hinted that she disagreed.

I walked forward, and Frond instinctively moved out of my way. *Ha!* Loved a petty win like that.

Wild fell into step beside me, and my advisors behind him. I cared not where Frond ended up. Varden's voice boomed through the tunnels, and soon they were filled with some confused—and some knowing—magus on their way to the eating chamber.

Once inside, I summoned my authority to the stage and climbed up to sit on it, then summoned chairs for the other advisors.

Huxley broke away from Rooke and Sven to join us. "What's up?"

"FronD is bringing me to trial," I replied, sensing that Wild was using all his focus on remaining on his chair and not wrapping his hands around FronD's neck.

Huxley nodded and sat on Varden's other side.

Winona, Opal, and Delta were pushing tables back and summoning long benches as one would expect to see in a courtroom.

"At least I'm not tied to a post in the middle of a heap of tinder," I murmured.

"Humans do this in their witch trials?" Varden asked.

"At points in their history, yes. Like any race, they fear what they do not understand. Their trials usually were a lose-lose situation for the charged, however. Death often proved their innocence."

"A hefty price to pay," Varden said.

The old esteemed was angry. Very much so.

I patted his hand. "It's okay, sir. This will work out. But thank you for being offended on my behalf."

The old magus released a weary sigh. "I hope we deserve you before this is through, High Esteemed. At the moment, we don't."

“I choose to be here,” I told him. “I choose the consequences of that. Truth is a small one to pay.”

The last coven members entered, and the remaining advisors took their seats either side of me. Winona rose and gestured for quiet, but as soon as the coven’s chatter had died down, *Fronde* was the one to speak.

“We, the coven of the Buried Knolls, accuse High Esteemed Tempest Corentine of practicing dark magic.”

Sven shouted from the back, “Speak for yourself, asshole.”

There was some laughter, but his comment was met with just as much annoyance. Varden had mentioned coercion when it came to *Fronde* collecting his signatures from the coven, but it didn’t look that way to me.

Winona hadn’t visibly reacted to his rudeness. “And have you collected evidence of reasonable doubt to invoke this trial?”

“I have.” *Fronde* glanced back and Josie, *Bedwyr*, and *Gentri*, of all people, stepped forward.

*Gentri* appeared as though he’d rather be standing naked as the groom in his union than be here right now.

*Fronde* gestured to Josie. “We have one coven member who witnessed black smoke pouring from the high esteemed in a battle against Corentin. She also witnessed the demon tongue pouring from the high esteemed’s mouth as though she were born to the language.”

I almost laughed. I was wired wrong. This wasn’t a situation to laugh at. I blamed my mother *and* my grandmother for that.

A growl vibrated out of Wild, and the coven glanced around before realizing where the sound originated from.

“We *all* witness the unusual behavior of Esteemed Advisor Astar since he entered a relationship with the high esteemed,” *Fronde* said louder.

Winona’s reply was dry. “Which we are aware is due to the first mating ritual ever seen in maguskind. I imagine Mr.

Astar's response is very much due to how you are treating his mate."

Wild was becoming a more deadly promise by the second.

Fronde recovered, then waved an arm toward Bedwyr. "We have a coven member who had an encounter with our high esteemed where she begged for sexual relief from magic invoked."

I *did* laugh then. I'd forgotten about that. Bedwyr had happened upon me while I was in the throes of a heat. Wild appeared not long after, but the situation *had* been an unusual one.

Bedwyr's face reddened, but he jutted out his chin. "I also witnessed Esteemed Advisor Astar cleaning soot from the roof of the training center again recently and heard the high esteemed speak in demon tongue."

"Gentri?" Frond prompted.

The magus had been exchanging a look with Berry, who appeared furious with him. *Yikes*. "I...", he started.

Fronde stared pointedly. "Say it."

Varden spoke, "A reminder to you, Frond, that you will not coerce any magus here to speak against their will. Gentri, do you wish to speak today?"

Sweat appeared on Gentri's forehead. He glanced between Frond and Berry. "N-No—"

"You saw black blood drawn out of the high esteemed's body by her cousin, Rooke," Frond snarled.

Gentri backed up. "Well, yes. But I also saw the red vial of blood too. And—"

"You have a duty to this coven." Frond whirled on him.

Varden surged to his feet and boomed, "You will *not* coerce our magus. Back down or see the end of this trial with immediate effect."

Gentri backed away, then squared his shoulders, avoiding Berry's accusing eyes. "I *did* see black blood drawn from the

high esteemed in the tunnel. But Rooke showed me the vial of blood later, and it was red. The light was dim. Thinking back, I can't be sure what I saw, and that should be considered when weighing my words. But with all that said, why does Rooke have the high esteemed's blood in the first place? We all know that blood is used in dark magic."

He walked past Frond and sat in the back.

Frond said in the wake, "I have witnessed the high esteemed possess impossible knowledge of demons. I have seen her use blood magic against the leader of the demon army. I saw her gain an affinity, which she says is part of the mating ritual. I don't believe we should take her word for this. She has concealed much from this coven in the last few weeks. It is only through questioning and pressure that High Esteemed Tempest has seen fit to give us *any* answers."

That struck a chord with the coven.

"I, along with over half the coven, believe there is reasonable doubt surrounding her use of dark magic," he finished.

The coven was at odds. I could appreciate that I still had some supporters in their midst. The nature of a coven didn't like division in their community, and while they'd been divided for a long time, they'd hidden that behind a game. The division was out in the open and had been for three weeks.

I could see many here just wanted to close the trial and walk out the doors.

"A vote," Winona stated. "Who in the coven believe a trial should take place?"

Magic glowed from the fingertips of magus in the chamber. Far more blue magic than red.

They wanted a trial.

"A trial will take place," Winona said. "High Esteemed, we have heard from those who accuse you. What have you to say in response?"

I stood. “I have never, and will never, practice dark magic.”

Fronde scoffed. “Are we to take your word for it?”

“The high esteemed listened to you,” Huxley snarled at him. “Perhaps you should pay her the same respect.”

Silence fell.

“Other than that, I have only one point to explain, and I choose to explain it knowing that more magus will go through a mating ritual. Most of you are unfamiliar with the mating processes of other supernaturals. It is common for the female to go through a heat at intervals in the process. This was true for the earlier stages of the ritual I have recently completed with Wild. Heats are very painful. And only one thing fixes them. Unfortunately for a very confused Bedwyr, he happened upon me when I’d just entered a heat. Wild appeared to help me with the situation, though Bedwyr never received an explanation after the fact.”

Bedwyr’s color had deepened, and Wild’s growling had escalated at my mention of the past.

I gestured to Wild, seeing that coven members were torn between listening to me and watching my mate. “In our mating, and from other matings I have seen in other supernaturals, Wild’s role is that of a protector. Every part of him is tuned to ensure I remain out of harm’s way. This is to keep both of us safe, as our lives and fates are now linked permanently. If one of us dies, as does the other.”

Gasps filled the chamber.

I’d revealed a weakness, perhaps, but it wasn’t one they couldn’t find in books on other supernatural mating rituals. “His response may come across as alarming and different to what we’ve known. I ask you to have patience as he is the first of his kind among us, and this situation is very hard for him. Frond, in line with that, I suggest you make sure to act with the respect my esteemed advisor just mentioned, and to keep your tone level and your posture unthreatening.”

“If he attacks me, then I will bring a trial against him.”

I smiled. “You have never been the first of anything, Frond. I doubt you ever will be. But I have been. Wild has too. Take it from us that some understanding is greatly appreciated during the upheaval, and as new policies or processes are put into effect to protect the growing diversity of our coven and great magus community. As said, there could well be more mated couples in the future. Room will need to be made in order to care and provide for those in that process.”

“The same rules apply to everyone,” Frond retorted. Josie nodded emphatically by his side.

“I agree that most rules should apply to everyone. Yourself included.” Time to finish this thing. “I could stand here all day and repeat that I have not and will not use dark magic, but I see that you are past the point of considering other explanations for what you have *witnessed*.”

I ran my eyes over the coven. The things I wanted were so simple. I wanted harmony. I wanted us to survive.

Those things were so far away. The coven had to be convinced absolutely of my innocence in this regard.

I smiled at Frond. “I propose a truth serum.”

That stunned the cruel fucker. “A truth serum?”

“There’s no way to trick that. You believe that I’m practicing dark magic, and you’re understandably worried about how that would affect the coven. A truth serum is an easy means to put this issue to rest.” I paused. “Unless using the coven’s uncertainty serves you in some other way? Unless you wish them to continue believing I wield dark magic?”

I let the accusation hang in the air.

“Of course it doesn’t,” Bedwyr said in outrage.

*Oh Bedwyr, you sweet summer child. Wild did this coven a solid the day he turned you to stone.* Instead of voicing all my juicy thoughts aloud, I arched a brow at Frond.

“Of course not,” he replied, crossing his arms. “I act with the best interests of this coven in my heart and mind.”

*Uh-huh.* Weirdly, he likely believed that too. “Your recent actions give me some concern. I wish I could believe you.” I tilted my chin, addressing the coven. “In the last few weeks, I have witnessed Frond gathering magus to him in a tight-knit circle. We know such circles are a favorite method for practitioners of dark magic.”

FronD spluttered.

I spoke over him. “In a time of uncertainty and imminent attack, Frond has appeared to thrive and grow in strength. To me, he appears to delight in augmenting the division in our ranks despite the obvious dangers this holds for us. We just watched him openly coercing a younger coven member. To me, these are signs that Frond could be using dark magic himself.”

My reasons were tenuous. I didn’t even believe what I was saying. But I’d seen an opportunity, a *trap*. I’d just set the bait, and now it was time to lure him in.

FronD stepped forward. “That’s preposterous.”

“I am happy and willing to take truth serum to discern whether I am or have practiced dark magic,” I said to him. “Are you willing to take truth serum also?”

His face warred. I mean, no one *wanted* to take truth serum. It was a vulnerable feeling to know that you’d be spilling your guts to the world no matter how hard you tried to keep the truth inside.

Opal spoke, “Considering the matter of this trial is clear, enough truth serum would be given to each of you for one question only.”

I tilted my head. “You seem reluctant, Frond. What should the coven make of that? Shall we put this to a vote also?”

FronD’s gaze shifted, and I could feel him tallying up whether a vote would work against him or not. The verdict would be a close one.

A sneer left him. “I will take truth serum enough to prove my innocence, though the coven is aware of my innocence already and must surely recognize this for the ploy it is.”



How delightful that he'd phrased his answer in such a way.

I smiled, and Wild's growling stopped. He'd glimpsed my plan in my mind or could at least feel my glee. "Bring forth the truth serum."



The advisors had left the stage, all barring Wild—who refused to budge from behind my chair—and Barrow, who held two droppers.

The droppers contained a minuscule amount of truth serum that glowed a pure white. Serene had measured and remeasured and then triple-checked the dosage amount.

I would answer one question.

Fronde would answer one question.

He sat on the chair next to me, and I'd been enjoying the smug smirks he was aiming at his groupies. And their return smug smirks. I'd been trying to appear worried the whole time, which may have fueled his smugness.

When Wild's parents visited during the three-hundred-year anniversary of Caves, I'd gone out strong against them, setting my feet in stone. Acting weaker may have served me better then. Acting weaker could serve me better now, so I was willing to appear cowed and afraid. This was just another type of trap.

Barrow stopped before me, an apologetic look in his eyes as he held up the dropper. "My apologies, High Esteemed."

"Go for it, Barrow." I opened my mouth, and he squeezed the end of the dropper. I felt the serum burn through me, and I grunted, tightening my grip on the armrests of my authority.

Wild grunted, too, and I could feel the extent of his iron will as he worked to stop from whisking me away to a hiding

place.

Fronde's voice permeated the burning sensation filling me. "Tempest Corentine, have you ever practiced dark magic in any capacity or intend to do so in the future?"

He'd tried to cover the past, present, and future in his question.

There was no point in resisting such potent magic. There *was* no resisting it. My heart squeezed, my chest loosened, and my lips opened. "I have never and will never practice dark magic."

I grunted again as the truth serum burned away and released me of its grip.

Loud talking filled the chamber, growing louder by the second. I was too busy composing myself to dissect the emotions of the coven. I sent a query to Wild, who sent me a visual. Some magus were nodding. Some were shocked. Most relieved. A few defiant.

As if truth serum could be outsmarted.

There was no trap against it. That was why the truth would *always* come out.

I took a steadying breath, then nodded at Barrow.

Barrow didn't bother apologizing to Fronde, and I got the feeling the magus wanted to ram the drop down the other man's throat instead.

But he dutifully squeezed the liquid into Fronde's mouth.

Fronde cried out, doubling over. *Allergic to truth?*

I finally allowed myself to smile. "Fronde, you gave me permission to use truth serum to prove your innocence. Here is my question. Have you passed a steady stream of information to the original coven in exchange for their promise that once I'm evicted from the authority, and they claim this coven for their own, you will be appointed the new high esteemed?"

There was a huge intake of air from the watching coven.

I'd tricked Fronde, yes. No one seemed to mind very much.

Fronde could no sooner resist the truth serum than I had. But boy, did he try. His jaw clenched, and his eyes bugged out. Tension ran through his body, and magic surged into his hands.

He screamed against the power of the truth serum, and then a torrent left his mouth. “Yes! They promised me the authority in exchange for coven secrets and information. I’ve given it to them since Wild came here.”

His words induced a silence far greater than any I’d managed to inspire. And that was saying something.

There was a hurt to the silence that I couldn’t have ever created because I’d only been part of this community for a few months. These magus had grown up *and* old with Fronde. They’d looked to him as a council member and an esteemed.

His group—those I could see—were slack-faced or aghast as they stared at the man on the chair beside my authority. They’d believed he had their best interests at heart when cold ambition had driven his actions for over five years.

“There’s much I could say to you now,” I said quietly, knowing everyone could hear me regardless. “But the faces of those you’ve betrayed are comment enough, and those looking at you have a far greater right to tell you how they feel than I do. If they wish to, then that’s their choice. As leader of this coven, my duty is to uphold coven law. You have broken several of them. You’ve acted selfishly and without consideration of the coven as a whole. You are found guilty of passing on coven information to outsiders. You are found guilty of treachery. You will occupy a holding cell until which time as the extent of your guilt is determined, and a choice is made regarding your future here.”

Fronde rose and whirled on me in one jerking movement.

Wild was behind him in a blur, but that didn’t stop the furious words bursting from Fronde’s mouth. “Don’t bother. I am wanted in another coven, a *true* coven ruled by *true* leaders. I wash my hands of the Buried Knolls and those within it, not least of all its high esteemed, who is nothing more than a pathetic magus who happens to possess four affinities.”

*Oh, good.* He'd decided to make things easy. "Are there any who choose to join Frond in departing?"

There was a ripple through his group. They lowered their gazes, but one stepped forward in valiant loyalty.

Josie glared daggers at me. "I will not live under your rule."

This day was working out well. I dipped my head. "So be it. The choice is yours."

Josie looked behind her. "Bed, you too."

Bedwyr's eyes widened. He whispered loudly, "What?"

"We're leaving," she said, throwing another glare my way.

"Uh," he lowered his voice. "Josie, I don't think..."

She snapped, "You cannot be fucking serious."

"I'm sure we can all work it out. Sounds like Frond wasn't in the right."

Any hope of accepting Bedwyr into her bed in the future dwindled and died with those words, judging by the chilling look in her gaze. "You spineless sack of shit."

Bedwyr grimaced as she stormed out of the chamber, but Frond stepped closer to me. Or tried to.

A snarl ripped from Wild, who clutched Frond's shoulder tight and wrapped his magic around the older magus's body.

"Time to leave," Wild purred, shoving Frond forward.

Fronde obeyed the magic moving his legs, and we all listened to his furious shouting as he was marched from the chamber with Wild in his wake.

A good thing that Wild would be occupied for a while.

A good thing Frond and Josie weren't here to overhear the next part too.

It was time.

I could take the easy road today, only to find it hard tomorrow or next week. Or next year.

The turn of events today had left the coven at a loss. Two coven members just left, one of them out of sheer hate, and one out of sheer ambition. I felt the impact of their departure, so the coven would more so.

“I’m sorry it came to that,” I told them honestly. “I’m sorry that some of you were used in the process. There will be no ramifications for those who supported Frond. I only ask you to consider *why* you did so. Was it just your belief in my use of dark magic, or are there other reasons you disagree so strongly with my rule? I am always willing to listen. A united and healthy coven is what I will always work toward.”

*It’s time*, I thought at my demon.

We didn’t work like that anymore. We didn’t converse as such. She would have felt the pulse of my determination, and in return, I felt her cool acceptance.

“With you all here,” I said, interrupting the deep frowns and contemplative quiet of my community, “and considering why we gathered today, I believe it’s time to give you an explanation for these unusual aspects of my magic that several have witnessed. I have never practiced dark magic, and I never will, but there is a side to me that is directly responsible for things like the black smoke.”

My gaze swept to the wide-eyed panic blanketing Rooke’s face, Sven’s frantic head shaking, Huxley’s nod, and Corey’s quick scan of the coven. Varden had closed his eyes.

Not everyone agreed.

I didn’t need them to. I just had to agree with myself.

“The story is a long one,” I said, sitting in the chair Frond had occupied during the truth trial. “It begins for this coven when my mother and grandmother suddenly departed this coven and the knolls.”

The mood was subdued, and emotions were low after the intensity of the trial. As much as ever, the coven would listen to all I had to say.

“I grew up outside of the coven, as you’re aware, but I never knew the reason for that. My grandmother troubled

herself to teach me and my twin sister coven etiquette. My mother never spoke of the coven, however, except to extract an oath from me and Syera when we were twelve years old. She made us swear to never come to this coven.”

Low whispers rang out.

I nodded. “I grew to believe there must be something horribly wrong or dangerous about this coven. She never told me more. Neither did my grandmother, Rowaness. Until a short while into my time here, I knew nothing of why they’d run from this place. I naturally suspected there was some issue with my father. I was never told who he was, and as the council can attest to our conversation during my initiation into this community, I held no interest in figuring out who my father was. The Mother had other plans for me, however.”

There was some exchanged looks at that. Was I about to reveal my father to them? I could tell the magus middle-aged and older were grossly intrigued by my tale. They’d grown up with my grandmother or mother and would recall the emotional impact of waking to find them departed. I only understood how much in the wake of Frond and Josie leaving today. My female ancestors had been greatly loved here too. That hurt would be remembered.

“The reason I came to this coven is that I gained a tether for no obvious reasons about a month prior to arriving here. The tether wasn’t a typical magus tether. I couldn’t locate the person on the other end. I couldn’t feel anything from them. Five years prior, I’d lost my tethers when my family was killed by a powerful supernatural—of whose race I was unaware until recently.”

There were gasps and murmurs, and it took me a moment to recall that although I hadn’t troubled to hide the truth in recent weeks, many magus here were unaware of my family’s real fate. “As you might fathom, this new tether became my hope and survival. I hadn’t felt connection to another being in so long, and the arrival of this bond—no matter that it was an odd one—was a beacon. I had to find the person on the other end.” I heaved a sigh, then smiled. “And so I arrived here

expecting to be murdered on site, having only my childhood imaginings to go off.”

There were a few chuckles at that.

“Consider my surprise when I *wasn't* killed or locked away.” I arched a brow. “Consider my surprise when I found a community and started to feel connection to those around me. *Why* did my mother and grandmother flee? Nothing added up. That mystery pressed almost as much at my mind as that of my mystery tether. And then the mating ritual with Wild began to ramp up. Tied in this ritual, I became aware of parts of my magic and past that I'd successfully locked away since the murder of my family. I became aware of a barrier in my divination affinity, the affinity I'd gained upon the loss of my grandmother, mother, and twin. I was, with the help of some here, able to piece together why a divination journey back to the night of my family's murder always resulted with me waking at the base of the north mountains.”

This all seemed so long ago. I'd figured out so much about myself and the hidden past of my mother. Perhaps I deserved credit for that. My life had been turned upside down so many times, and I still managed to land on my feet most times.

The coven didn't know where this was going. They didn't want more bad news. They wanted to know about me too. They wanted understanding.

“For everything I put together, five more questions arose,” I admitted. “More than ever I had no clue about my magic, my past, the pasts of my family, the identity of my father, the person on the other end of my tether, nor of the mating ritual happening with Wild. There seemed no way to explore what had been. Each time I went back, I was forced into a deep chaos—a chaos that grew deeper and lengthier with each journey. I was stuck until, quite by chance, I followed an echo of my mother across the knolls one day. There was something about this echo of her that seemed off. I tracked this version of her across the meadow and up into the alpine forest. I followed her to a ravine there.”

Everyone knew what ravines meant.



“I hadn’t expected the sudden appearance of my grandmother in the repeat,” I said. “A conversation between them finally revealed who my father was and why my magic was blocked. Their conversation told me why they left and—” I swallowed. “—the conversation helped me to understand why Hazeluna made me swear never to join this coven.”

I closed my eyes. “I have struggled with the weight of this knowledge since that night. I have struggled with keeping such an enormous truth from those here. I have tried to convince myself—as others have—that this truth was not one I had to share. That I could keep it as mine alone until which time as I might ever want to tell this coven. Inside I have warred between the feeling that I was betraying you through omission, the feeling that I needed time to understand my new self, and also the towering fear of what may come once this coven knew all of me. Fear of losing my grip on the happy and healthy coven I envision and hope for in our future. All of those were in my heart and mind for the last months as I played Caves to win, knowing—as my mother and grandmother had—that demons were using the game to infiltrate our midst and conquer us. Knowing—as my uncle and grandfather had—that our time was running out and the division within this coven could be what eventually killed us.”

I stood and held my hands, palms out, toward the coven. “Caves is done now, however, and I have come to see that fear should not stand in the way of this coven, nor their right to choose their leader. I relinquish the authority so that the leader *you* elect can fill it. I will not sit there again unless you decide it when in full capacity of the truth.”

Dread filled me. Hope too. As well as a curious nudge from Wild.

I sent him reassurance, then tilted my chin. “That night in the ravine, I learned my father was the previous demon king. I learned that I am half demon. I learned that my demon was blocking my divination affinity. And I learned that my presence in the knolls could be making the demon magic here stronger. This is why my mother and grandmother ran from the coven. This is why I was made to swear never to return.” As

the volume steadily increased, and magus surged to their feet, I raised my voice also. “This is why I can speak in the demon tongue. This is why my blood hurt the demon leader that night. This is why they fear me—because I am of the bloodline of their last ruler. This is why the new leader slaughtered my family five years ago, to be rid of anyone who could challenge him.”

The shouting made saying anything else pointless.

So I showed them.

I called forth my black smoke.

I called forth my black scales.



A small grate at the bottom of the cell door opened, and a cup of something chunky and sloppy was shoved through the gap. The cup toppled, and the goop spilled across the stone floor.

*Wow, they're really angry.*

The door opened, and Huxley popped his head in, grinning.

“Joking,” he said. “Did you fall for it?” He banished the cup and goop spill, then set a tray on the single bed beside me. A tray filled with nutritious and freshly cooked food.

I grabbed a soft roll. “Yes, I did.”

He picked up the second roll and took a bite.

Only one of us was locked away, but sure, *take my rations*. “How is it?”

Huxley pursed his lips. “Wild went bonkers when he arrived to find you being led away. The coven is reeling. They’re talking. They’re in turmoil. They don’t know what to do.” He glanced around. “Clearly. This place could never hold you. Why don’t you walk out?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Why? I want them to let me out.”

After finishing the bread roll, I dusted my hands off. “Is Sven pissed?”

“Yep. So is Rooke, but she’s pissed on your behalf. Sven is just pissed at you. He says you had an out. You didn’t have to tell everyone the truth, and with Frond gone, you would’ve

gotten away with it. He could have used his magic to bring back control.”

“Probably could have.”

“You don’t want control, though. You want truth.”

“I do.”

“With the turmoil, his magic isn’t having much effect,” Huxley said, pushing up his glasses. “He’s butthurt because of that. What matters is that you know why you told everyone.”

“Why was that again?” I joked.

“Because you grew tired of living a lie.”

His words were spoken from experience.

“Ah, yes. I remember.” I looked around the holding cell that was close to where Wild first tested my affinity magic. A similar room had contained Corey’s magic draining setup. The cells likely hadn’t been used to hold actual prisoners in some time. Until me.

Even then, Huxley was right. There wasn’t much holding going on by the cell. I was choosing to respect that the coven had put me here to await their verdict. I’d left Varden and the others in quite the pickle. “Is everyone else safe?” I hadn’t known if the quad and Rooke—even Varden—may end up in cells beside mine.

“Safe enough. Some are asking us questions. Some have been angry—we obviously knew most of what you knew for as long. I also think our presence is doing them good. We’re not bothered by what you are. We’ve eaten and laughed with you over the last few months.”

“And also spurned me,” I said drily.

“That was because Wild had dick issues.”

*True.*

“You’ve existed amongst them for months, and you have a track record of doing the right thing—of being brilliant and of putting your life on the line for them *against* demonkind. That’s making those who want to believe you’re a traitor or

dangerous pause for a second. Instead, they're wondering why we don't have an issue with your nature. They're wondering instead of reacting to their instinctual fear. That's something."

I set the tray on the table beside my bed. I didn't want Huxley to eat more, and he'd been looking at the chocolate-chip biscuit on there.

"Been up to much?" he asked.

I pursed my lips. "It's a busy place. I was actually thinking I could use the time to figure out all the differences concerning me and my demon and Wild. Is it weird that it took being locked in here to find the time to do that?"

"No. You've been working yourself to the bone for the last few weeks."

Is that why I felt so tired? Maybe. "How are you and Spyne?"

Huxley pulled a face. "You're worried about us when you're locked in here?"

"I seek escapism. It's been four hours." Two were occupied by Wild being here until I convinced him that he needed to be seen by the coven. That would help most of all.

Huxley reached over and tried to snag my cookie. I slapped the back of his hand.

"Don't touch my prison food."

He glared at me, rubbing his hand. "Asshole. Me and Spyne are... I don't know. What you did sat right with him. It doesn't sit right with me that you doing that sat right with him."

I squinted as I tried to follow. "You're annoyed because he wanted me to tell the truth, even though that ended up with me here?"

"Why couldn't he see it was your choice? Why didn't he trust that I wouldn't put him in danger?" Huxley wrinkled his nose. "Seems over. He wants to leave, and part of me wants him to go, too, now. Perhaps he's right, and we're not meant for each other right now."

For maybe the first time ever, I saw the full picture of their relationship. I wondered if Spyne was aware of how *little* he'd given of himself in their relationship. Not that Huxley's issues were Spyne's fault, but they'd become the focus of what they shared, when it was clear Spyne had his own too. As both sides in a relationship always did. Spyne wanted to leave, for instance, and he had displayed a few times that his urge to control others' choices sometimes got the better of him.

"Maybe the best thing to do would be to part ways and learn and grow in whatever ways you're meant to," I said softly. "Perhaps there's something more for you guys down the track."

Huxley swallowed. "I love him, Tempest. The last few weeks have been messy, but they've been a dream. I don't want to let go, and I know it's right at the same time."

I took his hand and squeezed. "I can't believe you're making this all about you when I'm the one in a dungeon."

The grimoire laughed, and when he'd wiped away a few tears from under the rim of his glasses, he squeezed my hand in return. "If you needed help to bust out, then I'd offer."

"Tell Sven none of this is his fault. Tell Corey to stop wearing linen."

"He's back in jeans."

My jaw dropped. "No way! Why didn't you lead with that?"

"Sorry, that was huge news, you're right."

Only the hugest news ever. "Tell Rooke she's the best. And try to keep Wild out of here long enough for him to get some sleep and maybe a bath."

"I wonder if he'll growl in his sleep," Huxley mused.

He would.

Huxley left the dungeon, and I grabbed my cookie, devouring it in three bites and in a way that said my emotions may be part of the eating process. I was glad Huxley hadn't seen it.

“It’s just you and me,” I said aloud.

Though there was really just *us* now. I could feel the progressive loss of separation between my reactions and knowledge and hers. Surprisingly, her thoughts and emotions only *tinged* my own. I would’ve expected us to meet in the middle. For instance, I’d expected to stop saying sorry to people for hurting them. Stuff like that.

Which wasn’t the case.

I’d still say sorry for a range of things, in contrast to demon culture, but I could feel that I’d lean more heavily toward apologizing for my weakness than anything else.

A purr built in my chest. For the first time, the purr was audible out loud instead of in my head. It was a softer, more feminine version of the purr Wild sometimes made.

We were proud of ourselves for confessing all to the coven.

I hadn’t bothered to hide the black scale on my head, though after swirling furiously around me for a time, the black smoke had receded to wherever it came from. My fingers trailed over the black scales on my forehead. They joined with the rune tiara of flowers, making up the centers of the flowers, and then trailed down half of my forehead like a string of crystals. The black scales edged my hands and neck, but they were sparse—something I knew signified weakness to demons. Cutting off the head was made easier by the lack of protection.

I tilted my hand in and out of the light. The black was glossy and rich. I liked the sight of the scales, and leaving them out felt... kind of great. I could tell accepting their presence had led to other things like the purr or the near-full merging of me and my demon.

The feeling of possessing another wing in my brain had remained.

I didn’t just *know* all that she knew in the same way I knew everything about coven life. Then again, my grandmother taught that to me. I could feel the full access to everything my

demon had been born knowing or had learned during her time in the demon realm. That knowledge would come to me as prompted by my thoughts or my situation, which was an odd feeling.

For better or worse, my demon was out for all to see.

I could live with whatever came next. I hoped.

*Are you all right?* Wild growled in my mind.

*Still all right.* He'd managed to go thirty minutes without asking this time. *Have you eaten?*

*Trying not to hurt everyone.*

I grimaced. *I'm sorry. I should have warned you of what I was doing.*

*Yes, you should have. But I understand why you didn't. You needed their full attention.*

I smiled. *You're just so distracting.*

*You want to be distracted, gorgeous?*

*Hmm, maybe there were other ways to pass the time. What are you wearing?*

His laughter rippled down our bond. He sent me a picture of him in our bathroom. The room was all but destroyed. He'd gone on a rampage.

*Better wash all that dust off, handsome,* I suggested.

Wild stripped off his clothes slowly, pulling his tunic overhead before giving me an excellent view of his ass and then a sudden close-up of his erection.

I blinked. *Whoa, I think I just got the magus version of a dick pic.*

*What's a dick pic?*

*Nothing good, usually, but this is an exception.* I sprawled flat on the bed and closed my eyes. *What comes next?*

Wild was running the faucet into the mostly intact bath. *How about I wash off that dust you mentioned in slow motion?*



That could work for me. *I could stand that.*

Or maybe not.

Dungeon life really wasn't half bad.



At some point during the morning, I'd summoned Ryzika's relics to stop from going insane. The coven was in a gathering, and Wild was there. I'd been attempting to interpret his emotions for the last hour.

I had to just leave the coven to it, come what may.

This really was some solid *get-to-know-yourself* time, though.

For instance, how many times had I the opportunity to explore these relics? About zero.

"You were part of her," I murmured. The last twenty minutes had convinced me of that. Upon her death or prior to it, Ryzika had poured her affinities into the four items. I could feel her presence in the robe, dagger, pendant, and gem. How had she rooted her affinities to remain in the items and outside of her body?

No clue.

But Ryzika had sounded like one badass bitch, so I was just fine with my clueless status. Especially because I'd gleaned that the function of each relic wasn't important. There wasn't something to unlock within them so they'd work for me. The relics would operate fully for me because I wore them. They'd operate in a unique way in response to my magic. If another person wore them in two hundred years, then the items would work differently for them again.

"That's why I've never felt much inkling to explore you guys," I said. Like with my grimoire magic, I'd sensed the

magic was healthy and willing, and that time and natural exploration would nurture them. Unlike my divination magic prior to recently. But that affinity was more difficult to access from the get-go, being the hiding place for a slice of my demon—and being embroiled in my bloody past.

Now, my divination channel felt raw, like freshly healed skin. My gut said that I had to treat it kindly, but that my affinity was on the way to becoming a real part of me. “Good ol’ Ogham Staves.”

Really, they weren’t to thank. The drive to open myself to the staves had proved more important. Then the mating ritual, too, in that joining with Wild had stabilized my magic further. Most of all, my demon’s return had pushed out the block in the channel. She’d no longer had to lock herself away in a tiny part of me and had instead fully occupied my being again.

I’d felt half crazy for so fucking long. What I’d been through was another reminder that I should always trust in my path. Worrying often didn’t change a thing.

*Fuck, the other supernaturals are here,* Wild interrupted my thoughts.

I lifted my head. *Shit. How did they find out?*

*They didn’t. We just forgot they were coming to train today.*

*Dammit, dammit, dammit.*

This could mean the end of the alliance. *This* was part of what I truly feared—the consequences of what I was. King Julius had made his sentiments on demons plain. Kyros and Basilia weren’t in charge of the Vissimo clan.

If I were them, my first thought would be whether I was a two-timing traitor that set all this shit up and if all the information I’d fed them was a lie to strengthen the demon king. *Can you speak to them alone?*

*Unlikely alone. I’m on thin ice with the coven too. I’ll do my best to smooth things over, but everyone here is heightened from the heated discussion prior to them arriving. If I can get the supernaturals to listen, then I’ll do my best to bring them*

*to you to answer any questions. I'm just not sure the coven will agree to that in this state.*

I glared at the stone walls around me. Yes, I could leave them. No, that wasn't without its own consequence. My continued presence here was symbolic of me giving the coven freedom to choose. I couldn't leave, even when all seemed at risk of falling apart. *They* had to place me on the authority.

*Good luck*, I sent to Wild.

He didn't answer, already focusing hard on the anarchy in the caves.

I paced the holding cell for a time, then sighed at the three relics laid out on the bed. The robe was on my back already.

"No point pacing up the room," I announced to no one. "Let's see what you puppies can do."

The relics dutifully awaited my magic.

I leaned down and picked up the dagger, sliding it free of the sheath gifted to me by Rooke. Opening my magic, I directed power down my battle affinity and into the dagger.

Black smoke exploded in my mind's eye—and in the holding cell. "Whoa," I whispered.

The black smoke churned as if trying to tell me something, but whatever it was, I wasn't cool enough to figure it out yet.

I kept the flow of magic going into the dagger at a steady rate, then poured power down my grimoire affinity into the warm robe covering my body.

A grunt was forced from me, and my knees buckled, hitting the ground in the next instant as an impossible lattice webbed through my head. A ninja spy seeking to steal the crown jewels would find the lattice impossible to navigate, and the red webbing was as impossible to decipher as the black battle smoke.

The smoke picked at the lattice, however, much as a lute player may pluck at the strings of their instrument. I watched the red lattice ripple for a time. It didn't otherwise react.

Nope. I had nothing.

*The coven has elected representatives to sit down with the supernaturals,* Wild said.

I barely heard him but managed to hum in reply.

*They only let me join them because the rulers demanded it. They seem willing to listen, but they're wary of the mood in the caves.*

He broke off communication again, and I honestly couldn't care less about the entire state of the coven right now.

My magic was in control and driving me somewhere.

The heavy pendant around my neck was next. I directed apothecary magic into it, and sucked in a harsh breath as a soothing white wave ricocheted out of me and into the void that was filled with the black smoke and red lattice. The wave was a calming force. The heat flushing my cheeks was kissed away, and the aches in me eased.

My mind cleared, and I saw that the black smoke no longer plucked at the red lattice. The white apothecary magic was soothing both of the other affinities and binding them together.

I blinked at the occurrence within me. *What the hell?*

Once my magic channeled through the pendant had done its work, all was still in my mind. The red grimoire lattice was wrapped in battle smoke, and that was all bound in apothecary.

As always, I seemed to turn to divination last.

The difference now was that one day this would change. I knew it.

I poured power down the divination affinity and into the gem in my other hand. The gem warmed.

Otherwise, the entire world and everyone in it, including me, froze solid.

My mind was seized in a vise as an explosion took place in there that I couldn't hope to track. The rapid roll and unfurling there belonged to forces beyond me. To these relics. To what Ryzika had been.

To the Mother.

I could only remain frozen. Even as I felt Wild freeze and *his* thoughts lock down as my own had done. We were being gripped and held far more securely than this prison cell had ever done. There was no hope of escape for us from this.

The only way this could end was by the mercy of the magic within me.



I opened my eyes and turned my head.

Wild was on the bed next to me. We were in our temporary room. I'd been moved by Sven and Rooke while Corey and Huxley had moved Wild in here from the eating chamber where he'd collapsed in near-tandem with myself three days ago.

How did I know this?

Not the stiffness in my body, nor the hunger gnawing at the walls of my stomach.

Wild opened his eyes, and we shared an acknowledgment and an awe.

“Whoa,” he whispered.

*Whoa indeed.*

Threads filled the room. They weren't entirely foreign to me. I'd glimpsed them a few times, first of all while training in the battle center.

Their appearance had altered. Four very distinct energies now formed the threads—the red grimoire lattice, the black battle smoke, the white apothecary casing around the first two, and then a thick gray line that sat at the very center of the red lattice.

*Divination.*

I'd wondered at the threads, not recognizing them for what they were because they'd never led anywhere, nor tied anyone

together.

Not like they did now.

The red lattice was knowledge, and not just my own. It was impossible knowledge from this coven and those I had connection to outside of the coven. I knew some of what they knew—enough for my grimoire affinity to unite with the robe cladding my back to make leaps and put patterns together.

*Knowledge.*

The black battle smoke provided the drive and fight to form pathways through the red lattice. The battle smoke presented the need for me to understand the map before me in a way that would allow me to defend and attack in the name of protecting those in this coven.

*Fight.*

The role of the white apothecary glow around the red and black had been obvious from the start. There was a need for my magic to work as one and not as four different entities funneled through four different relics. This was the role of the white.

*Harmony*

And lastly, divination.

The gray lines snaked in every which direction, but unlike when I'd first noticed the threads, each line had a destination. They poured from Wild for instance, and if I chose, then I could follow one to Sven, one to Corey, and one to almost every member in this coven. I could trace one to his parents and see all they'd shared. I could see Wild's past and the paths available to him and where they may lead. Seeing all that would take time, and too far ahead, I had a feeling the pathways would grow murkier or fainter.

My divination magic gave form to the threads.

*Direction.*

A tear trickled from my eye to soak into the blankets. "It's my quipu."



“Yes, my love. Your magic never left.”

The physical form of my quipu was set alight. There had always been the potential to make a new quipu about some other difficulty that popped up in life down the track, but I’d never foreseen what the threads meant.

Perhaps my magic never would have given me this gift if not for how it interacted with Ryzika’s relics.

I pressed a shaking hand against my mouth. It wasn’t all gratefulness. I could see so much. It was overwhelming to an enormous degree.

Wild’s arms wrapped around me. “Pull it all in, my queen.”

No easy feat.

His magic wrapped around mine, protecting it. Wild helped to pull in my four affinities to our center. I listened to his steady breaths and focused on his warmth as my vision returned to show me the room itself without the lattice of threads present. The quipu was fainter but still here.

From now on, I’d walk through a three-dimensional version of the knots and braids that used to hang on my wall.

“This will be disorientating,” I whispered.

“This is... Tempest. Do you know what this means?” he hushed.

He spoke the words, and as soon as my mind turned to the answer of his question, a pathway flared before me. I blinked and peered down the snaking thread into the distance as far as I could bear to see.

The pathway was massive and not just one thread but hundreds.

“Yes,” I stated.

Wild exhaled. “You may be able to see a way to beat the demons.”

I sat in bed. “We need to play Caves.”

“Uh... what?”

I got out of bed, pulling my robe around me. Maybe a bath was in order before I did anything else. A thread spiking out of my left upper arm rippled. I walked to the door and yanked it open. Sven was on the other side, his hand raised to knock.

“You’re awake,” he said.

I arched a brow. “Do you usually knock when you expect people *not* to be awake?”

He scrubbed at his face. “We tried to keep everything together while you were gone.”

I studied the threads pouring out of him. “I know.”

“The red smoke is spilling out of the ravines. We’ve pulled the sentries back. It’s moving slow, but definitely moving.”

“Yes,” I answered.

“The coven is scared,” Sven said next.

“I’m aware.”

He stopped and peered closer at me. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I have a quipu in my mind.”

“Oh, right.” He nodded a few times, then shook his head. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means I can see a lot of stuff, including that when Rooke gets pregnant, your parents will stop all their bullshit. *All* of it. They’ll be fantastic grandparents, and you’ll have the family you’ve always wanted.”

His jaw dropped.

Wild warmed my back. “I looked the same about ten seconds ago. What do you mean, we need to play Caves?”

Sven’s jaw dropped further.

I nodded. “We need to play Caves.”

Looked like there wouldn’t be a bath in my immediate future. “Come on, the coven is about to gather.”

“But—” Sven said.

I walked off down the tunnel, and the two men followed in my wake.

“What the fuck is so funny?” Sven snapped at Wild. “She’s lost her mind.”

“Gained it,” Wild said in reverent tones. “Isn’t she incredible?”

“Fucking crazy” was the reply. “We can’t play Caves right now.”

“Your mind is so small,” I responded. “Tiny.”

“It had to be to make up for my size elsewhere.” Sven laughed nervously. “But seriously, she’s not going to march in there and demand the game resumes, is she? You two have been out of it for two days. The supernaturals haven’t been in touch. The other covens don’t appear to know about her demon side yet, but they will soon enough. The advisors have received a list of transfer applications the length of my... well, it’s *big*, I’ll say that much.”

I kept walking, and as the rumble of shouts and crashing from the coven increased, and I made to enter the eating chamber, Sven bodily stepped in front of me.

“I can’t let you do this,” he said, half begging. “You need to lead this coven, and this isn’t the way. They need...”

I waited. “Time?”

“We don’t have any of that.”

“No,” I agreed, then studied his pathways. “We have seventy-two hours, in fact. You have done so much more than most here to keep this coven together. Thank you, Sven. It’s been hard on you, and it’s harder still to think that you may need to relinquish control when your life and Rooke’s are on the line along with everyone you know and love. But it’s time to let go.”

He closed his eyes. “You said that Rooke and I would have a child.”

“If we take the pathway I see, then that is a possibility. It is not in all other possibilities, except for the one where you and she run tonight and leave the coven to their fate. If you do that, then you will definitely have a child. Multiple. Though your parents won’t be involved in that future.”

Sven opened his gaze and looked down into mine. “If we leave, then she’ll be safe. If we don’t, she may not be safe.”

“You can exist in safety alone and out in the human world. Or you can risk death in the coven to fight for a life here with those who love you.” There was no judgment in my words. Those were just his options.

Sven took a breath. “Fuck. What a choice.”

I nodded. “It is. Get out of my way, large man.”

He paused, then dipped his head. “You got it, small woman.”

I entered the chamber, reaching back to take Wild’s hand in mine. We walked through the ranks of the quietening magus. They’d been shouting at each other not to shout so they could shout at the row of very stressed advisors lined up on the stage in front of the authority. Or something to that effect. No wonder the red smoke had spilled out of the ravines.

*Slow.*

Sven had mentioned the smoke moved slowly. That wasn’t usual for him, the demon wing in my mind informed me. Something was amiss in his realm, or he wasn’t at full strength. What, I couldn’t say, and yet I sensed that my demon *did* know. She simply believed the knowledge either wasn’t useful or that she wasn’t ready to share at this time. It wasn’t the first time I’d felt that from her, but now we’d merged, it was far more obvious that she was concealing something.

Part of possessing this quipu was also respecting that there should be limits to what I peered at. Like Sven, I’d figure that out in time, but I wouldn’t disrespect my demon’s wishes by prying. She had our best interests at heart.

“They’re awake,” someone said.

There was relief in her voice. For the most part, I wasn't sure what to make of the opinions and emotions in the room, only that everyone was feeling *very* strongly, whatever emotion they'd settled on.

The coven did part ways for me to access the stage, and when I climbed the few stairs there, the advisors stepped back to allow me space.

I ran my gaze over them, seeing any number of thoughts on their faces. These people had been closest to me in the last few weeks, and yet that could have left them feeling angriest at my revelation of four days prior. Varden looked terrible. This was his worst fear come true. Winona was set on a solution to the red smoke. Delta had taken my betrayal hard, as had Ruby, but she could admit that I'd always had an edge, and this explained why. My edge should be utilized.

Opal hadn't liked much of what I'd done. My unusual approach to the supernatural alliance made sense to her now. She'd never seen harm in me, and she felt for my grandmother, though she couldn't fathom what my mother had seen in a demon. She expected my mother was taken forcefully by him.

Huxley was 100 percent on board.

Barrow... he felt embarrassed most of all. He liked to think his position made him privy to inside information. He'd been put on the spot and made to look foolish.

I regarded them all. "I'm sorry for the turmoil you feel, and for the turmoil you've had to deal with since."

Meanwhile, I'd passed out again. How many times was this now? I really had slept—or undergone a series of transformations—for most of my leadership.

Facing the coven, I reeled back as hundreds of thousands of threads surged forward to greet me.

My knees hit the stage, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

Wild was crouched next to me, and I clung to him as we went through a more intense version of the centering process of this new quipu magic. I was panting by the end of it, and as

I recovered, I became painfully aware of the white glow of Wild's magic surrounding us.

Wild looked up at the coven. "There's been a development in Tempest's magic. A good one, but one that will take time for her to grow used to."

I rested a hand on his thigh. "Help me up."

"Can you stay standing?"

Considering the only place to sit was the authority that I couldn't sit on unless invited to do so... yes, I could stand. "They're manageable for the time being."

I could see the faces of the coven through the lattice.

"Wild's right," I told them. "The Mother, Ryzika, and my ancestors have gifted me something that may see us survive the battle in three days."

*Three days.* I saw the two words passed around.

"How do I know?" I voiced their obvious question. "Because it turns out that I am able to see my quipu in a way that's entirely new to me." I tapped my temple. "The pathways and patterns that were evident to me on the quipu that Frond ordered four of the magus in this room to burn." I paused. "And yes, I know who each of you is."

The four magus had been part of Frond's group. Two intended to leave the coven and had filled in a transfer application. The other two were horrified at how they'd been taken in by Frond.

"That quipu is now available to me in a way that can't be burned," I told the coven. "The scale of the quipu is unlike anything I'd ever created physically. With it, as with how I used the quipu in Caves, I am able to see the best path to our success."

My words weren't registering with everyone. Some couldn't tear their focus off my black scales and the wisps of black smoke escaping me now and then. They couldn't see past these demon attributes for now. Maybe they never would.

“I have not come to claim the authority,” I said. “My words to you four days ago hold true on that front. I come to freely offer this pathway to my coven so that we may live. Because I am part of this coven in my heart. I would be bereft without you. I would be bereft to lose the place I know as home. I will do everything in my power to protect it whether on the authority or not... if you chose to let me do so.”

The coven members looked at each other.

Winona spoke, “Many of you are angry. You have the right to feel that way. I urge you to not react in anger now by shunning this offer. We have trained to fight the demons. As of yet, other covens have not rescinded their support. We have formed weapons to defend ourselves too. We are not powerless now, just as we were never powerless in Caves.” She glanced at me. “And yet with this power, Tempest was able to end a three-hundred-year-old game in less than three months. You can feel anger while also making a choice that aids the survival of our family.”

Would I trust someone who’d concealed such a truth from me? Would I follow their magic blindly in this moment?

Only if I were desperate enough, and only then because I’d seen it work.

There were a few nods.

Delta called, “A show of those who would like to accept Tempest’s offer, please.”

Fingertips glowed blue and red throughout the eating chamber. Those of the advisors behind me shined blue. Wild’s did too.

The wave of blue appeared in large patches throughout the coven. Together, those patches formed over half. Two-thirds even.

Two-thirds of the magus here were desperate enough to accept my offer. The rest thought trusting me was the epitome of stupid.

Varden limped forward. “The majority have voted to accept Tempest’s offer. Regarding the choice of leadership in

this coven, I suggest we put that aside for now. That is not the real threat, and if we focus on that, then three days shall see us wiped away.” His sweeping scan of the coven was severe. “Might I remind those who voted against accepting Tempest’s guidance that they are part of a coven and therefore *will* abide by the decision of the coven. We will have no more individuals acting as Frond did. Not only will this not be tolerated, that person will be treated as the danger they are. We, all of us, are weary after the last few days of upheaval. Find peace or silence however you can while we fight for our lives.”

He dipped his head. “For what it’s worth, Tempest, I am very glad you’ve chosen to keep fighting for us. Tell us, how do we defeat the demon king?”

*How* was a big fucking question that would take time for me to filter through and explore. I may not even have time to fully understand every segment of what could happen before the demon king’s smoke encompassed us.

I did know the setting and how it would begin.

The threads had been flashing the answer like a damn neon sign since I woke.

A touch of amusement found me. Because the answer *had* stared me in the face for weeks. Hadn’t I resolved to always listen? Hadn’t I worried at the issue of how to resume Caves without strengthening division and the food source for the demons’ power?

I’d always looked at Caves as magus versus magus.

I’d never turned the puzzle around in my hands and seen the other face of it.

That Caves could be magus versus demon.

That we’d been in the perfect training for *three hundred years* already. That no one knew our home like us, and that no one had more incentive to protect it or the knowledge and real-life practice in doing so.

The solution was beautifully simple. And not a single person in this room, including me, would have ever seen it coming.



The demons had to be drawn down into the last place we instinctively wanted them. We had to invite the monster through the door.

I smiled at the waiting coven. “We play Caves.”



Ploys were first, of course.

Nothing like a good ploy to lure a demon king in the door. Unlike Fertim or Vero, the demon king wouldn't be alert to such things in the same way the magus in the coven had come to expect ploys in the day prior to game day *and* the game day itself.

Wild entered the advisory chamber. "The sense-blocking barriers are down."

"Good," I murmured, my gaze inward on the threads.

The first ploy offered by the combined Vero and Fertim members of the previous ploy teams had been to mimic the decay of our defenses against the demons. We wanted to lure the supernaturals in. We needed them on our turf and in our trap. They couldn't know that was the case.

They had to believe we were weakened and ripe for defeat.

"The apothecaries are working their magic on the sentries to ulcerate their skin now the demons will be able to hear and see us."

Also good. Our sentries would appear to crumble under the effects of the demon king's magic until we were *forced* to leave the outside defenseless and open to their occupation.

The two ploys were one of any number the coven ploy team had come up with. I didn't need to see a list of the ploys they developed. As they settled on a new one, the threads in my mind changed.

I'd largely been rendered incapacitated by the constant change across the strategy, defense, attack, and ploys teams. All I could do was sit in one spot and study the flow of alterations to our future to catch any that didn't help our cause, to leave the ones that didn't hinder us, and to pick up on any ideas that would strengthen our success.

The advisors were now acting as my personal assistants.

"Tell Sage to nix the collapsing cave idea," I murmured.

A crackle of magic, and then Barrow was repeating the message through the head portal he'd opened. They'd done it so many times, I didn't need to look anymore.

Sage replied, "Thank you."

The portal closed.

"The portal in your old quarters is being decayed at a slower rate," Wild said. "The sense barriers are all still operational."

And they had to remain so until we were as ready as possible.

The size of the task was impossible to prepare for, really. If we'd had months, then I could have assured success. The two days remaining to us could be counted in hours, however, and that lack of time had the power to collapse our stack of cards.

I tracked the bouncing, weaving, jerking threads as I sensed a sudden shift.

"What is it?" Wild asked.

The threads were withering. Some of them. My brow cleared. "The coven is honing ideas now and focusing on those that will help us."

It was a good sign, and I rolled my head and shoulders to ease the aching there.

"You need rest," Wild said, kneading my neck and shoulders.

I did. "I will, but first I need to speak with the supernaturals."

Without them, we wouldn't win, and they hadn't been in contact since Wild's collapse and witnessing the state of the coven.

"If you'd like to use this as a chance to rest and eat, then please do so," I told the advisors. "Otherwise, you're welcome to remain."

This coven wasn't under my rule.

Winona and Varden left, while the others remained.

I stood and walked around the table a few times to loosen my legs and body. Wild sent me soothing magic that washed over my frame and cleared the cobwebs from my mind if not the other threads.

Sending through a burst of magic, I dialed two supernaturals.

Two rings. "Hello? Tempest?" Andie answered. "Are you okay?"

*Seven rings* and Basilia's voice filled my head. "Love that song. What's up demon-witch?"

I shook my head, unable to stop the smile curving my lips. They'd answered, and that meant a lot. "I'm fine, Andie, thank you. Hi, Princess Basilia." I blew out a breath. "I'd like to speak face-to-face to you both, to Kyros and Sascha and King Julius too. May I open a portal? I am happy to meet in one of your territories if you'd prefer?"

"How about ours?" Andie said. "The pack is out for a run. Will King Julius mind?"

Basilia shouted, "Hey, Julius! You okay to meet Tempest in the Luther packlands?" There was a pause. "Kyros, it's fine. How else was I meant to ask?"

I wondered if Andie's brows were raised too.

"You live, demon-magus." The cold voice echoed down the line. The voice was arctic-frost cold, not just spine-chilling, so I could conclude that King Julius was on the other end, not his son.

“For now,” I replied. “I’d like the opportunity to explain what I am and what it means.”

“It means that, as with Vissimo and Luthers, you have been granted the ability to mate through the union of our race with a slice of demonkind. While our races completed this process millennia ago, you are the first we have witnessed in recent ages.”

I stared at the stone wall before me. *Well, shit.* “That is what we’ve put together. You... that’s a thing across the supernatural board then?”

“Demons had to be useful for something,” he answered in a bored tone. “Rootstock sums up the extent of that use.”

I mean, being in possession of a demon of my own, I knew there was more to them in general than rootstock. Otherwise, the king’s thoughts replicated my own. “I expected more anger from you.”

“I am angrier that you wish me to travel to a place that reeks of dog. Yet I am curious, and that is a rarity for me now. I will meet you in this place through a portal of your making. Do it now, Magus Queen. Our time runs out.”

It did. Was he aware just how much?

I opened a portal for him that would lead to the pack lands in Deception Valley. I opened another for me. Wild came to stand beside me. “Anyone else?” I asked the remaining advisors.

Delta and Ruby both stood, while Barrow and Opal shook their heads.

The ones who least trusted me were coming along to make sure I didn’t do anything to harm the coven. I was glad for their witness. I felt awkward dealing with the other rulers when I wasn’t one myself now. If the rulers would speak with anyone else, I would’ve been happy to stay in the background and focus on my thread children.

I stepped through into the green oasis dotted with simple cabins and huts and surrounded by thick, lush trees.

I inhaled deeply, hearing Wild, Delta, and Ruby do the same. This territory was far closer to what I envisioned as a comfortable home than the king's mansion.

Sascha and Andie were greeting King Julius, Prince Kyros, and Princess Basilia. Andie stepped forward to hug me after.

"Your question the other day makes more sense now," she said quietly. "Sounds like you were struggling with a secret identity of your own."

My chest squeezed. "I feel better now the truth is out."

She nodded. "How have they taken it? Are you leading them?"

The Vissimo turned to listen. Delta and Ruby did too.

"I will only accept the authority, the seat of leadership, if they invite me to it. For now, I have offered my magic freely as we figure out the best strategy against the demon king."

Wild spoke from beside me, "You should all be aware that the demon king's red smoke is slowly working toward our cave systems. Tempest's demon and the archives of Clan Sundulus have confirmed this happens prior to attack."

"He will attack tomorrow night," I informed them.

Basilia's brows shot up. "Convenient for him to give you a time and date."

Sascha grinned.

King Julius's eyes narrowed on me. "What has happened to you? There is something in the air." He traced a thread from me to himself, then blinked. "I can almost feel something. It is there and not."

*Shit*, he could feel the threads? Exactly what powers did this Vissimo have? He was sensing my magic. "That's the reason Wild passed out and we were out for the three days following. There's been a development in my magic that will give us the best chance against the demon king." I was getting ahead of myself. "That is unless you've changed your mind about the alliance between us."

The king strode toward the largest building in the area, a wide and open hut that appeared to be a gathering area of sorts. “If you are alive, Magus Queen, then you are the ruler of your kind, whether invited to the position or not. The alliance remains. And now you must tell us all so we may prepare for the battle ahead.”

Delta and Ruby exchanged a glance but didn’t refute his words.

I moved to follow him behind the others, and my mind drifted to the threads surrounding us.

Wild caught me under the arm as I stumbled, my sights set on the mammoth links connecting me and Wild with Sascha and Andie, and then with Kyros and Basilia too. We were chained together, bonded in a way that didn’t register on a magus-bond level. With my extra sight, I could see the connection so clearly. My mouth dried as I looked beyond the happily chatting group to the king who stood in the mouth of the hut ahead. His cool eyes burned into me, and he dipped his head that nearly brushed the top of the hut.

That’s what he’d seen that day we were all together. The six of us shared a fate. That was as close to an explanation as I could come up with on the spot.

But while the six of us were linked, King Julius didn’t share our fate. Neither did Delta and Ruby. The threads of the two female magus floated happily off in the direction of our coven, a couple of threads tying them to Wild and me. The king’s threads curled tightly around him, however, and I had no clue what to make of that.

King Julius’s lips curved, and he dipped his head a second time before walking inside the hut and out of sight.

I may have been gifted this mental version of a quipu, but it occurred to me that the Vissimo king was ancient and that life or experience or perhaps the higher forces we’d once spoken of might have given him a version of sight too.

One he’d peered through when considering the six of us.

One he’d had far longer to practice using.



Varden addressed the coven from a table of other advisors and older esteemed. He'd wanted me to do it, but I was steadfast in my refusal to take more of a leadership role than needed until the coven chose one way or another.

“Tomorrow, we wage war with demons,” he said. “Tonight, we share the company of those we love and speak any words we need to before the battle begins. Tonight, we are a coven.”

He made to sit, but Ty leaned to whisper in his ear. Which meant only the nearest ring of tables heard what he said.

Varden gestured to the divination mentor.

Ty bowed his head to the coven. “Some time ago, the high esteemed asked me to journey back and find an echo of this coven’s past. Of a peaceful time. She asked me to find an example of what this coven used to be before demons started to work their magic on us.”

I’d forgotten.

“The task was a confusing one for me, and because I didn’t understand the difference she implied between this coven and that which our ancestors lived in, I didn’t immediately undertake the task. But the upset in the coven of late drove me to venture into the past, from curiosity more than anything. Perhaps I just wanted to understand how a magus not raised in this coven perceived the way we lived and what change was needed. So I started to look.” His rich brown gaze swept across those closest. “I’d expected to struggle in the task. To



my surprise and... disappointment almost... the task was no struggle at all. As I walked the coven tunnels twenty years ago, then fifty, then one hundred and more, I came to understand exactly what Tempest had meant. The impossible task then became selecting *one* of the thousands of examples of coven unity from what was occurring before me. As I walked, however, I realized that the passage of time had been important in helping me to understand our current division, and so”—he waved a hand to the stone wall behind him—“I have strung together a series of coven echoes from across the ages. This isn’t designed to make anyone despair. It’s designed to motivate you to carve a better future once the war is won. We must do whatever it takes to return to what we once were, and if we’ve seen what that looks like, then the task becomes possible, if not easier.”

His meaning was clear to me, and his alteration to what we’d discussed weeks ago made perfect sense. I could tell the surrounding magus were taken aback or plain confused at what might be the ramblings of a divination affinity.

Ty’s voice took on a hypnotic edge. “We’ll begin ten years ago in a mission announcement.”

A scene flickered onto the stone wall, projected from Ty’s mind. He was walking there right now and playing what he saw to us in real time. An incredible feat of magic in the focus it would require.

Unfortunately for me, what the other magus were thinking and feeling was having a large effect on the thousands of threads in the room. The tendrils snapped and joined and snaked and glowed, obstructing my view of the projection almost entirely.

I was frozen in place as Ty moved to an echo of twenty years ago, then fifty and one hundred. The threads only glowed more furiously, and Wild leaned in to wrap my center in his iron-plated protection as Ty shifted the echo to one hundred and fifty years, then two hundred.

My breaths were coming fast. The threads were debilitating—just when I’d started to feeling cocky about

shoving them aside.

I spread a hand on the table to steady myself as we got to three hundred years. “What’s going on?”

“They understand,” Wild said low. “They don’t know what to feel about it.”

The constant shifting of the threads may make me physically sick at this rate. I pressed a hand against my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut. Which... what was that going to do when the threads danced their merry dance inside my head?

“He’s stopped,” Wild said in my ear.

I couldn’t even manage a nod. How the hell would I fight tomorrow if this happened? I could be a liability, not to mention an easy target.

The fevered response in the eating chamber was dissipating. The magus still churned over what to feel if the whipping and ducking of the paths attached to them was any guide. But they were settling into the discomfort now instead of feeling more and more.

I took a deep inhale. “Shit. That was intense.”

I felt lightheaded.

“That packed a punch,” Sven said, scanning the room. “A big hit. Interesting to see what might happen after the fight.”

*After the fight.* So much confidence that we may win. Or was it desperate hope? Sven and Rooke were still here. They’d chosen not to run. I’d assumed they wouldn’t, but when faced with possible survival or assured survival, not everyone would have made the same choice.

“After the fight seems like a long way away,” Huxley said.

In the grimoire, I sensed a deep determination. He’d proved himself time and again as an advisor in my book, but I could understand that he’d drawn parallels between tomorrow’s battle and the first one where he was taken hostage. He would fight tooth and nail.

Corey was wearing jeans. Stains were harder to get out of linen. So I could assume he was down to get rough and dirty.

Rooke would probably enjoy tomorrow because she'd be able to poison demons without ramification. A Corentine was a Corentine after all.

Wild... I was his only worry, and from that alone, his mind spun at a thousand miles an hour, just like mine spun at the same speed while picking apart details and running through our game plan over and over.

"Supernaturals arrive tomorrow?" he murmured as the other tables of magus began to discuss what Ty just showed them.

I nodded. "After lunch."

A strange feeling to be so certain about when demons were going to attack. I wanted to doubt what the threads told me, because despite knowing we had until this time tomorrow, I would've rested easier for *not* knowing what was ahead. When a person saw what little time they had left, there suddenly seemed a million things to do.

"Tempest," Sage said. "I just wanted to let you know that the last of the strategies have been finalized, and we'll hold a practice session for the magus involved tomorrow morning. They'll be ready to go during the battle."

I smiled. "Thank you, Sage. Please let Delta know. She's the person in charge of that area."

I was no longer leader, but it was an odd situation for the coven. They didn't know who to consult with any longer. Many were coming to me to let me know this and that tasks were completed.

Sage colored at my reply. "Of course. I'll tell Delta."

"The strategies are looking great, Sage." The lead strategist had struggled with her role since the beginning, though the position was so similar to that she'd held during Caves. She'd floundered through the last few weeks, and yet when our direction was Caves again, she'd miraculously regained her edge. She was the prime representative for those

magus who had turned against my leadership simply because it was different to what they'd known.

Varden's voice boomed through the eating chamber. "Your attention."

Everyone quietened, including Sven and Corey, who'd been bickering over battle tactics.

"There are those of us more advanced in age that will start to find our beds soon." He smiled. "And so I wanted to speak a few words on behalf of us all on this eve of uncertainty and fear and hope. It has been my honor to be part of this coven and community. I have cherished many friendships in these tunnels. I have found love in these tunnels. I have been nurtured and treasured and protected by this coven. Nothing is impossible to reclaim, and I have always held to that. I *will* hold to that until my last breath. Tonight, we promise each other never to reach this place again. I don't speak of demons. I speak of the state with one another. Tomorrow, we may fight another race, but we fight for *ourselves*." His voice cut off on the last word. Everyone could hear the tears clouding his throat, and Varden's last words were a whisper. "We fight for this coven. I fight to the end for you all."

He'd earned more than a few tears from those listening. For myself, I watched the old esteemed carefully. It wasn't like Varden to grow so upset in front of everyone. He prided himself on using logic and appearing calm as an example for the younger magus.

"What are you up to, old man?" I hummed to myself.

Wild shot me a look. "You think something is up?"

I focused on the threads around Varden. All the threads wrapped tight around him. No idea what that meant. "Yes, he's making plans. I'm unsure what." The threads around him appeared remarkably like those around King Julius yesterday.

"Incoming," Wild told me.

I glanced back as Winona, Barrow, and Opal approached.

"Before you turn in, Tempest," Winona said. "We wondered if you would send out a message to the other

covens.”

“What kind of message?” I asked. “The type of message a high esteemed would send?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “Many of the other covens won’t have heard from the original coven yet. If they have, a message delivered by yourself could confuse them enough to doubt what they’ve been told.”

“The message?” I asked.

“A call for aid,” she said as though discussing the weather. “There are those who could respond with support on a whim. We believe it’s worth exhausting all avenues. Two more magus on our side could save a life.”

I blinked as threads severed and reattached. “It is worth it,” I admitted. “I don’t see the issue with Barrow or Opal doing it, seeing as they negotiated with the other covens the entire time.”

“Then don’t do it as the high esteemed,” Barrow said. “Do it as the first mated woman of our kind.”

That was even worse.

“Do it as the wearer of Ryzika’s relics,” he tried next.

I snorted. “There’s a reason you were appointed as negotiator, Barrow.”

“I know.” The guy was smug.

“Fine. What do you want me to say?”

Winona passed over a scroll. “Just cast your magic over all the symbols in the advisory chamber to contact all the covens at once.”

I nodded and rose. Wild had entered the debate on battle tactics with his friends. This kind of discussion was how I’d first known the quad—as four sharp-minded men with unbreakable bonds. It was right that he spend time with them now. Tonight was a night to say the words we needed to say. This debate was the quad’s way of saying *I love you* and *goodbye, brother*.

“Can I come?” Rooke said to me.

I held out a hand to her. “Please do.”

Winona touched her fingertips to my elbow as I made to pass. “Tempest, I wanted you to know that it’s been my honor to know you and to wonder at all you are and will be. For what it’s worth, you are my high esteemed.”

I was left blinking back the sudden urge to cry. “The honor has been mine. Do you want to know something?” I leaned closer. “You were my pick for the job.”

Winona may not have four affinities or a mate or dancing threads in her mind, but in essence, I believed her to possess far more of the necessary leader qualities than I did. If the worst happened to me tomorrow, then I hoped against hope that the coven would recognize the value in the woman before me.

The older woman regarded me. “Thank you. But I would never accept the position. I decided against it long ago.”

“Why?”

“Because when I became a council member many years ago, I learned how much harder it was to achieve anything of value from a position of power. I got far more done as a simple coven member, when accountability and transparency and fulfilling expectations weren’t factors delaying me at every turn.”

There were more chains in leadership positions. There were good reasons for those chains being there too. “Why didn’t you bow out of the council job then?”

Her eyes twinkled. “I liked the bigger room.”

I snorted in response, then Rooke and I moved on alone down the empty halls. Some doors were open, revealing small groups inside who were hugging or crying or just spending what could be their last moments in each other’s company.

I couldn’t wait to cut the demon king’s head off tomorrow.

“What are you thinking about?” Rooke asked.

“Cutting off the demon king’s head. You?”

“Anticipating the mass effects of poison on demons.”

Yep, we were Corentines.

Rooke slid me a look. “You seem set on decapitation, but what about plunging poisonous needles into the demon king’s back?”

“I mean, if that was an option...”

“I’ll get you the prototypes. They’re filled with your stuff.”

*Your stuff.* My brow cleared. Oh, my blood. “It stores well, then?”

“Sure does. He won’t know what hit him. He’ll be in agony.”

My lips curved. “Do you ever wonder if we’re related?”

She grinned. “I’ve gotten worse since you came here. I used to keep my bloodthirsty side tucked away.”

“That’s when twistedness becomes creepy. You should thank me.”

We entered the advisory chamber.

“I don’t know. Sometimes people don’t know what to make of me these days.”

“Want to hear a secret?”

“Well, seeing as I don’t want to possibly die tomorrow wondering what the secret is, yes.”

I flashed her a smile, then said, “People always think I’m joking when I say twisted stuff I fully wish or intend to do. I could talk about the delight of sinking a blade under someone’s ribs, and those around me would laugh. It’s a defensive thing, I’ve decided. But the ones who don’t laugh? They’re twisted fuckers too. Those are the ones to trust.”

Rooke didn’t laugh, proving my point. “Good to know.”

I faced the wall and waved a hand to reveal the coven symbols there. “How did I get landed with this job?”

“Because everyone’s trying but failing to pretend like they haven’t already made the choice to plant your ass on the authority again. Even if they’re determined to bring the matter to vote, they’re *still* treating you as our leader. Because that’s what you are and will always be because you’re just you. I shudder to think of you returning to a mere coven member.”

I glanced at her. “I make a great normal person.”

We laughed.

And as the utter lie of my words sank in for real, we laughed harder.

Normal, I was not.

Neither was my cousin, though. She’d just perfected my mother’s art of flying under the radar. How different life could be if Grandmother hadn’t shoved her loud genetics my way.

“Okay, settle the fuck down,” I told her. “I probably shouldn’t laugh while I do this.”

*Mother be*, that just made me want to laugh more.

I could die tomorrow.

Rooke could die.

We might never have another ridiculous and delirious conversation like this.

I laughed again. There was something wrong with me.

“Okay, message time.” I scanned the contents of the letter from Winona. It was a well-thought-out plea to the other covens to aid us. It outlined what maguskind might lose—the first mated couple—and highlighted the number of children in our midst.

“They’re being evacuated to High Esteemed Nightlock’s coven,” I murmured. “They want me to send a message about losing *me*.” *Gross*.

Rooke backed up. “You’re going off-script.”

“Yes, I am.”



I washed my magic over the symbols on the wall until they were all aglow. I took a breath. “This is Tempest Bronte Corentine, daughter of Hazeluna Corentine, and granddaughter of Rowaness Corentine. The Buried Knolls will be attacked by the demon king and his army tomorrow night at sundown. This is an urgent call to all of the Mother’s children to join us in the fight for our coven and lives. We accept any help with open arms. And for those who chose not to come to our aid.” I frowned at the wall. “We wish you and your covens happiness and health in the centuries ahead.”

I severed the connection, not waiting for replies, then joined Rooke at the table.

“I think you meant that.” She was squinting at me.

“I think I did,” I told her. “Not the original coven, but the others... I know what I’d do in their shoes, but they’re not me.”

“See what I mean about being a leader, even when you’re not a leader?”

I grimaced. “That’s the last leadery job I’m doing unless the coven decides I’m the woman for the job.”

“Part of you hopes they don’t?” Rooke asked.

I pursed my lips. When the relics first chose me, I would’ve taken nearly any excuse not to accept the role of high esteemed. Now... “I am the best person to sit on the authority, but if they can’t see my value, then what I offer is without value. That’s my seat, and it must be given to me all the same.”

Rooke dipped her head.

“What I *hope* for,” I continued, “is a perfect drink to share with my cousin before I go make the most of the rest of the evening with my mate.”

My cousin waved a hand, and a gunpowder gimlet appeared before me. A dark beer appeared before her. I’d never seen her drink the stuff. As good a time as any to try something new, I supposed.

I lifted my glass to her bottle. “I am so very fucking glad I met you, cousin.”

She clinked her glass against mine. “The fucking gladness is all mine.”



For all my determination *not* to lead, I was the one silently moving through the caves checking on the positions of magus, Vissimo, and Luthers. I couldn't not. What if something had been missed? This was a matter of life and death for so many. What happened here tonight would set the tone for years or decades, even *centuries* to come.

The four learning centers had been reserved for Luthers and accompanying magus teams. Luthers needed space to shift and fight.

Magus were dotted in teams through the nooks and crannies of our cave systems. Some would embed in the stone to ambush victims. All had been allocated weapons and charms for the battle.

The five hundred and seventy Vissimo would largely await their victims throughout the rooms and tunnels, speed and stealth being their huge advantage. Teams of magus were periodically stationed down the tunnels to ensure all supernaturals had some level of magical backup and protection.

Magus from foreign covens were in their positions in four-affinity teams.

I entered the eating chamber, not sure that checking everything over had reassured me one bit.

“Are they here yet?” Basilia moaned.

The same restlessness plagued me. I wanted it over or started already. Then I could stop expecting it to happen. “I

feel you. We've got ten minutes."

She flopped into a chair, blowing out a breath. "A lot can be done in ten minutes. I could probably paint the nails of everyone in this room in ten minutes." She glanced around, then settled her gaze upon Andie, who was standing quietly in Sascha's arms. "What happens to your nail polish when you shift?"

"I keep my nails short to play music, so I don't often paint them."

Basilica rolled her eyes. "Such an Andie response. What would theoretically happen?"

Andie raised her brows and called over her shoulder. "Delta, what happens to your nail polish when you shift?"

Each supernatural had their most trusted in the chamber with them.

A female Luther broke off her conversation with Hairy. "It's there when I shift back."

Basilica hummed. "What about if you painted your Luther claws? Would that be there when you shifted to your wolf form again?"

Delta lifted a shoulder. "No idea on that."

Basilica fixed her eyes on the Luther queen.

Andie shook her head. "I can see what you're going to ask, and the answer is no—you can't paint my claws."

I pursed my lips. "I'd be interested in that too."

Andie glanced between me and Basilica. "Really? Demons are nearly upon us, and this is what you want to talk about?"

Basilica clasped her hands together. "If we make it through this alive, we'll paint your Luther claws."

I grinned. "Just because you make a begging gesture with your hands, doesn't mean your words can still be a demand. You need both to pull off a good beg."

“Billionaires aren’t good at begging,” she answered. “It’s a flaw.”

Andie groaned, then glared at me. “I would’ve expected this from Basilia, not you.”

“That’s a yes,” Basilia said in satisfaction.

“*Not* a yes,” Andie countered.

I wanted to paint the claws of a wolf. Was that not something most people would want to do? “We should always try to further the knowledge of our races.”

“Uh-huh,” she replied. “The possible permanence of nail polish application between shifts is right up there.”

I winked at her, then couldn’t help laughing at Basilia’s wide smirk.

The princess knew exactly what she was doing. If we won this battle, Andie’s wolf was getting a mani-pedi.

“High Esteemed Tempest.”

I turned and blinked at the woman there. *Well, this is a surprise.* “High Esteemed Rjuc. We weren’t expecting you.”

She squared her shoulders and seemed determined not to look at the supernaturals either side of me. “I had a change of heart. I recognized an area for growth within myself and saw that only my narrow-mindedness was stopping me from doing what I knew to be right in my heart. I’m here now, with twenty of my magus. We’re ready to fight.”

Only one other high esteemed was here—High Esteemed Mydnigh. That Rjuc came personally was pretty massive, and even more massive was that she appeared to have challenged her anti-other-supernatural thoughts. “We’re happy to have you.”

I studied the threads around her. “You will be best placed with Sven and Rooke in the west tunnels. Please arrange your magus into groups of all four affinities. Stand to the back when the fighting breaks out and watch how our magus engage first. The magic is not complicated, just methodical, and the fighting strategy should be clear.” I summoned a

glowing ball. “Please follow this to Sven, and I’ll send him a message to expect you. We’re expecting the attack in a few minutes.”

Rjuc tilted her head. “How do you know when the demons will attack?”

I arched a brow. “If we’re both still here after, then I look forward to telling you. Over a very strong drink.”

Her lips curved. “The only kind I drink. Keep safe, High Esteemed. You are our future.”

*The breeding mare.* Huxley once wrote as much in one of his fucking notebooks, and the words were proving sadly true of how foreign covens—and maybe my own—viewed me. I was the ovaries, the eggs, and the tubes. My grandmother would’ve cackled herself to death at what my life had come to.

“Already you inspire change.” A chilling voice rose.

I glanced back to find the Vissimo king himself had joined us. I’d met all of Kyros’s siblings over the last week, but the king had never joined our training sessions. The threads around him were still curled tight around his enormous Egyptian god frame, and even if I hadn’t had access to the quipu, my instincts would have told me this supernatural needed no designation. He’d fight how and where he liked and would be better for it. He’d even fight in his sarong.

“King Julius,” I said, dipping my head. “Will Queen Titania join us?”

“Before a warrior, my queen is a mother. She is needed in this respect, and so remains in my territory.”

Kyros glanced at Basilia, who scoffed, “I’m not staying at home, Kyros. Just try it.”

Clearly, he had.

I couldn’t imagine Sascha would have thought to leave Andie behind, but there were definite differences in the relationships between the supernaturals.

King Julius walked to Basilia and took her hand, bowing to place a kiss on the back. “For now, you are a warrior, daughter.

One day, I see you will make a ferocious mother, too.”

Basilia stared at the king, and whatever they exchanged was wordless before she stood and stepped forward to hug him.

Julius surprised me by enveloping her in his arms like some sort of natural hugger. The king untangled himself after a long beat, then approached his son. “No mercy for the enemy. No hesitation in war. Cool logic in all else.”

“Aside from matters of the heart and blood,” Kyros said, watching his father with a curious expression. They must be words he’d heard a few times. “Father...”

A ghost of a smile appeared on the king’s face. “Son...” He tilted Kyros’s chin and looked him in the eyes.

Wild walked into the chamber. “They’re here. Those on the surface have engaged the first ploy.”

My stomach churned. The magus we’d charmed to grotesque ulceration would be stumbling back to the caves, apparently forced by the demon’s magic. “Those at the entrance are primed?”

“Charms at the ready.”

We had to make our defenses appear believable. If we were under attack and had been forced back to the caves, we’d spare no expense in attempting to keep the demons at the entrance.

The sentry pendant around my neck warmed.

Corentin’s voice pulsed from it. “The last magus is inside. Charms going up.”

We’d made sure every area had a few sentries with pendants in it, so we’d all know what was happening.

I walked forward as eyes in the chamber landed on me.

They wanted words of reassurance or hope, and apparently I’d been voted in to speak them.

I opened my four affinities and heard the gasps of Luthers and Vissimo as my relics joined me. The thick cloak covered

the black tights and crop top I'd donned for the occasion. I wore a charmed and invisible chest plate over it at Wild's request. He'd fashioned it himself. Ryzika's pendant weighed around my neck, and I tightened my hand around the gem and dagger.

Slipping the gem into a pocket in the cloak, I summoned my father's demon blade. One magus weapon, and one demon. The symmetry and symbolism felt right. "Tonight we fight for our lives," I told those in the room, pushing battle into my voice so the entire coven and those in the caves would hear. "We fight for a future free of slavery and fear. We fight side by side with our new friends to protect our children and way of life." I slid a look to King Julius. "There is no mercy for our enemy today. There is no place for hesitation in war."

He dipped his head, ever the regal ancient.

I turned from him. "Protect each other. Fight for each other. If the Mother is willing, I will see you when the dust settles. Be safe, my coven, my friends."

I bowed to those watching me and felt the bows and deep nods in return.

Wild moved to stand beside me. "It won't take them long to get through the barriers."

As if summoned, Corentin's voice chimed through the pendant again. "Nearly through, we're retreating to our positions now."

I glanced up at Wild, and he leaned down to press his lips to mine.

"I love you," he said.

"And I love you," I replied, setting my hand gently on his chest.

He searched my face. "Where are you?"

I smiled, then released my demon side, feeling black smoke rise the instant after. I didn't need to reach up to check that my black scales were present. I could see some on the hand I rested on Wild's chest.



“There you are.” Wild’s lip curled.

“Something funny?”

“Just that the demons will shit themselves when they see you.”

Huxley’s voice chimed through the advisor pendant, “Passing through the main tunnels.”

We needed them inside, and that meant our magus through the entrance tunnels were in hiding until the signal went out. I gripped the pendant and answered, “What’s their progress like?”

“Cautious.”

They sensed a trap. Not enough to stay out. Perhaps they were falling for yet another ploy—that we’d try to get as far from them as possible and out into the largest fighting space.

Most of the magus here had grown up fighting in nooks and crannies.

Sage’s voice came through next, “First fork. They’re splitting.”

*Good.*

“East tunnels.” *Delta.*

“East fork, splitting,” Winona reported.

A second later... “West fork, splitting.” *Barrow.*

I walked in a slow circle, meeting the gazes of our fighting force of around eighty in the chamber. It was signal enough. We all turned outward to face the four entrances into the chamber.

Wild faced south with me. The tunnels from the south were shortest. Theoretically, the demons would come from here first.

All we had to do was hold out for long enough. The eighty supernatural here were chosen for a reason.

We just had to hold out.

I heard a ripped snarl and a clicking of scaled feet on stone from the tunnels outside. In almost comical fashion, a yellow-scaled demon poked his head around the corner. When he saw us, his blazing yellow eyes widened, and he quickly drew back.

Wild chuckled darkly, and then there was the strangest breath as though the entire cave was sucking in air.

Screeches and snarls erupted from the entrance, and then demons poured in from the south.

My feet were moving and walking me forward.

As I took in that the demon horde was a mix of yellow and oranges and greens, *they* seemed to see me.

The yellow demon who'd first peeked in the chamber slowed to a stop. "*Oyx Wehy.*"

*Black scales.*

"Oxy Wehy." His blurted words were passed back.

My lips curved. "Oyx Wehy." *I am more powerful than you.*

And there was something my grandmother told me never to do unless I wanted to make a particularly gory statement. Seemed like the right time.

I portaled inside the demon with yellow scales.

His body couldn't contain my magic, nor me. No sooner had the feeling of air been cut off, than cracks formed in the demon from the inside out, and his body exploded outward. The chunks scattered in all directions, and his blood was too weak to harm me as it dripped from my hair and cloak.

Some of the demons screamed. This time at *me*. Under their screams was the deep boom of King Julius's delighted mirth.

I walked forward and reveled in the fear in the demons' eyes.

Then I pushed battle into my voice for all supernaturals in the caves to hear. "Begin."

If I'd clicked a gigantic red button to launch missiles, the effect would have been the same. There was an explosion of sound and movement and magic that shook the very cave system.

Luthers launched forth either side of me. Vissimo were hot on their heels. Magic pulsed either side of the entrances from my magus.

The chamber was too large to allow the demons to sprawl out. We didn't want to keep them out of the eating chamber, but they did need to be controlled. The magus would use four-affinity barriers to extend the tunnels and limit the space in here. Until later.

I drew back to the center where Wild calmly—to outward appearances—waited for me with the other supernatural leaders.

Demons were engaged at all four entrances.

Wild's gaze briefly flicked to me.

"Always wanted to do that," I replied to his silent question.

Basilia came to stand beside me. "It set the tone."

Andie stood on the other side of Wild. "Nicely done. One of the chunks hit another demon in the face."

The first demon broke through the masses.

Kyros blurred forward, and then the demon's head was parted from its body.

King Julius laughed again. The guy would've gotten on a treat with my grandmother.

A crack of bones rent the air, and then Andie and Sascha's wolf forms were launching in the opposite direction at another demon. The orange scales guarding the female's neck were no defense against Andie's sharp claws.

The sentry pendant warmed. Barrow spoke, "Back up to west tunnels. They're pushing out."

We wanted to push them *here*. Like fire, we planned to snuff the demons out by pushing them into this central space

while surrounding them on all sides. Their smoke would have nowhere to go. Their fire would die.

A green demon raced toward me, and Wild and I parted, striding so ten feet separated us.

The green demon hurtled toward Basilia, and at the last second, Wild lifted his hand and I lifted mine. Our magic connected. When the demon hit our barrier, we lifted our other hands, so the growling supernatural was caught between two barriers.

Wild's dark eyes glittered as he clapped his hands together in unison with me. Our barriers snapped together, and the demon was shredded in the process.

“Gross,” Basilia said. “But cool. And I want the next one.”

She raced forward, and I only had a chance to watch Kyros steal her kill and to note that the demon numbers were steadily increasing before blue magic sliced before my face. Wild snarled and launched at my attacker, and then I was running forward to meet another green demon.

I sliced my father's dagger across the demon's torso, then plunged Ryzika's dagger into his neck. There wasn't much resistance. I poured in my battle magic, then tore outward to sever the supernatural's head.

A whoosh of air.

I crouched as a blade sang where my head had been. Whirling, I sliced across the red demon's thighs.

“*Ruhng Sritch!*”

*Unnatural bitch.* I laughed and then grunted as she managed to drive the hilt of her blade into my shoulder on the draw back.

A thread lashed out from her—an intention—and I blinked at the red thread before my magic instinctively rose to redirect it.

The drive of her blade veered wildly off course, and her confusion was evident.

I tilted my head and curled the thread back through her body.

The female demon screamed as she drove her own blade through her torso.

*Shit.* How the hell did I manage that?

I formed all four affinities of my magic into a disc and severed her head. It took the better part of a minute. Red scales were the toughest, though, like sawing through scarred sinew reinforced with fucking diamond.

My hand lifted of its own accord, and I peered back as my magic connected with Wild's. *Ooh.* We had a good batch this time. Five demons hit the barrier, and Wild and I looped the second barrier around their backs.

I felt the magical draw this time as we snapped the barrier together and shredded the demons caught between them.

I wiped sweat from my brow and took stock. There seemed an endless number of them. They were like *rats* pouring out of flooding sewers.

"Past first fork," puffed Sage through the sentry pendant.

The demons were being forced toward us.

"Kyros, let me have one!" Basilia stomped her foot as Kyros tore the head off another yellow demon.

King Julius, who hadn't budged, laughed yet again.

"They're working on the barriers," Wild said rapidly. His face was streaked in blood. A demon blade had sliced across his cheek, but the wound wasn't deep.

I scanned the caves and saw the barriers to the north that were working to narrow the fighting space were being attacked by a group of red-scaled demons who'd cottoned onto our ploy.

Wild took my hand, and we erected a barrier around ourselves first before directing the flow of our magic to the weakening barrier at the north entrance. There was something extra in the magic of the magus who shared a bond. Rooke had

already formed the theory during the first battle with the demons, and the sentries had tested it out when the barriers opened.

Barriers formed by bonded magus decayed at a much slower rate. And Wild and I were about as bonded as magus could get.

We wove all four affinities to reinforce the magic there, and then I felt a dark stirring in my blood that reminded me of the magic my demon used weeks ago to cover the demon gate in my quarters. This time I could understand what was happening. Black smoke was congealing and drifting to add yet a *fifth* dimension—or sixth if a bond could be considered one by itself—to our work. The black smoke had to evaporate from my body to stop my blood from boiling me alive, but I could send blood out with it.

The fifth layer of the barrier contained specks of it.

I grunted as a blow landed on the charm immediately protecting us. The hit disrupted my focus on the barrier. No matter, the job was already done.

Demons of every color were pouring into the room. Wild and I were jostled back by Andie and Sascha in their wolf forms, who'd opted to protect us while we worked. We dropped the barrier, and I glanced around. All sides were being pressed back to the center.

“What’s the status of the others?” Kyros asked coolly. The guy wasn’t puffed in the slightest. Though... did Vissimo need air?

Wild answered, “They’re in the main tunnels. There’s most progress in the east, but the demons are surrounded currently and being pressed inward as planned.”

I licked my lips and made way for Andie to launch forward and drag a blue-scaled demon to the ground. She yelped as the supernatural kicked out savagely, but Sascha was on the male in the next second. Basilia dragged Andie back to the center.

The ground shook.

I didn't mean a little shake—because that was already happening with upward of one thousand fighting supernaturals in here. The stone shook hard enough to collapse the place, and would have if the caves weren't magically reinforced. The caves trembled, and the tremble extended to my very heart.

Because a roar had caused all that.

A being with incredible power.

The demon king was here. And his roar alone had chilled my blood as effectively as the smoke evaporating from my body.

“He stands on the knolls waiting,” King Julius declared from behind. “We shall meet him there.”

I had no resistance against the eruption of threads as those attached to most of the rulers tore from the chamber to jet out and up. If we didn't go up there, then the demon king would come in here, or call his subjects back up to the knolls.

King Julius had put together the particular challenge in the roar quicker than me. The demon king was giving us a choice. Come out, or I'll bring you out anyway.

Considering drawing his army out was the better strategic choice, I was surprised we got a say in the matter.

“We're needed on top,” I told the other rulers.

Kyros was fighting but zipped back at my words to join Basilia. Andie already appeared to be mostly healed. Sascha helped her over.

I opened a portal and stepped through onto the knolls high above, Wild and the others close behind. King Julius stepped through last.

And most of us got our first look at the demon king then.

I'd seen him in a memory not long ago. This was the first time seeing him in the flesh. The enormous man had long black hair that was braided tightly against his head in a way I'd associate with Vikings. Ink symbols covered most of his torso that was bare. He wore only loose trousers that were tight at the hips and ankles.

The demon king was a fighter—a tower of trained muscle. He had the confidence of knowing the exact limitations of his ability. I knew it because I'd had that once. Before discovering my demon and then gaining the quipu in my mind's eye. Regaining that confidence would take me years, and I envied the loss of it now, even though my strength had greatly increased since.

This man killed my grandmother. My mother. My twin.

Black smoke poured from me as pure violence singed through my veins. Not a trace of smoke escaped him, however, and not a single red scale was present either. He looked almost entirely like any of us, and I understood this was a show of power. The demon king was telling us that we weren't worth the defense his scales provided.

“You have grown since I slaughtered your ancestors,” the demon king spoke.

That he'd spoken our tongue and not his took a beat to register.

I replied, “You're about to find out how much.”

“Tell me,” King Julius said silkily, almost appearing to glide forward. “What kind of coward sneaks into a queendom to conquer it?”

The demon king had been assessing the seven of us, but the others must have seen how he tensioned toward Kyros's father.

He tilted his head to look at King Julius. “A smart one. Only pride would see me do it any other way.”

“Dignity and pride mean little to a demon,” Julius answered.

“They mean little to a demon who will win.”

The Vissimo king had circled in front of our line and stood directly before the demon king now. “Yet by losing them, you have acknowledged you are willing to lose something, and so you show weakness. You could have refused to lose in any capacity and win all. You did not.”



Something flickered in the demon king's gaze, and I saw a fiery red glow deep within him for the first time. "Do you seek to fight with words, great king?"

"Nothing so foolish."

The Vissimo was there one second and gone the next. A seismic boom tore at the knolls as the two kings collided. Andie gasped, and Kyros and Basilia both stepped forward, their eyes not leaving the fight before them.

The Vissimo king was fast. Fast beyond reason. My eyes and quipu sight could barely track him. But the demon king didn't need to match him for speed.

He possessed magic.

Scales of the richest red appeared on the towering male's neck in a solid band, and red smoke poured from his body and outward.

Wild cast his power forth to light the knolls, and the light poured through the red smoke, allowing those of us without Vissimo vision to glimpse the clashing shadows within.

Julius's roar spliced through the air, and the demon king's followed.

"We should do something," Sascha said. "But how... fuck, I'd get in the way."

We'd all come to the same conclusion.

"Tempest?" Wild asked.

I took a breath. "I'm worried to look. If I peer at the quipu, I don't know if it will lock me in."

"Do you have a choice?" he asked.

My body was shaking, and I had an inkling Wild had already put together what I'd just realized. "Maybe not."

I groaned as threads erupted in every which direction, including under and above my feet. I gripped the sides of my head, and Wild caught me as I was driven to my knees by the force of inside attack.

Our forces below were keeping the demons contained. Those at the center had now portaled to join those pressing inward as planned. I winced as a magus tether withered to dust. A Luther tether recoiled and dropped to the stone.

It didn't matter which side won down there.

What mattered was who won out here.

If the demon king slaughtered us now, then there was little hope for the future of my coven.

And I saw the future roll out before me like a carpet of liquid black.

The demon king would rule all three supernatural territories if we lost this day. Magus would only be the start.

Because the most powerful beings in the territories were right here, and even as that was our strength, it was our weakness because we could have just provided our heads on a silver platter for this powerful supernatural.

My mind tightened and pulsed at the pace of change in the threads whipping and curling and withering. I panted, trying to regain clarity.

Wild was pulling in my magic in an attempt to help. "Focus on one part," he whispered urgently in my ear.

I shook my head. Not in refusal, but in a bid to do as he'd suggested. I needed to see if we could help King Julius. That was why I'd opened myself fully to the quipu.

Hands clawing in the dirt and grass, I pulled in the lens of my mind's eye inch by inch. Doing so didn't block out everything else, but the threads within my lens brightened.

"That's it," Wild said low. "Keep drawing it in."

I was either projecting the vision before me, or he could feel my magic tightening.

Sweat poured from me by the time I managed to narrow the quipu to the battle before me.

I looked ahead at the two kings. The demon king's torso was a mess of gouges that I could blame Julius's claws for, but

Julius wasn't free of injury. Blood poured freely from a shoulder wound, and others I couldn't see—not even in my mind's eye.

He'd slowed.

The demon king's magic was curbed too.

"I can't see that we're meant to be helping," I said, but part of that was because Julius's threads weren't playing the game and were stubbornly curled in on each other still.

"You know there is only one way to kill me," Julius said suddenly.

Kyros grunted, and Basilia gripped his arm tight.

"*Tey dslyk ths.*" The demon king spat out a reply in his tongue, too far in the instinct of battle to be thinking in ours.

"You'd like that," I said for the benefit of everyone else.

My body was shaking from the onslaught it just endured, and Wild seemed to sense I couldn't stand, opting to remain crouched beside me.

"I would," King Julius purred.

He was before the evil king in a flash I hadn't tracked.

The red smoke was sucked in from the knolls and back into the demon king's body.

"Yes," Andie whispered.

Julius's arm was *through* the demon's body. *Sticking-out-the-back* through. The demon king hadn't uttered a sound. In fact, the two kings were in a strange sort of silent exchange, neither seeming particularly bothered by their current situation.

Where he hadn't been able to before, the demon king bizarrely spoke our tongue now. "And so you have chosen your fate."

"The fate was mine," Julius replied. "I meet it with all the pride and dignity I have gathered in life, knowing I leave that pride and dignity behind in my children." His gaze flickered to

Kyros, then back to the demon. “I meet this fate in a way you no longer can, demon king. Yours is a fate far worse, and I only pity my executioner at the end.”

Dread had steadily built as the conversation continued, but with the way Julius skewered the demon king, I gathered that none of us had truly believed the finality and gravity in the Vissimo ruler’s words.

“Father,” Kyros exhaled.

He broke into a blurring sprint, Basilia hot in his wake. Andie and Sascha burst forward after, but I remained still.

I’d finally understood something.

Julius roared and a surge of power that I’d never experienced from a Vissimo burst from him, flinging the four supernaturals back.

From my knees, I watched as red cracks started to show in the arm Julius had plunged through the demon. The red spread over the king’s grim-streaked and bloodied torso, then spearing up his neck. Red filled Julius’s eyes.

Blood started to leak from them, but Julius didn’t make a single sound. Only as blood appeared to push out of his every pore did the Vissimo shake slightly.

“No.” Wild’s voice was filled with the horror I was frozen by.

When it seemed like all the blood in the ancient’s body had vacated to make way for the foreign power forcing itself inside, there was a high keening like fingernails on a blackboard.

Kyros was on his feet and surging forward.

Basilia was getting up, a look of pure panic upon her face. Andie was helping Sascha to stand.

“Thank you,” Wild whispered to the dying king.

Julius was there one moment.

And then only red smoke remained.

I realized too late that the way King Julius's threads curled around his body meant he'd chosen his fate with complete certainty before this encounter.

Kyros's father knew this fight with the demon king would be his last.

And it was.



Kyros's roar was rage and loss. His battle charge was *murder*.

And we'd all watched the demon king kill his father. The rest of us didn't need Basilia's scream of anguish to spur us into gear. All of us had to fight now.

There was a crack in the air, and a portal opened.

I'd barely made it up off my knees, and Kyros was only halfway to the demon king, when a magus in thick robes stepped through.

The magus lowered his hood, and Wild froze.

"Varden," he said in confusion.

*Varden*. What was he—? My eyes widened at the sight of his threads curled tight around his body.

"Varden, no!" I opened a portal and sprinted through.

Erupting out the other side, I was just in time to witness Varden's body erupting with white light. *The purest of magic*. That of sacrifice in the name of love. The kind of magic that could only be used once because the use was final.

"No," I screamed, dropping to the ground to shield my eyes from the fierce glare.

Kyros was on his knees, not far from me.

The glare faded, and though the baffled demon king registered in my mind, most of me was focused on the spirit floating toward me.

“Varden,” I choked, tears pouring down my cheeks. “Why?”

He smiled. “I was dead already. I chose a fate that would protect my people.”

I sobbed and extended a hand to him, a silent plea for the old esteemed not to depart.

But he was too smart to stay.

His hand rested atop my palm, which began to glow white. The white spread across my skin to cover me.

“Now you kill that which seeks to harm us,” Varden told me.

His eyes twinkled with the peace he’d found and the path he’d chosen.

I sucked in a breath. “Return to the Mother, sir. It was an honor to have known you.”

He bowed, already fading from this world. “The honor was mine, granddaughter of my dearest friend.”

A cry left my lips as he disappeared from sight.

Varden died to give me another layer of protection, and whether by his intent or by the mysterious summation of ingredients that resulted in fate, I could see that a thick, inflexible thread now connected me to the demon king.

I didn’t wipe my eyes as I stood.

*It’s time for me to fight, I thought at Wild.*

*Yes, my queen. I will give you all I have.*

*I love you, Wild.*

*And you will keep loving me for decades to come. No mercy, my love. No hesitation. He took your family. He’s taken too much from those we care about. It is time for the demon king to meet his end at your hand.*

Varden had given me a fighting chance, and—I realized—so had King Julius.

The demon king was favoring his right side. Blood still poured from hundreds of wounds over his body. More than that, the expenditure of magic he'd used to kill the Vissimo ruler had dented his supply.

If there was a chance to beat him, it was now.

And even then, I knew this could well be my final fight too.

Kyros's growls filled the air again, but I spoke without turning my head, "I understand this demon killed your father, King Kyros, but he killed my family long before yours. This fight is mine."

"It can be both of ours," he snarled.

His anger wasn't at me. The Vissimo was containing his power as best he could. "You know it cannot."

Power like ours didn't leave space for a team. Wild was the only person I could possibly fight with in a battle of this intensity, and only with ample practice over years or decades. We hadn't had nearly enough time to get there, and even Wild knew he'd hinder my efforts. We'd all known this when Julius fought. Perhaps we forgot as Kyros charged the demon king afterward, but I'd regained clarity.

We'd be as likely to hurt each other as the demon king if both of us fought.

"The battle is yours," he grudgingly admitted.

I dipped my head.

I walked toward the demon king, who had watched me for some time now. There was something strange in the way he stared that I couldn't peg. Was it my part-demon nature? Was it that he remembered me as a horrified teen? He may be reconciling that version of me with the relic-covered, black-scaled person he looked at now.

"Your fight is with me," I told him in the demon tongue.

"My fight cannot be with you," he answered.

"And yet it will be."



“And yet it will be,” he echoed. “Another curse in a cursed life. So be it, Magus Queen. We fight.”

I sent up a four-affinity barrier around me, and the demon king regarded it before skimming a look across the knolls to Wild. A low hum left the supernatural, but I was too busy peering at a golden spear protruding from his back that reminded me greatly of the tiny one in my heart.

“You have a mate,” I murmured.

Like the bond I shared with Wild, a golden line connected into the spear. I followed the gold line across the knolls and meadow, and up in the alpine forest where I assumed the bond disappeared through a gate to the other realm.

A growl rippled from the demon. A warning.

He was mated, so he'd be stronger.

What was stranger still was that a bond extended from me alongside the golden thread and into the distance. I hadn't looked for the bond since my demon returned to me. I'd believed so strongly that the bond was the connection between us in different realms.

But the bond still led off into the demon world.

A thought for another time.

I unsheathed my daggers and banished my cloak. I'd summon it if needed against an attack, but the cloak was cumbersome.

The demon king was gathering smoke, and I released smoke of my own to strengthen the barrier I'd erected.

He threw a funnel of red smoke at me so quickly, I barely had time to get out of the way.

*Fuck*, the demon could draw on his magic as quickly as Julius had moved.

The smoke hit my barrier, and I pushed an image of myself forward, stepping back into a portal to reappear behind the demon king.

I summoned the arrowheads filled with my blood and shot them into the supernatural's back. He managed to dodge half of them, but his furious bellow told me some were doing the trick.

Hesitation would kill me.

I sprinted forward and ducked under a slicing shard of red smoke to drive my father's dagger into one of the deeper wounds on his torso.

Darkness stirred in me, and I released the darkness through the blade for an instant before ripping it away to dance back.

I cried out as fire erupted in my calf.

Wild was on the job, and I let him heal me from afar as I pivoted. Summoning from our charm stores, I activated explosions of Rooke's antidote around the demon king. The mist rose around him in a dome, and his pained grunts could be heard from out here.

A demon was fire.

I blew ice to freeze the ground he stood upon, and the air inside the misty dome of antidote.

The ground began to shake, then boil.

The threads from the midst of my trap disappeared down into the ground, and I watched the ground deep beneath my feet, moving back with it to ensure my position was always between the demon and my mate.

Wild was the obvious target.

*"Gu en, bryve!"* I shouted. *Come out, coward.*

The ground in front of me erupted, and I wasted no time slicing my father's blade across the king's chest. This time, the blade was caught between the demon's two hands.

We remained locked there, and I got a sense the demon was drawing parallels between this moment and the moment he'd killed Julius too.

Red smoke built under the surface of the demon's skin. His scales were out in full force, and they glowed with a hypnotic

pulse.

“I suggest you let go,” he said in the demon tongue.

I smiled. “I appreciate the feedback.”

Carving a path with a vicious drilling of my magus magic first, I shoved the dagger—blade, hilt, and all—*inside* the demon king. My father’s blood was in that blade.

The ruler choked and staggered forward, and then I was hurtling through the air, pummeled bodily upward and away by a crushing blow.

I rolled across the ground, and my inner focus settled on a red spear of his blood shooting toward me. No barrier would help me with that, and my body was in shock from the blow.

Sascha hurtled into the path of the blood spear, and I cried out before seeing the spear had broken across the Luther’s back and splashed to the ground.

*Of course.* Luthers weren’t affected by demon blood.

Another spear was coming.

Andie intercepted this one, and I finally made it to my feet, forcing magic into my shocked body to spur it back to action.

The king’s eyes glowed red, as did his scales. Smoke poured from him now, and at least I had the relish of seeing the fucker lose control.

I switched Ryzika’s blade into my other hand, panting hard.

I opened a portal and sent an image of myself through. The demon king turned toward the image behind him, and I blurred forward from the front.

He’d half expected the trick, and a wall of red smoke rose between us. I couldn’t alter course in time, and I screamed as the smoke singed and picked at my skin.

I sliced across the backs of his legs, driving my black smoke into the wounds.

A red thread was coming for me. *Too quick.*

On instinct, I redirected it from me, and the demon king stumbled midturn. He frowned, and I kicked savagely at the wound in his side where I'd buried my father's blade. Sending out a blast of my magic, I sealed the skin over the dagger.

*Get that out, you bastard.*

The demon king sprawled on the frozen ground, and I flicked away another of his intended attacks. A rage I'd locked away a long time ago in an act of self-preservation had steadily been freed as I fought.

The rage was one of loss.

This supernatural changed my life forever one summer's day. He'd gone out of his way to kill people who had no designs to ever challenge his rule.

He'd killed my family.

I shrieked with fury and released a funnel of magic so powerful that it left my channels raw.

I fashioned the funnel into a blade and aimed it directly at a gap in the demon king's scales.

His arm thudded to the ground. The guy just stared at his arm on the ground, not making a sound.

"Grandmother would have liked that," I said.

The demon king was clawing at his side, trying to remove the poisonous blade I'd placed there.

*Tsk, tsk.*

I released another burst just as powerful.

This time, I connected my magic to the dagger buried inside his body. Hooking a rope of my power around the dagger, I then continued drilling to the iron cage around the ruler's heart. Breaking the case would take more power than I possessed, but I hooked the other end of the rope around the iron casing, connecting it to my father's blade.

Now, he couldn't pull the poisonous dagger free without ripping his own heart out.

A gory trap. “And my *mother* would have loved that one,” I told him.

I walked toward the king, vaguely registering the slight limp in my gait. “But my twin, my Syera,” I whispered, nearly choked by the pain of losing her. “She would have enjoyed all of this, and nothing but your life will do to satisfy the daily agony I endure at losing her.”

“Syera,” he hushed.

I released a volume of magic I’d *never* dared to release. Its exit scraped at the already raw channels in my affinities, and my jaw locked against the instinct to stop.

I staked the demon to the frozen ground and stood on his remaining arm to pin it in place. He struggled, and his magic rose against me. I battered the threads of his violent intent aside yet again, delighting in his confusion as his attacks appeared to fizzle and die.

I set the tip of Ryzika’s blade under the scale in the dead center of his throat.

“I’ll think of Syera as I saw off your head,” I purred.

“You know not what you do—” His answer cut off as I pruned off the red scale.

Not by what I’d done, I realized, but by the black cracks appearing across his skin. The dagger was killing him.

*Good.*

I was determined to be sure of the kill, however. Syera would get her slice of revenge too. I plunged the tip of Ryzika’s blade through the gap in his scales. Red blood—that was entirely demon in nature—bubbled from his lips and the wound. The crimson glow faded from his eyes, and I looked into chilling irises of almost translucent green. They were furious.

They were... sad.

They were uncompromising.

Thunder boomed around us, and too late, I noticed the hundreds of threads climbing to the surface from beneath us.

Demons erupted from under the knolls, and I felt the coldness of Wild's panic as they closed in on me. I erected a hasty barrier as claws slashed at me. The force of their attack threw me to the ground.

Crimson demons were everywhere. That's all I could fathom as I focused everything else on keeping my barrier up.

"Tempest!" Wild bellowed.

But the only way I'd been getting through the fight was by keeping my lens narrow and confined to the fight with the demon king. Now, hundreds of supernaturals were filling it once more. Magus, Vissimo, Luthers, and demons.

And I was crippled.

Blows rained on my barrier, and it took everything in me to keep the protection up amid the threads flying everywhere across the knolls.

I was dragged through a portal.

Hands shook my shoulders. "Draw them in, Tempest. Draw them in!"

My body was convulsing, though, and there was no *drawing them in* this time. I arched in Wild's arms, and the screams leaving me didn't sound like my own. They were too broken and pained.

The clamor of the threads had broken me.

I'd been broken, and the only choice left was to submit to their power. To the power of the Mother. To the power that had enabled me to save those I loved, seek revenge for my family, and to give magus a fighting chance.

I submitted, and my screams stopped. Peace floated inside to fill me, and my entire body relaxed. All I'd had to do was stop fighting.

All I'd had to do was remember that my power was her power. That I was merely the vessel.

And in that submission, I found an answer to the anarchy surrounding me and my mate. The answer wasn't one I would have chosen or even thought of.

But despite that my soul screamed against the decision, it also nodded in agreement with the Mother. This was the only answer.

I opened my eyes and smiled at Wild, reaching a hand up to rest against his jaw.

“I love you, Wild. I'm sorry.”



Wild placed his hand atop mine. “I am with you, my love, always. Don’t hold back.”

His words unlocked the last of my resistance against the power demanding I rise.

So I rose like a puppet on a string, and that was the irony of my ability to see and direct the threads around me—I was as much at their mercy as everyone else.

I walked forward into the sea of chaos before me.

Screams rent the air. Claw met blade, and light and darkness grated against each other for the upper hand.

Pain and death. Blood and despair.

A blue thread speared toward me, and I pushed it away into the nearest churning mass of yellow. I stepped over the newly decapitated, yellow-scaled demon as the blue demon stared at his hands, aghast.

I pulled his threads in around his throat. The blue demon’s head slid from his body.

My hands were flung outward by the overwhelming force of the power inside me. I mirrored a bolt of red away from Winona, then twisted the power of four magus into a spiral that blew an opponent in every direction.

My hands moved largely of their own accord because I sure as hell couldn’t keep track of all the magus lives I was saving and the demons I was killing. I was a puppet, and they were *my* puppets.



My actions were pure instinct. All reaction and no logic.

No hesitation.

No mercy.

The reminder of King Julius's words and his death and—my chest tightened—Varden's death, sharpened my mind against the awe tinging it. I doubled down on my efforts, screaming as I pushed with all my might to intercept a wave of deep and dark purple magic from encompassing Sven and Rooke.

They were surrounded and had given up the fight. Instead, they were arm in arm and looking into each other's eyes, ready to die.

*No fucking way.*

My hands clawed as I seized the tendrils escaping all the enemy surrounding them. The twenty or more demons froze on the spot, and then—with no finesse and only sheer force—I shoved all their threads into one another in a knot.

I hadn't intended to kill. Just to incapacitate so the magus fighting toward Sven and Rooke would have time to reach them. But as I watched the writhing demons, I saw that their threads had hooked into each other. Similar to the way I'd embedded my father's dagger into the demon king to weaken him, their threads were doing the same to each other. The threads connected all twenty of the supernaturals. There was a constant shifting of power through the threads as their poisons worked their misery. They were killing one another and had no way to stop it.

A calm exhale left me.

*I know what I need to do,* I thought at Wild.

A hand gripped mine, and I glanced at him. We were hovering in the air. I hadn't noticed that happening, or that Wild had floated up to join me at some point.

*Then do it,* he replied in my mind.

He smiled, but I couldn't do the same. My life wasn't the only one hanging in the balance if I drew too much power. The

path before me made it clear that this next move might not end with me breathing.

Him breathing.

*We will always be together,* Wild reminded me. *Don't be afraid, my queen. I am not.*

My resolve firmed, and I squeezed his hand.

A power shook within me like a caged beast desperate for freedom. My entire body shook so hard that Wild abandoned his grip on my hand to hover behind me, holding me tight against him as the building energy threatened to tear me apart.

The ground shook.

Dark storm clouds rolled in, and lightning struck at the ground in warning of what was to come.

Magus, Vissimo, Luther, and demon alike paused in their fighting. Their faces, turned upward to me, were awash with fear and hope and despair and pain.

I saw their faces. I saw what could be.

I saw what was needed.

More than one hundred demons remained. *One hundred and seventy-three,* I corrected myself, feeling the number of tendrils probing at my senses. I let the roaring power fill me and felt my shaking arms rise. Wild was pouring everything he had into me.

My head tipped back against his shoulder, and then my head whipped forward as a roaring scream ripped from my very being. Power erupted from me as my scream continued, and my shaking was far more a convulsion as one hundred and seventy-three black ropes of magic lashed from me.

I held onto them for dear life—for the lives of all those I loved and was responsible for. I held on until the scream and roar died from my lips and the convulsions faded to shaking, which then faded to stillness.

Utter stillness.

But not calm.

My knees were on the ground. The labored sound of my panting filled my ears. My magic was hooked into nearly two hundred demons.

I opened my eyes and blinked sweat away.

The demon army was frozen but aware. Panic trickled from them as they watched me.

“Help me up,” I said in a voice shredded and raw.

Wild lifted me to my feet, and we both staggered afterward. He’d nearly drained himself dry lending me power. *I’d* nearly drained myself.

I regarded the demons and didn’t bother speaking in their tongue. “You attacked our lands and our people. You have harmed those I care for. You get no mercy from me or anyone here.”

I already knew what to do. If death was my fate, then I would have died when unleashing the explosion of magic to trap them in my power.

Compared to that, this was the easy part.

I repeated what I’d done for Sven and Rooke on a larger scale. I shot each demon’s threads into the demons surrounding them. Their shrieks and cries filled the knolls as their poison began to work on each other. The remainder of the army was connected, and they’d do all the dirty work for us.

Slowly.

Certainly.

First the yellow demons dropped. Another minute and the orange demons followed them.

Greens.

Blues.

Purples.

Browns.

The first of the red-scaled began to fall, and I walked forward to one in particular. One female remained standing,

silent and determined not to meet the fate of the others.

And she wouldn't.

Though she'd be close to death, she might slowly recover if given the chance. Not that I'd let her.

*"Iy wun trey lyv hr,"* she spat, her face tightening with pain.

*You failed to kill him.*

I'd noticed some time ago that the demon king had disappeared along with a sizeable chunk of red-scaled demons. I'd pried one of his scales off and plunged a dagger into his neck. I didn't get time to cut his head from his body, but I had embedded a poisonous blade into the king's side and tied it to the iron casing around his heart.

He couldn't remove that dagger without killing himself, and if he didn't, then the dagger would keep him weak. *"Hr esnt ef bahd ef lyv,"* I told her.

*He is as good as dead.*

Her lips curved, and as the demon beside her dropped down dead, I plunged a hand into the chest of the last living demon.

The last of Varden's protection sizzled away, and I felt her blood burning me.

I ripped out the iron casing of her heart, only possible with her so extremely weak. She dropped to her knees and looked up at me, seeing her end in my hands.

Magic didn't work so well on iron. Strength did.

I cracked the casing around her heart as I would a coconut. Prying open the edges, I frowned at the pulsing gold heart within.

I'd expected black, and the color threw me.

But the very smell of blood soaking the grass filled my nostrils. I could hear the pain and *feel* the shock and loss of the other supernaturals here.

Reaching in, I pulled out her gold heart. Then, looking the red demon in the eyes, I squeezed the life from the beating organ and watched it die from her eyes in tandem.

She listed to the ground dead, and I dropped her heart and the iron casing.

Bodies sprawled in every direction around me. They hadn't died peacefully. They'd died writhing in agony.

I glanced down at my hand and saw it was coated in blood. The rest of me was, too, I knew. I was tinged red, and my black scales were out. I'd expended so much magic, black smoke no longer needed to seep from my pores.

I was dripping in battle.

Turning to face those who still stood in near silence but for the wheezes and whimpers of the injured, I regarded their expressions. There was a curious lack of horror. I saw shock and numbness. I saw a distance in some gazes that made me wonder if some had shut down to make it through the last several hours. Or however long had passed.

"The fight is over," I said hoarsely. "Tend to the wounded."

That unfroze enough of them that eventually the others started to wake up too. The Vissimo were far less bothered than anyone, and I assumed the sight of blood was no big deal to them. Maybe the sight was even a comfort.

I gripped the advisor pendant, which warmed to my touch. "Barrow, Ruby, and Opal, form a team to make sure all magus in our coven are accounted for. Help our allies do the same." We had to figure out who hadn't made it. We'd lost loved ones today. There was no way we'd all survived that.

I gripped the pendant again. "Winona, Huxley, and V—" I broke off. *Varden*. There was no more Varden. "Winona and Huxley, please form a second team to clear the eating chamber. We'll tend to wounded there."

Their acknowledgment came through one by one, and I released a breath after. I'd just assumed they'd all survived when making the order.

“Opal is injured, but Barrow and I have it covered,” Ruby’s voice chimed through the pendant.

I turned back toward the sprawling mess of demon bodies to peer across the knolls and meadow and up into the alpine forest.

“He escaped.”

I looked up at the Vissimo prince. *Vissimo king*. “I believe so. He called his demons to the surface when he sensed his death. I embedded a dagger in him that is poison. I tied that to his heart casing. He is as good as dead.”

“*Is he dead?*” Kyros growled.

“He’ll exist in a weakness so severe that he will never again be a threat. Or he’ll kill himself to be free of the dagger.”

The Vissimo didn’t answer.

“King Julius saved all of us,” I said softly.

I couldn’t have beaten the demon king if he hadn’t been severely weakened already.

Kyros’s throat worked. “He knew he would die. Much makes sense about the last few weeks.”

I nodded.

Basilia slipped up behind him and briefly squeezed my shoulder. “*Tempest...*”

Her loss of words was understandable. What words could express all we’d witnessed and endured? I replied, “Basilia.”

*We made it.*

She dipped her head, then rested a hand on Kyros’s back. “We must tell your brothers and sisters. We must check on your mother.” Her voice was soft and filled with unshed tears.

Kyros blinked. “My mother—”

“Will be okay,” I told him. “Your father had taken care to ensure she would survive.”

The two Vissimo looked at me.

“Your mother already knows. She would have known for some time.” There was no way she could have missed him pulling at the strands of their mating bond to distance himself so that she might live on without him. I’d never have thought it possible, and maybe it wasn’t for those of us less than six hundred years old.

Kyros wanted to believe me. And didn’t.

“Go and care for your family.” *And your kingdom*, I added silently.

Basilia led Kyros away, and Andie limped up, supported by Sascha.

She noticed me looking at her claws and fangs. “I can’t shift all the way back yet. I pushed myself too hard. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad, Luther Queen. Sascha?”

He scanned our surroundings. “I can’t believe we made it through that. I don’t believe it’s over.” The Luther placed a hand over his chest.

I wanted to do the same. There was a churning discomfort there at the power of the silence covering the knolls. The silence was oppressive, nearly. The wind was gone, for instance, even though a storm had whipped around us during the battle.

That the fight was over didn’t seem possible.

“I couldn’t get to the demon king,” Andie said. “A force of his red soldiers carried him away.”

I followed the jerk of her head and then blinked to focus on a faint streak of red—many threads in a group—that disappeared to the closest gate. “Yes, they took him back to their realm. I don’t foresee he will be a problem for us.”

“We’ve got to collapse the gates and rifts,” Wild said as he joined us. “The doors are all closed again, but this is our best chance to figure out how to drive the demon king’s gates and rifts—or those of any future demon ruler—back to the north mountains.”

“Agreed,” Sascha grunted. He glanced at me. “The old magus who sacrificed himself. You knew him.”

“I did,” I replied, my heart panging. “I respected him greatly. As did my grandmother. I would not have survived the wave of demons coming to the surface without his sacrifice.”

He and King Julius kept me alive.

Us all.

“What you did,” Andie said, shaking her head. “I don’t understand any part of how you controlled them, but thank you. We could have lost the day and everything without you.”

And yet I wasn’t sure if it was the gore or the obvious loss of life or just that I’d expended impossible amounts of energy, and I wasn’t in the best mental state, but what I’d done didn’t feel like nearly enough.

The foreign covens would know of my demon nature, but that didn’t bother me.

I’d killed so many supernaturals, but that didn’t bother me.

“We need to collapse the gates and push the rifts back to the north mountains,” I repeated Wild’s words. Then, even if the weak king was replaced by another in time, they’d have no access to attack us again without another several hundred years to get themselves in position.

And we’d never fall for the same strategy again. Scouting for demon gates would be a regular thing for the coven and other supernaturals for the rest of time. I was certain some identifying tool or magical demon radar could be formed eventually.

Most of the discomfort in my chest dissipated. “Yes, that’s what we must do.”

“Uh...,” Andie said. “Tempest?”

I peered at her, then followed her wide-eyed stare across the meadows.

Sascha stepped forward. “It’s a child.”



With my eyes blurry from fatigue, spotting what they'd seen took me a second.

"It *is* a child," Wild said low.

I saw the boy then. The *demon* boy. "Mother be."

He couldn't be more than three or four. *Boy* was a loose term, really. The demon boy branched the line between toddler and child if anything.

My mouth dried. The child's mother or father could be dead here. "I don't want him to see the bodies." I rushed forward, the other rulers close behind me.

Most of our force was still on the knolls, and slowly their movements and soft noise quietened as they, too, spotted the demon toddler.

I stopped on the other side of the demon bodies, and Wild and the others formed a line either side of me to block what we could of the child's view of the battleground.

The hooded child walked to us.

"He's walking to you," Andie said. "Do you know him?"

I shook my head. "No, I—" I mean, I was part demon. The only part demon here. That the child might be related to me made the most sense. "Maybe through my father's side. I have no idea."

The toddler fell over twice, and I listened to him scold himself in the demon tongue for being clumsy.

"Tempest," Wild said in a curious tone.

I wanted to ask him what he'd figured out, but I couldn't take my eyes from the small form as he stopped ten feet before me.

The boy lowered his hood and smiled directly at me.

I gasped as a bond within me that had only ever been thin and mostly unresponsive swelled and thickened and *glowed* with a surge of connection. The bond shot between me and the boy, and the love I felt for this demon toddler was undeniable

and unmatched in its nature—being the bond between an adult and innocent.

I'd crossed the space between us without realizing. I dropped to one knee before the boy, searching his face in wonder. "Who *are* you?"

He replied in my tongue, and a small dimple appeared as he smiled again. "I'm Adeuto, Aunty Tempest."

My eyes rounded. "What did you just call me?"

"Aunty Tempest," the boy said in confusion. "Mother said I had to come to you now. That you'd know who I was."

His mother fucking lied.

"I share a bond with you," I told him, reaching to take his hand. Now that he'd removed his hood, I could see that his scales were black, but embedded deep within them was a flicker of red. And that red was one of hundreds of hues of red.

I shook my head. "Who are your parents, young one?"

I'd never expected to be disarmed by a demon child. I didn't know what I thought they started as, but this boy was as any other boy. I could feel his sweetness and intelligence through our bond. I could feel that he didn't mean harm. I could feel that he loved. That he loved *me*.

"My dad is king," he answered. "But Mama said she's dealing with him, so don't worry."

The demon king's son was here. *Fuck*. I did my best to absorb that bombshell. "And who is your mother?"

He chuckled. "Your sister, Aunty Tempest."

The toddler said the words as though I were the silliest person in the world. He couldn't have any idea how they made my heart pump and my soul scream. I'd only had one sister. She was dead. He must be referring to a half sister. "My father—your grandfather—had other children? Another daughter?"

The demon child placed his hands either side of my face. "My mama is called Syera."

Andie's muffled curse barely registered as I stared.

*Syera.*

He'd said the name like he'd practiced it one hundred times. As it was, on his lips her name still sounded more like Sera. "Syera."

"You shared a tummy with her," he said factually.

"My twin."

"A twin," he said in excitement. "Yes."

I rested my hands over the boy's. "Your mama is my twin sister, Syera. And your father is the demon king."

*What the fuck? What the fuck. What the fuck!*

The boy nodded several times in rapid succession. "That's right. Mama said our hiding spot was no good now. I have to stay with you until she comes."

My breaths came fast. I squeezed my eyes shut. "She's dealing with the demon king."

"Yup."

"He could be lying," Sascha said low.

"No," I whispered. "I'm bonded to him. I'd be able to sense it."

"Mama said we'd get a bond," the boy chatted. "But it took so long for the wall to get weak enough."

The wall. "The barrier between realms?"

The boy lifted a shoulder. "And then you didn't come, but Mama had said you wouldn't. I just hoped because sometimes I was very bored."

*I'm going crazy, I thought at Wild.*

Wild's answer was slow to arrive. *If you're going crazy, then so am I.*

*My sister can't be alive.*

*He's not lying.*

"But I can't feel her," I replied aloud to him.

“Who?” the toddler asked.

I swallowed. Because if I started to believe this, and then Syera was still dead after I unlocked that box... What would I do then? “I can’t feel my twin anymore. Your, uh, mama.”

He chuckled. “Demons don’t share.”

I stared. “What do you mean?”

“Demon boys don’t share their mates.”

Was I the only one struggling with all this? “My sister is mated to the demon king,” I replied dumbly. “And demon men don’t share their mates.”

“I don’t have a bond with Mama either,” he said proudly. “One day, I’ll steal all my mate’s bonds away for myself too.”

I didn’t reply.

I couldn’t reply.

The bond I’d shared with my twin was withered and dead. The tether to her died the day my family was murdered by the demon king.

Except, according to this boy—my fucking *nephew*—the king never killed my sister. He may have intended to, but instead he’d discovered his mate that day. And when that process began, then what? He’d stolen the bond between twins for himself and made me believe she was dead.

My heart pounded against my ribs.

That day in the car... the magic that claimed Syera was black. *Black* power had burst into the car and filled it. *Black* magic had blotted out the sunshine.

I’d fought the demon king, and his power was red. The black had belonged to my *Syera*.

*Wild, is she alive?* I tried to calm my breaths, seeing that the toddler was growing frightened by my response.

*My love... it sounds like it.*

I clutched my chest and a sob left me. “Syera.”

The boy patted me. “It’s okay, Aunty Tempest.”

I had a nephew. I had a sister. My twin was alive? And mated to the demon I'd nearly killed. He'd told me I knew nothing. I'd seen the mating bond extending from him off into the demon realm.

*I nearly killed my sister.* Only the demon king calling for aide and being dragged away had saved her from me.

I covered my mouth, sobbing again.

My demon unfurled within me and opened a locked facet of her knowledge to me.

*You knew Syera was there,* I thought at her.

I felt her *yes*.

Her knowledge downloaded into me, and I sucked in a sharp breath. *Syera* was the one to free her from the cage in the demon realm. My twin had demanded my demon's secrecy in return for her freedom. *Syera* was the reason my demon knew why our dark and light magic collided to create black scales and smoke. My demon had known the entire time that my mystery tether connected me and Adeuto.

My twin had saved me and Wild with her actions in a different world.

Wild was reeling almost as hard as me.

The boy hugged me around the neck, bringing me back to the present, and I wrapped my arms around him tightly. *My nephew.*

My family just grew. I had a twin again.

And she was in danger.

I untangled myself. "We have to find her."

I stood and pulled the boy up with me. Turning to Wild, I repeated, "We have to find her."

The toddler nuzzled close, and I got the sense that although he'd smiled and charmed us from the outset, walking into this realm to approach us had taken much bravery. "She said you'd say that."

I stilled. “Your mama said that?”

“Yes. She said that you can’t come. Not yet.”

“Not yet,” I echoed.

“She said...” He squinted. “The gates and rifts must be destroyed.” He curled his tiny hands into fists. “And that... she has to deal with Dad to do that. It’s the only way.”

I had a feeling when Syera referred to *dealing with Dad* that she actually meant murdering him.

Wild bent close to the toddler in my arms. “Your mama said not to enter the demon realm?”

Adeuto shook his head. “Not yet. Oh! Here.”

I put him down so he could shove a chubby hand into his robe. He drew out a slip of parchment.

“Was meant to do this part first,” he muttered.

I took the message and unfolded it. I couldn’t read a single word of it at first because I was staring at my sister’s handwriting. Her hideous fucking chicken-scratch handwriting that Grandmother had *hated*.

“Syera wrote this,” I hushed, touching the words with trembling fingers.

There weren’t many of them. Trust my twin to feel like I’d just put together the story from a few lines.

But she’d written these words, and I finally let myself believe that Syera had lived. And possibly gone through hell ever since. I mean, why else would she be trying to kill the father of her child?

I read the letter in silence, considering the presence of my nephew.

*Dearest sister,*

*I am alive.*

*Wait until I send for you. Do **not** come now.*

*Be ready to fight.*

*If he is not defeated, then all supernaturals will fall.  
Please look after my heart. I would trust him with no one else.*

*My love, my apologies, and my hope,*

*Syera*



“We are ready for you,” Winona said from the open doorway.

I was sitting in my original esteemed quarters where Varden had moved to in the weeks before his death. “Did you have any idea what he’d planned?”

Varden entered the battle with the demons with an agenda. I’d strung together a series of his past comments that may have hinted at his intention, but that he’d sacrifice his life had never once crossed my mind.

“No, none of us did.” Winona took a breath. “He was keeping a secret from us all.”

I placed the gold magnifying glass back on his desk. “He was?”

“He’d sworn Serene to secrecy.” Winona’s voice softened. “Varden was dying. He lingered too close to the demon gate for too long. The injuries he’d sustained were irreversible.”

*Oh, Varden. Why didn’t you tell me?* Had he intended to? Spyne had interrupted him during one of our last conversations. Did Varden mean to tell me then?

“I don’t know if that makes what he did better,” Winona remarked. “But I, for one, am happy he chose his end and protected those he loved. That sits better with me.”

I nodded. “Me too.” Then I sighed. “Let’s go.”

We walked toward the eating chamber, and I felt the weight of my relics on me. Their weight was calming in a



storm that was anything but. The fallout of the battle had proven a harrowing and confronting and grieving process.

We'd lost forty-seven magus in the battle. A huge number of our coven that I could barely fathom. Everyone had lost someone dear to them, and our mourning would extend far into the future for those murdered souls.

The foreign covens, the Vissimo, and Luthers had all lost loved ones too. My heart ached as surely for them as for my own coven, and nausea filled me whenever I contemplated how much of a coven we would have had without their help. The price of keeping our caves and territory seemed so steep but could have been so much greater.

And if the weakness of a coven was that one blow was felt by all, then the strength of a coven was that one blow was distributed across many. Any fallen would be picked up by the ten magus around them too.

We'd get through our grief and the memories of battle together.

I'd woken today, a week later, feeling a return of normalcy for the first time. Despite that my demon nephew now lived in the coven with us. Despite that my sister was alive and mated to the demon king that she intended to *deal with*. Despite any number of future problems.

So of course that was when the coven had decided to hold a vote.

"Whatever happens," Winona told me just before we entered, "you are my leader."

I murmured my thanks and entered ahead of her.

Large vials, much like the affinity test vials, sat upon the stage. Instead of four tubes, there were two.

"The blue vial will fill with votes *for* your leadership," Barrow announced as I stood before the stage. "The red vial will fill with votes *against* your leadership."

Today, the coven decided to vote whether I would lead them.

“If the majority vote *against*,” Barrow boomed, “then the coven agrees to pick another suitable leader in the timeframe of one month.”

We’d beat the demons back. We’d hurt them and the king badly. I didn’t feel the same pressure as I had to fix everything as only I could see how. The path was clearer now, and I felt confident that any number of magus could rise to the role of high esteemed.

Winona was still my pick.

“Please cast your votes now,” Barrow said, glancing at me.

Smiling, he lifted a finger that glowed blue. The blue magic parted from his fingertip to fly into the vial rapidly filling with blue.

I didn’t take my eyes off the vial, but oddly, *believing* what I saw proved hard. The blue vial was nearly full, and only a handful of red filled the vial opposing my leadership.

The magic filling both vials slowed.

I looked at Barrow for confirmation, and he bowed. “High Esteemed Tempest, the coven has voted. Will you accept our invitation to take up the authority yet again?”

He swept aside, and I peered at the authority that had been behind him.

*Will you accept our invitation to take up the authority yet again?*

The issue with that question was that I never accepted this throne in the first place. I’d sat there for show. Because I had to. But I never accepted the seat due to not accepting myself or that I deserved to sit there.

Did I accept this seat?

I summoned a cushion. Purple. Filled with beans—a mini version of the bean bag I liked to use from the divination center. The cushion landed on the authority, and I climbed the steps, then sat.

Did I accept their invitation?

“I accept this authority and all that comes with it. I will not fail you.”

Barrow bowed low again. “You never *have* failed us, High Esteemed. May we deserve you as leader in return for your vow.”

The coven bowed to me, and a hum of magic built in the chamber as their acceptance washed over the stone and up on the stage to meet me. There was far less fanfare than the first time I’d sat on the authority, and yet this instance felt *right*. There were no lies between us. No barriers to fester or limit.

They were my coven.

I was their leader. But more importantly, I was a coven member myself and I finally, *finally* felt the truth of that on every level.

Wild’s arrival caressed me like a finger down the spine. I shuddered in bliss, then glanced to the entrance where he’d appeared with guests.

I stood and walked from the authority to greet them.

“King Kyros and Queen Basilia.” I dipped my head.

“High Esteemed Tempest,” Basilia murmured, returning my gesture.

“Magus Queen,” Kyros said.

Their week had likely been as chaotic and ever-changing as mine. Maybe more so. Kyros had inherited his father’s throne and stepped into leadership himself. “How is your mother, King Kyros?”

His gaze darkened. “She has her children, and for them, she is determined to live.”

*To live without her mate.* I couldn’t imagine the pain of such a choice. “When she is ready, I would like to personally thank her.”

Queen Titania was the unsung hero. In many ways, she’d died at the same time as King Julius. She’d sacrificed herself

as surely as Varden. And she'd done all that without lifting a finger. My heart ached for her.

The worst fate was to be left behind when all your loved ones were torn away.

*Trust me. I know.*

“She will look forward to seeing you,” Kyros answered. “I have also considered your request for one of your grimoires to spend time in my clan. I see no reason this won't be possible after some finer details are negotiated.”

Spyne would be happy with that news. Or partially happy. Huxley might feel relief on some level too. They didn't want to part ways for a time, and also knew they had to. “Thank you, King Kyros. Please send through your stipulations whenever the timing is convenient.”

Andie moved forward to hug me. “Congrats on the throne. Love the cushion. Always thought that thing looked fucking hard.”

I grinned. “I can confirm that was the case.”

Sascha leaned in to kiss my cheek, and it said a lot that Wild had little response to the action.

He trusted the Luther leader. The Vissimo leader almost as much—but there was something about Kyros that warned a person never to fully relax their guard.

His father had possessed that something too.

I led the rulers to a nearby empty table and helped Wild to summon trays of food, not that two of our number would have appetite for food as such.

“How are your injured?” I asked Andie.

We fell into conversation about the states of our peoples, and Basilia soon joined in. A bizarre feeling crept in as the time whittled away and our conversation flowed with ease.

How were we all here?

How had we survived to enjoy a relative peace? How had we earned more time in this world?

So much could've been different.

“High Esteemed?”

I turned to find Ruby behind me with a stack of books in her arms. “Yes, Ruby?”

“You know that thing we spoke of? I decided to get a jump on it.” She grunted in the act of balancing the books in one arm and extended a roll of parchment to me. “I just need your signature on this to start the process.”

I stared at the books in her arms, thinking of our conversation a few days prior. The conversation I hadn't thought anything more of since. “You've spent the last few days doing this? How did you know the next high esteemed would go for it?” There'd been no guarantee the coven would vote me back to the authority.

She quirked a brow. “We all knew you were the only one for the job.”

That she'd believed in that to the extent of spending several days on what could've been a thankless task warmed my heart. “We have a strong claim then?”

“Yes, High Esteemed. I've run it past Chistyr and some of the more powerful grimoires to be sure.”

I flattened the parchment and ran my eyes over the document that would set a trial in motion and force a council of coven leaders to form and pass a verdict.

Basilia peered over my shoulder. “Who is the original coven?”

“My parents' coven,” Wild answered. He didn't need to see the document. He was reading it through my eyes.

I summoned a quill. “They failed to uphold their contractual alliance with us. We plan to make sure they're held accountable.”

Even if we didn't win the trial, the show of resistance and open challenge might make the original coven think twice about fucking with us again—or another coven for that matter.

I signed the document and passed it back to Ruby. “Go for it.”

She smirked. “With relish.”

Andie took a sip of water that was at complete odds with how she’d... well, *wolfed* down her tower of food. “I heard magus talking about playing Caves on the way in. I thought the game was done. You changed your mind?”

*Caves*. The game I hated to love and loved to hate. “The coven has decided we’ll play Caves once a year. The game was part of our culture for a long time, and I can understand that some magus don’t wish to let go of what they perceive as a tradition and part of their identity. Once a year is less than some want, but there’s still a threat against us, and the coven agreed a yearly game wouldn’t be too distracting. Now Caves will be more of an event, perhaps a festival, and an opportunity to invite other covens along.”

“I wouldn’t mind coming to watch,” the Luther replied.

“If there’s a VIP tent, then I’m there,” Basilia added.

I grinned. “For you, I’ll set one up.” A dose of foreign supernatural would be good for magus in general.

Wild took my hand after. “How about a dusk stroll on the knolls?”

“When you rhyme like that, how can I say no?” I replied.

His answering chuckle warmed me.

“That sounds lovely,” Andie stated. “No offense, but being underground gives me chills.”

Sascha kissed her temple. “Mind company?”

“Never yours,” she answered him, sending a soft smile with her words.

Wild and I took the lead, and the other couples trailed behind us.

Fresh air broke over me, with the tiniest amount of chill from the change in season. Summer was officially behind us, as was the immediate fear of attack and death.

The knolls appeared as it ever had, but I wasn't sure I'd ever forget the sight of it as a bloodbath.

"I haven't paid homage to the new high esteemed," Wild murmured against the back of my hand.

I arched a brow. "Does your back bend that way?"

"I only seem to recollect the way your back can bend. How the rest of your body can bend, too, for that matter."

"I wonder if it will still bend for you... considering you haven't paid homage and all."

Wild stepped close, humming low. "I had an idea that I could pay homage directly. In the flesh, so to speak." He brought his lips to my ear. "With these lips between your legs and your hands in my hair."

"I see," I managed to reply.

"No you don't," he answered.

I gasped as a vision of me held upside down and naked, my pelvis to Wild's face, hit me square in the forehead. His erection was in my mouth, muffling my screams as he feasted between my thighs.

Wild stroked his thumb over my nipple, and I moaned.

"*Now* you see," he half growled.

His nostrils flared, and if not for the current company, I'd be portaling to the scene of our carnal activities right this fucking second.

"Are we interrupting something?" Sascha asked as he exited the knolls ahead of Andie.

"Yes," Wild said, earning a smirk from the Luther.

Andie blew out a breath as she came to join me. "Hard to forget what happened."

"Sure is."

"And all that's yet to come."

*Sure was.*

“Has your nephew said anything more?” she asked.

Basilia joined us on Wild’s other side. The six of us stood in a line facing the battleground that claimed the lives of too many of our peoples. If my sister was to be believed, then more would be lost stopping the demons for good.

“No,” I replied. “My sister worked hard to keep him in the dark. I can’t gather that he’s even met his father. Syera has been in hiding with Adeuto since his birth. Other than that, he has nothing to add to her warning to be ready.”

“Even if your dagger kills the demon king, there is more to come,” King Kyros said in the silence after. “I feel it, as do we all.”

There was no disagreement. I still believed there was no escape for the demon king from my trap. If he managed to survive, then he wouldn’t survive my sister in his weakened state.

But a new king would rise to fill the space.

Discussion wasn’t needed for the six of us to agree that we’d all fight to the bitter end in this war. As unlikely a force as we were—two magus, two Luthers, two Vissimo, and a bit of demon—we’d banded together. We’d seen the demon king and what a future with him ruling *all* supernaturals would look like.

For myself, I could literally see it. With our resolve and with Adeuto’s appearance, the threads had woven into a clear path, one that confirmed Syera’s warning.

*If he is not defeated, then all supernaturals will fall.*

Soon. Not too soon, but sooner than any of us would prefer, another fight would come. In this one, the winner really would take all.

I linked hands with Wild. “We’ll be ready.”

Andie cracked her knuckles.

Basilia replied, “This time for good.”

There was no other option.



Because winning Ingenium and Grids and Caves wouldn't mean a damn thing unless the demon king—and all concept of future demon kings—died.

If not, we'd lose the most important game of all.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Kelly is not reading or writing, she is lost in her latest reverie.

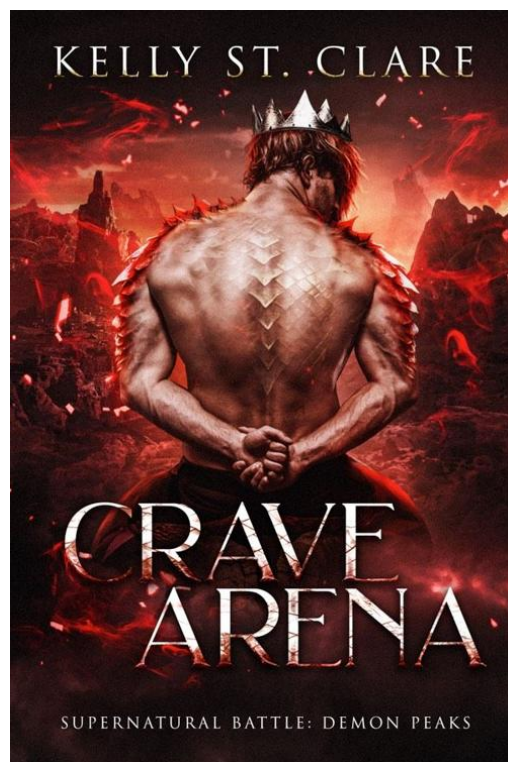
Books have always been magical and mysterious to her. One day she decided to unravel this mystery and began writing.

Her works include *The Tainted Accords*, *Last Battle for Earth*, *Pirates of Felicity*, *Supernatural Battle*, and *The Darkest Drae*.

Kelly resides in New Zealand with her ginger-bearded husband, a great group of friends, and whatever animals she can add to her horde.

[Join her newsletter tribe for sneak peeks, release news, and disjointed musings at kellystclare.com/free-gifts/](http://kellystclare.com/free-gifts/)

# CRAVE ARENA



The *Supernatural Battle* world ends with **Demon Peaks**.

Book one coming soon!

WHILE YOU WAIT

THE SUPERNATURAL BATTLE STARTS HERE!



**[Complete Series. Available Now!](#)**

## BOOKS BY KELLY ST. CLARE

### **Magical Dating Agency (Paranormal urban romance)**

[Love & Curse Making](#)

[Love & Magic Shaking](#)

[Love & Heart Braking](#)

### **Honey & Ice Trilogy (Fae adventure romance)**

[A Court of Honey & Ash](#)

[A Throne of Feathers & Bone](#)

[A Crown of Petals & Ice](#)

### **World of Honey & Ice ( Fae adventure romance)**

[Thorn Kissed & Silver Chains](#)

[Ivy Touched & Bronze Blade](#)

Black Roses & Gold Queen

#### **Supernatural Battle**

### **Vampire Towers (Paranormal romance)**

[Blood Trial](#)

[Vampire Debt](#)

[Death Game](#)

### **Werewolf Dens (Paranormal romance)**

[Shifter Wars](#)

[Moon Claimed](#)

[Wolf Roulette](#)

### **Coven Caves (Paranormal romance)**

[First Ritual](#)

[Chaos Pact](#)

[Last Gift](#)

### **Demon Peaks (Paranormal romance)**

**Crave Arena**

**Wrath Curse**

**Final Tier**

### **The Darkest Drae (Dragon shifter romance)**

with Raye Wagner

[Blood Oath](#)

[Shadow Wings](#)

[Black Crown](#)

### **The Tainted Accords (Royal fantasy romance):**

*Fantasy of Frost*  
*Fantasy of Flight*  
*Fantasy of Fire*  
*Fantasy of Freedom*

Novellas:

*Sin*  
*Olandon*  
*Rhone*  
*Shard*

**Pirates of Felicity (Pirate fantasy romance):**

*Immortal Plunder*  
*Stolen Princess*  
*Pillars of Six*  
*Dynami's Wrath*  
*Veritas*  
*Eternal Gambit*  
*Mortal Trinity*

**Last Battle for Earth (Dystopian romance):**

*Earth's Warrior*  
*Rebel's Crusade*  
*Traitor's Mandate*

# JOIN THE BOOK BARRACKS!

Join our book tribe for Demon Peaks book chats, giveaways, advanced reader opportunities, and more!