



MIDNIGHT ASCENSION

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Midnight Ascension

BLOODLINES BOOK 5



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Midnight Ascension
Bloodlines Book Five
By
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Midnight Ascension

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Written by L. Guyatt as Erin O’Kane

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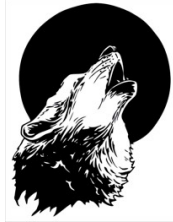
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Chapter One



When I woke up this morning in my mates' arms, fighting a giant minotaur was not what I thought the day had planned for me.

Now is not the time to wonder what in the goddess's name I've gotten myself into. I need to focus on making sure my mates are okay and not dying or being dismembered by *that* thing. It bellows, the ground shaking with its fury, and my limbs feel weak with fear.

The minotaur easily stands as tall as three full-grown males, with the face of a bull and long, sharp horns that curl up and around its head, and its muscular body makes Joel look small in comparison. It snorts and stamps its huge back legs, getting ready to charge at my mates. The points of its horns look sharp, and I have no doubt that if one of them gets stabbed, they will die. Just that very thought has me steeling myself and pushing my uncertainties away, the fear of losing my mates far greater than my worries about myself.

The dark presence that resides within me rises, reminding me of what I learned before I stepped into this chaotic scene.

The archway of truths.

I'm sure it was designed to tear me apart and make me question myself, and it did, leaving me feeling raw and vulnerable. However, as always, my mates are my priority, so for them, I accepted all of my faults. At some point, I have no doubt that everything I've learned will come crashing down on

me, but that time is not now. A vision was gifted to me when I passed the test within the arch—a vision of my mother and the goddess before I was born—and I learned something very important, something that's going to change everything. Goddess blood runs through my veins.

At my side, Star, my wolf made of starlight, glimmers in the artificial light, her hackles raised. Her low snarl is aimed at the minotaur, but she doesn't stray from my side, waiting for my instruction. Glancing around the room, I take stock of our situation, quickly noting that Scott and all four of my mates are here. Other than the minotaur, we're alone and have no weapons, but my skin tingles with my power. I'm not powerless here, I have magic.

“This challenge is simple. Find and defeat your opponent.”

The queen's voice floats through my mind, reminding me why I'm here. Thanks to the prophecies that have recently come to light, the witches seem to believe I am the key to ending the war between the werewolves and witches. I will either succeed in uniting them, or I will bring doom upon us all. No pressure.

To prove that I am this chosen one from the prophecy, I've been given a series of challenges, each testing a certain aspect of my character. This is the first of those challenges. Defeat your opponent. Simple, yes. Easy, no. Of course, it couldn't have been another witch, oh no, it was a creature I didn't know existed outside of mythology. Do they really think I'll be fighting creatures like this in my task to bring about peace? Most likely this is the queen exerting her power over me and hoping I'll fail in the process.

At the moment, the minotaur is between my mates and me, so my first task will be reaching them. They don't look too exhausted, which makes me think they've not been here the whole time and probably had to work their way through the maze like I did. Allowing my eyes to pass over each of them, I give myself half a second to check them for injuries.

The only one who seems to be injured is Syn. He's clutching at his arm, and it hangs in a strange position that makes me think he dislocated his shoulder. However, as soon as I stepped through the archway of truths, his gaze locked straight on me, a hint of madness gleaming in his eyes.

"Mate," he calls, and somehow, I'm able to hear him despite the distance between us. My bond tingles in my chest, and I realise I'm not truly hearing him, but *feeling* him. In fact, all of my bonds seem to be restored, even the strange, unexplained connection with Scott.

The others have all noticed me and are calling out, but they keep their primary focus on the threat standing before them. Everyone except for Syn, that is. He continues to stare at me, seemingly oblivious to the danger around him, and slowly begins to walk my way, right into the path of the charging minotaur.

"Syn!" I shout, my voice cracking with emotion as I reach out. My magic flares inside me, but I don't know what to do or how to protect him as the stampeding beast barrels towards him. Everything seems to move in slow motion, and I watch as Star races across the space to try and reach our mate, knowing she won't get to him in time. My palms buzz with magic, but without direction, it just sits there uselessly.

All of a sudden, time seems to return to normal, and a body slams into Syn, pulling him back and narrowly avoiding being trampled by the minotaur.

Tilting its head back, the creature bellows its anger at the loss of its prey. My breathing is ragged as Star throws herself at the minotaur. On instinct, I run forward, trying to get to my mate, and I have to force myself to stop and plan how I'm going to do this.

Joel has his arms wrapped around Syn, holding him in a bearhug to stop him from doing something stupid. Syn doesn't see it that way though. He's lost to his madness, his eyes locked on me. Right now, Joel isn't his friend, he's an obstacle stopping him from getting to me. Snarling, he fights against the larger alpha, trying to get out of his impossibly strong

arms. I can see Joel talking to Syn in a low voice, trying to get through to him, but he's too far gone, not even caring about his injured arm as he thrashes about. My bond is practically weeping in my chest, and I find myself slowly skirting the edges of the space, desperate to get to my mates.

Scott, Atlas, and Nicolai have been attempting to distract the creature. Its eyesight doesn't seem to be very good, relying on sound and movement to direct it. The three of them have spread out and are shouting, making as much noise as they can to confuse it, giving Joel more time to drag a struggling Syn back. It seems to be working, because the creature's ears flick back and forth as it picks up on the many different sounds.

Making the most of the distraction, I pick up the pace and cross the space. My movement must catch its attention, though, because its huge head swivels around, and the minotaur narrows its squinty eyes on me. I know I've fucked up. It charges towards me, not giving me time to think. Breath caught in my chest, I stare at my death. A surge of magic flows through me, and acting on instinct, I raise my hands, palms extended as power rips out of me. Surrounded in a glittering ball of starlight, I pray it will hold as the creature lowers its head.

The impact causes both myself and the minotaur to fall back. *I'm still alive*, I think dumbly, lying on the ground and staring up at the ball of stars I'm encased in. However, they flicker before my eyes, and I feel my power waning. I won't survive another hit. The minotaur is slowly getting back to its feet, shaking its head, and it won't be long until it's charging again.

"Laelia!"

There's a lot of noise, but one of my mates' voices is louder than everything else—Atlas.

"Laelia, get up and fucking run!"

His order snaps me out of my daze, and I force myself to stand. My body is still in shock from the force of the minotaur's blow, and it takes a moment for me to find my balance. The shield flickers around me again, and Star is doing

her best to keep the creature away, but she's so small in comparison that she's unable to actually cause any damage. If anything, it just seems to enrage the creature more.

Magic pulses around us, and my eyes lock on Atlas. His face is twisted in concentration, both hands extended as he stares at the minotaur. The ground beneath the creature's feet is glistening with a sheet of ice, causing it to slip and fall. It won't keep it down long, but it's the opening I need.

Stumbling forward, I force my uncooperative legs to move. I'm not afraid to admit that I'm scared, glancing at the huge, enraged creature as he sees me hurrying past. Its efforts to free itself only double, forcing Atlas to concentrate harder on maintaining the spell.

Seeing my struggle, Scott and Nicolai rush towards me, meeting me halfway and practically dragging me over to their half of the space. It's only when I reach that point when I feel a faint tingle over my skin—a barrier. They separated us *again*. Somehow, I'm able to pass through easily, but I don't miss how Scott pauses for a millisecond before I cross over that invisible threshold. They must have learned the hard way about the shield cutting them off from this side of the room.

I have no doubt that the minotaur has free rein of the room though. Images of the minotaur impaling me while my mates watch on play across my mind. Part of me wonders if this is exactly what the queen was hoping for.

In their arms, my shaky legs threaten to give way, but they support me until I reach where the five of them had been convened.

“Laelia,” Nicolai murmurs beside me, like he can't quite believe I'm here, alive and in one piece. Cupping my cheeks, he stares into my eyes, and I think he's going to say something, but the moment passes.

A low growl pulls my attention to Syn, who is still being held by Joel. “Let me go,” he hisses, thrashing against the other alpha. Joel says something to him in a low voice that I don't catch.

“Mate.”

That one word is all the warning I get before Syn barrels into me, pressing against me. He grips my face between his hands and stares into my eyes, much like Nicolai did a moment ago, but this is somehow more intense, like he doesn't have the words to express himself, so he's trying to communicate with his eyes instead. His pain radiates through the bond, and I hate how he's hurting. Pressing his forehead against mine, he holds me as he slowly breathes in my scent. I can feel Joel close by, both because he feels the same pull to me as I do to him and so he can act if Syn turns feral. He's not going to though. Now that we're back together, I can feel his madness receding and my Syn returning.

“Can we please save this little reunion for later?” Atlas grinds out, and I see him still working his magic on the minotaur. He's beginning to show strain from holding the ice in place, making his face tight. That's exactly how the others will see it, as his magic is taking its toll, but he can't hide the little flare of jealousy he's feeling from me.

He's right though, we're still in danger, and it's foolish of us to let our guard down while the threat is *right there*. Stupid.

“What now?” Scott asks, as practical as ever as he visually checks over me, looking for signs of injury.

“We just need to kill the minotaur, right?” Nicolai asks, his voice tight as he looks over at the giant creature, his face paling at what he sees. “Sounds easy enough,” he mutters sarcastically.

Biting down on my lower lip, I look over at the minotaur. Star is still snapping at its heels, and Atlas's ice is keeping it at bay, but we all know that it won't be long before it attacks us once more. I have my suspicions about this task, and I quickly go over the various outcomes in my mind before coming to a conclusion. Blowing out a breath, I glance at the others.

“The minotaur is our target, but I think *I* have to be the one to end it.” Dread churns in my gut as I share my thoughts, my throat tightening. “The queen was pretty clear. I have to kill my opponent, and I'm allowed the *assistance* of my team.

Assistance.” Emphasising the final word, I shake my head. “If anyone else makes the killing blow, I’m sure she’ll find a way to void the victory.”

Atlas shifts his stance, his fingers trembling as he keeps his ice magic focused on the creature. “She’s right.”

If anyone is going to understand the queen’s whims, it’s him, and the others seem to come to the same conclusion.

“We have to use our strengths to get through this,” Joel comments, comfortably stepping into the alpha roll. Glancing at Syn, he lowers his voice slightly. “Are you in control of yourself?” It’s not to shame the other alpha, but because he’s about to put his trust in the male and needs to know that he’s not going to go feral again. Syn doesn’t even bother to look offended, simply nodding.

“Okay. Syn, Scott, and I will be in wolf form. Atlas and Nicolai will do what they can with their magic,” Joel continues, stumbling over the word “magic” when he’s speaking about Nicolai, but he carries on as if nothing happened. “We can distract the creature and keep it away from you while you come up with a plan to kill it.”

I love that he has so much confidence in me, far more than I do in myself, and for a moment, my insecurities almost get the better of me. *I don’t know how to control my magic*, the small voice in my mind says. *What if I hurt one of you? What if I can’t do it? Am I strong enough? I don’t even know if I can kill this thing.* Doubts creep in, but I shut them down quickly. Ivar told me to trust in the goddess and my instincts before the challenge started, and so far, the advice has led me true.

You are part goddess, I remind myself firmly. *The goddess made you as you are. Embrace your differences.*

Taking a deep breath, I nod my head in agreement. Joel’s small, proud smile strengthens me. He doesn’t ask how I’m going to manage it, he just knows that I can do it, and that gives me the confidence to try. The others all agree to the plan, bolstering me even more. Joel and Scott begin stripping off their shirts and removing their pants, preparing for the shift,

and I turn to Syn. He's undressing too, and worry sparks in my chest.

"Syn, are you okay? Your shoulder—"

Before I can utter anything more, he reaches up and violently shoves it back into place with a sickening crunch. His eyes glow with his wolf, and he grits his teeth, but he makes no sounds of pain. Werewolves heal quickly, and the shifting process should fix his shoulder completely, but I still worry.

Taking my hand, he presses it to his cheek and stares deeply into my eyes. "For you, mate, I would break every bone in my body and fight a thousand minotaurs."

He kisses me fiercely, taking my breath away. Before I know it, he backs away and kneels on the ground next to Scott and Joel, the familiar tingle of their werewolf power washing over me as their bodies shift into huge wolves. Without waiting for further instruction, they run into the centre of the room where the minotaur is still fighting against the ice beneath its feet. Star is tiny compared to them, but the four of them snarl and lunge at it, keeping it away from where I stand with Nicolai and Atlas.

"Are you okay?" I quietly ask Atlas, noting the shake in his arms and wishing there was some way I could help.

"What can I do?" Nicolai asks, appearing at my side, his face holding a mix of complex emotions. I can feel his indecision and pain through our connection. He's missing his wolf. He wants to be out there with the other wolves so desperately, but he knows he can't, so instead, he feels useless. His magic is practically pulsing from him, begging for an outlet, but he doesn't know how to use it.

Atlas glances at him, obviously sensing the same thing I am, his eyes brightening with an idea. "Place your hand on my shoulder. I can channel some of your magic into myself and use it."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Nicolai warns, but he steps forward nonetheless and places his hand on Atlas's

shoulder, grateful to have a job.

“I’ll guide you.”

Atlas quietly instructs Nicolai, and I tune it out, taking a step away so as not to disturb them. Now, I just need to figure out how I’m going to kill this creature. I know that, somehow, we’re being watched, and my every move will be judged. Even if I had full control of my power and could blast the creature with one mighty bolt of magic, I’m sure that I’d get accused of not performing the challenge properly. The queen wants a show, so that’s what I’m going to give her.

I make sure that everyone is okay before blowing out a breath and kneeling on the ground. The grit bites into my knees, but I ignore it as I close my eyes and take several deep, calming breaths.

“What’s she doing?” Nicolai asks, his voice carrying over as I settle myself.

“She’s praying.” Realisation lightens Atlas’s voice. If he explains further, then I don’t hear it, too deep in my meditation.

Praying aloud would make more of an impact, but I won’t make a pantomime out of praying to the goddess. She deserves respect, and I sincerely mean every thought I weave into my prayer. However, knowing that I’m being watched is only going to help send the message that I’m serious about this to the watching witches. Atlas vocalising what I’m doing only helps me. Many within Haven already believe I’m a saintly figure who has been sent by the goddess to carry out her work, so if this adds to that and gains their support, then that can only be a good thing.

Mighty goddess, I begin, reaching out to the comforting presence I’ve always known. Guide me. Help me use the magic you’ve blessed me with and complete this gruesome task. Please, look over us and keep us safe.

Immediately, I feel the goddess surround me with her love and warmth.

Always, little moon, she whispers into my mind. Trust your instincts. I am with you always.

With a smile on my lips, I open my eyes and see that only a handful of seconds have passed. Atlas is still instructing Nicolai in a low voice, and Star is with my three wolves, dancing around the minotaur and keeping it busy. All I have to do now is trust that I'll know what to do at the right moment.

Standing, I brace myself and start walking out across the open space, closing the distance between the creature and me. The closer I get, the more the ground shakes, and I'm not sure if that's because of the creature itself as it stamps around or the quaking of my knees. At this point, I still don't know what I'm going to do.

The creature sees me coming and stills, locking its eyes on me. Completely ignoring the attacking wolves, it focuses entirely on me as if it knows I'm its target. With huge steps, it pushes past the wolves, somehow gaining traction on the ice, and picks up its pace as it lowers its head, ready to charge at me with its razor-sharp horns.

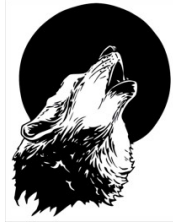
The darkness rises up inside me, and my fear evaporates. Trusting in my power and the fact that the dark presence hasn't ever let me down, I start to jog towards the creature, picking up momentum. I still don't know what the plan is, but I keep being given the same message. *Trust your instincts.* That's exactly what I plan to do.

Power tingles through my body, making me come alive. I feel like I'm *made* of magic, every cell in me buzzing with energy. The creature is practically upon me now, and when the horns are within touching distance, I follow my gut and grab onto them, using my momentum to swing around and straddle the back of the minotaur's neck. My whole body screams out in pain as I use muscles I've not used before. I know I'm going to hurt tomorrow, but in the meantime, I focus on keeping my seat as the creature bucks, trying to throw me off. Tightening my thighs around its neck, I hold out my right hand, my magic congregating there. It only needs a tentative thought, and it materialises into a blade of starlight. It's a marvel, but I don't have time to admire it as the meaty hands

of the minotaur try to grab me. With both hands, I raise the blade high before plunging it into the side of its neck. It's quick and bloody, but it does the trick.

The creature stumbles, and for a moment, I feel powerful and goddess-like, but then reality hits me, and the creature collapses, taking me with it to the ground.

Chapter Two



Being pinned under the minotaur's bleeding body wasn't how I expected to win my first challenge, but beggars can't be choosers. My plan seemed so good while I was in the middle of enacting it, but what I didn't take into consideration was that the creature might turn and stumble onto its back as it died. As a result, I'm stuck under the huge head of the corpse, the blood from its neck pouring straight onto me before sinking into the ground.

Thankfully, I didn't hurt myself in the process, but I'm now trapped, and no matter how I wiggle, I can't extract myself.

I can hear my mates calling to me, and after a few seconds, I start to wonder why they've not come over to help me. Usually, they would rush to my side. Has something happened to them? Sudden, uncontrollable fear overwhelms me, and I start to thrash more, turning my head both ways to try and catch sight of them.

My vision starts to waver, and that panic only increases. What is happening? It's only as I fall completely into darkness that I feel magic encasing me.

Applause is the first thing I register, polite clapping filled with the occasional shout of my name. Slowly, I blink my eyes

open, banishing away the darkness that stole my vision. My foggy brain is slow to put everything together, and looking dumbly around the room, I sluggishly realise that I'm back in Haven. The magic must have pulled us back here.

I feel hundreds of sets of eyes on me, and I twist to look up at the tiered seating, packed full of witches. Many watch me with interest, and some still watch me with disgust, but what disturbs me the most is the number of witches who are looking at me with something akin to adoration. The witches' support is key to me surviving here, especially if the queen decides that I've outlived my usefulness. However, what I see in their eyes scares me.

A groan beside me reminds me of why we're here—the challenge. Whipping my head around, I see all five guys slowly waking up from whatever magic knocked us out. I have no idea how much time has passed since we killed the minotaur, but we're all still caked in dirt from the fight. My clothes make a squelching noise, and I glance down, wincing as I find I'm still covered in the creature's blood. It's still wet, so I don't think much time has passed.

Movement catches my eye, and I follow it to find Kano, my half-brother, walking towards me. His expression is a mask of dull amusement, but as he holds out his hand to help me stand, he leans in close. "Are you okay?"

My whole body aches, and I know I'm going to be covered in bruises thanks to the minotaur landing on me as it died, but in the grand scheme of things, I came out of the challenge quite well. Killing the beast wasn't the hard part, but facing my failures in the archway of truths was. Honestly, I still feel a little broken from what I witnessed, but I'll deal with that later.

My lips quirk at Kano's question, and I dip my head slightly in answer, not trusting my voice right now. The hall has quieted, and everyone seems to be waiting for something. Beside me, Scott and my mates begin to stand. I want to go to them, check them all over, and make sure they are okay, but I won't do that here—not in front of the queen. She'll use any weakness she believes I have in her favour, so instead, I put on a confident mask and squeeze Kano's hand in thanks.

He gives me a final once-over then spins on his heel and strides across the open space until he's back at the queen's side. Luna is standing on the other side of the dais, a wide, proud smile stretching her lips. My smile becomes genuine for a moment.

Ivar is behind the throne, his black eyes watching me closely. Finally, unable to ignore her any longer, I move my attention to the queen. She sits upright in her throne, a pleasant smile gracing her lips. It's all a lie. I can see her annoyance over the fact that not only did I survive, but I passed all of her little tests within the challenge.

Although I'm aching, dirty, and groggy from the magic, I feel a smug sense of pride, but I don't let my smile show on my face. I wait for whatever she has planned next. However, her eyes narrow on me, and I realise I must not have hidden my satisfaction at beating her very well. Goading her is a bad idea, especially when she has an audience and is forced to hide her true nature.

The clapping has died down now, anticipation building in the room as I sketch a shaky curtsy in her direction. My mates do the same, although Syn's barely concealed snarl and dip of his head is hardly following protocol. The queen must decide it's not worth her time to address his behaviour, because she keeps her eyes locked on me. In fact, I've noticed how she's hardly even looked at my mates. No, that's not true, I've seen her watching Atlas, and she even sent a curious look towards Nicolai. It's my werewolf mates she's refusing to acknowledge. Disgust rides me hard, and it takes effort to keep it from my expression. It seems she will only deal with werewolves when it will gain her something. Why I'm surprised, I don't know.

Sitting forward in her throne, she smiles demurely, resting her hands on her lap. "Laelia, congratulations on completing your first challenge." Clapping fills the hall once more, echoing around us thanks to the acoustics, making it seem as though far more people are here than there really are. The queen preens like the applause is all for her, glancing around the room and meeting the smiles of the people. Once it dies

down, she finally returns her gaze to me. “I think that I speak for everyone when I say your methods were creative and... unexpected.”

I want to smirk at this comment, but I force myself to keep a neutral expression. A couple of smothered laughs sound from behind me, quickly covered by coughs. The urge to turn around and see who laughed is strong and almost causes me to break my mask. Taking a deep breath, I stay strong and wait for the queen to continue, wanting to get out of here as quickly as I can.

“You passed the challenge,” she continues, pretending as though she didn’t hear the laughs. “Now, you and your team may go and clean up, rest, and get ready for the party.”

I’ve said nothing to her since I was dragged back here after the challenge, and I hadn’t planned on it, but her comment pulls me up short. “Party?”

“Of course. Did you not know?” Her smile widens into a grin at catching me off guard, gesturing wide as she encompasses everyone in the room. “After each challenge you complete, there will be a celebration. Let us celebrate with you.”

“Oh,” I reply dumbly. “Wonderful.” I have no idea how else to respond without giving away my true feelings about this new little bombshell.

The last thing I want to do is be paraded around at a party when I just broke my soul open to save my mates, followed by fighting a mythical creature. Verbally sparring with the queen at a party while pretending to celebrate my victory sounds like a nightmare. The corner of her mouth twitches, confirming what I suspected—this is exactly why she’s throwing these celebrations. Not only does it make her look like a generous queen, but she also knows they’ll make me uncomfortable, and that, while I’m exhausted and aching, I’m more likely to make a mistake and offend someone. This is all a game to her, a game of how popular she can be, and right now, she’s feeling threatened by my performance in the challenge.

“You are dismissed. Luna, make sure they are looked after properly.” The comment is warm, like she truly cares that we’re taken care of, but it’s abundantly clear that she’s done with us from the vague wave of her hand. Now that she’s finished dealing with me, she can return to having the witches’ full attention.

Luna curtsies to her monarch and walks over to meet me, gesturing for me to follow her. “Come, champion,” she teases quietly before she walks straight towards the double doors, which magically open to let us out.

I turn my back on the queen, rolling my eyes at Luna’s comment and following her from the hall, my mates close behind me. As soon as we’re in the hallway and the doors shut behind us, I feel like I can breathe again, the band of anxiety around my chest finally releasing me.

“Are you okay?” Luna asks quietly, sidling up to my side. “That looked rough.” From the sadness in her eyes, I know she’s not talking about my fight with the minotaur or the hedge creatures, but my inner battle in the arch. The comment makes me wonder exactly what they could see while it was happening, and for a second, fear grips me.

“You didn’t... You couldn’t see...” My voice is a croak, and I trail off, not knowing what to say. I don’t want my mates to hear what happened there, since they would worry. Mercifully, Luna understands.

Reaching out, she places a hand on my arm. “No, no, don’t worry. We could only see your body and expressions.”

Releasing a shaky breath, I nod in response, not having the words to explain my relief. I feel sick from the stress of it all, but I just want to go back to my room and cuddle up with my mates. I need to feel them and remind myself why I’m here.

Sensing my distress through our bonds, my mates drift closer, not really knowing what’s causing it, yet feeling the urge to ease it. Syn snarls lightly at Luna, assuming she’s the one behind it, but I place a hand on his arm and shake my head, silently asking him to stand down.

We say nothing more, and Luna leads us back to my room. My mates surround me like my own personal guard, sending little looks my way as though to assure themselves that I'm still here. Once we reach the corridor that leads to my room, we say our goodbyes to Luna and quickly enter.

As soon as the door shuts, I turn and look over each of the guys. "Is everyone okay?"

There are some acknowledgements, but each of them allows me to examine them without protest, sensing my need to do this. I check Syn over the most thoroughly, making sure that his shoulder has healed properly. Thankfully, the process of shifting forms has sped up his healing, and he seems to be okay. It's only once I step back from him that I see everyone is still gathered in a semicircle, wearing varying looks of concern on their faces.

Joel clears his throat and steps forward, reaching out and cupping my cheek with his large hand. "Laelia, are *you* okay? The bond feels... taut."

Of course Joel would be able to see through my mask. The events of the day finally sink in, weighing heavily on my shoulders. Did they experience what I did with the arch? Was that part of the challenge for everyone, or did the queen save that experience just for me?

"Did any of you have to pass through an arch?" My question is asked tentatively, needing to know if they feel the same hollow feeling inside them that I do. I almost don't ask. If they know nothing about it, then they'll ask me to explain, and I'll have to tell them about everything I saw. What if they are disgusted by what I tell them?

They frown and shake their heads, confirming what I thought. That task was saved especially for me, and now they are going to discover how broken I am.

Atlas is staring at me with a furrowed brow, which slowly turns into a shocked expression. "An arch... Laelia, do you mean the archway of truths?"

Dread rises within me like a tidal wave threatening to wash me away. He's heard of the arch, and he looks horrified by the possibility that I had to pass through it. I say nothing, but my expression must give away my answer, because he curses loudly and turns away from me. His anger reaches me even through our incomplete bond.

The others have been watching this little interaction between Atlas and me in silence, but they can't hold back their questions any longer. Distantly, I wonder who's going to be the one to ask the question, but I'm struggling to think past Atlas's reaction.

"What's the archway of truths?" Nicolai asks, his expression concerned.

Atlas finally turns around, and although I can still feel his anger, when he glances at me, his expression softens, and I realise his outburst isn't aimed at me. Sagging with relief, I lean against Joel, snuggling up against his strong, supportive body.

"It's a magical gateway. You have to walk through it to pass, however, in the process, it will strip away everything you are and reveal the truth about you. It reduces most into dribbling wrecks. No one has ever passed through and stayed sane." Atlas's eyes stay on me during his entire explanation. Low curses sound from the others, and even Joel grumbles beside me, wrapping an arm around me protectively.

"Laelia, did you pass through the archway?" Atlas asks quietly, his expression carefully blank now as he tries not to scare me.

My breath is stuck in my throat, but there's no use denying it. "Yes," I choke out. Before any of them can begin to fuss or try to do anything, I put my hands up and back away from them, untangling myself from Joel. "I'm fine though." It's a lie. Now that my adrenaline is fading, and the drive to protect my mates is gone, everything feels like it's crushing me. The others will feel my lie through our connection, but I continue to back away.

"Laelia—" Atlas starts, but I cut him off with a tight smile.

“I’m going for a shower. I won’t be long.” All of a sudden, I don’t want to be touched, and now that I know they are safe, I need to be alone. Turning, I scurry away from them and practically run to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

As soon as I’m alone, I fall apart. The fact that I can feel their concern and yearning to be with me, to comfort and protect me, only makes me feel worse. This isn’t something they can protect me from. When I stepped through the arch, I knew it would be hard. I was warned after all. However, I had no idea how tough it was going to be. I made sacrifices for my mates, which is exactly what the queen wanted.

“Our hero will need to be brave and risk his or her life for the greater good.”

Her voice echoes in my mind as I slowly strip off my dirty, bloody clothing, dropping it to the floor in a messy pile. At the time, I thought she meant physically. Now I know that the true challenge wasn’t the minotaur, but the archway.

Stepping into the large shower, I turn it on and move into the spray. It’s freezing to start, startling a gasp out of me, but it quickly warms up. I watch as the water turns a reddish brown as it pours down my body. I don’t move or make an effort to scrub myself. I feel like I’m falling apart. Every part of me was stripped away, and now I have no idea how to put myself back together. All of my mistakes, selfish thoughts, and every lie that has ever passed my lips was thrown at me in that arch. My actions from the werewolf trials were examined, showing me where I caused pain and almost failed.

I accepted all of my flaws for my mates. I’ve always known I was different and have never denied that I’ve made mistakes. It didn’t defeat me back at the archway, and I’m determined that it won’t defeat me now. I’m just raw from everything and overwhelmed now that the danger has passed. Learning all of that about yourself is a test of mental strength, and I can understand why many are destroyed by it.

Whatever magic is embedded into that arch is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. It was almost sentient, as though it had a mind of its own. That theory is only

strengthened by the vision I experienced at the end. I get the feeling that the vision I had at the end wasn't usual, a gift from the archway. It felt... pleased with me for passing its test.

With tears still streaming down my cheeks, I grab a sponge and shower gel and begin to scrub the challenge from my skin. The circular motions seem to help, and as I wash away the dirt and blood, I start to feel a little lighter. I rub it over my skin repeatedly, far past the point where any visible dirt is gone.

I hear the bathroom door open, and from the pull in my chest, I know Atlas is in the room with me. He doesn't make a sound as he moves into my field of vision, and I see him leaning against the sink, arms crossed over his chest.

Having him close warms something in my chest, but I keep scrubbing, my skin still feeling dirty. *I need to be clean. I'll feel like myself again once I've washed today away.* The rational part of my mind is telling me this is a trauma response, and at this point, the only thing I'm achieving is making my skin red. However, my brain isn't in charge right now. My mates need me to be sane and keep us together, so I need to pull myself together and stop acting as though I'm falling apart. The goddess is with me and will help me through this.

I'm not sure how long I'm in the shower for while Atlas watches, but my skin has wrinkled, and the room is full of steam. When my mate steps up to the shower, he opens the door and places a hand on my arm, stopping my frantic movements.

"Laelia, stop. You're hurting yourself."

I'm not sure what he sees in my expression, but pain flashes in his eyes.

Hating that he's hurting, I try to force a smile onto my face, but it's shaky and unconvincing, even to me. "I need to get clean. It's helping. I will beat this."

He stares at me intently for a few minutes, then, to my surprise, he steps into the shower with me. He doesn't seem to care that he's still fully clothed and getting soaked from the

spray. His body fills the rest of the space in the shower cubicle, but instead of feeling claustrophobic like I thought I would, it helps settle some wild part of me. It also awakens something else. A flicker of desire works its way through the sadness and reminds me of some of the joys in my life.

Placing a hand on my naked waist, he pulls me against him, cupping the side of my face with his free hand. “Yes, you will, mate, because you are the strongest person I’ve ever met in my life.” He believes every single word he’s saying, and there’s not a single inch of doubt in his mind. It makes me wonder what he sees in me that I don’t. Is it the bond tinting his view of me, or can he genuinely see an inner strength in me?

Before I can begin to question it further, he lowers his head, pressing his forehead against mine. My heart aches for a different reason now as I feel his love pouring through our partial bond.

“I know you can survive all of this,” he repeats, his expression shifting to one of longing. “However, you don’t have to do it alone. Let me help. Let *us* help.”

Need fills his tone—the need to help me, heal my pain, and strengthen me in my time of weakness.

As our eyes meet, another need rises to the surface, one that I know he had no intention of pushing when he walked into this bathroom, but it’s making itself known nonetheless. It’s a longing that I feel too, that we’ve put on hold for too long waiting for the right time. I’m beginning to see that there’s never going to be a right time. My life is too complicated, and there will always be something that tries to come between us. We have to steal some time to sate this desire we so desperately feel.

My gaze flickers across his face, taking in his expression. “I know what will help.” My words are as quiet as a whisper, and I’m surprised that he can even hear me over the water.

“What?” he asks earnestly. “Anything for you, mate. I will do whatever you need.”

I can see he means it, and that absolute dedication confirms what I'd known for a while. Atlas hated me and despised our bond when we first discovered we were mates, which is why I refused to complete the bond initially. I wanted him to bind his soul to mine out of love rather than obligation or because he felt he had no other option. He's grown so much since we met, and I'm proud of the male he's become. I'd be honoured to call him mate.

“Fuck me. Complete the bond with me.”

It's not the most romantic of proposals, but that's never been how the relationship between Atlas and me works.

The flare of his own desire and excitement flutters in my chest, as does joy that this might finally be the moment we both become whole. With the bond only half completed, it feels like I'm missing a part of myself, something that Atlas has reiterated. Tonight, we can do something about that and create something from love after the destruction of the day.

His body stills, and his expression becomes serious as he searches my face. I'm not quite sure what he's looking for, but he's hesitating for a reason I can't comprehend. Having him close is washing away my pain and confusion far quicker than the water in the shower managed to, helping me feel more like myself once again.

Every spot he touches tingles and spreads warmth through my body. It's an addictive feeling, and I need more. Like a demand, the word “more” thrums through my body with each frantic beat of my heart. My hands fist the wet fabric of his shirt, which is now plastered against his chest.

“Laelia, are you sure now is the right time?” A note of strain laces his voice, and I realise why he's still against me—he's struggling to hold himself back and fuck me like I'm asking, instead making sure I'm ready.

I want to snort at the irony of his question given my own little mental conversation just moments ago, but I don't have the words or will to voice it. Instead, I bite down on my lower lips as I run my eyes across his body. Although I've seen him

naked before, there's something about him in a wet shirt that's making heat gather between my thighs.

"Yes, I think now is exactly the right time," I whisper.

With a pained groan, he tilts his head back and squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, obviously having a mental discussion with himself. When he looks back down at me, his desire is clear on his face. It's more than that though, he wants this more than just to fuck me, but to be *mine*, body and soul.

"I want nothing more than to complete the bond, Laelia," he begins, his lips pulling into a flat line as he pauses for a moment. "However, you've been through so much today, and I don't want you to do this as some sort of trauma response and then regret it in the morning."

My heart breaks a little for him at the idea of him thinking I might ever regret sealing our bond. Perhaps it's my fault for denying him the first time when my other mates completed their bonds easily. Now, I'm even more determined to finish our bond than ever.

"I will never regret you." My voice is strong and sure so I can be certain he doesn't misinterpret what I'm saying. Releasing his shirt, I press my right hand over his heart, the beat steady beneath my palm. "You hold a piece of my heart, of my soul, and the goddess brought us together for a reason. You complete me, Atlas, and my life would be broken without you in it."

We both know we've left this too long, the strain of holding back from completing the bond getting more intense as each day goes by. More than that, though, we need each other. We were predestined to be together. He has always been one of my missing parts, even if we only discovered each other recently, and now that I found him, I don't know how I ever lived without him. As with my other mates, Atlas was someone I didn't know I was living without.

The overwhelming rush of feeling from him is powerful as he reacts to my reply, the words meaning something to him as a mix of love, gratitude, relief, and other emotions I can't even

begin to put a name to reach me via our connection. He doesn't say anything, but I see the shift in his eyes.

He loses his battle against whatever moral compass he's been fighting against and presses a searing kiss to my lips, devouring my mouth. Moaning into the kiss, I return it with passion, sliding my hands up and around his neck, the spray from the shower falling down on us like rain.

After a moment, he rips himself away from the kiss, his chest heaving as he takes deep breaths, his hair plastered against his head. I'm sure I don't look any better, especially as a frown crosses my face, my confusion evident. Why did he pull away?

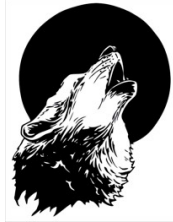
Before I can ask, he cups my face in both hands, his expression intense.

"Forever, Laelia," he tells me, the words firm, but I see the vulnerability he's trying to hide. "This means I'm yours forever."

I smile softly, hoping he sees that I'm taking that responsibility seriously. He will be mine, but I will always be his. We will be bound until the goddess calls us back to her and death takes us. Even then, I believe that we shall be together in the goddess's realm after our lives are over, living in eternal peace.

"Forever," I whisper in return, succumbing to the need in my chest.

Chapter Three



That single word releases Atlas from his insecurities and worries. He drops his hands from my face, skimming them over my body, and makes a noise of appreciation as he finds me completely naked.

Our mouths meet in a collision of teeth, tongues, and lips, and we kiss like long-lost lovers reuniting. His kisses are rough, but his hands are gentle as they move across my body. I'm not so gentle, my hands scrabbling at his clothes, desperate to get him naked so I can press myself against him. The feeling of his touch is addictive, and right now, his clothes are stopping me from getting my hit. My fingers fumble with his buttons, and he laughs against my lips. Irritation makes me bite down on his lip, drawing a groan from him.

Pulling back, he smirks at me. "Impatient," he scolds, but his expression takes any sting from his words. Grabbing two fistfuls of shirt, he tugs once, and the fabric tears, revealing his chest beneath. My eyes are wide, drinking him in as he pulls the shreds of shirt away from his body. Moving his hands to his trousers, he undoes his belt and fly before pushing them down, revealing that he's not wearing any underwear beneath. Kicking the sodden denim away, he stands naked, collecting a handful of water from the shower and splashing it over his face.

Shaking away the excess water, he locks his eyes on me, his hungry expression making me wet in a way that has nothing to do with the shower. He closes the distance between

us and pushes me backwards until my back hits the tiles of the wall. I gasp at the juxtaposition of the cold tiles and hot water. With a wicked gleam in his eye and a smile, he takes my hands and pins them above my head. With a single hand, he's able to hold me there, leaving his other hand free to explore my body.

The water trickles down his naked form, and I follow the path of the droplets to his hard cock. It's standing tall, pressing against his stomach, and even from here, I can see the pearly precum glistening on the head. I want to taste him. I've had him in my mouth before, but today, it feels more important. However, as I try to pull away from the wall, he tuts and flashes me a grin.

"I don't think so, mate."

Dropping his mouth to my neck, he kisses and nips along the length of it while his free hand trails down the bare expanse of my stomach. Reaching the apex of my thighs, he pushes one of his legs between mine, nudging them apart and giving him better access. My head rests back against the tile, and with nothing else to do, I bite down on my lip and enjoy the feelings he's creating in me. Finding my clit, he circles it with his fingers as I moan and writhe in his hold.

He pulls his hand away from my clit, and I focus on the attention he's giving my neck. He bites down on the curve between my shoulder and neck, and I gasp at the pain, only for him to press his tongue against it, followed by a gentle kiss. He does this over and over, swapping to the other side of my neck after a while.

More. I want more.

Atlas laughs against my neck. "Has anyone ever told you how impatient you are?"

Oops. That was only supposed to be in my mind—a hot, pleasure addled thought—but I must have spoken aloud. All other coherent words seem to have fled my mind, leaving me with only one.

"Please," I gasp, my pussy crying out for attention and my clit throbbing with need.

“Seeing as you asked so nicely,” Atlas replies, passionately kissing my lips.

The scent of magic fills the shower stall, and it takes me a moment to realise that he’s called his power. Attempting to lift my head, I try to find the words to ask what he’s doing when he presses his fingers against my clit. Icy cold digits circle the nub of nerves before tracing my labia and my entrance. The cold disappears, only to be replaced by his hot thumb rubbing my clit once more until I feel like I’m burning up. Then, the icy kiss of his fingers has me gasping again, and I’m unable to form a single coherent thought.

It’s a sensation I’ve never felt before, and it only enhances the sensitivity as the hot water continues to rain down on us. From his smirk, I can tell he’s enjoying himself, teasing me until I’m a quivering wreck. Leaning forward, he kisses the side of my neck and licks a trail down to my left breast. I’m so distracted by the sensations between my legs that when he sucks my nipple into his mouth, I almost fall to my knees. Had it not been for him holding me up, I would be a puddle of need in the bottom of the shower.

He chuckles, the vibrations making my already achingly hard nipple impossibly harder. Releasing it, he moves over to the one on the right, giving it the same treatment. He slides one, and then a second finger into my pussy. I cry out, needing this so badly. He continues with this pattern until my quaking body finally gives in, and I come around his fingers.

“Good girl,” he whispers, kissing me gently as the ripples of my orgasm fade. My sweaty forehead rests on his shoulder as I catch my breath, his hand stroking up and down my arm.

“Are you ready to be mine?”

His words send a thrill through me, along with a desire so strong it shocks me. I just had an earth-shattering orgasm, and I’m already ready for him. *Yes, I’m more than ready*, is what I want to say, but my voice has decided to desert me. Instead, I nod, my pleasure addled mind already anticipating the feel of him stretching me with his cock.

I've not even touched him yet, and as I try to pull from his grip, he stops me again with a smirk.

“Oh no, I don't trust myself right now. There will be time to play later.”

I'm feeling pretty slow, and it takes me a moment to realise what he's saying. He confirms this with his wry smile and next comment.

“If you touch me, it'll all be over. When I come, it will be when I'm buried inside you, where I belong.”

Stepping closer, he releases my hands and picks me up with a swift movement. A small, shocked noise escapes my throat, and I automatically wrap my legs around his waist, gripping his shoulders. His cock presses against my entrance, and I groan in need. He might not be the only one who doesn't last long, because I'm already clenching at the thought of him filling me. The strain is evident on his face now, and I know he's feeling desire just as much as I am.

The head of his cock presses against my entrance once more, nudging in, and I bite my lip to hold back my needy moan. Atlas takes in my expression, and in one swift movement, he slams into me.

I gasp at the sudden stretch, and it takes me a moment to adjust to his size. He seems to be just as dazed as I am, my pussy clenching down on him tightly. This is reality. This is real and finally happening. I can see the words going through his mind. He seems to realise that he was anything but gentle.

“Are you okay?” he chokes out, obviously not meaning to push in so quickly but unable to hold himself back. Even now, it seems to take great effort for him to restrain himself, his neck cording with tension.

“I'm fine, mate,” I assure him, pressing my forehead against his. “Fuck me.”

He watches me for a moment, looking for any signs of pain or uncertainty on my face, but there are none. It seems to be his turn to lack any coherent words, so he just nods and tilts his hips. It's the smallest movement, but it has me crying out.

He freezes, thinking he hurt me, until his frantic eyes land on my face.

“More, mate. I need more of you.”

This is all the assurance he needs, shifting his hips again. I grip onto his shoulders for dear life. My nails dig into his skin, and it must be causing him pain, but either he doesn't notice or doesn't care. Soon, he's pounding into me, the sordid sounds of our bodies coming together amplified thanks to the enclosed space of the shower cubicle.

From the way his movements are stuttering, I know it won't be long for either of us, our pleasure building until it crashes over us. I think I'm the one to go first, the orgasm hitting me like a wave and pulling Atlas with me. My pussy clenches down on his cock, and I feel the moment he comes, his semen filling me with each thrust.

That's the moment the bond snaps into place between us.

Our orgasm goes on and on, my ears ringing as my body adjusts to the feeling. Once I finally I return to reality, I find Atlas staring at me in wonderment.

“Mate,” he whispers like he can't quite believe it.

Smiling, I cup his cheek and lean in for a kiss. “Mate,” I confirm against his lips.

Our kiss is slow and passionate, saying everything that words cannot. We share how much it means to have one another and all of the pent-up emotions that we've never been able to express to the other. Most of all, we show our love. It's so easy to say those three words, but to truly show it, to truly feel it in your soul, is something only fated mates can experience. I know he loves me, because I carry a part of his soul within me and vice versa.

The water begins to cool, reminding me how long we've been in here, my skin wrinkled like a prune. I need to get out and speak to the rest of my mates, reassuring them that I've not had a mental breakdown, but the dull throb between my legs reminds me that I have other matters to deal with first.

“I need another shower after that,” I joke with a smile, picking up the abandoned sponge from the shower floor. My voice sounds croaky from calling out my pleasure, but I don’t care. Putting more shower gel on the sponge, I gesture for him to turn around.

He raises his brow, and I know he thinks I’m trying to hide my body from him and wash without him seeing, but that would be pretty pointless after everything we just did together. He’s seen me naked before, so I find it amusing that he assumes I’d want to cover my nakedness from him after completing our bond. Rolling my eyes, I gesture again. “I’m not being modest. I’m trying to wash your back.”

There is confusion in his eyes, as though he can’t understand why I would want to when he can do it himself, but he doesn’t protest and turns obediently.

Gently running the sponge over his back, I use my free hand to knead the muscles in his shoulders, releasing some of the knots I find. Slowly, he relaxes under my touch, his soft noises of pleasure making me smile. His head falls forward, and I see something on his skin that makes me pause. Blinking several times, I lean forward and see that it’s exactly what I thought it was—a mate mark. I’ve not seen it on him before, and I just assumed it was a wolf thing. None of the witches I know have ever mentioned marks indicating they are predestined to be with another.

My finger brushes over the mark on his shoulder, making him shiver. “I didn’t know you had this.”

Glancing over his shoulder, he shrugs as if it’s no big deal. “It’s a birthmark. I’ve always had it.”

“It’s not... Look, let me show you something.” Turning, I lift my wet hair and show him the matching mark on my own shoulder. “It’s a mate mark. They are rare within werewolf circles, but they are a sign from the goddess that you’re destined for another.”

As I turn back around, I note his shocked expression, his eyes glancing to my shoulder as if he can still see the mark. A million questions seem to flicker across his face, but he finally

manages to settle on one. “How have I never seen yours before?”

This is a very good question, and one I was wondering myself. How had I missed his for as long as I had? Were we just not looking for them, so caught up in our confused feelings for each other that we didn't notice? Atlas didn't know what he was looking for, and I didn't think it was possible for him to bear the mark.

“Maybe you didn't want to see it?” I ask quietly, posing the other possibility. “Perhaps it's only because you've finally accepted that we belong together that you've acknowledged the mark.”

I'm not sure if he hears me, his gaze distant as his mind turns over everything he's learned. Not pushing him for a response, I rest my head against his chest, letting him process without interruption. His arms wrap around me, and he lets out a sigh, dropping his cheek to the top of my head.

“All this time, we were destined.” His voice is distant, and I get the feeling he's reliving his memories and seeing them in a different light now that he knows he had a mate all along.

“You knew this,” I say gently, not wanting those memories to be tarnished. Since the moment our eyes locked when I was brought here, we've known what we were to each other. It was undeniable, and seeing our mate marks doesn't change that.

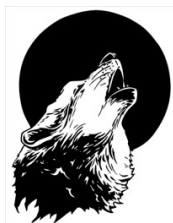
“I know, but actually seeing evidence of it... to know that at birth I was yours all along, just waiting for you...” He lifts his head and looks down at me with a troubled expression. “What if things hadn't worked out this way? I might never have found you. I *hated* you when we met.” Scoffing, he shakes his head with self-disgust. “It all feels so stupid now.”

I place my hands on his face and make him look at me and see the compassion in my expression. “No, it's not stupid. Your life was difficult, and it shaped your opinions, just like my upbringing did with mine,” I explain quietly but firmly. “What matters is that we're here now. We're bonded.”

The tension in his shoulders seems to leave his body with a long sigh. His end of the bond lightens, as though a huge weight has been lifted from it, and hope glimmers in his eyes. “I don’t know what I did to deserve a mate like you. You are perfect.”

My protesting words are caught in my throat as he presses his lips to mine in a slow, passionate kiss. As our mouths move together and we lose ourselves in the touch and taste of each other, I forget what I was going to say. It doesn’t seem important any longer, only this moment matters. I’ve not been “fixed” after my experience in the archway, and I’m still feeling raw from what I saw, but I can get through it with Atlas and my mates helping me. Everything else will still be there once this time together is over, but right now, this is exactly where I should be.

Chapter Four



When I open the door that divides the bathroom from the bedroom, all eyes turn expectantly to me. They are trying not to look, glancing back at whatever they were doing, but from the side glances I'm receiving, it's becoming clear that they knew exactly what we were doing in the bathroom.

“Feeling better?” Nicolai teases from the other side of the room, not even bothering to pretend otherwise.

Glancing over, I find him sprawled across the huge bed, winking when our eyes meet. He seems relaxed and not at all bothered about what just happened. Reaching out, I find his end of the bond is still shaky, but he seems so much lighter than he was before the challenge. Part of me wonders if it's because he channelled some of his power into Atlas, but he almost seems like the old Nicolai I know and love.

His comment, while making my cheeks flush, has the benefit of breaking some of the tension that had been hanging over the room.

Scott snorts from where he's leaning up against the wall. “It's about time you two fucked. He might lighten up a little now.”

At first, I worry that he's annoyed, his voice flat, but as our eyes meet, I see the humour in his gaze and his lips turn up in a smile. It was only a matter of time before Atlas and I

completed our bond, and he's had that time to come to terms with it.

Scott and I have a strange connection, one that neither of us can figure out, and I'm drawn to him in a way that I've only ever felt with my mates. If I'm truly honest with myself, I can admit that I have feelings for him, and I know they are reciprocated. However, even if all of my mates were okay with me adding Scott to our relationship, he was promised to another.

When he was younger, he was in a relationship with another werewolf. He loved her so much that when she needed to be saved, Scott traded his chance to meet his true mate so his girlfriend would live. Unfortunately, that relationship fell through, and Scott is left with the knowledge that somewhere out there, his true mate exists, and he'll never find her.

This puts us in a strange place. Why he's chosen to stick with me this whole time when he knows I'm promised to the four males in this room, I don't know. All I know is that we have an undeniable connection, and my instincts are telling me to keep him close.

"Yup, Atlas is part of the gang now," Nicolai coos from the bed, and I drag my attention from Scott to find him wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Syn strolls over and pulls me against him, burying his face into the side of my neck only to pull away a moment later, his nose wrinkling. "You smell like him now." Despite his apparent disgust, he doesn't release me from his hold, just eases back enough so he can glare at Atlas over my shoulder. "I don't like you, and if you hurt her, I will disembowel you. However, for her, I won't cause any problems."

Wow. Although not the warmest reception from Syn, he was the one that I wasn't sure how he'd react with Atlas becoming my full mate. The two of them didn't have the best introduction, what with Syn becoming feral and somehow tracking me down to the witch's hidden sanctuary. I also know he still struggles with controlling the madness our separation caused in him, so this is a huge step for him. Nuzzling against

him, I take a deep inhale of his scent and kiss the delicate skin of his neck.

“Gee, thanks,” Atlas mutters sarcastically, his arms crossed over his chest. I can feel how difficult he’s finding it to see another man touch me, not to mention my reaction in return.

Taking a deep breath, I attempt to step back from Syn, but it’s not easy. My bond is crying out for all of them. Honestly, I feel like I’m high on the scent of my mates after finally completing the bonds and with all of them here in one place. My mind is spinning with possibilities, and I want to crawl all over them and cover myself in them.

My mates can feel the direction of my thoughts, thanks to my horny bond, including Syn, who tightens his hold on me as I try to pull away. This only agitates Atlas all the more, the scent of magic surrounding him. He may not be able to growl to show his annoyance like my werewolf mates, but his magic speaks for him. I need to find a way to curtail this now before it breaks out into a fight. If only I could find my voice and control this rising need.

“Syn, back off for a moment.”

Joel’s order comes like a wave of cool water, helping to dampen the crazed feelings in my mind while also breaking the tension that was beginning to build between Syn and Atlas. It’s clear Syn isn’t happy about being ordered around by the other alpha, but Joel just raises his brow, not backing down.

“Don’t you remember how raw everything felt after you bonded? What would you have done if someone else touched your mate at that moment?”

Syn snarls once more, this time at Joel’s comment, confirming what the alpha said. Werewolves are possessive, and alphas are ten times worse. Syn is both of these things, and on top of that, his past makes him react faster and harder than my other mates. Not to mention when he turned feral, the only thing that kept him going was our bond.

He takes one last inhale of my scent and reluctantly releases me from his hold. In silence, he moves to the other

side of the room and leans against the wall, watching me with dark, possessive eyes. Atlas releases a tense breath, the scent of magic dissipating as he steps up behind me, his hand brushing the small of my back. Just that tiny contact has my body buzzing and need burning through me once more. His groan tells me that he feels it too.

“Please tell me this feeling goes away?” he asks no one in particular, his teeth gritted.

Joel chuckles ruefully. “The feeling that you want to fuck her all day, every day, and kill anyone who touches her?” The corner of his mouth turns up in a half smile. “Yeah, it eases, but you will always feel that pull. Welcome to our very own pack of misfits.”

Laughing at Joel’s welcome speech, I give into the pull and move until I bump up against Atlas’s side, leaning against him as his arm wraps around me. Some of the strain that was building up in my chest eases at his touch, and I relax against him.

“I’ve been around for a while now,” Atlas counters, addressing my other mates. “You all knew I was one of Laelia’s mates.”

Nicolai rolls over so he’s lying on his stomach and can look up at us. “Yeah, but you were so reluctant that until that bond was completed, we couldn’t know for sure.”

Joel has been watching me closely since I entered the room, and although I know how much he wants to step closer, he keeps his distance. “Laelia, how are you feeling?”

The change of topic makes me pause. I’m about to tell them that I’m fine, but from the look on his face, I know it’s pointless. They are all connected to me, even Scott in his own way, so they were able to feel my breakdown in the shower. After all, it’s what brought Atlas into the bathroom in the first place. A thought suddenly comes to me as I think about what happened in the shower after that, and my eyes widen at the realisation.

“Can you guys feel it when I bond with someone?” My question is hesitant, almost like I don’t want to know the answer.

“Yup.” Nicolai smirks, confirming my suspicion.

Fantastic. I guess I assumed they heard Atlas and me, since we weren’t exactly quiet. Oh no, while that’s probably true, they knew the exact moment we finally completed the bond.

“We can feel every strong emotion,” Syn chimes in from the other side of the room, not sounding pleased. “Whenever you fuck one of us, the rest of us know about it.”

Well, shit. My cheeks flare with heat, and I don’t know where to look. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, since sex is a natural part of life and these are my mates, I just had no idea they could feel my pleasure every time...

“Laelia?” Joel prompts, his previous question still unanswered.

My stomach drops, and I realise I’m not going to be able to hide this from them. Huffing out a breath, I try to figure out where to begin. “I’m... I don’t know what to tell you.” Shrugging, I glance up and meet his concerned gaze, only to look away again. I don’t want to see any of their reactions. “The archway broke me,” I admit quietly, feeling all of their gazes on me. “It fractured me into tiny little pieces of all my flaws and past mistakes, and scattered them like confetti. It’s going to take me time to put them all back together, but I’m stronger with you guys. Even now, after bonding with Atlas, I feel stronger.” As I speak, I realise that I do actually feel stronger. Sharing this wasn’t as awful as I thought, and as Atlas rubs the small of my back in support, I lift my head and look at each of my mates. “I will be okay, it might just take time.”

I see pride in their eyes and the small smiles of encouragement they give me.

Joel slowly steps towards me, glancing at Atlas to check that it’s okay to approach. My witch mate stiffens slightly, but he nods sharply to indicate that the alpha can come forward.

Closing the distance, Joel stops just a hairsbreadth from me, not quite touching but close enough for me to feel his body heat. His restraint is impressive, as I can feel how much his bond is calling on him to touch me, yet he holds off, knowing how raw Atlas feels right now.

“You can take all the time you need,” he begins slowly. “We love you, flaws and all. We all have them, and we all make mistakes. If we have to remind you every single day for the rest of our lives how perfect we think you are, then that’s what we’ll do.”

My eyes sting with tears that I attempt to hold back, glancing over to find both Syn and Nicolai nodding in agreement. When I look at Scott, I’m not sure what I’m going to see, but I am taken aback as he nods solemnly in agreement. Does that mean he’s agreeing, or he’s just acknowledging that I need support and he’ll be there?

No, I tell myself as I force my gaze away. I can’t start questioning everything, not when I need their support more than ever. I give them a small, shaky smile.

“Thank you,” I manage to croak out, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. Suddenly, I realise that there’s something else important I’ve not yet told them. My gut clenches anxiously in anticipation of their reactions. What if they don’t believe me? Clearing my throat, I pray for strength from the goddess. “When I was in the archway, something else happened to me.”

The tension shoots up, and they all look at me with confusion. Nicolai even rolls off the bed and stands, slowly walking over and stopping at a suitable distance away so as not to agitate Atlas. “What do you mean?” he asks calmly, but his bond is practically jumping in my chest with anxiety.

“It gifted me a memory.” Silence follows my dramatic comment, and everyone continues to look confused. “It wasn’t my memory, but I know it was true. I can feel it.” Pressing my hands against my chest, I wish they could feel the same instinct I could, and then they would stop looking at me like I just told them I could fly to the moon. Hearing it aloud, I realise it sounds crazy. If one of them told me that, I’d think

they had one too many drinks. It doesn't make sense, nothing about the arch does.

Needing some space, I step out of Atlas's arms, take a large step backwards, and close my eyes so I can't see the looks they share with each other.

"The vision was of my mother and the goddess," I continue, hoping that if I explain what I saw, they'll believe me. My eyes stay closed as I bring the memory forward in my mind. "They were having a conversation about me. She was heavily pregnant, and there was an alpha in the background who I think might have been my father." There's a fondness to my voice that takes me by surprise, and I blink open my eyes, staring down at my hands which are clenched tightly in front of me. "My mother knew she was going to die, and she knew that I was going to be special, blessed, then the goddess said something—" I cut off, realising how stupid it's going to sound out loud. If they didn't believe me before, then this will tip them over the edge.

"Tell us," Syn urges quietly.

Huffing out a breath, I lift my gaze and meet each of their stares. However, when I meet Syn's stare, his eyes glisten with knowledge, and I know he believes me. That gives me the strength to say what's been playing on my mind since I discovered it. "She said that I was part goddess."

There's a long pause, and I swear no one breathes, the room completely silent. When sound does finally return, they all speak at once in a rush, and I can't make out what anyone is saying. Overwhelmed, I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment and take several deep breaths, needing to control my emotions. I still feel fragile from earlier, so this is easier said than done.

"Give her a moment," Joel calls out, and I hope he can feel how grateful I am.

Once I've regained my senses, I open my eyes and look at each of them with trepidation. None of them speak, allowing me the chance to sort my thoughts. "I know it sounds crazy, but I swear it's true. I can feel it in my gut."

“It makes sense,” Syn comments with a casual nod, as though we’re discussing the weather and not a vision where I learned I’m part goddess. I knew he believed me, but the ease at which he accepted what I said when the others are still struggling to get their minds around it takes me aback.

When everyone looks at him in surprise, including myself, he raises a brow. “What? She’s the first werewolf-witch hybrid, the goddess talks to her directly, and her magic is starlight. Not to mention the prophecies about her.” Shrugging, he rolls his eyes at their dumbstruck expressions.

“You have always been different,” Nicolai speaks up, his expression thoughtful. “Even before your magic manifested.”

The two of us had grown up together. Honestly, I had a huge crush on him. When we were older, we started to become much closer, and his flirting felt much more meaningful. He remembers everything about our lives in our remote pack, and he is the only one who knew me before.

Being described as different always used to seem like a bad thing, only making me stand out from everyone else in the pack. I was an orphan with bright red hair and lilac eyes, not to mention my connection to the goddess. Then my magic appeared, confirming once and for all that I was different from everyone else. However, now that I see the path my life has taken and who I’ve met in the process, being different doesn’t seem to be too much of a bad thing after all.

Atlas has been quiet for a while now, his brow furrowed, and I’m worried about his reaction. Of my mates, he knows me the least, and although both the witches and werewolves worship the same goddess, they have different beliefs about her. Therefore, I don’t know how his knowledge of the goddess will affect how he sees me.

A small, thoughtful noise pulls my full attention to him, and as his eyes meet mine, nerves twist in my gut. “I have heard of the archway giving truths about a person’s life in the form of memories before, but we always thought it was nonsense, because no one survived the arch with their mind

intact.” He looks apologetic, and I sense his regret over the situation. “We thought it was babble.”

“Did you meet any of them? What happened to those witches?” I’m pretty sure I already know the answer to my final question, but I need to know if they are still around, and if I can speak to them and try to decipher their visions.

Atlas’s face is drawn, as if he’s lost in an unpleasant memory. “I only met two of them. The archway isn’t used often.” Sighing, he rubs a hand roughly through his dark hair. “Those witches died.”

“At whose hand?” Scott asks quietly. The question is asked neutrally, but it’s pretty clear Scott already has an idea of exactly how they died.

Atlas’s whole body stiffens at the unspoken accusation. “Some of those witches were dangerous. They were spouting nonsense about being attacked from the inside and were trying to hurt other witches within Haven. They had to be dealt with.”

We all know what that means. Those witches are now dead and were put down like stray, feral dogs.

I wonder how many of those witches actually had visions like mine but were dismissed as insane. The archway leaves no mental stone unturned, so I know how easy it would have been to fall into madness. There’s no denying that they were broken from their experience, but all of the memories they saw are now gone forever. Their truths were wiped away and forgotten just like they were.

“The others just retreated into their minds and eventually died within a couple of days,” Atlas continues, his arms crossed over his chest.

That final comment seems to break what little restraint Syn had been holding onto, and within a flash, he crosses the room and pins Atlas up against the wall. Gasping, I step back as Scott and Joel jump in to separate the two.

“You didn’t think to mention this before now?” Syn snarls, his face a mask of rage. “Our mate is at risk.”

An icy breeze suddenly fills the room, and Syn is shoved back several feet, the two werewolves holding onto him stumbling back in surprise. Atlas stands in a defensive position, ready to use his ice magic again, but I can already feel him calling it back to himself.

“Laelia is a completely different case. Don’t you think I’d be panicking if I thought she was ill in the same way? If I thought she might die?” he barks, his own anger spiking over the implication that he would allow me to get hurt and not say anything. His pride as a mate is wounded, and after bonding so recently, that’s got to sting.

Thankfully, Syn shuts his mouth, sensing that anything he says will only hurt me despite his anger at the witch.

Joel, ever the peacekeeper, steps into the gap, pulling all eyes to him and helping to relieve the tension in the room. However, he turns his gaze to me, his expression expectant. “What do we do now?”

It takes me a minute to accept that they are all looking to me for guidance. All I know is that I’m having to take this one step at a time. I can’t think too far ahead without panic seizing my gut. My darkness has been suspiciously quiet, and I wait for her to chime in, but when she doesn’t, I take a deep breath and focus on coming up with a plan.

“Now,” I start, glancing between them, “we get ready for a party.”

Chapter Five



“You look badass.”

Luna’s comment makes me smile as I finish swiping my blood-red lipstick over my lips. I’m wearing minimal makeup, only a dusting of powder over my face to give me a slight shimmery look in the light and some mascara to frame my unusual lilac eyes. My scarlet hair falls around my face in loose curls.

She’s right, I do look badass.

“Thank you, that was the vibe I was going for.” I grin at her in the mirror, my eyes widening as I take in her barely there outfit.

I was assured that tonight will be different from the other balls and celebrations that have been thrown since I’ve been here. Ball gowns, corsets, and formal suits are being ditched in favour of modern clothing, apparently all in my honour. Stepping into Haven had been like stepping back in time, and I never really understood why. It’ll be interesting to see what everyone else is wearing and how they interpret the dress code.

Luna spins around, and I let out a low whistle. Her dark hair is pinned up in an artfully messy bun, and several strands curl around her face, showing off her glittering silver eyes. Her body is clad in a skintight red dress that ends halfway down her thighs. Triangular slits in the dress show off patches of her tanned skin around her waist, the neckline dipping

dangerously low. The outfit leaves nothing to the imagination, and honestly, she looks amazing.

“I know, I look smoking.” She grins, posing with a pout for a moment to give me a better look at the overall effect.

Laughing, I raise my brows. “Whoa, stunning. Has Kano seen you yet?”

The question is asked innocently enough, but Luna instantly turns suspicious, narrowing her eyes as she plants her hands on her hips. “Why do you ask?”

Snorting, I shake my head, done with pretending. “Because the two of you are blatantly in love with each other.”

Outrage flickers across her face, followed by confusion and reluctant acceptance. Frowning slightly, she huffs out a sigh. “No,” she mutters as though that tells me everything I need to know. “I’ve not seen him yet.” Turning, she steps up to the mirror and checks out her appearance, smoothing down the fabric and picking at an invisible piece of lint. “You think he’ll like it?”

The question is asked lightly, like she doesn’t care about the answer, but she watches me in the mirror with anxious intensity. I want to reassure her and tell her to stop dancing around the issue and just tell Kano how she feels. She doesn’t need to dress up to impress him. However, as I go to do just that, I see the vulnerability in her eyes. She puts on a bold, brave face, but really, she’s just as anxious as the rest of us.

Knowing now isn’t the time for that pep talk, I purse my lips and say the only thing I can think of. “He’s my brother, Luna. I’m not having this conversation.”

She laughs and spins around, slinging an arm over my shoulders, all traces of vulnerability evaporated like morning mist in the sunshine. I smile back at her, my heart warming. I’ve never had many close friends who were girls, not through any choosing on my part. I’ve always just felt closer to the guys in my pack. Meeting Luna has been one of the huge, unexpected bonuses of being here. She feels like family, and I

truly hope we can find a way to keep that bond when all of this is over.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I come to an abrupt stop when I see the five males in my room. I thought it wasn't possible for them to be any more gorgeous, but it turns out I was wrong. Nicolai and Scott look mouth-wateringly handsome in dark trousers, white shirts, and unbuttoned black suit jackets. Joel is wearing navy blue suit trousers and a white shirt that pulls tight across his chest, showing off his muscular body, his suit jacket folded over his arm. Syn is also only wearing his shirt and trousers, his black suit jacket thrown over his shoulder. The top three buttons of the shirt have been left undone, giving me a tantalising view of his chest.

I look over at my newest mate, who's leaning against the wall. He wears black denim jeans, a tight white T-shirt, and a leather motorbike jacket. I'm not surprised that he chose to dress differently than the others, since he's able to get away with much more than the rest of us.

Where all of these clothes came from, I have no idea, but honestly, I don't really care right now.

All five of them turned to look at me as I exited the bathroom, freezing when they see what I'm wearing.

The dress is a shimmering silver that gleams in the light, a small tribute to my newest mate and his silver eyes. The bodice is tight and fitted, but the skirt flares out once it reaches my hips. Additional layers of light, glittering fabric lie over the top to give the appearance of stars. The skirt ends at my knees but tapers, making it longer at the back than the front.

As I was getting ready, I found the dress in my wardrobe with a note attached. It only had a symbol of a moon, which I interpreted as being a gift from Luna. As I was putting it on, I felt stronger, like I was putting on my armour. The tight but breathable bodice is like a bandage, keeping my broken bits together and making me look formidable in the process.

They stare at me as I stare at them, the room suddenly feeling hot as the atmosphere becomes tense. This is a different type of tense from before when we were talking

about the challenge and the vision. Worry and concern have temporarily vanished, replaced by a sexual tension that makes my skin heat.

“Mate...” Joel starts, lost for words as his heated gaze runs over my body. I can almost feel the touch of his gaze, my skin tingling as the scent of his desire reaches me. It’s not just him I scent, though, but the desire of all five males in the room. It makes me feel beautiful, desired, and powerful.

“Fuck,” Syn mutters from the other side of the room, and I turn my head to look at him, finding his hands balled into fists. Our eyes meet, and he curses again. “I’m going to end up killing someone tonight with you looking like that,” he bites out.

Is he losing control of the madness? When I touch his bond, he seems as stable as he usually does, so I’m not sure what triggered this comment. “What do you mean?”

Scott snorts, his appreciative gaze never leaving my body. “He means that everyone is going to be looking at you, admiring you, and *wanting* you.” The emphasis at the end of his comment does something to me, building warmth low in my stomach. My emotions are all over the place, heightened from my experience in the archway, and it’s making me feel like a yo-yo.

Joel makes a gruff noise of agreement. “We’re going to have to be on our best behaviour.”

The darkness within me finally stirs at the thought of the bloodshed they could cause. I should be worried, horrified even that their possessive natures could cause so much damage. However, the idea of my mates fighting for my honour is a huge turn-on to the dark presence residing inside me. It’s been unusually quiet, and even now it feels sluggish as she rises to the surface. *Don’t blame the darkness*, my mind whispers. *Admit it. You’re turned on by the thought of them fighting for you.*

Is that what I’ve been doing? Using the darkness as an excuse for my more violent, territorial feelings? Sure, she has always been the one to instigate it in the past, and she helps

me manage my power when I'm in danger. Lately, she's been so quiet, though, that I wonder if these thoughts are really just an extension of my own and feelings that I haven't been able to express myself.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts and staring at my mates that I jump as Luna steps up to my side.

"Geez, males are so territorial," Luna comments with a roll of her eyes. "Come on, let's go before they try to barricade the door to stop you from leaving."

"Don't tempt me," Syn murmurs darkly, a couple of the others grunting in agreement.

Luna links her arm with mine and practically drags me from the room, my males hurrying to join us.

Jazz music greets us when we enter the ballroom. The space is lit with pink and blue lights, giving the large room an otherworldly feeling. The differences are small, yet it feels like I'm in a completely different place. It's almost enough to make me forget where we are. The atmosphere of the room is electric, as are the wide smiles of those attending.

I needn't have worried about our clothing and if we'd stand out or not, as everyone seems to be wearing similar, less formal dress than usual. Even the queen is dressed down. Perched on her throne, she wears a long, form-fitting black dress, the rich fabric draped artistically across her shoulders and chest. Her hair looks golden in this light and is intricately braided, her crown sitting gracefully on top.

She greeted me with a nod of her head, her eyes narrowing on my dress. It doesn't escape me that we're mirror opposites of each other, with me as bright as starlight, and her swathed in darkness. It seems fitting somehow.

Surrounded by my mates, Luna and I walk through the ballroom and past the various groups of witches, greeting some with smiles and a nod. Some look like they want to step

forward and speak to us, but with one look at my mates, they back off.

Atlas is practically glued to my side the entire time, glaring at anyone who dares to get too close. His change in behaviour is obvious, and we're given several pointed looks, yet he doesn't let go of me for a moment. My bonds are vibrating in my chest, my mates alert and ready to pounce into action if necessary. They don't trust the witches, and here they are, right in the heart of the den of vipers.

We've almost completed our circuit of the room when I feel Luna stiffen, her breath catching in her throat. Glancing over at her with concern, I see her wide eyes are locked straight ahead. I start to follow her gaze when she takes a stumbling step, missing her footing. She straightens immediately like it never happened, but I notice the blush that colours her cheeks. Before I can ask if she's okay, she instantly returns to staring at whatever caught her attention in the first place.

Kano. She's staring at my brother, and he's staring right back.

There's a cluster of male witches at the base of the queen's dais, all chatting animatedly—all, that is, except for Kano, who seems to be locked in a trance. The two of them stare, and I admiration in Kano's eyes. When I look back to Luna, I see longing in her gaze.

My brother's companions realise he's no longer in the conversation with them and follow his gaze to see me and Luna walking their way. One of the males, a tall, gangly witch with shaggy dark hair, nudges the male next to him, saying something that makes the group smirk. While I don't know what he said, I recognise that smirk. Whether it was aimed at me or Luna, I have no idea, but it makes me angry nonetheless.

Kano doesn't find it amusing, though, and turns on them. I can't make out what he's saying, but his tone is harsh and biting. During all this, the queen watches on with interest, her eyes slowly moving from my brother to Luna, a smirk pulling

at her lips. She knows exactly how the two of them feel about each other, even though they try to hide it. It's one of the reasons she chooses Kano to be her "companion" so often.

As is expected, we need to greet the queen, which involves us stepping right up to the dais and where Kano and his companions stand. When we reach them, we slow, and Luna seems to purposely ignore him as we turn to the queen. We curtsy, and my mates follow Atlas's lead by dropping into a short bow. She watches the whole thing with a glint in her eye that tells me she's enjoying all of this, and then she waves us away dismissively.

We step back and practically bump into Kano as we turn to leave.

"Laelia." He dips his head in greeting, doing the same with my companions. "Atlas and... mates," he greets formally, stumbling slightly on how to address the gaggle of males surrounding me. He turns to Luna, his breath hitching in his throat. "Luna, you look..." He suddenly seems to remember that he's not alone and his every move is being watched. "Lovely. You look lovely."

My friend seems to deflate beside me, upset about the lack of reaction from my brother. However, I saw the desire and longing in his eyes that he tried to hide. An awkward silence falls over us, and Syn snickers behind me.

"Thank you. Will you be joining us?" I ask cautiously. I'm sure he would have already been with us if he wasn't bound to the queen tonight, but I ask for Luna who seems to have lost her voice.

Kano clears his throat, his smile becoming brittle. "The queen currently requires my presence, but I will join you later if I'm able."

Reading between the lines, I hear what he's not saying. She's magically bound him to fulfil her every need tonight and is displaying him for all to see like a trophy at the foot of her throne.

Smiling to cover my discomfort at the whole situation, I nod and tug on Luna's arm to get her moving again. She's staring down at her hands, which is where she has been looking since Kano mentioned the queen. He had simply been explaining the situation, but to Luna, it's another reminder of who Kano belongs to. Lifting her head, she blinks, and a bright smile pulls at her lips as she walks by my side, winking and blowing a kiss to one of the males beside Kano. My brother's reaction is about as happy as you would expect, his expression darkening, but Luna doesn't see it because she's looking straight ahead, studiously ignoring him.

We move on, and although she's smiling and nodding to witches we pass, I know that interaction with Kano upset her. Jealousy of the queen's relationship with him is only a small part of how she really feels, but the pain of being unable to be with the one she loves is written across her face. Of course, reacting the way she did only hurts both of them.

She's unusually quiet at my side. I don't like it.

I'm not the only one to notice.

"What was that about?" Atlas asks his cousin once we're out of earshot, leaning around me so he can see her reaction. There's an accusation in his question, his frustration showing.

"What?" she asks lightly, but I see the tic in her jaw. She knows exactly what he's talking about and that she's about to get a lecture.

"You just flirted with someone right in front of Kano. Geoff of all people." Scoffing, Atlas shakes his head and makes his feelings on Geoff clear. "If you're trying to get his attention, flirting with the sleaziest guy in Haven isn't the way to do it. You may be my cousin, but he's my closest friend."

Halting, Luna tugs on my arm, bringing me to a stop. Atlas, still attached to my arm, pauses and turns back so he can stare at his cousin. Hurt, anger, betrayal, and frustration all war on her face, her emotions so overwhelming she's unable to hide them beneath the usual mask that she wears.

Taking a shuddering breath, she rolls her shoulders back and pins Atlas with a narrowed stare. “I don’t know—”

Atlas seems to swell with anger, and I know I need to do something before this gets out of hand and becomes a full-blown argument in front of everyone.

Untangling my arm from my mate, I reach out and take her hand in mine, waiting for her to turn her attention to me. “He’s right, Luna,” I say softly without judgement, my eyes trying to convey what I can’t say aloud. “You’re both in a difficult situation, and doing things like that is only making it harder for both of you.”

I want to tell her the queen is a bitch who is using Kano against her, and these reactions are exactly what she wants. Everything I’m saying is out of love for her, and I’m trying my best not to sound like I’m scolding her. I’m just trying to help her in any way I can.

She doesn’t take it that way though. She stares at me like she’s looking at a stranger. Shaking her head, she takes a step back, pulling her hand from mine. Betrayal gives way to indignation.

“So let me get this straight. You can have five guys following after you, fucking you wherever you like, but I can’t flirt with one guy?” She laughs without humour, her eyes narrowing as she crosses her arms over her chest. “I’m single, he’s single. There is nothing wrong with me trying to have a good time. You’re a hypocrite.”

I stare at her for a moment, not quite believing what I just heard. Her comments hurt, flung like weapons to wound me, and they hit home. Shocked that she would turn this around on me, I wonder if I was actually wrong, and she isn’t my friend after all? *No*, I argue with myself. *She’s hurt and lashing out.* It’s true, she was probably expecting me to agree with her over Atlas.

I could let my injured pride talk for me and argue that these are my mates and we’re goddess blessed. I could remind her that she’s my friend and I’m trying to help her, but also

protect my brother. I could also remind her that she's in love with my brother, and acting like this just hurts them both.

However, as I stare into her face and see her glistening eyes, I know she's not in the right place to hear any of this, and fighting her will just cause a rift between us.

"Luna!" Atlas doesn't get this memo and snaps at his cousin, stepping forward as if to separate us.

Syn is at my side in an instant, and I know things are about to get ugly if I don't defuse them quickly. Reaching out, I grab his hand and make him look at me. I shake my head, silently communicating that I'm okay and I don't need him to protect me here. My mates have closed in on us, and Luna is looking up at them, noticing how they surround me, and she's outnumbered.

"I think you better step back," Joel suggests with a deadly calm that I've only heard him use on a handful of occasions.

Her mask finally shatters, and I see the hurt woman beneath. As she takes a step back, a look of betrayal flashes across her face. Before I can say anything, she turns and stalks away. I'm not sure what causes me to do it, but I glance over my shoulder and catch sight of Kano watching her walk away.

Despite trying to keep a low profile, we've attracted a fair bit of attention, especially with Luna stalking off. Honestly, it would have been hard to miss. Groaning, I cover my face with my hands. What a disaster. My mates close in around me, and while it makes me feel better to have them near, it's not helping defuse the attention we've attracted.

They seem to realise this too, and by some unspoken signal, they take a step back and fall into the positions they were in previously, creating a rough circle around me.

"We did the walk thing," Scott comments, and when I glance over my shoulder, I see the tension in his shoulders. He's struggling here. "Can we go and get a drink now?"

"Yes, I feel like I need about fifty," Atlas answers, his smile grim.

On the way here, Atlas and Luna explained that while it was a much less formal event than what we were used to and we wouldn't be announced on entry, we were still expected to do a circuit of the room, acknowledging those who were in attendance. It was a way for everyone to see the newcomers and for those who just arrived to pay their respects to the queen before enjoying the party. However, I get the impression that these more casual parties don't happen often.

To my immense surprise, I spotted a bar that's been set up in the far corner of the ballroom, complete with bartenders mixing drinks. The six of us make our way over and walk through groups of witches gathered nearby. Unsurprisingly, there's a queue, so we wait patiently for our turn, staying close to each other and silent. At least, that's what I'm attempting to do and not think about my argument with Luna. Am I a hypocrite? There is certainly nothing wrong with a single female enjoying herself with a single male, so I truly hope that she doesn't think I was trying to shame her. I simply don't want her or my brother hurt by them doing anything rash. My mates brush their hands against mine as we wait, something that could look innocent enough, an accident even, but each touch is meaningful, sensing my need for grounding.

Thankfully, we don't wait long, and before I know it, we're next in line to be served.

"Um, Lady Laelia?" a timid voice says from behind me.

Surprised, I turn around and half expect them to be looking for someone else, which is stupid, as there are no other Laelias in Haven. However, a group of five witches stands just a few feet away, anxiously waiting for... something. They are all around the same age as me, in their twenties and early thirties, with three females and two males. At the front of the group is a petite dark-haired witch.

"Can I help you?" I ask politely, but I don't manage to hide my surprise or confusion. I've been approached before, but it doesn't happen often and is usually when the instigator wants something from me. These witches are strangers to me, so I'm not sure why they stepped over to speak to me. Casual conversation isn't something that seems to happen here.

The female at the front of the group in a glittering purple dress smiles widely, her eyes full of excitement.

“It’s such an honour to speak to you,” she gushes, the group behind her nodding in unison.

“Oh. Thank you?” I don’t mean for it to sound like a question, but I’m completely baffled by this whole conversation. They are acting like I’m a celebrity, and after my day today, I’m still feeling emotionally raw, so I’m struggling with processing this. My mates are close, ready to step in if needed, but I’m not getting any hostile vibes from the young witches, so they are giving me some space. Atlas is still standing just behind me, hovering thanks to the newness of our bond, but he’s at least pretending not to listen.

The female glances around to make sure she’s not overheard by anyone outside of our little group, and a tingle of magic runs over my skin. Suddenly, the noise of the room, the music and chatter of the guests, seems to mute, like I’ve got something in my ears that muffles sounds. Glancing around in confusion, I realise that the magic I sensed was some sort of sound bubble.

“Now we can talk properly. We just wanted to tell you that we fully support you.” She smiles widely, her eyes sparkling with mischief as if confirming that she *is* the one who used the magic. “We’ve been questioning the actions of the queen for the last few years, and now that you’re here, things are finally changing.”

My eyes widen, and I can’t help my instinct to check that we’re not being listened to. Of course, this only makes me look suspicious, so I force myself to take a deep breath and focus on the witch. No one around us seems to have noticed anything different, and given what she’s saying, I now understand why she didn’t want to be overheard.

“She’s stuck in the past and afraid to accept the modern world. The feud with the werewolves dates back centuries, and we don’t want to be locked away anymore because of a stupid fight our ancestors started.”

This is treason. Are they friends with the young witches who approached me before with similar statements? Only, that previous conversation had been much tamer. From what I'm hearing, these witches want change, and they want it now. They also seem to think I'm the one to make it happen. This isn't to say I don't agree with them. No one can give me a straight answer about why the witches and werewolves hate each other, everyone having their own theory, and being trapped in Haven and not being able to leave is like a prison sentence, a feeling I know well. I imagine that many of the younger generation have never seen the outside world.

However, getting into a fight with the queen and being seen as the figurehead of the revolution is not something I want. I'm surrounded by enough shit as it is.

Atlas's hand touches my lower back, and I can feel his wariness. He seems to be the only one of my mates included in the sound bubble, not that the others have noticed, too busy ordering us drinks. I get the impression from my witch mate that he wants me to wrap this up quickly and be cautious. The fact that group sought me out in such a public place and openly spoken about disagreeing with their queen is risky and rash—a dangerous combination.

Taking a deep breath, I school my features and give them a kind but engaged smile, not wanting them to think I'm brushing them off. Diplomacy is needed here. Too harsh, and I could turn them against me, creating a whole new issue for me to contend with. Too accepting, and it might be seen as encouragement and that I'm actively trying to turn the queen's people against her.

"I don't want you to go against your queen." Making sure I'm very clear on this point, I make eye contact with each of them in turn. "A civil war is the very last thing I want to happen here. I'm just here to learn to control my magic and follow the goddess's wishes. If it turns out that I am part of these prophecies, then I will do my best to bring everyone peace."

"So wise," one of the male witches murmurs, and the others nod in unison. At first, I think he's joking or being

sarcastic, but their serious expressions tell me otherwise. It's a little creepy, and I feel the need to extract myself from this situation as soon as possible.

“Whatever happens, we support you,” the perky witch says, picking up on my discomfort. “There are more of us than you think, and if you need us, all you have to do is call out ‘star catcher,’ and we will hear.”

Frowning, I turn the words over in my head, not understanding how two simple words could do what she's saying. “Star catcher? I—”

A shiver of magic runs over me, and I see several heads in the ballroom turn to look at me. When they see who I'm with, they return to their previous activities. The hair on my arms stands on end as I realise what just happened. I spoke those words, and in a heartbeat, somehow, several witches knew. We were too far away for them to hear me, yet something alerted them. Not only that, but they knew where I was. They didn't need to search for me.

“We have a wordsmith among us.”

She says the term as though I should know what that means, but what I *do* know is that magic has to be involved. I'm still amazed by the possibilities and what magic can do. I've barely scratched the surface with my lessons.

“We shall leave you to enjoy the rest of the party. You know how to contact us if you need us.” She smiles and dips her head, the group leaving without another word.

I shake my head slightly, bemused and troubled by the whole encounter. There's a faint popping in my ear and sound returns. That whole conversation was baffling, and I need to talk to my mates about it.

I step forward to join them, but a shape moves in the shadows. I only just notice when Ivar appears beside me, walking from the darkness. “Wordsmiths are very rare, almost as rare as you,” he comments lightly, his black eyes locked on my face.

“Holy goddess, Ivar,” I swear, pressing my hand to my chest, my heart pounding against my rib cage from being startled by the dark witch. “One of these days, you’re going to give me a heart attack.” I sound breathless, but I can’t find it in me to care. If it were anyone else, I might try to hide it and pretend I’m fine. However, there’s no point in that with Ivar, as he’ll be able to see straight through that.

His smile dims a little, and he mimics my movement, pressing his hand to his chest. “My apologies. The nature of my magic can make me a little... unpredictable.”

He’s not kidding. He always seems to creep up on me, and until now I would have said that he did it on purpose, but seeing his concern makes me believe otherwise. Ivar’s magic is like nothing I’ve ever seen, and I don’t pretend to understand it.

My mates watch on with narrowed eyes, but they don’t step in. They know about my strange friendship with the dark witch, and although they dislike him and don’t understand why I speak with him, they don’t try to stop me. Considering what we’ve been through today, I’m actually surprised with how much freedom they are giving me. I know we’re trying to show a strong front while all eyes are on us, yet this is more than I expected.

Not knowing how to respond to his comment, I tilt my head to one side, letting a tiny smile pull at my lips. “Are you going to explain what a wordsmith actually is?”

His responding smile is bright, a juxtaposition to the darkness he literally carries around with him. “Of course. It is a witch that has been gifted with the ability to imbed magic into certain words. They are highly sought after.”

After what I just saw, I assumed something like this was the case. “I can see why,” I reply with a raised brow, taking in the possibilities. Something slowly occurs to me. Ivar knew I was speaking about a wordsmith, yet he shouldn’t have been able to hear what was being said thanks to the magic shield that covered us. Snorting, I shake my head slightly. “I take it you were able to hear that whole conversation?”

He smiles and tilts his head to one side. “One of my many gifts. Magic such as sound shields doesn’t work on shadows, so when I become one with the shadows, I am able to hear the conversation others cannot.”

My gut tightens. This could cause us a lot of issues if he decided to tell the queen what he overheard. I might not have had anything to do with the group, but I doubt the queen would see it that way when she hears what the witches, her people, were saying about her.

“Are you going to report it to the queen?”

Ivar is totally loyal to her, and to withhold this sort of information goes against what he believes. However, his expression becomes troubled. Most wouldn’t notice the change of emotions he experiences, mostly because they won’t meet his eyes, but also because the changes are minor. However, I’ve been getting to know the witch and can recognise the shift in his moods.

“The queen has been acting... dangerously recently. Telling her will only make her act out.” He seems a little uncertain as he speaks, but something about saying the words out loud seems to help him make his decision. “I will follow my queen until the afterlife, but I also act in her best interests.”

“You know that I don’t want a fight with the queen.” Of course he knows this, otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation, yet I feel the need to clarify anyway.

“I do. That’s why I like you.”

I expect to see his large, wide smile and eyes as dark as the void staring back at me, but what I actually see is his sombre expression.

A shadow appears at my shoulder, and Ivar’s head turns as he looks at the newcomer behind me. Even without my werewolf senses picking up his scent, I’d know it was Syn from the pull of the bond in my chest.

His arms wrap around me, pulling my back against his chest as he rests his chin on top of my head.

“Laelia, is this witch bothering you?”

Chapter Six



“Laelia, is this witch bothering you?”

Syn’s words roll over me as he holds me close, his scent wrapping around me. He’s always been territorial and possessive over me, even when he hated me back in the beginning. As an alpha without a pack, he was always toeing the edge of madness, and then bonding with me and being separated only made that ten times worse. My mates agreed to be protective, but not over the top, allowing me to make my own decisions at the party. However, being surrounded by enemies has taken its toll on Syn, and he’s lost the battle of holding himself back.

Placing my hand on his arm, I send him a wave of peace through the connection, wanting to defuse the situation. I clear my throat so I can introduce them. Tilting my head up, I meet his eyes and smile slightly so he can see I’m not stressed or upset by the witch’s presence. “Syn, this is my friend, Ivar.” Turning to the witch, I gesture between them. “Ivar, this is one of my mates, Alpha Syn.”

Smiling widely, Ivar presses a hand against his breastbone and dips his head in greeting. “Brother, it’s good to finally meet you.”

Growling, Syn tightens his hold on me and drags me back a couple of steps. “I’m not your brother, *witch*.”

Gasping, I frown and look up at him. I will admit that Ivar looks a little creepier when he smiles, but Syn’s reaction is far

more extreme than I would have thought. Why would being called “brother” cause such a violent reaction? I remember Ivar having mentioned Syn in conversation before and his ability to use shadows to blend in with his surroundings. He wanted to meet my mate to discuss his power, and it seems he got his wish.

Thankfully, he doesn’t seem offended by Syn’s reaction to him, and he tilts his head to one side, seeming amused. “Not in the traditional sense, no. However, your dark magic originates from the same place as mine. Can you not feel the call?”

Releasing me, Syn takes another step back, trying to put as much distance between the two of them as possible. I expected him to become angrier at the comment about magic, yet if anything, it’s only making him panic. Did he have these thoughts about himself before?

“I don’t have magic. I’m a werewolf through and through.”

Ivar’s eyes shift, and his gaze grows distant. “You’re not ready to admit that yet. I won’t push you, but know I am here if you need to discuss the shadows.” Returning his attention to me, he dips his head and smiles once more. “Laelia, congratulations on the challenge. I will see you soon, I am sure.”

I look at Syn to see his reaction to the other male’s comments, but when I turn back, Ivar is gone. Confused, I glance around, looking for the witch to no avail. Syn is looks as stunned and confused as I am, but he says nothing as the others join us. They glance between us and realise that something must have just happened.

“What was that all about?” Nicolai asks with a raised brow.

I have no idea how to answer that question, especially not without explaining what happened with the group of witches offering their support. Now is not the time or the place to be repeating what was said. Ivar proved that even when you think you’re safe, there is always someone listening.

“He just wanted to check in. I’ll fill you in later,” I say with a wave of my hand. Joel clearly doesn’t believe me, but he holds out a drink without a word. I take the offered drink and down it in three gulps. Alcohol burns my throat, and my eyes water as the heat of the liquid moves through my body. Should I be drinking when the queen is looking for any excuse to point a finger at me doing something wrong? Probably not, but I’m stressed, and I need this. My mates can tell. They are on alert as they glance around for any potential threats.

“Laelia, come dance with me.” Scott holds out his hand, and I take it gratefully. Everyone is watching us, and having the six of us looking like we’re expecting to be attacked at any moment is not going to gain us any allies.

We step out onto the dance floor, the music now switched from jazz to modern pop music, which is perfect for dancing. There are no musicians in the room, so it must be some ingenious type of magic that plays music, but I don’t really care. I want to let my hair down and forget for a bit. For just one night, I want to be the twenty-one-year-old that I am and not have to worry about prophecies, magic, challenges that can kill me, and enemies around every corner.

With the lights low and the music turned up high, the bass moves through me, and I remember how much I enjoy dancing. It’s only as my body twists and writhes with the music that I realise I’m still holding Scott’s hand. My cheeks heat, but as I look up to see his reaction, I find him watching me with a smile. Seeing that he doesn’t mind, I smile and pull him a little closer. I’m very aware that the others are watching, so I make sure that our bodies don’t touch other than our hands, but the pull towards him is stronger than ever.

“You look beautiful tonight.”

I can only hear him over the music thanks to my werewolf hearing, so I don’t think that anyone else should overhear us. Even so, I make sure to keep my voice low. “Thank you.” My cheeks are still flushed, and I don’t expect them to return to normal anytime soon now that he’s started complimenting me. Clearing my throat, I change the subject. “How are you coping with being here? I’m sorry I got you dragged into this.”

I'm not sure why I'm sabotaging this moment between us by bringing this up. Why did I feel the need to discuss something that I know is going to bring the mood down when I could have chosen anything else? Especially here, of all places. Guilt has been holding me in its vice-like grip, even though Scott and I have spoken about this before. He doesn't blame me, and that should ease my guilt, yet I can't seem to enjoy this short time without self-sabotaging.

Scott shakes his head before I've even finished speaking and squeezes my hand. "It's not your fault I'm here, Laelia. You didn't kidnap me."

A surge of shame rushes through me, grabbing onto my vocal cords and strangling them with the sense of responsibility I feel. I might not have been the one to abduct him, but none of this would have happened if he had never met me.

"No, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be trapped here, unable to leave." I stop dancing and stare at him. "Your whole life is on hold because of me. You're at risk here."

Huffing out a breath, Scott glances around, and I realise I must be calling attention to myself. Now that I've opened this box of shame I carry, I'm struggling to shut it again. Thankfully, he's keeping his cool and pulls me closer with our joined hands. My body bumps against his, and a quiet gasp escapes me. His free hand lands on my hip, the touch momentarily making me forget about my guilt. He nudges me into movement, and we start to sway from side to side, giving the appearance that we're still dancing.

The look he gives me takes my breath away. The raw acceptance, love, and passion that he's showing is more real and honest than any words could ever be, but he clears his throat to speak.

"Laelia, I don't know why I'm here either, but I *want* to be here. This way I can help you. I'm no use elsewhere." His gaze is intense, and he looks into my eyes for signs that I understand what he's saying. It suddenly seems really important to him. Huffing out a sigh, he looks up for a

moment, and I get the impression he's preparing himself for whatever comes next. When he looks at me again, his expression is set. He's made up his mind. "My life has been on hold since that moment I gave up my fated mate. I think the goddess has brought me to you to give me a second chance. We may not be mates, but I could love you just as much as they do."

My words are stuck in my throat, and this time it's not because guilt has its hold on me. What did I ever do to deserve these amazing males? Scott is one of the most self-sacrificing people I've ever met, and it was pure chance that we met in the trials. A tingle goes through me, and I have to correct myself, realising that the goddess has a hand in bringing us together.

Scott is willing to give up everything to be with me. Star is practically baying in my chest, something she's only ever done around my mates, so the fact that she's doing it with Scott makes me believe that we might actually be able to make this work. This connection we share must be there for a reason.

I can't find it in myself to be sad that he's here, and I think that's the root of my guilt. On a soul deep level, I'm *glad* he's here. He might not be my mate, but he's part of our small, unlikely pack, and it wouldn't be the same without him here. My biker werewolf.

Our eyes are locked together, sharing what my words can't manage, and I feel my body start to heat at his touch. We're so close together, our bodies swaying and brushing up against each other, it awakens my arousal. Suddenly, all other thoughts are gone, and I can only focus on one thing—him. I want to taste his lips. I want to surround myself in his scent and roll around in it like a bitch in heat. I want his hands on me, exploring my body with the hunger I feel for him. Of course this isn't the best place for this little realisation, given the fact we're being watched by everyone and I've not spoken to my mates about this, but adding Scott to my little harem feels *right*.

"Scott—" I start to tell him, needing him to hear the words aloud, but a movement behind Scott suddenly catches my

attention.

There are so many people in the room, moving about, that it seems strange that one in particular would catch my eye, but before I know it, I'm jerking my head to catch sight of a figure at the back of the room. Frowning, I look closer, but in the time that it took for me to blink, whoever I saw is now gone. Glancing around, I try to find that person. I don't know why they caught my attention, nor why my heart is pounding in my chest.

Shaking my head at myself, I let out a tense breath. I must be imagining things, as I can't see anything untoward. My watchful gaze scans the room while I continue to dance so as not to attract attention. The feeling that something is off just won't go away, and it's making me angsty.

“Laelia?”

Immediately feeling bad for leaving Scott hanging, I force myself to put the disappearing figure from my mind. When I look at him once more, I find him watching me with a raised brow. An apologetic smile graces my lips, and I try to come up with a response. He just poured his heart and soul out to me, and I said nothing. He needs to know that my silence wasn't because of what he told me. It's going to sound stupid once I tell him that I thought I saw a strange figure at the back of the room, but he deserves the explanation.

That's when it hits me, a smell I would recognise anywhere—werewolf.

Glancing around frantically, I look for the source. It's not anyone I recognise, but it's definitely from a werewolf. They smell unique and unmistakable, like nature, moonlight, and something that reminds me of home. That's exactly what I'm scenting now, only it's mixed with a bitter undertone that makes my nose wrinkle.

“Can you smell that?” I ask, practically snapping at him as I take a step back and turn on the spot. I'm on high alert, my body vibrating with the need to act, to do *something*.

My mates are watching with concerned expressions, and Syn is already moving towards me. Scott looks confused and a little hurt. “Laelia, what are you—”

A wave of the scent surrounds me, and once more, I see a flash of movement at the back of the room. Without a word, I dart away from Scott and dive into the crowd, trying to push my way to the back. It’s reckless and stupid, and I can hear Scott and the others calling after me, but I’m like a woman possessed, and I need to find the source of the smell. Everyone seems to surround me, stopping my mates from following. Somehow, I’m able to weave through the mass of bodies with little trouble.

Why would there be a werewolf here? Werewolves and witches are at war with each other, so it makes no sense. As far as I’m aware, Scott, Syn, Joel, and I are the only werewolves in Haven, and there’s specific magic surrounding the witches’ sanctuary to make sure it stays undiscovered. Did someone let the werewolf in? Am I actually scenting a witch who’s recently been with a werewolf? Perhaps they captured a werewolf who got too close to Haven. That’s a possibility... However, I can’t seem to let go of the ache in my chest and the feeling that something is wrong.

Reaching the back of the hall, I see a flicker of movement by the small back door that leads out of the ballroom. It’s the entrance that the queen uses so she doesn’t have to enter or leave with anyone else. Darting through before any of her guards can see and stop me, I quietly shut the door behind me. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the light, or lack thereof, but the scent of the wolf is even stronger here.

Star materialises beside me in a glimmer of stars, lighting the hall. Why it’s kept so dark when the queen is going to be using it, I have no idea. It seems strange, but I don’t have time to think about that now. The scent is fading with every second, and I can’t afford to waste any more time. Leading the way, Star trots ahead of me, her nose to the ground as she follows the scent. We’ve been travelling for a while now, having passed several corridors that lead to nicer, well-lit areas, but we’ve continued on. It feels like we’re descending, the air

getting cooler, and when we reach a set of stairs, I pause at the top. I can feel my mates pulling at the bond, trying to find me. They should be able to follow the pull, yet confusion and panic filter through the connection. Somehow, they are able to feel my emotions, but not track me down.

Something is at play here. How was I able to enter the passageway, but my mates can't seem to find it? Why was Scott not able to smell the werewolf? Being here on my own is a bad idea, and I should wait for them to find me, but what if they don't? The scent of the werewolf is much fainter now, and I know I'll lose it completely soon. I stare into the dark void that the stairs produce, and my instincts tell me not to go down there. That should be enough to make me turn around.

What do I do? I ask myself, biting down on my lower lip. Return to my mates unharmed, or risk my safety for information?

My mates are going to tan my hide for this, I just hope that I'm still alive for that to happen.

Taking a deep breath, I step forward and descend into the darkness.

Chapter Seven



The steps are made of stone and are worn, indicating they've not only been here a while, but are used regularly. I can see nothing ahead, and we're quickly surrounded by darkness.

Star provides the light I need, and together, we quietly make our way down. Her hackles are raised, and she stays close to me but doesn't make a sound. She feels the strangeness of this place too. Although I'm being as quiet as I can, I still wince at the small noises I make, the sound echoing back at me in a way that tells me water waits for me at the bottom. I'm still waiting for someone to discover me at any point. I should have seen some guards or *someone* by now.

We reach the bottom of the stairs, and the space opens up. I don't move for a moment, scanning what I can make out with my werewolf sight and Star's light. The space feels large, it's colder down here, and I can smell the water and hear it gently lapping against stone.

Is this how the werewolf got in and out, through the water?

Star lingers at my side, and I take comfort from the fact that she's not snarling. At least, not right now.

The scent of magic fills the air, and lights appear ahead. Dropping into a defensive stance, I call magic to me, my hands tingling with power as I search for the creator of the lights. However, I conclude that they lit automatically, because as I

look around, I see no one. Now that I can see what I'm standing before, it's easy enough to understand why.

I'm standing in a cavern. About a quarter of the space is a rocky ledge in the shape of a crescent moon, and the rest of the cavern is filled with crystalline water. It's gorgeous and looks inviting, but given the goosebumps on my arms, I'm guessing it's going to be freezing.

Judging by the rough surface of the walls, I'd guess this was a natural formation, the water possibly a spring that provides the water for Haven. The question is, why am I here? It doesn't look as though anyone is here or has been here recently despite the dust free, worn stairs. The water is mostly still, so I don't believe the mysterious werewolf is hiding in there. Did I mistake the scent and take the wrong corridor? My senses have always been very precise and one of my best skills, so I don't believe that's what's happening here. In a place of magic and mysteries such as Haven, there are endless possibilities that I can't even comprehend. I've only just scratched the surface when it comes to magic, and I discover a new use for it daily, so I have to be on my guard.

"Hello?" I call, my own voice replying to me as it echoes back. Why I decided to call out when it's clear no one is down here, I don't know, and I instantly feel stupid. If there was someone hiding down here, it's very unlikely they would reply. I take a few, hesitant steps forward, trying to see to the back of the cavern. My heart beats so loudly in my chest, I almost expect to hear the sound bouncing around the space like my footsteps are.

"Hello, Laelia."

The smug voice seems to boom around me—a trick of the cave or magic? Either way, I spin on the balls of my feet so quickly, I disturb the little pebbles and stones, almost losing my footing. Thankfully, my faithful wolf predicted this and is pressed against my leg, steadying me as we stare at the male who just spoke.

Shit. No, not just one male, but several. My eyes lock on the familiar figure at the front of the group, identifying him as

the ringleader of this little ambush, and that is exactly what this is.

The figure in the stairwell blocking my exit is Lord Maliki, the wolf hating witch who took Atlas under his wing and taught him to despise all werewolves. Behind him is a group of middle-aged male witches, all of which are staring at me with a range of emotions from anger to disgust and even outright hatred.

Did they somehow lead me down here? I've not heard of any magic that can mimic scents, but there is still so much I don't know. After all, they managed to keep the sound of their descent from me without me sensing their use of magic. *Stupid*, I curse myself. *Why did I have to run off without my mates into an abandoned part of the castle? So fucking stupid.* The thoughts plague me, my mind twisting as I try to hold my panic at bay.

The lord watches me, his smug expression deepening as though he's able to read my inner panic. Star snarls at him and the other males blocking our only exit, but Maliki only has eyes for me.

"We've been keeping an eye on you for a while now, Laelia. When we saw you rush off this evening without any of your *mates*" —he spits the word like it's acid in his mouth— "we knew we had to follow you." Clapping his hands in front of him, he arches a brow. "When we realised where you were coming, we knew our opportunity had arrived."

He's talking about killing me, and instead of making me feel worse or raising my anxiety levels even more, it actually just makes me angry. The last time they attacked me, I came out on top. Being surrounded in a dark, forgotten part of Haven scares me, and I value my life, but I survived then, and I can do it again.

"Your opportunity to kill me?" Snorting, I shake my head. "You tried that before, and it didn't work out very well for you."

His face tightens with anger, and really, I shouldn't be baiting him. However, something about his smug attitude and

the way he believes he's above everyone else makes me want to prove to him that he's wrong. His face smooths out as he seems to remember something, and *that* makes me nervous more than anything so far.

"Do you know where we are, Laelia?" he asks, sounding scholarly as he prepares to educate me before killing me. What is the point of this? Is he just grandstanding, needing the attention so badly he's forcing it upon me?

Sighing aloud, I make it clear how done I am with this conversation. "I'm assuming this is the spring that supplies water to Haven."

He tips his head in my direction as he acknowledges my comment. "You are correct, but it's so much more than that." Smiling, he steeples his hands together, clearly excited to reveal something that I don't know.

"This is the Lake of Dedication. Most have forgotten the significance as the standard teaching doesn't speak of its powers, and many believe it to be a myth, a fanciful story. Those who do know the truth of the lake have no idea that it's sitting right beneath them."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Unperturbed by my apparent lack of interest, he continues with his explanation. "The water is very special. Centuries ago, there were multiple witch queens who led their own covens. Due to this, there were many fights for power and territory, making it a turbulent time to live. These queens would travel to the lake with their consorts and have them drink from it. It was the ultimate show of dedication, because if the consort held ill will towards their queen, the water would weaken their power. If they were fully dedicated, then they would keep their full strength. It was a way of sifting out the spies and reducing treachery."

A slow, sinking dread settles in my stomach as he speaks, increasing with each moment as I come to a horrific conclusion.

"You're feeding this water to your people."

The statement comes out more as an accusation as I gape at the beautiful, calm water of the lake. Making everyone in Haven drink water that could reduce their powers without their knowledge is *wrong*. Luna explained that magic wasn't as strong anymore, and this could be the very reason why. The queen is lying to everyone and drugging them, limiting their powers if they don't fully support her.

"It is not as potent when not drank directly from its source, not to mention the queen is supposed to stand in the lake so the people are bound to her specifically." Shrugging off my accusation like it's not a big deal, he narrows his eyes and continues. "Something interesting has happened since you arrived though. Without the queen performing the ritual in the lake, the people are being pulled towards who they think the strongest leader is, and it's no longer the queen."

There's a pause, and as I stare at his expectant expression, I slowly begin to comprehend what he means. They are choosing me. That explains why groups of witches have been approaching me recently and offering their support, and while having their backing is important, not knowing whether that's through choice or the magic of the lake makes it very different. Do they have a choice in this? Is the magic changing their will? I feel sick at the thought, and panic flutters in my stomach that I'm involved in something that is basically mind control.

I ball my hands into fists to try and hide the quake in them. "This is wrong, she's tricking her people, and why are they drawn to me? I am not a queen. I'm not even a full-blooded witch!"

"This is just another reason why you never should have been allowed to exist in the first place. Your very presence is causing problems." The lord has shed his calm demeanour now that I've come to the conclusion he was waiting for, a manic light glistening in his eyes. "At least we don't need to worry about any more witches being drawn to you."

His sudden calm tone should be a warning, but I'm so horrified by what I've learned that I miss it. "Why's that?"

His manic grin sends chills down my spine. “Oh, because you’ll be dead of course.”

Magic slams into me so hard it knocks me from my feet and pushes me across the ground. Gravel and stones bite into my skin, my arm stings from the graze, and an ache travels through the whole left side of my body where I fell. Scrabbling to my feet, I turn to face my assailants. Star is growling and attacking the witches on the stairs, taking some of them out and giving me respite from the full force of the magic. However, there are too many of them blasting magic my way. Reaching for my power, I throw up a shield of stars, my hands outstretched as I stand my ground. I’m able to hold the shield reasonably well, and their strikes are weak enough that they don’t drain me too quickly. The issue, I’m quickly realising, is that the force of their blasts together are pressing against my protective dome. Thanks to the rocky ground underfoot, the strength of it is pushing me back, and a quick look behind me tells me that I’m going to end up in the water.

Panic makes my chest tight, and I berate myself for not listening to my instincts. I know how to shield against attacks, thanks to practicing with Atlas, and I can just about send out power in an attack, but I don’t know how to do both, and as I attempt to push the group back, my shield wobbles. Sensing my weakness, they redouble their efforts.

The stars break momentarily, so quickly that it’s barely even noticeable, but it’s down long enough to let a rogue strike through. My shield is back up straight away and defending against the other attacks, but that one blast of magic is all it takes to throw me off my feet once more, and I land on the ground with a heavy thud. My body rolls, and with horror, I realise I’m going to go into the water. Rolling closer, I attempt to throw my arms out, my nails scrabbling against the rocky ground as I desperately try to find purchase, but nothing helps. My body tumbles over the rocky ledge, my whole world tilting and shifting. At the last second, my fingers graze rock, and I grip on with all my might. Managing to grab the edge of the ledge, I hang from one arm, my feet already in the freezing water and my shoulder screaming from the weight of my entire body.

Reaching for my magic, I desperately search for something I can use to help me, but I come up blank, my mind so focused on keeping my shield up and holding onto the ledge at the same time that I can't cope with adding anything else to my frazzled mind. My palms are sweaty, and I desperately throw up my other arm to grab the edge, but I can't reach it. *If I survive this, I'm hitting the gym more often*, I promise myself, feeling my fingers slip.

With a noise of desperation, I reach out to my mates, knowing that they are trying to find me and praying that the goddess leads them to me. I'm not afraid to admit that I need them right now. I need help. Star is baying, trying to get to me, but it's going to be too late.

My hand slips, and I fall, my shield shattering as the freezing water surrounds me and pulls me under. All thoughts leave my head, and my body seems stunned by the rapid change in temperature, the chill sinking into my limbs and making them feel heavy and useless. The desperate need to breathe kicks me into gear, and I force myself to swim, gasping and filling my lungs the moment I break the surface of the water.

"There she is! Begin," Maliki shouts out, his voice ringing through the cavern. I can't see him, but several of the witches from the stairs come into view as they move to the edge of the rocky ledge.

Panting and kicking my legs to keep my head above water, I prepare myself to be struck with magic once more. As the tingle of magic surrounds me, though, I'm surprised by the lack of attacks. Something is happening, I just can't tell what it is yet. My teeth are beginning to chatter, and I know I need to get out soon and warm up, otherwise this could be deadly for me.

The water begins to move around me, and I freak out, thinking there's something in the water with me. Images of ferocious beasts lurking below, waiting to pull me to my watery death flash through my mind. Of course, this only makes me gasp for air faster, thrashing around and using more energy as the frigid temperature sucks it from me. Thankfully

the water is so clear I can see all the way to the bottom, and after a frantic search, I come to the conclusion that I'm in the water alone, and the water is moving thanks to the witches on the rocky ledge.

Several of my foes are wearing focused expressions and moving their hands in complex patterns, the water responding with the same patterns. Initially, the movements seem fairly gentle, but they quickly become faster and more turbulent, and I'm being tossed around in the water like a rag doll. There's no way I'm going to survive this. Hypothermia is setting in, I can hardly feel my feet anymore, and my strength is being sucked out by the second. I also can't concentrate enough to form my magic into anything useful. My dress is now hindering my movements, tangling around my legs and making it impossible for me to swim properly, only increasing my panic.

Where is the dark presence that resides within me? Why isn't she helping me? She's been getting quieter and quieter recently, but she's always been there when I've been in danger, taking control of my magic and helping me when I've been unable to. Reaching inside me, I yank at the darkness and force it into being.

Help me! I demand, and it sluggishly fills my body as the water covers my head and I'm sucked below. Magic builds inside me so strongly that I have no idea what to do with it, so I just allow the darkness to use it as it wishes. A blast of power leaves me in a rush, ripping a cry from my lips and making me lose precious oxygen.

There's a loud cracking noise, followed by something heavy crashing into the water, throwing me about even more, and I desperately pray to the goddess. My lungs are burning, and the urge to take a breath is so strong that I nearly cave to it, but I know if I do I'll only inhale water and speed up my death. Something hits the water again, disturbing the surface. After several seconds though, I realise the water feels less turbulent, and with monumental effort, I'm able to force myself to the surface.

Gasping, I inhale a lungful of air, greedily sucking it down. My lungs scream as I try to stay above water, needing to get

my breathing under control now that the constant attacks seem to have stopped. I'm using all of my energy just to keep moving, to keep warm in the frigid water, my brain switched into survival mode.

“Laelia!”

Atlas's desperate cry gives me strength I didn't know I had left in me, and I begin swimming to the rocky ledge. My other mates are here, I can feel them, and next thing I know, Atlas and Syn are leaning over the edge and offering me their hands. They found me. Tears of relief and exhaustion sting my eyes, and I don't bother to stop them from rolling down my cheeks as they grab my extended hands and pull me up onto the rocky ledge.

I desperately cling to them while trying to catch my breath. Panic still lances through my body, but now that the immediate danger has passed, I feel my adrenaline start to fade as shock sets in. Shakes rack my entire body, a combination between my delayed fear and the chill in my bones.

Syn and Atlas wrap themselves around me, feeling my urgent need for them. My hands are like claws, my fingers frozen as they dig into their shirts, holding on tightly like my life depends on it. The heat from their bodies surrounds me, almost too warm for me to handle, but it's so blissful that I don't complain or try to escape their touch. I don't feel any pain, although if I manage to make it out of this injury free, then that will be a miracle, so I assume that my body is focusing on keeping my heart beating.

“Shit, Laelia, you're freezing,” Atlas curses, his hand running up and down my sodden back. I must be getting them wet, but they don't seem to care.

Syn grumbles, his chest vibrating beneath my cheek as he rests his chin against the top of my head. In other circumstances, I might marvel over the two of them working together so closely without snapping or fighting with the other. However, they seem to be in agreement that helping me is more important. Besides, my mind has practically shut down,

and I'm not in the right state to be hypothesising over anything right now.

Mumbling something under his breath, Atlas shifts and gently pries my hand from his shirt. The lack of contact and chill that fills the void make me pine, a strange, desperate sound emerging from my chest.

"Shh, it's okay," Atlas whispers, quickly removing his shirt and then pulling me against him. "There, you're safe. I've got you."

Something settles within me, and although my other mates aren't touching me, I know they are close by. A splash makes me flinch, and as I twist in their arms, I see it was just some small rocks crumbling from the side of the cavern, falling into the lake and causing the water to ripple out. *The water isn't moving by itself, it's not being magicked. I am safe*, I tell myself, needing my heart to calm so I can stop this damn shivering.

As I look at the small divot in the wall where the rock just crumbled from, I see another beside it, the rock blackened. Frowning, I look around, trying to pay closer attention, and I realise what my magic did. Scorch marks mar the walls in a perfect circle with me in its centre, as if my stars expanded around me and burnt anything in their path. When I spot several smoking bodies, I realise they must have been hit by my strikes. My mates must have arrived after the witches were already knocked down. I have no idea if those witches are alive or not.

My breath catches in my throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut as I contemplate what I might have just done. My magic is strong, the power of the goddess. Burying my face against Syn's chest, I shudder, but this time, it isn't from the cold, but what I'm capable of.

"Is she okay?" Joel asks, tension making his voice tight.

Glancing over Syn's shoulder, I look at my alpha mate. I can see how much he wants to be with me from the way he keeps glancing over with concern flashing in his eyes. However, he stays where he is, kneeling by two of the

unmoving bodies. Scott and Nicolai are assisting, and I see them dragging the body of Lord Maliki over to the side where they can keep an eye on him. Did Maliki get hit by my magic? Looking at his pristine clothes, I don't think so, which means that one of my mates knocked him out. At least, I hope he's knocked out. The idea that I've taken another life grips around my heart like a vice.

"We need to get her out of here and warm her up. Other than that, I think she's okay," Atlas replies, his hand still moving in smooth motions on my back.

Not wanting them to worry, I attempt to prove Atlas's statement true. "I-I'm o-okay," I say through my chattering teeth.

There's a heavy silence, and I feel all eyes on me. Whatever they see makes them believe otherwise. I don't want to admit that I'm struggling, but thankfully, I don't have to.

"You have magic, can't you warm her?" Scott asks from the other side of the cavern, an edge to his voice that I'm not used to hearing from him. Trying to lift my head to look at him, I find I don't have the strength. In fact, fatigue is starting to set in, my eyelids feeling heavy.

"I have *ice* magic. I don't think that will help the situation," Atlas snaps. "If I didn't drain Nicolai's power earlier, I probably could have taught him to use his though."

Joel huffs out a frustrated breath, and I feel him walking over to me. There's some sort of grunted communication between them that I don't hear, and the next thing I know, I'm being lifted and pressed against a new chest—Joel. I'd recognise his scent anywhere. Shifting slightly in his arms, I press my face against his chest.

He places a kiss on the top of my head and addresses the others. "Let's get her out of here."

Chapter Eight



A new set of clothes later, I'm wrapped in blankets and surrounded by my mates on my bed. They are taking turns thanks to the fact that they don't all fit, and currently, I've got Atlas and Scott pressed against me, the others watching on from other parts of the room. They watch me like a hawk, looking for signs that I'm getting worse.

Apparently, when they brought me back here, I kept falling asleep and becoming unresponsive, a dangerous sign of hypothermia. As soon as we got back, they changed me and started to warm me up—not that I remember any of this.

I'm beginning to feel a little better. My shaking has improved, and I'm able to think a little more clearly than before. Nicolai made me a hot drink earlier, but my hands were shivering so much that I couldn't hold the mug without spilling it.

Atlas and Scott must be boiling under all these layers of blankets. I'm sure I resemble a marshmallow, but the glorious warmth of their bodies is enough that I don't care. Shifting my weight on the bed so I'm leaning on my left side, I rest my face against Atlas's bare chest. Our bond is still so fresh that being without him feels physically uncomfortable. It's not painful, so to speak, but like the throb of a newly formed bruise. Lying against him like this helps ease that while also warming me up to a normal temperature.

No one has spoken in a while, the atmosphere tense in the room, but as I tilt my head up, I find Atlas looking down at

me, and I'm speaking before I realise it.

"You found me." My voice is hoarse and broken, but he seems to hear me clearly enough, as do the rest of the guys who perk up at the sound of me speaking.

Atlas's expression softens, and he leans down to press a kiss against my forehead. "I will always find you when you need me, Laelia."

His promise warms my heart, and my other mates mumble their agreement. Scott stays silent on my right side but squeezes my hand as if to show he also agrees. The connection between us feels odd, almost taut, and I realise that when I ran off in the ballroom, he had just confessed his love to me, saying he would stay with me forever despite the fact we weren't mates. I never answered him. Does he think I was running away from him and what he told me? It would explain why he's been so quiet. Crap. I need to talk to him and explain everything, but I won't do it here in front of everyone. He's already feeling like shit, so the last thing he needs is for me to expose everything he told me in confidence while my mates are listening.

Instead, I glance over my shoulder and give him the best smile I'm able to, squeezing his hand back. Returning to my position on my left side, I feel Scott move closer behind me, keeping me cocooned between them as I settle. Thinking back over what happened, I frown slightly as Atlas's response registers in my mind.

Just how did they find me? It was clear that something was separating us. They weren't far behind me, so how was it that we became so separated, and why couldn't I feel where they were when I stepped into the cavern? Somehow, they found me.

"How?" My energy is failing me, and this is all I have the strength to say, but thankfully, they understand what I'm asking.

"Magic," Syn spits, his eyes gleaming as he walks that line between sanity and madness. My chest constricts as I think about how hard it must have been to be separated from me.

The fact that he's still in control just goes to show how far he's come in the short time since he arrived at Haven.

"There must have been a spell over us, because we could feel you deeper in the castle beneath us, but the corridor was concealed from us. We walked in circles for what felt like a lifetime," Atlas explains, taking over from Syn and giving me the details I need. "It was actually Syn who found you."

The attention of the room shifts over to my dark alpha, unasked questions hanging in the air. This shouldn't come as a surprise to me since Syn managed to track me despite the magic that was designed to hide me. Ivar had made comments about Syn's shadow abilities before, and I've always suspected that he has some sort of magic that helps him blend into darkness. When he's using it, I can see a dark shadow hovering over him that no one else can see, and I know it's something we'll have to talk about at some point.

Syn seems uncomfortable under everyone's scrutiny, but he has eyes only for me. "I was almost too late."

"But you weren't," I say, but I hope he can feel what I'm unable to put into words—how much I love him, and how grateful I am that he found me and is taking care of me when I need him. A weight seems to lift from his shoulders, and his mouth parts as he begins to say something.

He's abruptly cut off when Kano storms into the room.

"What happened?" Kano demands, his voice like thunder. He ignores the threatening looks and protective stances my mates take.

When he sees me lying on the bed, surrounded by Atlas and Scott and shivering like I'm encased in ice, his expression darkens. Walking up to me, he places his hand on my forehead and closes his eyes. A new sense of awareness fills my body as his magic flows through me, gently warming me from the inside and taking away the ache in my bones. My muscles suddenly feel restored, like I've just had several shots of coffee and the caffeine is kicking in. It won't last long, and when it leaves, my energy will crash, and I'll sleep like the dead. However, I'm grateful not to be feeling so weak and

frail. After yet another attack on my life, feeling vulnerable is uncomfortable, and while my mates would never let anything or anyone hurt me, I'd like to know that I could protect myself if anything were to happen.

“Maliki tried to kill her again,” Atlas explains, his voice as cold and sharp as his magic, all of the respect he had for his former mentor now long gone. “We were separated, and then someone spun a magical trap that stopped us from following her.”

“They pushed her into the lake beneath Haven.” Joel’s voice is uncharacteristically harsh, matching the angry energy of the others in the room. “They were using their magic to create a whirlpool in the water, making it impossible for her to get out. She was drowning when we arrived. Even if they hadn’t been using their power, that water was freezing. Hypothermia would have killed her.”

Hearing them describe what they witnessed makes the truth of what happened fall heavily over me. A whirlpool, that’s why I couldn’t fight my way to the surface, it was pulling me down. They could have just struck me with their power, but they chose to try and drown me instead.

This time the shudder that racks through my body has nothing to do with the chill. All eyes fall on me, the anxious action telling me just how much danger I was in with my hypothermia. Once they assure themselves that I’m okay and not deteriorating, they continue to fill Kano in on what happened in the events running up to them finding me, but I tune them out as my mind tries to do its own processing.

They have no idea why I went beneath Haven, what had drawn me there in the first place—the wolf. The scent had been so strong, I don’t know how Scott hadn’t sensed it, and no one has mentioned anything, so I’m assuming they hadn’t either. Where had the werewolf gone once they had reached the cavern? From my exploration, I hadn’t found any way out, and even if there was a way to swim out, the water was so cold he wouldn’t have got far. None of this makes any sense.

“There was a werewolf.” My own voice startles me, the sound off, scratchy, and the others seem just as surprised.

“What?” Syn barks with a confused scowl I know isn’t aimed at me. He’s struggling with seeing the others wrapped around me after the threat on my life.

The others seem just as confused as he is.

Taking a deep breath, I try to clear my throat so I can explain. “In the hall, I was dancing with Scott and then I smelled a werewolf.” Pausing to take a breath, I absentmindedly rub my throat, the guys tracking the movement. “I thought I saw... Well, I’m not sure now what I saw, but I followed the scent.” I hold up my hand to stop their barrage of disapproving remarks. “I know it was stupid to go alone, but I needed answers. Anyway, the scent led me down to the lake. That’s when the lord ambushed me.”

There’s a brief pause as they think over my words and try to come up with their own conclusion. Nicolai speaks next, a slight furrow of his brow as he steps forward, crossing his arms over his chest.

“He tricked you into thinking there was a werewolf here, drawing you away from everyone and then attacking you. His magic stopped us from helping.” Although it’s not phrased as a question, I can hear the slight upturn of his voice as he theorises what happened. Joel and Scott nod in agreement, the explanation fitting with what they believed transpired.

“No.” Pausing to cough and clear my throat, I shake my head. I can understand why he came to that conclusion, but I have a different theory. “I think the two things are separate. Maliki just took advantage of me being alone and attacked.”

Atlas is stiff against me and practically vibrating with anger. I know he feels partially responsible for the actions of the group he used to align with, but I hold none of that against him. This was the action of a bitter, hateful old man who happened to surround himself with people of the same beliefs, giving him delusions of grandeur and righteousness.

“How would a werewolf get in Haven?” Kano challenges, his frown severe. He’s a general here in Haven, and it’s part of his job to keep everyone safe from the outside world. Knowing who enters and leaves is a major part of his role, so the idea that a werewolf could have been brought in without his knowledge is disturbing.

“They managed to kidnap all of us,” Nicolai points out, shrugging as though this doesn’t bother him. “It’s not much of a stretch to believe they did it with someone else.” I can feel the tension on our connection, and when I tentatively reach out, I realise he’s reliving his horrific experience when the queen had the witches experiment on him and try to bring him back to life. I send him soothing vibes, and I know he feels them when his eyes snap up to mine, his posture relaxing a little and the corner of his lip twitching up in a ghost of a smile.

Kano huffs out a frustrated breath, his body language showing how wound up he is right now. “Yes, but for a werewolf to walk around Haven unnoticed by everyone... That just doesn’t seem possible.”

“I know what I smelled.” While my voice might be quiet and soft, the determination in my eyes is firm. I won’t back down on this. I *know* I’m right, and there’s something else going on here.

“No one is doubting you, Laelia. We’re just trying to work out what happened,” Joel soothes, placing his hand on my leg over the mound of blankets on top of me.

“Is he dead?” Kano’s question is barked like a demand and snaps me out of the moment I’m having with Joel. I know who he’s asking about without him having to specify, and from the tight looks on the faces of the others, so do they.

Although Maliki has never lifted a finger to hurt me himself, he’s been behind the attacks and provoking the hatred of others towards me. While I hate the male for what he’s done and the indoctrination he put Atlas through, I’m waiting with bated breath to know if he survived or not. I might not have

been the one to injure him, but to know I played a part in his death holds a tight vice around my chest.

Thankfully, I'm not left waiting for the answer long.

"No, he and his followers are being taken to the cells as we speak," Atlas answers, putting me out of my misery. "I ordered the guards down there as soon as we were out of the passageways."

Feeling dizzy with relief, I go limp against Atlas and Scott, the latter burying his nose into the crook of my neck and holding me closer. Kano's expression doesn't change as he nods his head firmly.

"The queen will hear about this. I will make sure they are dealt with." He looks like he's about to leave, so I stop him with an outstretched hand. I know he'll do his best to get to the bottom of what happened, and although he has such a close connection with the queen, I trust him on this. Before he disappears, though, he needs to hear what I was about to tell the others before he arrived.

"There's something else I need to tell you."

The tone of my voice must tip the others off that this isn't going to be good news, all of them reacting to the tension in their own way. Syn bares his teeth in a snarl, while Nicolai's body tenses and Joel's hands ball into fists at his sides. Atlas and Scott attempt to stay calm, holding me against them, but it's easy to feel how on edge they all are.

Meeting each of their eyes, I come to Kano last, focusing my gaze on him. "What do you know about the Lake of Dedication?"

Clearly not expecting this direction of conversation, he raises an eyebrow. "It's a myth. If it was ever real, it's been lost for centuries."

Atlas hums in agreement. "Many believe it dried up long ago."

Feeling a lump in the back of my throat, I cough to clear it and pray to the goddess that they believe what I'm about to tell them. After all, I'm telling them that what they thought they

knew is wrong, and their lake of legend has been close this whole time. “It’s real, and it’s beneath Haven. That was the lake they pushed me into.”

“The lake beneath Haven is our water source,” Kano replies slowly, and I watch him process what he just learned and what that could mean.

His expression turns horrified. Atlas doesn’t seem to have made the same connection yet, and the others are watching us with confusion.

“Will someone please explain what’s going on?” Nikolai asks, glancing between us.

Kano takes a deep breath, scrubbing his hands over his face, looking exhausted from the weight of the knowledge. “The Lake of Dedication is a magical body of water that can weaken the powers of those who drink it if they don’t fully follow their leader or mean them harm.”

Guilt settles over my brother as he explains, clearly having worked out what this means. This is all information that he should know, yet the queen has been keeping it from him. Not only did he not know she was using the lake, he didn’t even know it existed in reality.

Taking pity on him and my mates who seem even more confused than they were before, I clear my throat to begin. I tell them everything else that I learned about the magic of the lake and how it used to be used centuries ago, including how the queen uses it today and its weakened powers. When I tell them about Maliki’s accusation that my presence was changing people’s allegiance without me having to bless the lake, Atlas and Kano share a meaningful look.

“Laelia, you were submerged in the water, did you swallow any?” Joel asks, suddenly alert as he looks me over with a frown.

Drinking from the source is supposed to have a far stronger effect. If I swallowed it, in theory, that would cause my power to weaken. With the threats on my life and the deadly challenges the queen is throwing at me, I need my

power at full strength now more than ever. Looking inside myself, I search for any changes to my power. As I search, I feel relief as I find that everything feels the same, even after using a large portion of it earlier during the attack.

“Some,” I reply after a moment. “But I don’t feel any different.”

Kano is staring at me with a look of consideration and tilts his head to one side like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to work out. “Magic has always affected Laelia differently. Let’s just keep an eye on things.” Releasing a sigh, he tilts his head back and looks up at the ceiling as if trying to bolster up the energy to tackle a great challenge. After a moment, he rolls his shoulders back and turns his attention to Atlas. “I’ll go down to the cells and make sure they are being dealt with properly. I will make sure this is taken care of.” The face of the general is back as he prepares to leave and face the rest of Haven. “Rest up, sister. I’ll make sure you’re not bothered and that any challenges are pushed back.”

Wasting no more time, Kano turns and strides from the room, everyone silent as he leaves. It’s only as the main door to my suite slams shut that anyone moves, seemingly holding their breath until now.

Syn uses this moment to stalk forward, resting his hands against the footrest of the bed and leaning forward with a sceptical expression. “So you’re telling me that the queen has been using magic water to control her people? If that’s the case, how come your magic hasn’t weakened since you started drinking it?”

Put like that, it does sound ridiculous, and I understand why he’s questioning it. His second question holds a lot of weight and is also something I want to know. Since I arrived here, my magic has blossomed, and if anything, my power has only grown as I’ve learned to wield it.

“Perhaps she is weakened,” Scott suggests, “and we just never knew her strength beforehand.”

This is all still so new to me that my magic could be affected by the water. I’ve barely used it outside of Haven, and

I never knew how to use it, so a dip in its potency wouldn't really be noticed. Another thought comes to me, chilling me to my core. If my magic is currently weakened, that would make me the most powerful witch here, even stronger than the queen.

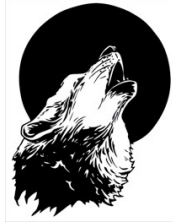
“She's got the blood of the goddess. The water might not work the same on her as it does on everyone else. Maliki even mentioned that allegiances have been changing since she arrived, and she's never blessed the water. She's clearly different from a regular witch,” Atlas insists.

Everything they are saying makes sense, but it's also really disturbing to me. My brain is overwhelmed from everything that happened today. This morning's challenge feels like it was weeks ago now, but it's only been eight or so hours since I was fighting a minotaur. The party, followed by another attempt on my life, has only topped off my shitty day, and I can't deal with anything else.

Thankfully, Joel senses this and squeezes my leg through the covers before addressing the others. “That's enough for now. We need to let Laelia rest.”

Hums of agreement fill the room, and I don't bother to protest as Scott and Atlas rearrange me between them, making sure I'm covered by the blankets. My mind shuts off as they take care of me, and I fall asleep within moments.

Chapter Nine



D ragged from a deep sleep, I groggily swim to the surface of consciousness. I don't think I've been asleep long, and it takes me several moments to work out what woke me—voices. They are trying to be quiet, and from the muffled quality of the sound, I know they are talking in the other room. That on its own shouldn't have woken me, especially with how deeply I was asleep, so instead of ignoring it and going back to sleep, I focus on the voices.

“I really don't think now is a good time,” Atlas says quietly. There's no malice in his voice, but even I can tell he's not going to change his mind on this. I can even imagine the wide stance he's standing in, his arms crossed over his chest as he bars entry to the bedroom.

“Please,” the second person pleads, and it takes me a moment to identify them as Luna. Her voice is broken and hitches in her throat, which is so unlike her usual upbeat self, my heart aches to hear her pain. “I need to speak to her, to apologise.”

The last time we spoke, we argued in the ballroom at the celebration. It hadn't been pretty, and the last thing I want to do is hash it out now, but hearing just how upset she is, I know I need to speak with her. My friendship with her was one of the only things that got me through when I was first brought here. Am I still annoyed by what she said? Yes, her comments hurt, but I know she was only lashing out because she was in pain.

Forcing my eyes open, I find myself lying face down on top of Joel, my head resting against his naked chest. Nicolai's eyes meet mine, and I know Syn is pressed up against my other side.

Taking a deep breath, I shuffle my weight, trying to assess how much energy I've got. My body is warm now thanks to my mates, but I feel weak, most of Kano's power from earlier having left my body. "Will you help me sit up?" I ask the three of them quietly, and they wordlessly help me. Nicolai scoots to the end of the bed so I can lean against the headboard, with Joel taking his place. This bed really isn't big enough for all of us.

Once I'm settled, I take a deep breath and prepare to speak with my friend. "Atlas, it's okay, let her in. I want to speak to her," I call out softly.

There's a momentary pause, but I know they both heard me from the change in their breathing. Atlas must still be blocking the entrance, as I hear the moment that he lets out a defeated sigh and steps aside. As soon as he does, his cousin comes barreling through the door, her beautiful face distraught and tears rolling down her cheeks. Her gorgeous black hair, so pristine earlier for the party, is now a matted mess.

"Laelia, I'm so sorry," she chokes out when she sees me propped up in the bed. Other than being exhausted with a few bumps and bruises, I managed to come out of the attack relatively unscathed and those minor injuries are almost healed thanks to my werewolf blood. The fact that she seems so upset when she looks at me makes me wonder just how much of a mess I am.

"Why don't we give them some privacy?" Joel suggests, and between him and Syn, they fuss around me like mother hens, puffing up pillows behind me so I'm upright and comfortable. In any other situation, I'd roll my eyes at their mothering, but I think we all need it, and Luna is hardly in a state to appreciate the joke. Once assured that I'm not going to need them for the short time I'm going to speak to my friend,

the five of them step out into the sitting room, leaving us alone.

Luna continues to stand on her spot just inside the doorway, her hands clutched in front of her as though she's frozen in place. Tears roll slowly down her cheeks, and she doesn't bother to wipe them away, simply staring at me as she waits for my response.

Seeing just how upset she is causes a lump to form in the back of my throat. I know I can't continue to let her feel this way, so I lift my hand and hold it out to her as a peace offering. Her eyes widen slightly as they lock onto my hand, and with a sob, she stumbles forward and takes it, climbing onto the bed until she's kneeling beside me.

"I'm so sorry, Laelia. If I hadn't acted like a colossal bitch, then this might not have happened. I'm the worst friend in the world." The words tumble out of her in a rush, so desperate to be heard they merge together until they are almost unrecognisable.

Frowning slightly, I replay her words in my mind, and even then they don't make any sense to me. "Luna, what are you talking about?"

Taking a large, hiccupping breath, she sits back on her heels and looks up at the ceiling as if asking the goddess for strength. "Kano told me what happened. You nearly died!"

I'm going to need to have a word with Kano and find out exactly what he said to her, because if he put the blame on her, then I'm going to have some harsh things to say to my half-brother.

"Yes, I did, and none of that is your fault." When she looks at me once more, I don't avert my gaze, making sure she can see the truth of what I'm saying. "We had an argument, Luna, that's all. That's something friends do all the time. What Maliki chose to do has nothing to do with you."

There's a flicker of darkness in her silver eyes, and although she knows I'm telling the truth and don't blame her, she doesn't believe it, taking the blame upon herself.

“You might not have run off if I hadn’t upset you.”

Sighing, I squeeze her hand and cut her off before she spirals any deeper into her guilt. “Me running into danger was because of me, and it had nothing to do with you. I thought I saw a werewolf, and the scent was so familiar that I couldn’t stop myself. It was stupid and reckless. I acted on impulse, and Maliki took advantage of that.” Fiddling with the edge of the blanket over my legs, I look down with resignation, knowing that my actions could have got me killed. I try to shake it off and smile slightly as I change the topic. “We should talk about earlier though. Are you okay?”

Being in love with someone who isn’t in a position to love you back must be heartbreaking, especially knowing that person has feelings for you in return. Luna’s way of coping is to try to get any sort of positive relationship to drown out her feelings in the hopes that it will stop her from pining for someone she can’t have. However, one-night stands with a male she doesn’t care for only seem to make her feel worse about herself.

“I acted like a bitch, and you almost died, yet you’re asking if *I’m* okay?” She laughs without humour and looks at my hands, which are twisting the blanket. With a shaky exhale, she rolls her shoulders back. “I’m sorry for the way I behaved and for what I said to you. This is no excuse, but I find it hard seeing you so happy with all of your mates, all the while knowing that I can never be with the one I...” She trails off, not wanting to say the word, but it’s fairly clear that she was going to say “love.” Waving it off, she continues. “It doesn’t help that the queen flaunts her control over him at every opportunity.”

I debate what I’m about to say next, not wanting to give her false hope, but my gut is saying it’s the right thing to say. “We will find a way to get you both out of this situation, Luna. You will be happy, I promise.” Taking her hand once more, I squeeze it, leaving our fingers intertwined on the blanket. “I can’t even imagine how hard this is for you, and I forgive you.” I don’t actually think what she did requires forgiveness, but I can see that she needs to hear it.

The watery smile she gives me is full of thankfulness and hope. Squeezing my hand, she takes a deep breath and wipes the tears from her cheeks, looking more like the Luna I know. “So, tell me everything that happened after I left. Don’t leave out any details.”

For the next hour, that’s exactly what I do. I tell her all about the scent and the attack, as well as what I learned about the lake. She’s horrified, and we go over several of the details with her inserting her own theories. I’m fully aware of the five males on the other side of the door, pacing and waiting not so patiently to come back in. It’s clear that Luna is aware of it as well from the smile that pulls at her lips as she glances over at the door.

I hear one of my mates pace past the door. “I don’t think they’ll wait much longer.”

Luna laughs and rolls her eyes. “To be fair, they’ve lasted longer than I thought they would. I suppose we should put them out of their misery.” Leaning back, she cups her hand around her mouth. “You can come in now.”

They are not even subtle about it as they all try to squeeze through the doorway at the same time, making me snort. Luna needn’t have attempted to amplify her voice, they were poised and waiting the entire time. In my mind, I imagine the five of them pressed up against the door, their ears to the wood as they listen to everything that was said.

Sensing that her presence is no longer welcome, Luna climbs off the bed and smiles down at me, her eyes brighter and face rosy now that we’ve cleared the air between us. “Rest up, Laelia. I’ll see you soon.”

She nods at Atlas as she passes, and I notice how he returns the gesture stonily. The others don’t react to her leaving except for Syn, who scowls at her as she walks by, obviously still annoyed on my behalf for what she said to me at the party.

“How are you feeling?” Nicolai moves over to the side of the bed as he speaks, scanning me to check I’ve not changed in the short time they were in the other room.

Nicolai might have been the one to ask it, but the others seem just as invested in the question, slowly moving closer. It's strange seeing these large, powerful males being drawn to me like magnets. Half the time, they don't even seem to realise that they are gravitating towards me, and I often find myself unconsciously moving to be closer to them.

Focusing on the question and not my mates, I take a quick scan of myself. Considering I was drowned and had hypothermia not that long ago, I'm feeling surprisingly well.

"My body aches, but that will pass soon," I reply with a small smile, watching as their bodies all seem to relax.

There's a strange feeling coming from one of my bonds, and with curiosity, I feel for it and find it's the connection between Joel and me. Turning my gaze to him, I find him sharing a look with Atlas. Joel turns, and the look he gives me is intense, his eyes sparkling with something I can't quite place. He walks towards the bed, stopping at the base and planting his hands on the mattress. There's something about the look he gives me that awakens my arousal, his smouldering eyes pinning me in place, making it so I couldn't move even if I wanted to.

"We were talking while you were with Luna," Joel begins, his voice a little lower than usual. "Mates can help speed up healing through sexual acts, making the connections between the bonds stronger. It should make you feel better."

They want to heal me with orgasms.

Chapter Ten



Raising my eyebrows, I look between the five of them in bemusement. “You spoke about this? And all of you agree?”

Werewolves are possessive at the best of times, alphas even more so. I have two alpha males, a lone wolf, a former wolf, and a possessive witch all wanting to call me their own. Sharing isn’t in their nature, I understand that, and the times we have had sex together, it’s always been in small groups. What he’s suggesting now is an orgy.

“We are in this for the long haul, Laelia. If we want you, we have to accept that all of us are a part of the package.” Leaning against the wardrobe, Atlas attempts to look casual as he speaks, but the intensity of his gaze and the heat from his bond tells me otherwise. “It might not be within our natures, but when the reward is being with you, *loving* you, then the choice is easy. Nothing compares to being with you.”

“Let us look after you, Laelia,” Nicolai chimes in, confirming that he’s also in agreement with this plan. I was never worried about him though. Nicolai is my sweet boy next door type mate, always there for me when I need him.

My eyes flick over to the one person who hasn’t been mentioned yet—Scott. What will his role be in all of this? He’s been silent since entering the room, and although he’s wearing a neutral expression and nodding along with what they are saying, I can sense his hurt, not to mention how awkward this must be for him. They are talking about having sex with me,

something we both want. I wish there was something I could do that would make this better, but I just don't know what the solution is.

Clearly, Scott doesn't either, and although no one has said anything, it's the elephant in the room.

His shoulders drop ever so slightly, and I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't already been watching him. "I'll be in the sitting room if you need me," he says lightly, quickly turning on his heel and beginning to move towards the door.

"Scott, wait."

The words are out of my mouth before I even realise it, and I'm leaning forward in bed, my hand outstretched as if to stop him. Tentatively, as though he's not sure what he's going to find when he does, he turns around to face me. My gut clenches painfully as I see his resigned expression.

What am I doing?

He's not my mate, so having sex with him won't heal me like the guys are suggesting, and they clearly didn't include him in the conversation. That, or they told him that he's not to be involved. Either way, I hate that he's being excluded when we both want each other. However, jumping straight into an orgy with him is hardly the best place to start for a budding relationship, nor do I really want the others watching during our first time together. That's a discussion I need to have with my mates before involving Scott anyway. The timing is all wrong, but I want him to be a part of this.

Feeling flustered and unsure, I finally look at my mates to gauge their reactions. I've not told them anything. They only know that I've asked Scott not to leave. What are they thinking? They don't seem surprised, but a couple of them look resigned, like they expected this to happen, and I can see uncertainty in some of their eyes. Scott is here to stay, and they know that. I've made it pretty clear, but we've never addressed the relationship aspect of his presence. It's a conversation we need to have, although now is not the time.

“Stay. Watch us,” I blurt as I glance back at him, unable to form full sentences. My cheeks heat instantly, and I realise how this sounds. This is Scott, we have a connection, so why is this so hard? I know it’s a gamble to offer him this, and it’s hardly a romantic proposal. Will he take it as an offense? The last thing I want him to think is that I’m rubbing my relationship with my mates in his face, something that he’ll never have. Or will he take it as the opportunity that I’m offering? I want him here, I want him to be a part of *this*, I just have no idea how to navigate this and am terrified of upsetting anyone. After he bared his soul to me at the party, this feels like a way to show him how I feel, involving him in a way no one other than my mates have ever been given. I was never able to tell him how I felt at the party, something I regret, but I can do this. Maybe this will make up for me running off.

Scott instantly stills, his chest freezing as he holds his breath. His gaze locks on me as he senses the honesty of my offer. This isn’t some half-baked proposal because I feel guilty about him being left out, but an honest attempt to integrate him into our romantic lives. While his posture is rigid, he seems poised and ready to jump into action, yet something is holding him back. Releasing a pent-up breath, I watch him take a deep inhale and slowly look at the others.

“Is everyone okay with that?”

The question is asked smoothly, as if he’s discussing something menial, when really, I can see how much the answer means to him. He locks his hands together to stop himself from fiddling and giving away the hopefulness he’s attempting to keep in check.

Joel meets the other male’s stare and nods, not holding back. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re one of us, mate bond or not. You’ve proven your dedication to Laelia. It was only a matter of time.”

Nicolai is already nodding his agreement, having accepted the other male long ago. The two I am most worried about have yet to speak, my breath catching in my throat as I wait for their reactions—Atlas and Syn.

Atlas, however, takes me completely by surprise as a slow, sly grin spreads across his face. “What’s one more werewolf?” he comments, and I exhale with relief, only he’s not done yet. “Having an audience will only make it hotter. Having him watch as we pleasure you, care for you...”

“Oh,” is all I manage in response, warmth travelling straight to my core. Where did this side of him come from, and why did his words have such an effect on me? I now have images of him going down on me while Scott watches with hungry eyes.

Looking over at my final and most possessive mate, I silently ask him with my eyes. This decision is his to make, and I don’t want to pressure him, yet I know he wants to keep me all to himself, and accepting another will be hard for him. As he keeps his steely gaze locked on me, though, I feel the moment he makes his decision, our bond briefly wavering.

“Fine, as long as he doesn’t touch you while I’m touching you,” he grumbles, not even bothering to look in the direction of the male in question. It might not be a huge step, but it is a positive one all the same. I don’t say anything aloud, knowing he wouldn’t want me to make a fuss, but when I touch our bond, I push a wave of love and appreciation his way so he knows this doesn’t change the depth of my feelings towards him.

“Agreed,” Scott replies from the other side of the room, his voice a little tight. Movement pulls my attention from Syn, and I look over to find Scott grabbing a chair and dragging it into the corner of the room. He sits in a typical male fashion, his legs spread wide apart, and he leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He rolls up his shirt sleeves, his eyes never once leaving me. It’s intense and the most sensual I’ve ever seen him, awakening a whole new level of attraction to him.

Having decided that he’s waited long enough, Atlas climbs onto the bed, working his way up until he’s hovering over me. He holds his weight off my body in a press up position and unhurriedly lowers himself until his lips are against mine. The kiss is quick but passionate, and he pulls away before I know

it, biting down on my lip and taking the flesh with him as though he's struggling to stay away. A tiny, breathy gasp escapes me as I arch my back as if to follow, already missing the feel of him.

His silver eyes light up with satisfaction, and his tongue swipes across his lower lip before he moves once more. For a moment, I'm confused as he stands on the mattress and shifts me forward, and it's only as he slides down behind me that I understand what he's doing—acting as my own personal living armchair. Sliding his hands up the length of my arms, he kneads my shoulders with his strong fingers and encourages me to lean back.

The physical contact is already helping me feel better, and as his hands skim across the tops of my arms and to my shoulders, he begins to massage me with his strong thumbs. An embarrassingly loud groan escapes me as my head drops forward, the sensations exquisite. I hadn't realised how tight the muscles in my neck and shoulders had become. The feeling is glorious, and my eyes close for a moment as I succumb to the pleasure.

The mattress dips by my feet, and I open my eyes to find Syn crawling towards me. His movements are fluid, and he looks at me like I'm his next meal. When he's like this, he seems more like an animal than a man, his inner wolf closer to the surface as his desire for me rises. For as long as I've known him, Syn has always been closer to his inner animal and rougher around the edges than my other mates. This has only been enhanced since our separation.

As I meet his hungry stare now, I don't see any signs of that madness that lingers in the back of his mind. He's a hundred percent in control. Sure, his instincts are driving him, but he wants this, wants *me*. It sends a thrill through me, awakening the werewolf in me as my mate comes to claim me, our primal instincts at the forefront of our minds.

Stopping between my legs, he reaches for the loose pyjama bottoms I wear, gently sliding them over my hips. With Atlas's help, I lift my ass so Syn is able to pull them down, revealing my uncovered pussy for the room to see. His growl of

appreciation makes the hair on my arms stand on end, and I bite down on my lower lip to stop myself from begging him to take me.

He pushes my knees apart and stares down at my core as though it's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Leaning forward, he takes a deep inhale, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. In other circumstances, I might be embarrassed by this. He's sniffing my most intimate area, something that many in polite society would consider disgusting, but his reaction wipes away any of my squeamishness. Glancing at the others, I find them watching with envy, not at all disgusted by Syn's actions.

"I am going to enjoy this." That's all the warning he gives me before burying his face between my legs.

Like a starving man, he feasts on me, his tongue exploring from the bottom of my slit to my clit, flicking the small nub of nerves until a moan breaks through my restraint. I feel him smile against me, his smug sense of satisfaction rolling through the bond.

Atlas continues to rub my shoulders, his hands then moving up to my scalp, the mixture of sensations almost overwhelming me. This only intensifies when Syn pushes his tongue into my entrance. The noises he makes only turn me on further, and the pure sounds of pleasure coming from him as he pleases me is almost enough to make me come there and then.

"Let me touch you. Taste you, something."

I hate how needy I sound, how my demand is more of a plea, but Syn simply laughs against me, the vibrations moving through me and making me groan. Someone approaches from my left, and when I look over, I find Joel. He's still topless from before, and his muscles look even more impressive from this angle. Catching me staring, he smiles and leans down, pressing a slow, seductive kiss against my lips.

"No, this is for you, Laelia." He pauses to kiss me. "We want to care for you. Let us."

Five males who all want to give me orgasms and treat me like their queen? Who in their right mind would say no to that offer? Not that I'm capable of responding right now, because Syn moves his attention back up to my clit. He's not soft and gentle like the others, nipping it and pressing bites to my inner thighs.

I fucking love it.

I nod in agreement, and Joel kisses me again until he reluctantly pulls back, giving us space. Syn takes this as a signal to increase his efforts, pushing me over the edge.

Atlas grips my shoulders as an orgasm rips through me, holding me in place. Pleasure races through my body, banishing all of my aches and pains. It makes me feel alive, and having my mates around me only helps to re-establish that. I've been living life a day at a time, as it was the only way I could get through what's been thrown at me. This reminds me that I have a life and five amazing males who support me endlessly.

As the pleasure of my orgasm recedes, my focus returns to the room and lands on Syn. He's lapping up the evidence of my arousal, sounding like someone who is savouring their favourite dish. Sitting back on his heels, he looks at me with a love so intense that it makes my heart constrict. He would destroy the world for me if I requested it, and I adore him for that.

Licking his lips, he gives me a slow, cocky smile then crawls up my body until we're face to face. His kiss is possessive, reminding everyone that he's mine and I'm his as he bites down on my lip, drawing a gasp from me.

A pointed cough sounds from someone in the room, a reminder to Syn that he's not the only mate here. Syn's body stiffens slightly as he fights his primal urges, and with a disgruntled noise, he pulls back, his eyes promising that we're not done.

His cock strains against the loose tracksuit bottoms he wears, but he doesn't ask for anything from me in return.

Retreating to the other side of the room, he leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

Before I can say or do anything, Joel and Nicolai approach me from either side. Climbing up onto the bed, they kneel at my sides. Nicolai leans over, fitting perfectly against my body, my old friend turned mate matching me like he was made to be here all along. Joel barely fits on the bed, his large form so different from Nicolai's slim frame, but he is also perfectly made for me, our souls matching.

As if by some unspoken signal, the two of them start to kiss my neck and jaw, taking turns to kiss my lips. All the while, Atlas runs his hands over my body, a tingling sensation trailing in his wake. Even though I just had one of the most powerful orgasms of my life, I feel arousal building low in my gut, warmth travelling straight to my throbbing core once more.

A large, calloused hand lands on my left thigh, clearly Joel's. Gliding over my smooth skin, he dips his hand between my legs. He groans against my neck at the wetness he finds there, coating his fingers in it before sliding two of them into my entrance. My head falls back in ecstasy, resting on Atlas's shoulder as those two digits twist and move inside me. I have no words for how good it feels, something that only intensifies as Nicolai lowers his mouth to my right breast. Sucking my nipple into his eager mouth, he rolls it with his tongue, flicking it until it's hard enough to cut glass.

Atlas's exploring fingers turn cold as he focuses his magic, the icy feeling creating a contrast with the rest of my body, which feels like it's burning up. Deciding that my left breast isn't getting enough attention, he moves to rectify that, his fingers brushing the delicate skin. My nipple stiffens as he brushes against it, pressing the icy magic against me for only a second before pulling away. His other hand takes over, his warm palm covering me and massaging my breast, kneading the sensitive flesh. He continues this way, switching from hot to cold, and it's only enhancing my arousal, turning me on even more than I thought possible.

This continues, driving me senseless with pleasure and stimulation to the point where I almost feel disconnected from my body. I need them. If they want to heal me mind, body, and soul, then I need them physically. I appreciate the fact that they are doing this for me and working together to make sure I experience every pleasure they can offer. I really do. It makes me love them even more, but this goes beyond that. When I'm pleasuring them, it makes me feel good. I love to make them feel what I'm feeling, and I can't do that if they refuse to let me touch them or bring them to orgasm.

What I want to tell them is that I need them inside me *now*. I need to feel their pulsing cocks and their cum in my pussy. I want them in every way, and their pleasure only increases my own. However, my brain is filled with pleasure, and I can barely think.

"Please, I need you inside me," I rasp. "Fuck me now."

There's a brief pause, and I know they are trying to resist because they believe this is what's best for me after what happened today. Really, it's the opposite.

"Remind me what I'm fighting for." Flushed and pining, I look around the room and meet their gazes, pushing my fractured feelings from the challenge and the attack down the bond—feelings that I'm unable to put into words but fill my mind so violently. "Remind me why all of this pain is worth it."

I didn't mean for those words to slip out, nor did I mean for my voice to crack at the end, my emotions getting the better of me. Blaming it on overstimulation and my desperate need to come again, I push back those feelings and wait for them to decide.

Joel sits back, watching me with a concerned frown. He looks at the male behind me, and the two of them seem to have a silent conversation. When my muscled alpha mate returns his attention to me, I see the determination in his expression.

"We've got you, Laelia," Atlas whispers into my ear, kissing my lobe and nuzzling the side of my neck.

Joel's gaze sees right into my soul. He doesn't look away for a moment as he pushes his shorts down, exposing his hard cock. My mouth instantly waters, wanting to taste the bead of pearly precum on the head of his dick. Shifting positions so he's between my legs, he lines his cock up with my entrance, his gaze still locked on me.

"That's it, mate. Take your alpha's cock." Atlas's dirty words fill my ears as Joel slowly but firmly pushes his dick inside me. "He's going to fuck you nice and deep, filling you with his seed."

Slamming to the hilt, Joel fills me completely, and something about having another male whisper encouragement and filthy words to me only makes it that much hotter. Pulling back, Joel grips my knees and pounds into me. A cry of pleasure is ripped from me, encouraging him to keep going, his movements controlled and deep. I feel completely safe with Joel, knowing he would never hurt me and understands our limits, taking me to the edge of what I can handle.

Nicolai has moved from the bed, and I'm vaguely aware of a quiet conversation happening somewhere in the room, but I'm so lost in pleasure that I can't focus. Syn soon fills the place where Nicolai had just been, his hard cock in his hand.

"You can't have just one of your alphas' cum inside you. You need mine too," he says with a growl, his possessive nature showing as he kneels beside me.

I am completely on board with this and nod eagerly, opening my mouth and sticking my tongue out to take him. He presents me with his cock, and I suck him into my mouth, his salty taste coating my tongue. Syn groans, and when I look up through my lashes, I find him staring down at me with adoration. He's already twitching in my mouth, so I know it won't be long until he reaches climax.

"Good girl," Atlas praises, his hands still administering the icy cool touch to my nipples. "Such a good girl for your mates."

So fucking hot. I've always wondered how I was going to manage intimate relationships with four mates and a fifth

male, especially given some of their possessive alpha natures. However, as I relax the back of my throat to take Syn as deeply into my mouth as possible while Joel pounds into me and Atlas holds me, I realise this could actually work.

I was right that Syn wouldn't last long, his cock twitching in my mouth as I run my tongue along the underside of his cock, hollowing my cheeks as I suck deeply. With an animalistic noise ripping from his throat, he stills as he comes in my mouth. Humming at the taste, I swallow his seed then smile up at him, my whole body jerking from the force of Joel's thrusts.

The alpha in question shifts his hips, angling them in a different way and stealing my breath away. Hitting my G-spot with every thrust, he starts to make little grunts which I know means he's close to climax. His movements stutter, and he cries out in shock, his orgasm taking him by surprise. His cock releases its load, pulsing inside me.

I'm so close to my own orgasm, but I hold myself back. Nicolai and Atlas have yet to finish, and I'm not sure I could come for a third time. Perhaps in different circumstances, when I haven't had a day from hell, but I want to enjoy this with them.

Breathing like he's just run a marathon, Joel's chest heaves. I don't blame him, my own breathing heavy as sweat clings to both of our bodies. With his cock still inside me, he leans forward and captures my lips in a lazy kiss. It's a kiss full of confidence and love, and while I could keep kissing him forever, he keeps it short. He pulls semi-erect dick from my pussy with a groan.

Feeling suddenly empty, I bite my lip to stop myself from demanding to be filled again. They were right when they said this would help heal me, and there's a part of me that is crying out for something I don't know how to vocalise.

Somehow knowing exactly what I need, Nicolai appears in my line of sight, standing at the foot of the bed. He's completely naked, and my eyes run hungrily over his body. While slimmer than my other mates, he's still muscled and

powerful. As a pack enforcer who is training to be third-in-command, he had to be strong and fast, his lithe form making that easier. My father, the second-in-command, is much larger, which aided in his role of helping the pack and when necessary, doling out punishments.

A lump forms in the back of my throat as I think about my father, but I push it away and focus on my mates. Now is not the time to be thinking of my family. They occupy most of my thoughts on a daily basis anyway, and thinking of them while I'm fucking my mates is not appropriate.

Crooking his finger, Nicolai gestures for me to go to him. I untangle myself from Atlas and crawl to the end of the bed. I'm aware that my swollen pussy and ass are completely exposed like this, and I can feel Joel's cum leaking out of me. I should be embarrassed, and I am a little self-conscious, but hearing the noises of appreciation from my mates is enough to stop me from trying to cover myself.

Nicolai grins, cupping my chin as I reach him, and then he leans down to kiss me. His tongue dances with mine, giving me a taste of him before he pulls back to look into my eyes.

"Stay like that," he whispers and moves away.

Frowning, I follow his instructions, waiting on my hands and knees at the end of the bed. The mattress dips as he climbs on, and when his hands land on my ass, I realise why he wants me like this. He pushes my ass cheeks apart and exposes my pussy. If I thought everything was on display before, then I was wrong.

He hums, his fingers dancing over my inner thighs until he reaches my pussy.

"Look at this pretty pink pussy." The praise in his voice makes me press my legs together to try and get some friction. Nicolai simply clicks his tongue and continues to spread me wide open. "All swollen and full of your mate's cum, although you seem to be losing some of it. I'll help," he comments lightly, as though this is a common occurrence. Sliding his fingers to my entrance, he gathers some of the escaped cum.

The moment he pushes his fingers inside me, I gasp and throw my head back.

He repeats the process of collecting the cum that's escaping and pushing it back inside me, finger fucking me with another male's seed. It's dirty and fucking perfect. He pushes those talented fingers deeper, but too soon, he's removing them, leaving me feeling empty.

He tuts. "This is no good. It seems I need to fill you again. Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I bite out, no longer caring how needy I sound.

Laughing, he lines up behind me, his cock pressing against my entrance. He only has to nudge it in, my pussy taking it greedily. The lurid sound of our flesh slapping together fills the room, enhancing my own pleasure. Until recently, I had no idea that Nicolai was into any of this, nor that I enjoyed it so much.

My pleasure builds, and all the dirty words from Nicolai have now stopped as he fucks me as deeply as he can. This angle is perfect for that, his cock hitting my G-spot with every stroke.

Movement catches my attention, and my eyes fly to the corner of the room. I hadn't forgotten that Scott was there. I was aware of his gaze on me the entire time, I just hadn't wanted to see if he was feeling jealous or left out. I can't hold off looking at him any longer, and to my immense surprise, he's watching me with a crooked half smile. The movement that caught my attention was actually his hand moving over his stiff cock. He's wanking himself off while watching me being fucked by my mates. He wouldn't be doing that if he hated what he saw, and his smile tells me that he's very much enjoying what he sees.

Each thrust from Nicolai's hips pushes Joel's cum farther inside me, and soon, Nicolai's will join it. With Scott watching and that thought going round my mind, it's just too much for me, and I shatter around Nicolai's cock, crying out as the orgasm rips through me. My vision goes white as pleasure overwhelms me.

Clenching down on his dick, I pulse around Nicolai as waves of pleasure wash over me. Just as I think it's starting to ebb, Nicolai lets out a croaked cry, his movements stalling as he pumps his cum inside me. This only extends my pleasure as we fall apart around each other.

Slumped over my back, Nicolai stirs, wading through his pleasure fogged mind as he slowly removes his cock. He hums with approval, and I feel his fingers at my entrance, gently pushing his cum back inside me. There is no possible way I could go again, but that doesn't stop my core from clenching at the action.

My pussy is so sensitive now, throbbing from the attention it's received, and I know I'll feel this little session in the morning. Right now, though, I feel like I'm floating, my limbs light. Lifting my head, I see Scott leaning back in bliss, the evidence of his enjoyment clear to see.

Exhaustion floods me, but it's different from how I felt earlier. That was a bone weary exhaustion that follows both physical and mental exhaustion, overwhelming and consuming me completely. This is like a warm, sleepy hug of a loved one, my eyes heavy as my body hums from pleasure. However, I'm very aware of the fact I've not spent much time with Atlas.

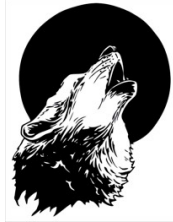
He hasn't come yet. In fact, I've hardly touched him, and leaning against him like a chair doesn't count. When I turn to him, I find him watching me with a pleased, sleepy smile. It doesn't take me long to figure out why. His semi-hard cock is still in his hand, his cum coating his stomach. It seems Atlas took his pleasure into his own hands.

Knees quivering, I sit down on the edge of the bed with slightly more force than I planned, my balance thrown. A blissful smile plays on my lips, and I have no words for how I'm feeling.

Thankfully, Joel senses what I need before I even work it out for myself and approaches me with a gentle expression. "Come, mate. Let's get you cleaned up," he murmurs quietly, picking me up and cradling me in his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. It's such a caring gesture and so much like

my big alpha mate that I don't insist on walking to the bathroom myself. Instead, I lean against him and let him care for me.

Chapter Eleven



In the morning, I feel surprisingly well. The aches and bruises from the day before are healed, and that bone deep exhaustion seems to have passed. What really shocks me, though, is how clear my mind is. After yesterday's challenge and the mess the arch left me in, I wasn't expecting to feel like myself for a long time.

Sure, I'm still questioning a lot of what I learned about myself. I'm not certain anyone could ever be completely whole again after they see all of their mistakes and flaws displayed like that. The wounds it created were on a soul deep level and were too large to heal overnight. I might never be the same as I was before, but I can grow to be okay with that.

I survived, though, and last night with my mates helped heal my state of mind as well as my body, something I didn't know was possible. I'm so blessed with them in my life. Other than the obvious healing benefits, it was the hottest night of my life. They all worked together to care for me and bring me pleasure, even involving Scott in a way they never would have before.

Untangling myself from the mass of limbs on the bed, I smile as I slip away, padding over to the bathroom. Once I've used the toilet and wash my hands in the sink, I glance up at my reflection in the mirror. I look different, older, wiser perhaps, but I see the effects of my mates' love on my face. My lilac eyes are brighter and shine with an inner strength I didn't have before. My skin almost glows with health, and I

seem to carry an air of contentment that can only come with a relationship you have fully committed to.

Hope blooms in my chest as I think back to last night. If we survive this, then we could actually be happy together. However, that will never happen while we're being held hostage in Haven. Sure, we've been given all the comforts we could need, but a gilded cage is still a cage. If we tried to walk out, we would be stopped, and now we're being forced to perform in this game the queen concocted for her own reasons.

Determination fills me. I will carve a life for us, no matter the cost or what the world has planned for us. We will eventually leave Haven and live peacefully. I will find my pack, make sure they are all safe, and be reunited with my father. We can all live peacefully. Is it naïve to believe that's possible? Maybe. However, it gives me strength to push forward and survive these challenges.

Smiling at myself in the mirror, I send the goddess a quick prayer of thanks and return to the bedroom. Three of my males are spread across the bed, their arms and legs hanging over the edge of the mattress. I smile and shake my head. Syn, Joel, and Scott are all still fast asleep, and I'm about to join them when I hear a quiet conversation coming from the sitting room.

Usually, I would just pass by, not stopping to listen in on something that's obviously private, but something in my gut tells me this is important. Frowning, I slow to a stop by the slightly ajar door.

Nicolai's strained voice reaches me, my heart clenching tightly in my chest as I hear his distress. Instinctively, I start to move forward to comfort him, but I force myself to stop. If he wanted my comfort, he would have asked for it, so although it stings, I respect his choice—even if I am breaking his obvious wish for privacy by listening in.

"I just need you to take it away," Nicolai states, his voice strained. "You did it before, I don't understand the problem."

My frown deepens with confusion as I puzzle over what he's speaking about.

Atlas sighs, confirming my assumption that's who Nicolai is speaking to. His response is instant, like none of this is new information and they are repeating something they've already discussed. "You sent some of your power to me when I was using vast quantities of my own and needed more. I didn't take your magic away," he explains, making sure he's precise in his explanation so Nicolai understands what he's trying to convey. "When you use a lot of magic, it takes a while to build back up in your body. That's why you haven't felt the need to use your magic until now. You used it all, and now it's returning."

My eyes slide shut as understanding hits me with anguish. Tears prick at my eyes as I bite down on my lip to stop any sound from escaping. Nicolai is struggling with his magic. I knew that he was fighting for control when we discovered his power, but since the challenge, he's been lighter, almost like the old Nicolai. Shame surges through me like a swollen river after a torrential downpour, making it difficult to control or tame. In the stress of everything that's happened, I'd practically forgotten about the struggle Nicolai has been experiencing.

"I don't want it to build up. I just want it gone! I can *feel* it moving through me." His anguish is plain to hear in his voice as he gets louder, not caring who overhears him at this point. He's desperate. "Please, just take it."

Placing my hand against the door, I attempt to soothe him through our connection. I feel his heartache and desperation through the bond, and it's agony. The desire to do something, *anything*, that will help him is so strong that it fills me with sorrow. There is nothing I can do to take away his magic, nor can I seem to banish my guilt, knowing that he's in this situation because he wanted to be with me.

There's a heavy pause, and eventually, Atlas huffs out a breath. Whether this means he's considering the other male's request or how to reject it without sending him into a spiral, I don't know. If I could see him, see their expressions, then I could possibly help. Unable to hold myself back any longer, I push the door open and step into the sitting room.

Both of them look over at me, and while Atlas doesn't look surprised to see me, Nicolai appears panicked. The former is wearing a pair of low slung grey sweatpants, and his arms are crossed over his bare chest, his expression frustrated. I can feel that he's torn, wanting to help my other mate but not knowing how. My gaze quickly flicks over to Nicolai, taking in his ragged appearance. Loose trousers and an oversized shirt cover his body, but his hair is sticking up at all angles as though he's been repeatedly combing his fingers through it.

"Nicolai? Atlas? Is everything okay?"

I heard enough of their conversation to know that it's not okay, but I don't want Nicolai to feel uncomfortable. Besides, I want him to tell me what's happening. I want him to trust me with his struggle.

Smiling tightly in a way I'm sure he thinks is reassuring, he waves me off with a flick of his hand. "We're fine. You should get some more sleep."

"No." Atlas reaches out as if gesturing for me to stay, yet his eyes are locked on Nicolai. "We are *not* fine." Tone firm, he faces off with the other male before slowly turning to address me. "Nicolai is struggling with his magic, but he doesn't want to learn to control it. He wants me to syphon off some of his magic to make it easier to keep under control."

My eyebrows rise. "I didn't know you could do that."

I knew about sharing magic when performing powerful spells, but I hadn't realised that you could simply take power from another to make it more controllable. It certainly would have been easier for me when I first arrived and was unable to control my magic.

Looking at my expression and seeing far too much, he purses his lips and nods. "We only do it in emergency circumstances or to control prisoners with unusually strong magic. It's lazy, addictive, and doesn't fix the issue. Ultimately, he has to learn to control his magic."

While this makes sense, Nicolai doesn't take the news well, his eyes widening as he realises that Atlas is going to say

no.

“But I don’t want it!” Throwing his hands up in the air, Nicolai looks between us before pacing the length of the room, looking like an animal in a cage. “I never asked for this. When I gave up my wolf, I was fine being a normal human. I’d accepted that. Sure, I miss my wolf like crazy, but I never wanted to become a *witch*.”

He’s spiralling, and you don’t have to share a connection with him to see that. Atlas gives me a pointed glance, and I know I have to make Nicolai see sense.

“Nicolai, you need to learn to control this magic, or it will consume you.” I’ve gone through this myself and remember how out of control I felt until I mastered the basics of handling my magic. Once I had it, it just sat in the back of my mind, only coming forward when I wanted to use it or when I needed protection, like in the cavern. I’ve been told plenty of horror stories by Luna and Madame Constance about what happens to someone when they lose control of their magic, and I won’t let that happen to Nicolai.

Anger, frustration, and hopelessness filter through the bond as he continues to pace, not meeting our eyes, his hands moving in constant jerking motions as if he can’t keep them still. “Maybe that’s what should happen.”

I freeze, my body going cold, and I’m unable to move as if Atlas used his magic on me. I’m sure I didn’t understand Nicolai properly, because it almost sounds like he wants to lose control, meaning he would... *die*. He would die.

“What?” Finally regaining some function in my limbs, I take a step forward, my voice shaky with disbelief. “What are you saying?”

Even Atlas seems surprised by the comment, his frustration at the other male disappearing as he realises just how close to the edge Nicolai is.

Nicolai’s agitated energy runs out as he stumbles to a stop, his head and shoulders drooping as if he’s carrying the weight

of the world. When he looks up at me, his expression is full of despair, shame, and self-hatred.

“I’m saying that maybe I should just let it consume me.” Now that he’s started speaking about those dark, hateful thoughts, it’s like he can’t stop, each word coming out faster than the one before until they all rush together. “Magic is destroying me, I’m no longer the pack protector I was, and I have no purpose. I was supposed to die anyway, so why not just let it take me?”

My heart is breaking, feeling as though it’s tearing itself apart in my chest. Each breath suddenly becomes difficult, and nausea churns in my gut. I’m going to be sick. This can’t be happening. I was so hopeful of our life together only minutes ago, and now I’m having to contemplate a life without my mate, my Nicolai. The urge to hold him, to show him how loved he is, becomes an order in my mind, and as my eyes sting, I don’t stop the tears from rolling down my face.

“Nicolai...” I take another step forward, my legs feeling weak. “I love you. You’ve always been there for me, both as a pack protector and a friend. When you died—” My voice cracks, and I have to press my hand to my chest as the memory causes physical pain, momentarily taking my breath away.

My instincts are to push my feelings down and not let him see how upset I am, but this time, I ignore that instinct. The habit of suppressing my strong feelings may protect me in certain circumstances, but now, Nicolai needs to see it, to witness just a fraction of the pain I feel at even the idea of losing him again.

Meeting his distressed gaze, I force myself to take that final step until I stand right in front of him. “It felt like I’d lost a part of my soul. I *need* you.” Taking his hands gently in mine, I hope that he can feel how earnest and honest I’m being. My feelings go far deeper than I’m able to vocalise, so I push them down the bond. “This magic wasn’t what you asked for, but perhaps it’s a blessing from the goddess. There is so much you can do with your power, so many good uses for it. You just need to learn to control it.” My voice becomes a little

stronger as I speak despite the tears that still roll down my cheeks.

“Madame Constance has been teaching me, and she’ll help you too,” I insist, nodding my head rapidly as panic that I’m not doing enough to convince Nicolai washes through me like a tsunami.

Nicolai’s expression cracks, and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me against him. “Shh, it’s okay. Please don’t cry, Laelia.” He kisses the top of my head while I cry against his chest, my hands gripping his shirt like a lifeline.

I’m the one who’s supposed to be supporting him, yet here he is, holding me together. *You’re showing him that he’s needed, that he does have a purpose*, the small voice in the back of my mind points out, and I realise it’s right. It might not be as obvious as what he’s doing to help me, but we are each other’s anchor, keeping us close when we go adrift.

“I can’t lose you again.”

While my words are murmured and muted against his chest, he still hears me and rubs my back as he comforts me. “Shh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m not going anywhere.”

Remorse and shame colour his voice, and I make an effort to calm myself so I can see his expression. Frowning at what I see, I take a deep breath and rest my hands against his chest. “I don’t want you to feel guilty, Nicolai. It’s normal to feel the way you do after what you’ve been through. I can’t even imagine what it’s like, but this world is a better place with you here. Magic or not.”

I watch as he swallows against a lump in his throat, his expression still unsure. It’s only as Atlas steps closer that I remember the other male is still here.

“She’s right,” he begins, placing a hand on his shoulder. “What they did to you was cruel and wrong, but you survived. You also did something they never expected, you stole their magic and made it your own. You could be a force to be reckoned with.”

Atlas is talking about the torture his abductors used to bring him back to life. I don't know the details, and I don't want to, because I already feel sick from the small amount I've been told. Despite what the witches believe, it was the goddess who brought him back to us, and I truly believe that she's the one who gifted him with magic.

"Your entire world has changed, and now you have magic to contend with too," Atlas continues, the two males locked in an intense stare. "Even witches struggle to adjust, and we're brought up knowing we'll have magic."

This seems to impact Nicolai. He slowly nods, some of the hopelessness leaving him. Standing straighter, he looks more confident. I'm not done, though, because the panic from thinking I might lose him is still clawing at my chest.

"Nicolai, If you feel this way again, please, come find me," I plead, waiting for him to look at me before I continue, a small smile flickering on my lips. "I'll remind you of all the ways we need you here."

Lowering his head, he presses his forehead to mine. "Okay, I promise."

We stand this way for a few minutes in silence, simply holding each other and soaking up the mix of intense emotions until just our love for each other remains. Atlas stays quiet and steps back to give us some space during this time, which I appreciate.

Once I'm feeling more settled and the bond between us is stable, I dab at my face and smile up at Nicolai. "Does this mean you'll learn to control your magic?" I ask lightly, but I won't back down.

Sighing, Nicolai nods and gives me a small, tight smile. "Yes."

"Madame Constance will have your magic controlled quickly. She's a great teacher," Atlas comments from his position against the wall, and I flash him a smile over my shoulder.

I'm about to agree when Nicolai suddenly stiffens and takes a small step back. Alarmed, I look back at my mate and see the panic in his eyes. "Wait, why can't you teach me?"

"I'm not a teacher—" Cutting himself off, Atlas waves it away with a gesture. "Psh, okay, fine. I'll try, but if it doesn't work, you're going to Madame Constance."

Atlas seems to have realised the same thing I did—Nicolai wasn't going to be comfortable with or sharing his vulnerability with another witch. I'm just grateful that he's willing to take Nicolai on as a student despite not being an instructor. He assisted with my learning when it comes to shields though, so I know he's good at explaining magic, even if it's reluctantly.

"Okay, I understand." Understanding Atlas is offering something that he usually wouldn't, Nicolai nods his head rapidly as if he's afraid the other male is going to change his mind. "Can we start now?"

Barking out a laugh, Atlas crosses his arms over his chest. "You're eager all of a sudden."

I'm about to agree, since the change in Nicolai is rapid and obvious, but the strained expression he gives in return stops me from saying anything.

"I hate not being in control of my own body. Once I have control, it will be better."

A tiny frown appears between Atlas's brows, but he doesn't comment on the change in my mate. Instead, he glances at the clock on the wall and the early hour of the day and exhales heavily. "Let's go get some breakfast, and then we can start working on the basics."

Hope blooms in Nicolai's eyes, and he skips towards the door, a spring in his step once more. Meeting Atlas's pointed look, I mouth my thanks and push my love for him down the bond. His expression softens, and his eyes sparkle with emotion.

As I watch them leave, my stomach twists, not with hunger, but concern. Seeing Nicolai like that had been

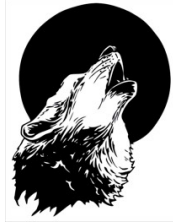
heartbreaking. I would rather face the archway of truth every day for a year rather than see him so desolate again. Hopefully with Atlas's help and my support, he will make it through this stronger.

Taking a deep breath, I send a prayer to the goddess that everything will work out, and that she'll guide Nicolai through this turbulent time.

"Laelia?" Syn calls sleepily from the bedroom, breaking me from my thoughts.

Knowing there's nothing else I can do for Nicolai at this moment, I turn to walk back into the bedroom, ready to climb into bed with my mates and let them comfort me.

Chapter Twelve



I extend my trembling hands and focus on calling my power. Stars appear in my palms, the lights dazzling. With a simple thought, they dim to a softer glow. That's the easy part. Taking a deep breath, I focus on the next stage of my task. Closing my eyes, I push the stars away from me, willing them to go *through* the door and into the bedroom.

I know I accomplished it when Scott yelps in surprise. A small smile begins to pull at my lips, only that weakens my concentration, and my control slips. It takes all of my focus to manifest my stars.

“Um, Laelia, why is there a star hovering over me?” Scott’s tense voice calls out from behind the closed door into the bathroom.

“Sorry! Just practising!” Releasing the hold on my power, I feel the magic fade away, and Scott’s quiet sigh of relief informs me that the star in question has now disappeared.

His concern is valid, considering the scorch marks on the walls that document my many unsuccessful attempts at trying to make my stars travel through objects. It turns out those stars get hot and will burn. Using magic around my werewolf mates still seems to make them uncomfortable—not that they would ever say anything, and I see them trying to hide it—but Nicolai and Scott seem to struggle with it the most. Syn doesn’t care as long as he’s with me, and Joel is glad that I have a way to protect myself.

The last few days have passed by in a whirlwind. By order of the queen, I've been confined to my rooms to "rest and recover" from the attack. Kano tells me that the queen is investigating the matter very seriously, and that makes me nervous. Even so, I've been trying to make the most of the down time with my mates. I was beginning to go crazy with nothing to do, though, so Luna was able to persuade the queen to allow me to practice my magic. She agreed, but only if I had the lessons in my rooms.

Madame Constance and Luna have been spending hours here with me, teaching me and filling me in on what's been going on in Haven. Having something to focus on has been helping me immensely. I feel like I'm piecing myself back together after being shattered by the archway. I had been feeling so vulnerable after that and the attack, that it seemed stupid not to learn to wield my power. My skills in controlling and using it seem to grow rapidly, almost impossibly so, but Madame Constance tells me this is normal. I feel stronger and more confident. My use of my star magic might be rudimentary, but it's strong and does what I will it to ninety percent of the time.

The dark presence in me rarely speaks to me anymore. It seems that the more control I take for myself, the quieter it becomes. This should comfort me, after all, that presence has only ever enhanced my negative reactions, turning them into volatile thoughts and emotions. Instead of comfort, though, it only makes me nervous. Knowing that it would take control if I was ever in mortal danger became somewhat of a security blanket for me.

That pit of darkness within me remains, and I often dip into it when I use magic that requires more power. The intensity of the power I draw from there is different, like the voltage has been turned up to max, and it allows me to accomplish things I never thought possible. Learning to use this instead of relying on the dark presence to protect me is vital, but I won't deny that it feels strange without that voice in the back of my mind. It always seemed to know what to do, whereas I feel like I'm struggling to keep my head above water.

When Atlas is not working with Nicolai, he helps me practice my shielding and defensive magic. During our first few sessions together, we could barely tolerate each other, and now it only brings us closer together.

Even the thought of his hands on my hips as he guides me through defensive moves, both physically and with my power, makes my heart flutter in my chest. We discovered that my magic manifests much more powerfully when I move with it. Some witches can control theirs with their mind, not needing to move or say a thing, while others use words or sounds to conjure their power. For me, it's linked to movement. When I get lost in the magic and my body sways to the rhythm that intrinsically runs through me, it feels almost like a dance. There is no music or specific moves, just instinct.

Now that my magic has returned to the place where it dwells inside me, happy and content, I open my eyes. Blinking against the light, I take a few moments to glance around the room. Nothing has changed in the minute or so since my eyes have been closed, but I find it helpful to ground myself after using it a lot. It's easy to get absorbed and forget who I am when holding that amount of power.

Luna stands beside me, giving me a few moments to return to myself before speaking. She's been the only one helping me today, seeing as Madame Constance was called away to deal with an issue that occurred somewhere in Haven. My mates all give me space when I'm training so as not to distract me, so they are all currently in the sitting room. All, that is, except for Syn who refuses to leave. Even now, he's watching from the corner of the room, his eyes heavy on my body.

I smile and turn to Luna, her smile warming something in my chest.

"That was great," she praises, squeezing my arm gently. "Your control has grown so much in the last couple of days."

Smile turning wry, I raise a brow. "Being locked in my rooms and having nothing else to do other than practice has probably helped with that."

“I was going to say it must be my fabulous teaching, but that could be part of the reason too,” she mumbles, but her lips twitch, so I know she’s not really offended.

Sensing that magic lessons are over, Syn peels himself away from the wall and crosses the room, wrapping himself around me. Nuzzling against the crook of my neck, he inhales deeply, his resulting satisfied grumble making my core tighten with desire.

The scent of magic is still strong in the air, but it doesn’t belong to me or Luna, so I know that Atlas and Nicolai are still training together in the sitting room. Nicolai has been focusing on drawing and releasing his power in a non-destructive way. He seems to have very strong, volatile magic, as if the violence of his rebirth has transferred into his power. Thanks to Atlas’s help, if he can focus, he’s able to tame it and form it into something useful, but if it’s left too long, it will find its own way out. Unfortunately, that’s usually in the form of uncontrolled blasts of power. So far, no one has been hurt, but there’s a tension that hangs in the air as we all wait for it to happen. Atlas tells me that Nicolai is making steady progress, though, and to give it time.

We don’t have time.

I don’t know where that thought came from, but it’s been plaguing me. All day, a sense of urgency has weighed on my shoulders. Why I feel this way is a mystery. The goddess isn’t sending the message, and it’s not the darkness within me speaking. Something in my gut is whispering it, and I would usually just brush it off as being a nervous thought, but this isn’t easy to just push away.

A knock on the door pulls me from my turbulent thoughts. I hear Joel in the other room moving to see who’s there, and I gently untangle myself from Syn and pad into the sitting room. Since I’ve been confined to my rooms, the only visitors we’ve had have been Kano or Luna and Constance for my lessons. None of them would usually knock on the door. Besides, Luna is already here, and Constance was called away, which leaves my brother, but he rarely comes during the day because he’s

working for the queen, so I'm intrigued to see who is knocking.

Pulling the door open, Joel freezes for a moment before stepping back to reveal Kano. Surprised but pleased to see him, I step forward to greet him. I'm about to make a comment about being disappointed that he wasn't someone more exciting when I take in his expression. His whole body seems rigid with tension, his jaw tight and hands balled into fists at his sides. However, it's the concern flashing in his eyes that truly worries me. Something is wrong.

I feel my chest tighten. "Kano, are you okay?"

He moves farther into the room, waiting for the door to close behind him, his eyes shifting as if to make sure we're alone. His chest moves rapidly, and I see a slight sheen across his face, like he rushed to get here.

"I wanted to give you as much warning as possible."

The tension in the room rockets as my mates step forward, ready to defend me at a moment's notice. Even Luna moves forward, taking half a step in front of me—not from Kano, but whatever news he hurried here to tell us.

"The queen wanted to spring it on you, but I knew I had to give you some warning," Kano continues, the words tumbling from him.

Alert, I tilt my head to one side at the mention of the queen. What is she planning now? Things were too quiet over the last few days, and I've been expecting her to spring something on me. While I'm not surprised, I'm also not foolish enough to think that I'm not going to be in danger.

"Warning? About what?" I ask, somehow managing to keep the anticipation and growing trepidation from my voice.

Joel shifts his weight, and I feel his alpha power swell from the other side of the room as he addresses my brother. "Is Laelia in danger?"

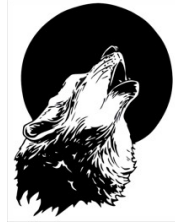
Syn, who has been standing at my back closely enough that I can feel the heat from his body, growls at the invisible threat, claws extending from the tips of his fingers. Reaching

out, I absentmindedly run my hand down his arm in comfort as I focus on what's happening.

Kano straightens and meets my gaze. "The queen has announced a mandatory meeting in an hour. She wouldn't tell me what it was about, but everyone is to attend."

If I had thought his expression was grim before, he proves me wrong as it darkens, his brows furrowing as he delivers his next words. "I think she's going to announce the next challenge."

Chapter Thirteen



Under guard, we're led to the meeting hall. From the almost empty halls, I would guess that once again, we're going to be the last into the meeting, all eyes watching us closely. It makes me feel like a criminal, which I'm sure is exactly why the queen arranged things this way.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter angrily under my breath for the hundredth time.

"I'll be sure to pass on your criticism to the queen." Luna smirks beside me, but I know it's to cover her mixed emotions on the situation. Being the good friend she is, she doesn't want to worry me any more than I already am. Honestly, her joke helps as I snort, imagining the queen's reaction.

"I feel like an idiot," I mutter, gesturing to my clothes as we approach the meeting hall.

It's been almost an hour since Kano warned us, giving me just enough time to prepare myself both mentally and physically. We still have no idea if this meeting is actually about a challenge, or when and where it will take place. To make sure I was prepared, I dressed in dark trousers, combat boots, a loose white shirt, and a leather jacket I found at the back of the wardrobe.

The clothes are completely different from anything that is usually worn around Haven, especially by females, meaning I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb. However, I'd much rather prefer committing a social faux pas with my clothes

than be dressed in a ball gown and have to run away from whatever monster the queen is sure to unleash on me in the next challenge.

My mates are dressed in a combination of dark jeans and jackets, much like mine, and if the circumstances were different, I would be drooling over them right now, because *damn* they look fine.

The seven of us finally arrive at the hall, and I give myself a little shake in an attempt to rid myself of this nervous energy. None of us have a clue what this is about, but with the queen keeping things so secretive, even from Kano, it makes me think along the same lines as my brother, that this is about the next challenge. The last one nearly destroyed me, so to say I'm nervous is an understatement.

Our guards march us straight to the door, stopping right by the entrance and gesturing impatiently for us to go in. Biting my lip, I allow myself this one quiet moment to experience my feelings before I have to put on the mask everyone expects from me. My mates surround me, all finding a way to touch me, knowing this will make me feel strong and whole. With them at my side, I can do anything. Luna snaps something at one of the guards, probably ordering them to give us a moment, but I'm not really paying attention, focusing instead on this time with my mates.

I roll my neck and stretch out my shoulders like I'm warming myself up to enter a boxing ring. Honestly, that's what these appearances with the queen feel like nowadays, and I know it's eventually going to come to a head. Stepping back to give me space, my mates silently move into formation around me, with Atlas at my side. As my witch mate, it makes the most sense for him to be in the spotlight with me, showing our united front. Syn and Joel come next, and Scott and Nicolai protect me from behind.

Ready to face whatever is waiting for us, I start moving. As soon as we cross the threshold and pass the magical barrier that keeps sound from escaping the room, the noise of hundreds of people hits me like a physical blow. A bead of sweat rolls down my neck, one that's not just from

anticipation. It's hot in here, the bodies pressed together making the room uncomfortably warm.

As I suspected, the meeting hall is packed, the tiers of seats around the room a blur of faces. The air is full of excited apprehension, low chatter filling the room as they converse and try to guess what the meeting is about. They look as though they are about to watch their favourite game show. I wonder if anyone brought popcorn.

Many of the spectators spot me as I walk in, a hush descending on the room as all eyes land on me. Tension and agitation flow through the bond with my mates, and I'm surprised to find most of the animosity is coming from Nicolai. Of all of my guys, he's the slowest to anger. *These people tortured him and turned him into something he never wanted to be*, I remind myself. Thinking about it that way, I'm surprised at how well he's keeping himself together.

Kano is waiting for us in the centre of the hall, calling us to him with a wave of his hand. My stomach drops with dread, my naïve hopes that this meeting wouldn't be about me quashed by this simple gesture. Luna squeezes my arm in support and peels away to take a seat as we walk the rest of the way into the huge hall.

"Wait here," Kano says, his voice magically amplified. His eyes say something different though. It's clear he's unable to tell me what's about to happen, but whatever it is, he's warning me to be prepared. Returning to his place at the foot of the dais, he stands tall and straight, hardly moving. Others wouldn't notice it, but I spot the slight wince he tries to hide.

Anger replaces my dread as I come to my own conclusions on what happened. Glancing at the dais, I meet the queen's gaze. I would bet my life on her being the reason behind Kano's pain. Was this his punishment for seeking me out once he knew about the meeting? Whatever the reason, injustice burns inside me, and as I narrow my eyes at the queen, I know she sees my repressed rage. Instead of looking uncomfortable, she simply smiles, her expression a challenge.

Bring it on, bitch.

Remembering she's in the spotlight, the queen looks up and smiles at her people, tilting her head gracefully as she rests her hands on the delicate soft pink dress she wears today. She's the picture of a kind, benevolent leader. The two of us couldn't look more different, and while she couldn't have known what I was going to wear, I'm sure she's ecstatic.

"Greetings," she calls out, pausing to make sure everyone is listening before she continues. "Thank you all for coming at such short notice. I wouldn't have called you here unless it was important. As you can see, I requested that *everyone* attend, and that's for a very significant reason." The smile drops from her face, a grim expression replacing it as though what she's about to say next causes her pain. "We have a traitor in our midst."

Surprise ripples through the room, and shocked exclamations rise from the tiered seating area. I'm barely able to hear it over the ringing in my ears, and for a heart-stopping moment, I think the queen is going to ditch her plan to kill me off through the challenges and just call me a traitor outright. Is that why the meeting was called so last minute and with no explanation of what it concerned? Or the reason why I was brought here under guard when I've never been escorted to these meetings before?

Glances are thrown my way, and I know some of them are wondering the same thing. The queen has placed me front and centre for a reason, either because I'm on trial, or she's attempting to make people doubt me. At this point, either could be true. The others are tense around me, but Atlas seems the most relaxed, and that makes me think I'm not about to be tried for treason. Even so, my heart still beats frantically in my chest.

When the queen's eyes fall on me, I know she's aware of how this announcement would affect me, and that she's dragging out this moment on purpose.

"As some of you may know, there was an attack upon Laelia several days ago." Her voice seems to clear the sense of bated breath in the hall, and the onlookers begin to murmur to

each other once more. “An attempt was made on her life, and she very nearly died in the process.”

This time when everyone turns their attention to me, it’s with a mixture of pity, anger, upset, and outrage. How quickly the tides can change.

“Bring in the accused.”

The large doors behind us open dramatically at the queen’s order, and a small, huddled figure is dragged into the hall. The two guards marching him in practically have to carry him. His hands and feet are bound, making it next to impossible for him to keep up with them. However, when he’s dumped in the centre of the room, I see another reason for his sorry state. He’s covered in bruises, and the way he hunches forward and winces with each breath indicates that at least one of his ribs is broken. Finally allowing myself to look at his face, I stare at the frail old man who’s caused me so much pain.

Lord Maliki—the male behind the plots to kill me.

The injuries he has sustained are far greater than what he received from me when I defended myself in the cavern, which means the guards have been beating him. Shouldn’t I feel a grim sense of justice? When I look at his sad, broken frame, however, I just feel pity.

A twinge in my bond with Atlas has me reaching out for him mentally, realising how difficult it must be to see his former mentor in this state. When I read his emotions, though, I’m surprised to find very little discomfort. Instead, his anger and sense of betrayal ring loud and clear. Maliki dared to touch his mate, and that is something that can never be forgiven.

“General, you may begin your interrogation.”

My gaze quickly snaps to Kano who stands at the foot of the dais as I realise my brother is going to be the one carrying this out. He’s the queen’s general, so I shouldn’t be so alarmed by this, but he’s hardly going to be impartial. This male tried to kill his sister, and that’s bound to make a man angry.

Kano, to his credit, manages to make it seem like he knew this was coming and strides forward. Each of his footfalls seems to be in slow motion, taking an impossible amount of time to cross the space. Pausing in front of the Lord, Kano towers over him. I hadn't realised how short Maliki was, but he looks tiny next to the general. Perhaps his hatred was so large it made him appear that way too.

“Lord Maliki of the family Jadus, you have been charged with the attempted murder of Laelia of the family Fairing.” His voice rings around the room with an authority I forget he carries. Kano has become a part of my dysfunctional pack, whether he knows it or not, and I rarely see this cold, commanding side of him. He didn't become a general by being weak, but I've also seen the kindness and loyalty he's capable of.

Pushing aside my discomfort, I focus on the trial itself. There's a reason I'm being forced to stand before everyone, and I don't want to miss any details. They are only charging Maliki with one count of attempted murder, even though there have been two attempts now. While I have no physical evidence that Maliki was behind the first one, I know it to be true. The males involved were all from the group Maliki uses to incite hatred towards werewolves, and he had already threatened me. He wasn't as subtle with his latest attempt though.

There's a pause after Kano announces the charges, which I assume is for dramatic effect, but I quickly realise from the change in his expression that it was a chance for Maliki to defend himself.

“Do you have anything to say?” The demand is incredulous. He clearly can't believe that Maliki isn't going to even attempt to defend himself. Disbelieving murmurs from the spectators echo his feelings.

Clearing his throat to speak, Maliki suddenly bursts into a coughing fit, his lungs rattling with each hacking breath. No one moves to help him. Once he finally has himself under control, he wipes spittle from the corner of his mouth and looks up at Kano with a sneer.

“You’ve already made up your mind, so there is no point in arguing against it. You’re going to trust the word of a lying werewolf over a valid member of your society.” Disgust laces his tone, and I realise he truly thought he was doing the right thing by trying to kill me. The manic look in his eyes shows no regret for what he did, and if he were given the chance, he would do it again.

“There were other witnesses. It is more than just her word against yours,” Kano counters. “Your actions also resulted in the death of several other witches who belonged to your little coven!”

Maliki finally shows a semblance of grief and regret, his eyes closing for a moment as he bows his head, mumbling a quiet prayer to the goddess to care for their souls. When he raises his head again, his expression is cool and collected despite the sheen in his eyes. Swallowing audibly against a lump in his throat, he meets my brother’s stare.

“The loss of those witches lays heavily on my heart. However, I know that they were happy to sacrifice their lives if it meant that we purged Haven of scum.”

This is the exact moment that Maliki loses the crowd. Before now, there were some who might have been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, or who were on the fence about following me. His casual, almost flippant comment about the deaths of several men under his command is what damns him though. Outraged shouts rain down on us, and Maliki seems to realise that instead of uniting the witches behind him, he only succeeded in alienating himself further.

Turning as much as his manacles will let him, he glares up at the crowd with disbelief that slowly turns to loathing at what he witnesses.

“You’ve all been brainwashed,” he snarls, his chains clinking loudly as he jabs his finger damningly towards me. “She is not your saviour! She’s a werewolf hybrid piece of trash who has you all wrapped around her little finger.”

He finally allows all his hatred towards me to rise to the surface, and I see the true male beneath the façade. He’s a

hateful coward, filled with malice and contempt, incapable of committing any of the attempts himself. The only reason he got caught this time was because he couldn't fight his desire to watch my demise in person.

The shouts of the watching witches gets louder, and he has to raise his voice to be heard, jabbing his finger accusingly at the crowd. "She deserves to die before any of this madness gets us all killed!"

Tension is rising, and the atmosphere is almost at a boiling point. If something isn't done soon, it's going to boil over, and who knows what will happen then. My chest is tight, and my mates become watchful of the witches closest to us. The last thing we want to do is get caught up in a riot.

This is the reason Kano holds such a high rank in Haven though. He looks around the room with a soldier's eye, already five steps ahead. Raising a hand, he stands silently in the centre of the room. That's all he does, yet people pay attention. Shouts and catcalls die down until the room is quiet once more. I'm not sure how he managed it, but it's clear the people here respect him.

Now that the attention is back on him, Kano places his hands on his hips and slowly begins to pace a circle around the bound lord. Even I can admit that he looks intimidating, his expression severe as he looks down.

"You do know about the prophecy, yes?" Kano asks, his tone light as though this is a conversational interaction and not a trial. Without waiting for Maliki to answer, he ploughs on. "If Laelia is the chosen one, as we all suspect, then you could have doomed us all if your plan was successful."

Maliki twists his head to follow Kano with his eyes as he's circled. "If the prophecy comes to pass, we shall be overrun with mutts, and our great legacy will be tarnished. I couldn't allow that to happen." Giving up on trying to convince Kano, he turns to the witches once more. Genuine confusion and frustration colour his expression as he glances from person to person, seeming to be searching for something. When he doesn't find it, he laughs in disbelief. "Do you really trust the

werewolves not to slit our throats when our backs are turned?” he demands, but Kano has decided he’s heard enough.

With a flick of Kano’s wrist, the lord is forcibly turned with magic so he’s facing forward once more.

“So you admit you tried to kill Laelia.”

Without hesitation, Maliki jerks forward and bares his teeth. “Yes. My biggest regret is that I wasn’t successful.”

Chapter Fourteen



The pure hatred emanating from the lord as his composure cracks slams into me, and my chest tightens as I struggle to take a breath against his animosity. His hostile feelings towards me have always been clear, but this is a whole new level, and it's taken me back. Detesting someone so much it pushes you to kill is one thing, but he doesn't know me. How is it possible to despise someone you don't know? He's become someone else in his anger, allowing his hatred of me to completely consume him.

I refuse to let him see that his words affect me, though, so I stand up straight and meet his resentful stare.

With the confession landing like a bomb in the meeting hall, there's a moment of silence before the witches are in uproar. Some argue in defence of Maliki, but the majority of clamouring and jeering demands justice.

Kano watches it all with a neutral expression, carefully judging the mood of the room. Having got his confession, some might expect to see success in Kano's eyes, but instead, he just looks tired. Turning his attention back to Maliki, he narrows his eyes on the male, and for a moment, I think he's going to say something. However, he turns back to the queen instead and gives her a short bow. "I am done with my questioning, Your Majesty."

The queen dismisses him with a nod, slowly stands from her throne, and takes a few small steps to the edge of the dais,

Ivar materialising from the shadows behind her. The room falls silent, waiting for what comes next.

“Lord Maliki, you are hereby found guilty. You will be stripped of your title, your magic shall be blocked, and you shall rot in my cells until you die.” There is no regret or sadness in her voice as she passes judgement on one of her former lords. I don’t make the mistake of thinking that this means she cares about me and she’s making sure I have justice.

Expecting Maliki to be dragged from the room and to his cell, I wait to be dismissed. When this doesn’t happen, I glance at the queen in confusion and notice her expectant expression. She’s waiting for something, but she doesn’t have to wait long.

Several witches shout out in disgust at the leniency of the sentence, their voices angry and loud in the echoey hall. After a few shocked moments, more witches begin to call out until the hall is filled with bloodlust and calls for the former lord to be put to death.

“He doesn’t deserve to live!”

“Protect the chosen one!”

“Make him suffer like he caused Laelia to!”

“Kill the traitor!”

I’m amazed and horrified at how quickly the mood can change as they turn on one of their own. Some are calling out for Maliki to be spared, but overwhelmingly, the witches want justice. I don’t believe that Maliki should be given any leniency as he’s just going to spread his hatred to others like a disease, but their bloodlust is palpable.

The queen watches with dark amusement, her gaze flicking around the room as the voices get louder, and I realise this was what she wanted. She expected her people to call for Maliki’s death but didn’t want to suggest it herself. I should know now that everything the queen does is to protect her image.

This is so overwhelming. Not the fact that they want this justice, but the reason for it—me. Life imprisonment in a dark

cell with his magic blocked sounds like hell on earth and is an awful punishment. I don't think it's safe for Maliki to be around, since he won't stop his tirade against werewolves, and a dark part of me whispers that maybe he does deserve to die for what he did. What makes this so disturbing, though, is the fact that they want him dead for trying to hurt me. On some level, they are probably fearful of the negative side of the prophecy coming to pass, but I think it's more than that. As I look around the room and take in the anger in their eyes, it's like a religious fervour has taken over them. Many are on their feet, jeering at the bound man in the centre of the room.

Maliki seems to realise that he doesn't have the support he thought he would, his face paling in horror. Eyes wide, he attempts to stand, his mouth opening and closing, but no sound comes out.

The queen is still watching quietly, scanning the room, and eventually, she brings her eyes to me. A shiver runs down my spine as the smallest smile pulls at her lips. Everything is happening just as she planned it.

She raises her hands in a silent gesture to capture their attention once more, and as if by magic, the shouts stop as all turn their gazes to their queen. There's an expecting air about them, but it's clear they don't want to lash out against her, so with bated breath, they wait to see what she has to say.

Lowering her hands, she looks around the hall, her face open in her effort to be transparent with her people. "I have heard your opinions, and as your queen, I will honour them." Taking a deep breath, she appears to shake her shoulders as if preparing to say something difficult. I don't buy the act for one second, she's loving every minute of this attention.

"Maliki, for treason to the crown and attempted murder of Laelia Fairing, you are hereby sentenced to death."

It's as though everyone in the hall suddenly takes a breath, and a roar of approval echoes from the walls.

The queen glances over at Kano and gestures towards the bound man. She says nothing, but my brother nods as though she does, striding forward. I realise why Kano had seemed so

exhausted and reserved—he is to be the executioner. I hardly recognise my brother as he gathers his power, calling it from deep within. He almost seems to grow as his magic builds, a sparkling aura surrounding him that I don't think others can see.

They are going to kill Maliki now, right here in front of everyone. It sends a message not to mess with the queen and will have the most impact, so she's monopolising on that.

With a sharp gesture, Kano's magic wraps around Maliki, binding him further and forcing him onto his knees. When he looks down at the former lord, his mouth twists into a sneer as he says something to the other man. He must be whispering, as I can't pick it up even with my werewolf hearing. Without taking his eyes off the male, Kano holds his hand out dramatically and waits, not moving a muscle.

The way he's acting is almost theatrical, as though he's following a script. Frowning, I wonder what he's waiting for, and I glance at Atlas to see if he knows what's happening, only for a movement to stop me.

Ivar appears behind my brother, stepping out of a cloud of shadows that wasn't there just a moment ago. I feel Syn jerk with recognition, his shrewd eyes narrowed on the mysterious male, but he says nothing. Ivar moves to his side and places something dark into Kano's outstretched hand. When the male steps back and returns to the queen's side, I see that Kano now holds a dagger. I don't know what's different about this blade to any other, but I can feel a sense of wrongness emanating from it.

I'm going to be sick.

Everything is happening so fast. I was dragged here without warning, forced to face my attacker, and now he's been sentenced to death and is about to die before my very eyes, all in less than an hour. Not to mention who is about to carry out that sentence.

That causes me to question why Kano is the one who has to carry out the execution. Is this part of his role as the general, or is the queen asking this of him because of me? He seemed

to know what the queen wanted, and the act of receiving the dagger seemed well rehearsed, as though they had done it before. *Don't assume everything is because of you*, I chide myself mentally, taking small, steady breaths. A warm hand rests on the small of my back as Atlas attempts to comfort me, grounding me as my emotions threaten to overtake me.

“Laelia, please step forward. You can leave your mates there.”

The queen's words cause me to freeze. She might have sweetened it with a “please,” but I know I don't have a choice in the matter. Panic swells within me as my mind starts to think of all the reasons why I'm being called forward. Is she making sure that I am close enough to see every gory detail of Maliki's death? Or even worse, is she going to put me on trial? No, she wouldn't risk it here with so many witches who support me observing. I need to stop catastrophising and pull myself together.

Glancing over my shoulder, I meet each of my mates' gazes with a small, soft smile before turning back and stepping forward to meet the queen.

“Your Majesty,” Atlas starts from behind me, but she cuts him off with a glare and a sharp wave of her hand.

Watching each of my steps with a curl of her lips, the queen says nothing, making it seem like I'm crossing the space for an eternity with bated breath. She can see exactly how this is affecting me. Each step away from my mates feels like a mile, the bond stretching and pulling in my chest, yet I ignore the feeling as best as I can and continue on. When I pass Maliki, I ignore him completely but allow myself to briefly meet Kano's eyes. He looks just as puzzled by this as I am. Once I'm just beyond my brother, the queen raises a hand in a motion for me to stop, which I do.

“Laelia, it is now time for your second challenge to prove yourself as the one to bring peace to us all,” the queen announces with a beatific smile, opening her arms wide as she encompasses everyone in the room with her gesture.

“Sometimes, in the name of peace, it is necessary to take a life. As such, your challenge is to kill this man.”

I should have seen it coming. There was a reason she had me stand at the front of the hall. She wants me to take a life. She wants to make me a murderer for the sake of a prophecy I’m not sure is real. Of course she would stage it this way, making it almost impossible for me to refuse while hundreds watch on.

Kill this man. Kill this man. Kill this man.

The words repeat in my mind, blocking out all else. If the watching crowd reacts, then I don’t register it, because I am too lost in my own thoughts. *Just kill him*, my mind whispers, urging me to act on my feelings. *He doesn’t deserve to live, and you have to do this to pass the challenge.* Gritting my teeth, I try to push those intrusive thoughts aside. No one deserves to die, and it’s certainly not my place to be the cause of their death. However, I can’t help but think there’s something poetic about me being the one to end his life after he tried to take mine.

Stop.

I’ve acted out in self-defence, and I believe some died in the werewolf trials as a result, but I have never attacked first. Attacking someone is so outside of my nature that it makes me physically sick, and taking a life is a foreign concept to me. Sure, I have grown a lot from the naïve young woman I was before my magic showed itself, but I won’t let this change me into someone I’m not. My beliefs and values mean a lot to me, and if I were to discard them now, I would be a hypocrite.

If I decide not to kill Maliki, there will be consequences. The question is what those would be, and if I could live with them.

I would fail the challenge and, in theory, according to the queen’s interpretation of the prophecy, I would prove that I wasn’t the chosen one. The title has never felt right to me, and I hate the way others look at me with expectancy in their eyes, so to no longer have that pressure on me might be a relief. On

the other hand, I know the goddess has plans for me, and uniting the two races is part of that.

Will I be expelled from Haven if I don't comply? I don't want to be here, I never have, but I don't trust the queen. There is no doubt in my mind she would find a way to punish me for refusing, such as keeping my mates prisoner, or threatening to hurt one of them.

The queen hasn't thought this through properly. I don't think the queen truly believes that I would go against her, nor how much support I have from witches within Haven. She certainly hasn't contemplated how all of this could make her look if she tried to harm me or force me to comply.

"He tried to kill you," the queen calls out, clearly confused with how long I'm taking to decide. Those watching are getting restless, and she needs to give them action before a riot begins. "He hates you and will try again. If he succeeds, you doom us all. Protect us by killing him."

The pressure is mounting, and I have to make my decision. I consider my options once more, but I keep coming back to the same point. Ultimately, I don't believe that killing Maliki is going to help me bring about peace to both werewolves and witches. The familiar presence of the goddess touches me gently, and I know I'm making the right decision.

"Laelia," the queen begins, losing patience, but I cut her off before she can continue.

"No." There's a gasp from behind me that's quickly echoed around the room. "I won't kill him."

I won't be like you. I direct the thought straight at her, and her brows shoot up as if I just spoke the words into her ear. Did I just use magic? I don't think so, but she looks shaken by what just happened.

For a moment, everyone in the room falls away, including my mates, as the queen and I lock eyes in a battle of wills. There is just her and me, no other noises or distractions despite the fact that I can still feel my mates are close.

She finally drops her practiced smile and narrows her eyes on me, her frustration manifesting in her magic as she calls it to her. She's not going to use it on me, I'm not sure she even realises she's wielding it, but she's attempting to appear powerful, and that's one of the ways she knows how.

“If you fail this challenge, there will be consequences.”

The threat is clear, and the situation is rapidly declining. Needing her to hear me out, I attempt to convince her of another way. I step back when the bubble of silence surrounding us disappears as quickly as it came.

“What I am trying to say is that we can still have our justice in the name of peace without taking a life!” I plead.

No, the queen has already made up her mind, and no matter what I say, she's not going to stray from her decision. Maliki is going to die today. What is still unclear is who will take his life. An idea comes to me, and I turn to address the waiting witches. Clearing my throat, I push aside my doubts and pray to the goddess to give me the right words.

“The prophecy says I'll bring the two races together. There was no mention of taking lives. I won't kill someone, not like this. Yes, he tried to murder me, but taking his life in revenge or anger is not the way to bring about peace. What is the justice for slaughtering an old man?” Glancing around, I notice some of the witches nodding and Atlas looking on with a proud expression. Pulling my eyes from him, I continue. “I would be just as bad as Maliki, killing out of hatred. I am a peaceful soul at heart, and doing this would change who I am at my core. If I had to choose a chosen one, I would prefer someone who doesn't use violence to reach peace.”

Speaking from my heart, I hope they hear the truth of my words. This is where I should stop, but there is something else I need to say. My gut clenches with nerves, as I know I'll be drawing a line in the sand between myself and the queen, putting us on separate sides, which could work disastrously for me.

“This is merely a power play to shift your loyalties back to the queen and make me look weak or heartless. I won't do it.”

My words are close to treason, and the shocked murmurs represent the tension in the room. The room seems to be divided—those who support and agree with me, and those who firmly follow their queen. It's the latter group that I pay the most attention to. Those witches seem to be an older demographic, and interestingly, I see the confusion on their faces, as though my words have moved them but talking out against the queen has made them uncomfortable.

I've not asked them to rise up or to do anything, I've merely challenged this one move by the queen. However, it cracks the fragile control she's had over them, and once there is a crack in the foundation, things start to leak through.

While most leaders would work on securing that crack, the queen is incapable of allowing any control to slip through, and as I turn my attention back to her, I can see the evidence of that.

She looks livid, not bothering to hide her fury. Desperate to pull back any form of control, her head snaps to her general.

“Kano, do it.”

Guards who were previously pressed against the walls to make themselves as unintrusive as possible now step forward at her command, surrounding us in a circle. They do nothing else, waiting for further instruction, but the threat is clear. If Kano doesn't go through with the execution, the guards will.

“I said, no.” My power takes over me in a rush, bursting out of me in a wave of sparkling lights until Kano, Maliki, and I are surrounded in a transparent shield of stars. The guards jump back in fear, not wanting to be touched by the magic. They needn't worry, because now that it's surrounding us, it hardens and freezes in place. No one can pass, and as I pour more power into the dome, the stars shine even brighter until it's a dazzling display.

I should feel drained, because maintaining something of this scale takes a tremendous amount of power, yet I feel... alive. The magic I'm using now is from the deep place within me where the dark presence used to reside. However, she has slowly been fading away and seems to have disappeared

completely, leaving a part of my power that is often untouched. I've always been afraid to use it, relying on the darkness to wield it for me in desperate situations. Now that she's gone, I'm reaching into it and wondering why I was ever afraid.

This has gone way beyond saving the life of one male who may or may not deserve it. I'm not necessarily standing firm to protect Maliki, but the principle that public executions are not right, nor is forcing someone to take that life as a form of challenge, punishment, or entertainment.

What I'm doing is dangerous, and there will be serious consequences. Before, I was just refusing to take a life, but now, I'm outwardly defying the queen. As power courses through my veins, I can't find it in myself to be sorry. I feel strong, powerful... unbeatable. The blood of the goddess flows through me, and for the first time, I can feel it.

“Laelia, your eyes are glowing.”

Kano's hushed words snap me out of my daze. I don't like how cautious he sounds, and I glance over my shoulder to see his expression matches his tone. A sparkle catches my eye, and I glance down to see that even my skin glows, as though I am made of diamonds. A familiar, gentle brush against my thigh tells me that Star has manifested beside me, and I automatically thread my fingers through her fur. Her comforting presence helps ground me and remind me why we're here. I'll speak with Kano later, but for now, I have more pressing matters to deal with. Standing strong, I face forward and stare down the queen.

The witches watch on in awe. I can feel their eyes on me, taking in every glowing part of me and my magic. I hear many whispers calling out to the goddess and thanking her for my presence. From the tightness in the queen's face as she looks around the room, she hears it too. Any attempt she makes to harm me now could backfire on her pretty spectacularly.

Settling back in her throne and attempting to appear unruffled, she raises a hand to command silence once more and clears her throat. “This challenge has been postponed.

Laelia was gravely injured in the attempt on her life and clearly hasn't fully recovered from her ordeal."

So that's how she's going to manage this, I ponder with a smile. Honestly, it's smart to play it off this way. She's conceding that it was not a good idea to try and force me to execute someone, while managing to make it look like she's considering my health. By shifting the blame onto me, she can write off my behaviour and attempt to rewrite the narrative—that I wasn't challenging her authority, but am struggling mentally from my ordeal. Punishing me outright with this audience watching would cause a rift that she can't afford.

"Laelia, why don't you go back to your rooms? I'll make sure there are plenty of guards outside in case you need them. They will keep you safe," the queen dismisses loudly for the whole hall to hear, a poisoned smile pulling at her lips.

It's a poorly disguised threat if ever I've heard one. I'm to be confined to my rooms, and the guards will be there to ensure I don't leave. However, if I'm able to see it for what it is, then those watching will too. I don't have time to think on that, though, as she's speaking again, gesturing towards Maliki with disgust.

"Ivar, take the prisoner down to the cells."

"No," I snap instantly, my voice leaving no room for argument. "I'll take him."

I wouldn't put it past her to have Maliki killed on his way to the cells, especially with Ivar being the one to escort him. Once the former lord is locked away, there is little I can do to protect him, but I need to make my point clear, especially with everyone watching.

"Fine, you may escort him with Ivar," she grits out, her jaw tight as she concedes. She glances over my shoulder, and I get the impression of several bodies approaching my shield. They don't touch it, simply moving closer—my mates.

The queen's eyes narrow on them before focusing on me once more. "You can only take one of your mates with you for safety reasons. Atlas perhaps?"

Mentioning Atlas instantly makes me suspicious, and I don't trust her not to attempt to take my werewolves while I'm away. Atlas will act as a deterrent if he's with them, and I know he would fight to protect my other mates. It doesn't take me long to decide whom to choose.

The shield drops in a shower of stars, and I take a moment to absorb the appreciative oohs and ahhs of those watching. My limbs quiver with the amount of power I just used, but I feel exhilarated. Now that it's over, my thoughts and worries start to weigh heavily on my mind. I can't believe I just did that. I felt invincible, like no one could touch me. However, it now leaves me to face the consequences. It was reckless. Thank the goddess that it didn't backfire on us.

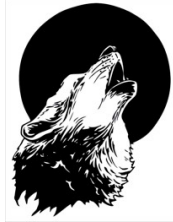
Reaching for my bonds, I tug on the connection between Syn and me. He's at my back in an instant, wrapping an arm over my shoulders possessively as he snarls at the queen.

While I was holding that much power, the bonds in my chest seemed to fade. They were still there, but they felt muted. Now that I've released the magic, their feelings slam back into me. Concern, fear, frustration, and pride all mingle together until I can't tell who is feeling what. That's not true, I'm able to pick out Syn's emotions now that he's touching me, his close proximity amplifying them.

With the shield separating us, he felt madness clawing at his mind, but he was able to keep himself sane by focusing on my glowing form. The word "beautiful" forms so strongly in my mind that I know it's from him. I can't usually sense individual words from my mates, just strong emotions. Awe and pride well in him as he holds me tight.

"You were magnificent," he whispers in my ear, making me flush under the watchful eyes of so many. Syn doesn't care though, nipping the soft skin of my neck and mumbling words between kisses. "My mate. My goddess."

Chapter Fifteen



“That was an interesting display,” Maliki comments lightly as he’s led down the large, twisting staircase taking us down to the bottom of Haven. We’re having to move slowly since he’s finding the steps difficult with his hands and feet bound. From his wincing, I’d say that his knees are causing him pain as well, and now that his magic has been blocked, he’s lost the natural ability to keep himself young. As such, he looks his real age and appears before me as a small, spiteful old man.

“I wonder if anyone opened their eyes to see you for the danger you really are.”

Gritting my teeth, I say nothing as we continue forward. Syn snarls at the man from his position behind me where he protects my back. Ivar walks in front of us, our prisoner under his control.

“How does it feel to know that you’re going to single-handedly bring down the witches?”

Finally cracking, I let a growl slip out as I ball my hands into fists to control the magic that so desperately wants to come out. “Will you shut up?”

Star snarls at my side in agreement, ready to leap forward at my command. It’s like Maliki is determined to annoy me into killing him despite the work I put into keeping him alive. He’s not afraid of me, so my words mean nothing to him.

“Say another word, and I’ll rip your tongue from your mouth.” Syn has been quiet until now, leaning around me as he threatens the old man. He’s possessive and protective, lashing out at anyone who dares to offend me. Honestly, I’m surprised he managed to last so long.

Maliki suddenly jerks in front of us, stumbling to a stop as magic flares around us. At first, I think he’s having a fit until I see the dark tendrils of shifting shadow that now cover his eyes, ears, and mouth. Only one of the three of us is capable of using that type of magic.

Raising a single brow, I turn my questioning gaze to Ivar.

“Now he can’t cause any more problems with his hate.” He smiles at me, tilting his head to one side, those black eyes gleaming. “He can’t see, hear, or speak, so we may talk freely.”

When we first met, I found Ivar disturbing, as do most here in Haven. He’s different, and his all black eyes give the impression he’s emotionless. I’ve learned that he’s fiercely loyal. We’ve started a tentative friendship where we help each other. Even so, when he turns those eyes on me and smiles like that, it feels as though he’s eyeing up his next snack and is going to eat me.

“Now that’s a useful trick,” I murmur, pushing aside my discomfort.

Prodding his prisoner gently in the back to get him moving once again, Ivar glances at me over his shoulder, his eyes then settling on Syn behind me. “It’s one your mate may be able to master depending on how much darkness hides in his blood.” Ivar shows a rare display of emotion and raises his brows in surprise at our confusion. “Let’s stop lying to ourselves. You have shadow abilities.” He addresses Syn fully this time, and I feel my mate’s discomfort at being under the male’s full attention.

It’s clear the moment Syn processes what Ivar said, and he instantly goes on the defence. His claws press against the skin of his knuckles, begging to be freed, and his teeth lengthen

into fangs. “I’m not a witch,” he insists, the words slightly mumbled thanks to his extended incisors.

Ivar’s made comments about Syn’s abilities before, and it’s something I’ve been thinking about since. The others don’t seem to notice, but I’ve seen the shadowy tendrils that sometimes surround and hide him when he doesn’t want to be seen. When I tried to mention it, he brushed me off, but being confronted like this is making him examine his abilities further.

“No, you’re right,” Ivar agrees with a tilt of his head, jerking Maliki to a stop as he turns to face us. Syn seems to slump in relief behind me, but that feeling doesn’t last long. “You are full werewolf with a small amount of shadow blood. If I was to guess, one of your parents was a half-blood shadow being. We are rare, and it is almost impossible to find a full-blooded shadow being, as they become shadow.”

Everything he says makes sense. I’ve always known Syn was different in more ways than just his tragic past, and now we have a name for it. Like calls to like, and Ivar seems to sense the same abilities he possesses in my mate. I’m not actually surprised by this. I turn to Syn, expecting him to deny it, but he’s actually frowning in consideration. Reaching for the bond, I find a turbulent mix of fear and hope. He’s finally getting some answers about who and what he is.

“That must be how you’re able to blend into shadow sometimes,” I comment lightly, reaching out and taking his hand in mine. “It makes sense.”

Hoping that he reads between the lines, I smile softly at him. I need him to know I don’t see him any differently to how I did before, we just have some more answers. He meets my gaze, and I hope he sees my honesty and love. Most of all, I hope he sees my acceptance of him.

We stay like this for countless minutes, Ivar simply watching us communicate silently. Eventually, Syn grunts and drops his gaze. Huffing out what sounds like a cross between a sigh and a cough, he looks back up and brings his brooding eyes over to Ivar. “That’s why I’ve never fit in?”

My heart breaks for him. I want to wrap him in my arms and tell him that he's found his place with me. However, I keep quiet as I watch the two of them. This is his moment, not mine, and he needs to work this out for himself.

Ivar nods his head slowly, as if understanding the weight of emotion behind the question. "Most likely. Our natures make us comfortable in the shadows and cause our differences to stand out in the light."

We fall silent with those words, and Ivar nudges Maliki into action once more. As we continue our descent, I can almost hear Syn thinking over what Ivar said, his end of the bond heavy. My own mind is turning, taking in everything that's happened today and how I potentially put us all in danger.

As if he's able to sense the direction of my thoughts, Ivar clears his throat and glances at me over his shoulder. "The queen will be coming for you now. You should be prepared," he warns quietly, not sounding like the jovial Ivar I'm used to. "You frightened her today with your show of force, and frightened people make rash, impulsive decisions."

Shit, if he's warning me, then it's serious. He's loyal to the queen above all things, and he knows her better than anyone else, so for him to tell me this is significant. He's right though, the queen will lash out. We need to be ready for when she does.

Reaching out, I place a hand on Ivar's shoulder, squeezing slightly in gratitude. "Thank you for the warning."

His body tenses under my hand, and at first, I think he's stiffening because he can't stand my touch. I'm about to pull my hands away, but before I can, he reaches up and places his over mine. His responding smile is open and exposed. With how he's avoided by almost everyone, I realise that he's probably rarely touched like this. My heart aches for him, and I squeeze his shoulder once more before pulling back.

We finally reach the bottom of the staircase, and Ivar pulls Maliki to a stop once more. It's almost comical, and I'm sure the male is raging underneath the shadows.

“You should return to your rooms,” Ivar comments, his body language shifting as he glances around the poorly lit corridors. “You’re safer with your mates. You should all stick together.”

Jerking my head towards Maliki, I try to ignore that the change in him is making me anxious. “I need to take him—”

“You need not worry, I will not hurt him,” he assures me, cutting me off. A slight frown furrows his brow as he meets my eyes. “If the queen orders me to, I won’t have a choice, but I’ll try to talk her out of any rash decisions.”

Relief rushes through me, and I release a breath I hadn’t realised I was holding. The need to get back to my mates has been building in me by the second, but I wanted to see this through. However, I trust Ivar’s word that he won’t kill Maliki unless he has no other option.

Smiling softly, I take his hand in mine and squeeze gently. “Thank you, Ivar.”

He smiles, and this time it feels more genuine. “That is what friends are for.”

Syn and I quickly race up the stairs and make our way through the corridors, trying to remember the way back to my rooms. At first, we have a smooth run, but as we pass the meeting hall, we come across a large group of witches who seem to be waiting for something.

“The chosen one! She’s here.”

The group quickly converges on me, and I instinctively react by creating a shield around myself and Syn. I’m sure they don’t mean any harm, but my heart is racing, the recent attack making me a little twitchier than usual. Their voices all raise to be heard over each other, clamouring to have their say. The guards might have been afraid of my shield, but these witches have no such reservations and reach out to lay their hands on it.

“Laelia, we support you. We know the queen set up that situation to force you into killing the traitor.”

“You are so humble for sparing his life, I know many would have done otherwise.”

“You are truly our saviour.”

Overwhelmed, I look around for an escape route, but I’m completely surrounded. Everyone here has something they want to say, a compliment to offer or to pledge their support, and while I appreciate the gesture, it’s completely overwhelming. I don’t want to go against the queen, and nothing I did was brave or humble.

“I only did what was right,” I mumble out with a tight smile as I attempt to push forward through the mass of people. “Please, let me pass.”

Syn seems to swell behind me, a low rumble emanating from his chest as he senses my rising panic and discomfort. He can’t hurt anyone while in my shield, but things are going to escalate if we don’t get out of here soon.

“Yes, yes, I know, she’s magical,” a familiar, lyrical voice says, her annoyance clear. “Let me through!” she demands until I see a small pair of hands appear between two witches before they are suddenly shoved aside to admit a frazzled Luna. “If you lot don’t back off and give us some space, I’m going to go apocalyptic on you.”

Her threat seems to work, and the group disperses. They still hang around the hallway, trying to get a glimpse of me, but I immediately feel better, the crushing weight of their expectation lifting from me.

“Luna!” I cry, never more glad to see a person in my life. Taking a moment to calm my racing heart, I release my magic and lower the shield. She immediately moves forward and wraps me in a bear hug, which is exactly what I need right now.

“What the fuck was that?” she exclaims into my shoulder, still not releasing me from her embrace. “You’re insane to

challenge the queen like that. Kick ass, but insane nonetheless.”

She finally releases me, and I laugh maniacally in agreement. Yup, I was insane to challenge the queen, I don't know what I was thinking other than in that moment, I felt undefeatable. “Walk with me?” I ask, linking her arm with mine and half dragging her down the corridor towards my rooms and away from witnesses.

Syn stays silent but follows close behind, and Star trots diligently at my side. Once we turn a corner, Luna releases a sigh and glances around to see who might be within hearing distance.

“I'm worried about Kano,” she tells me quietly, her voice low.

“Is he okay?” I ask quickly, glancing at her to see her neutral expression as a couple passes us in the hallway. With a tight smile, I follow Luna's lead and dip my head in greeting, waiting for the moment they are out of sight to ask more questions. “What happened after I left?”

The queen has so much control over Kano that he was always going to be the easiest person for her to use to get to me through him. He's often alone with the queen, and it's well known that they are lovers, so it wouldn't seem out of the ordinary for him to disappear into her rooms for days on end.

“She ordered Kano to follow her. He looked like he was in physical pain.” Luna grimaces as she continues. “I tried to follow, but her guards turned me away.”

My chest constricts painfully at the thought of the queen hurting my brother, but other than storming her quarters, I don't know what else I can do. Besides, I'm sure that would just make this whole situation worse. “I'll do everything I can to make sure he's okay,” I promise as I squeeze her arm in a gesture I hope is comforting.

Taking a deep breath, Luna blinks furiously, and I know she's trying not to cry. “Anyway, after he left, everyone started to leave.” Her voice is tight, and she has to pause to clear it.

“You should hear some of the things they are saying about you.” She rolls her eyes in a very Luna-like gesture, but I can tell she’s worried.

Uh-oh. I’m almost afraid to ask. “What sort of things? Good? Bad? Any worse than what just happened outside the meeting hall?”

“They are singing your praises. Some of them think you’re a goddess incarnate and you’re going to save us all. They believe that the queen is stopping you from fulfilling your destiny.” It’s easy to tell that she thinks they are spewing nonsense from the sarcasm in her voice. “One of the older witches started to say that he thought you challenging the queen was out of order and that you should have been forced to kill Maliki, and your crazy fans shot him down. I thought they were going to break out into a fight.”

Eyes wide, I glance at Syn in time to see him sigh and shake his head. “This is insane,” I mutter, not quite believing what’s gotten into everyone.

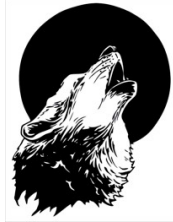
“It’s what you deserve,” Syn replies, surprising us both. He doesn’t tend to speak much while others are around unless it’s to defend me, and for him to offer his opinion is even rarer.

His words disturb me though, and I shake my head with a frown. *Deserve*. The word plays over in my head. *Deserve* makes it sound like I’m entitled to something, and those witches’ attention isn’t something I feel entitled to. “No, I don’t want that.”

His expression is sympathetic as he gestures to the end of the hallway where another group of witches await us.

“It looks like you’re not going to have a choice in the matter.”

Chapter Sixteen



Syn's words haunt me all the way back to my room. We're accosted twice more by eager witches who want to speak to us, but thankfully, everyone is scared enough of Luna that they quickly depart at her quiet threats.

The whole atmosphere over Haven is changing, and a tense, excited air seems to follow me everywhere. Something big is coming, and I know that I'll need the witches' support when it does. The queen won't let any of this pass. I've pushed her too far, and it's only a matter of time before she lashes out. We need to be ready.

We finally reach my room, and four guards wait outside with stern expressions. My jailors are waiting for my return. One good thing about having them stationed there is that they will turn away any overeager witches who want to speak to me.

I turn to Luna, but whatever I was about to say is quickly forgotten as she practically throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around me.

"Be careful," I whisper into her ear as I hug her back. My eyes sting with tears, and my chest aches. Why does this feel like I'm saying goodbye?

"You too. Look after each other," she whispers, her gaze flashing once to Syn before she squeezes me tightly again. Her eyes are glossy with unshed tears as she pulls away, and without another word, she turns on her heel and hurries away.

Acutely aware of the guards watching us, I take a deep breath and take Syn's hand in mine, entering my room with Star trotting just ahead of us. I'm a mess of emotions, and I don't want the queen's guards seeing me when I'm vulnerable. Everything they see will be reported back, and honestly, I just want to be with my mates where I can be me without having to worry about how something I do or say might be interpreted.

Seeing the four of them waiting for me in the sitting room brings a smile to my face. They are attempting to appear casual, as though they've not been worrying, but I don't need to feel their tension in the bonds to know how stressed they've been. Nicolai is standing by the bookshelf with an open book in his hand, but it's obvious he just grabbed it, seeing as the whole thing is upside down. Joel stands by the window, glancing outside, but the wooden frame is groaning as his hands grip it tightly. Scott is playing chess by himself, and Atlas doesn't bother to hide it, crossing the room as soon as the door shuts behind me.

Pulling me against his chest, he says nothing, simply pressing his lips to the top of my head. As my newest mate, our bond is still fresh, and the distance between us causes strain, so I'm not surprised by this behaviour. I'm equally as desperate to see him, gripping onto his shirt as though it's a buoy and I'm lost at sea. I feel the others all moving closer until they surround us. I don't feel the pressure to stop hugging Atlas and pay them attention. In fact, having them all close like this is loosening that tight knot of anxiety in my chest.

When I feel more like myself, I slowly untangle myself from Atlas and pull back so I can take in all five males—my mates. Well, all except... My gaze falls on Scott, his smile widening when our eyes meet, and something in me pulses. Our connection is there as always, that tug towards him somehow feeling more urgent today, like there's a ticking clock hanging over us and we have little time to seal our connection. I've never felt this pressure before, so I don't know if I'm just imagining this or if it's the stress from the day.

“The queen will come for you now.” There’s no judgement in Atlas’s voice, he’s just stating a grim fact, and I can’t keep the grimace off my face as I look away from Scott to acknowledge what he said.

“You decided to make a stand against the queen,” Joel comments, his gaze intense. “You told her no, and then you told her people that she was trying to manipulate them.” While he doesn’t say this as an accusation, the weight of what he said has me pausing.

“I know. I didn’t plan that last bit.” I bite my lip at the admission, not wanting to ask what’s gripping my heart. “Do you think I made the wrong decision?”

There’s a heavy pause, and for a second, I think they do. Guilt starts to rise within me. It was an impulsive decision, so I couldn’t ask them in advance, but they’ve always supported me so far. Perhaps this decision was too rash, because we’re all in danger now.

Nicolai shakes his head, and I feel a rush of relief. “No, I think it was only a matter of time, and you were right about not killing Maliki. You shouldn’t be forced into becoming a murderer for a stupid challenge.” He snorts and shakes his head. “Maliki deserves to die, but that’s the goddess’s decision. Not ours.”

“He’s right,” Atlas comments, taking my hand in his and threading our fingers together. “The queen would have kept pushing you until something like this happened. It was only a matter of time.”

Nodding, I acknowledge their comments. They are right, this was coming, but the weight of the potential consequences weighs heavily on me. Swallowing against a lump at the back of my throat, I glance around at the five men, but I’m not really seeing them, lost in my own fragmented thoughts.

“If my gamble hadn’t paid off, we could have all died today. She could have tried to hurt you,” I whisper, not wanting to say the words aloud in case it causes them to come true.

“She didn’t hurt us, and we’ll be prepared for when she makes her move,” Scott states confidently.

My eyes slip to Scott again, and I realise what that twisting feeling inside me was trying to say. We’re in danger every day and need to live as if today is our last. We were lucky today, but we might not be tomorrow, or the day after that. He is part of our mismatched pack, and he is one of my lovers, even though we’ve not taken that step yet. I’m tired of waiting. I don’t want to die without Scott knowing exactly how I feel about him. He belongs here with me and my other mates.

Dragging my gaze from him, I look over my loving mates. They are all here, and our connection will keep us safe. Scott deserves that too, so I will do my best to give it to him.

“Scott and I have something important to settle. I need some time alone with him.” My statement is met with silence, but I don’t see anger or resentment in their faces. We spoke previously about Scott being part of our group, and they all approved, albeit reluctantly in some cases. However, they know our connection is strong, and they have seen what he’s done for me and risked for us.

Looking between them, I take in their slow nods as they realise what exactly this entails. They all trust me and trust in the fact that I wouldn’t do this unless I was sure about him. They might think the timing of it is odd, but with our uncertain future, I’m no longer willing to wait.

This feels important, and that invisible clock is ticking in the back of my mind.

I offer Scott my hand. Frowning and a tad confused, he takes my hand and follows as I lead him to the bedroom.

Shutting the door behind us, I slowly take off my jacket and hang it on a nearby hook, facing away from him as I try to calm my fluttering nerves. I’m not sure why I’m suddenly anxious. With the others, it just happened in a rush of need, but in this case, I’m instigating it, and I feel... shy.

“Laelia, is everything okay?” Scott asks, and I hear him take a step closer as he picks up on my tension. “What’s this

important matter you need to discuss with me?”

Turning around, I find him a couple of steps away from me, his face concerned and hand outstretched.

No longer feeling anxious, I cross the space between us and collide with his chest. Instinctively, he wraps his arms around me, and before he can ask what I'm doing, I stand on tiptoes and press my lips to his. They are surprisingly soft, and it only takes a second or two for his surprise to pass and then he kisses me back just as eagerly. Sliding my arms over his shoulders, I steady myself against him as my lips and tongue move against his.

An unknown stretch of time passes, but when we pull back to catch our breaths, his lips are red, and his hair is a mess from where I ran my hands through it. I'm sure I don't look much better. I gaze into his eyes and say the words that I've wanted to voice for a long time now.

“Make me yours.” The words are quiet, almost a whisper, but I know the exact moment he hears them.

His eyes shift and begin to glow in the dull light of the room, his wolf pushing against his barriers. Scott has always had great control over his wolf, so this should scare me, yet if anything, it only turns me on. I watch emotions flash across his face—surprise, arousal, and a tentative hope—yet something seems to hold him back.

“Laelia, do you know what you're saying?” he chokes out, his voice much lower than usual, sending a shiver of excitement down my spine. “What about the others? They are your true mates. I'm just... me.”

So that's what it is. His assessment of himself and how he thinks the other guys are more important than him make my heart hurt. He's been feeling this way, yet has stuck by my side this whole time, expecting nothing. It's not as though he is just a random guy I picked up off the street. We have a connection unlike anything I've ever experienced. We're meant to be together, it's just a different feeling from the mate bond.

Placing my hands on his cheeks, I make sure he's looking at me, and only me, as I speak. "You might not be my fated mate, but we are meant to be together. I love you, and you belong with me just as much as they do. You are just as important to me as they are." I keep my voice steady and true as I speak, watching the doubt in his eyes disappear. "So I'll say it again, make me yours."

He surges forward, no hesitation or worries holding him back. His hands are everywhere as he kisses me deeply and firmly, stripping me of clothes until I'm standing before him in just my underwear. It would be so easy to get swept away in the arousal and end up in a tangled mess on the bed with me impaled on his cock. However, I force myself to slow down and make the most of our first time. For all we know, it could be our last, and I want to give Scott every part of me and not rush through this. He deserves more than that.

I take my time to undress him with teasing touches, managing to resist his hot hands that attempt to derail my plan, kissing everywhere my fingers touch. Dropping to my knees, I keep my eyes on his as I unbuckle his jeans and slide them down his legs.

His cock strains against the fabric of his boxers, and it takes everything in me to move past it as I lean up and press a trail of kisses down his abdomen. Scott makes a pained noise and threads his hands into my hair as if needing something to hold on to. Peeling the elastic of his underwear down far enough so it exposes the top of his pelvis, I press my lips to his hip bones.

"You wicked little witch," he murmurs, sounding like he's in pain, yet his expression is one of exquisite pleasure.

Chuckling, I decide I've teased him enough and finally pull down his boxers, his cock springing free. My breath catches in my throat, my eyes straying from his face to take in his erection. The connection between us seems to throb with each beat of my heart, demanding to touch him, taste him, and make him *mine*. Following the urge, I grip him in my hand and lean forward to suck the head of his cock into my mouth, his taste exploding on my tongue.

Moaning around his cock, I take him farther into my mouth, his groans of pleasure only encouraging me. Squeezing his base, I work my way up and down his shaft, pressing the tip of my tongue against the underside of his length. I'm just beginning to get into my rhythm when he steps back with a pained groan.

"I'm going to come in your mouth if you keep that up."

"I don't see the problem there," I reply with a smirk.

Laughing, he runs his hands through his hair in frustration. "When I come, I want to be inside you."

My core clenches at the dirty words, and just the thought of him deep inside me causes a rush of need to gather between my legs. Biting down on my lower lip to hold back my groan, I stand up. He wants to fuck? I'm only too happy to oblige. I reach behind me and unhook my bra, dropping it to the floor with the rest of my clothes. Hooking my fingers in the top of my underwear, I slide them down and kick them to the side until I'm standing before him completely naked.

The wolf is back in his eyes, and he prowls towards me with the grace of a predator stalking its prey. A low, satisfied growl rumbles in his chest, making the hair on my arms stand on end. Placing one of his large hands on each of my hips, he pulls me close, our bodies pressed together as he drops his lips to my neck. I roll my head back to give him better access, my eyes falling shut as I enjoy the intimacy between us.

My whole world suddenly spins as his hands slide around to my ass, and he lifts me, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist. Gasping as his hot cock presses against my exposed core, I try to shift in his hold, desperate for him to be inside me. Before I know it, though, he's laying me down on the large bed and crawling up my body. Holding himself above me, he smiles as though he's looking at the most beautiful person on the planet.

"I don't know what the future has planned for us, but I will love and protect you every day of my life." He continues to hover over me. The only part of him he allows to touch me are

his lips in a passionate kiss. “I can love you just as much as they can, if not more. *I choose this, not some cosmic fate.*”

Every single word rings with truth as he pours his feelings out to me, and I wonder how long he’s been waiting to say this. My heart bleeds for him that these worries have been plaguing him, and I regret that we’ve not been able to do this until now. We both know that we had to wait until the right time, and now that time has come, I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving that he belongs with me.

“It won’t always be easy, but we will make it work,” I promise, letting my love for him show in my eyes. “As long as we love and care for each other, we will survive this. I just can’t go another day, another hour, without you belonging to me.”

My declaration seems to break something that’s been holding him back, and with a noise of longing that sends a wave of arousal straight to my core, he kisses me deeply. Planting a knee on either side of me, he braces his hands on the bed above my shoulders. Not liking the gap between us, I wrap my legs around his waist and try to pull him down on top of me, needing to feel him against me once more. Chuckling into my kiss, he stays firm. I’m about to demand that he fuck me this instant, but his weight shifts slightly, and his fingers suddenly trail down my side. They are whisper soft as they brush over my ribs and circle my hip bone.

Our lips move together slowly now, passionately, disrupted only by my shallow gasps, my skin sensitive to his touch. When he finally dips his fingers between my legs, I want to praise the goddess, but I bite my tongue. Trailing kisses along my jaw and down my neck, he grumbles appreciatively at the slick he finds as his fingers explore my pussy. He circles my clit with his thumb, and his deep chuckle rumbles through me as I squirm beneath his touch.

I feel like I’m about to combust, and the tie between us winds tighter, binding us together with each intimate moment. When his fingers finally slip inside my entrance, I’m so ready for him. He says something against my neck, more growl than words, and I’m so wound up in my growing pleasure that I

don't catch what he says, but somewhere, in the back of my brain, I register that it sounds approving.

“Fuck me,” I demand, writhing beneath him. “Please, fuck me.”

He chuckles, but I can hear the strain in it. Perhaps he's suffering just as much as I am. A whine almost escapes me as he removes his fingers, my core aching to be filled, but I manage to hold it back by biting down on my lip.

The hot head of his cock presses against me, stretching my entrance teasingly. At this point, I am way beyond teasing.

“If you don't fucking shove it in me, I'm going to impale myself on your dick,” I threaten. It's hardly romantic poetry, but it gets my feelings across, and a thrill rushes through me as his eyes shift once more.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as he pushes his erection into my entrance, slowly but steadily, until he fills me completely. Moaning with pleasure, I rock my hips, impatient and desperate. This seems to push him over the edge, and he loses his grip on his control, pounding into me with fervour. I fucking love it. My hands grip his back, my nails digging into his skin as I urge him on.

We continue this way for some time, my release growing and building until I'm walking the tightrope of orgasm, and I'm already free falling off the other side. Once we find our release, nothing will ever be the same between us again, and I'm no longer worried about that. We can only get better and stronger from here.

“Mark me.” I mean it as an order, but the words come out breathy and desperate as I jerk my head to one side, giving him full access.

An animalistic noise comes from him as he lunges forward, following his werewolf instincts and clamping his teeth over the junction between my shoulder and neck. The sting of the bite is quickly taken away as his thrusts become slower but more powerful inside me, pleasure and pain mingling until I moan and writhe on his cock. It's not long

until my pleasure wins and pushes me into orgasm. It shifts through my entire body, and I feel our connection changing and getting tighter as if holding us together. My pleasure becomes so intense, it's blinding.

It's only as my pleasure fades that I feel the shift in the room. Out of breath, I open my eyes and find that I'm no longer in my room, and Scott certainly isn't inside me.

I should be panicking, which would be a normal response, yet I only feel mild curiosity. I stand fully clothed in a clearing surrounded by trees, and the whole atmosphere around me is calm and peaceful. This isn't the forest that surrounds Haven, and it's not my home either, but wherever I am, I have the overwhelming sense that I'm not in any danger.

"Little one," the goddess greets, her warm voice as familiar to me as my father's.

Now that I focus, I realise that I can still feel my body back in Haven, so I know this is all happening in my mind. This is the loudest I've felt her since I've been at Haven. Something about Haven makes our connection fuzzy, so seeing her before me like this warms my heart.

"Goddess," I reply with a smile before glancing around at the forest. "Where am I?"

"I pulled you into the dream world." The look she gives me is secretive but apologetic. "I apologise for interrupting you. I couldn't speak with you until you hit your peak. Your magic created a bridge for me."

"What about Scott?" My cheeks flush with embarrassment that the goddess knows about my sex life, but I can't help but wonder how Scott is handling all of this. Is he just staring at my unmoving body while I'm here? The thought makes me grimace. It's going to freak him out some much.

The goddess chuckles as though she can see the direction of my thoughts and gestures towards a figure in the treeline. Scott stands there, fully dressed and looking very confused.

He appears to notice me at the same time I see him, his eyes lighting up. "Laelia!" he calls, running over to me with

concern written on his face. Colliding with me, he wraps his arms around me tightly, his confusion evident. Before he can ask me any questions, he catches the goddess's movement and realises we're not alone.

Turning, he spots the goddess watching us with a warm expression. He immediately recognises her for what she is and drops to his knees, staring up at her with wide eyes. "Goddess."

No, it's more than just that, and I realise what I'm seeing. "You've met before." It's phrased as a statement, but my question is loud and clear.

Scott stays in his position on the ground, showing no signs of getting up anytime soon. Turning my attention to the goddess, I watch as she lifts her gaze from his and dips her head in acknowledgement of my statement.

"You are right, Laelia. Scott chose to give up his true mate to save the life of the one he loved. I was the one to grant that wish."

Of course. I don't know why it took me so long to realise this. Scott told me all about his deal with the goddess, so I don't know how I forgot. The way Scott kneels there makes my chest hurt. He regrets his decision, seeing as when he saved his love, she ran off with another, but that brought him to me.

The goddess clears her throat and continues. "I am now giving you the chance to right that wrong."

Head jerking up, Scott frowns at her, but he's unable to hide the shimmer of hope in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

My lungs constrict tightly as I try to take a breath but can't. What is happening here? Is the goddess giving him the chance to find his true mate? My heart threatens to crack at the idea of him leaving me to go to another, but can I really be that heartless to deny him that happiness? *What about your happiness?* My mind whispers. No, if this is what Scott wants, then I won't stop him, even if it hurts me in the process. What would happen to our connection? Would it be shattered?

“You and Laelia were always meant to be.”

Hope and disbelief wash through me in a flood of overwhelming emotion. “I was supposed to be your mate,” I say, pressing my hand against my chest as though it would calm my racing heart.

It all makes sense now—the undeniable connection between us, the way he fits in with my mates, and the way we feel about each other. We always felt like we were meant for each other, but with the lack of a mate bond, it made us question it. It’s only recently that we decided to ignore the fact we weren’t mates and make a go of *us*, and it turns out that we were destined to be mates after all.

Somehow, despite the fact that Scott gave up his chance of a happy ending with his fated mate, we still found our way to each other.

His eyes widen as he processes everything the goddess said. “You... You’re saying that I can have Laelia as my mate? That I’ve not messed up our chance of being happy together?”

“Yes, but it comes with a price,” she cautions, gesturing from him to me, a glowing tether of stars appearing between us. “Your life will become bound to hers. If she dies, so will you.”

I’m so mesmerised by the glowing bond that I almost miss her words. Blinking, I drag my eyes away and stare at her for confirmation, but she’s staring at Scott.

“Yes,” he agrees instantly without even a hint of doubt in his voice.

Shocked at his sudden decision, I gasp, closing the distance between us and placing a hand on his arm. My life is dangerous, and the idea of Scott dying if anything were to happen to me is almost too much for me to comprehend.

“Scott, wait. You should think about this.”

Turning to me, he presses a kiss against my lips. My eyes flutter closed as I lose myself in his touch. After only a moment, he pulls back and greets me with a gentle smile as my eyes open.

“I don’t want to live in a world where you don’t exist, Laelia,” he declares. “This is what I want. I’m meant to be with you.”

I desperately want to accept what he’s saying—after all, we were literally made for each other—but his life could be cut short... No, I can’t even think about it anymore. If this is what he chooses, then I won’t try to make him change his mind, but I need him to know there’s another option.

“We can still be happy, mates or not. You found me, and we still fell in love without the bond. You know that I will always accept you whether or not you’re my fated mate,” I explain, taking his hand in mine and linking our fingers together.

“I know, and that’s exactly why I feel comfortable doing this.” With our hands still linked, he turns to the goddess and lowers his head respectfully. “I would like to accept your offer, great goddess.”

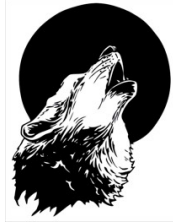
Although she says nothing, I get the sense that she’s pleased with his decision. She lifts her hands, and I feel warmth move through me as the world fades away.

We both return to our bodies with a gasp, orgasms still tingling through us. The tingle of the mate mark on my shoulder seals us together as his newly formed bond makes room for itself in my chest. It’s hard to accept that this actually just happened, and if it wasn’t for the fact that I can *feel* him, then I wouldn’t believe it. I can’t see his back from this position, but I’m sure if he were to turn around, I would see a fresh mate mark on his shoulder.

Once our pleasure has finally abated, we stare at each other in wonder, out of breath and exhausted. A large smile spreads across Scott’s face as he pushes back a lock of my hair and stares at me in wonder. My heart pounds and a word repeats itself in my mind, one I know he’s also feeling as he whispers it against my skin.

“Mate.”

Chapter Seventeen



At some point, I fall asleep, curled up against my newest mate, my heart finally feeling full and complete. Scott was the missing piece I didn't know I needed. I still have a lot of emotions to work through regarding what happened and what this will mean for the future, but in this moment, everything feels perfect.

A low murmur breaks through my contented dozing, and as I start to fight my way through sleep, I realise that I'm alone in the large bed. A small, needy noise escapes me, and I blindly reach out, searching for Scott. The sheets are still warm, so I know he's not been gone long, and our bond hums in my chest. He's close.

The quiet talking paused for a moment at my sleepy noises, but they continue now, getting louder as someone moves towards the bed. Reluctantly peeling my eyes open, I look up and find Scott smiling down at me, Joel standing at his side. The bed jolts slightly, and as I shift my gaze, I find Syn already climbing up the mattress and lying beside me, rubbing against me like a house cat. Humming with happiness, I wrap my arms around him and blink up at my other mates, wishing they could also be wrapped around me right now.

As if on cue, Nicolai and Atlas appear in the doorway. The bonds feel so warm and fuzzy in my chest at having them all here together that my body feels as light as a cloud, and I could float away at any moment. It's such a peculiar feeling, and I just want to bask in the glory of it. It would be so easy to

coax them all to the bed and spend the day getting lost in each other's bodies. Just the thought makes me giddy, and a giggle escapes me before I can stop it.

The strange looks that my mates give me help sober me up. They all seem fairly relaxed, and I feel cautiously optimistic about the chances of getting through this conversation without anyone getting frustrated or annoyed.

"I take it you know about Scott?" I'm almost holding my breath as I wait for their response.

Joel nods, placing his hand on my exposed leg. "We felt it when the connection snapped into place and knew what happened, but he came out to speak to us all individually to check if we were okay with it."

Eyes wide, I gaze at Scott who looks incredibly awkward, his cheeks turning pink as he rubs the back of his neck. I'm shocked that he felt the need to speak to the others. I thought we worked through Scott's worries about fitting in with my mates.

"You're my mate, Scott. There is always a place for you here," I insist quietly, sitting up on the bed so I can face him properly. "Even if you didn't get your mate bond back, you still don't need to explain yourself."

He smiles, his eyes crinkling at the sides, and I feel his gratitude flood through the bond. "I know, but I'm coming into this late, and I wanted to explain that I was always supposed to be with you. They deserved to know the full story."

There is something incredibly sweet about the fact that he did this when he didn't need to. He wanted to make sure that everyone got a say and knew exactly what happened. None of us expected Scott to be granted his mate bond, so it makes sense that he would want to clear the air.

Taking a deep breath, I look around the room and meet all the guys' gazes. "How do you all feel about this?"

There's not much they can do about it, even if they did disagree. My bond with Scott is as unbreakable as the one I

share with them. However, they deserve to have a say, especially since Scott has opened this conversation.

“It’s about time,” Syn says, surprising the hell out of me. Of all my mates, he struggles the most with sharing me, yet he’s now the first to speak in Scott’s favour. Nicolai snorts from the doorway, and I know he’s just as surprised as I am.

Syn raises a brow at our attention and shrugs his shoulders lazily. “It means I don’t have to put up with his pining or wistful stares any longer.”

Now that’s the Syn response I was expecting. I can’t help but laugh, and thankfully, Scott finds it funny too.

“We all knew Scott was yours, this just confirms it,” Nicolai comments, and hope begins to soar inside me. This is it, this could actually work. The idea of having five amazing mates who work together and love me beyond reason always seemed like a dream come true. It was so good, in fact, I was waiting for the penny to drop, for one of them to say they couldn’t handle it.

Trust in the goddess, something whispers inside me, and I vow to follow that guidance for the rest of my life.

Joel nods his agreement, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s good you completed your bond. We need to be a strong, unified unit.”

My happy buzz dims at the reminder of what waits outside of this room. I’d gotten so lost in the blissful post bonding haze that I pushed the other worries to the back of my mind. It was impossible to forget completely, but at least I was able to lose myself in Scott for a few hours.

“Any word on what’s going on in Haven? Has anyone been by with any news?” I ask, almost afraid to hear the answer.

The tension in the room suddenly shifts as my mates remember the threat that awaits us. Joel’s hands clench and unclench at his sides, but I’m pretty sure he’s doing it without realising, his body seeming to grow as he anticipates what could be coming our way.

“Other than the guards bringing us food every six hours or so, we’ve seen no one.” My alpha mate is a planner, and at the moment, we have no clue what the queen’s going to do, and that seems to be putting him on edge.

Biting down on my lower lip, I try but fail at hiding my anxiety, my gut clenching uncomfortably as I acknowledge what that means. No one has been by, meaning none of us have seen Kano since everything went down yesterday. I hoped that he would have been able to stop by, at least just so I could see for myself that he’s unharmed. I’ve been worried about him ever since Luna raised her fears, a worry that’s only increasing the longer I don’t see him. *He was probably banned from coming here*, I reason with myself. After all, there’s no point in jumping to the worst-case scenario.

Needing to shift my mind to something else, I pull the sheet tighter around myself and rub my arms, suddenly feeling cold. “Atlas, do you have any idea what the queen might do now?”

He huffs out a tired sigh and rubs his hand across his face, the action not doing anything to help alleviate my worries. “You stood up to her in front of everyone, failed the challenge, and then basically announced that she was manipulating them,” he reminds me, his grim expression making me wince.

Hearing it all said aloud like that makes it sound much more like treason than I thought.

Leaning against the doorframe, he seems to contemplate his next words. “She will either continue blaming your failed challenge on your ‘trauma’ and find a way to force you into killing Maliki to gain the witches’ confidence back.” Everyone shifts uncomfortably at his words, but he continues. “Or, she could go down the opposite path and outright call you a liar and denounce you as the chosen one. That could end up causing her more problems, as it will create a split between those who follow you, and those who believe the queen.”

Atlas’s first example sounds more like the queen that I’ve come to know, but I’ve never pushed her this far before. She’s a smart woman, so she’ll know the risks of an all-out war

against me, but at the end of the day, it will come down to how many supporters she has. If she believes she can win, then I think she could choose that option. Of course, we could be wrong, and she'll decide to do something else that we hadn't thought of and catch us off guard.

"Honestly, I don't know what she will do, but you can expect her to attempt to manipulate you in some way by threatening to hurt someone you care for." Atlas doesn't mince his words, telling me exactly what I need to hear. However, he says it softly and with an understanding that this knowledge is going to unsettle me.

He's right, and it doesn't take me long to realise who would be the easiest target.

"Kano," I whisper with horror. He's bound to the queen in a way I don't understand, so he's forced to follow her orders and has limited freedom. If that was the pathway the queen chose to take, then I imagine he would be the first person she would hurt.

Joel moves closer and kneels at my side, placing his hand on my leg. My skin tingles at the contact. "We'll do everything we can to make sure he's okay."

I meet his loving gaze and give him a strained smile, appreciating his efforts to comfort me. It's not just him though, I can feel the others reaching out with comforting vibes through our bonds, along with the wish not to overcrowd me. Taking a moment of quiet to absorb their love and supportive mental touches, I let it strengthen me. Goddess knows I'm going to need to be strong to survive this.

Taking a deep breath, I lift my head and meet their gazes, letting them see how much I appreciate them. "Okay, so what I'm hearing is that we need to stick together and be prepared for anything." We can do this, I'm sure of it, and from their determined expressions, they seem to be confident as well. "We'll take this a day at a time."

Standing, I adjust my bed sheet that I fashioned into a dress to make sure I'm not flashing anyone. I'm sure they

would love to see me parade around in nothing but my skin, but that's only going to distract them from the matter at hand.

I'm about to comment on what we should be doing next when a strange feeling ripples over my skin. For a second, a twist of dread has me in a chokehold, leaving me unable to move or speak. It only lasts a moment, but it sends a shockwave through me, making my knees weak with the force of it. Never in my life have I felt anything like that, and even now that it is over, something feels different, but I can't place the reason. Whatever it is, I don't think it's to do with me or anything happening to any of us in particular, but to Haven itself.

The curses and bewildered expressions around me indicate that I wasn't the only one to feel it, only adding more confirmation to my theory that something is happening within Haven. At first, I think it's only a magical shift, but my werewolf mates look just as confused and unsettled.

"Was that just me, or did something happen?" Nicolai asks, looking pale and queasy, his hand pressed to his stomach as though he's about to throw up.

Atlas looks grim and slides his hand through his hair, messing up the dark locks. "That was the warning system around Haven. Something is happening."

Part of me idly wonders why their warning system couldn't consist of an alarm like most of the world uses instead of this awful magical weight of dread that still haunts me, even though the magic has passed. Forcing those unhelpful thoughts aside, I give myself a mental shake. Something is happening, and from the feeling I carry with me and the look on Atlas's face, it's not something good.

"What do you mean?" I ask, afraid of the answer.

He grimaces and shifts his weight, an unusual display of discomfort from my witch mate. "It could be anything—a threat from the inside, a warning of something happening outside. This happened a few years ago when an earthquake hit us, and we were given a warning so we could get to safety."

Somehow, I don't think this is an imminent natural disaster, but some part of me wonders if that would be a blessing compared to what could be waiting for us.

“What do we do?” Syn asks, climbing from the bed and standing at my side, his eyes glowing.

A loud noise comes from the corridor outside our room, followed by distant screams and the sounds of running footsteps. We all share a look. Whatever is happening, we need to be ready. Jumping out of bed, I hurry to gather my clothes, which are still strewn on the floor. The others all jump into action, and I watch as Atlas hurries out of the room and towards the door.

I can hear him shouting at the guards, demanding answers, but I need to focus on getting dressed. Joel approaches me with a dagger and sheath. Where he got it or how he smuggled it past the guards, I have no idea, but I smile appreciatively and strap it to my waist. It feels better to have the weapon with me when I'm about to step out into the unknown, even when magic is my strongest asset.

When Atlas returns, he looks as serious as I've ever seen him, and I can feel the chill of his magic in the air as he attempts to control himself.

We all turn to look at him, sensing the change in the atmosphere. He seems shocked by whatever he learned, and a distant, faraway look haunts his eyes.

Unable to take the silence any longer or that awful expression on his face, I walk over to him and place a hand on his chest. “What's happening, Atlas?”

His eyes clear, and he meets my gaze with fierce determination. Looking up, he takes in the other males around me before returning his focus to me.

“The wards around Haven have fallen. We're under attack.”

Chapter Eighteen



We're under attack.

Recoiling from Atlas's words, I watch him with wide eyes. Bile burns the back of my throat, and even if I knew what to say, I wouldn't be able to vocalise what I'm feeling.

"Who would be attacking you?" Scott asks, his brows drawn low.

I don't need to hear the answer, as I've already figured it out. There is only one explanation if Haven is being attacked from the outside. Only one group of beings who knows about the existence of witches is large enough to be a threat.

"We only have one natural enemy." Atlas looks grim, fully aware of whom he's talking to and what effect this news is going to have on us. He meets my gaze as he says those damning words. "The werewolves."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try not to let this overwhelming information throw me into a panic. My sole focus narrows to keeping my breathing steady and even as my heart pounds, becoming the only thing I can hear. My hands tremble with adrenaline, the need to do something coursing through my body, but what could I do?

The prophecy rings in my mind. Is that what this is? My chance to bring everyone together? The werewolves don't exactly trust me, so even if I did approach them, I doubt they would listen to me. There is also no guarantee that they are

attacking because of me. There are several reasons why this is a bad idea, yet I couldn't live with myself if someone got hurt while I just sat here and did nothing.

The buzz of my mates' voices tells me that they are arguing about the best course of action, but as I open my eyes, I already know what we need to do.

"Take me to them."

Everyone falls silent and turns to look at me as if I've grown two heads.

"Not a chance," Syn snarls, taking my arm and turning me to face him. Anger twists his usually handsome face, but I know it's really a mask to hide his fear. He's terrified of losing me. "You really think we're going to let you walk out into the middle of an attack? You have no idea who it is. Even if it is werewolves, you're not exactly very high on their friendship list right now. What if they are feral?"

To my surprise, Nicolai and Joel nod in agreement. Honestly, I can't blame them, everything Syn says is true. It is dangerous and a huge risk. Right now, we don't even know for sure that it *is* werewolves. For all we know, they could just be feral, in which case there will be no reasoning with them, their minds lost to madness.

"Syn, without me there, the witches will be torn apart." We all know it's the grim reality of the situation, and I see it written on their faces. "I'm supposed to bring peace to both groups, so I have to at least try. What's the worst that could happen? They don't listen to me?"

"They could attack you, Laelia. You might get hurt. You could die," Joel replies bluntly, not mincing his words.

Again, all true, but they are not going to change my mind on this.

"I am not going to sit safely closeted away while innocents get hurt, and if you think I would, then you don't know me at all."

I see the moment my words hit their mark, Joel's expression softening. One of the reasons they love me is for

my caring heart, and they can't expect me to just forget my morals when they are needed the most.

Atlas swears and steps forward so he's in the centre of our little group.

"For fuck's sake. I can't believe I'm doing this," he mutters to himself before raising his head, his expression determined. "Okay, we need to work together to keep everyone safe. We're all getting out of this alive. No one tries to play the hero, and we stick together. At. All. Times. Got it?" Atlas's military background is showing as he barks out orders. His end of the bond suddenly feels different, focused somehow, as he slips into the role of general, helping him sharpen his thoughts on what needs to be done. He glances around the group, but I get the distinct feeling he's talking specifically to me.

If this was a different situation, then I might take offence at the implication that I'd put myself or the others in danger by trying to be heroic, but I know this isn't the right time. *You can't be offended at something that's true*, my mind points out, and I silently admit that I've been known to put myself at risk to help others.

It doesn't take long for the group to agree, and we make our way to the doors that lead to the main corridor, where I prepare to argue with the guards. They are not going to want to let us pass, but I'm sure I can persuade them to see my reasoning. When I swing the door open, though, I'm met with an empty corridor.

The guards are gone.

This makes our departure much easier, as I don't have to fight to get them to listen to me, but it makes the hair on my arms stand on end. It's eerily quiet out here. I won't let myself think of the reasons why it could be so quiet.

Atlas slips past me, and we share a knowing look that makes me sick with dread. With a quick gesture for us to follow him, we move through the hallway and down the spiralling staircase to the main wing of Haven. Atlas doesn't tell us to be quiet, we instinctively stay silent and move as

soundlessly as we can. We don't know what we'll be facing, and approaching our enemy without them knowing will give us the upper hand, something that might help keep us all alive.

The atmosphere is tense, and my instincts are telling me that we're walking straight into danger. Alarm bells ring in my mind, warning me to turn back, but we keep going. We don't see anyone until we're on the main floor, and a female form comes barreling around a corner, slamming straight into Atlas's chest.

"Luna!" I call out in surprise, instantly recognising my friend. I've never seen her look like such a mess before. Her hair has been hastily scraped back into a messy bun, and her clothes are haphazardly thrown on. It's the expression of panic written across her face that takes me aback though. Luna is always perky and confident, so seeing her like this is a huge warning sign.

Gripping onto her cousin's arms, she looks like she's about to pass out, her body shaking. Torment flickers in her eyes. Whatever she's seen has traumatised her to the point where she's almost hysterical. "Laelia, Atlas, I was just coming to find you. We're—"

"Under attack, we heard," Joel states matter of factly, his alpha instincts taking over as he tries to take control of the situation. "Tell us what's going on."

Joel's straight talking and clear commands actually seem to help her shake off her distress. Taking a deep breath, she digs her nails into the palms of her hands so she can focus on the pain and keep her mind clear. She nods her head slightly as if giving herself a mental pep talk.

"Werewolves have broken into Haven," she begins but pauses as she glances at me. "They are demanding to see Laelia."

Oh shit. All of my fears are coming true. My family wouldn't have stormed Haven to rescue me. It's not the way they would handle the situation, and they know I have my mates here with me, which means that someone else has managed not only to find Haven, but break the shields around

it and attack the witches to get to me. What do they want with me?

Clearing my throat, I try to keep my voice steady as I ask my next question. “Did they say why they wanted to see me?”

Shaking her head, Luna bites down on her lip as she attempts to come up with suggestions. “We did abduct you. Could they be wanting to check you’re safe? Is this a rescue mission?”

“No,” I say at the same time as my mates, all echoing the same sentiment. There’s no way werewolves would attack Haven just to rescue me. “They were trying to find an excuse to kill me before you guys took me. They are not here to help me.”

Something about hearing those words aloud suddenly makes me feel much more vulnerable. I call Star, and she materialises at my side in a glimmer of starlight. She’s instantly on alert, leaning against my leg as she senses my discomfort. A hand brushes against mine, and I start to flinch away until I feel a familiar tingle that tells me one of my mates is touching me. Looking up, I find Scott watching me, his hand linked in mine.

I have no words to tell him how much I love and appreciate him, or how having him here completes me. Thankfully, I don’t need to vocalise it because he can feel it all through the bond. The others take a step closer, creating a cocoon of bodies around me. Whatever’s about to happen next could change everything, so I make the most of this moment. To my surprise, Luna doesn’t say anything and waits quietly for us to finish, like she knows we need this time together.

We transcend to another level within our bond, communicating through images and emotions alone. It’s the strangest sensation, and if I were asked to explain it aloud, I doubt I could. Now that we’re complete with the addition of Scott, we’re able to sink more deeply into our bond, the six of us connected and thinking as one unit.

In fact, we’re so connected, they all step back simultaneously when we’re ready, revealing Luna. My mind is

clear now, and while I still feel fear, I don't allow it to take over or spiral in my thoughts like it did before.

“We're ready.”

Luna scans us with wide eyes, and I get the impression she wants to say something, but instead, she bites down on her lip and nods. Spinning on her heel, she turns back the way she came and gestures for us to follow her.

We come across the first body a few minutes later—a male witch who was clearly fleeing. My throat constricts so tightly that for a moment, I can't breathe, horrified by what I'm seeing. Atlas detaches himself from our group and kneels beside the fallen male. Pressing his hand against the witch's neck, he feels for a pulse even though it's clear this man is dead. A vicious leg wound seems to be the only sign of injury, a trail of blood on the floor acting as a grizzly signpost leading from where he had been running.

Atlas has clearly come to the same conclusion, and although his eyes are hard as he stands, I can feel his grief. He didn't know this male, yet he still mourns for one of his kin.

Unfortunately, this isn't the only dead witch we find as we work our way farther into Haven, a name that feels mocking in the current circumstance. The majority of the bodies are female, and all have their throats torn out. It's easy to see why Luna was so spooked when she found us. She grew up here and knew these people her whole life. It's her home, and now it's being desecrated. Atlas had a different upbringing and spent much of his life outside of Haven, so while he's struggling with this, it doesn't impact him as strongly as it does his cousin.

We're almost at the centre of Haven when a terrified scream fills the air, the sound seeming to go on forever thanks to the echoing effect of the cavernous hallway. We race down the corridor. We may give away our advantage, but we're not willing to allow these monsters to slaughter anyone else. These witches are innocents, they don't deserve this.

When we round the corner to the main corridor, I stumble to a stop at what I see, Syn crashing into my back. Abhorrence

and horror seem to freeze me in my tracks.

A female witch is pinned against the wall by a male werewolf. She is literally pinned by his shifted hand, his long claws extending through her body and into the stone wall behind her, her feet lifted from the floor. The only sounds coming from her are awful, gulping gasps as she struggles to breathe. I'm not a medical expert by any means, but I would guess that the foul beast's claws have punctured her lungs.

Her face shows her terror as the werewolf presses himself against her, his mouth moving against her neck like a tender lover's kiss. I can see now that he's slashed the top of her dress open, exposing her chest and leaving three long slashes across her collarbone and over her shoulder. With sickness in my stomach, I realise what he's doing at her neck. He's drinking her blood like something out of a horror movie.

This is what finally snaps me from my shock. Witch, werewolf, human, no one deserves to be terrorised like this. This is *sick*. He's not defending himself from an attack, no, he pinned her to the fucking wall so she couldn't fight back, exposed her so she felt vulnerable, and is now stretching out her terror. Werewolves don't drink blood, and there is no such thing as vampires. This male is just twisted and getting off on her fear.

"Get the fuck off her." I hardly recognise my voice as it's amplified by both my anger and the acoustics of the hallway.

The werewolf had been so distracted by his disgusting acts that he hadn't heard us coming. He stiffens, but as he pulls back, he glances over his shoulder and laughs as he spots me, his eyes lighting up. It's Grove, the sick, twisted alpha who tried to get me killed during the werewolf trials.

He looks just the same as the last time I saw him, time doing nothing to take away the feeling of disgust I get every time I think of him. Tall and spindly, he almost looks emaciated. He uses that to his advantage, though, and is deceptively strong and fast. He looks like a hobo, so you would never expect him to be one of the strongest alphas in the country.

“Laelia...” He stretches my name out as though tasting the word on his tongue, his eyes roving over my body. I’m disgusted, but not because he’s objectifying me. No, he doesn’t want me sexually, he’s probably just imagining all the twisted things he wants to do to me. For Grove, torture is a form of foreplay.

Grinning, he yanks his claws from his victim who falls to the ground like a discarded toy. “Bates is looking for you.”

Both Atlas and Nicolai instinctively start to move towards the fallen woman but stop when Grove makes a high-pitched whistle. Four lanky forms appear at the end of the corridor, two in wolf form while the other two are bipedal, loping towards their alpha. There are five of them now, making the odds of us getting past them to save the woman very low. They all have the same lanky form as their alpha, and blood splatters their bodies and faces, telling me they were following Grove’s example.

My heart goes out to the woman now convulsing on the floor, but as soon as Grove mentioned Bates, icy rage moved through me, my vision focused on the alpha.

Bates. Star growls at my side, her fur standing on end at his name. Alpha Bates is a dangerous male who’s been trying to kill me since he learned of my existence. My anger doesn’t stem from his continued attacks or attempts on my life, but what he told me the last time we saw each other. With the help of the scientists back in the werewolves’ home city, he’s created a virus that has been genetically modified to attack werewolves. Currently, it can only be passed on by injection, but they were working on making it airborne.

He was the reason Nicolai died and was reborn. *He* killed my mate. I want my vengeance. Glancing at Nicolai to check he’s okay, I see his face is a hard mask as he stares at Grove. I wish I could reach out and reassure him, take his hand in mine, but it will just be seen as a sign of weakness, one the enemy alpha is sure to use against us.

Grove follows my gaze, his eyes widening in delighted surprise, and he crows out another laugh. “You survived! Now

that's a twist I didn't see coming." He leers and tilts his head to one side as he studies Nicolai, as though the answer to his rebirth is written on his body somewhere. "You would make for an interesting specimen."

An animalistic snarl rips out of me as I take a threatening step forward, Star right beside me. So long for not giving away my feelings, but I've been overly protective of Nicolai since I lost him. I didn't just think he was dead, he *did* die. It's only through our loving goddess's blessing that he was offered the chance to come back.

A hand reaches out and grabs my wrist to stop me from going further, but that was never my plan. I'm not angry enough to lose my senses, and I know I'm not strong enough to fight Grove and his wolves alone. Instead, I take a step to the side, shielding Nicolai with my body.

"You won't touch a fucking hair on his body," I snarl, still not quite recognising the person I've turned into. I'm not upset about the change though, it makes me sound powerful. All it took to wake it was threatening my mates.

"It seems like the little wolf is all grown up," Grove muses, the sneer I'm used to seeing on his face finally back in place.

I don't know what he's waiting for. Surrounded by his backup, he's got enough numbers to attempt to take us on, yet he's just standing around making small talk. It puts me on edge. Is he waiting for something? Whatever it is, it seems like Atlas has had enough of waiting for the big reveal.

"You made a mistake coming here, and I shall enjoy peeling your skin from your body, one little piece at a time." Icy cold magic swirls around us, and ice starts to form on the ground, crawling towards Grove and his wolves. There's a strain and a tug in my chest from his bond, which takes me by surprise. Atlas is immensely powerful, and I've seen him do far more with his magic and never feel drained like this, but I'm not about to give that piece of information away to Grove and his cronies.

As it is, surprise appears on their faces, and they share a confused and alarmed look. If the situation wasn't so dire, I might snort a laugh. Are they so stupid that they didn't expect us to retaliate? They attacked the home of the *witches*, using magic is what they do.

“What did you expect?” Atlas bites out, a mocking smile tugging at his lips. “For us just to lie down and not use our magic to protect ourselves?”

Grove is snarling now, the smile wiped from his face as he backs away from the approaching ice. “How—”

“Laelia, I can't access my magic!” Luna cries in alarm, her voice tight and verging on panic.

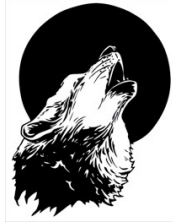
“Interesting,” Grove comments, stretching out the word as he tilts his head to one side, his disgusting gaze roving over Luna before flicking back to me. “Magic should have been blocked. All the witches I've come across so far have been powerless, including your little friend.”

Oh shit. That explains why so many are dead and we've not come across any werewolf bodies. Without their magic, witches are basically human. I assumed that the witches were taken by surprise, and that was why they were suffering a higher body count. Without their power, it's going to be a massacre. I'm not sure when I started caring about the witches' lives to the point where I would defend them against my own kind, but this is an all-out attack against innocents. There is no way that I'd associate myself with the monsters behind this attack.

Grove is still watching me like I'm an insect he can't wait to dissect, his sick desires rooting him in place while his fellow wolves continue to back away from the icy magic reaching for them.

“Which means,” he continues, “that *you* are the reason your mate can use his magic.” His sneer turns into a sick grin. “You really are interesting. Perhaps Bates will let me have you once he's done with you. I wonder how loudly you'll scream for mercy when I cut you open, piece by piece, to see what's so different about you.”

Chapter Nineteen



Grove is saying all the things he knows will wind up my mates in the hopes it will cause them to lose control and attack blindly, making stupid mistakes in the process. Thanks to the bond, I'm able to help my mates stay in control, but his words have a profound effect on them nonetheless.

Unfortunately, I've heard all this before from the psychotic alpha and others just like him when I was in the werewolf city for the trials, so it doesn't have the same effect on me. Sure, it makes me sick to my stomach, but if anything, it just makes me more determined to make sure that Grove doesn't leave here alive. His reign of terror is over.

Reaching within myself, I pull my power together, letting it grow and build around me as stars, surrounding us in a halo of light. Grove snarls at the show of magic, but he doesn't move, not giving any signs of being disturbed. His wolves aren't able to hide their fear and disgust though, shifting their weight from foot to foot and glancing at their alpha, looking as though they don't know if they are fighting or fleeing.

I'm so focused on collecting my power and keeping it controlled that I don't notice how one of my mates strains against the bond until it's become like a tight leash around his neck. It's only as my concentration slips for a second that he finally reaches his limit, the constant threats on my life becoming too much for him to handle.

I shouldn't be surprised, especially as I realise which one of my mates it is, yet it causes my control to slip.

Syn.

Several things happen in unison.

Eyes glowing and lips pulled back in a ferocious snarl, Syn leaps forward, his powerful legs helping him cross the space in a matter of seconds. With only meters to go, he leaps towards them and shifts into his wolf form mid-air, aiming for Grove's neck.

Meanwhile, the stars I collected around us are free of my control. Full of power that is uncontainable, the stars shoot out in a burst of light, much like what happened in the cavern when Maliki attacked me, burning everything they touch. The damage to the hallway is immense.

My magic seems to have acted like a starting gun in a sports race, everyone springing into action at once. Glancing around at the chaos, I note with a sigh of relief that the arches that hold the hallway seem to have remained undamaged, maintaining the weight of the building above us.

One of Grove's wolves was taken down with a wayward star and is now being tackled by Scott in wolf form. Nicolai and Atlas stand together, the latter giving instructions as they use their magic to slow the progress of Grove's wolves. Joel is currently fighting the two werewolves still in human form hand-to-hand simultaneously, and he seems to be coming out on top.

With a battle cry that almost makes my heart stop, Luna throws herself into the fray. She may be without magic, but a small dagger gleams in her hand, and she is intent on using it.

Grove manages to move just in time to avoid Syn's bite, but not quickly enough to avoid being tackled to the ground. I watch with my heart in my throat as they grapple, my magic buzzing inside me and demanding to be used. Syn whines as he receives a bite to his flank, one of Grove's wolves having joined the fray. Without me even having to direct her, Star races forward and tackles the wolf who dared attack our mate.

Reaching for my power, I pull only a small amount and hold it in the palm of my hands, shaping it as Luna taught me. Soon, I'm holding two glowing spears. Picking my target, I hurl the spear towards the wolf Star is fighting, knocking him off Syn with a yelp. My attack isn't particularly strong, but because my weapons are made of stars, I have control over them and can guide them to hit my target every time.

I continue with this over and over, my power starting to feel a little strained in my chest. It's the strangest feeling, because *I* don't feel like my magic is waning, but it's as though I'm using too much in one go. During this whole process, I notice the distinct lack of the dark presence within me. Now that I've got better control over my power, I don't feel as vulnerable as I once did thanks to my training. There's no need for a mysterious being to swoop in and save me, because I can save myself now.

You've always had the power, little moon. You just finally learned to accept it, the goddess whispers into my mind, taking me by surprise and making me stumble as I throw my next spear.

That's when I finally realise the dark presence within me was never a separate being, but a part of myself that I sectioned off and hid away. It felt dangerous and untouchable, so I pushed it away and made sure never to use it. It was always the dark part of my mind that stepped in to help me. I'm no saint, I can admit that I have dark thoughts and desires sometimes, but the difference between that and being evil is knowing when not to act on those impulses. I didn't understand that before. It reflected my darkest thoughts, so somehow, my mind created a part of me who would use the magic when I felt I couldn't.

Now that I've accepted all of my magic, I'm stronger. I noticed it when I started training in earnest after the first trial. I was no longer going to be ashamed of my power or who I am. I have goddess blood in my veins, therefore my power can't be inherently good or bad. It's what I choose that makes the difference.

“Laelia!” Joel cries out, the warning in his voice snapping me from my revelations.

I see a large male barrelling towards me, his face twisted into a grotesque smile. With only enough time to brace myself for impact, I shift my stance and raise the spear of starlight. The impact of his body against mine feels like being hit by a freight train, my body crying out in pain as I’m knocked to the ground. A crack in my chest makes me yell out as he lands on top of me, snapping at least one of my ribs.

“Don’t kill her. Bates wants her alive!” Grove shouts, snarls and grunts surrounding me.

The male on top of me groans, shifting a little but continuing to pin me down. *Why isn’t he getting off me?* I think to myself, my chest screaming in pain, but my more pressing issue is the fact that I can’t breathe with his weight on me.

Warmth begins to spread across my torso, and panic makes me believe that it’s my injury causing it, and that I’m bleeding out. However, as the male shifts again, he braces his hands on either side of me and pushes up with a pained groan. My gasp for air is immediate, and although it’s agonising, I fill my lungs with as much of it as I can. It’s in that moment when I see the warmth I felt was blood, but not my own. As the male tackled me, my spear pierced his abdomen.

His arms give way, and he falls back onto me, jostling my broken rib and causing me to cry out in pain. Several of my mates call my name, but I’m once more out of breath and unable to reply. This male is dying on top of me and crushing me in the process. He’s now unconscious from the blood loss, and if I turn my head enough, I can see the tip of the spear protruding from his back. Just the sight makes me queasy, but I know I’ve got to get him off me if I want to stand a chance.

Placing my hands under his shoulders, I push up with all my strength, but my hands are shaking and slippery with his blood. I come to the realisation that the spear won’t be helping my efforts in moving him off me, so I close my eyes and call the magic back to me.

A familiar presence appears at my side, and I open my eyes to find Nicolai kneeling beside me, grabbing the body and hauling it from me. Helping as best as I can, I push and attempt to wiggle away at the same time. This male is much larger than Nicolai and dead weight, so it takes a couple of tries. When I'm finally free, I get to my knees and press my forehead against the floor, allowing the panic to leave my body.

“Are you okay?” Nicolai's voice is soft, and I can tell he wants to reach out and pull me into his arms, yet he holds off. I was being suffocated, and even though he's my mate and his touch usually brings me peace, the last thing I want right now is to be touched. Pushing my gratitude and love for him through our connection, I slowly sit up and rub my hands across my face.

I quickly scan my body for injuries, wincing at the sharp pain in my side. His eyes cloud with anger as he takes in my pained expression, but he waits for my reply.

“I think I might have some broken ribs, but I'm fine.” I wave him off as though broken ribs are nothing, my gaze snagging on Atlas who seems to be struggling with containing a wolf behind a wall of ice. “Go, Atlas needs you.”

Glancing over his shoulder, he appears torn as he looks at me again. Although I can feel his uncertainty through the bond, I don't need the connection to read what he's thinking, as it's written all over his face.

I slowly climb to my feet, ignoring the ache in my ribs. My werewolf genetics are coming in handy as the injury heals, becoming more of a discomfort than the blinding pain it was before. Even so, I wouldn't let it stop me from what I have to do next, even if it was agonising.

That determination must show on my face, because Nicolai stands beside me, frowning with trepidation. “What are you going to do?” He seems nervous, but the fact that he's not trying to stop me or suggest I hold back makes me love him all the more. This is an attack and our reality, we don't have time for them to coddle me.

“It’s time to end this. Grove has to die.” Although my voice is quiet, it’s strong and unwavering, much like my determination. I’ve never gone into a fight knowing that I’m going to kill someone. In fact, I’ve always gone to great lengths to avoid that at all costs, and that should shock me. However, Grove is not just a danger to myself, my mates, or the witches he readily attacked, but his own kind too. I haven’t forgotten the poor cowering females from his pack I met at the trials.

“Cover me?” I ask, knowing I’ll need to focus on Grove if I want to survive this. Nicolai’s face clears, and with a jerk of his head, he runs over to Atlas, telling him the plan.

Taking a deep breath, I send a quick prayer for protection, then I stalk towards Grove. He’s still in human form and is fighting Syn who’s in wolf form. Blood rolls down his arms, but the wounds have already healed over, leaving shiny pink scars that will be gone in minutes. For a moment, I admire my mate in action. He’s lethal. Each bite is deep, and if Grove wasn’t a werewolf, he already would have bled out. Star is attacking from the other side, but their efforts don’t seem to be having the effect they should be. Something is wrong here.

“Syn,” I call, giving a gentle tug on the bond to coax him back to me. “Grove is mine.”

It doesn’t take much, and with a final growl at his opponent, Syn turns and runs to my side, nudging my leg affectionately with his head. Star does the same, standing at my other side so I’m flanked by two wolves. For a moment, Grove’s gaze falls upon us, and I see a wary look in his eyes, but it’s gone in a flash.

“So the princess has finally decided to fight,” Grove taunts, but I let it wash over me. I’ve been taking out his wolves while he’s been fighting, but I won’t stoop to his level. It’ll make him think he’s won, and that’s not about to happen.

I summon my magic, my right hand tingling as a shining dagger forms there, lighter and easier to use than my previous choice of weapon. Not giving him time to react, I leap towards him, Syn and Star doing the same, circling him so he can’t

retreat from my attack. I slash towards his neck, and he narrowly dodges the attack, blocking with his forearm. A curse spits from his lips at the long cut I carve into his skin, but he retaliates, throwing out his half shifted hands, his long claws dangerously close to my face.

He's both faster and stronger than me, not to mention he has ten razor-sharp claws. I need a shield to protect myself, as there's no way I can avoid every attack, but I don't have the control to create one that moulds around my body so I can still fight while I'm moving—that will take years to master. However, as Grove blocks another attack with his arm, an idea comes to mind.

Starlight appears in my left palm, and instead of it forming a weapon, I will it to become a shield. A circular disk the size of my torso extends at the back and wraps itself around my wrist so I'm easily able to move without the risk of dropping it. This takes a lot more concentration, but it could be what saves my life. When he attacks me again, I use the shield, and his claws bounce off with a shower of sparks. The force of it knocks me back, but I'm unharmed. An added bonus is his shout of frustration as yet another attack fails.

The sound of fighting is all around me, but I stay focused on Grove, blocking his now constant barrage of attacks. He's worked out my weaknesses, and I think he's decided to just pummel my shield until I run out of magic. What he doesn't know is that I've got more than enough magic to keep my shield up. The last time he saw me, I had no control over my power at all, and it used to escape me only in times of great danger, but I'm a completely different person now.

Despite the fact that his attacks seem unending, I keep attempting to slash at him with my dagger and push him back with my magic when not defending myself. However, I don't consider how far back he's been pushing me with his blows, away from the protection of my mates. Joel calls out a warning, and I know I need to get back to them as soon as possible. Syn and Star are biting the back of Grove's shirt, trying to pull him backwards and give me the space to attack him, but he seems to be immune to their bites. The look in his

eyes is manic now, and for the first time, I wonder if I've gotten myself in too deep. I may be different from the last time he saw me, but Grove is a different male now too. Something about him has changed, and it's making him harder to beat.

I'm focusing so closely on his attacks, I don't notice that the stone slabs on the floor have become dislodged because of the fight. My foot catches on the edge of one, and I fall to the ground with a thud, my healing ribs protesting. Victory gleams in his eyes as he leaps onto me, pinning me down and kicking away my weapon so I'm completely unarmed.

This is it. I fucked up, and it's going to get me killed. There's so much I still want to do with my life. I'm never going to see my father again, nor my old pack, and I'll never know if they are safe. The thing that upsets me most is the fact that I'm going to die at the hands of *Grove*.

Syn is taking huge chunks out of him, but Grove doesn't seem to notice. It's like he's accepted his fate, but he's determined to take me down too—or he's somehow immune to the pain. He reacted when I attacked him, but not from any of the other blows, so it makes me think something's afoot.

His claws appear at my neck, and all other thoughts flee my mind. I know now that it will only be a matter of seconds until I die, and that's a humbling thought. My life has been good, just short. Faced with the end, I can only think of the things I've not had the chance to do yet.

“What, no light show now?” Grove mocks, leaning close until his foul breath is in my face, making me want to retch. Something about what he said niggles my mind, but I can't figure out what it is. I play those words back and try to work out what my thoughts are getting stuck on.

Light show... Lights... Stars...

I know what to do.

“Bates will be mad I killed you, but I'm prepared to take his anger. My one regret is that I don't have time to stretch this out.”

Grove carries on talking, enjoying the sound of his own voice and missing my revelation. A part of me is horrified by what I'm hearing, but honestly, I'm not focused on him or his foul words any longer, not as hope builds inside me. I close my eyes so I can focus on what I need to do, and I'm sure Grove probably thinks I'm fearing my death, when really, I'm preparing for his.

Flinging a warning through the bond to all my mates, I collect magic in my hands and shape it. I call it to my skin like a thousand tiny diamonds. Grove chuckles, not knowing what's coming next. A sharp burst of pain pierces my skin as he begins slicing my neck, but before he can get any farther, I call on my stars to do what they do best—shine.

I shine brighter and brighter until he cries out with pain, and even still, I will the stars to keep glowing. The light is blinding, even behind my closed lids, so I have no idea how he's coping while staring directly down at me. The answer to that soon comes as he climbs off me, and I hear him scurrying back. I open my eyes. I was worried that I might blind myself with the light, and although it's bright, it doesn't hurt me. *Of course*, I think to myself with a smile, *it's my own light*. The goddess wouldn't bless me with something that would hurt me.

Glancing around, I see my mates shielding their eyes, and I feel a grim sense of satisfaction as I watch Grove back away blindly, scurrying away like the foul vermin he is, his eyes streaming with tears. Getting to my feet, I follow him, not feeling any sense of urgency now that the power balance has shifted. I grab his shoulders and pull him to a stop.

As soon as I touch him, he screams, steam rising from the contact as my glowing hands burn him. I'm not like him, though, and I hold no interest in dragging this out. I just want it to be over. Grabbing his throat, I command the stars to glow even hotter, and he stops screaming.

The effect is immediate, his expression one of horror as the light fades from his eyes. In fact, I'm burning so hot that my hand melts through skin and muscle, his head falling from his shoulders.

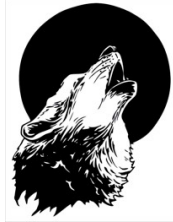
My body stops shining instantly, and I stare down at Grove's decapitated body as Luna and my mates slowly gather around me. I assume the other werewolves are either dead or gone, seeing as there's no more fighting, but I can't seem to pull my gaze from the corpse at my feet.

I did this.

"Whoa," Nicolai mutters quietly, that one word summing everything up pretty well.

My only answer is to turn around and empty the contents of my stomach on the stone floor.

Chapter Twenty



I did what I had to. I know that, yet it doesn't change the fact I've taken a life. I'm a murderer.

Grove attacked Haven, tortured and killed countless witches, and was going to hurt my mates and me next. He was killing me, crushing me, and about to cut my throat, and I did what I had to do in order to survive. He's caused so much misery over the course of his life, especially in his position of alpha, so in taking his life, I protected the lives of many.

Yet, taking a life changes you. I feel older, like a heavy weight has been added to my shoulders. Holding that power in my hands and knowing that I could so easily take a life is both heady and terrifying. I want to go back to the innocent girl who loved running in the forest with the wolves, who knew nothing of magic and war and witches. However, if that were the case, I never would have met my mates or discovered that I have a brother. My power never would have developed, and I'd always have an empty part of my soul that I was never able to fill.

Either way, there's no point in dwelling on what might have been, as it's not possible to turn back time.

With a deep breath, I stand up straight and take comfort in having my mates close, especially as they lay a hand on me. Nothing dramatic happens, no one pulls me into their arms, not even Syn who is back in human form now. They all sense my need for both comfort and space. If they were to make a fuss over me or crowd me like I usually prefer, then I'd break

down and not be able to function. I can't afford that luxury right now.

Feeling more like myself and emotionally stable, I open my eyes and scan my mates, checking for any injuries. I don't see anything obvious, although Atlas looks exhausted from using his magic.

"We should find Kano and the queen. I'm sure Bates will be wherever she is," I suggest, remembering what Luna told me when she first found me. *They want to speak to me.* I'm assuming the "they" is Bates. He seems like the type to launch an attack like this.

Luna steps forward, and Atlas makes space by his side for her to join our little huddle. "Laelia, are you okay?" Luna asks gently, seeming to expect me to fall apart at any moment.

I give her a sad smile that I don't feel. "No, but this isn't over yet."

There will be time to break down later. In the meantime, there are witches who need our help.

We find evidence of the werewolves as we work our way through the hallways. Pictures have been slashed, candles lie in pieces on the ground, windows are smashed, and drapes are torn to pieces as though they were used in a game of tug-of-war.

Following the trail of destruction, we find ourselves approaching the ballroom. Instead of the usual guards standing to attention by the grand doors, we find a group of werewolves in their human forms. They grin when they spot us. Tensing, I wait for them to race towards us and attack, and from the tension in the bonds, I know I'm not the only one.

Only, that never happens. They watch us as we approach, and only when we're several meters away does one step forward. He's taller than the others and walks with a swagger that suggests he's fairly high up in his pack. I discreetly sniff the air and confirm that none of these males are alphas. My two alphas could have them rolling on the ground and showing

their bellies like puppies if they wanted to, and I have to bite my lip to hold back the snort that image conjures.

“We’ve been expecting you. Now that you’re here, the party can really begin. Come,” he barks, ordering us about like a dog.

Syn takes great offense at this and steps forward threateningly, his alpha power swelling around him like an angry storm. The effect is immediate. Whining, the males at the back of the group shrink in on themselves, their shoulders rounded as they try to make themselves small and non-threatening. Some of the weaker males even fall to their knees. One shifts into his wolf form, pressing himself as low as he can to the ground, his ears flattened to his head in a show of submission.

The male at the front fights against his instincts, but ultimately, he can’t resist kneeling to the alpha.

“I follow no one but her.” Syn jerks his head towards me, his voice a deep rumble.

Joel hums in agreement behind me, and I can just imagine the look on his face. He and Syn might butt heads, and they might not always agree, but they’ve learned to work together.

Syn returns to my side and gestures for me to lead the way into the ballroom. It feels like we’re walking into a trap, but we don’t have many options, so I roll my shoulders back and lift my head high, calling Star to my side. Then, as a group, we enter the ballroom.

The room is full of people, but as I scan the space, I take note of the fact that there are less people here than there should be. A naïve part of me hopes that they’ve merely managed to stay hidden during the attack and are somewhere safe and alive.

Witches line the walls, all huddled together, leaving the centre of the ballroom clear and open. At first count, I see six werewolves in wolf form, and at least ten in their human forms. Sixteen werewolves against a whole ballroom of

witches should be an easy fight, but without their magic, it skews the power dynamics.

At the back of the room is the queen's throne, and sure enough, the ruler is sitting in her favourite place. However, her face is pinched, and as I look closer, I notice she's got a split lip. In fact, she looks nothing like the pristine woman we usually see. Her shiny, perfect hair is a mess, and her face is pale and without makeup. Instead of her usual grand gowns, she's wearing loose, casual clothes that you'd expect to see someone to wear on a lazy Sunday. It seems she's been affected by this just as much as the rest of the witches. Two males stand behind her as a constant threat and reminder of what will happen if she acts out.

Noises like I've never heard before pull my attention to the foot of the dais where Ivar is thrashing around under the hold of two males. They are far stronger than him thanks to their wolf genetics, but even they are struggling to hold him down as he rages against them. His black eyes are wide, and his lips are pulled back in a snarl, revealing long, sharp teeth. He's more like an animal than a witch right now.

Glancing at the other figure at the base of the throne, I feel a huge wave of relief as my eyes lock onto my brother. Kano has the beginnings of a black eye, and he's leaning slightly to one side, making me think he injured his leg, but he's alive. He won't meet my eyes, keeping his stoic gaze forward, which makes me think he's doing it on purpose. Bates might not know about our connection, and even if he did, he might not know how close we've become. By ignoring me and not reacting to my presence, he can keep up that appearance in an attempt to stop the alpha from using us against each other. It's a good plan, and one I'm going to stick with.

Knowing that I can't linger in the doorway forever, I slowly enter the ballroom, making sure each step is strong and firm. I refuse to give any sign of weakness. Bates hasn't noticed me yet, his attention on Ivar, who seems to be getting himself more and more worked up. It's torture to watch, and even those who usually shy away from him are watching on with sympathy, yet no one tries to do anything to help.

“Ivar,” I call, hating to see him suffering. As soon as he hears my voice, he visibly calms despite my quiet, gentle tone. Breath heaving from his chest, he turns his head and locks his unusual eyes on me. I try to smile at him reassuringly, but I’m sure it looks more like a grimace. He seems to take comfort from it, though, and slowly nods his head, his body relaxing as he stops fighting against the males holding him.

“You calmed the beast,” Bates drawls, finally looking up and meeting my gaze. We stay locked in a battle of wills for several moments as we both take each other in. My nemesis is here, in a place I never thought he’d reach me. As though sensing the direction of my thoughts, he grins, looking pleased with himself as he does a slow circle and gestures around the deadly quiet ballroom. “You’re finally here,” he crows. “We couldn’t get started before our guest of honour arrived.”

All of the nausea I felt earlier is gone the moment I lock eyes on Bates. He looks the same as the last time I saw him, but most of all, it’s his twisted smirk that triggers me the most. This male tormented me, tried to kill me multiple times, killed Nicolai, and has now stormed Haven. Righteous anger floods through my body and washes away all of my other emotions. Ignoring his comment about being the guest of honour, I narrow my eyes and cross my arms over my chest. “Why are you here?”

I’m proud of the strength in my voice, not a single waver or sign of fear on display. If he was expecting the weak young girl who was unsure of who she was, then he’s going to be in for a surprise. I’ve grown up, and I have my mates and my friends to support me. I’m not alone.

The only sign of his surprise is a twitch in his brow and the pause he takes before he starts talking. He hides it well, and I only notice because I’m watching him so closely.

“We have finally come to rid ourselves of our enemy.” He looks around the room with a sneer as the werewolves cheer in agreement. Howls echo around the room, and the witches shuffle around nervously, attempting to sink into the walls.

“It also helps that you’re here, and we can slaughter you like the foul halfling you are. We can kill two birds with one stone.” Hatred seems to radiate from him, his manic grin distorted by the violence clearly written across his face.

Taking a step forward, I feel the weight of the entire population of the ballroom watching me, waiting for my reaction with bated breath. His reasoning doesn’t surprise me, but I can’t help but think that there’s something else going on here. It’s nothing more than an inkling, a twinge in the corner of my mind, yet one I can’t seem to shake.

We have finally come to rid ourselves of our enemy. Those toxic words repeat in my mind, only stirring up my anger. That’s what this is all about. People on both sides are being killed in a war no one understands the origins of in the first place.

“Why are you attacking the witches? Because of an age-old feud that our ancestors started?” I demand with derision, needing everyone to hear these words and realise how ridiculous it is to fight a war no one wants. “We need to make a stand against this war, and only *we* can make that change. I’m not saying you have to like each other or even interact, but fighting for the sake of it is just a pointless waste of lives.” Looking around the ballroom, I address the witches. “Don’t you want to live in peace so you don’t have to hide any longer?” Hope blooms in me as I see several nods of agreement and sparks of new possibilities in several of the witches’ expressions. Maybe I really can do this and stop this once and for all.

Clearing my throat, I shift my attention back to Bates. “This has been going on for too long. Stop this madness, and let everyone go free.”

There’s no room for disagreement in my demand, and for a moment, I feel powerful and full of purpose. Warmth and love wrap around me as my mates’ feelings flood through the bond, their pride at being my mate lifting my spirit.

That lasts for all of about five seconds and is shattered by a loud, slow clap from Bates. He looks at me with a mocking

smile, his werewolves laughing at the very idea that they could just release us.

“No, I don’t think I will,” he replies, clicking his tongue with a tilt of his head. “That was a very pretty speech. Well done. You see, Laelia, it’s talk like that that leads to the creation of vermin like yourself, and I cannot allow that. The council agrees with me.”

If he was waiting for my shock at his declaration that the council was behind this attack and wants me dead, then he’s to be disappointed. Sadly, none of this surprises me. While I wouldn’t put it past Bates to rally an attack on Haven on his own, I doubt he’d have this much support, not to mention the fact that the council was trying to find ways to kill me in the werewolf trials. They failed then, and they’ll fail again today.

“In fact,” Bates continues, stretching out the word, “if you weren’t here, this whole attack wouldn’t have worked, and we never would have found this place, so I suppose we have you to thank for that.”

Despite the fact that I know I’m not to blame, I can’t help but feel a twinge of guilt. I don’t know how they found us, but somehow, it’s linked to me. Star butts her head against my leg as she senses my turmoil, and I automatically thread my fingers through her fur, feeling grounded once more.

I’m working on my response when movement at the back of the room catches my attention. The queen is leaning forward, her shaking hands gripping onto the arms of her throne. “You,” she whispers with anger, and despite the low volume, the word seems to carry around the ballroom for everyone to hear. “This is because of you. I knew you’d bring destruction upon us.” Voice cracking, the queen looks up and glances around the room at her people with watery eyes. “You see, Laelia is the one from the prophecy, but because she failed the challenge, instead of bringing us together, she’s torn us apart!” Shouting now, the queen gestures towards me with a damning point of her finger.

That turned quickly, I think to myself in shock. Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised that she’s turned the blame on me. In

fact, it's a very clever way of solving her dilemma with me refusing to kill Maliki. This way, all of the fault is on me, and the queen comes off looking innocent. Now really isn't the time to be pointing fingers while we're in the middle of an attack, yet she seems determined.

My mates gather around me, staying close as they sense the deteriorating situation. I take comfort from their presence, and even more so when Luna steps up with them, standing by us in support. This could cost her everything, yet knowing she's got our backs gives me the strength to face the queen.

Fully aware of everyone watching this feud, I take a deep breath and try to calm my rising anger. "I had nothing to do with this."

Completely ignoring my comment, she pushes up from her throne with shaky limbs to address her people. "She is the reason for the deaths of our kin!"

Unfortunately, that comment is one step too far, and my control around my power snaps. Blaming me for the deaths of the poor witches who were slaughtered is heartless and cruel, especially when the very creatures who did it are standing right in front of her, keeping her captive. Stars burst into life and float around on a phantom breeze before disappearing. The light is quickly replaced as my skin begins to glow as though I'm covered with thousands of tiny diamonds.

Gasps of shock echo around me, not only from the watching witches, but our werewolf captors as well.

"See? She still has her magic! How is it that only she was able to keep her power when all of us have been stripped of it?" the queen shrieks, jabbing her finger at me once more, her face twisted with rage. "She must be working with them. How else would they have found Haven? We've lived a peaceful life and gone undiscovered for centuries, then all of a sudden, she shows up, and her werewolf kin manage to break through our shields."

"I would never betray you! The prophecy said I'd bring us all together!" I remind them all with rising panic. The queen was always going to retaliate, and she used the attack on

Haven as the perfect opportunity. The fact that she's putting the blame on me hurts. It shouldn't, we knew something like this was coming, I just had no idea how painful it would feel.

"As interesting as this is," Bates drawls, cutting through our conversation with a bored expression. "We have business to attend to."

The queen seems to remember why we're all here and falls back into her throne like a puppet with her strings cut. She looks so small and delicate with a hand pressed against her chest and eyes glazed over with agony.

"Laelia," Bates barks, pulling all attention back to him, including my own. "We're willing to bargain with you and give you the chance to be the chosen one, one last time. Give yourself over, and we'll take it easy on the witches. No torturing or playing with their bodies, we'll simply slaughter them and move on."

I want to laugh at his offer. It's hardly a good compromise. They are only going to try to kill me whether I sacrifice myself or not. There's going to be a bloody fight, as I know they won't just allow themselves to be killed. Plus, if I hand myself over, then they really are all lost, because my mates and I are the only ones with our magic unblocked. We'll be able to protect them as best as we can. Bates and his wolves don't yet know that Nicolai and Atlas can still use their magic, and that's something I want to keep hidden until we need to reveal it. I can't help anyone if I'm dead, so I'm going to have to do my best to stay alive.

Indignation and outrage start to flood in as I examine his words further. He's talking about these witches as though they are already corpses. *No torturing or playing with their bodies.* These people are still alive and hearing everything he has to say, yet he acts like they are not worth addressing.

Syn steps directly in front of me, blocking Bates' view of me, but I also get the impression he's silently telling me not to even think about handing myself over. "You won't touch her, you sick fuck."

Luna clears her throat delicately. “I hate to agree with a werewolf, but in this case, I agree.”

I glance at my friend, and she meets my gaze. We share a small smile of solidarity. She could have chosen to slip into the crowd and not be associated with me, but she didn't. Standing by my side puts a target on her back, yet she doesn't seem to care, and that warms my heart.

“There is no way we are letting you take our mate. Us witches have pride, and we will go down fighting. We don't sacrifice our own,” Atlas calls out sharply, reminding me that he held a high position within Haven, working underneath my brother. Noises of agreement fill the hall, followed by a shuffling sound as hundreds of people shift their stances. Before, they made themselves small to avoid attention, but they've been reminded of their strength and honour and are standing taller as a result.

The atmosphere has become charged, and it will only take one small spark to light the whole thing up. Having one of their own support me and stand against our attackers has riled them up.

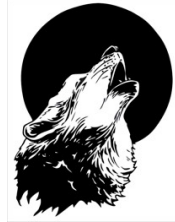
Bates seems to realise this and raises an eyebrow. “You're happy to sacrifice the witches for your own life? What happened to bringing us all together? Your attitude has changed all of a sudden now that your life is on the line.” The accusation is aimed to make my supporters doubt me, but if anything, it just makes them want to fight all the more.

Snorting, I shake my head. “You just told me that either way, they are going to be killed. I have magic that can help them. We will not bow to tyrants like you.” I don't bother saying anything further, my point made as several witches hoot in agreement.

Bates just laughs, and I wait for his retort, but he's obviously done talking. His face twists, and he raises his hand in the air, clicking his fingers once. “Go play.”

The werewolves turn on the witches, and pandemonium ensues.

Chapter Twenty-One



The sound of bodies clashing together, and the cacophony of screams, growls, and shouts, is so loud, it's almost deafening. Most of the males who were in human form have now shifted into their wolves and are joining the fray, their teeth and claws flashing in the dim light of the ballroom. The witches are fighting back, using whatever non-magical fighting skills they possess. The guards seem to be having better luck, but without weapons or magic, the wolves still have the upper hand.

A blur of brown flashes in front of my eyes as a wolf pounces on Joel, wrapping its large jaws around my alpha's bicep. Grunting in pain and annoyance, Joel punches the wolf in the face, and the others jump to help.

The next fifteen minutes or so are a blur of fighting as I try to work my way through the ballroom, even though it feels like time is stretching on forever. I need to get to Kano and Ivar, not to mention Bates. He seems to have disappeared in the chaos, but I occasionally get a glimpse of him, still in human form, in the melee of fighting.

My magic comes to me easily, my anger fuelling it as I direct star-formed daggers towards our attackers. Star stays with us, protecting our backs. So far, we seem to have come off with only a few injuries, but I have no idea how the rest of the witches are doing. From the glances I've managed to sneak, Ivar and Kano are battling furiously before the dais, the

queen standing by her throne, watching the battle with a frown.

Of course she's not fighting. I hope everyone sees her standing there, her people dying as she watches on and does nothing. I needn't have worried about attempting to expose her true nature, because she's done it all by herself.

With a quick, frantic look around the room, I see several bodies lying on the ground, their throats torn out. It's a quick, bloody death, and each person who dies hits me hard in my chest. None of this is necessary, and the witches are taking heavy damage. I need to find out how Bates has managed to block their magic. If I can restore that, then the witches have a fighting chance and can defend themselves.

In the corner, I see a werewolf who seems to be muttering something to himself. His expression is tense with concentration, and as I watch, a bead of sweat rolls down his forehead. Reaching out with my senses, I feel a strange sensation around him that almost feels like... magic.

How is a werewolf using magic? I thought I was the only one, and considering the lengths that the council have gone through to kill me, I find it strange that they allowed this one to survive. Unless he's working for them? If I'm right, and he's the one who's blocking the magic, then that could change everything. It's a very useful skill for a werewolf to have when witches are your natural enemy.

He's standing back from the others in the darkness, which isn't a werewolf trait. We like to run into danger and show off our fighting skills, so he's either a coward or he's hiding something. Either way, I'm going to find out. Glancing at my mates, I take in the current situation. Other than Scott, who's at my side in wolf form, keeping away anyone who breaks through the line of my mates, they are all busy. Not wanting to interrupt them and break their concentration, I mull it over and come up with a plan.

"Scott," I call softly, gratified as he instantly looks up at me. Tilting my head in the direction of the hidden wolf, I wait a few seconds for him to make the same connections I had. A

low growl rumbles in his chest, and the tug in my chest from his bond tells me he understands. Together, we work our way across the room.

It's pandemonium in here. People move around and get in the way, making our journey long and tedious. However, this helps conceal us. If this werewolf does have magic, then he could try to use it on me if he spots me coming, and although my confidence with my magic has grown, I'm certainly not ready for a duel. Ducking, weaving, and dodging both witches and wolves, I keep my mind focused on one thing.

Perhaps I'm wrong, and he's actually a witch who's on their side, but as I move closer and catch a whiff of him, the scent of werewolf greets me. He's definitely a werewolf. This opens a whole host of confusion and questions, but now is certainly not the time to be asking them. If we survive this whole mess, I can look for answers then.

Just as we reach him, he glances to his left before his eyes lock on me. My instincts tingle, and I glance over just as a huge form appears from behind one of the ballroom pillars, aiming straight for Scott's exposed neck.

"Scott!" I call out, my heart in my throat. My magic expands as I go to throw a shield around us. Suddenly, my magic slows, moving through my body like treacle. Thankfully, Scott's reactions are lightning fast, and he's twisting mid-air to meet the hidden werewolf's attack head-on.

The two of them lock in a ferocious battle of teeth and claws, snarling and biting at each other. My heart aches, and I want to help Scott, but with my magic not responding properly and the werewolf who just confirmed that he *does* have magic, I have to put my faith in him. I have my own battle to face.

When I meet my opponent's gaze, he smiles smugly. He thinks he's neutralised me like the rest of the witches. What he doesn't know is that my magic is still there, and it *is* working, just at a much slower pace. Keeping that bit of knowledge to myself, I continue to run towards him, my right hook to his face taking him by surprise. He wasn't expecting me to fight physically, that much is certain.

If he's anything like most of the magic users I know, his physical fighting skills will be underdeveloped, as they rely on their power to protect them. I'm relying on this fact to help me win this battle, thankful that Atlas and Joel forced me to train physically. If he shifts into his werewolf form, then I'll be in trouble, but I'm betting that his control over his power is far weaker when he shifts.

Stumbling back from my hit, he instantly touches his face, his anger making his eyes flash with his wolf. My power flickers strongly in my veins for a moment until he grits his teeth, and that sluggish feeling returns. If I can break his concentration, then I can call my magic back and subdue him. At least, that's the plan.

Of course, he's still a full-grown male werewolf with instincts faster than my own, so this is going to take all of my skill and concentration. Following up my punch with a double kick, first to his kidneys and then to his head, I throw a barrage of attacks his way, attempting to take advantage of the fact that he's been taken off guard. Unfortunately, he recovers quickly enough to block my attacks, but I notice the strain on his face as he attempts to keep whatever magical block he's creating from collapsing. Keeping up my attack, I narrowly manage to dodge most of his counter attacks. My cheek stings from when I took a hit, and my right shoulder is screaming at me from where he jerked my arm back, but otherwise, I'm managing to hold my own.

I'm exhausted, which means that he must be struggling even more. I'm not using any magic, and here he is, trying to defend himself and keep hundreds of witches' power blocked. He's bound to slip up sooner or later.

Thankfully, that moment comes quickly. Power flutters in my veins, and this time, I'm ready for it. Grabbing hold of as much of it as I can, I will a dagger of starlight in each hand. Before he even has a chance to realise what's happening, I leap forward and press the blade to his neck. I don't mean to kill him, too much blood has been spilled today, but he starts to move towards me at the same time, pressing the dagger into his neck. His eyes widen for a split second as he realises what

happened, and then he drops to the floor with a horrifying gurgle as blood gushes from the wound.

Feeling sick, I add his life to the list of those I've taken.

I don't have time to process what just transpired as the heavy weight of the magical block lifts. From the gasps and exclamations around the room, I'm guessing that the rest of the witches gained their powers back too. I was right, the dead male at my feet was blocking their magic. So why didn't it work on me like it did with the others?

In a state of shock, I look up and take in the scene around me. The tables have turned, and magic floods the hall as the witches fight back. What was already a chaotic scene before only increases now that magic is involved. Sparks, flames, and shadows fill the space. A twinge on the bond has my attention snapping back to my mates. Scott is still battling the werewolf who had been hiding by the magic user. I notice a large bite on his shoulder, but he's not letting it stop him. In fact, I can see his skin knitting together as he fights. Taking a deep breath, I check in with my other mates. They are all alive and okay, slowly trying to make their way over to me as they continue to fight their opponents. I've lost sight of Luna, but I'm sure she's with Kano.

I'm in the far corner of the ballroom, which is slightly shadowed thanks to the large pillars that hold up the roof, so it gives me a brief reprieve as I catch my breath. Magic tingles at my fingertips, and I know I have to re-join the fray. I get a handful of steps towards the centre of the room when a strange feeling settles over me. The hair on my arms stands on end, and a sense of warning twinges in the back of my mind.

It doesn't take me long to spot what's causing me to feel on edge. Bates is moving deliberately towards me, fury written across his face. I've ruined his plan, and although I shouldn't wind him up, the thought makes me smile.

"You bitch," Bates hisses, his every move exuding violence. He doesn't just want to kill me, he wants to hurt me first. That should fill me with fear or trepidation, but it's what I've come to expect from him. My own rage towards this male

which has nothing to do with his vendetta against me, so him hurtling insults at me only fuels my ire.

“You can’t just fucking die like you’re supposed to, can you? No, you’re like a cockroach that keeps coming back.” Snarling, he stops a few meters away from me, tilting his head from one side to the other as if stretching out his neck in preparation for an attack.

The fact that he’s stopped confuses me though. I thought he’d take this opportunity to charge at me while my mates are occupied, yet he seems to be hesitating. That’s when I hear footsteps. Glancing to the side, I find that it’s not the witches running for safety now, but several of the werewolves. They’ve realised they don’t have a chance now that their enemies’ power is restored.

Barking a laugh, I shake my head as I return my gaze to him and take in his furious expression as he slowly backs away. “You don’t seem so confident now that the witches have their magic back. Vulnerability isn’t a nice feeling, is it?”

Matching him step for step, I follow him across the room. The warming presence of two of my mates gives me more confidence, and I don’t need to look to know that Scott and Atlas are at my sides, watching my back as I track my enemy. How times have changed. *Bates* is retreating from *me*. The feeling is a weird one, but it strokes my ego, making me feel strangely powerful. My magic reacts to that feeling, flaring around me in a shower of stars.

“I’m going to make you suffer,” *Bates* promises, but he doesn’t sound so confident now, especially with the males by my side. “By the time I’m through with you, you’ll be begging for death.”

“You think I’m going to let you leave?”

The words leave my mouth, but it doesn’t sound like me. In fact, I don’t recognise the person who’s speaking. *You’re in the middle of a battle*, my thoughts remind me. *You’re doing what needs to be done. He will only continue to hunt you if you let him go.* Acknowledging the truth of it, I continue to stalk

Bates. He's backed himself almost all the way up to the rear wall, the throne and dais on his right.

I briefly note that the queen is still by her throne, watching this exchange with narrowed interest. However, she's not a threat right now, so I push that piece of information to the back of my mind and continue to focus on Bates. Plans start to formulate on how we're going to capture him, but before I can do anything further, a cruel grin stretches his lips, chilling me to my core.

"You don't have a choice," he coos with a confidence that a male in his position shouldn't have. Level with the back of the dais, he leans behind it to an area I can't see thanks to the throne. Thinking that he's about to try and escape around the back, I prepare to chase after him.

That's not what happens though. Standing upright, he drags an unconscious form with him. As soon as I spot the shiny black hair, I know instantly who it is.

Luna.

No. No, no, no, no. Panic starts to build, my heart racing and my fingertips tingling with magic. I don't dare use it, though, in case I hit Luna. The world seems to tilt, crumbling beneath me at the shock of seeing my friend in the arms of a twisted male like Bates. My guilt threatens to take over. If only I had kept a better look out for her when we were fighting, I might have noticed when she was attacked. I just thought she was with Kano. The two of them always gravitate towards each other, so it seemed like a fair assumption.

Atlas stiffens beside me, his own fears for his cousin's safety echoing through our bond. He takes a half step forward but stops as Bates tightens his hold on Luna's limp form. "Let her go," Atlas demands, his jaw clenched tightly.

Bates completely ignores him, not even bothering to look at or acknowledge my witch mate. Holding her closer, he looks down at her with a mocking expression. "She's a pretty little thing. Shame she's a filthy witch." He's trying to wind us up, hoping we'll make a mistake. With him holding her like

that, his claws slowly sliding between his knuckles, the threat is clear. We can do nothing.

“She’s my insurance policy,” he continues, looking at me with a smug smile. “If you come after me or try to stop me from leaving, then I’ll kill her.”

He thinks he’s won. What he doesn’t know is that there’s no way I’m going to let him take Luna with him. I’m obviously not the only one who thinks this, as a form appears from the shadows of the dais.

No, not one person, but two.

Syn is in his human form now, his hand on Kano’s shoulder as they seem to magically materialise behind Bates. Anyone else looking on might think it was Kano using his magic, but I know better. Syn somehow used his shadows to help hide their approach from Bates. No one else other than myself, Syn, and Ivar have been able to actually see the shadows he seems to be able to control. It appears that he’s finally ready to accept this strange ability he’s been gifted.

As soon as Syn releases Kano’s shoulder, the illusion is shattered, and Bates realises he’s no longer alone. Spinning with a snarl, he presses his claws into Luna’s skin, narrowly missing her vulnerable neck, and instead, slicing across her collarbone.

My chest is tight as I watch with bated breath. How do I help without hurting Luna or getting in the way? Desperate for some way to assist, I watch as Bates slowly side steps towards the main hall entrance. An idea comes to mind, and with a flick of my wrist, a dome of stars settles over us, creating a shield and preventing anyone from entering or leaving.

Kano’s magic comes in bursts of power, smacking into Bates from all angles, attempting to force him to drop Luna’s body to protect himself. Backing away, Bates collides with the edge of the shield with a satisfying sizzle, burning his back from the heat of the stars. Snarling in frustration, he snaps his teeth threateningly, his wolf just beneath his skin, begging to be released.

Scott lingers at my side, waiting for my instructions, and Syn stands at the edge of the shield, ready to step into the fight should Kano need help. This is the sort of situation where too many people will actually hinder the fight and it could end very badly, so we wait with anxious expectation. Atlas remains at my other side, moving his hands in complicated patterns, and I watch as ice begins to appear beneath Bates' feet. I don't feel a drain on my power now that the magic block is gone, and I realise that the reason Atlas and Nicolai could still use magic was because they were channelling mine.

Bates uses Luna as a human shield, making it difficult for Kano and Atlas to attack without hurting her. However, it also means that Bates is limited in defending himself and fighting back. It's clear he was just going to use her to protect himself and leave the hall without consequence, but with my shield surrounding us, he's stuck.

Wobbling with Luna's weight in his arms and the ice beneath his feet, Bates struggles to keep his footing, and it's only a matter of time before he slips. In that moment, he flings Luna's body away so he can save himself just as Kano leaps forward to catch her, clearly acting on instinct. Spotting the opportunity, Bates grabs onto Kano as he falls, jamming his fist and razor sharp claws into my brother's stomach.

Time seems to slow despite the fact that this all happens within the blink of an eye. Kano's eyes widen with shock and pain, his head rolling and back arching. Bates grins manically, and Luna falls to the ground, discarded like trash. Pain stabs in my chest, and my breath gets stuck in my throat as I watch my brother fall to the floor, blood pooling around him.

Time suddenly snaps back into place, and I realise this isn't some terrible nightmare. It's real, and I might be about to lose my brother. Shock and pain washes over me and stops the magic in my veins, causing the shield around us to collapse.

I'm moving before I even realise it, my knees hitting the floor hard as I kneel by my brother. Atlas is by my side a second later, pulling his cousin into his lap and trying to wake her. Fighting back the panic and tears that are threatening to fall, I put Kano's head in my lap and look down at his

stomach. It's a mess of ripped flesh and blood. A strangled noise works its way from me as I lean forward and press my hands to the wound. Kano grimaces and places his own hands over the top of mine.

From the corner of my eye, I see Bates making the most of the distraction and using his werewolf speed to run from the ballroom. Syn gives chase, but my focus is on my injured brother. Someone runs towards us that I don't recognise, and I'm snarling at them before I've even registered what's happening, my protective instincts running on high. "Come any closer, and I'll gut you."

Skidding to a stop, the female lifts her hands to show she's unarmed. "I'm here to help," she promises, a streak of blood staining the front of her simple dress. Considering I just threatened her, she seems remarkably calm. Her face is kind, and I get the impression she could be stern when she needs to be. She gives off the aura of a powerful witch, and for some reason, I want to trust her.

"It's okay, she's a healer," Atlas assures me, waving her forward.

The healer gives me one last look, assessing if I'm going to be a threat to her. She must decide that I'm not, as she quickly kneels by Kano's side. "Remove your hands for me please," she instructs quietly.

Doing as she says, I feel sick at the blood that starts to flow from the wound once more. Humming, she places her own hands over his stomach, and within seconds, I see a glow forming over the wound.

Running my hands through Kano's hair, I watch the healer, my stomach in knots. While this is happening, the bonds in my chest hum, informing me of my mates' whereabouts. I start to breathe a little easier as I feel each of them get closer and join our little group. When Syn returns, I feel his dejection, which tells me that Bates managed to escape. In other circumstances, I'd be frustrated by that, but I'm focused on making sure Kano is okay, and honestly, I'm just glad that all of my mates are

alive. Luna is still unconscious in Atlas's lap, and from the bruise forming on her temple, we know why.

"This is a serious wound, you're lucky to still be alive," the healer informs my brother, frowning in concentration as she continues to work. "I can stop the initial bleeding, but I don't have enough power to fix all this now."

"Our attackers are retreating!"

The queen's triumphant cry is met by cheers from the weary witches. Lifting my head and looking around the room, I see she's right. The hall has been destroyed, and bodies lie everywhere, both those of witches and werewolves. Many are injured, and I spot several healers all wearing the same style of dress as the female treating Kano working their way through the casualties.

All of the surviving werewolves seem to have vanished, although they can't be too far since I can still hear their running feet with my enhanced hearing. The remaining, uninjured witches are looking around with the dazed expression of people who just witnessed something awful. They hover in groups, not knowing what to do next, waiting for instruction. Several of the guards gather together and make their way to the queen, falling back into their protective role.

"They are retreating! Get them, don't allow them to escape!" the queen yells again, but this time, there's a manic look in her eyes that makes me anxious. Feeling my gaze on her, she turns and scowls at me, jabbing an accusing finger in my direction. "Arrest Laelia and her mates too! They were behind this and will die for their crimes," she screams, her voice going high as she loses her composure.

This seems to create a divide between the remaining witches, many of them looking to each other in confusion. I had a lot of support amongst the younger population, and it seems that might have spread, none of them wanting to intervene. The only ones who move are her guards, and even they are hesitant as they step forward, attempting to circle my mates and me.

I'm still kneeling on the floor with Kano's head in my lap. The last thing I need right now is the queen making things difficult. We've lost so many lives, and my brother is bleeding out before me. She should be focusing on catching those responsible, not forming a witch hunt against me.

The guards come closer, pushing all of us together and forming a tight circle around Kano and Luna. They are going to take us away, and I'll never know if he'll survive or not—not to mention she'll split me from my mates. Fear turns to rage, and magic flows through my body, making my skin tingle. I've used so much of it today, but as I reach for my reserve, I no longer feel tired. I feel... powerful, like I could do anything, and I'm not about to let the queen split us apart like this.

“Arrest her! Take them to separate cells and prepare them for execution.”

I hear the gasps of the onlookers and cries of outrage calling for a fair trial, but the queen ignores them. She's too far gone now. The attack on her people has broken the mask she usually wears and is revealing the unhinged woman beneath.

She's dangerous, she's going to hurt you and your mates, my thoughts coax. No, I won't allow her to do this to us. I must protect us. She needs to be stopped. My thoughts are dark, but the longer I linger on them, the more they begin to make sense. I'd be doing this for *us*. Power grows within me until I have no choice but to release it.

I stand, my body glowing with the light of a thousand stars, and it bursts out of me in a shockwave, shoving the guards back and pinning them to the ground with shimmering domes hovering over them. Gasps of surprise wash straight over my head, but after a quick glance around, I can confirm that no one other than the guards have been affected. I turn my head back to my target, and another wave of magic surges from me. I smile grimly as the queen is knocked back into her throne, looking horrified as I slowly walk towards her. I am electric. I am all powerful. Magic like nothing I've ever felt gives me life, sustaining and filling me to bursting, and as I

climb the steps of the dais, I stare down at the woman who's caused me so much grief since I was brought here.

Her eyes are wide, and fear ripples from her. She looks pathetic, and I don't know why I was ever afraid of her. There's a little voice in my mind shouting at me, but I ignore it. Those soft, inconsequential thoughts have never gotten me anywhere. This is what I should have been all along.

"You don't deserve this throne." My voice sounds different, older and full of power, almost vibrating with it. "You've shown your true self, and it's only a matter of time before your people rebel."

"You did this," she hisses, but she doesn't dare lean forward and lash out like I know she's dying to. In fact, she's struggling to meet my gaze, and I don't think it's the fact that I'm shining so brightly.

"No," I snarl, leaning forward and bracing an arm on either side of the throne, watching with a dark sense of amusement as she leans back and tries to put some space between us, the blood draining from her face. The scent of her fear fills the air, and it makes me want to smile. "This is your doing, and they will see that."

Pulling back, I make a rolling gesture with my hands, and two bands of starlight appear over her arms, binding her to the throne. Straining against her bonds, she twists and snarls, trying to break free. I lift a glowing hand. Clearly, she needs more of a warning than what she's received so far.

A tug in my chest pulls me back to my mates where I'm needed, so with one last meaningful look at the queen, I turn to them. As soon as I see their faces, I feel the strange power drain away. What in the underworld just happened? I felt like I was the most powerful being on the planet, and that I could do anything just because I wanted to. The urge to punish the queen for what she's done was so strong that if my mates hadn't been here, I probably would have done it. Horrified, I stumble back to them, falling into Joel's outstretched arms. My body shakes with the realisation of what I could have done.

That power was dark and addictive. Even now, I want another taste of it.

“Laelia.” Kano’s weak voice pulls me from my internal crisis. Taking a deep breath, I turn around and find him looking up at me with a tired smile. The healer is still working on him, her eyes shut and hands glowing as her full focus stays on my brother.

Kneeling beside him, I take his hand and thread our fingers together. I’m aware that the guards will soon break out of their magical restraints, and we could still be at risk, but I can’t rush this. Besides, I know that my mates will protect us if anyone tries to attack.

“You need to go,” he croaks out, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips. “They’ll kill you if you stay.”

He’s right, we can’t stay here. However, if we leave, we can’t take him. There’s no way he’s fit to travel, plus we’ve still not found a way to break the hold the queen has over him. Tears finally escape my eyes and roll down my cheeks. “I’m not leaving you.”

Even as I say it, I know that I’ll have to if I want to survive, but I won’t admit it aloud, the words hurt too much to say. The knowing look in his eyes tells me that he sees right through me. Squeezing my hand, he gives me a serious look. “You have to, I’ll just slow you down.”

“What about you? Do you really think you’re safe here?” I counter, my voice choked as I attempt to hold back my sobs. I’m acutely aware of my mates gathered around me, their agony that they can’t take my pain away flooding down our bonds.

“That doesn’t matter.” Shaking his head, he gives me a pointed look. “Whether I live or die is inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. What matters is that you get out of here and stop this stupid war.”

My eyes squeeze shut at his agonising words, my chest aching with the knowledge that I’m about to leave him in a dangerous situation with a life-threatening injury. With a

gasping breath, I open my eyes and squeeze his hand. “You dying is not inconsequential to me, brother.” My words are harsh, but I need him to understand that I need him to survive this.

He doesn’t seem to react how I expect though, his eyes widening slightly and the ghost of a smile appearing on his lips. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you call me that.”

Barking out a teary laugh, I shake my head. “Then you need to get up and come with us, and I’ll call you that every day.” My voice breaks once again. It may have sounded like I was trying to joke with him, but really, that’s exactly what I want.

His face twists in pain, but this time, it’s not because of his wound. Reaching up, he brushes my tears away. “I wish I could. Goddess, you’re going to be spectacular,” he whispers, and my lower lip wobbles as I try to hold back a sob. He sounds like he’s saying goodbye, as though he doesn’t expect to live. “You know you have to do this. Take Luna with you.”

“Kill them!” the queen screeches, still bound.

My mates flinch around me, getting angsty, their eyes on the guards who are struggling against the magical shields. Without channelling that dark power, though, I can feel them weakening, and it won’t be long until they are free.

“Laelia,” Nicolai calls gently but firmly, “we need to go.”

Tears roll down my face as I nod and slowly lay Kano down, trying not to jostle him as I climb to my feet. “This isn’t the last time we’ll see each other,” I say, although it sounds more like an order.

He just smiles painfully and waves me away. “Of course. Now go, take care of Luna for me.”

Atlas stands, carefully draping Luna over his shoulder as the others circle around us.

With one last look at my brother, I attempt to smile at him. Joel’s hand slips into mine, gently pulling me, and I know it’s time. With all eyes on us, we jog through the ballroom and into the hallway, the queen’s screeching orders following us.

None of the remaining witches try to stop us, watching solemnly as we pass.

Atlas takes the lead, his usually bright silver eyes dull as he holds his cousin tighter. “Come, I know the way out.”

Hearing those words makes the reality of what’s happening sink in. We’re finally leaving Haven.

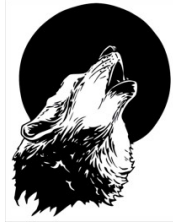
“Where do we go from here?” Scott asks, back in human form and running at my side, not the slightest bit out of breath despite the energy he’s exerting.

They all glance at me, and for once, I know exactly what we need to do.

I acknowledge the bittersweet mix of emotions swelling inside me. “We go back to where it all started.”

I’m going home.

Chapter Twenty-Two



As I stand at the edge of the pack boundary, I'm a mess of emotions. It's been a couple of months since I was last here, although it feels like years. Glancing around, I find it difficult to accept that everything is different while the pack forest feels, looks, and smells exactly as it did before I left.

However, the place I once called home no longer feels like that. Sure, everything is familiar and brings a nostalgic smile to my face, but the Laelia who once lived here no longer exists. In her place is a hybrid werewolf witch with the blood of a goddess who might have singlehandedly destroyed the sanctity of Haven. I have five mates I can't imagine living without, and I've grown and developed my unique magic. I've also taken a life and been through terrifying trials where I've had to make awful decisions. All of those things change a person, for better or worse, and there's no changing any of that.

Will my father still look at me the same when he finds out what I've done?

Don't think about that now, Laelia, I tell myself, taking a deep breath and pushing those thoughts aside. If I think like that, I might lose my nerve and never come back. My mates would support me either way, and while they might argue with my choice, they respect that this is ultimately my decision. Having Nicolai here with me is a huge strength. He knows the pack and holds a position of authority. I do worry how he's

coping with being back here now that he's no longer a werewolf though. Checking in with our bond, I find that although he's sad, there's an overwhelming sense of determination and love aimed towards me.

We need to know what's been happening amongst the werewolves while we were locked away with the witches, which is what led me back here. It took us several days to get here, taking shelter in caves and under bridges as we needed to for rest. Haven wasn't as far away as I feared it would be, but the specifics are fuzzy thanks to the strong magic over it, now reinstated after the attack. How Bates managed to find it and get in and out is a mystery to me, but I suspect he was working with someone on the inside. The way out Atlas knew about was actually him finding a specific guard and threatening him to guide us until we were led to the outside.

Closing my eyes, I tilt my head back and let my other senses take over. It doesn't take long for me to hear movement deeper in the forest, so I know at least some of the pack members are back from the werewolf stronghold. One of the possibilities that could have awaited us here was that the pack was still being held captive by the council. During the werewolf trials, they had been kept under "protection" as a safety measure. Really, it was a way to use them as leverage against me if I decided to act out.

The pack boundary has the subtle scent of my pack around it, informing any passing werewolves that they are about to enter claimed territory. This also confirms that the werewolves awaiting us are my pack and not others trying to claim the territory for themselves.

Slowly, I open my eyes and search for visual clues on the border. They are not easy to see, but if you know what you're looking for, it's not hard. *There*. With my gaze locked on a very faint track trod into the ground, I note the plants that lean slightly to allow a wolf through. As the second-in-command and one of the pack protectors, my father would have walked this boundary many times. Inhaling deeply, I think I can scent him, but with a gentle breeze, it's blown away, taking my hopes of finding him here with it.

The last time I saw my father, he was being used as bait for one of my trials and was tied up, covered in cuts and bruises, with a giant snake creature coiled around him. Before I could rescue him, I was stolen away by the witches, so I never knew if he survived or not.

He must have, I tell myself, denial strong in the back of my mind. *I would have known if he hadn't. I would have felt it.* I really hope I'm right, as I don't know how I'd cope without him. There's no way that someone as close to me as my father could die without me knowing. The world would become a darker place, and it would shake me to my core. I would just *know*. He may have adopted me, but I don't think that matters, not with a bond as close as ours.

My mates shift a little closer, sensing my distress at the thought of losing my father, but no one says anything, waiting for me to be ready. Luna stands amongst us, thankfully awake after the blow to her head. A deep sense of sadness has settled over her, very unlike the usual lively female I know and love. I want to comfort her, but I don't have the words. It's difficult to tell someone that everything is alright when you don't believe it yourself.

Great goddess, give me strength, I pray as I take a step forward, crossing the boundary. Fanning out behind me in the formation my mates seem to have adopted, they follow closely, Luna half a step back to my right.

We're spotted quickly, and two wolves race towards us. If we were a threat or unwelcome, they would snarl at us and force us from the land or, in the worst-case scenario, attack us. Thankfully, this doesn't happen, and we continue to walk as they flank us, guiding us towards the centre of the pack.

This is a formal greeting, and I assume we're being escorted to the alpha. I would expect nothing less, considering there are not one, but *two* alphas from other packs on their land. A fear of mine had been how they would react to having Atlas and Luna on their grounds. They accepted me for who I was, magic and all, but I grew up with them, so they knew me. Not to mention the two witches with me were the ones who broke into the trials and abducted me.

Atlas is on edge, his movements stiff as he stays close, eyeing the werewolves carefully. Being surrounded by so many werewolves must be difficult for him with his upbringing, yet seeing how far he's come makes me proud, my heart full of love for him.

The trees begin to thin as we approach the main grounds where the werewolves live, our escorts leading us straight to the beating heart of the pack. We don't need to be guided, I could make this journey with my eyes closed, expertly weaving through the trees without so much as brushing one with my fingertips. I spent my whole life here until the day I turned twenty-one and everything changed.

Figures start to appear between the trees, and I hear people calling out and the sound of footsteps. Three more wolves join us, none of these protectors like our escorts, just pack members who are keen to see my entourage. The trees open up to show a large clearing and several wooden cabins, but there's one in particular I head for.

Several wolves I vaguely recognise jog over, calling out Joel's name, sounding joyous at seeing him and clapping him on the back. It only takes me a moment to realise they are from his pack. I know that Joel arranged for my pack to be integrated with his for protection. At some point, they must have returned here, and several of Joel's wolves came with them. While his face has lit up at seeing some of his old pack, I notice how he keeps them away from me, blocking me from their eager eyes with his body.

Reaching the steps to the largest of all the cabins, I begin to start climbing when the door swings open and a large figure steps out. For a heartbeat, I think it's my father, but as the light lands on the male, I see that it's the alpha. This was who I came to see. Although I'm desperate to see if my father is here, pack protocol demands that I speak with the alpha first, especially given the status of several of my mates.

"Laelia, you're back," he comments, walking down the steps to clap a hand on my shoulder. Something about the way he says it rattles me, as does his gesture, the touch a little too rough to be loving. The alpha and I have always had a good

relationship, especially because of how close he is with my father, so I'm a little surprised by his frosty reaction. It could be the fact that my mates are all staring at where he's still touching my shoulder.

His pack was dragged into a whole heap of trouble because of you, and then you spent months in the enemies' hands. It's no surprise that he's cautious, I chide myself. I'm not the werewolf I was, so it's no surprise that he's putting the safety of his pack first.

"Alpha." Dipping my head in greeting, I automatically look over his right shoulder, the place where my father would usually stand, protecting his alpha's back. No one appears, and I can no longer hold back the question. "Is my father here?"

I should ask how everyone's doing, how they all managed to get back, or what happened after I was taken, but my father is my most pressing concern.

It seems I was right to worry judging by the alpha's darkening face. He is agitated, and it looks like I'm about to get shouted at or blamed, but instead he looks over at the cabin that my father and I used to live in.

"He was here," the alpha begins, putting emphasis on the past tense. "We finally got back a few weeks ago and were attempting to rebuild our lives, until the council arrived a few days ago and took your father back to the city."

My initial relief that he's alive is quickly overshadowed by the fact that he's back with the werewolf council. They've shown how much they value his life, using him against me at every turn. Why would they have called him back?

The alpha shakes his head and meets my gaze once more. "They phrased it like a request, but we all knew he had no choice. I wanted to go with him, but I couldn't leave the pack, not after everything that's happened to us."

He sounds genuinely apologetic, but again, there is a note in his voice that sounds off, like he's expecting me to fight him for not protecting my father. I've seen the power of the council

and what they can do. I wouldn't want the pack to be put at risk again, and neither would my father.

"I understand, honestly." My smile is in earnest, and I see some of the stress leave his expression. Reaching up to where his hand still rests on my shoulder, I give it a squeeze. "I need to go after him."

Sighing, the alpha removes his arm and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper. Frowning down at it for a moment, he seems to be contemplating on whether or not to give it to me. "He thought you might say that and left a note for you."

I take the note and stare at it for a moment, not sure if I want to know what's inside.

"Open it," Scott encourages behind me, resting his hand on the small of my back.

Taking a deep breath, I unfold the paper and start reading.

To my little wolf,

Laelia, I hope you don't ever have to read this letter and you've not returned to the pack. In my dreams, you are off living a new, exciting life with your mates, safe from the council's reach, but I know your caring heart will likely lead you back to us.

I've been summoned back to the council, and I fear it has something to do with you. If they do have you, then I will find a way to rescue you. I couldn't help you before, and I've never felt so hopeless. That won't happen again, I promise.

I will see you again.

I love you to the moon and back.

Dad x

My eyes water as I read his letter, going over the words again. He was right, as always, I did return to the pack. He was

the one person who always knew me well, sometimes even better than I knew myself.

“Alpha,” Joel starts, stepping forward and taking some of the attention off me as I struggle to keep my tears at bay. “Is there somewhere we can rest and get our strength back before we leave again?”

Realising that he’s completely ignoring protocol by not greeting the two most senior guests first, the alpha shakes his head as though not believing his slipup, especially when one of those alphas was responsible for keeping his pack safe for months.

“Alpha Green, excuse my rudeness. It’s good to see you again. Of course, we’ve got an empty cabin you can use. Make that two,” he corrects himself, seeing Luna at my side. His eyes flick over me and straight to Syn on my other side, who is watching with a smirk.

“Alpha Syn,” he greets reluctantly. Syn doesn’t have the greatest reputation amongst the packs, thanks to his history of working for the council. He was also known as being volatile and carried around the weight of his disgrace after he made a mistake that resulted in members from his pack being killed.

The alpha finally moves past Syn and comes to a sudden stop. “Nicolai,” he gasps, looking as though he’s seen a ghost. He appears surprised, clearly not recognising his old third-in-command without his werewolf scent. Not that I blame him, we were all told that Nicolai was dead, and from the state he was in last time anyone saw him, he looked only moments from death.

A concerned frown pulls at his brows, and he blows out a long, slow breath, gesturing to the cabin behind him. “I think we’re in desperate need of a catch up before you rest, if you’re up to it. Clearly, there’s a lot that’s been happening that I don’t know about.”

“Not before I get my hug, you don’t!” a female voice shouts out, causing Luna and Atlas to jump, not hearing the older woman walk up behind them. “Oh, move out of the way. Laelia, your mates are very pretty, but can you please tell them

to let me through?” The small figure attempts to push through the wall of muscle my mates have formed between us.

“Selena!” A watery smile pulls at my lips as my eyes well. “Let her through, she’s family.”

As soon as my mates step aside, giving the odd female a couple of strange looks, she practically throws herself at me. I don’t blame them for being cautious, as Selena doesn’t give off stable vibes. She’s the closest thing to old that I’ve ever seen on a werewolf. Although she won’t tell me exactly how old she is, I suspect she’s close to a hundred and fifty. Thanks to her werewolf genetics, she looks middle-aged. She enjoys playing up to the idea of being old though, dressing in clothes you see human grandmas wear on TV.

“Oh, my girl,” she coos, crushing me in her arms and rocking slightly, her voice cracking with an unusual show of emotion. “You’ve got one hell of a story to tell me.” While many would think the comment is perfectly innocent, I know better. It sounds more like a threat when it comes from Selena.

“Always the gossip,” Nicolai teases, crossing his arms over his chest and grinning as she jerks back from me in shock.

“Nicolai?” she exclaims, joy lighting her eyes before she sniffs the air delicately and wrinkles her nose. “What happened to you, boy? You smell like you stuck your finger in the electrical socket.”

“I died and the goddess brought me back as a witch.”

She frowns suspiciously, giving him the once-over. “Is it catching?”

Nicolai just laughs and shakes his head. “I think you’re fine, Selena.”

I’m unable to hold back my snort of amusement as I watch the two of them banter, which seems to remind her why she hurried here. “Oh, how I missed you both.” Her expression slowly shifts, the smile dropping from her face. “You heard the news about your father?”

My stomach ties itself in knots, and I nod my head, trying not to let the true extent of my concern show in my body language. “Yes, we were about to update the alpha on what’s happened. Why don’t you come in so I don’t have to repeat everything later?” I tease lightly with a smile I don’t feel. Really, I want her there with me because she’s the closest thing to family that I have here, but I don’t want to ask aloud. Plus, she will only ask me the same questions later. Thankfully, she doesn’t make me ask, striding straight into the alpha’s cabin without waiting for an invitation.

We spend the next couple of hours telling our story and being updated on what happened with the packs.

Selena and the alpha explain that my father was freed from the trial but locked away because they thought my escape was organised by him. It was soon realised that I was taken against my will, since I never would have left my mates behind. Joel’s pack and mine melded together for a while to keep safe, especially after Joel and Scott were taken, but after a time, they wanted to return to their own pack grounds. Several of Joel’s wolves came with them to help them settle, and from the sound of it, they might stay and make a life for themselves here.

It’s then our turn to explain how I was taken and who those witches were. Selena and the alpha are both shocked at the news of a half-brother and my being mated to a witch, but they quickly move past that when I explain about my mate sickness and learning to use my magic. Their expressions turn thunderous as I speak of the witch queen and how I was forced to complete challenges. Finally, I tell them about the attack on Haven, Bates, and how we escaped.

A few ideas are thrown around, but none of us have anything concrete to go on, so the alpha dismisses us and lets Selena guide us to the cabin we’re going to spend the night in. We dropped Luna off at the small cabin beside ours, making sure she was happy and comfortable before walking over to ours.

On the very short walk between cabins, Selena links her arm with mine, pulling on it gently to slow our pace. My

mates get the idea and spread out a little, giving us the illusion of privacy. Of course, most of them have werewolf hearing, so they'll be able to hear us anyway, but we can pretend otherwise.

“So, you're a goddess,” Selena says lightly, as though this was something she always suspected.

Rolling my eyes, I give her a pointed look. “Hardly. I have the blood of a goddess, it's different.”

We've reached the bottom of the short staircase that leads to the cabin entrance. All of my mates other than Syn are already waiting inside. Pausing, she pulls me to a stop and stares at me. “Mm-hmm, whatever you say, your holiness.” Clearly not believing me, she leans forward and wraps me in another bone crushing hug. She releases me when Syn snorts with amusement, glaring at him for interrupting. She raises her brows as she takes in his bad boy exterior, winking at him cheekily. “Get some rest, we'll speak again in the morning before you leave.”

Giving her a kiss on the cheek, I unwind my arm from hers and walk over to Syn, taking his hand and leading him into our home for the night.

I feel bad about leaving Luna in a cabin on her own, especially while she's still so quiet, but I trust the wolves not to harm her. My mates and I really need some time alone together to decompress after the battle at Haven. One of us has always had to stay awake to guard the others while we were sleeping outside of the protection of the witches and wolves. This made it difficult for us to bond, not to mention awkward while Luna was with us. I'm sure Luna would understand that we need some alone time together, but having her in the next room... Let's just say she might not get any sleep with us only separated by a single wall.

However, I am also really grateful that we're not sleeping in the same cabin my father and I lived in together. With him gone, it would feel wrong for me to be safe and snuggled up with my mates in a space I once shared with him. Glancing around the L-shaped reception room and small kitchen, I note

that the cabin is about the same size as my old one. A decent-sized bathroom is in the small corridor off to the right, which makes the main difference between the two cabins one very large bedroom rather than the two separate ones I grew up in. A large bed takes up most of the space, and while it's going to be a squeeze, we should all fit on there.

As soon as I walk over the threshold and into the bedroom, I start removing my clothing. I'm so exhausted after our journey here, and I just want to feel my mates against me. Not even necessarily in a sexual way, I just need to be intimate with them to reconnect and reset after such stressful times. However, I have very little self-control when my mates are naked around me.

I feel gross and really need a shower, but the bed is calling to me. Pulling back the sheets, I practically fall face first onto the mattress. With a ridiculous noise that sounds more like it belongs in a porn movie than from the simple motion of getting into bed, I stretch my limbs and sink into the soft mattress.

A snort of amusement has me lifting my head and taking in my mates in the doorway. They all seem so big—not just physically, but their personalities too—that it's strange to see them here in my old homeland.

Joel is watching me with hungry eyes as he leans against the doorframe, a smile on his lips. I want him badly, but with a twinge of guilt, I realise that he probably wants to spend time with his pack members who gave up their place in their pack to protect mine.

Propping myself up, I meet his eyes. “You can go see your pack mates, I'm sure you want to catch up with them.”

Joel pushes away from the doorframe and slowly walks towards me with the grace of a leopard, his gaze predatory as he takes in my naked form. “I do, but they can wait. My mate is more important.” Reaching my side, he leans down and kisses me, cupping my cheek tenderly. “Besides, you are my pack now.”

My heart flutters in my chest, his love for me so obvious it's impossible not to swoon at his words. He's right though, we are a pack in our own right—a mishmash of both witches and werewolves coming together and forming a family. That's all a pack is really, a family whose loyalties are thicker than blood.

“He's right. If one of the... pack needs us, then we're here.”

Atlas's voice takes me by surprise. Not the fact that he's speaking, but what he's saying. This is a *huge* realisation for Atlas, even if he stumbled on the word pack. His attitude has changed from only being here to support me to pledging his support of the whole group.

I can see that the others are surprised too, but it's a happy type of shock, and one that makes them re-evaluate their own stance on our little pack.

“Atlas,” I begin, and honestly, I'm not sure what I'm going to say next. My bonds warm in my chest with my feelings of gratitude and hope. Thankfully, I don't need to worry about that as he cuts me off.

“Seeing how everyone has rallied together in support of each other, and how you've all automatically accepted Nicolai back into the group even though he's no longer a wolf... Well, it made me realise that what I thought was family was actually just a way to control me. Being with everyone here has been an eye-opening experience for me.”

He looks embarrassed by his little emotional speech, and I know I'm not the only one moved by his words. When my eyes sting with tears this time, it's not from sadness or fear.

“Come here.” I hold out my hand, offering it to him to draw him closer.

Joel steps away, making space for the other male, and I send a wave of gratitude down our bond. Despite being an alpha, he's willing to let someone else take the place that should rightfully be his. It's just one of the many reasons I

love him. He can see the needs of others and put them above his own.

Atlas slowly undresses as he moves forward, each piece of clothing dropping to the floor and revealing his smooth, tattooed skin. All thoughts of just lying quietly together, skin to skin, quickly fly from my mind as arousal tingles through my bloodstream. He's mouth-wateringly gorgeous, and I want to taste every inch of him. As he kicks his boxers to the floor, his cock stands to attention, already hard from seeing me naked. His eyes roam over my body, taking in every inch, and I know he's not the only one from the rustle of clothing and the hot weight of their gazes.

Taking my hand, he climbs onto the bed and gently pushes me back, moving me until I'm resting against the headboard. Crawling up my body, he straddles me and presses a slow, hot kiss against my lips. I can't help the groan that escapes me as I eagerly kiss him back, my body alight with sensations. I'm fully aware of being watched as we kiss, which might be off putting for some, but it's the opposite for me. I can feel how much they love to watch, getting off on my pleasure. Those emotions simply cycle around the bond, growing and building with each second. It's intimate, and despite the fact they've not touched me, I'm so aroused.

As Atlas continues to kiss me, I feel his hand move down my body, his fingers leaving a trail of desire behind until he reaches my core. As soon as he brushes my clit, my back arches and my legs open automatically, causing the guys to chuckle and mutter their appreciation.

I obviously give him the reaction he was hoping for, as Atlas breaks away from the kiss with a grin, shimmying down my body until he's kneeling between my legs. His mouth leaves a trail of kisses as he works his way down to my core, pressing a kiss to my needy clit. I gasp, my hands balling into fists in the sheets. Chuckling, he licks around my clit, through my folds, and presses his tongue into my entrance.

"You taste so fucking good," he says, his mouth still against my most intimate parts as he speaks, the vibration almost enough to bring me to climax on its own.

Syn decides that he's had enough of simply watching and joins us on the bed, lying beside me. His naked body presses against my side, and he props himself up on one elbow, moving in to take my nipple into his mouth. Sucking the sensitive flesh, he flicks it with his tongue, each movement sending sparks of desire straight down to my core.

Joel moves to stand by the headboard, his hand sliding into my hair as he glances down with a glint of adoration in his eyes. "That's it, mate," he grumbles in a low voice, the deep timbre moving through me with each word. "You're so beautiful lying there. All of this is for you. We would burn the world to the ground if we knew it would make you happy."

His words, coupled with Syn's and Atlas's ministrations, prove to be too much for me, and my orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave. Pleasure fills every inch of my body, wringing moans from me as I ride it out. Syn keeps up his attention on my breast, going as far as to nip my nipple, extending my orgasm to its full potential.

Panting, sweaty, and feeling more alive than I have in days, I open my eyes, finding Atlas looking very satisfied between my legs. He starts to move, as though to make way for someone else. His cock is swollen and needy, ready for me, but he's prepared to put his pleasure at bay for the good of the pack. There was never a chance that I was going to let him leave my side without coming at least once, but now I just want to do it all the more.

"Fuck me, mate," I instruct, my voice raspy from my shouts of pleasure.

His eyes briefly flick around the room as if expecting someone to protest, but when they don't, his silver eyes return to mine, desire shining in them. The hungry look he gives me makes me bite down on my lower lip, the predator in him preparing to take what's his. He may not be a werewolf, but there's always been a darker side to Atlas that made him stand out. I assumed it had to do with the way he was brought up, but whatever it is allows him to settle within a pack of werewolves and maintain a position of strength.

Not needing to be told twice, Atlas grasps his cock firmly and lines it up with my entrance, pushing into my pussy as our eyes lock. My eyes roll into the back of my head at the stretch as he fills me completely.

“Eyes on Atlas, mate,” Joel instructs, using his grip on my hair to lift my head. It doesn’t hurt, he would never do anything that hurt me, just a light tug to encourage my movement, and I discover that it’s actually a huge turn-on.

Doing as instructed, I meet Atlas’s gaze, taking in his smile as he starts thrusting. Moaning, I attempt to move my hips to meet each of his thrusts, but with Syn practically pinning me down on one side and Joel up by my head, it makes it difficult for me to move.

Movement from the corner of my eye has me glancing to my right, and I see Nicolai moving forward. He kneels on the edge of the bed, his cock straining as a bead of precum glistens on the head. As he leans in to kiss me, I automatically grasp his cock in my hand and start stroking his length, needing to touch the velvety soft skin. Gasping into my mouth, he kisses me with renewed vigour. He cups my other breast, squeezing it in time with my strokes on his cock, avoiding my nipple despite me arching my back and pushing it into his hand.

With four of my mates touching me, all working together to bring me pleasure, it’s almost perfect—almost, because one of my mates is missing. Twisting my head as much as I’m able to, I see Scott watching, still wearing his unbuttoned jeans. His cock is in his hand as he slowly works the length. As my newest mate, I know he’s still trying to work out his place, and the fact that he’s standing back right now makes my heart ache. His longing to be involved is an uncomfortable twinge in the bond, yet he won’t step forward for fear of disturbing the hierarchy my mates have established.

No, that won’t do.

I’m just planning how I can encourage him to get involved when I feel Atlas’s movements begin to stutter. His grunts get louder, and the pounding of his hips gets harder until I feel his

cock swell, and he buries it deep, pulsing as he comes inside me.

I fucking love the feeling of my mates coming inside me, the primal need to mark me as their own as I carry their seed within me. It's a huge turn-on for me, and I have to bite down on my lip to stop myself from going over the edge with him. Pacing myself is something I'm going to have to learn with five mates. While I'm able to have multiple orgasms, there's a point where everything becomes overstimulated, and I want to enjoy myself fully with all five of them.

With one final thrust, Atlas hums his pleasure and slowly pulls out of my pussy. Warm and languid, he climbs up my body, ignoring the grunts of protest from Syn and Nicolai. He kisses me slowly, and when he pulls back, his smile is warm and genuine. Climbing off me, he lies in an exhausted but sated heap at the bottom of the bed, watching as the guys take advantage of the extra space.

Still at my side, Nicolai leans over my body as much as he's able to while I'm still holding his cock in my hand. Taking in the view of my pink, swollen pussy, he moans at the sight and slides his fingers through the thick folds, covering his digits with a mixture of my own arousal and Atlas's cum as it leaks from me. Scooping the cum that's escaping, he pushes it back inside me with several fingers.

It's almost too much to bear, the sensations overwhelming as I'm still reeling from my last orgasm. I find this hot as hell, though, because Nicolai is *obsessed* with it, getting off as his eyes are locked on my pussy. His cock twitches in my hand, and I know he's about to come. I double down, stroking him firmly until he finds his release.

Cum bursts from the head of his cock, splashing against my side and dribbling down my hand. He shudders against me, his dick pulsing under my grip. Panting, he removes his fingers and presses a kiss to my lips.

"I fucking love you," he whispers against them, biting down on my plump lower lip as he pulls back.

Syn kisses and bites my neck, completely content to stay pressed against me for the time being, but other than him, I feel strangely naked now that my other mates have moved away.

I know exactly how to rectify that.

“Scott,” I call softly, looking over at my newest mate, gently tugging at our connection and letting him feel my need for him.

The others step aside as if to let him through, showing their acceptance and approval with actions. He seems surprised, but he doesn't wait to be told again, stepping forward until his legs brush the bed. His eyes run up my body, taking in the two sleepy but sated mates at the bottom of the bed and Syn, who's still wrapped around me. Lifting his gaze, he meets Joel's eyes. I suddenly realise what's happening. He was a lone wolf for years, so he's not quite sure how to act in this situation, and he's waiting for permission from the alpha.

Joel seems to understand that Scott needs some encouragement without making it obvious to everyone. Using his grip on my hair, Joel tilts my head back until my eyes meet his. He lowers his head until our lips meet in a slow, passionate kiss. Releasing my hair, he pulls back just enough so he can look into my eyes.

“Get on your knees and move to the end of the bed.”

A thrill rushes through me, and I do as instructed. Seeing the invitation for what it is, Scott walks around the bed and climbs up behind me, his hands running over the smooth skin of my ass as he helps me into position. Glancing over my shoulder, I watch him as he rubs the head of his cock against my entrance, coating it in my slick. He pushes in, and I bite my lip as I see the look of pleasure cross his face.

Once he's fully sheathed inside me, he grabs my hips and starts to move, evoking a moan of pleasure from me. My whole body rocks, and I have to stop looking at him so I can concentrate on staying upright.

Syn watches my every movement with the authority of someone who is a hundred percent confident of their position within the pack, a surety that translates into his actions. Now that he's no longer touching me, he seems determined to change that. He's always been possessive of me, it's part of his nature and something I find incredibly sexy in the right situations, so I'm not surprised that he wants to get involved. Syn sits upright and crawls across the small distance between us, giving me a savage kiss as he mimics my position. He devours me, swallowing my small noises of pleasure as his tongue explores my mouth.

Biting down on my lip, he pulls back with a growl, his eyes glowing as his wolf pushes to the surface. As he tries to control himself, I decide that I'm not sure I want him to.

"Let me taste you," I croak between gasps of pleasure as Scott continues to slam into me.

Not needing to be told twice, he shifts positions, kneeling before me and giving his impressive cock a few strokes, his grumbling growl only turning me on more. Fisting the base, he holds his erection tightly, giving me the perfect opportunity to flick out my tongue and taste him. The salty flavour makes me groan, and I'm soon sucking the head into my mouth. The noises that he makes are almost enough to make me come on the spot, my thighs clenching together in response.

Scott continues to fuck me from behind, his hands gripping my ass as he pounds deeper. Putting my focus on not falling over, I relax the back of my throat and allow Syn to fuck my mouth. The two of them work in tandem, seeming to coordinate their movements, and it's not long until Syn growls and squeezes my shoulder as he moves his hip faster. Hollowing out my cheeks, I concentrate on sucking his length, pressing my tongue to the underside of his cock as I feel the tremors that indicate he's about to come. His cock unleashes its load, his semen coating my tongue.

Pulling from my mouth, he watches me with an intense expression, and I know what he's waiting for. Swallowing his cum, I lick my lips and meet his gaze. "Good girl," he coos,

tilting my face up so he can press a kiss to my lips, our bond glowing with pride and love.

Scott's movements feel stiff, and I know he's close to the edge from the noises he's making in the back of his throat. "Finally," he mutters, and I realise he was waiting for Syn to move.

He pulls out of my pussy, climbs off the bed, and flips me around so I'm on my back with my ass hanging over the edge. Before I even have a chance to realise what's happening, he's pressing his cock back into me, his hips working double time. The expression on his face makes him look like he's in pain, but thanks to the bond, I know it's the opposite.

"I wanted to see your face when I make you come, and as I fill you with my seed, I want you to see mine," he explains breathlessly, his actions suddenly making sense.

I love being taken from behind during sex, but there is something so much more intimate when you can see the other person's expression, especially when they are coming inside you. Nodding eagerly, I rock my hips, feeling my pleasure grow, my heart pounding in my chest.

It's not long before I'm writhing, my orgasm slamming into me as my core squeezes down on Scott's cock, pulsing around him and dragging him into his own release. With a grunt of pleasure, he thrusts into me one final time, filling me with his come. Our eyes stay locked together the entire time. I could feel how important this moment was for him, so I made sure to give him this.

Riding out the aftershocks of our pleasure, he gently pulls out of me, running his hand over my swollen clit. My whole body jerks in reaction, the bundle of nerves sensitive after two orgasms. I'm not done with it yet, though, and my thighs are already clenching together, my clit tingling at the thought of having sex with Joel.

I sit up and turn around so I'm looking up the bed. Scott is climbing over to one side of the bed where my sated mates now lie, their limbs in a tangled heap.

Now, there is only one.

At some point, Joel must have climbed onto the bed and is now sitting against the headboard with a smirk. Crooking his fingers, he motions me towards him. I'm eager to be with him, so it doesn't take any convincing as I climb into the gap between his legs. I automatically take his cock in my hand, pumping it to make him ready for me.

He seems surprised, gasping and jerking in my grip. "Laelia," he comments between gritted teeth. "I only wanted to hold you. You don't have to do—"

He cuts himself off with a sharp inhale that sounds like a hiss as I take his cock into my mouth. I'd already been moving the whole time he was talking. He clearly didn't expect me to pleasure him after I just had an orgy with four of my mates. This is the exact reason I want to do this. Joel gives without expecting anything in return, and I want my alpha to have it all. Bobbing my head a few times, I suck his length with all the vigour and strength I have left, squeezing the base until I feel him tense around me. Releasing him from my mouth with a quiet pop, I throw back my wayward hair and shift positions so I'm straddling him, taking exactly what I want from my alpha while giving him everything he needs. Reaching between us, I position his cock at my entrance as I slowly slide onto him. Despite his size, it's made easier thanks to the two loads of cum I have inside me.

Gripping his shoulders, I rock my hips, groaning as my swollen clit rubs against him. I squeeze my thighs together as I ride him. It's a small movement, but one that seems to drive him crazy, his head falling back as he works to control himself. His hips thrust up in time with my rocking, his hands on my waist as he attempts to steer my movements.

My orgasm is slow to build this time, my arousal sluggish in my veins, but with each rock of my hips, it increases. This isn't as fast as it was with the others. Joel takes his time filling me, his hands skimming over my skin.

We get lost in our pleasure, reacting only to each other's bodies. When my orgasm hits, it's not as blindingly intense as

with the other two, but it's just as powerful, moving through me like a wave. Joel leans forward and captures my moan with his mouth, kissing me softly as we continue moving. It's not long until his own orgasm rips through him, his grip tightening on me as he thrusts up.

Falling back against the headboard and looking exhausted, Joel gives me a soft smile. I love watching him after we've had sex, as he's always at his most relaxed and smiles much more freely. Smiling back at him, I lean forward and rest against his chest, my eyes fluttering shut as my body tingles with leftover twinges of pleasure. My eyelids feel heavy, and it would be so easy to fall asleep, but I know falling asleep on Joel is just asking for an aching back.

Reluctantly, I pull away from his chest and climb off his cock, my pussy throbbing. I'll probably be a little sore later, but it'll be worth it. Perching on the edge of the bed, I run my eyes over the sleepy, pleased males, my lips quirking up at one corner.

I want to curl up on the bed and sleep amongst my mates, but I have one pressing issue I need to deal with first. I'm covered in sweat and dirt, and my mates' cum is leaking from between my legs. I can think of only one thing that will make showering better.

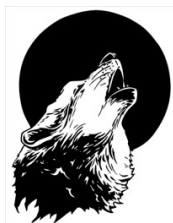
"I'm going for a shower. Does anyone want to come with me?"

A chorus of answers fills the room as they all attempt to untangle themselves. Syn manages to grab me first, throwing me over his shoulder as he runs towards the bathroom, the others shouting and following close behind. A loud, genuine laugh rips from me, my joy reflected back in my mates' eyes.

Outside of this moment, in the world beyond this cabin, we have mountains of issues to deal with, things that could get us killed in the process. However, that only makes me more determined to enjoy this time where I can be a young woman having a goofy moment with her mates.

I'm going to need every happy memory to keep me going through the trials ahead of us.

Chapter Twenty-Three



I run my fingers under the padding of my borrowed backpack to make sure the straps are not twisted, keeping myself busy with tasks so I don't overthink what's coming next.

“Are you sure I can't convince you to stay?” Alpha Jones asks as he watches us from the bottom of the steps of his cabin, his arms crossed over his chest. “It's what your father would want.”

Low blow, Alpha, I think to myself, wincing at his comment. He's right. The last thing my father wants is for me to storm the city, looking for him, but it's my decision to make. Plus, I have a funny feeling that Bates is going to be there. He practically told me that the council was behind the attack, and if he's to be believed, then they've had a hand in many of the terrible things that have occurred recently—such as creating a virus that attacks werewolves.

Alpha Jones is clearly still waiting for an answer, and with a sigh, I turn to face him. He might not approve of us going, but I see the concern in his expression, and I know he's only trying to convince us to stay because of that worry. My father is his closest friend, so this must be difficult for him.

“I know, Alpha, but I can't let them hurt him again.”

It's his turn to wince as my words hit home. He'd been there when my father was taken, beaten, and used as bait in that final trial, and he had not been able to stop it or prevent it

from happening. I'm not blaming him in any way for that, and I had this conversation with him last night after we made our plan, yet I know he's still carrying that guilt.

"Do you have everything you need?" he finally asks, which I take as the closest thing to acceptance I'm going to get from him.

We're not taking much with us. We need to be fast and not have anything that restricts our movements, but there are a few things we're going to need that will make the journey easier than the one that brought us here.

Only Luna, Nicolai, Atlas, and I wear packs, as the others will be in their wolf forms. When we were planning this last night, we ended up having a heated discussion on how we were going to get to the werewolf compound. Eventually, we had a plan, but it is a reluctant one.

We are going to be riding the wolves.

Unlike Star, whose shoulders are around my hips, the werewolves are all much larger than that and can easily carry the weight of a person on their back.

I'm going to ride Star, while Scott, Syn, and Joel act as rides for the others. It'll be fast and quiet, which is exactly what we need. We have no idea what's waiting for us in the city, only that they have my father, but I know it's going to end in a fight. The council needs to step down after their tyrannical rule, yet we all know they'll refuse to do so.

A familiar figure weaves through the pack members who came to see us off and give us their well wishes.

"Stop giving the girl grief, she needs to do this," Selena calls out as she makes her way to my side. Her eyes are fogged as she speaks as though she's looking far away. After a second, she blinks and shakes her head, and I get the feeling that her words were a premonition from the goddess. Selena has always been knowledgeable in the ways of the goddess, so I'm not surprised, especially now that I've seen the evidence of magic in several wolves. I'm starting to believe it's not as uncommon as it was made out to be.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me behind,” she grumbles at me before anyone can question her on what just happened, since I wasn’t the only person to notice her strange behaviour.

Releasing a sigh, I press a hand to my head to stave off the headache that’s building there. We’ve been over this, and although Selena has finally accepted that we’re not taking her with us, that doesn’t mean she’s okay with the decision, and she seems determined to make sure I’m aware of it.

“Selena, it’s going to be dangerous,” I explain for the hundredth time. Stepping closer, I place my hand on her arm and lower my voice. “I can’t risk your life.”

Her eyes soften, but the twist to her lips stays the same. “It’s my life to risk, and I just got you back.”

My eyes sting with tears, but I refuse to let them fall, as that will just make saying goodbye so much harder. Smiling with as much fake cheer as I can muster, I squeeze her arm gently. “You’ll see me soon, when I bring Dad back.”

Pursing her lips, she makes a dissatisfied grumbling noise. “Hmm, you better, otherwise, I’m coming down there and dragging both your asses back.”

This time, my smile is genuine, her comment exactly what I would expect from her. Having her back in my life, even for a very short period of time, has made me realise just how important she was to me growing up. Saying goodbye after less than twenty-four hours together is much harder than I ever expected it to be. “I love you, Selena.”

Her stern expression finally drops, replaced with a sadness I’m not sure she meant for me to see. It’s raw and full of pain and regret, making me wish we didn’t have to leave so soon. However, I’m determined that this won’t be the last time we’ll see each other, and Selena seems to feel the same way.

“You too, Laelia. You’re the closest thing I’ve got to a granddaughter, and I love you like family, so you better hurry back to me.” Pulling me in for a hug, she holds me close. Wrapping my arms around her, I take a deep inhale and

memorise her scent and the feel of her small body against mine, her words hitting me harder than I expected.

“Anyway, that’s enough of that,” she blusters, pulling out of my hug and wiping at her face. She attempts to pass it off by pushing her hair back from her face, but I don’t miss the shine of tears on her cheeks. She waves me away before I can say anything. “Go kick some ass.”

Knowing that I’ll cry if I say anything else, I smile and turn around, walking over to my mates, Luna, and our volunteers.

Several werewolves offered to come with us. My father was well loved within the pack, so his loss was keenly felt. He protected the pack for most of his life, and now his friends and pack mates feel as though it’s their turn to take care of him, starting with getting him back from the council. We didn’t want to leave the pack unprotected, though, so we’re only bringing three additional volunteers with us. Liam and Julie are both from Joel’s original pack, although you could work that out just by looking at them. Their bodies are muscular and toned, making them both look strong and fierce. In fact, Julie looks like she could lift me above her head with one hand and make it look easy.

The final werewolf to join our group is Dale, an old friend of my father’s. He’s several years younger than my dad, and thanks to werewolf genetics, he looks like he’s in his early thirties. I used to think he was huge, but compared to Joel and his wolves, Dale looks small in comparison. His dark hair is shaved short on the sides, and he pulls the longer hair at the top back into a man bun. It looks good on him.

We say our goodbyes and move out into the forest so everyone can shift. As the feeling of the wolves being called to the surface fills the air, I can’t help but note how similar the sensation is to when the witches use magic. Perhaps they are not so different after all. Keeping that bit of information to myself, I call Star, knowing now isn’t the right time to share my musings. Kneeling down to greet her as she materialises in a shimmer of starlight, I press my forehead to hers, whispering sweet nothings. I channel magic down our connection like

Luna taught me, willing my intent as I do so. To my amazement, Star begins to grow until she's the same size as the other werewolves now surrounding us.

There's little talk in the next couple of minutes as we mount up on the backs of the wolves, partially because there's nothing to say, but as I glance over at Luna, Atlas, and Nicolai, I can see how awkward they feel about all this. It must be particularly strange for Nicolai, who's riding on Scott's back. Until very recently, he would have been in wolf form with the others. Now, he's unable to shift, that integral part of him gone with no way of ever returning. Thankfully, Scott and Nicolai have formed a friendship and seem to be pretty close, so having him take Nicolai on his back made the most sense.

Our journey goes by in a flash. The werewolves are fast in this form, making quick work of the miles, yet it's the fact that I'm so lost in my own thoughts that really makes the journey disappear. It's almost as though I blinked and we arrived.

Really, it took hours, but I have so many worries and fears that I didn't notice. What if they hurt my father? Who will be waiting for us when we get there? I'm assuming that's where Bates ran straight to after the attack on Haven. That's one thing I'm *not* anxious about. It's time for Bates to pay for all the pain and death he's caused. The council also needs to answer for what they've done, but I have no idea how we're going to manage that with just ten of us.

Just as my thoughts spiral deeper, I feel the goddess reach out to me, the comforting warmth of her presence immediately settling the battle inside my mind.

Have faith, little moon, she whispers into my mind. Now that you have accepted your inner goddess, you are more powerful than any of those who stand against you. You also have your mates to support you. I chose them to be yours for a reason.

I glance to the side and let my eyes trail over said mates, feeling comforted by the reminder. A goddess chose them to be with me, each of them helping in a way others can't, and while it does comfort me, something she said sticks in my

mind. What did she mean by accepting my inner goddess? As I've grown in confidence with my magic, I've become stronger, is that what she's suggesting? I suppose she could mean that I've now accepted that I have her blood in my veins, making me different...

No, young one. Her voice is gentle as she cuts off my thought, and I swear I can sense a note of anticipation, as though she's not sure how I'm going to take her next revelation. *You've always carried power within you, and until recently, you would shun it away.*

Initially, I think she's talking about when my power first materialised on my twenty-first birthday. I was terrified when I discovered my magic, and I did everything I could to hide it. However, it doesn't make sense, as it's been released for months now.

The gentle rocking of Star's movements lull me deep into thought as I mull it over. My instincts are telling me this is important, so I make the most of the time, aware the goddess is still with me. She doesn't push or prod me, allowing me time to think through it. It takes me a while, and then it hits me.

The dark presence that resided inside me, the, powerful magic that I was too afraid to touch. The presence slowly became more and more quiet as I learned to master my magic and eventually disappeared completely. I had been wondering where it had gone, and now I know why. My cheeks tinge pink with embarrassment that it took me so long to work out. All this time, I was cutting off a part of me because I was afraid.

Yes, child. It was never a separate presence, only a part of yourself you weren't ready to accept. However, you are now, and no one can get in your way other than yourself.

I'm not sure what she means, and I'm getting warning vibes from her, but she doesn't seem keen to expand on her explanation. I feel her pull away from me, and I'm once again left with my thoughts. She gave me answers, yet not for the questions I needed answers for, and I'm more confused than ever. How can I be the only one to get in my way? She

obviously knows more than she's letting on, and the only reason she wouldn't share this with me is because it's something I have to discover for myself.

I'm still lost in my thoughts when Star comes to a stop. Surprised, I look up and discover that I recognise this forest. The tall, thick trees offer large coverage and the smell of many different wolves. Straining my hearing, I listen for any hints that we might not be alone, but all I hear are birds singing.

We're in the forest that surrounds the werewolf compound, hiding it from the rest of the world. In the centre of the forest is a whole town that the council resides in and rules over. Several packs live there full time, such as Bates', while others come and go as they need to. We are currently far enough out that I can't hear any sounds from the town, and I can't help but muse over how well it's hidden.

Climbing off Star's back, I walk over and help Luna off Joel's back so he's able to shift back into human form. Energy fills the air as the werewolves all change forms and Luna turns her back to give them privacy. I don't bother, werewolves are very comfortable with nudity.

"We're here?" she asks quietly to fill the silence, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as she looks around with wary eyes.

I nod my head, also taking in the unassuming trees. "Yes, the city is hidden in the forest." I hate seeing her like this. "Are you okay?" It's a stupid question, as she's clearly not okay.

Huffing out a humourless laugh, she shakes her head and rolls her eyes up to look at the canopy, but really she's trying to stop tears from escaping.

"Kano..." She trails off, her voice going tight at the mention of my brother.

My heart squeezes painfully in my chest, and I reach out to pull her against me, hugging her close. I have no words of comfort, especially when things looked so dire when we left,

and I can't lie to her, so I simply stay silent. I can hold her, though, and let her share her fears.

Joel's steady presence appears behind me, stopping a few steps back so as not to startle Luna, but I can feel how much he wants to wrap me in his arms. "We should check the perimeter and see who's around, make sure we have an idea on numbers before we do anything," he suggests, but there's not much room for disagreement in his tone.

I nod my head in agreement. What he said makes sense. Before we walk into a dangerous situation, we should make sure we know what we're up against. To my surprise, Syn shakes his head.

He seems different, his body stiffer and more like the old Syn. I can still feel him, but it feels as though he's muffling his side of the bond from me, and it's throwing me off. Syn's past here is long and filled with trauma, so I was expecting some reaction from him, but being back here is changing him, and I don't like it.

"No," he argues, stepping forward. "We should get closer. We won't find out anything from this distance, and we shouldn't split up." He glances at the others around us, but it's Joel he directs his words to.

My alpha frowns, his eyes taking in the dark edge that Syn's giving off right now. "It's too dangerous. We could be seen and captured. It's much less likely to happen from back here, and if we're in smaller groups, we can stay undetected."

"You want me to leave my mate here with only one or two protectors?" Syn scowls, making his feelings clear on that point. He takes a step closer to Joel until they are almost chest to chest. Joel is a calm and reasonable leader, but he's also an alpha wolf, and there are certain things that make it harder for him to control the primal side of himself. Being challenged by another alpha is one of those things. Chest puffing out, he looks down at Syn with a dark expression.

Alpha power fills the air, and Syn presses on, not bothered that he's angered an alpha almost double his size. "We could

get caught either way, but at least this way I'm making sure my mate has as many good guys on her side as possible."

Joel doesn't say anything to acknowledge Syn's comment, but my other mates mutter amongst themselves. Clearly bringing my safety into it makes them more hesitant, even though Joel's plan is the safest.

Sighing, Atlas steps over to my side, affectionately brushing back some of my unruly hair before facing the two alphas. "I hate to admit it, but the crazy one makes a valid point."

Syn half-heartedly snarls at Atlas's comment, which is a pretty mild reaction for him, especially with him being in this strange mood, but my witch is on his side, so thankfully it stays at that.

"It's not as though she'd be alone though. I would be here, and in case you forgot, we both have magic," Luna calls out, a small frown between her brows, offended at the implication she couldn't protect me if it came down to it.

Growling with frustration, he runs his hands through his hair, his claws pressing against the skin of his knuckles, begging to be released. "Look, I know this city like the back of my hand. I know every nook, crevice, and secret passage. If anyone is going to get through unseen, it's me." Once again, Syn addresses all of us, but he keeps his firm position in front of Joel. "I can lead us all into the centre without getting caught."

He sounds so confident that I can't help but lean towards his idea. If we're all together, we can watch each other's backs, and I won't have to worry about my mates splitting up. We are stronger together, the goddess told me that, so perhaps this is the right path after all. Reaching out to his closed off bond, I attempt to comfort him, metaphysically pressing myself against it and asking him to let me in. He doesn't, but I see something shift in his eyes as he senses it. It makes me uneasy, but I know that being back here is difficult for him, so I hold back my own discomfort.

“If Syn thinks he can keep us safe, then I trust him,” I say, my voice as confident as I am in his abilities. Above everything, my safety is Syn’s top priority, so he would never do anything that might endanger me.

There’s a twinge in the bond between Syn and me, but when I reach for it again, that muted barrier is still there, stopping me from feeling him properly.

Joel lets out a long, heavy sigh and glances over at me. I smile back at him, knowing that the group will follow what he decides, and I need him to be confident in that decision. He brushes against our bond, his hesitation fleeting. Turning his attention back to Syn, he frowns and stares at the other male, a battle of wills taking place before us. It doesn’t last long, his mind was already made up.

“Fine, what’s the plan?”

We travel in near silence. Liam, Julie, and Dale are in wolf form, their ears perked and listening for any sounds that might indicate there are people nearby. My mates and I move with the grace of werewolves, and Nicolai still carries that stillness about him even without being a wolf any longer. Atlas is quiet for a human thanks to his skills as a fighter.

Luna, on the other hand, sounds like a herd of elephants moving through the forest. Once we get out of the forest and hurry through the town, she still manages to make so much noise that I’m cringing with each step she takes. In reality, she’s probably not that loud, but with our sensitive hearing, it makes her movements sound all the louder. In any other situation, it would be fine. Unfortunately, we’re sneaking through a place that’s full of creatures with incredible hearing, and any misstep could get us caught.

The plan is simple—get into the city, scout the area, see what’s happening, and learn the council’s movements. Once we have a better idea of the situation and numbers, we’ll move back to the forest and make a new plan. We all know the risks

we're taking and that we might not get another chance, so if the situation is appropriate, we'll grab my father and take Bates out in the process.

My stomach is in knots over the whole thing, my instincts telling me that the council is up to something, but my priority is my father. Once he's safe, I'll focus on working out how to take down the council. I follow Syn's lead, the others sticking close as we move from the shelter of one building to another. It's been a relatively easy journey. The streets are practically empty, which only puts me more on edge. It's too quiet.

Just ahead is the centre of the city, a large, flat meeting point surrounded by tall buildings. I'm surprised that Syn has brought us this close, but I'm guessing that my father will be in one of the council buildings, which are just beyond the meeting point.

He raises a hand above his head, and we all freeze, waiting for him to decide our next move. My heart beats so hard in my chest, I'm sure the others can hear it, and I'm going to give us away. It's only when Syn's body seems to relax that I take a deep breath, not realising that I'd been holding it in the first place.

He turns to face us, his expression tight. "Take a quick break. The next part is going to be the most difficult." His voice is low as he leans against the wall of the alley we're sheltering in. The others do the same or take off their backpacks, sharing the bottles of water we carry in them.

I'm happy to take a break, but I'm so on edge that I'm constantly worrying that we're going to be discovered. Our only advantage at the moment is the element of surprise, and we could lose that at any time.

You need to look after yourself if you want to save your father, I tell myself firmly, taking a bottle of water out of my bag. The cool liquid helps as I take several long pulls from the plastic. Feeling eyes on me, I glance over and find Syn watching me intently. Swallowing my mouthful, I smile at him and offer him the bottle. His expression doesn't change, but he shakes his head slowly. I return the bottle to my bag and check

on the others, well aware of Syn's eyes on me the whole time. Something just feels... off, yet I can't work out what it is, so I put it down to nerves and make myself useful.

Once I've checked everyone is okay, I turn to look at the end of the alley and see Syn still leaning against the wall, keeping watch. He looks disturbed, and I hate seeing him like this.

"Syn," I call softly, moving over to his side and placing a hand on his arm. "I know that being back here is tough for you and a reminder of your past. I loved you then and now, but don't let them take away this part of yourself that you've discovered." My words come straight from my heart, and I hope he can feel how sincere I am. "You've worked so hard to become the male you are today, and you are one of the bravest and strongest people I've ever known." My affection for him pours down the bond, and although his end is closed down, I know he can feel it.

His expression finally cracks, and something that looks like devastation takes over. His dark eyes glisten, and he turns to face me, pulling away from the wall and placing his hands on my shoulders. My eyes are wide as I stare up at him, his expression scaring me. I'm not afraid of him, but whatever is causing him to look so broken sends a cold wave of dread through me.

"Laelia," he starts, his eyes flicking across my face as though memorising every inch of it, "whatever happens next, I need you to know—"

"Well, well, well."

The voice startles all of us as a figure steps into the mouth of the alley. How they snuck up on us, I have no idea, but we all fall into defensive positions, growls and warning snarls echoing off the brick walls. The male is dressed in the dark, loose clothes and cloak of the council, and he wears a mesh-like mask to hide his identity as per their rules. However, as other council members fan out behind him, I already know who stands in front of me, instantly recognising his voice

without needing to see the precious stone on his arm to identify him.

Councilman Ruby.

“Our prodigal son returns,” the councilman croons, opening his arms wide. Despite the mask that’s hiding his expression, I can hear the smile in his voice. He’s enjoying this. Tilting his head to one side, he seems to be looking at each of us in turn. “It seems he also brought us a gift.”

I risk a glance at the others to see if they understand what’s happening here. He doesn’t seem surprised in the least that we’re here. In fact, it’s almost like he was expecting us. A tiny part of my mind is screaming in denial as I piece together his words and how easy it was for us to get into the centre of the city.

Prodigal son.

Joel spent a lot of time here, but the only one who actually lived and worked here was...

Syn moves forward with swagger in his step, a smug smirk pulling at his lips as he drops into an elaborate bow.

“Just as you asked,” he drawls, flinging out his arm to gesture at me. “Laelia and her mates, hand delivered as promised.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



My stomach drops, and my heart clenches so hard in my chest that I gasp at the pain, pressing my hand against it in an attempt to ease it. Stumbling back a step, I stare at my mate in horror, my ears ringing.

No, this can't be real. I'm so shocked by what's happening that I feel frozen in place. I'm half expecting him to snort and say he was joking and then attack the councilmen, but he doesn't. Worse, he throws his arm around the councilman's shoulders and smirks at Ruby's obvious displeasure of the physical contact.

"Syn?" I hadn't meant for his name to sound so wounded. In fact, I hadn't even meant to speak aloud.

My heart feels like it's shattering in my chest as I look on with wide eyes. I've experienced a lot in my life that's caused me pain, but other than when Nicolai died, nothing else has come close to the pain I'm experiencing now. The connection I have with my mates is soul deep, and lying shouldn't be possible. If Syn was planning to betray me all along, then I would have felt it, especially when he was losing his battle against the madness that threatened to take over his mind. Right? The hurt part of me wants to question everything, including my other mate bonds, but my mind is such a mess that I shut that thought down before it can grow. I'm going to need them to help me get through this.

Syn's mask flickers as he both hears and feels my pain, automatically stepping towards me as if to offer comfort.

This is too much for Joel, who has been silent until now. In the blink of an eye, he steps between Syn and me, my other mates surrounding me, trying to protect me physically where they are unable to fix the mental betrayal I'm feeling.

"You traitorous piece of filth," Joel roars in a voice I've never heard him use before, my calm alpha flying over and punching the other male in the jaw.

Syn could have easily avoided it, yet he takes the hit, knocked back by the force of the blow. For a second, I feel our bond flicker with a brief wave of regret and apology before it's quickly shut down. He shoves Joel away, putting some space between the two of them, watching the larger male carefully.

Why is he doing this? What do they have against him that's forcing him into doing this? He hates the life he had here, believing that this was his only path after he lost his pack. Alpha males without a pack don't tend to do well on their own, and his mind had been twisted from loss before the council stepped in and offered him work. Something about working for them helped keep the madness at bay until I came along, and he started to realise that he had another option—a life with me and my other mates, where he was loved and would never be looked at shamefully or with disgust ever again. That's what my love offered him, and he flourished. Why would he give all of that up? If anything happens to me, it will literally kill him. His life is tied to mine, so why betray us?

Syn shut down his end of the bond when we arrived here, but he's always been open with me before, and I know he'd never betray me.

At least... I did until this happened.

Was that the reason he closed off the bond, to put distance between us so it was easier for him to betray me? To make sure that I didn't realise what he was about to do? *No, this is Syn, he would never hurt me*, I tell myself fiercely, remembering what he was trying to say to me before the councilmen arrived. *"Whatever happens next, I need you to know..."* Those were the words he whispered to me and never

had the chance to finish. Was he going to tell me the truth and explain what was about to happen?

A grunt of pain brings me back to the present, and I flinch as Joel swings at Syn again, knocking him back into the wall. He slams his knee into Syn's abdomen, causing him to double over in pain. Joel seems determined to beat my other mate into a bloody pulp, and despite everything that's happened, Syn isn't fighting back. None of my group seem inclined to stop the fight, and I'm going to need to do something. While I understand why Joel is acting this way, I don't want Syn to get hurt. We still don't know what's happening, and I hope that this is all some great big misunderstanding.

Before I can do anything, Councilman Ruby clears his throat and snaps his fingers. "Call off your guard dog, or I'll be forced to find another way to incapacitate him."

Another councilman chuckles darkly. Glancing at the band on his arm, I discover that the one who finds this all amusing is councilman Emerald. "As entertaining as this is, we have need of that one, and if this goes any further, then he'll be useless."

I should have known it was Emerald, as I've had run-ins with him before. Anger rises within me at the way he's talking about Syn like he's simply a possession they can throw away after they get their use out of him. I want to snap at him, and Star is begging to be released so she can sink her teeth into them. However, it's Ruby's comment that forces me to control myself. I've seen their punishments and how they treat their people. Joel's safety is more important than name calling right now.

"Joel, stop." My voice breaks, and I know the council will see that as a sign of weakness, but I don't care. It's a sign of my love, which is nothing to be ashamed of. "I need you."

This gets his attention, his head jerking up as he feels my pain. He slowly backs away from Syn, panting as though he just ran a marathon. I've never seen him so furious.

Unable to help myself, I look over at the mate who betrayed me. He's bent over at the waist, but his head is up,

and his eyes are locked on me. Realising that he's under scrutiny, he stands upright, scowling as he touches his jaw and wipes blood away from his split lip. Barking a laugh, he dips his head as if in respect towards Joel. This only seems to make my alpha angrier, but I place my hand on top of his fist, and it slowly uncurls to thread his fingers through mine.

The others have surrounded us, including our three borrowed werewolves who are still in animal form. A tingle of magic fills the air, and I know both Atlas and Luna are reaching for their magic. I've been around them long enough now that I can tell who is using magic just by the feel of it. Angry with myself for not thinking of using my power, I work past my tangled emotions and slowly call it to me.

"Oh no, I can't allow that, I'm afraid," Ruby comments, making the smallest gesture with his hand. A strange feeling settles over us. I almost missed the movement, but thanks to my time with the witches, I've learned how to notice certain tells—not to mention that I'm able to feel magic, a skill that's unique to me, or at least I thought so until just now when Councilman Ruby knew we were drawing on our power.

There is only one explanation. The council has magic.

Now that I look back on the events of the past, it makes so much sense. They were always able to transport us during the trials, and they always had huge venues for the trials that seemed impossible.

"I can't use my magic," Luna whispers from her position at my side, panic entering her voice.

From the anger and frustration I feel from Atlas's bond, I know he's also been blocked from his magic. Glancing over at Nicolai, I find him frowning, and I guess he's been affected too. As with what happened during the attack on Haven, my magic feels sluggish, but I'm still able to access it, and I wonder if it has anything to do with my goddess given abilities. Releasing my grip on my power, I let them believe that whatever spell they are using worked.

I meet Syn's gaze. I hadn't anticipated how hard that was going to be, and pain radiates out from my heart. "Why are

you doing this?” I ask quietly, wishing this intensely private moment wasn’t on display for everyone to see. Despite their masks, the smugness emanating from the councilmen tells me they are finding this amusing.

“This was the only way we could be together,” Syn answers. He sounds solemn, and I believe him. Whatever led to this moment, he believed this was the only way. Something terrible must have been threatened, or he made a deal to get back to me that resulted in this.

A thought tickles the back of my mind, growing as soon as I acknowledge it. Was this how Syn managed to find me at Haven? Is that how Bates was able to find it when they attacked? They tracked him? My heart breaks at the thought that he might have done all of this purely to get back to my side. He was losing his mind, the madness driving him to do the impossible.

“You sold us all out,” Scott snarls, his eyes flashing with his fury. “You put your mate in danger. What do you think they are going to do to her now? Let the two of you skip off into the sunset together?”

Scott makes a good point, but it’s not my future that I’m worried about. What will happen to my mates now that we’ve been captured? I know my purpose is coming to an end. The prophecy was right, only I wasn’t the one to bring them all together, I was the one to destroy everything we know. All I hope is that my mates will find a way to live on without me.

Jutting out his jaw defiantly, Syn refuses to back down. “I’ve always known my time with Laelia was limited, so I made the most of what I had.”

My heart breaks for him despite what he’s done. He didn’t think we had a future. It turns out that he was right, only he’s the reason we’re being separated, a self-fulfilled prophecy.

Syn looks deadly serious now as he speaks, his eyes locked on me. “She will be safe, I’ve seen to that.”

Those words make me nervous. He’s speaking like he’s saying goodbye and never going to see me again. My breath

gets caught in my throat, and my mind is spinning. I don't understand what's happening. This has to be a bad dream, a nightmare that I'm going to wake up from at any moment.

As I spiral towards a mental breakdown and stare in devastation at Syn, my group still snarls and stands in defensive positions, expecting an attack at any moment.

Nicolai bristles beside me. "Even if that was the case, do you think she will ever forgive you for this?"

"How lovely." Councilman Ruby's sarcastic voice cuts through their conversations, stopping Syn from answering with a gesture of his hand. "I'm going to have to interrupt though. We have a special guest I think you'll want to see, Laelia. We shouldn't keep them waiting."

He's so smug about this whole conversation and the fact that they caught us out, the councilman practically purrs. He has something over me, and he knows I'll do whatever I need to so I can make sure everyone is safe. I know who the special guest is. He's the very reason I'm here in the first place—my father.

That's what all of this is about, them getting their hands on me. They don't really care about my father or even my mates. All they care about is that my existence no longer challenges their rule. Had they left me in peace in the first place, none of this would have happened. They created this mess by trying to kill me in the trials, causing many of the werewolves to support me in the process. There has to be a way I can convince them to let the others leave safely.

Clearing my throat, I take a small step forward, away from my mates and towards the councilmen standing in the mouth of the alley. "If I come with you peacefully, will you let my mates and father go?"

"No," Joel growls, grabbing my arm and pulling me back until I bump against his chest. Wrapping his arms around me, he holds me firmly against him, leaning down to rest his chin on top of my head. "We stay together. Always," he murmurs.

The others agree with various nods and vocal agreements, and even our three borrowed wolves make themselves heard.

It seems that it doesn't matter anyway, because Ruby just snorts. "You don't have a choice either way, so why would I let them go?" The atmosphere in the alley suddenly becomes tense as the councilman slowly walks towards us. "I'm not stupid, Laelia, and I'm done playing games. As long as I have your mates and father, you're going to do as I say."

As Ruby gets closer, the growls get louder with each threatening step. Even Syn snarls, his eyes narrowed on the councillor. We're in a tinderbox, and all it will take is one spark for the whole thing to blow up.

"Enough of this," one of the masked councilmen mutters, his voice weathered, making him sound older than the others. He's clearly had enough of the scene playing out before him, and if his voice is anything to go by, he sounds exhausted.

My eyes are locked on Councilman Ruby who has paused before us, but I pick up some movement behind him, and the feeling of magic swells in the alleyway.

I open my mouth to warn the others, but before I can, the world goes black, and I fall into unconsciousness.

Groaning at the pounding in my head, I slowly open my eyes, my head feeling foggy and sluggish. Bits of dirt and grit bite into my skin, telling me that once again, I'm lying on the floor. I piece together all the fragmented bits of memory until I'm able to work out what's happening.

We were sneaking into the city when the councillors caught us. Syn betrayed us and handed us right to them. The council has magic and has learned how to knock us out and transport us to new locations.

It's an impressive skill, but I'm getting really fed up with them knocking us out. Councilman Ruby already pointed out that I was always going to follow their orders to make sure my

father was kept safe, so all they needed to do was tell me to shut up and follow them, and I'd do it. That's not good enough for them though, oh no, they use magic to show that they have power over us.

I reach for my bonds. I'm worried we've been separated and my mates are far away because the connection feels fuzzy. However, as I blink and stare at the bracken on the ground, I slowly feel those bonds come to life. They are here with me, and if I were to take a guess, I'd say they were also knocked out and are just waking up. Their groans confirm my suspicion.

Gathering my strength, I push myself into an upright position, hating that my arms shake in the process. I wait for my brain to catch up with what I'm seeing. We're back in the forest on the edge of the compound, in the clearing where it all began. This is where we had all been called for the beginning of the werewolf trials and where I first met Joel. It was also where the councilmen called me out and forced me to participate in the trials, knowing full well that I was unable to shift and it would most likely result in my death.

Not my favourite memory.

I look for my mates and find them sprawled on the hard dirt beside me. They look like they were just dumped in a pile, their limbs entangled and twisted at odd angles. Wincing, I shuffle onto my knees and attempt to stand and help them up. I'm aware that we're being watched, but my mates are the most important thing right now. Our captors can wait.

Helping everyone up, I move over to Luna and pull her up, steadying her with a hand on her shoulder as she winces and presses a hand to her head. I know the feeling. Once everyone is upright and present, I finally turn to the wooden platform behind me.

The councilmen stand on the small stage that raises them above us, all as still as statues as they look down upon us. Not bothering to waste my attention on them for long, I do a slow spin and take in the crowd surrounding us. Werewolves of all shapes and sizes fill the clearing, some standing in larger

groups that are clearly their packs, but others are just in groups of two or three. While it seems like there are a lot here, there are not nearly as many as there were at the beginning of the trials. Is that because the packs refused to attend? Or simply because they didn't have time to get here on such short notice?

Syn stands at the foot of the stage, leaning against the wooden structure with his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his face as he glances around the clearing. His darkness has practically enveloped him, something I know most can't see. However, *I* can see it, and when that happens, it's usually because he's feeling overwhelmed by his emotions. Instinctively, I reach for the bond, only to bounce back off it, still shut off. I do notice the wince that twists his face momentarily as I touch it, so I know he can still feel me, whether he wants to or not.

Everyone is strangely quiet, which is the complete opposite of how it was when I was revealed as having magic. Yet here I stand, half wolf, half witch, with two other witches and Nicolai who has clearly been changed, and no one makes a sound. In fact, they seem wary, the atmosphere tense, and I get the strangest feeling that it's not us that they are afraid of, but the council. What happened while we were gone that put everyone on edge?

Councilman Ruby steps forward, unnecessarily clearing his throat to call for silence.

"Werewolves, you have been gathered here because treason has been committed," he begins, his voice amplified around the clearing. Pausing for dramatic effect, he clutches his hands in front of him, hanging his head slightly as though this news brings him sorrow. Taking a deep breath, he continues. "Our laws are clear, death is the only acceptable punishment for such a crime. However, this isn't any usual offender."

I lift my head high as all eyes automatically fall on us, and I stare back at Ruby, refusing to appear weak in front of him. My mates and friends shift their positions until they are spread out behind me, making it clear that they stand with me.

“Laelia was promised to us,” the councillor continues, ignoring the silent statement we make, “and despite her having magic, something that is banned amongst us, the council gave her the chance to prove herself in the trials. She managed to cheat her way through, until she was rescued by a group of witches.”

If I were a wolf right now, my hackles would be raised. He’s making it sound like the council was gracious in “allowing” me to compete in their deadly challenges. There was no mention of the threats, the attempts on my life, or the fact that they fixed the trials to make it even harder for me to survive. Then to say that I cheated... My blood boils.

How dare they speak of me like this? They have no idea who I really am, I rage, my thoughts turning dark as my power swells within me, demanding to be released. *They should be bowing to me, not making me out to be cheating scum.* That last thought startles me out of my anger. Where did that come from? The power I’ve accepted from the goddess comes with its own challenges it seems, one of them being the darkness I carry.

Now that I’ve pulled myself from my anger and managed to soothe my power, I realise that something he said stands out. *Laelia was promised to us.* Is this just another lie to make me seem evil and untrustworthy? Because he’s making it sound as though they already knew of my existence. Or, at least, that I would arrive one day. What I once thought would have been impossible is now put to question. The council has magic, so it could be possible that they also knew of the prophecy. This is just mind-blowing, and I can feel my mates’ confusion. They seem just as thrown by this information as I am.

At the mention of witches, the gathered werewolves finally react, hissing and snarling. However, it feels strained, as if they are making the noise because they are expected to. They’ve been brought up to hate witches, and it feels like an automatic reaction instead of their actual feelings.

“It turns out that those witches were also traitors,” the councillor continues, his voice swelling with emotion. “At the

witches' stronghold, Laelia spread unease and lies until she tore it apart. She then came back here and attempted to break into the council with her mates so she could do the same thing."

Where did they get this information from? We know that Bates was sent by the council to attack Haven, but what he's saying is too close to the truth to be a simple guess. While I never spread unease or lies, I can't deny that my presence split the witches' loyalty. Unease settles in my stomach, the hair on my arms stands on end, and a tingle of warning trickles down my spine.

"That's all lies!" Atlas seethes, moving as though to march forward. The only thing stopping him is Luna and Nicolai, who are holding him back. I take his hand in mine and pour my love for him down the bond.

"Don't give him the reaction he wants," I whisper, hoping that my presence will calm him. Thankfully, it seems to work, his body relaxing as his anger slips away.

Releasing his hand, I give him the smallest smile and step forward. My mates go to follow me but stop at the slight shake of my head. Scanning the watching werewolves, I turn my back on the council and address them instead.

"The witches are innocent and not our enemy. They want peace. It's the council and a small group of witches who want to keep this war going, but most of us just want to live in peace," I explain, wishing my voice was amplified like the councilman's, but thanks to their keen hearing, I know they can all hear me. "The council sent a group of werewolves to attack Haven and incite violence and destruction, destroying our progress to convince the witches that we weren't all savages. After that, we were given no choice but to leave. I've never spread lies, and any change in attitude wasn't because of me."

I'm quite surprised that none of the councilmen try to stop me as I defame them, laying their crimes out for all to see. I've not even gotten started with what they did to Nicolai. A ripple of unease spreads through the group, and I notice several of

the wolves looking at each other as they question what they are hearing.

“She does have one thing right,” Councilman Ruby says, cutting over the low murmurs. “The witches are no longer our enemy. In fact, we share a common enemy, and that is anyone who tries to destroy us.” I get the impression that had he not been wearing a mask, he would be smiling widely.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, and I know I’m not the only one from the gasps of confusion and outrage. The werewolves seem to have been pushed beyond their unease and begin speaking out. For the council to do such an about turn on their stance on witches and magic is almost unbelievable. When and how did they come to this conclusion? It doesn’t make any sense.

The noise in the clearing gets louder, and those watching start questioning the very same thing. It’s clearly making the other councilmen nervous, as I notice them shifting from one foot to the other. Councilman Ruby has it all in hand though, clapping his hands together to gain everyone’s attention.

“Laelia, you have been charged with treason. How do you plead?” he calls loudly, making sure that every single person in attendance can hear his charge.

Shaking my head in disbelief, I stand firm. It seems that I can kiss any thoughts of a fair trial goodbye. *Is this it? Is this the day I die?* No, I’m determined that it won’t come down to that. I plan to live a long, happy life with my mates.

“Not guilty,” I shout, my voice clear and loud. “This is madness. You have no evidence to back up your claims!”

“Actually,” a smooth female voice says, sending a chill down my spine as I recognise it, “I have witnessed her crimes and can provide evidence.”

Seeming to materialise out of thin air, the queen of the witches steps into the clearing. The werewolves closest to her hiss and jump back to let her pass, sensing exactly what she is. Instead of walking straight to the platform like I would expect,

she walks over to me, smiling widely as she looks down at me with a conceited grin.

“Hello, Laelia.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



The witch queen is here, in the heart of the werewolf compound, and none of the councilmen seem the slightest bit surprised. How long has this been going on? From their reactions to each other, it's clearly been going on far longer than just the attack.

It makes sense how they knew of the events in Haven, and other little pieces of information that never quite settled right in my mind start to make more sense as well. They've been keeping this close to their chests from the looks of it, as the werewolves in the clearing seem shocked by the turn of events.

Glancing over at Syn, I see that he's just as surprised by this revelation as we are. At least he's not betrayed us in that matter too. If he was aware that the queen was working with the council the whole time, it would have been another blow to the heart. He attempts to hide it, but his entire body is trembling, and his smirking mask is gone, replaced with a tension that looks painful. It hurts to look at him, so I quickly yank my gaze away and focus once again on the woman who's caused us all so much pain.

I don't even need to look at Atlas to know this is a huge shock to him, the sudden silence in our communication giving me all the answers I need. Feelings of betrayal and disbelief meet me as I touch his bond. The very fact that she dares to stand here now with an air of superiority after selling out her entire race is only adding fuel to the growing hatred inside

him. His hatred of werewolves was never discouraged by the queen, it was often encouraged, and to discover that she's been working with them is a bitter deception. While his loyalties to the queen were already severed and have been for a time, it's hard for him to discover this, especially with his tragic history.

Atlas struggles to control himself as he glares up at the woman he used to admire. "You." The word is strangled and full of hatred, his lips pulled back in a snarl.

"Hello, Atlas," she croons, her attention finally switching to him. Her body language changes as her eyes scan him in an assessing way that makes my blood boil.

Mine, my inner wolf growls. I battle with the urge to wipe the stupid smirk off her face, my power trying to burst from me and teach her a lesson. I have to remind myself once again that there's a reason that I'm keeping the fact that I can still use my magic a secret, but it's one of the hardest things I've ever done.

The queen continues on, oblivious to the death I'm planning for her in my mind. "It's such a shame you let her taint you. I had such high hopes for you. Gone are the days where you would sit at my feet and look up at me adoringly, following my orders with a click of my fingers." Shaking her head and pressing a hand against her ample breast, she lets out a long sigh. Turning her head, she looks at Luna, her whole expression transforming as true disgust flits across her face. "It's neither a shame nor a surprise that you've turned into a traitor. You've always been a disappointment."

Luna leaps forward, slapping the queen across the cheek, the sound satisfyingly loud. "Now I can finally show you how I feel about you." Spitting at the queen's feet, she bares her teeth. "Where is Kano?"

Atlas pulls Luna back into our protective group, fearing retribution on his cousin. I place a hand on her arm in support. The queen has always treated Luna like a second-class citizen, something that infuriated me. She doesn't need me to stand up for her, though, because she's perfectly capable of doing it herself—as she just demonstrated.

The queen seems genuinely shocked at the hit, her head still turned from the force and a hand pressed against the quickly reddening skin. It seems she's become too reliant on magic protecting her, and she assumes all attacks would come in a magical form. She drops her hand and looks at Luna, her smug satisfaction slapped right off her face.

"That's rich," she begins, her voice sharp. "You ask for Kano after you left him for dead and ran away to protect yourself. For someone who professes to care for him so much, you sure don't show it." She doesn't need weapons to hurt Luna, using her words to injure instead. The blow lands true, and Luna flinches at the accusation. Satisfied, the queen turns her attention back to me. "And you, Laelia, where is your concern for your brother? You don't even know if he survived his injuries."

The look I give the queen suggests that I'm not impressed with her attempts to wound me. I shouldn't be challenging her, but I can't seem to help myself. She's revealing her true colours for everyone to see. When Kano was injured, he was pretty forceful about making sure we left, and sticking around wouldn't have helped either of us, so I refuse to let her make me feel guilty. Besides, my intuition tells me that he's alive, and I trust in that.

The need to comfort Luna is strong, and I wish I could tell her she's not to blame for what happened to him. When all this is over, we will have that conversation, but now is not the time. She was unconscious when we escaped, so she had no say in what happened then, but Kano insisted we take her with us. I have no doubt that if she were awake, she would have stayed with him, and then we wouldn't have been able to help her.

When I don't give her the reaction she wants, she tries a different angle. "You should be happy, Laelia. You wanted to bring everyone together, and now you have."

Unfortunately, she's right. I did bring the werewolves and witches together, just not in a way I ever predicted. Their hatred for each other has been overshadowed by their hatred for me, and they've put their animosity aside to work together

in destroying me. Is this what the prophecy meant? Am I the villain in this story?

Disturbed by the realisation and what that could mean, I reach for my mates, needing their comforting bonds to surround me. On the outside, I don't let it show that I'm questioning everything, yet from the sparkle in the queen's eyes, she's worked it out anyway.

"Why are you here?" I demand, needing answers.

"Were you not listening to the councilman? We've united against a common enemy." Placing her hands on her hips, she raises her brows as if scolding a difficult child. "You. Removing you from our lives is what brought us together."

Whoa. They put aside a centuries' old feud just to kill off little old me. Am I really so bad? *You challenge their rule, and you destabilise their power*, I remind myself. "The council ordered the attack on Haven. They *killed* your people. How could you ever want to side with them?"

I don't know why I'm trying to reason with her, she's already made up her mind. Either she decided that I truly am a threat to the witches and the werewolves can help her, or she doesn't actually care about her people and the council will give her what she wants—my death.

Clasping her hands before her, she gazes down at the ground as though in mourning, taking a deep, shuddering breath before looking back up through tear-filled eyes. "I'm doing what's best for my people, and that's eradicating you. This is the lesser evil."

While her act is pretty good, I don't believe it for a second. She's doing this because it's what's best for her and nothing else. The witches who died at Haven were just collateral.

"Your Majesty, please join us," Councilman Emerald calls, bored of the little show unfolding before him. Ruby seems perfectly content to continue watching us swap insults, but the other councilmen are shifting from foot to foot with impatience.

Irritation flashes across her face at the demand. She doesn't like being told what to do. As quickly as it appeared, it's gone, her expression serene as she glances back at them and nods her head. With one last intense look, the queen walks to the stage and waits by the steps. It takes me a moment to realise that she paused there for a reason. She's waiting for someone to escort her up the stairs. A snort escapes me as she realises that's not coming and she has to walk herself up. Low chuckles fill the clearing as the werewolves watch on.

Mustering as much dignity as she can manage, she tosses her hair over her shoulder, picks up the skirt of her dress, and climbs the five small steps up to the platform. The councillors welcome her with low dips of their heads, a motion she returns.

Now that the queen has joined them, Councilman Ruby steps forward and addresses us once more. "Laelia, we have discussed your crimes, and the only fitting punishment for you is death."

He pauses, which could be for dramatic effect or because voices rise at the comment. My mates all seem furious, growls of varying pitches emanating from them and Atlas shouting denials. I'm surprised by the amount of dissatisfaction that seems to come from the watching werewolves. I've never been popular here, and given the fact I not only have magic but two mates who also possess it, I assumed they would automatically take the council's side.

"However..." Councilman Ruby's voice is amplified so loudly that many of us wince, but it has the desired effect as everyone falls silent and waits for him to continue. "We are a benevolent council, and we have decided to give you one more chance. A final trial, if you will."

My ears are ringing, blocking out most of the noise around me. Another trial. I barely escaped the werewolf trials alive the first time, and I have no doubt that the trial will be rigged so I'm unable to win. Why are they doing this though? Either way, it will end up with my death, so why go through the effort of a challenge? Knowing the council, they probably just

want to put me through as much pain and torture as possible while showing their power as a warning to the rest of our race.

“This is not what we agreed,” Syn roars, the noise breaking through the ringing in my ears. Everything seems to move in slow motion as he spins to face the council, gripping the edge of the stage and snarling up at them. Fear that I’m pretty sure doesn’t belong to me flickers down our muted bond.

Taking a deep breath and steadying my shaking hands, I clear my throat. “What do I get if I play along and complete your trial?”

“Your crimes are severe, so you will face death either way. However, if you win your trial, then your mates and your father will be allowed to go free.”

This is a better option than I thought they would offer me, adding weight to my theory that they are trying to make my death into a spectacle for everyone to watch as a reminder of what happens to those who choose not to follow the council. I’ll hand it to them though, they know how to motivate me.

“You promised she would be safe!”

Seeming to lose control of himself, Syn smashes his fists against the stage, the wood groaning and splitting. His eyes are wide with fear, and he continues to shout up at the councilman. “You promised!”

This is painful to watch, he’s tearing himself apart. He betrayed us, and it turns out that it was all for naught. Despite everything, I feel sympathy for him. He’s still my mate, and I’m convinced that there was a reason for his actions.

Councilman Ruby stiffens as Syn shouts at them and attempts to rip apart the stage one plank of wood at a time. With a growl of frustration, he tilts his masked head down. “You have fulfilled your usefulness to us. You are dismissed from our service.”

The words seem strangely formal, and when Syn falls to the ground as though he’s been struck, I realise they have severed the bond between him and the council. Brutal and

instant, he's been cut loose. Staring at the ground with wide, stunned eyes, Syn slumps, panting as he comes to terms with what just happened.

Ruby makes a noise of disgust, lifts his head, and looks in my direction. "Your trial will be composed of several aspects and will challenge your mind, body, and soul. As such, we will give you the night to rest."

They've not told me what the trial will actually be, and I'm sure it will be the hardest challenge I've ever had to complete. However, the fact that they are giving me time to rest is odd for them. They wouldn't do something like this unless it benefited them in some way, so I'm on edge, waiting for the penny to drop.

I'm not left waiting long.

"To ensure your return, your mates will be staying here with us."

I am already shaking my head before he finishes, my mates shouting out their anger and refusal to be separated from me. Unfortunately, I don't think we're going to have much choice.

"No," I begin, only to be cut off by my group of wolves freezing in place. Not with ice magic like Atlas's, but something else entirely. Was this done by Ruby too, or one of the other councilmen?

All of them are trapped, even their bonds are sluggish, as though they are in a deep sleep—all except for one.

"You will see them in the morning, and they will remain unharmed as long as you do as we say," Councilman Ruby instructs, making it sound so simple. He's discussing my mates' safety and has taken them away from me. Was my father not enough? I feel sick and want to argue, but I have no idea what to say.

The councilman looks down at Syn, shaking his head. "You can take that one with you. We have no need for him anymore." Disgust tinges his voice, and mutters of agreement seem to filter up from the watching werewolves. Syn doesn't have any friends here, and now that he's been cut off from the

council, they view him with even more contempt than they did before.

My skin tingles, and I get the impression that all five of the councilmen are watching me through their masks. The queen steps forward and stands beside Ruby with a wide, sadistic smile. “Your trial will begin in the morning.”

After that, Syn and I were escorted away by several masked wolves who clearly worked for the council. I wanted to fight, to unleash my magic on them, but they already had my friends and mates, so I couldn’t risk acting out in case they hurt them. This meant that although it became harder to breathe with each step I took, I still left.

We’re now at the edge of the forest that protects the city. We’re clearly not welcome in the compound itself, but there’s no way I’m leaving to find somewhere to stay for the night. It would take too long to go back to my old pack, and I couldn’t cope with seeing Selena and having to explain everything that occurred.

Guilt grips me as I pace a groove into the undergrowth, gnawing on my lip as I desperately try to see a way through this. I’m slowly coming to the conclusion that I’m probably not going to make it out of this alive, but if I can save my father, Luna, and my mates, then I will do just about anything.

Star sits by a large tree where I dropped my bag, watching me with mournful eyes, reflecting how I feel. As soon as I knew we were alone, I released her, needing some form of comfort, and she’s always been there for me, even before I met any of my mates. Even just knowing that she’s here, watching and protecting me while I fight not to fall apart, helps soothe me.

Her low warning growl has me looking up in time to see her blocking Syn’s path to me. Just like the other times in the last twenty minutes since we’ve been here, Syn raises his hands and backs away. I’m not ready to speak to him, and I’m

worried I might fall apart completely if he touches me. I don't know how long this is going to last, though, because he's becoming more desperate.

“Laelia, please, listen to me,” he begs. His end of the bond is now fully open, and his emotions are practically flooding through our connection.

Shaking my head, I turn from him and continue pacing. It hurts to look at him—in fact, it hurts to *not* look at him too. I've effectively been banished for the rest of the day, and they sent Syn with me as an insult. He betrayed me and is more interested in explaining himself than helping me.

“I don't have time to listen to your excuses, Syn.” I hardly recognise my own voice, which is tight with tension. “I need to figure out how to save the others.”

It's a line I've used several times now, but instead of backing away and watching me until he can't hold himself back anymore, he does something different. He takes a deep breath and wrings his hands together.

“The council has some way of controlling the madness that the feral wolves fall into.”

Of all of the things he could have said to me, I never expected to hear this. I want to ignore him, but the gravity of what he's saying makes that impossible. Why he's telling me this, I don't know, but I'm about to find out.

I stop and finally turn to look at him. “What do you mean?”

He looks nauseous, his face pale as he continues to twist his hands together nervously. I've never seen him like this, and despite my anger and confused feelings about him, I can't rid myself of the desire to wrap my arms around him.

“The council bonds the lone wolves to them before they are evicted from the packs. This is because the lone wolves are required to come back to the council periodically. They discover who is close to pulling away and force a bond on them. They are then able to control them with the threat of becoming fully feral.”

Scott was once a lone wolf before he met me. I wonder how close he was to receiving this bond. He once made a comment about the council and how he begrudgingly had to bend to their will to make sure he didn't turn feral. The reasoning that lone wolves would be protected against madness if they followed the council's rules seemed odd then, but it makes sense given what Syn is saying. If he's right, then all of those attacks from feral wolves were instigated by the council...

"We always thought it was the distance from a pack that turned them feral, but the council is able to control it," Syn continues, unaware of my inner turmoil. Pausing, he pushes a hand through his hair, looking ragged and worn. "When you were taken, it felt like I lost a part of me. I was surviving, working alongside Joel, but I could feel myself losing my grip on sanity. That's when the council called me back with their bond and twisted my mind until I could think of nothing but getting back to you. It became an obsession, as though you were a drug and I couldn't function without you."

My breath catches in my throat. Now that his bond is open, I can feel it all, even an echo of that madness that was driving him. It's all consuming, and that was just a fraction of what he felt. I don't think he realises that I can feel everything, or perhaps he does and this is his way of showing me he's telling the truth.

"They promised they would help me get to you, and that you would be safe. All I had to do was bring you back." His eyes flash, a sure sign that he's struggling with his wolf. "They threatened to make that final push and turn me feral for good, and I knew they would if I didn't do as they ordered."

"Oh, Syn." Everything makes more sense now, and I ache for him. He had to make this awful choice alone and did the best he could in the situation.

Am I glad that I know he was forced into this and didn't betray me? In a way, I am, as I know he had no other choice. When we were at Haven and safe from the outside world, he settled into his role of being my mate, and there was a point where he actually seemed happier there than among his own

people. I see now that I was right. He probably thought we were beyond the council's reach.

Syn has always been more morally grey than the rest of my mates, and I knew that from the start. The way his mind works is different, but since we bonded, he's been wholly committed to keeping me happy and safe. This was part of the reason I was so surprised and hurt when he betrayed us.

"I promise that I never would have done it unless I thought it was the only way." His eyes are mournful but full of acceptance. He thinks I'm going to push him away. "You were always too good for me. I knew it would never last. Why would the goddess bless someone like me?"

That's the comment that breaks me. My eyes sting with tears, and this time, I don't force them back. Two fat tears roll down my cheeks as I close the distance between us. I'm not sure if it's my own pain I'm feeling or his, but since we're bonded, that's practically the same thing. He hurries to close the distance but hesitates when he's only a step away from me, as though afraid I might reject him or not want his touch.

For a moment, I hold myself back, but I need him, and he needs my comfort despite it all. Taking that final step, I reach up and cup his cheeks between my hands, making sure he's looking at me as I speak. "You are perfect for me, that's why the goddess chose you. This life is a second chance for you."

His eyes seem to clear with my touch, and I see a myriad of emotions flicker across his face, guilt and surprise being the main ones.

"You still want me?" The question comes out quietly and full of vulnerability, pulling at my heartstrings once more. The fact that he thinks I could so easily reject him just goes to show how poorly he's been treated in the past, and how he doesn't trust the power of our bond.

"You're my mate, and I know now why you did what you did. You had no choice, and I will always love you." I say the words slowly, so they have a chance to sink in. Syn's self-worth is so low it almost doesn't exist. He needs to hear this. He also needs to hear how his actions have affected us.

“However, that doesn’t mean you’re instantly forgiven. You should have spoken to me about it. The pain...” I trail off, unable to put what it felt like into words. My body aches with the memory of how it tore through my heart. “I understand, but the consequences of your actions are steep. The others could be killed, Syn.” My hands slip down and grip his shirt, needing support at the very thought of anything happening to them. A few, slow tears roll down my cheeks, and he growls, gently thumbing them away.

“I know they are important to you, and because of that, I work alongside them and help them out,” he explains, lowering his head until his forehead presses against mine. “However, you are my only priority, and you always will be. I told you before, Laelia, that I would do anything for you, and I still would to make sure you’re safe.”

I shudder at the intensity of his words. My inner wolf loves hearing this from my alpha mate. His possessiveness and overprotective nature have always been something that I just had to accept about Syn, just as I have to learn to accept that he will never be best friends with my other mates. He gets along with them *for* me because it makes me happy. In any other situation, he would have nothing to do with them. This is part of who he is, but does that mean it can never change? Should I expect him to?

“We’re a pack now, all of us, and we have to protect each other,” I reply, pulling back slightly so I can look into his face as I speak.

They are not just a group of guys I collected, we’re a family.

He stares into my face, his own expression open, and a tiny frown appears between his brows. He nods. “Yeah, I’m beginning to see that now. Joel’s reaction...”

He trails off, glancing away as if to hide his expression, but I can sense what he’s feeling, and although it confuses him, he feels bad that he caused Joel pain. Perhaps he is warming up to them after all. From the sound of it, he’s never

really had a family, and the one he forged with his pack was torn apart. This is still new to him, and he's learning.

He still has a lot of grovelling to do to make up for this, but I also understand his choices were taken away from him. The council was able to control him with the madness, and I witnessed firsthand how difficult it was to pull him back from it. That the council has this ability is disturbing. Even in the hands of the most benevolent person, that gift is easily manipulated, and the council is anything but saintly.

A sudden thought freezes me to my core. "If they twisted your mind before, they could do it again." I want to trust Syn, but can I if he isn't fully in control of himself? Knowing the council, they would turn him on me again when I need him most.

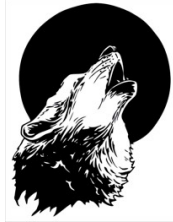
Syn shakes his head, and his grip on my arms tightens. "No, I felt that power over me disappear when they snapped our bond." Hope flashes in his eyes, and it lights up his whole face. "I'm free of them."

Relief hits me like a lead balloon, and I'm able to take a deep breath as that fear is put to rest. I can still feel the madness hovering in his mind, but it no longer feels like a being in its own right. It always felt odd that he was carrying this presence that shifted and changed, but now that the council has cut him off, that feeling has gone. However, I realise that the damage has already been done to him. Some of the madness was from our bond being stretched so far, and some might have been as a result of the trauma Syn went through with losing his pack, but the rest was from the council messing with his mind, and that left a scar. Unfortunately, I don't think that will ever heal, but at least I don't have to worry about the council controlling him again.

I look him over, and the urge to kiss him is so strong that I don't bother to hold myself back. He seems surprised but responds in kind, humming with pleasure against my lips. It's not the deepest kiss, and it only lasts a matter of seconds, but it helps strengthen our bond and settle us. I decide to trust him, sliding my hand into his.

“In that case, I have a plan, and I need your help.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



“Did I tell you how stupid I think this idea is?” Syn whispers to me as we jog through an underground tunnel.

“Yes, repeatedly,” I reply dryly, the ball of stars in my hand casting light ahead of us so we are able to see where we’re going.

In his defence, it is an outrageous plan, and I’ve not exactly been forthcoming with the reasons I’m getting him to sneak me into the city. He hasn’t tried to stop me, helping me without question, but he has made his feelings about this very clear. After the last time I trusted him to lead me somewhere ended in betrayal, you would think I’d be more hesitant about trusting him with the same task, but this time, his bond is open, and I’m able to feel his regret and determination to make it up to me. Overall, it’s his love that convinces me.

We waited until the cover of darkness, and with Syn’s gift of hiding in shadows, he manages to sneak us through the compound. There are only a few patrols on this side of the city, so we don’t come across many wolves. Those we do, we simply wait for them to pass and move past them once they are far enough away not to scent us.

The werewolf trials had taken place in spectacular venues that were almost impossible to imagine, not to mention impossible to hide in a city. How they managed to create them, transport us all, *and* keep them hidden must have been a feat of magic. Looking back on it now, I don’t know how I didn’t

pick up on it before. Why had no one questioned this previously?

A dim, grey light starts to fill the end of the tunnel ahead, getting brighter the closer we get. I call my magic back to me, and the stars in my hands slowly flicker out of existence as we step out of the tunnel and into a large arena. Being back here causes a wave of memories to flood my mind.

We now stand in the battleground of my final trial.

I can't believe I'm here and how much my life has changed since then. Syn stands beside me, his hand brushing against mine in comfort, while Star is on my other side, quietly panting.

That trial was the last time I saw my father. The goal was to cross the arena, rescue the object of value, and touch the large pylon on the other side. What they didn't mention was that the object I had to collect was my father, who was being guarded by a gigantic, snake-like creature. Just to make the challenge that much harder, there was a lake built into the arena. Sounds impossible, right?

It gets worse. The only way for me to get to my father was to swim across the body of water. Just thinking of it causes me to shiver, remembering how the freezing water sucked my energy. Before I was able to reach the other side, something wrapped around my leg and dragged me beneath the surface. It felt old and unimaginably angry, its golden eyes full of malice. It was going to kill me, but something held it back until I was able to call my magic. My body lit up and pushed it back, making it pause. When I channelled more power to defend myself, I was stopped by the darkness inside me. Of course I know now that was part of my goddess given gifts and not a separate presence, so I must have instinctively known the creature was important.

Don't kill it. It's cursed and doing what it has to, the voice instructed, and I listened to it. If the creature didn't intend to harm me, then I didn't want to cause it pain. I'd been hesitant, sure it was going to change its mind and attack me, but for some unknown reason, the creature decided to let me go. The

humanity in its eyes told me that it was an intelligent being and as trapped as I was.

I have no clue where I got the idea that I could break the curse over the creature, nor that it would deign to help me if I did manage that. This could end horribly, and I'd become dinner, yet my instincts are insisting that this is where I need to be. I'm not even sure what made me remember the creature was here in the first place, I just knew that I needed backup, and this is where my gut is telling me to go.

Taking a deep breath, I look around the arena and make sure we truly are alone despite knowing that Syn or Star would have already picked up on that. My eyes fall to the other end of the space where I had last seen my father, the pylon now gone and the grit on the ground no longer stained red with blood.

Moving my eyes to the lake, I can't help but think it looks sinister in the dim light. That could be because I know what's waiting for me beneath the inky black surface.

"It's not too late to turn back." Syn stands strong despite his words. He'll follow me to the ends of the earth, but he won't stop trying to protect me on the way.

"No, this is where I need to be."

I feel a pulsing urge that's calling me forward like a siren's song. The goddess is with me, and my own power is humming in my blood. Closing my eyes, I tilt my head up and let the moon's rays fall over me. I've always found comfort in the moon, even before I discovered my connection with the goddess or my magic manifested, so I let it settle over me now, absorbing the strength it gives me.

Finally feeling ready, I focus on the lake once more and nod my head firmly, more to myself than Syn, but he takes it as confirmation anyway. He takes my hand in his and squeezes it tightly as we begin to walk.

We cross over to the edge of the lake, staring down at the still water. Doubts start to set in, my body remembering the trauma of entering this lake. I don't know what I'm thinking,

this is such a stupid idea, yet it's one I need to see through. Sighing, I shake my head as I remove my shoes, the grainy ground biting into my bare feet. Syn is reluctant to release my hand, but after the third time of almost falling over, he lets it go so I can properly undo my laces.

I really hope I'm right about this, otherwise I'm about to get myself killed.

"Hello?" I call out and take a step into the frigid water, instantly feeling stupid. I don't know if the creature can hear me or understand what I'm saying. Will a creature like that even respond to my call?

"That's how you're going to tackle this? Your grand plan was to stand in the shallows and say hello?" Syn snorts behind me, clearly thinking my planning skills are lacking. I don't blame him, but I've not exactly had much time to formulate a foolproof plan. My instincts are leading the way, and I can't always put the feelings I get into words, so he's just going to have to trust me on this.

Even so, my cheeks tinge pink with embarrassment. "Do you have any better ideas?"

Huffing, Syn steps up to the edge of the lake, but he doesn't go as far as to step in like I have, and I get the feeling it's because he's picking up on the danger lurking in the deep. "Water dragon, we want to talk to you!" he shouts.

Syn knew there was a creature in the lake, but not what it was. When I explained what I was going to do, I told him about my experience with the creature in the last trial. I'm sure it's not called a water dragon, but the description fits, and I have nothing else to call it.

I can't quite tell if he's being serious or not as he hollers, and there isn't the slightest change in the water. "This is ridiculous." Brushing my hair from my face, I will the cold breeze to cool my burning cheeks.

A tiny ripple catches my eye, and as I look across the water, I see two sleek black horns rise from the depths. My heart seems to freeze in my chest as two golden, reptilian eyes

appear, locked on me. I get the distinct impression that it's sizing me up like its next snack.

It's just as terrifying as I remember. My stomach twists, and I have to fight the urge to run away, reminding myself why I'm here. Once it seems like it's not going to leap out of the water and eat me, and I'm able to take a breath again, I clear my throat, praying my voice is steady and clear.

It's not.

"I want to talk to you—" I cut off with a croak, feeling flustered, my hands clenching and unclenching at my sides. There's no point in pretending not to be terrified, as I'm sure the creature can sense it. When I was last here, I picked up on the beast's intelligence, and it will see right through any attempts of hiding my emotions. If I have any hope of getting it to work with me, then I have to be honest with it, even if that terrifies me.

The creature's eyes seem to narrow in derision, writing me off as a waste of time, and it begins to sink back into the water. Why wouldn't it when I couldn't even finish my sentence?

Panic floods my mind, and I splash forward a step, my foot sliding on the muddy ground and steep incline, almost sending me toppling into the water. "Wait! Please. I want to break your curse."

The creature seems to freeze, then deliberately, as if to make it seem even larger, it lifts its body out of the water. Inch by inch, it continues until its head towers above me, blocking my view of the moon. The whole lower half is still concealed by the water, but it's so much larger than I remember. The razor-sharp talons on its front legs glisten in the moonlight, and a loud grumble emits from its chest, its top lip pulling back in a growl.

"Laelia," Syn warns. Many would back away, but he stays behind me, ready to pull me back at a moment's notice, even as the creature lowers its huge, ferocious head until its golden eyes meet mine.

There's a strange flickering sensation in my mind, like I've got butterflies fluttering around and bouncing off my skull. I've never felt anything like it, until a heavy presence settles over me.

I remember you. The powerful, yet feminine voice echoes through my mind. Despite the fact that it's all happening inside my head, I get the distinct feeling that it's not pleased by my presence. *Why have you disturbed me?*

My eyes widen in shock, my body alert as I realise I'm communicating with what is essentially a water dragon via its thoughts. How is it managing this? My mouth opens as though to ask the question, but I stop myself at the last moment. I've already disturbed the creature, which clearly hasn't endeared me to it, so asking pointless questions is only going to anger it further.

Not knowing how to speak to it via my mind, I vocalise my side of the conversation. "I want to free you."

A loud snort makes me jump, my heart skipping a beat, but I refuse to step back and yield ground, as that will just make me look weak. Star growls in warning from the bank, but the creature just ignores her completely.

You truly believe that a tiny being such as you could break my curse? Turning its huge head, the dragon glances at me with one, large glowing eye. While the creature has limited facial expressions, I still get the feeling that it's not impressed with what it sees. *I have been trapped for over a century, child. You might reek of magic, but that doesn't mean you are able to unwind such a curse.*

There's a lot to unpack in her reply, including the fact that she evidently doesn't believe that I'm capable of doing what I say I can do. I'm briefly blown away by the idea that this creature is older than I can comprehend, especially as she's been stuck here for over a hundred years. Taking a deep breath, I focus on the important questions, as I'm not sure how long she will humour me. There are many I could ask, but there's one that has been bothering me for a while now.

"Why did you stop yourself from attacking me?"

From the flicker of interest in her eyes, I know I've taken her by surprise. She wasn't expecting me to ask that. A low hum seems to rumble from her chest, and I'm worried I've offended her, but I realise she's actually thinking. *The hand of the moon goddess lies on you, and I make it a mission of mine not to kill those my sister gifts.* The sensation of amusement tingles through me as she pulls back to stare at me once more. *Plus, you reminded me of myself when I was young.*

Again, I'm not sure how to comprehend this information, particularly that I remind her of herself. It makes me wonder what she was like before she was cursed. However, one word in particular stands out to me—sister.

“Your sister... You're a goddess?”

Syn is probably wondering what in the underworld is happening, as I look like I'm having a one-way conversation with the creature and making grand statements. I dare not look away from the dragon though. While I don't think she's going to attack me at this moment, it would be foolish to turn my back on a predator such as her—not just any predator, but a goddess.

Once upon a time, I was known as the goddess of the beasts. Her weariness passes through to me, reminding me that she's been trapped for so long. It just goes to show that it doesn't matter how strong your power is, anyone can be captured in the right circumstances, even the gods.

Our power is relative to how many subjects we have, their worship fuelling us. After my human lover was killed, I hid in the shadows of my grief. I didn't realise that so much time had passed, nor did I notice how my powers had dimmed. Human lives are so short, and the world had forgotten me. For the briefest of moments, I feel her grief over the loss of her lover and the loss of her followers. I can't even imagine the pain of being forgotten. Anger instantly replaces her sadness, and I know I'm right to fear this being. *Because of this, I was weak, and that allowed me to be captured and cursed to stay in this form.*

My heart bleeds for her, although I will never tell her that. Something, someone, as powerful as her would only take my sympathy as an insult, so I give her what I know she wants instead. “I can help you get your revenge.”

This gets her attention, her golden eyes glittering, and I can practically feel her excitement at the prospect. There’s a slight probing feeling against my mind as she attempts to see if I’m telling the truth, holding herself back from pouncing on the idea.

And what do you want in return for freeing me?

Clever, very clever. She knows nothing is for free. Thankfully for her, our needs align. “Those who trapped you have my family, my pack, and I can’t do this on my own. They have a lot of power, and I need more people on my side.”

I stumble over the word “people,” as I have no idea how to describe her, but I manage to keep going. Emotion laced my words as I spoke, but I’m not embarrassed because it shows how much I care and how invested I am in making this work.

Her eyes narrow slightly, and she releases a long, warm huff of air, almost knocking me back with the strength of it.

I will not hold myself back. I am not one to talk and be diplomatic, she warns. I will tear them apart and make them regret the day they dared to trap me.

She’s going to help us. My heart leaps in my chest, and hope surges through my body as I allow a small smile to pull at my lips. “I would expect nothing less.”

Then let’s see how brave you are, little one. While the words sound like a pet name, there’s still malice in it that makes me shudder. The creature moves back into the centre of the lake, lowering itself so just its head is above the water.

It takes me a moment to realise that I’m going to have to get into the lake with her to uphold my part of the deal. Remembering how cold it was last time, I wince but strip off my jacket and chuck it back at Syn.

I have no idea how I’m going to break the curse, but my instincts are still guiding me to trust the creature, and

unfortunately, that seems to involve getting into the lake.

“I really hope you’re not about to do what I think you are.” Stepping up to the edge of the lake, Syn reaches out and grabs my shoulder, turning me to face him.

“To free the creature, I have to follow her into the water.” Before he can argue, I press my finger against his lips, stilling him with my touch. “I know you didn’t hear what she said, so you’re just going to have to trust me on this.”

“I trust you,” he grumbles through my finger. “It’s the fucking water dragon with evil eyes who’s watching you like a snack that I don’t trust.”

Smiling up at him, I drop my hand to his shoulder and squeeze it gently, appreciating how difficult this must be for him. Directing Star to stay on the bank with Syn, I take a deep breath and glance up at the moon, praying for strength. Bracing myself, I count to three and dive into the water.

The cold hits me immediately. Any thoughts I had of being prepared for how it feels to be submerged in the freezing water were naïve. My body immediately goes into shock. Resurfacing, I gasp on reflex, my heart beating like a jackhammer. My movements become jerky as I fight against the instinct to flail my limbs around. Forcing myself onto my back, I float and take several deep breaths as I work on calming my breathing.

I can’t afford to stay like this for much longer. I can already feel my strength being sapped from my muscles, so as soon as my breathing calms, I begin to swim, needing to get some warmth back into my body. Swimming is a past time of mine. I used to love swimming in the lakes where I grew up, so I’m a decent swimmer. However, in cold water, it’s completely different. Each movement is difficult, but I keep going, swimming towards the creature who watches me with just the top of her head exposed.

As I reach her, she disappears below the surface, taking my hopes of an easy encounter with her. Treading water, I slowly spin in a circle, a nagging feeling in my gut reminding me of the last time I was in this lake. I tell myself that this isn’t the

same and force down the rising panic, attempting to reason with myself. Syn is calling out to me from the bank, and Star is whining, feeling my fear and wanting to be closer to me.

I'm just thinking about turning back when the water shifts around me. Sucking in a shocked breath, I twist around to try and see what's happening. When a talon wraps around my ankle, I shout out with terror, but it's quickly cut off as I'm pulled below the water.

Coldness surrounds me once more, and the blackness of the murky water presses in on me. I'm pretty sure that only the dragon and her prey live down here, but my mind starts to play tricks on me. Panic flares in my chest, and I can't hold my magic back any longer. Stars suddenly surround me and light up the darkness as I'm dragged farther down. The light doesn't penetrate the darkness very far, but it's enough that I can see the creature's back as she pulls me behind her.

She suddenly lets me go, and before I can even think about it, I'm instinctively swimming up towards the surface.

Something slams into my body, knocking precious air from my lungs. Another hit comes from my other side, and I'm sent spinning, but not before I spot the creature. She moves so fast that I almost can't see her. Hit after hit knocks me about, my body aching and my lungs screaming. I'm out of air, and my body is battered, my limbs so cold I can barely feel them. My vision begins to become black at the edges.

Is this how the creature breaks her curse, or was she just toying with me? Was this all an elaborate trick to get me into the water so she could hunt me for sport? I don't understand why she would kill me when she has the chance to be free, unless my death is the only thing that will free her.

I'm dying, and I am no longer afraid. My only regret is that I never got the chance to say goodbye to my mates. At least the creature will finally be free, so some good will come from my death.

A bright light burns through the dark water, warming my body. I must be hallucinating, the shock of the cold water making me believe that I'm warm. Movement catches my eye,

and I turn my head sluggishly in time to see the dragon surrounded by the light. With a flash so bright that I have to squeeze my eyes shut, the water around me shifts.

When I open my eyes, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen is floating in front of me. Long dark hair floats around her, and her facial features are beautiful but harsh, all sharp angles and perfect pale skin. Her eyes give her away, the golden irises shimmering in the unnatural light, and two, tiny curled horns poke from her hair.

The lack of oxygen and shock finally take their toll on me, and my eyes close, my mind starting to shut down. I feel a gentle set of hands on my cheeks, but I don't have the energy to react as she lifts my head and presses her lips to mine. Shock registers in my mind, but it's only as the burning in my throat suddenly eases that I'm able to open my eyes. My lungs fill, and instead of choking from the water that's now flooding them, I instantly feel better. That's when it hits me.

I'm breathing underwater.

Frantically reaching for my throat, I find three little slits on either side of my neck. She's given me gills. She's smiling, enjoying my reaction, her teeth pointed and sharp.

You broke my curse. Tilting her head to the side, she watches me with her golden eyes as though she can see straight through my chest and into my soul. Whatever she finds, she seems to be pleased.

Worried that I'm suddenly going to be drowning again, I feel on edge, wishing we could have this conversation on solid ground, yet she isn't in a hurry. Question after question fills my mind, as I have no idea how I managed to break her curse. I press my hand against my throat and attempt to speak, but no sound comes out. I have no idea how to reply to her, but thankfully, she seems to know exactly what I want to say.

Someone had to be willing to die to save me. That was the only way to break the curse. The voice in my mind sounds old and powerful, as though her dragon is still speaking to me. *You showed great courage, proving that you are worthy of my help.*

Her comment from before makes more sense now. I assumed she simply meant that I'd have to be brave to climb into the lake with her, because honestly, getting into pitch-black water with a freaking dragon takes a lot of courage. What she really meant was that she'd have to take me to the point of death and see if I was still willing to save her. At no point had I tried to use my power to save myself, which is strange because that's become my first reaction after my intense training with Luna and my mates. It's as though I knew she wasn't actually going to kill me.

Twisting to tread water and keep myself in place, I wince at the pain in my abused body.

I apologise for your injuries. It was the only way.

I can't say that I fully understand, but it obviously worked, and she rewarded me in kind. Having been trapped in this lake for so long, I would have thought she'd be desperate to get out, yet she seems to be hesitating. Tilting her head upward, she stares towards the surface, longing painted across her beautiful face.

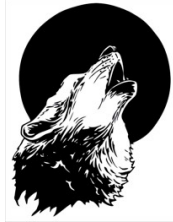
No one will remember me up there.

The voice is so quiet in my mind, I almost think I imagined it. This fearsome goddess has incredible power, and she's still afraid of the world above. I suppose the wide world above is scary after being down here so long. Everything will have changed, and she won't recognise anything. That doesn't mean that it's all bad though. My world has changed completely over the last few months, both for good and bad, but I met some amazing people in the process, and I wouldn't change it. She can be anyone she wants to be. There's nothing holding her back.

Her golden eyes shift to me, looking thoughtful. *Yes, it is time I forged a new future for myself. You are very wise for one so young*, she replies, and I realise she had been reading my thoughts the entire time. Before I can fully process that, a slow, malice-filled grin pulls at her lips, revealing her long, pointed teeth.

Let's go get our revenge.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Staring up at the exterior of a huge arena, I shake my head. Of course it's in an arena. It's not the one we were in last night, but a whole new one that I've not seen before. How many of these things does the council have? I know they've used magic to keep them hidden, and that will have helped with construction, but it must have cost a fortune in materials and labour. After all, they are hiding their use of magic from their people, so how they've managed to get away with it blows my mind.

Our escorts have formed a circle around us while we wait for the signal that we're allowed to enter, and I have no doubt that they would attack at the first sign of us showing any hint of disobeying their rules.

The rules are simple—keep quiet and follow orders.

After a sleepless night, Syn and I look a little worse for wear. Making the most of what might have been our last night together, we spent a majority of it talking and staying close. There was nothing sexual about it, mostly because we were in the woods with little shelter, but also because we're still healing from his betrayal. We shared everything that needed to be said with our words, and everything that didn't with our bond, becoming closer than I ever thought possible.

Thanks to this, it makes keeping quiet easy. We've already said our goodbyes should this not work out, and we promised to find each other in paradise where I know I will eventually

be reunited with my mates. Holding hands, we do as we were told and wait, the chill from the early hour finally easing.

The goddess I rescued, who told us to simply call her Belua, disappeared to hunt, something I'm exceedingly glad I don't have to witness. She may look beautiful and young in her human form, but I know what hides beneath her skin, and it terrifies me. She didn't tell us what she's hunting, and honestly, I don't want to know, but I'm pretty sure it's not the rabbits and squirrels we've seen in the forest. She promised to return when we needed her most, and I had no real choice other than to agree. I wasn't about to have a fight with a goddess who could change into beasts.

Unlike last time, we didn't sneak into the city, and instead, we walked proudly through the main roads. Once again, it was strangely quiet, but we were aware of the eyes watching us. We weren't stopped, and it was only when we reached the meeting point from yesterday that several werewolves stepped out. They were all in human form and wearing matching uniforms, but I could hear the soft padding of wolves in their animal form nearby.

I didn't recognise any of them, but the hatred in their eyes as they looked at Syn told me they worked for the council. One of them gruffly informed us that we were to follow him, and his tone left no room for argument. At that point, with my father, friends, and mates at risk, I wouldn't dare do anything to jeopardise their safety. The remainder of the walk was silent, and thankfully, not too far. Stepping through the buildings and empty streets, it felt like a ghost town.

Now, as the sun lights up the sky and burns away the early morning mist, I quietly take in everything around me, enjoying the beauty of the forest despite the situation we're about to face.

“Do you think she's coming back?”

Syn's voice is so quiet, I almost don't hear it. He's risking a lot by talking about Belua while we're surrounded by enemies, but when no one shouts at us for speaking to each other, I assume they've not heard us.

“I trust her.” Squeezing his hand, I hope he understands what I’m not saying.

Belua is currently our secret weapon. She wants her revenge, and from the wrath that fills her, I have no doubt that she will get it. She will return. The council will have no idea that we managed to convince the goddess of beasts to fight with us after I rescue my family.

I fully intend to win the trial and save everyone, but knowing the council and queen, they will have some sort of fail-safe in place to make sure that doesn’t happen. They are not willing to lose, and for them, my death is the only acceptable outcome. Whether I win or not doesn’t stop the fact that they are planning to kill me, they’ve been very clear about that, it simply means that my mates will be allowed to go free if I win. Of course, I have my own plan, and that includes taking the queen and council down as soon as I get my mates and family back.

The council doesn’t know that I still have access to my magic and the power of a goddess in my blood.

“Come,” one of the guards barks, not bothering to wait and see if we follow.

The harsh tone breaks through my thoughts, and I glance at Syn. His expression is serious, not giving any sign of emotion, but his bond is fully open. Waves of his love and trust in me fill me with confidence and warmth. I’m not doing this alone.

You will never be alone, little moon, the goddess whispers into my mind, reminding me once more how blessed I am.

I send my own wave of feeling back at Syn, squeezing his hand. As one, we stride forward, our shoulders rolled back and heads held high as we follow the werewolf into the tunnel that I assume leads inside the arena. A sense of déjà vu washes over me as we walk through the dim light, reminding me of what we were doing last night. This time, though, we’re surrounded by werewolf guards, and my anxiety is for a totally different reason.

Stepping out from the tunnel, I shield my eyes from the bright lights beaming down on me, my sight needing time to adjust. From the hiss beside me, I know Syn is having the same issues. Star isn't bothered at all, her trot at my side never faltering.

Blinking my poor, abused eyes, I take in the space before me. It looks like a football stadium, the tiered seating high above us and full of bodies. As I take a closer look, I realise there's a deliberate divide between the two sides of the arena, which is not a coincidence like I first suspected. One side of the seating contains werewolves in their various groups and packs, and the other side seems to seat witches.

They don't look comfortable. In fact, it appears to be the exact opposite. Fear, anger, and all the emotions in between are on the witches' faces, and for once, I don't think it's aimed at me. They are *not* happy to be here. Did they have a choice? Knowing the queen, I seriously doubt it.

Glancing over at the werewolves, I can't help but notice how their numbers seem lower than they originally did when I first competed in the trials. I noticed it last night, but in the light of day in a stadium this size, it's much clearer to see. What has caused the decline in the numbers?

We've entered the stadium at one end, and at the far end is a raised platform higher than the rest of the seating. There, the council and the queen wait for us, the former wearing their masks and the latter wearing a smirk. She looks perfect, while I look like I've been dragged through a hedge. Seated together on six large chairs that look suspiciously like thrones, they seem to be waiting for something specific.

I lower my gaze to see what awaits me. The actual arena itself has been shielded by several huge partitions. Fabric hangs across the width of the pitch, blocking off my view of whatever challenge awaits me, yet it's hung just below the seating, giving those watching a perfect view. The ground is made up of dirt and sand and doesn't give me any hint of what I might be facing. I guess I'll be going into this blind then.

Our escort abruptly stops, fans out, and waits for us to pass. Once we have, I glance over my shoulder and watch as they all step back and form a wall of muscle, blocking the exit completely.

“Welcome.” The voice of Councilman Ruby echoes around the stadium, magically enhanced so no one can mishear him. Silence falls over the stands, and all heads turn to the platform where the council and queen wait. Once again, Councilman Ruby seems to be taking the role of spokesperson for the rest of the silent figures, stepping up to the half wall that surrounds the platform, stopping him from falling to the arena below. Shame.

“This is the final trial for Laelia of no pack,” he continues, his masked head turning as he looks around the stadium. “She has been found guilty of treason to both werewolf and witch kind, and as such, will be put to death.”

My death has been spoken about so candidly for so long now that I only experience a slight twinge at the sentence. I’ve almost died so many times in the last several months, yet here I am. Focusing on surviving is what will get me through, not the death that’s waiting for me.

Loud voices begin to reach me, mainly from the witches, but many of them are raising concerns. I can’t quite make out what they are saying, but it’s definitely not in agreement with the council. When I was still at Haven, I had followers, so it’s quite possible that they are here now. Hope blooms in my chest. If the worst happens and things don’t work out, would they fight with me? Even the werewolves look uncomfortable. I know it will be hard to convince them to fight with us, as the packs that are here seem to be the ones that already follow the council.

Councilman Ruby ignores the rumblings and continues on as though nothing happened, his voice rising above us all. “This trial is for her to prove herself and earn a death worthy of a warrior. If she fails, then she and her mates will be put to death like vermin.”

Movement behind him pulls my attention to the queen, who is standing from her throne. Her dress is an angelic cream colour, and her golden curls almost glow in the light. With her hands clasped loosely in front of her, she addresses the crowd. “We have all been brought together for a joint purpose, and as such, we can now start to put the pain of the past behind us and move forward to a brighter future.”

Why is she suddenly acting like a sweet, virginal queen who only wants the best for both races? The only thing she wants is power, and she’s figured out that partnering with the council is the only way she’s going to be able to do that. The urge to roll my eyes at her flowery words is strong, and in the end, I give in to it, shaking my head. From Syn’s snort, I know he’s not convinced by her act either. I observe the reactions of those watching. Most of them seem suspicious and unsure.

For years, both races have been taught to hate each other, and now they are being brought together without warning and being told that werewolves and witches are going to build a future together. I don’t blame them for being wary.

“Laelia.” Councilman Ruby finally addresses me, my spine going rigid. “Your final trial is before you, made up of three different challenges. Once you pass one stage, the next will be revealed to you. Reach this side of the arena, and you win the trial.” He tilts his head to one side. “Do you have any last words?”

I’m surprised that he’s giving me the opportunity to speak out. I could say anything against them right now, but there’s only one thing on my mind—my family. I include my father, mates, and Luna in that category, because to me, that’s exactly what they are. Blood doesn’t make a family, actions do, and they’ve proven over and over again that they are part of mine. “Where is my family?” My voice is steady and loud, and despite the fact I’m not using magic to project my voice, I know they hear me.

“They are here, safe and waiting for you.” Taking the queen’s hand, Ruby stands tall and turns to address the crowd. “Let the final trial begin.”

The large fabric partition that hangs before me drops to the ground, and I find an archway waiting for me. A shudder passes through me as I remember the last archway I had to pass through, but I try to push that to the back of my mind so I can focus. I can't afford to get distracted. Stepping forward, I frown when I find nothing else in the space except the archway in front of the next partition.

Hearing a noise behind me, I turn and find the guards blocking Syn's path. He's throwing himself around, trying to break through and be with me, but to no avail.

"She must do this alone," the werewolf guard who led us here barks, his face set in a sneer as he glares at my mate.

Syn seems determined to get past them, getting more and more worked up as they start to use force to disable him. *No, no, they can't hurt him.* "Syn, stop." My voice is gentle, and as he looks up at me, I push my feelings for him down the bond, comforting him. "I need you to be safe for me to complete this."

His eyes clear of the madness, and I know he understands. He nods and relaxes in the guard's hold. Managing to muster up a tiny smile, I make sure he's okay and turn to face the archway.

Everyone seems to fall silent as I walk towards the arch, the only sounds made by my feet crunching on the gravel. I can't see anything on either side of the stone structure, and in the centre is just a reflection of me. Unsure how to proceed, I look up, searching for answers, but Councilman Ruby begins speaking again.

"Warriors are wise and can see different meanings behind the challenges they must face. As such, the first part of this challenge is a riddle. Once you know the answer, step to the arch and give the password. If you are correct, you will be allowed through, and if not, the archway will tear you apart."

An arch that can tear me to pieces. How wonderful. I shouldn't have really expected anything less. The council and the witch queen have teamed up to create this after all, so I'm expecting it to be twisted.

“You have one minute to work it out, and your time starts as soon as the riddle has been read aloud. Here it is. What is there one of in every corner and two of in every room?”

My mind goes blank. I’ve always hated riddles, my brain not thinking in the right way to work out each answer. My mind twists and picks apart the question, attempting to look for every angle. *Two in every room. Could it be windows? No, that doesn’t work. One in every corner... Radiators? No, that can’t be right.* Time ticks down, and I get more and more frantic as I try to work out the answer. *See the different meaning behind the challenge*, that’s what the councillor said, so maybe the question doesn’t mean physically. An answer suddenly comes to me, one that fits, but I’m not sure if I’m right. It’s a twist on what might be expected, which is usually exactly what a riddle needs.

“You have ten seconds remaining,” the queen’s angelic voice rings out, causing me to grit my teeth in annoyance. She’s enjoying every moment of this.

“Shit,” I curse under my breath, jogging over to the archway with my heart beating like a drum. Do I risk using my answer? I don’t have much of a choice either way, and I don’t have any other ideas about what the password could be. I’m almost out of time. Taking a deep breath and trusting in the goddess, I place my hands on either side of the archway.

“The answer is the letter O.” The arch seems to buzz under my hands, and with a confidence I don’t feel, I step through. A tingling sensation passes through me, but other than that, I feel nothing else, no agonising pain as I’m ripped apart. I hastily step through to the other side just in case it made a mistake, and I realise I must have got the answer right.

I did it.

I let out a breathy laugh in disbelief. When I was preparing myself for this trial, I never thought I would be facing a riddle. Agility and fighting, yes, those were the exact trials I was expecting, so when he read out the riddle, I thought it was game over.

“You completed the first part of this trial.” There are no congratulations in the councilman’s statement. In fact, he doesn’t sound pleased by this turn of events. A small cheer comes from the stands at the announcement, and it makes me feel giddy. Perhaps I really can do this.

“Next, a warrior is strong in battle, even when the odds are stacked against them,” Ruby announces, his voice returning to his usual timbre. “Using only a dagger, you must defeat your opponent.”

The partition falls before I can comprehend his words, and I come face to face with my opponent.

Alpha Bates.

His smirk instantly raises my internal hackles. This male has always put me on edge with the way he looks at me. His hatred for me is so strong that he can barely control himself around me, and he’s finally been given the chance to kill me in front of all these people.

This is the kind of challenge I was expecting, and for once, I feel okay about it. I’m not a fighter, and it’s going to take everything that I’ve got, but I *want* this. A confrontation between us has been a long time coming, and it looks like now is my chance. He took Nicolai from me and is a threat to everyone, both werewolf and witches alike. Everything is coming together. I can feel the goddess with me, and with Syn observing and Star at my side, I know I can do this.

Crossing over the fallen partition, I see a plinth to my right, and on closer inspection, I see a single dagger waiting for me on a black velvet cushion. Picking it up, I test the weight in my hand. It’s a decent blade and sharp enough to do what I need it to. Nodding in satisfaction, I turn to face my opponent.

Smirking, Bates crosses his arms over his chest. Everything about his posture looks relaxed and completely unbothered about the fact that he’s about to take part in a fight to the death. “Hello, little halfling. Are you ready to face your death?”

Snorting, I shake my head at his intimidation tactics. “Funny, I was just about to ask you the same thing.” Raising my brows, I nod towards his booted feet. “Are your feet okay?”

He doesn't want to ask, but his confusion and curiosity get the better of him. “My feet?”

“Yeah, from when you ran away from Haven when it looked like you might be beaten. Your poor feet must be so sore.” I really shouldn't bait him, but I just can't help myself. “You won't have that option this time, I'm afraid.”

He growls, his hands partially shifting so his claws appear between his knuckles. “I'm going to make you wish you were never born.”

I've been moving slightly the whole time we've been talking, keeping my steps light and falling into the defensive stance Atlas taught me, so when Bates finally loses his patience and leaps forward, I'm ready for him. Jumping to one side as he barrels towards me, I slash out with my dagger, catching his arm as he passes.

The disadvantage may not look huge, but he has his full strength, speed, and skills as a werewolf. His claws alone are like ten versions of my dagger. Realising that I'm out here alone, I glance back to see Star is being restrained by some sort of force, unable to assist me. They were serious when they said I could only use a dagger.

That half second glance costs me, and Bates is on me. It's a stupid mistake, I shouldn't have taken my eyes off him, I know better than that. Barrelling towards me, Bates slashes at my exposed side. Crying out in pain, I stumble backward, pressing a hand against the wound. Thankfully it's not too deep, but that manoeuvre could have killed me if he hit me harder. Brandishing my dagger, I try to wound him back, but he's too quick, twisting out of the way and slashing at me with his claws.

I need to be smart about this. I'm never going to out fight him when he's got his claws and superior skills, which means I have to use my brain to figure out how to beat him. Scanning

him for weaknesses, I try to figure out any places he leaves unguarded when he attacks. Unfortunately, I have to focus so completely on making sure I don't get sliced to pieces that I struggle to find one. The only thing I notice is that he favours his left leg, preferring to keep his weight off the right.

In a move too fast for me to track, he manages to barge into my left shoulder, the force causing me to twist and fall to the ground. From the pain screaming there, I'd say it was dislocated, but I don't have time to worry about that. Scrabbling to my knees, I crawl forward so I can get to my feet. That never happens, though, as a booted foot stamps on the back of my leg, the pain making black stars appear in my vision as I'm pinned and unable to move. Pressing his knee into my back, he keeps me immobile with his weight. A hand yanks on my hair, and I cry out as he twists my head and slams my cheek into the dirt so he can look at my face.

"It looks like our fight is over," he coos, his features twisted into an evil smile. He scrapes his claws across my cheek, but the sting of the small cuts is nothing compared to the panic I'm experiencing. I can't believe this is how I'm going to die.

"It's a shame." He clucks his tongue, his voice sounding anything but upset like he's claiming to be. "I would have liked to stretch this out."

That's when I realise what his true weakness really is—his ego.

Forcing myself to laugh, I roll my eyes up so I can see him and raise my brows. My heart is pounding, and I'm so afraid of the fact that this might be it and I'll never see my family again, but I know I need to keep my calm for this to work. Channelling my anger, I focus on all the shit Bates has put me through.

"Then let me go and let's have a real fight." Amazingly, my voice is steady, containing only a hint of anger. "Are you really going to stab me in the back like a coward? I suppose you already proved yourself to be one during the fight at Haven, so I shouldn't be surprised."

I don't have to wait long to see that my jibes work.

"Get up," he growls, his anger palpable as he shoves my face into the dirt once more.

His weight finally lifts from my back, and he steps backward to allow me up. That's not part of my plan though. Rolling over, I swing my leg out and hook it around his right ankle—the very ankle I noticed he was avoiding putting weight on—knocking it out from under him. He falls to the ground with an agonised cry.

I move instinctively, my training from Joel and Atlas kicking in, as I climb onto his fallen body and pin him down as best as I can with my small stature. It's the knife pressed against his jugular that makes him still beneath me. I have to be quick, as I know he'll figure out a way to get me off him once the shock has worn off. When something like fear flashes in his eyes, I bare my teeth and snarl in his face.

"This is for Nicolai."

With a quick slash of my blade, I cut his neck, and he bleeds out beneath me. He moves his mouth, but no sound comes out. The light fades from his eyes, and he dies like the piece of dirt that he is. I should feel horrified by the fact that I just took a life. When I killed Grove, it made me physically sick, yet this doesn't seem to have affected me at all.

Standing up, I climb off his rapidly cooling corpse, grimacing at the pain in my shoulder and the blood staining my clothes. I prod at my shoulder and wince, but it feels better than it did previously, and the fact that I can now move it makes me think it popped back into the socket when I hit the ground. My limbs start to shake now that the instant threat to my life is over. *You can do this*, I tell myself like a mantra. *One more to go.*

A strange noise catches my attention, and I realise it's applause. It's quiet and scattered, but it's there all the same. I glance over to the side where the werewolves watch, expecting them to be snarling and growling at me for killing one of their own. However, I notice several nodding their heads towards

me in respect. Turns out that Bates wasn't universally liked by everyone who lived here after all.

"You have completed your second task, and your final challenge waits for you," Ruby calls out, silencing everyone once again. He doesn't sound happy, and sure enough, when I turn to look up at the platform, the queen is wearing a scowl, and the councilman's body is rigid. This isn't going to plan for them, and I really shouldn't, but a smile pulls at my lips.

"A warrior needs to make difficult decisions for the betterment of their people."

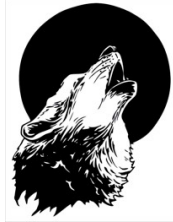
An awful, sinking feeling fills my gut like lead, my body feeling chilled as my instincts try to warn me. I don't like the sound of this, and I'm sure the council would have left the hardest task for last.

Sure enough, Councilman Ruby sounds smug as he announces my task. "You have to choose one of the three prisoners to execute. Choose wisely."

Execute... No. This is like the challenge the queen gave me in Haven before the attack. I'll bet this was her doing. Before I can fall into my spiralling panic, the partition drops, taking my heart with it as I see the three prisoners waiting for me to end their lives.

Syn, my father, and Luna.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



All sound is suddenly drowned out by the ringing in my ears. From the corner of my eye, I see a commotion going on in the stands, aggressive movements and waving of fists. Despite the fact that I can't hear what they are yelling, the atmosphere becomes charged. The council has misjudged this part of the trial if they thought it would gain them more support.

In a twisted way, I can see why they chose to make this part of the trial public. In forcing me to kill one of my loved ones, they were hoping to make me out to be the bad guy to those watching. With a witch's and two werewolves' lives on the line, both races would become emotionally invested. However, it's backfiring on them, because it's not me the crowd is angry with.

What the crowd is doing is currently the least of my worries though, as I stare at the horror before me. One of them has to die at my hand for the others to survive. I feel sick, my body wired so tightly that I'm trembling with the effort to stop myself from running forward.

My eyes flit over the three prisoners. A guard stands behind each of them, pressing a knife to their necks. If I step one foot out of line, they will kill them. Bound in reinforced rope designed to keep werewolves restrained, they all show signs of being beaten, their faces bruised and bloody.

Syn's upper lip is pulled back in a snarl, and his eyes glow with his wolf. They must have found a way to stop him from

shifting, as I have no doubt he would have lost his battle with his wolf by now. They must have taken him when they separated us and forced me to continue with the trial alone. I should have known the council would try something like this.

When I glance at Luna, guilt rises within me as I see her poor swollen face. She's only here because of me. When our eyes meet, though, there's a fire in her gaze that promises vengeance—not against me, but those who dare to hurt us. She may be sagging against her restraints, but her inner strength shines through.

Finally, I drag my attention to my father. He's the hardest for me to see like this. He was hurt in my previous trial because of me, and now he's been taken and beaten once more, but as my eyes flit to his face, the anger and pain I expect to see isn't there. Instead, all I see is love and pride.

No. I can't do it. I *won't* do it.

If I don't, my other mates will die. Can I sacrifice one so the others will live? Some might say the overall sacrifice is worth it, but there is no way I could take any of their lives. I could never live with myself. *What do I do?*

"Laelia," my father calls out, his voice barely a croak. "Don't ever give up. I believe in you. If you must take a life to save the others, take mine. I've lived my life, and you are the best thing that ever happened to your mother and me."

"Dad..." Tears roll down my face, and Star whines at my side, her grief showing as sparkling tears drip from her eyes. I have no words to express how I'm feeling. Does he really think I could ever kill him? Having his blessing to end his life so the others survive only makes this harder.

The dagger I used to kill Bates suddenly feels heavy in my hand, and I drop it to the ground, not wanting to touch it. Breathing becomes difficult as my mind becomes blank, and all ideas of escape and plans to get out of this alive have fled.

"No, killing her father would destroy her," Syn argues, shaking his hair from his face. "Laelia, we know my life is tied to yours."

The meaning behind his words is clear to me. Beyond being my mate, Syn and I are bonded differently thanks to the madness. When I die, he will die with me, the bond taking him to the grave. Although I planned to leave this arena alive and with my family, it's looking like that's not going to be the case. If I'm killed like the council and queen have declared, then Syn will die anyway.

"You should kill me. I know you'll be with me in paradise. I'm ready to go." Our bond is wide open, and for the first time, I can't sense any of the madness that plagues him. He knows what he's saying and that I understand his double meanings. He's willing to die for the others' sake.

Could I ever take his life though, even if it meant saving the others? It would destroy me, and I would rather cut out my own heart than hurt my family.

There is no sign of Belua, my secret weapon, and other than Star, I'm all alone in making this decision. My other mates are hidden somewhere, but because I've not seen them, I have no idea if they are actually safe and unharmed. My magic is mighty, but there's no way I could make it out of here without someone getting hurt. Attempting to take out the three guards before me is out of the question, as I don't fully trust my aim.

Feeling completely lost and torn, I let out an agonised cry and drop to my knees. I want to rage and scream and sob. It's not fair. Why is this happening to us? Why can't we just live in peace?

"Great goddess, please, I'm begging you. Help me. I can't do this," I whisper aloud, tears rolling down my cheeks. I know I'm stronger than this, but I feel beaten and helpless. Clasp my hands together, I rock forward on my knees, reciting the prayer over and over.

Oh, little moon, the goddess murmurs in my mind. I will always be with you, but you don't need me. You have the strength within.

I so desperately want to cry out that I do need her, but she's right, I need to do this on my own. I've been given this

power for a reason, and strength isn't always physical. I have endured so much and haven't let the darkness take away my love of life. The council may have taken away my control, but there is always a different option. I might die today, but at least it will be on my own terms.

Taking a deep breath, I wipe away my tears and lift my head. A nudge at my side has me turning to run my hand through Star's long fur, using her presence to give me strength. Standing, I brush my hands over my clothes, removing the dust and grit from the ground.

"Laelia, what is your decision?" Councilman Ruby calls out with barely disguised glee. My little breakdown was exactly what they wanted, and now they wait for the final act.

Well, I'm not about to give them what they want.

Calling my magic, I throw it towards the guards who hold knives to the throats of my loved ones. Gasps and shouts fill the air, but I'm so focused on the glowing globe that now surrounds the guards that I hardly notice it. Everyone within the ball of stars is frozen in place. Unfortunately, that includes Syn, my father, and Luna, as I don't have the finesse to separate them yet. It does mean that, for the moment, they are safe from injury. It takes my full attention to form it, but now that it's complete, I just have to make sure I send a constant stream of power into it.

Knowing they are safe for the moment, I stare up at the council and queen on the platform, glaring at them defiantly. I shift my attention to the stands and take in the anger, confusion, and fear on the crowd's faces. This is my moment. Summoning all my courage, I clear my throat and jab an accusing finger towards the council.

"Can't you see what they are doing here?" I walk in a slow circle, making sure I address everyone. "All I want is peace between our two people, and *they* are the ones inciting war. *They are* the ones who are forcing me to kill. I belong to both races, and I want to see them flourish." Whether everyone believes me, I don't know, but I hope they can hear the sincerity in my voice. There have been cracks showing in the

leadership of both the werewolves and witches for a while, so it might not take much convincing. “I know you can see this is wrong, and I won’t be a part of it any longer.”

I’m surprised that the council isn’t stopping me. After all, I’m trying to turn their people against them, yet they stoically watch on. Perhaps they are surprised by the fact that I’m somehow managing to use my magic and are trying to piece it together. Either way, I’m going to make the most of this time.

“The council has magic.” Although my voice isn’t amplified by magic like Ruby’s, it seems to carry its own weight, catching everyone’s attention. My declaration seems to break some sort of spell over them, their blinking eyes looking around as though a veil has been lifted from their sight. “Look around you. How is it possible for all of these huge arenas to exist without humans discovering you? They have been hiding it from you this whole time, yet they persecuted me for having it. You’ve got to ask yourself why. Why are they so afraid of me having magic?”

“Enough.”

Councillor Ruby’s voice rings out, sharp and full of authority. If they are only stepping in now, then I hit on something they don’t want to share. If they really think that I’d stop simply because they ordered it, then they don’t know me at all.

“They have also produced a virus that only affects werewolves. They created it as a way to control us. I know this because they killed my mate, and it’s only through the blessing of the goddess that I have him with me today.” Voice cracking, I clear my throat but don’t try to hide my distress. I turn to address the witches and point towards the woman in question. “The queen is not innocent either, and I know you’ve begun to see it. She’s been working with the werewolves while inciting fear to keep you all under her control.”

The queen steps up to the wall of the platform, raising her hands as though to calm everyone, her face the picture of innocence. “These accusations are outrageous. Laelia is a traitor and a liar, do not listen to her—” She never gets to

finish, because those watching begin to shout over her. More and more voices join in until the noise is almost deafening, but I manage to make out several of the calls.

“Let her speak!”

“You’re the liars!”

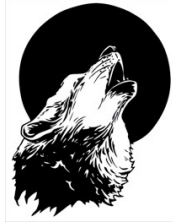
“You’ve been going behind our backs for years!”

If I thought the atmosphere was tense before, then this is unbelievable. There’s going to be a riot, and I need to seize the opportunity. Fights are already breaking out in the stands where differing views collide, but I need them to focus.

“Don’t fight each other. They are not your enemy. The council and queen are the ones who need to be removed from power. Fight with me and help me stop their tyranny!” I shout. I can feel the goddess’s approval as a roar of agreement rises up from the crowd. Taking a deep breath, I turn to face the raised stage once more.

“Yes, Councillor Ruby, I have made my decision.” The commotion dims to hear my words. “I choose not to kill any of them.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Pandemonium ensues. My final words seem to have acted as a rallying cry, and witches and werewolves alike leap from their seats.

“Get them under control!” one of the councilmen shouts. Guard after guard files out of hidden doorways and into the stands to subdue their own people. I notice several witches also appear, but they seem disturbed to be here and uncomfortable with the idea of fighting other witches. This has probably bought me a little time, but I don’t have long.

Help is coming, little moon, the goddess whispers into my mind, reassuring me with a wave of her strength and love.

Running forward, I reach into my dome of stars and remove the knife at Syn’s neck, throwing it away before repeating the action with my father and Luna. No one moves, my magic holding them firmly. Untying them is difficult due to my fumbling hands and the reinforced ropes, but I move as quickly as I can until they are all undone. It won’t be long until the council sends someone in to restrain me, so I have to be fast. Finally, after what feels like forever, they are untied, and I drop the dome around them.

Syn instantly shifts and turns on his captor, tearing the male apart one limb at a time. I needn’t have worried about my father, as he’s already fighting his guard and has the upper hand. As second-in-command of his pack, he’s the pack enforcer. Sending Star to his aid, I run to help Luna, my hands already glowing with magic. Her power is still being blocked,

but that doesn't mean she's helpless. She's holding her own against the guard, but I send a high kick towards his ribs, taking him by surprise. My blow knocks the air from him and gives Luna the advantage as she jumps forward and smacks him in the temple. That's all it takes to knock him out, his body crumpling to the ground.

I check his pulse to make sure he really is unconscious, then I get to my feet and throw my arms around Luna, my heart aching as I see her awake and relatively unharmed. "Are you okay? I'm so—"

"If you say you're sorry, I'll kick your ass," she murmurs against my shoulder, squeezing me back just as tightly.

Choking back my emotions with a laugh, I change my words. "I'm so glad you're okay." Pulling back, I look into her face and run my eyes over her once more to be sure. Movement from the platform quickly dulls my mood as I realise the mammoth task that awaits me. "I have to get up there. This won't end until they are dealt with."

A sober expression replaces her smile, and she nods. We both know what I mean by that, and I'm not going to put the weight of that responsibility on anyone other than myself. The queen and council will never step down willingly, and I doubt we could contain them for the rest of their lives. They are too good at manipulating others, and it's too dangerous to allow them to live.

"We'll get you up there, Laelia, my love."

At the sound of my father's voice, I spin around with my heart in my throat, not quite believing that this is actually happening. Barrelling into me, my father crushes me with his embrace and kisses the top of my head. We really don't have time for this, but I don't have the heart to push him away. We've been separated for so long that it feels like a lifetime, and I don't know when I'll have another chance to hug him. At one point, I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to.

Syn snarls at my side, his huge wolf nudging me with his large head to get me going. He's right, but something is bothering me about the arena.

“Where are the other guards?” I ask with suspicion, glancing around as though they might pop in from thin air. “It’s too quiet.” They could all be fighting up in the stands, but as I count their numbers, I’m convinced there were more than that originally. Not to mention, where are the ones who escorted us here?

We just start to jog towards the end of the arena and the door that I’m assuming leads up to the stands when a huge, booming noise fills the arena, the ground shuddering beneath my feet. Gasping, I throw my arms out to catch my balance, and I look around for the cause. A flash of colour makes me grin as a wingless dragon bursts into the arena with a terrific roar that makes my ears ring. Belua is here.

Screams fill the air as the creature twists and leaps up into the seated area and weaves through the fighters, seeming to know which ones are fighting for the council. Her body is huge as she slowly works her way towards us, jumping back down into the arena and chomping something in her huge maw. It’s only as she reaches us, her long, scaled body covered in blood, that I see an arm bone hanging out of the side of her mouth, and I realise she might be behind some of the missing guards.

Young one, she greets in my mind, something I still can’t get used to.

“Belua.” Dipping my head in greeting, I gesture towards the council and queen, who watch us. “We need to get up to the platform. Will you cover us?”

Slowly, in what I think is the closest a dragon can come to smiling, she exposes her teeth, and a growl rumbles through her body as she narrows her golden eyes on her captors. *My pleasure*, she replies before jumping back up to the stands, leaving mayhem in her wake.

“Of course she’s friends with a dragon,” Luna mutters to herself, staring at the creature. Glancing at my father, I see he’s doing the same, shaking his head.

I grip his arm, and gratitude warms my chest as he switches his attention to me, ready to help me in whatever way

I need. “Did you see where they are keeping the others?”

It’s something that’s been niggling at my bond since we arrived, needing to know my mates are safe. The nagging pull tells me they are close, but I have no idea where, or if they are safe and unharmed. From the state of the three before me, I’d guess the others have received the same treatment. I don’t want to have to fight the council without knowing they are safe, yet I know deep down that this is about more than just us, so I might have to do this alone.

“There are cells beneath the arena where they locked us up.” My father frowns. “They were down there last time I saw them.”

The doors we’re moving towards suddenly slam open, and we’re faced with row upon row of werewolves, both in wolf and human forms. From the looks of hatred they throw our way, I’m guessing they work for the council and are out for blood. Cursing, I skid to a halt, the others doing the same. I could use my magic on them, but there are so many that I doubt I could take them all out. If they all stayed in that small, enclosed area, I might be able to—

I don’t have time to complete my thought, as they start charging towards us with howls that make the hair on my arms stand on end, and my thoughts turn to simply surviving.

Star and Syn leap forward and meet our attackers head-on, tearing and biting at the wolves. The sounds they make are horrific, but it’s now my turn to fight as our attackers charge towards me. I raise my hands, and magic flows into my palms, creating daggers of starlight. I’m exhausted from my sleepless night and fight with Bates, each movement making my muscles cry out with fatigue, yet I don’t stop, slashing and throwing my magical daggers. All thoughts of disarming and disabling our attackers goes out the window, and my body count slowly rises. This is war and kill or be killed.

For each werewolf I take down, two more appear.

There’s a shift in the atmosphere, and I realise something is happening in the tunnel leading into the arena, the attention of our attackers turning to whatever is occurring behind them.

Their distraction gives us an advantage, and it's only when I feel an almighty tug in my chest that I realise what's happening.

My mates are here.

Somehow, they managed to break free of their cells and fight their way to me, the tugs on my bond acting as a beacon for them to follow. Now that I know they are on the other side of the wall of werewolves, I fight harder.

“Laelia!” Atlas calls out, our eyes locking above the mayhem.

A relieved smile pulls at my lips as I push away the body of a male I just killed. I'm going to need a lot of therapy after this, but all that matters at this moment is getting to my mates. Joy spreads through every cell in my body, and hope that we could make it out of this alive blossoms. We still have to face the council and queen, which will be the hardest part of this, but even so, I feel so much stronger now that I know my mates are safe.

Joel and Scott are in their wolf forms, and our three borrowed werewolves bring up the rear. Nicolai and Atlas fight with fists, utterly ruthless despite the disadvantage of not having claws or blades. Our bond is open, and with me acting as a conduit, the guys can feel each other too, making it easier for us all to work together.

Seeing an opening, I barrel towards Atlas and throw myself into his arms. The urge to do the same with the others is strong, but that could be deadly as they are all still mid-fight.

“We have to get up there.” The urgency inside me is growing, and my instincts are telling me that if we're not quick, we're going to lose our opportunity.

Nicolai overhears and whistles loudly to get our attention. “Laelia, take Syn and Atlas with you. We'll stay here and take care of this. When it's clear, we'll join you,” he calls out while holding a male in a headlock. With a vicious snarl and a bulge of his muscles, he twists his opponent's neck, the snap telling

me his neck is broken. Nicolai drops the body and hurries over to press a kiss to my lips, and then he moves on to his next opponent.

For a moment, all I can do is focus on his departing back, completely in shock that Nicolai is casually snapping necks. Why is that such a turn-on for me?

Atlas clears his throat, and my cheeks shine beet red. Avoiding his amused gaze, I call out to Syn, and the three of us fight our way through the tunnel. We don't come across many more guards, most of them already out in the arena fighting the others, and Syn makes quick work of those we do find. The tunnel opens up into a large room that seems to curve, making me think it runs around the edge of the arena. Thankfully, we don't have to look too hard for a way up, as there's a twisting metal staircase on our right.

The stairs seem to go up and up as we climb, passing what must be several floors, only there's no way to access them from this staircase. Instead, this one only appears to access one floor at the very top. *This could be it*, I think to myself, and as we reach the landing, we slow down and pause outside the single door that awaits us.

The closed door is very unassuming and looks no different from any other door, yet behind it could be the people who might take our lives. I press my ear against the door. The sounds of shuffling feet and pacing reaches me, so I know that *someone* is behind the door, I just don't know who. Turning to look at Atlas and Syn, I open my mouth to ask what they think we should do when someone begins talking.

"I warned you this wouldn't work!" a voice I recognise as one of the councilmen snaps, his voice shaking with anger. "We need to leave now before things get worse."

Eyes wide, I remain still as I listen to the conversation, knowing we found the right door.

"No, I was promised my revenge. We need to regain control," the queen argues, her constant need to be in control showing through even now.

A male scoffs. “Soon, there might not be anything left for you to control!” one of the councilmen retorts. I think it’s Councilman Diamond, but it’s difficult to tell because I’ve rarely heard the others speak.

“No, the queen is right. We can still rectify this,” Ruby insists.

Just hearing his voice stirs up the anger within me. They are talking about us like we’re all errant school children not following the rules, not their people rioting against their rule. They will never understand that this is their fault, blaming the few who dare to think for themselves.

Having heard enough, I nod at Atlas and reach for the door handle. I throw the door open, and the three of us step inside, Star rematerializing at my side. The six of them spin to face us, surprise written across the queen’s face, and although I can’t see the faces of the council, I can feel their shock. Did they really underestimate us so much and think we wouldn’t find a way to get to them?

“Unfortunately, you’re wrong.” Brushing my hair from my face, I raise a brow as I stare directly at Ruby. “You should have listened to your fellow councilman.”

“Laelia,” he sneers, stretching out my name like a curse. “I suppose it was only a matter of time before you found your way to us.” He doesn’t sound surprised or worried about my presence, just reluctantly accepting. Twisting slightly, he gestures towards the chaotic stadium. “Are you happy with the mayhem you’ve caused?”

I take his brief distraction to glance around the space and take in the current situation. The platform is literally just a large balcony, the wall around it protecting them from falling and also separating them from everyone else. The space is much bigger than I expected, their large, throne-like chairs taking up about a quarter of the area. The rest is empty save for a cabinet filled with alcohol and empty glasses. It seems they were determined to enjoy the show.

“I’m here to put an end to your rule. You’ve terrorised us for too long.” Taking a deep breath, I fight against my instincts

as I speak again. “If you step down and agree to go peacefully, then we will allow it. This doesn’t have to end in death.”

In the back of my mind, I know they are not going to agree with it, and that they would never stick to the rules even if they did accept. The safest thing for everyone is for them to die. However, in my heart, I knew I had to at least offer. I won’t let them take my kindness away from me completely, even if they would kill me in a heartbeat without offering me the same.

“Laelia,” Atlas counters, warning and disapproval in his voice, but he doesn’t say anything else or try to stop me. Syn snarls in agreement with the witch, and I know if he was in his human form, he would have some stern words for me.

They needn’t have worried though, as the councilmen laugh at my offer. I notice how the queen stays out of the conversation, keeping her distance, her eyes on the door as she tries to work out how she can escape. Unfortunately for her, we are blocking the exit, and even with magic, she wouldn’t survive the drop from the platform if she were to jump over.

“Do you really think we’ve not had to deal with rebellions before?” Councilman Ruby sneers. “Oh, child, you have a lot to learn.” He reaches up and pulls off his mask. My heart races as I wait to see the man behind the mask after all this time. When he drops it to the floor, I feel a wave of disappointment. He looks completely normal. I’m not sure what I was expecting, some evil-looking villain with fangs and glowing eyes, but he’s just an old male with a completely unremarkable face. While I didn’t expect to recognise him, this just feels underwhelming. The whole time, this mysterious figure that I’ve feared was just an old man in a mask.

The others follow his lead, revealing much of the same. They all have different features, but ultimately, they all look ordinary. Atlas is looking at me in confusion, having felt my mix of emotions, not really understanding the significance of what’s happening. Syn, however, is just as shocked as I am. Having worked for the council for years, he’s never seen their faces until now. When all you have to go on is a person’s voice and their behaviour, I suppose you build up an image in your

mind of how they look, and this is definitely not what I expected.

A maskless Ruby steps forward, his face twisting as he looks me over, ignoring Star's and Syn's warning growls. "You have been a constant thorn in my side. Even before you were born, you were causing trouble."

Dumbstruck, I'm completely lost for words. They knew about me all that time. My magic wasn't a surprise to them, as they already knew I existed.

"You knew about me before my magic showed itself?" I choke out, my hair falling into my face as my head shakes in denial.

Ruby's brows rise, and a smirk pulls at his lips. "Oh, we knew of you, but we weren't sure you would ever develop magic. You smelled like one of us, and you showed no signs of being anything other than a werewolf, so we never had to step in."

"And now?" I ask bitterly.

This time, Ruby's smile is wide as he chuckles. "And now, you have to die."

Raising his hands, the councilman throws a ball of magic towards me, but I manage to block it easily with a shield of stars. The other councilmen jump into action, moving to attack Syn, Star, and Atlas.

"Leave the girl. Ruby wants her for himself," one of the councilmen shouts, confirming my suspicions as they focus on attacking my mates instead of me.

Ruby's attack never falters despite the sudden movement around him. His magic may be weaker than mine, but he knows how to control it much better than I do. It quickly becomes apparent that I'm not going to win a magical battle against him. If I want to win this, it's going to have to be hand-to-hand. Forming a plan in my mind, I create a glowing shield around myself, slowly closing the gap between us.

"How do you have magic?" I gasp as a huge wave of his power batters against my shield, pausing and bracing against

it. The force is so strong it pushes me back, my feet slipping on the smooth floor.

The huge use of magic seems to have taken its toll on the councilman, though, as sweat drips down his face and he takes great gasps of air. “Werewolves have had small magics for centuries.” Using this as an opportunity to recover, he regales me with information. “Probably thanks to our ancestors breeding with the witches, and those gifts have passed down over time. It’s mostly diluted so thinly in our blood now that most never know they possess it. The council’s bloodlines are strong, so we can actually use our power.”

The explanation makes sense, but I really just want him to keep talking.

When a flash of colour moves behind him, I know I need to push my advantage. Strengthening my shield, I step forward. Of course, he counters this with several weak blasts of magic, stepping back as he realises it’s not affecting me in the slightest. The councilman goes to look over his shoulder to check how much space he’s got, and I quickly fire my own blast of stars—not to injure him, but to keep his attention on me.

“Let me guess, you then kill off anyone who shows signs of magic. Just how many have you killed to keep your secret?” I don’t have to fake my disgust.

He shrugs, sending another wave of magic towards me. “We couldn’t risk the masses finding out we had our own.”

Shaking my head, I feel my magic react to my anger, swelling within me like a hurricane. “You’ve betrayed your own people for your selfish greed and need for power.”

I’m going to show him what we do to traitors, I think to myself as I raise my hands, twisting them to help me channel the huge round of magic I’m holding. With a simple thought, I release my power, and a literal wave of stars shoots towards him, pushing him back and pinning him against the balcony wall. He shouts out, waving his arms as he tries to steady himself, fear flashing in his eyes as he thinks he’s about to be

thrown over the wall. That's not what I have planned for him though.

"He's all yours," I call out, pumping a steady flow of magic into his restraints.

Belua rises above the outside wall, her huge water dragon form towering over us. When Ruby looks up, pure fear shines in his eyes. A scream erupts from his mouth, but it's over in a flash as the goddess pounces, snapping her jaw and taking his head and half of his torso into her mouth.

Sweet revenge, she purrs into my mind as she tears the male apart. Councillor Ruby's death was hers, and it was only right that she was the one to take him down. His death is so gruesome that I actually have to look away. Belua's vengeance is bloody, making me nauseous. There's a shift in magic, and I quickly look back to find her in her human form. Covered in blood, she looks like a beautiful nightmare.

Real panic has settled into the councilmen's hearts now that they realise exactly who the creature is, but we're still outnumbered, and Atlas still doesn't have access to his magic while the council seems to be able to use theirs. Syn and Atlas are holding their own, especially now that Belua is here, but as I take a quick look over the balcony wall at the fighting below, my gut lurches as I see great groups of witches and werewolves being rounded up by the council's wolves.

As though the goddess heard me and sent a blessing right to me, a stir suddenly passes through the arena, and the scent of magic fills my lungs. Whatever the werewolves managed to do to keep us from using magic, it's been destroyed. The temperature drops as Kano embraces his ice magic, and I see glows all around the arena below as the witches are finally able to fight back. A cheer rises up, and a grin splits my face. We could win this thing.

Help is here, little moon, the goddess whispers in my mind, her voice full of warmth.

Frowning in confusion, I look around, trying to work out what she means. I assumed that the help she spoke of previously was Belua, yet it seems I was wrong. The cheer

from below suddenly becomes a roar, my ears ringing as the witches and wolves fight back even stronger than before. That's when I see them.

Running through the tunnel I first arrived in and flooding into the arena is a familiar group. Witches and werewolves alike that I've trained with or known all my life pour into the space, seeming to know where they are needed. It doesn't seem to matter what race they are, they work together for the chance of freedom. I begin to pick individuals out of the group, my eyes stinging as I see my instructors from Haven, Selena from my old pack, as well as my other pack mates. Leading it all is Kano.

He's alive.

Sure, he looks like he's had better days, but his expression is ferocious as he flings his magic towards any who stand in his way. I'm not sure how I know, but he was the one who managed to return the magic for the fighting witches. I can just sense it.

It's a struggle to pull myself away from the edge, but I still have something I need to do up here. Now that magic is returned, Atlas is freezing the councilmen while Belua and Syn tear them apart, which leaves one person who needs to be dealt with.

Turning my attention to the queen, I find her trapped at the far end of the balcony by Star. She looks like she's contemplating her chances of surviving the drop from the platform.

"You can try jumping. It would save me the trouble."

My callous comment seems to make up her mind. Spinning in a swirl of skirts, she narrows her silver eyes on me. I've never seen her so furious before, her hands balling into fists.

"You've ruined everything," she hisses, her face contorting with hatred. "Why couldn't you just die like you were supposed to?"

“I don’t understand why you couldn’t just let me be.” Shaking my head, I gesture to the arena around us. “It’s clear you’ve been working with the council. They are werewolves, and you seem to get on with them okay, so why encourage the hatred for them at Haven?”

I’m starting to realise that it’s not necessarily werewolves she hates, but anyone she deems below her, which happens to be most of us, wolves and witches alike.

Tossing back her golden locks, she purses her lips. “I doubt your puny mind will understand.”

“Try me,” I demand. Power tingles throughout my body, begging to be released so we can finish this once and for all.

“Do you know how long I’ve been in power?” She shakes her head as though this is something I should know. “No, I doubt you do. I look good for my age. What about the faceless councilmen? Do you really think they hide behind those masks just for the hell of it? They are *centuries* old, simply changing identities every couple of decades so no one notices.”

Stunned, I process what she’s suggesting. If it’s true, then the council never actually changed, they’ve been hiding who they are so they could continue to rule, making it seem like we actually had a choice when it comes to our leadership. Using this same logic, the queen has been doing the same thing. What she planned to do when people eventually noticed that she wasn’t aging, I don’t know, but one thing is becoming clear.

“You’re never going to give up the throne, are you? You’ve been manipulating people to keep yourself in power.”

Throwing her head back, she laughs loudly, a twinkle in her eye. “Clever girl, maybe I underestimated you.” It’s clear she’s messing with me, but I don’t give her the reaction she’s looking for. “You see, war brings people together,” she begins, slowly walking towards me and trying to find a path around Star. “If we have a joint purpose, such as keeping everyone safe from the evil werewolves, then no one questions my power or rule, as I’ve been protecting everybody. The same goes for the council. Their rules are harsh, but they keep you

safe from witches. People fear change. What if someone else replaces the council, and they are somehow worse? Then, you're without protection. Yes, a few people have to be sacrificed, but it's for the betterment of everyone else. It's worked for centuries, until *you* turned up and destroyed it all."

It's sick logic, but it's clearly been working all this time.

"You've purposely been continuing the war between the witches and werewolves, all so you can stay in power. Both you and the council." I thought I knew the lengths they would both go to so they could stay in power, but I underestimated them. What she's saying is horrific. The casual, callous way she speaks of her people's death makes my anger boil within me. They deserve so much better than her. We all do.

"Yes," she croons, smiling with sick pride. "And with the council's new virus, we will have another way to control everyone."

My heart stops beating in my chest for a second as the true horror behind it all is revealed. While I knew the queen would stoop to killing those in her way, this is a whole new level that I'd never even imagined. "You're talking about biological warfare."

Nodding with mock sympathy, the queen smiles at me with pity. "It's for the best."

"For you, maybe. For everyone else, it's genocide!" I'm shouting now, and I know we're collecting an audience. "Did you really think you could get away with this?"

Anger twists her face once more as she barrels towards me, only to skid to a stop as Star snarls and snaps at her. "I was getting away with it, but the goddess had to start meddling and send *you* to cause problems, using my own best friend against me."

I might not have known the woman, but from what I've learned of her, I know one thing for certain. "My mother would have been disgusted with you."

Pain flashes across her face, and she sucks in a sharp breath as though I just burnt her. She quickly masks her hurt

though, her eyes narrowing on me. “Maybe it’s time you’re reunited with her.” Glancing over her shoulder, she seems to look for something. No, not *something*, someone. “Ivar, kill her.”

A dark figure appears behind her, and with trepidation, he steps around the queen. I didn’t even notice that Ivar was here, his shadows helping him blend in and hide until she needed him. Honestly, I’d completely forgotten about him, which was a stupid mistake on my part, one that might cost me my life. An old conversation comes back to me where he told me we could be friends, but he would never stop serving the queen. While I’ve seen him flourish since we’ve become friendly, he has stuck strong by the queen’s side despite all he’s seen.

Even now, regret clouds his face, and he looks like he’s in physical pain as he moves towards me, each step robotic as he fights whatever control she has over him. Star has never liked the shadowy male, and even now, his presence has her backing away, her tail between her legs.

“I am sorry, Laelia. I hoped it would never come to this.” He seems genuinely upset, and I hate that she’s doing this to him.

“Then don’t, say no. I’ve seen how she treats you. Make a stand and forge a new life for yourself.”

His black eyes seem to glimmer, regret and sadness etched into his face. “I wish I could, but for a shadow like me, I have no business being in a world of light.”

A ball of shadows begins to form within his hands, the darkness twisting and pulsing, growing larger and larger until it completely surrounds him. I back away as he raises his hands, throwing the shadows towards me, and I only just have time to throw up my own shield of starlight.

“Where there is light, there will always be shadows,” I tell him, needing him to understand that despite what he thinks, he *does* have a choice. “You don’t have to do this, Ivar. There is a space for you within my world.”

He doesn't reply, but I feel his shadows fluctuate, knowing he's heard me. He doesn't stop though. In response, I pour more and more magic into the shield until my stars glow so brightly that those around me have to shield their eyes.

End this now, I tell myself, my thoughts becoming dark as I reach into the murky pit of my power. My eyes flick over the platform, taking in the situation around us as more and more magic floods through me. My mates are still fighting the remaining councilmen, something that creates anger within me. How dare they attack my mates? How dare they attack *me*? With a wave of my hand, I send out a shower of stars, and the council are incinerated where they stand. Twisting, I look down at the arena below us and pick out those fighting against us. Sending my magic towards them, I do the same, and they are incinerated. I feel nothing but satisfaction as those lives blink out with a simple thought.

Something inside me twinges. Shoving it aside, I continue to pick out the guards who hurt our people, *my* people. The twinge happens again, stronger this time, and the more I try to ignore it, the stronger it becomes. I'm still holding off Ivar's shadows, and I'm so deep into my power now that taking the lives of those below is as simple as breathing. The twinge becomes a pull, and then like a punch, making me double over.

Catching my breath, I blink rapidly, and my thoughts seem to come back to me. What am I doing? This isn't me, and those people certainly aren't *mine*. This power tries to consume me, twisting and changing my thoughts, making me believe that I'm better than them. If I allow it to take over, then I'm no better than the queen who's watching on with wide eyes.

Standing upright, I take several deep breaths, my mind scurrying to find a way to disable Ivar without killing him. Thankfully, I don't need to think too hard, as Ivar's barrage of shadows suddenly stops.

"Goddess," Ivar whispers with awe, falling to his knees, his eyes wide as he sees something about me he's never seen before. Something appears to change in him before my very eyes, and although I can't put my finger on *what* it is that's

different, I know he'll never try to harm me again, his link with the queen broken.

My relief is short-lived as the queen screeches with rage, her final weapon taken from her. She thought Ivar would always protect her, yet I've managed to convert him, shattering the connection between them.

“No!” In a frenzy of rage, she bares her teeth and throws her magic at me. She tries to destroy me, using every spell she knows, but I have the full power of a goddess at my disposal, and with my shield of stars being impenetrable, her attacks are merely an annoyance. Screaming in frustration, she becomes completely unrecognisable as she gives into her fury. “You’ve taken everything from me, and now I’m going to take everything from you.”

She glances over to where Syn sits in wolf form, watching us closely. She’s going to kill him. That certainty fills me and clouds my mind with righteous anger. Extending my shield to protect both Atlas and Syn, I turn the full force of my power onto her. With a powerful blast of magic, I fling her back, watching with cold amusement as her body hits the wall, a cry of pain escaping her.

The control I managed to steal back is destroyed in an instant, wrath taking over my mind. Before, I would have made sure she had a quick death, but after trying to kill my mates, she doesn’t deserve it.

I’m going to obliterate her.

Trying to struggle to her feet, the queen stumbles, only to fall back to the ground as I shoot stars towards her. She cries out in pain, the magic burning her skin, yet not enough to actually kill her. We go through this little cycle repeatedly, the queen too stubborn to stop. A small, cruel smile appears on my lips, and it takes a moment for me to realise that someone is talking to me.

“Laelia.”

It’s one of my mates, our bond pulling in my chest. Giving into the feeling, I glance to the side and see Joel standing in

the doorway. “Stop. I agree that she needs to die, but this isn’t the way to do it.” With a hesitation I’m not used to seeing from him, Joel raises his hands and slowly walks towards me. He seems like he’s expecting me to lash out, but I’d never hurt my mates. When he gets within touching distance, he pauses. “Don’t lose yourself to the magic,” he whispers quietly.

“We love you, mate, come back to us.” Hearing Nicolai’s voice, I look over Joel’s shoulder to see all of my mates are now here, filling the doorway of the platform.

They are right. Gasping, I look down at my hands as though I don’t recognise them. What am I doing? This power is toxic. Even as I try to push it away and reject that part of myself, I feel it fighting back, seductively calling to me.

“Sister.”

Hearing Kano’s voice brings me back. Tears sting my eyes as I spin around, desperate to see him for myself. My mates step to one side, allowing my brother to step onto the platform. I leap forward and wrap my arms around him, trying to hold myself together and not give into my overwhelming emotions. He returns the gesture, and we hold onto each other, momentarily forgetting the battle going on around us.

“How touching,” the queen sneers, her voice a slur. Now that she’s not being pounded with magic, she looks up at us with hatred. “Oh, Kano. What a disappointment you are. Not only did you not have your family’s power, you now turn on your lover. Have you no loyalty?”

Kano stiffens in my arms at her insults, and my first instinct is to jump in and defend him, but I hold back, knowing he needs to do this for himself. Gently unwrapping himself from my embrace, he cups my cheek and smiles softly. Then, with a deep breath, he stands up to his full height, his expression shifting as he turns to face the queen.

“I was forced to be your lover and do atrocious things under your rule.” Emotion laces his voice, and he doesn’t bother to hide it as he finally faces his own captor. “I won’t let another suffer like I did.” Magic swells around us as he calls his power. My heart breaks for him, hearing him share his pain

aloud, and I prepare myself in case I need to assist. This is his battle though, so I refrain, simply placing my hand on his back so he knows I'm here should he need me.

Taking in the two of us standing shoulder to shoulder, she attempts to get to her feet once more. "You piece of—"

With a flick of his wrist, an almost invisible stream of magic flies towards the queen, hitting her in the temple. Falling like a sack of potatoes, she slumps to the floor, her body limp. It seems I wasn't the only one who was fed up with hearing her voice.

"She's not dead," Kano says quietly, not taking his eyes off her body. "I just knocked her out. You should kill her before she wakes."

Shaking my head, I give him my full attention, squeezing his hand until he looks at me. "Her death is yours." I mean it. While part of me wanted to be the one to end it, Kano has been suffering under her hand for far longer than I have, and I feel like he needs this to begin to heal.

Scanning his face, I see a mix of emotions, I realise how hard this is for him. The queen practically raised him, so although he now hates her, she's been a huge part of his life, and the idea of killing her is much more difficult than he expected. Taking a deep breath, he slowly releases it, his decision made.

"No." Shaking his head, he grips my hand tightly. "You have as much claim as I do. Let's do it together."

I nod, and we turn back to the queen's body, walking over with surprisingly steady steps. Raising a hand, I call my magic to me and create a blade for us. I meet his gaze and hold it out, and without hesitation, he grips the handle. My heart pounds in my chest, but somehow, having Kano at my side is a huge comfort.

Holding onto the dagger of stars, we raise it above her body and plunge it into her heart, killing the witch queen.

Chapter Thirty



After the queen died, the control over the stadium seemed to shift. The fighting stopped almost immediately, with those who worked for the council or queen either running away or surrendering.

It's been a week now since that final battle, and life has been a whirlwind. My little pack of my mates, Kano, Luna, and my father have stayed in the city, trying to help everyone adjust to their new lives without the council looming over them. To my surprise, several packs who stayed away are now moving to the city, repopulating it after so many died in battle.

Ivar is like my shadow, staying close and watching me with adoring eyes. There's nothing romantic about the way he feels about me, but he worships the ground I walk on since I showed him the full extent of my powers.

Many assumed that I'd be taking on the council's role once they were killed off, something that I very quickly dismissed. Being in charge is not something I've ever wanted, despite what my power might tempt me with. I can't wait to find a new home for us, somewhere quiet in the woods, away from the craziness of the city. For now, though, we're needed here.

Many of the witches who supported me wanted to stay in the city and create a new life for themselves. Haven had become a prison for many, and now that they have their freedom, they don't want to go back to a place with so many horrific memories. The animosity between the witches and werewolves isn't going to go away overnight, but huge steps

have been made, and I think it might actually be possible for them to live in harmony.

Belua disappeared after the battle, and I've not seen her since, but sometimes I swear I see a glimpse of golden eyes in the forest, which is exactly where I am now.

"They are going to send out a search party if we don't go back soon," Nicolai teases, but unfortunately, there is truth behind his words.

Life in the city is chaotic, and many look to my mates and me when making big decisions, despite us trying to avoid leadership roles. Occasionally, I have to escape into the forest around the city so I can surround myself with nature and get away from the hustle and bustle.

Being reunited with all of my mates was an emotional experience, and since then, I've not been able to be away from any of them for long without anxiety consuming me. They seem to feel the same way, and because of that, I always have at least one of them with me at all times. This will ease with time, but for now, this works.

"I know." I sigh, my reply reluctant as I think of all the work that awaits me. I'm not a city girl, and there's nothing I love more than running through the forest. "Just give me five more minutes," I call over my shoulder and leave him leaning against one of the tree trunks. I weave my way farther into the forest, Star looping joyfully around the trees.

I don't go far, still able to see my mate through the trees, but the deeper I go, the calmer I feel. Brushing my fingers over the rough bark, I tip my head back and take a deep breath.

A warm presence settles over me, and I smile before my eyes even lock on the glowing form of the goddess. I've not felt her much since the battle, so being able to actually see her here fills my heart.

"Little moon." Smiling widely, she greets me warmly. "Are you ready to take your position beside me where you belong?"

Any warmth that I felt thanks to her arrival vanishes like a bucket of icy water has been poured over me. I gape at her shimmery form. I can't have heard her right.

"What?" It's not eloquent, but I can't think past the sudden panic that's settling over me. From what she's saying, it sounds like... like she's going to take me away.

"You're part goddess, and you've proven yourself worthy of your powers." The look she gives me is sympathetic, but it's clear she thinks I'm going to jump at the chance to be a goddess. "It is time for you to ascend."

Is this truly what my future has in store for me? Becoming a goddess and embracing my powers? There's one very important factor that's preventing me from being excited though. "But what about my mates? My pack?"

"You would have to leave them behind. You can watch them from above, but you wouldn't be able to continue having a relationship with them."

No. There's no way I could leave them. They are my fated mates, the goddess chose them for me, I can't give them up now. It would destroy them and give me nothing to live for. I'm not a goddess. My mind rebels against the idea, throwing me into complete panic.

Picking up on my turbulent emotions, the goddess frowns, watching me with a contemplative expression. "Ultimately, it's your choice. Accept your place as a goddess amongst the stars or stay here on Earth." Before I can answer, she holds up her hand. "I will warn you though, if you choose that path, you would have to give up your powers."

I would give up my powers for my mates in a heartbeat, but there's something that causes a twinge of sadness. "What would happen to Star?"

She's literally made up of my magic. If I have no magic, then Star would cease to exist. She's not just a magical being though, she's my wolf, my confidant, and constant companion. Could I live without her?

The goddess hums and smiles softly, looking down at the wolf of stars sitting at my feet. “Star is a part of you. Without your magic, she would simply become a normal wolf.”

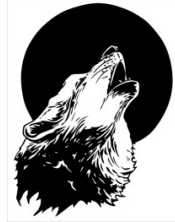
Releasing a shaky breath, I look down at the wolf in question, rubbing her ears as I ponder everything I just learned. It’s a lot to digest, but there’s only one choice for me to make.

The goddess watches me closely through all of this, and when she smiles at me, there’s a tinge of sadness there as though she already knows what I’ve decided. “Have you made your decision?” she asks, the words strangely formal.

Looking over my shoulder at Nicolai, I reach for my bonds, smiling as they react to my touch. My mates need me as much as I need them. Turning back to the goddess, I return her smile and firmly nod my head.

“I’ve made my choice.”

Epilogue



The goddess stares down at the woman who once could have been her equal.

She likes to check in on Laelia and see how she is getting on with her mates and adapting to her life without her powers. She knows it's been a struggle, and many challenges have presented themselves, but with her mates and newly formed pack, they have conquered them all. In the last year, Laelia was finally able to move to the forest she loved so much, the hybrid city of werewolves and witches functioning without her help.

The goddess smiles at the happiness radiating from the young woman, her stomach swollen with child as she's surrounded by her loving mates.

Although she chose to give up her powers, the goddess can't help but think the young woman made the right choice.

THE END

Author's Note

I can't quite believe that this series is over. I've been working on this for over a year now but had this idea for far longer than that. Laelia has spoken to me in a way characters never have before, and I feel I have grown as she has throughout the books. This is my longest series, and while I'm sad to be leaving this world, it feels like the right time to put it to rest and move on to my next project.

As always, there were so many people who helped along the way, and this series wouldn't be what it is without them. My editor, formatter and alpha readers make the story make sense. In particular I wish to thank Kat for her support and stepping up to the bar when I needed her. My PA Courtney, Nikki, Katie and my other author friends for being my sounding board for ideas and helping me through burn-out.

Thank you, every single one of you.

I can't forget the support of my family through all of this, especially as we've gone through such times of loss while I was writing this story. You are all amazing.

The last people I always like to thank are you guys, my readers. You are the one's who make my dream a reality.

Thank you.

Lots of love,

Erin xoxo

About the Author

Erin lives in the UK with her cat and works full time as an independent author.

Now a *USA Today* bestselling author, she began writing in 2018 when she published her first book, *Hunted by Shadows*. She specialises in writing fantasy and reverse harem paranormal romance.

She met K.A Knight in 2018 when they became partners in crime and began writing together. In 2019, she became co-authors with Loxley Savage, writing fantasy reverse harem.

She's Disney obsessed, loves cookies and baking, and is always planning her next story.

Make sure to follow her on her social media pages for updates on what she's currently working on:

Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ErinOKanesShadowRealm>

Facebook Author Page:

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