


DAWN OF



THE  
ZODIACS



CAPRICORN  
BLESSED

RACHELLE BONIFAY

# Capricorn Blessed

**A Dawn of the Zodiacs Novel**

Rachelle Bonifay

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## Prologue



**A** long time ago, when the universe was first born, so were the Constellations, beings of great power who watched over the universe. The Dark Ages brought around the time of the supernaturals and unleashed magic across the universe.

The Constellations watched as Earth's inhabitants abused their newfound power, causing a rift to open many light years away—a speck at first that grew larger until it consumed the very stars around it. The Constellations knew if Earth's inhabitants didn't stop their misuse, the rift would consume everything.

A prophecy was released telling those on Earth that if they did not change, then twelve Zodiacs would be born to make the change for them. But those with power were greedy. They refused the prophecy and instead twisted it for their own

nefarious purpose, pushing it on the masses in its' bastardized form to suit their version of the future and secure their power.

No one, not even the Constellations would take what was theirs, and thus the true prophecy was lost to all but a few, leaving only the twisted version in its place:

*At the dawn of an era*

*Twelve Zodiacs will rise*

*Swiftly and fiercely*

*They will change the tides*

*The divines have bestowed*

*The daughters with power*

*They come for your children*

*To destroy and devour*

*Hear the call of their magic*

*Hear them cry and decree*

*The dawn of the Zodiacs is here*

*No one is safe, no one is free*

# Chapter 1

## I Hate Mondays



**T**he cool water laps at my toes as the sand shifts. My feet sink down, and my worries seem to fade away. The beach has always been my happy place. Well, any water, really. Untreated water is better, but a pool or a nice long bath will do in a pinch. I guess that comes from being born with the gifts of Capricorn.

Growing up, I would joke with friends that there must be mermaids in my family line, but no matter how far back I looked, I could only find fae. And not water fae. I come from a line of Earth fae on my mother's side and fire fae on my father's.

I turn and walk along the shore. Seagulls' calls echo around me. I can't see anyone else, but I don't feel lonely. The sun



beats down on me, warming me without making me too hot.

Movement up ahead catches my attention, and I pick up my pace to get close enough to see what is happening. I find a swing set a few feet from the water's edge, one of the empty swings swaying in the breeze. Sitting down, I slowly start to move back and forth, staring out at the endless water before me.

I lose track of time as my body and mind fall into the rhythm of the world around me. A giggle makes me jump and look beside me. A girl who looks to be four or five is sitting on the swing next to me.

“Higher, Daddy!” she calls, kicking her legs like she can run on the air.

“Okay, okay.” Her dad laughs. “Just make sure you keep holding on.” He shoves her swing, and she laughs and wraps her arms around the chains, clapping her hands.

“Sia, hold on,” her father warns.

The little girl screams as she tumbles from the swing to the ground below with a thud, her arm twisted at an angle beside her. Her dad crouches down and scoops the girl up, cradling her to his chest.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” He rocks the girl back and forth. “Let Daddy see it.”

The girl shakes her head and tucks her arm in closer to her chest.

I pop out of my swing and move closer to the pair.

“Can I see your arm?” I ask. “I’m a doctor.”

Neither of them acknowledges me. The dad continues to try to calm the child who screams every time she’s bumped or jostled. I reach forward to try to get their attention, but my hand passes through the dad’s shoulder.

I jerk back and stare at my hand. It looks solid to me. I reach toward the man again and again. My hand passes through him without him noticing.

I step back, lifting my hand. Reaching toward the swing set, my hand bounces off the bar with a ring. I lower my hand toward the girl, trying to check her arm. When my hand touches it, pain shoots through my arm, making me clutch it to my chest.

“I’m so sorry, Sia,” the man tells her with tears in his eyes. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

The little girl blinks back tears as she looks up at the man. “It’s okay Daddy. It can be our secret.”

“I don’t think it can this time, Bug,” the man says, kissing her on the top of the head. “We are going to need to see a doctor, and then they may find out what you are.”

“What am I, Daddy?” she asks. “A fairy? I didn’t think we had to hide anymore.”

“Not a fairy, baby,” he answers. “You are something more. You were born to heal this world, but Mommy and I wanted to protect you from it until you were older.”

I blink, and they fade away as if they were never there. I lick my lips and taste the salt of the tears I didn't realize were tracking down my face. The man and girl looked so real, but I can't help the feeling that I should know them from somewhere. Almost like a dream from long ago that slips away when you try to remember it after you wake up.

I turn back toward the water, looking for comfort from its soothing presence, but instead of the sunset that was there a few minutes before, gray clouds have filled the sky. A breeze rushes past me, tugging some of my raven black hair into my face. I have it in a ponytail, but it's gotten long enough that I can't keep it all contained and out of my way.

A lightning bolt streaks down, striking the water. I instinctively take a step away as the thunder shakes the surrounding air. Rain starts to pelt down, soaking through my leather jacket and shorts. I shiver and turn back to the swing set to find it isn't where I thought it was. I spin all around, trying to see if I just got turned around, but it's gone. Everything is gone. I turn and start running up the sand, my legs burning as I search for anywhere that I can hide until the storm passes.

The lightning picks up, striking closer and closer. I push my legs harder, my calves aching as the sand seems to be slowing me down. A bolt shoots by, hitting the ground to my right. I duck and cover my head. I can't see anywhere to escape. My breaths saw in and out of my lungs. All I can think about is to keep moving. If I stop, the storm will end me.

I skid to a stop as a bolt comes toward me, splitting into multiple bolts and landing around me in a circle. I drop to the ground, covering my head and squeezing my eyes shut.

“Sierra,” a voice sounds all around me. “Remember your destiny.”

*At the dawn of an era*

*Twelve Zodiacs will rise*

*Swiftly and fiercely*

*They must change the tides*

*The divines have bestowed*

*The daughters with power*

*To right that which is wrong*

*To destroy all who devour*

*Hear the call of our magic*

*Awaken in our time of need*

*The dawn of the Zodiacs is here*

*To undo the faults of your greed*

I bolt upright, clutching my chest. I look around my room. It's still dark outside, and I glance at the clock. 4:26 AM.

It was just a dream. I focus on my breathing. In through my nose and out through my mouth. I keep going until my heart rate slows back to a more normal pace.

I lean back against the headboard and sigh. I don't have to wake up for another hour, but the tremors still coursing

through my body make me realize I'm not going back to sleep anytime soon. Tossing my silver comforter to the side, I climb out of bed, my t-shirt falling down to cover the tops of my thighs.

I walk into the kitchen and fill the kettle with water, setting it on the stove to heat. Grabbing my favorite mug and the jar of peppermint tea, I fill my mana-tea strainer. I drop into one chair at the table and stare out the window.

God, I hate Mondays so much.

## Chapter 2

### The Truth Comes Out



The doors slide back, and I'm greeted by a burst of cold air. I walk to the elevator, my mind still focused on the dream from last night. I press the button for floor five and lean against the side. This early in the morning, the car will fill up with everyone coming on shift.

"Sia?"

A hand lands on my arm, and I jump.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I'd said your name a few times, and you didn't respond."

I shake my head, trying to wake myself up.

"Sorry, Dennis. I must have zoned out." I turn to face him and force a smile onto my lips. "How are you this morning?"

“I’m good, but I’m guessing your morning hasn’t been great? Were you on call last night?”

“Nope, just didn’t sleep well. I’ll fix myself a cup of tea while I read everyone’s charts.”

The ding of the elevator announces our floor. We step out and head up the hall to the lounge to drop off our stuff and clock in for the day.

The morning starts out as I expect. I see my post-op patients who haven’t been discharged yet. We make countless loops around the floor for those close to leaving. Some of my newer patients work on walking from the bed to the chair and going up and down stairs with rails. I move quickly from room to room, only pausing long enough to chart their progress and make a plan for what their next appointment should hold.

By mid-day, I’m exhausted from my early wake-up. I head back to the breakroom and turn on the kettle. Listening to the water slowly warm, I pull my large white mug with a fox and the words “For Fox’s sake” out of my locker. I know some people get offended by it, but a former patient gave it to me at her last physical therapy session. She formed a habit of cursing her way through all her exercises, but whatever it takes to reach our goals, right?

I place a bag of Earl Gray into the mug and set it on the counter as the kettle whistles. I pour the water into the mug and sigh as the comforting scent fills the air.

“Long day, huh?” asked Dennis, heading straight to the coffeepot and filling a large styrofoam cup.

“What makes you say that?” I ask. “And you really should bring a mug to leave up here. You get coffee every shift. It would be better for the planet if you bring in something reusable.”

He chuckles and moves to the couch to sit.

“Join me? Or do you have to race off to another patient?”

“I’ve got time,” I say, carrying my mug over and settling onto the couch. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“And what would that be?” he asked with a smirk.

“What made you say it was a long day?” I ask again.

“Your mug,” he nods toward it as I take a sip and feel my muscles relaxing. “You only ever pull that one out when you need an extra lift in the day. You are too worried about people seeing it and complaining about it to be an everyday mug. You are also already making tea before lunch. Most days, you wait until the afternoon to have a cup while you’re finishing your charts.”

I stare at him for a few seconds, shocked at how many details he’s noticed about me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

I take another sip while debating the best thing to say.

“It was just a bad dream,” I shrug. “It shouldn’t be affecting me, but I woke up early, and I’m struggling to keep my eyes when I’m not with a patient.” I take a deep pull from the mug, draining half its contents.



“What did you dream about that kept you from going back to sleep? It had to be something pretty awful to shake you up.”

“It was just...” I trail off. “I can’t really remember anymore. It was more of a feeling than anything else. Like something was after me. Was chasing me and was going to turn my life upside down.” I shake my head. “But now I’m sounding like I’m losing it, and I have my next appointment arriving in a few minutes.” I empty my mug, rinse it out, and put it back in my locker before heading to the door.

“Sierra,” Dennis calls softly, “You don’t sound like you’re losing anything. We can’t control our dreams or what happened to us when we were children. I know I’m a work friend, but if you ever need an ear to listen, I’m here. We could grab dinner or drinks after work or just go for a walk around the city. Just know you don’t have to be alone if you don’t want to.”

I swallow hard and rein my emotions in. I nod slightly in acknowledgment and push my way out the door.

I walk to the waiting room and look around, forcing a smile to my face as my eyes land on a familiar woman sitting in the corner.

“Mrs. Simmons, how are you today?” I walk closer as she uses her cane to stand up.

“I’m hanging in there like a hair in a biscuit, Dr. Lopez,” Mrs. Simmons answers as we slowly start to shuffle toward the treatment room.

I stifle a laugh as I look at the old lady who I wish could have been my grandmother. “I have no idea what that means,” I tell her.

“Mrs. Simmons, you know we are here to help you. Despite the surgery, you’ll still keep all your commitments, even during the week you’re supposed to rest.”

She smiles and shrugs. “Your life distracts me from all the torture you put me through.”

“It’s not torture,” I say, pushing open the door to the treatment room. “It’s physical therapy. Now, let’s start over there.” I point to where a foam pad is sitting in the corner. “Climb up and try to balance. I’ll toss some balls for you to catch.”

“Yeah, yeah,” huffs Mrs. Simmons. “You explain it like we haven’t been doing the same thing for weeks now.”

“Well, prove you can do it and we will work on getting rid of the cane. How does that sound?” I ask sitting on a rolling chair and picking up a foam ball. “Ready?”

“Of course, put her here,” calls Mrs. Simmons.

I toss the ball, and she easily catches it, lobbing it back at me.

“Is that the best you’ve got, Doctor? You know I played college softball. I can take more than that!”

“Please be careful,” I say, moving closer as she starts trying to pick up the left. “College was a while ago for both of us. But we can move on to the rails if you would prefer.”

“I would prefer,” she says, stepping off the block and stumbling slightly.

I race over and catch her arm, helping to steady her while retrieving her cane and passing it over.

“I don’t need that stick. I can walk just fine with you, dear,” she says, pushing it back toward me.

“Mrs. Simmons, if you ever want to stop coming to physical therapy, you need to follow the steps and trust the process.”

“Who said I want to stop seeing you every week?” she asks. “How will I know when you get a boyfriend if we give up these weekly meetings?”

I laugh and roll my eyes.

We spend the rest of her hour working through some exercises while I try to fend off questions about my nonexistent love life.

Passing the nurses’ station, my attention snags on the news. There’s a breaking news alert. The Council of Supernaturals announcement reveals a breakthrough in tracking the Zodiacs, promising an end to the war on magic. I try not to pay too much attention as I walk past.

“Can you believe that?” one doctor says. “The Zodiacs think we don’t know they are out there stealing from all of us. I’m glad the Council is trying to protect us.”

“It’s disgusting,” answers the blonde nurse standing next to him. “It’s like they don’t even care about all the shifters in the

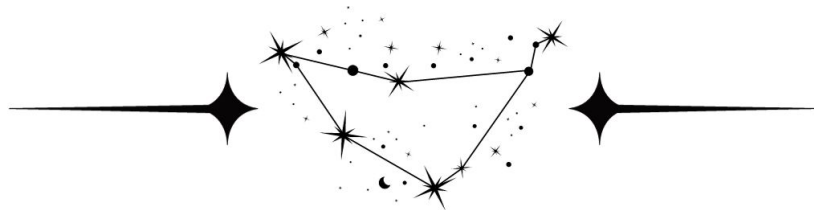
world. If everyone loses magic, I worry we'll lose our animals. It feels like my cheetah is getting weaker every time I shift."

"Our spells aren't working as well either," answers the nurse, who's leaning on the counter. "Maybe if we can find and get rid of all these Zodiac Girls, everything will go back to normal!"

I can't listen to it anymore. I speed past the desk and slam the locker room door shut and lean against it. I try to draw air into my lungs, but no matter how hard I gasp, it feels like I'm suffocating. I fumble in my pocket and drag out my phone. Unlocking it, I pull up the number of the person I know will always be there for me. She picks up on the second ring.

"Izzy, I need you," I force out.

"Hang in there, Sierra," her voice comes through the phone. "I'm on my way!"



The door behind me nudges open, and my best friend slips inside. She sits down on the floor next to me, wraps an arm around me, and tugs me into her chest. This is the closest feeling to home and family I have now. I lean my head onto her shoulder and breathe in her comforting scent of amber.

“Want to talk about it?” Izzy asks. “It’s been a while since you’ve had a panic attack.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Yeah, but not here. I just need to get out of here.”

She loosens her arm and hops off the floor.

“Of course. How about we grab some lunch? I put a sign on the door that said ‘*Family emergency. Be back when I can,*’ so I’ve got all the time you need.”

She reaches down a hand, and I let her pull me up. She shoves her long brown ponytail behind her shoulder and places her hand on the door.

“You ready?”

When I nod, she pulls open the door and we walk out. Right into Dennis.

“Sierra, what’s wrong? Are you okay? I saw Mrs. Simmons leaving and then you never came out back out front. I was worried.”

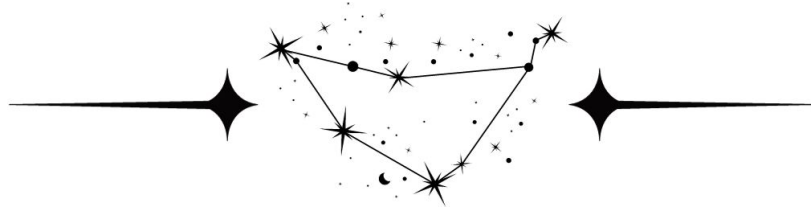
“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for checking,” I answer.

He nods and turns to Izzy. “Hi, I’m Dennis, one of the physical therapist on staff here, and you are?”

“I’m Isabella, Sierra’s best friend.” She shakes his hand before grabbing my arm and starting forward. “And now, if you’ll excuse us, we were on our way out.”

She tugs me forward, and I offer Dennis a half wave over my shoulder and head to the door.

“I’ll see you later,” I call.



Izzy and I sit down at a booth in the back of a little sandwich shop near Izzy’s store, Mystic Treasure. She’s been the owner since her mother passed away a few years ago, and while she said she has all the time in the world, she likes to be close. Her store specializes in magical artifacts and anything else related to magic they can get their hands on. With people feeling the magic draining away, they have been busy more days than not.

“So are you ready to talk about what set you off?” she asks, sipping on her coke.

“It shouldn’t have upset me so much. There was a story about getting closer to finding the Zodiacs, and people at work were saying such hateful things about them. I just saw myself in their shoes and thought about what if those people were saying that about me? I mean, they kind of were. One of them wished death on all the Zodiacs.” I get all the words out in one breath, afraid if I stopped, the fear would come back in. Grab my glass of water and take a gulp.

Izzy reaches out and squeezes my hand. “Awe, Sia, I’m so sorry, but you know you’ve been careful. No one knows but me and your parents, and they disappeared years ago. You

don't need to be afraid of the people you work with finding out. You know I'd take your secret to the grave with me."

I give her hand a squeeze and force a shaky smile onto my face. "I know you would, Iz, but let's hope it won't come to that. I just feel like something big is coming. The magic seems to be fading faster than before. I'm not sure if it's the city or if magic is truly vanishing faster, but we're running out of time to fix it before magic is gone forever."

## Chapter 3

### An Unexpected Friend



I walk up the stairs of the subway station, feeling less alone after our talk. But still, I can't shake the feeling that time is running out.

My parents had told me a little about being blessed by Capricorn before I was born. She appeared in a dream to my parents before they knew they were expecting. She told them that each Zodiac had chosen a worthy baby. When the child was born, the Zodiacs would bless her with some of their own powers, and they had chosen their daughter to be their chosen one. At breakfast the next morning, they realized they had the same dream and maybe it meant something more.

They had taught me about my destiny when I was a child, but they'd also taught me to hide the extra powers. I used my



fae powers and pretended everything was normal, hoping the day would never come when I had to out myself to everyone else.

A noise in the alley next to my building catches my attention. I pause and listen, hearing a faint sound almost like a baby laughing. I look around to see if I can find an adult who is hunting their child, but no one else is on this block.

“Hello?” I call out slowly, heading down the alley.

I hear the cry again. It’s not a child, but some kind of animal. I tsk my tongue to try to find it. Something tells me whatever is making these sounds is hurt or stuck.

I babble soothing nonsense, moving down the alley toward the sound, not wanting to scare whatever it is and cause it more pain. As I pass the dumpster, I realize the noise is coming from inside it.

I pick up my pace and rise on my tiptoes to peer over the edge, glad for being almost six feet and not needing to climb on it to see inside.

“Oh dear, how did you get in here?” I ask as my eyes land on a white baby goat with gray spots. It bleats back at me, making me smile. “Come on. You aren’t trash. Let’s get you out of there.”

I reach over the edge, and the kid climbs over the bags and walks up to me without fear. I lift it out and look closely at it. It’s small and skinny, like it could do with some food or milk.

Its fur is mostly clean, so I guess it hasn't been stuck for too long.

“You poor thing. You shouldn't be out here all alone. Let's get you inside and find you something to eat.” I pull it in close and head back up the alley toward the door.

The goat lays its head on my shoulder and lets out a huff of warm air against my ear.

“Awe, you're just a sweetheart, aren't you?”

I carry the goat inside and up to my apartment. The whole way, its head stays down, its eyes closed. Reaching my apartment, I open the door and slip inside, quietly closing the door and hoping no one noticed me breaking the “no pets” rule enforced by the landlord. Although, I doubt the lease said anything about not having a goat as a pet in the middle of New York City...

I lower the animal to the floor and move toward the kitchen.

“Let's get you some water and clean you up,” I tell it.

I fill a bowl with cool water and set it on the tiles. Flipping the tap to warm, I stick my fingers under the stream and wait for it to warm up.

The little goat walks into the kitchen and lowers its head to the bowl, drinking most of it before lifting its head to look at me. The water warms, and I pull out a dish rag. I squirt out a spot of soap and wet the cloth. The goat looks up at me and bleats as I kneel on the floor.

“Come on, this should make you feel better,” I say, reaching out and gently washing the spots I can see that need the most tending. “How did you get into the dumpster? I would have to guess you didn’t get in there by accident. And I’m guessing whoever put you there won’t come looking for you...” I move toward the goat’s belly. “Hmmm... I guess if you’re going to be around while I figure out what to do with you, you’ll need a name. You’re a boy, so how about Billy?”

The goat looks at me and bleats.

“I’m going to guess that means you like it, so Billy, it is.”

Billy bleats again.

“You are going to have to stop that before you get us both in trouble,” I scold him, shaking my finger like I would if I were talking to a child. “Now let’s find you something to eat.”

I walk over and open the fridge, peering inside. “What do goats eat?”

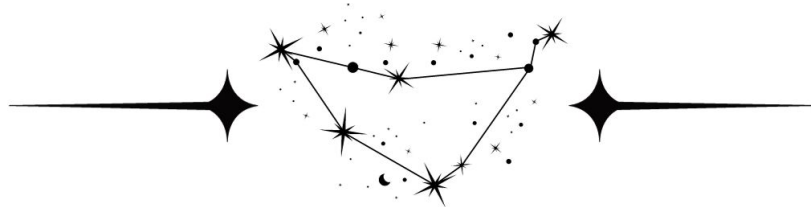
I glance back to see Billy staring at me. I pull out some lettuce and pour it on the ground. Billy walks over and sniffs it before looking up at me. I add some carrots and cut up some apples to add to the pile.

“I know it’s not what you want, but it’s the best I have on short notice.” I shrug, hoping he can understand me.

I’m not sure how smart goats are supposed to be, but he seems to understand as he starts to eat.

Moving to the couch, I sit down and use my phone to google what to feed goats. Looks like I’ll be hunting somewhere that

sells hay and alfalfa. Guess that's a problem for tomorrow. For now, I'm going to search social media and see if anyone is missing a goat.



The next day's work passes quickly. My mind keeps wandering back to Billy and hoping he and my apartment are okay. After he ate, he spent the rest of the night sleeping on the couch while I had no luck finding anyone who admitted they had lost him. I did find a stable willing to sell me some hay, so at least while we are stuck together, Billy will be well fed.

I move to a desk in one of the shared office spaces after my last patient to catch up on my charts. Most days I try to keep up, so I'm done when my patients are, but today I couldn't seem to keep up. A stack of files and my laptop sit in front of me. Sighing, I open the top file and glance at my handwritten notes before finding the digital patient file.

I know the digital files make it easier to share information with all the doctors on the team, but it can feel very redundant sometimes having to retype everything I've written. Oh well, the faster I get started, the faster I can get finished.

A hand lands on my shoulder as I close the last file. I flinch so hard that I almost fall out of the chair. A familiar deep chuckle reaches my ears.

“Dennis, when did you get here?” I ask, spinning the chair around to face him.

“About ten minutes ago,” he answers. “You seemed so focused, I didn’t want to interrupt. How was your day?”

Shrugging, I answer, “Same old, same old. Although I’m thinking of investing in a tablet, so I can do my notes once and be done. How was yours?”

“It was good. I got to dismiss two patients as recovered. Seeing as it’s only five o’clock, could I tempt you to join me for a drink?”

“That sounds tempting, but I have an errand I have to run outside the city tonight.” I stand and gather the stack of files to return to the nurses’ station. “Otherwise I would say yes.”

He reaches out and lifts the stack from my arms. “What errand? I don’t mind making a stop, and I’m sure we can find somewhere near there to go or come back and find something in the city. After all, we live in the city that never sleeps.”

“Ummmm...” I debate with myself if I want to tell him or not. I mean, having a goat in your apartment isn’t a typical New Yorker thing to do. Let alone taking him to a rescue. “I need to run by a farm for a few things,” I decide to answer.

“Oh cool! Does the farm have horses?” Dennis asks. “I’ve always wanted to ride a horse, but I’ve never had the chance.”

I laugh but don’t correct him.

We head out front after grabbing our things from our lockers and changing back into street clothes, walking down the block

to catch the subway. Our conversation comes easily, and before I realize it, Dennis is standing up and offering me his hand.

“It’s about to be your normal stop.” He helps me up and we scooch past the others to make our way to the doors.

As the train stops, he places his hand in the middle of my back, leading me up the stairs and back onto the street.

“Okay, where to now?” he asks, looking up and down the street.

“I just need to run by my apartment and grab something real quick.”

I lead him to my building and up to my door. Opening it, I see Billy laying on the couch. I walk in and scoop him up, turning to find Dennis waiting in the door.

“Dennis this is Billy. I found him last night.”

“And he’s made it here from a farm outside the city?” he asks.

“No, but it’s an animal rescue. I’m hoping they will take care of him.”

He nods.

“Do you think they have horses?” he asks.

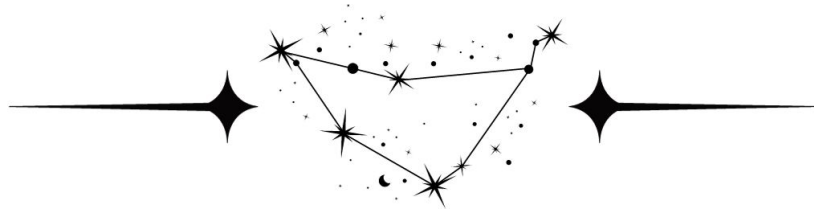
I laugh and shrug. “I have no idea,” I answer. “This is my first time going there. But their website had a lot of animals.”

He smiles. “That seems like a noble thing to do. Many people would have ignored an animal in need over

inconvenience themselves.”

I beam. We exit the apartment, locking the door behind us. I carry Billy down the stairs, holding him closely while Dennis hails a cab.

The driver gives me a weird look as I slide into the backseat with a goat, but doesn't comment. I guess he's seen stranger things working in New York. I tell him the address as Dennis climbs in and then we are making our way out of the city.



**T**he rescue farm is how I would picture farms from a movie. A big red barn, a small farm house with a picket fence, and lots of fenced off pastures surrounding it all.

I called earlier today to ask if they would be willing to take on a goat and the woman who answered was seemed nice. She said the gate would be open and to just come ring the doorbell.

The taxi pulls up and we ask him to wait as we both climb out. I carry Billy up to the door and Dennis presses the bell.

A woman with a light brown braid hanging over her shoulder opens the door. Her eyes light up as a smile breaks over her face.

“You must be Sierra,” she says. “And this must be the little fella you found last night.”

“I am and he is,” I answer. “Thank you again for agreeing to take him. I couldn’t leave him there alone, but can’t imagine a goat living in an apartment.”

“You’re the one who needs the thanks. This little guy wouldn’t have lasted long trapped as he was,” she says. “I’m Anna, by the way. I run this place with my husband. Would you like to come in?” She steps back slightly so we can enter.

Dennis looks at me, letting me decide.

“I would love to see what all you’re doing here, but we have a taxi waiting. I’d hate to waste his time.”

She nods and holds her hands out. “Well, you have my number. If you want to come check on him, you can give me a call, but rest assured he’s in good hands out here at Storybook Farms.”

I thank her and pass Billy over to her. She steps inside and Dennis and I turn to head back to the taxi.

We climb into the backseat and ask the driver to take us back to Astoria.

“How about we go for drinks somewhere? We can celebrate the life Billy now gets to live out here on the farm.”

“That sounds great,” I say. “I was fully prepared for you to call me crazy and move on with your night, but instead you helped me save a goat and still want to get drinks with me.”

“We all have our own eccentricities, and this is one I can live with. Who can be mad when it’s over a helpless animal?”



## Chapter 4

Is He the One?



**A**fter returning to my Astoria, Dennis and I head to the local bar near my apartment.

Walking in, I stride up to my usual seat, ignoring my shoes sticking to the floor and the smoke that seems to fill the air even though it's a nonsmoking establishment. I slide out a black vinyl high-top chair in the middle of the bar and sit down. Dennis slowly follows, sitting next to me and grabbing a cocktail napkin to wipe his hands and the bar top in front of him.

“Do you come here often?” he asks, turning to face me.

Sarah, the bartender, wearing her leather vest, places a frosty pint of Guinness in front of me before I can reply.

“Sia, how are you tonight?” She smiles, pulling a rag out from under the bar and wiping the top down before dropping a cocktail napkin in front of Dennis. “And what can I get for you?”

I laugh to myself at her asking a question and forgetting to listen to the answer. She’ll come back for a catch-up chat once everyone has been checked on.

“Bud Light in a bottle, please,” Dennis answers her.

“We’ve got cans or draft,” says Sarah.

“A can is fine,” he replies.

She turns to the fridge, grabs a drink, and pops the top open, setting it on the napkin before going to check on someone else who came in.

“I’m going to guess it’s a yes if the bartender knows your name,” Dennis says, turning to me. “How did you find this place?”

“It’s the closest bar to my house.” I shrug. “And it has good people if you come at the right time.”

“And when would the right time be?” he asks.

“About eight. We may see some of them tonight. So, where’s your place to go when you aren’t at work?”

“Don’t judge me,” he says, reaching up and rubbing his chin. “But I like to spend my time at the bookstore or coffee shop. You never know what gems you’re going to find when you take the time to really look.”

I sip my beer and smile. “What types of treasures have you found?” I ask. “I used to read a lot, but I feel like I’ve been too busy lately to have time.”

“I’ve found a signed copy of *Moonlit Alexandrite* by TL Hamilton. Even though I rarely read paranormal, once I started, I couldn’t put it down. I’ve also found some early editions of classics.”

“That sounds fun. I’ll have to go with you sometime.” I take a swig of my drink and wave down Sarah. “Can we get some pretzel bites and cheese, please?”

“Coming right up,” she answers, writing our order on a ticket and walking toward the kitchen.

Dennis and I continue to talk and get to know each other while we wait on our food. We get along in our quick interactions at work, but we have a lot more in common than I thought. By the time our snack arrives, I know I want something more than just after-work drinks from tonight. We laugh, we eat, and we make our way through another round of drinks before Dennis closes our tab and grabs my hand, leading me out of the bar.

“Sierra,” he says, turning to face me. He reaches up and tucks a stray strand of my hair behind my ear. “I’ve really enjoyed tonight with you, and I hope we can have more of them.”

I smile and squeeze his hand slightly.

“Would it be too forward of me to ask if I can kiss you?”

I tilt my face and lean in, answering with my actions rather than my words. He cups my face and brings his lips gently to brush against mine. A whisper of lips on lips that leaves me longing for more. I drop his hand and grab his waist, pulling our bodies flush against each other. His lips move to my neck as he nibbles his way down and back up. I moan slightly before tugging him back to my mouth. His tongue traces the seam of my lips, and I open for him.

The moment our tongues touch, my whole world shifts. I can feel Dennis inside like he's part of me and his feelings are mine. Luckily, he's enjoying this just as much as I am. I squeeze my thighs together, hunting some friction before remembering that we are on the sidewalk and not somewhere private.

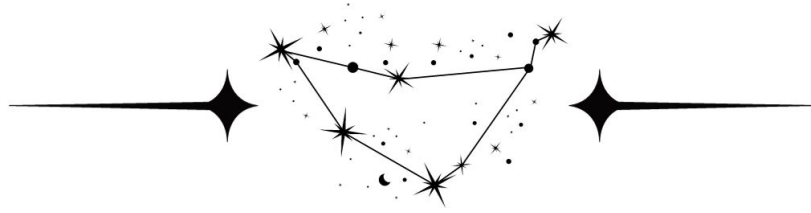
I pull back, and he moves back to kissing his way down my neck and across my collarbone.

“Dennis,” I pant. “We have to stop.”

“But I want you more than anything else in the world,” he gets out between kisses.

“Let's go back to my place. I want you, too, but I'm not sure anyone wants that type of show. Even in New York.”

He sighs, but lifts his head enough to look around. Interlacing our fingers, we almost run up the street heading for my apartment.



As soon as the door closes behind us, our lips find each other. My fingers grope for the bottom of his shirt, untucking it and trying to pull it over his head, only to remember he's still in a button-down from work. I grab the ends and jerk it open, the buttons flying around the room. Dennis reaches down and lifts my shirt up, breaking the kiss long enough to remove it and toss it out of the way.

Unclasping my bra, his mouth moves down to kiss my breast while my fingers undo his button and zipper, pushing his pants down around his ankles.

I moan as my head falls back. "More!" I demand. "I need more."

He lifts his head and smiles. "Your wish is my demand." Leaving his pants behind, he pulls me over to the couch. Planting my hands on the back, I arch my back and wiggle my ass.

"Are you sure?" he asks as he lines himself up behind me.

I grind myself against him, forcing a yes out on a pant.

"I'm on the pill," I tell him.

He thrusts forward, filling me and pushing the air out of my lungs. My mouth hangs open as I struggle to catch my breath while matching his thrusts.

My stomach starts to tighten, but I'm not sure it's enough. Reaching down, I rub myself, trying to get over the last peak. My legs shake as I feel Dennis's pace starting to become erratic.

"Not yet!" I tell him. "I'm almost there."

I rub harder and feel the thread snap. Tremors course through my body, and my arm gives out. I collapse on the couch, Dennis landing on my back.

He roars and pulses inside me. When his climax finishes, he shifts to his side, pulling out and landing on the floor in front of the couch.

"God, that was awesome." He sighs. I laugh. "What?" he asks.

"Awesome? That's the best word you can come up with?" I turn around and plop onto the ground next to him. "Not mind-blowing or the best sex I've ever had?"

"What would you say if I told you this was my first time hooking up on a first date?" he asks, dropping his head.

"That I hope you enjoyed it," I answer. "Can I ask why I was different?"

"You are— There's aren't words to describe how amazing you are." I lean up and plant a kiss on his lips.

"But now, I need to go clean up." I try to keep my legs tucked together as I stand up and waddle to the bathroom. His laughter follows me as I shut the door.

Remembering I'm at home, I decide that a quick clean-up is overrated and turn on the shower, climbing in before the water is all the way warm. Not wanting to leave Dennis for too long, I skip washing my hair and get out in record time. I find a sleep shirt tucked in the corner and pull it over my head.

I open the door and walk back into the living room, calling out an apology for taking longer than I said. Hearing no reply, I turn to look at the couch and chuckle at the sight of Dennis on the couch fast asleep.

"Guess that wasn't quick enough for him," I mutter to myself, making my way into my room and to bed.

## Chapter 5

Past and Present Collide



The sound of birds chirping draws my attention to the trees. How odd. I couldn't remember coming out here recently. In fact, I couldn't remember ever coming out to a place like this. Looking around, I realize I'm in a clearing. Pine trees surround me, and I can distantly hear moving water. A river, maybe. Or a creek. I spot a woodpecker high up on a tree pecking away at the tree as butterflies flutter around, dancing from flower to flower.

Curiosity gets the best of me, and I pick my way between the trees, heading toward the water. A snapping branch makes me freeze. Something tells me I'm not alone anymore. A majestic white wolf steps out of the trees, pausing to meet my eyes. He



licks his lips and turns, walking in the direction I was heading. Guess I won't be finding the water after all.

I carefully step back, wary of turning my back on a predator. On my second step, his head swings back my way, and the wolf lifts his lip in a snarl. My mind races, trying to remember if I should make myself as small a target as possible or as big. Who knows things like this when you grow up in a city?! I take a guess and throw my arms up in the air, spreading my feet apart.

“Shoo,” I yell. “Go away!”

He cocks his head to the side and takes a step toward me.

“No, no!” I flap my hands in the wolf's direction. “You go that way!” I point in the direction he was heading. “Go on. Go.”

He takes a few measured steps toward me.

“Well, shit, maybe it was to get small to make him go away.” I crouch down and wrap my arms around my legs.

The wolf lunges. Bounding across the space, he lands in front of me. We're eye to eye, and I can't think of anything except to not move. My heart pounds inside my chest, and I hope he can't hear it. Predators sense prey, and I really don't want to become prey. Inhaling deeply and then holding my breath, I hope it will help me.

The wolf lowers his front paws into a bow. I exhale but still don't move. He starts to shift around me, moving slowly but circling enough to make my palms sweat. Twisting my neck, I

try to follow where he's going, but lose sight of him when he gets behind me.

Something bumps my ass, making me fall forward. I catch myself on my hands and knees.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see the wolf's head moving in for another bump. I crawl forward, trying to escape him, but he follows his tongue hanging out of his mouth. God, I hope he isn't thinking he's playing with his food. I really don't want to be eaten by a wolf in the middle of some random woods.

I scramble to my feet and stumble a few steps forward. He follows close on my heels. I break through the trees and find myself standing on the edge of a small river. A sense of calm immediately fills me as I breathe deeply, momentarily forgetting the predator at my back. The wolf lies down next to the water, his head on his paws as he watches me. He suddenly doesn't seem so threatening, but just in case, I move about fifteen feet down the bank before settling down on the ground. Pulling off my shoes and raising the hem of my pants, I dangle my legs over the edge. My feet skim the top of the water, and I slowly swish them through the cool stream.

A weight in my lap causes me to blink and look down. The white wolf has moved to sit next to me and is resting his head on my lap. When our eyes meet, I could almost swear he smiles. I lift my hand and gently pet his head. I should be scared, but he seems so calm now that we are at the water, almost like his goal was to get me here all along.

Stretching out on my back, I stare up at the clouds lazily moving through the sky. I'm not sure if I doze off or just lose track of time, but I realize some time must have passed. I feel like I've been lying in the sunshine for hours, and sweat rolls down my back. Sitting up, I'm startled to see a Bengal tiger against my right side. His eyes are closed, and his breathing is slow. Vaguely, I wonder how I didn't hear an animal this large approach me or feel him lie down.

Before I can ponder too much, a voice draws my attention. "Good, you're all here."

I glance in the direction the sound came from and blink several times. Someone is standing in the water, but I can't seem to make my eyes focus. I can see a long white dress flowing into the water and long blonde hair reaching to the middle of her body. But her face seems to change every time I look at it. Her eyes shifting color and shape with each blink. Her mouth going from thin to thick lips.

"We're all here?" I ask. "It's only me."

"No, Sierra," she responds in a musical voice. "Two of your mates are here with you. Your third is asleep in your apartment like you are. It took some time to for all of you to be asleep at once to gather you."

"Mates? Third mate? Gather us? You aren't making any sense." I rub my eyes, hoping to see her better. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Rubbing your eyes won't help. I am a reincarnation of Capricorn. The time is coming when you will have to step up

and begin fulfilling your destiny. You were born to do more incredible things than you can imagine.

“In the Dark Ages, we, the Zodiacs, gifted some of our magic to earthlings. We wanted to make the world a better place. A happier place. To bring them out of that time. But it didn't take long for them to take advantage of the gifts. They got greedy. Taking more than their share.

“A tear opened in the universe. Stars are disappearing. We tried to warn them, but they didn't listen. We begged them to slow down on their use of magic. To no avail. We had to do something. We set a plan in motion for your destiny.

“Each Constellation picked a person who would come to Earth before it is too late. She would be blessed with powers from us to help mend the rift. When all twelve were on Earth, the plan would commence. You must find your four relics and bring them back to this place. Find the temple here and complete the ritual on Winter Solstice. The words will come to you. I created you for this.

“You will need to find a rapier. Your parents had you trained so you can defend yourself. The onyx jewelry. It will ground you and help you focus on your journey. The lead goblet. It is connected to the earth and gives you strength. And the combs lined with pearls. They connect us to the water and to the land. You need the serenity and force of the ocean to finish this mission.

“But beware! The Council doesn't want you to succeed. They will stand against you at every turn. They will turn the

masses against you. They will hire hit men to try to stop you. Be wary of who you trust.

“Your mates will be true and will help you on your journey. There is also a resistance. They know the truth and want you to succeed. They can be a valuable asset to help you on your journey. The council knows about and is hunting the resistance. Don’t put it past them to try a lure you in by faking being part of them.

“Trust your gut. Trust your mates. And look for my mark on the relics and the temple. I will be watching you from above.”

She fades out of view, disappearing as quickly as she had come. I reach out and gently run my hand through the wolf’s fur as the tiger chuffs quietly beside me.

As crazy as it sounds, it also feels right. My parents hinted I was something more when I was growing up. I guess now I know why. Glancing at the two shifters beside me, I wonder if I know these two already and if I’ll recognize them when our paths cross.

“Well, I guess we are in for a wild ride,” I say to them.

The tiger licks my hand, and the wolf lets out a huff.

## Chapter 6

### Facing My Destiny



I wake up in my bed, the dream still vivid in my mind as the chuff of the tiger fades slowly.

Walking out to the living room, I see Dennis in the kitchen pouring a mug of coffee while the smell of food fills the air.

“Hope you don’t mind that I started making breakfast.” He nods to the eggs on the stove. “And sorry for falling asleep on you last night. Guess I was more tired than I thought.”

I laugh and grab my mug. “No worries at all. It’s nice not to have to think about what to make and then end up leaving without food... Oh shit, that’s assuming there’s enough for me.” I sip my drink to stop the rambling and cut my eyes to Dennis.

“Of course, I made enough for you, too. I’m not a neanderthal.” He flips the eggs and starts opening cabinets.

“Plates are over there.” I point toward the cabinet on his left. He nods and pulls two down, splitting the eggs between both dishes. I grab forks and napkins and move to stand next to Dennis at the counter.

“These are incredible!” I moan on my first bite. “A sexy doctor who knows his way around a kitchen. How did I manage to get so lucky?”

He chuckles and brushes his hair off his forehead. “My mom was a single mother. She taught me early on how to cook for us in case she was stuck at work.”

We finish our meal in companionable silence. I clean up the kitchen when we’re done eating.

“So, random question, but did you have a strange dream last night?” I keep my back turned to him as I ask.

“Like a beautiful woman, who I can’t take my eyes off, agreeing to go on a date with me. Then rescuing a baby goat, going to a bar, and ending with mind-blowing sex? No, I don’t think that was a dream,” he answers. “At least I hope it wasn’t.”

I snort a laugh. “That wasn’t a dream,” I say. “But I meant more like wild animals in the woods and mysterious talking beings type thing?”

“I don’t remember anything like that, but I also don’t normally remember my dreams.” He shrugs and walks to the

bathroom.

I finish the dishes and follow him, grabbing a brush and starting to get ready for my day at work.

“And with last night. Was that normal for you?” I ask.

“Which part?” he asks, using water to try to tame his hair.

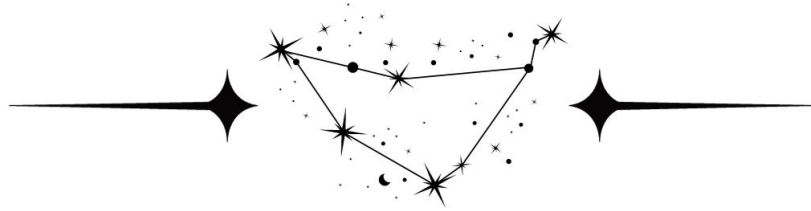
“The sex,” I say with a wince. I knew this would be an awkward conversation, but it was worse than I imagined. “I typically am not a fuck on the first date type of girl, but I couldn’t control myself last night. It felt so right and like we are meant to be together.”

“I’m not either,” he answers. “But I’m also not a stick around until the next morning type of guy either, so it looks like we are both breaking our norms. But I felt so comfortable here and with you. It’s like I can’t walk away and go back to being casual work friends. I need you in my life more than I’ve ever needed anyone... God, now I sound like a stalker.”

I shake my head. “Normally, yes, but I think there is more at play here, and neither of us realized. At the risk of sounding insane, I think we are destined to be together whether we want to or not.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we like each other than, isn’t it?” he asks, stepping out of the room so I can finish getting ready. “I’ll wait out here until you’re ready to head to work.”





We walk through the main doors side by side. The subway ride to work had flown by. If I had any doubts that he was made for me, they were quickly fading.

Getting on the elevator, we each push our separate floors for the morning shift. When the elevator dings for my floor, we part with a quick peck.

I go to the doctor's lounge, open my locker, and pull out a clean pair of scrubs to change into.

"Did I see you coming in with Dr. Hayes this morning?"

I startle at the sound of Cynthia's voice, not having seen her in here.

"Yep," I answer.

"Was it on purpose?" she persists.

I pull on my top and turn to her. "Yes," I answer quickly, turning back around.

"Girl, you need to share the deets!" Her voice rises as she speaks.

"It's still new," I respond. "But we went on a date last night that lasted until this morning. It was nice."

"Did you do the deed?" she presses. "You had to for it to have lasted until the morning."

“I’m not talking about this at work.” I shake my head. “I like my job too much and don’t intend to get fired.” I slip on my Sketchers and hastily exit the room.

I walk to the central desk and look at the stacks of files ready and waiting for today. I grab the top three and slump into a chair, opening them to review who I’m about to see. Not too bad. Two patients recovering from surgery and one trying to prevent surgery. I close the files and carry them with me toward the waiting room.

The morning passes with patients coming and doing a variety of exercises to try to continue building strength.

I finally reach my last patient before lunch, a four-year-old who needs to strengthen his hips and legs to be able to walk up and down stairs.

I find him and his mom in the waiting room.

“Mrs. Jones. You and Sam can come on back.” I hold the door open as she grabs his hand and they shuffle back to the therapy room.

“How are you today, Sam? Learn anything new at school?”

He nods.

“Use your words,” his mom reminds him.

“We learned about the rip in the sky,” he answers.

“Rip in the sky?” I ask, leading them to the corner of the room.

“Stars are going away. My teacher says we may lose planets too!” he continues.

“That sounds scary,” I tell him. “Let’s start with moving from sitting to standing without our hands.”

He moves to the bench and plops onto it.

“Remember, we are working on controlling going up and down.”

We practice the transition until he seems bored.

“Ready to practice on the stairs?”

Sam nods and leads the way over to the mini-staircase. I smile, reminding him to take his time, watch where he’s placing his feet, and hold on to the rail. After a few times of going up and down, I shift my eyes to his mom, giving her some tips to watch for at home.

“Look, Mom, no hands!” he yells, lifting his arms up as he takes a step down. His foot slips off the step. He falls back toward the wooden stairs.

I don’t think. I throw my hands out toward him, trying to conjure enough air to cushion his head and keep it from hitting the corner. A stream of water shoots forward, soaking him from head to toe and not helping soften the blow at all.

“Sam!” his mom cries, scooping up the crying child. “What was that? Why did you soak my child?”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to! I was trying to catch him with air. I don’t know what happened! I’ve been able to do that

since I was young. It's always worked!" I turn my hands over and look at my palms like the answer to what happened would appear there.

Mrs. Jones takes a few deep breaths to calm herself and show Sam how to calm down.

"I guess it's that curse. We all knew it would come one day. Those Zodiacs are stealing all the magic. If we don't do something soon, they will leave the rest of us with none, and they will try to control us all!"

I give a shallow nod and change the subject.

"Well, I think after all the excitement, we should call it a day. I'll see you for our next appointment." We walk to the lobby, Mrs. Jones continuing to blame the Zodiacs for wonky magic.

I make my way to the cafeteria, fix a tray, and plop down at an empty table.

I sigh and stir my food, not feeling like eating.

"Why so glum, sugar plum?" Dennis asks, sitting down across from me. "You know, Fried Chicken Day is the best day of the week in the cafeteria." He smiles at me, picking up his fork and tearing in.

I force a half smile back. "I tried to save one of my patients from falling today during therapy, but I ended up shooting water at him. I haven't lost control of my powers like that since I was a kid."

He nods, finishing his bite. “I’ve heard about that. The Zodiacs have been stealing more and more magic for themselves, right? That’s probably what happened.” He reaches out and pats my hand.

“That’s what they say, but I don’t think they are right,” I answer.

“Why would the Council lie?” he asks. “Aren’t they like the leaders of all supernatural?”

I nod. “They are, but I don’t think they are telling the whole truth. Magic is getting wonky and seems to be getting weaker, but I don’t think it is the Zodiacs doing it.”

“Why not?” he asks.

I drop my voice to barely a whisper and lean across the table. I’m choosing to trust him with my biggest secret since I’m choosing to accept him as my mate.

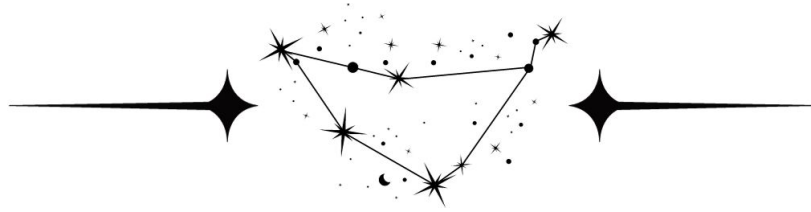
“Because I’m a Zodiac,” I answer him. “And I’m not trying to take any extra power. I just want to keep what’s mine.” I look at Dennis’s face and see his eyes look ready to pop out of his head. “But this isn’t the place to have this conversation. I need to go to Mystic Treasure and see Izzy. Care to walk with me?”

He nods and grabs both our trays, taking them to the return line before meeting me at the exit. We silently walk back through the hospital, only pausing to grab our things before exiting onto the busy street.

“So about this—“

“Not here,” I interrupt. “Too many people. Izzy’s shop will be more isolated. And I need to tell her what’s going on, too.”

He nods again, doing pretty well to take it all in stride.



The bell jingles as I push open the door.

“Welcome to Mystic Treasure! I’ll be with you in a moment if you need help!” I hear Izzy call from somewhere in the back.

“It’s me, Iz!” I yell back.

“Sierra,” she answers, coming closer, “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” She rounds the corner to join Dennis and me at the counter.

“We are,” I say. “But I’m taking a leave of absence starting today.”

“What?!” They both turn to stare at me.

“Can we go to your office to talk?” I ask Izzy. “There’s something you need to know, and I didn’t want to just disappear for who knows how long.”

She nods and starts picking her way through the aisles filled to the brim with almost anything a person could want. We move from the kitchen section to games. Through books and linens, before reaching the small office tucked into the back

corner of the store. We walk in and close the door behind us, Izzy sitting behind her desk, me across from her, and Dennis leaning against the door.

“Okay, girl, spill!” Izzy demands leaning forward and crossing her arms on the desktop.

“The first thing you need to know is that I’m a Zodiac,” I tell her, watching her eyes to see how she reacts.

“Well, that explains why you always seemed so special. But why does that mean you have to leave?” Izzy asks.

I explain to her what happened at work earlier and what Mrs. Jones said. I also tell her and Dennis about the dream from last night. I was hoping Capricorn meant that the time was coming in the future, but hearing people openly blame us and having my powers go wonky made me sure I need to start setting things right. I tell them about the wolf and the tiger, who are my mates and are out there somewhere waiting to help me on this trip, and that Dennis is also a mate, which explains the pull and lack of control we felt for each other.

“I’ve realized it’s time to face my destiny. I have to find these relics and the spot by the river. If we can close the rift and save the magic, maybe people will believe we aren’t the evil ones the Council is making us out to be.

“I’m hoping you’ll come with me.” I look at Dennis. “Capricorn says my mates will be there to help, and I feel like it is crucial to follow what she said if we want to stop the rift from spreading.”

He swallows hard enough to make his Adam's apple bob, but nods. "I'll put in for some time off too, but I don't know how much help I will be. I can't do any magic... but I don't want the Earth to be sucked into the black hole like the stars and Mars are. Where do we start?"

"Something tells me we need to stop in Europe, so we can see where there's a flight that still has two seats," I answer.

"Three," Izzy cuts in.

"What?" I ask, turning to face her.

"We'll need three seats," she repeats. "I'm coming with you."



## Chapter 7

Mad Dash



“I’m sorry. You’re what?” I ask.

“I’m coming with you,” Izzy repeats. “I’ll just need to call Maggie to cover the store, but I’m sure she will.” She shrugs, pulling out her phone and sending off a quick text. Her phone dings almost immediately. “See, no problem. Let’s go!”

She leads the way out of her office and back through the aisles of her store. As we are walking to the front of the store, a strange feeling draws my eyes to the far wall, where Izzy stores weapons and workout equipment.

“Did you get anything new recently?” I ask, turning and moving toward the wall.

“Yep,” she answers. “I found a storage locker that had all kinds of things in it. Like stuff from all over the world! I’ve already sold a lot of it.”

I reach the wall and look around, finally turning right and heading to a display case.

“Did all this come from the locker?” I ask.

“It did!” Izzy nods. She points out an old compass, hand-drawn maps, some daggers believed to be from Damascus, and pottery from the Huns.

“This is really cool, but I feel like there’s something else here. Something I need to find...” I trail off.

Izzy taps her chin as she looks up and down the display case before nodding to herself and circling around the back. She pulls her keys out of her pocket, unlocks and opens the storage, then pulls out a black case.

“This was in there too, but it just didn’t feel right to put it out with everything. I almost forgot it was down there.” She sits it on the top of the glass and unzips the case. It falls open to show a beautiful silver rapier sword. I’m sure it’s a trick of the light, but it almost looks like it’s glowing. I reach out and gently lift it out.

Memories come flooding back. Being a small girl with my father practicing fencing. Then being older and using a weapon similar to the one I’m holding now. We dance back and forth, swords clanging. We jump over roots and slash back

and forth. My arm slips, and my dad swipes out, drawing blood.

“Ow!” I whine, reaching up and clasping the wound with my free hand. “Why do we have to do this every day? I’m tired, and my arm needs a break.”

“Sia, one day you will need these skills. They may save your life or the life of someone you love,” he answers.

“Like you and Mommy?” I ask.

“If we are still around, then maybe, or the others destined to help you.”

“But I don’t want you and Mom to go away!” I yell.

“We don’t want to either. We’ll stay as long as we can,” he answers, reaching out and running a hand down my hair. “Now let’s go again. You’re getting better, but there’s always room for improvement.”

I nod and lift my sword back up as he lunges at me.

Blinking, I notice Dennis and Izzy both staring at me.

“Are you okay?” Dennis asks.

I swallow hard and nod. “I just remembered my dad teaching me to use a sword like this when I was young. He said it may save my life one day.”

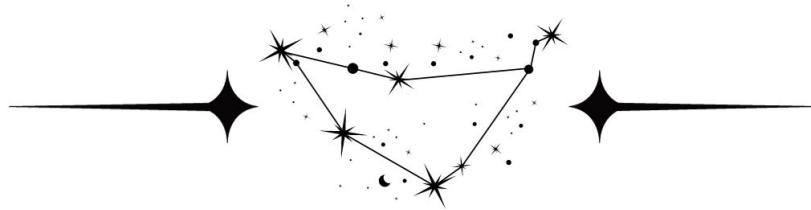
“While it’s a good skill to have. Hopefully, we won’t be in sword fights on this treasure hunt,” Dennis says.

I nod and glance back down at the rapier, noticing a spot that looks smudged. I use my shirt to try to polish it, but the mark

won't move. Looking closer, I notice eight tiny stars making the shape of a triangle. I gasp.

“That’s the Capricorn constellation,” I whisper. “I think I just found the first relic.” I stare wide-eyed, waiting to see if the mark disappears. The marks remain, but the feeling that brought me over here diminishes.

“Guess it was meant to be,” Izzy answers. “Now, are we ready to go?”



**W**e go to all three apartments to pack and get ready for the trip, deciding it is best to pack in hiking backpacks over suitcases in case we end up somewhere remote.

I’m the last one shoving clothes and toiletries into a bag. We take all three backpacks and my new sword and walk out the door, locking it behind us.

A quick stop for some travel sized items and snacks and we are ready to head to the airport. We hail a cab and pile into the back.

The cab driver keeps glancing at the mirror and looking at the sword on my lap, but he quickly takes us to the airport and drops us off at the nearest entrance for travel.

We walk into the airport and stare at the departure board.

“So where are we going?” asks Dennis, sitting the crate down at his feet.

“Hmmm...” My eyes run through all the possibilities, continuing to come back to the same destination. “Bordeaux, I think.”

“Ooo, France.” Izzy claps her hands, “I’ve always wanted to see Paris! Maybe we’ll have time to pop by!”

I laugh as we make our way to the ticket counter. We slowly make our way to the front of the line, hoping there are still tickets available on the flight.

Reaching the agent, I try to appear friendly as her eyes dart to the sword strapped across my back.

“Good morning,” she greets carefully. “What can I do for you today?”

“We are hoping to buy three tickets to Bordeaux, France,” I tell her.

“It’s very last minute,” she says. “So I can’t make any promises, but let me look. Do you have your passports on you?”

We nod and pull them out, handing them across the counter. She taps away at her computer, her brow furrowing. The wait drags as I watch other people get handed passes and head farther into the airport to catch their flights.

“Okay,” the agent says. “We have a few seats available. They won’t be together, but they are all in business class. Is that okay?”

“Thank you, that would be great!” I answer.

The agent nods and starts typing in numbers and reserving seats. A few minutes later, she prints out the boarding passes and passes them over to us.

“You’re almost all set, but we will need to check the weapon.”

I sigh but pass it over to her, watching her mark the case with a tag and place it on the conveyor to go under the plane.

We turn to leave when Izzy says over her shoulder, “Thanks again! You’re a lifesaver, maybe literally!”

## Chapter 8

### The Local



Stepping out of the airport, I take a deep breath, smelling the distinct scent of water nearby. We hail a cab and pile in, asking the driver to take us to the main part of the city.

We pass by old stone buildings adorned with overflowing flower boxes, a tall bell tower that appears older than the city itself, and numerous boutiques and coffee shops that I hope to return to and explore.

The car stops, and I pass over some of the Euros we picked up at the airport before smiling and waving at the driver. He doesn't return the gesture.

“Any thoughts on what to do now?” asks Dennis.

“Not really,” I say. “My gut says we are in the right area, but I just don’t know where...”

“Then we get to explore?!” Izzy says excitedly.

Dennis and I shrug.

“Guess so,” I answer.

We pick a street at random and start to walk. I admire the asphalt streets turning into stone as we move down the road. No nudges come to direct us, so we keep walking up and down the streets waiting and hoping.

An hour later, we are tired and thirsty and decide to stop in to a local cafe for a break.

They lined the road with wrought-iron tables and chairs with dark green umbrellas to block the sun. Dennis moves over to a table at the end and takes a seat.

“I’ll wait here. You two go inside and order. Can you get me something to eat and water?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say, moving to the door and opening it for Izzy to enter.

Blue tables and wooden chairs are spread throughout the room. The counter is to the left of the door. It’s a white-washed wood with dark wood countertops in front of modern stainless steel espresso machines and what appears to be a modern kitchen. We make our way to the counter and smile at the woman who passes behind it.



She doesn't approach us, simply furrows her brows and keeps walking. I look around to see if there is a sign about waiting to be seated, but everything is in French, and I can't read it. I don't see any servers at tables, so I continue to stand at the counter.

"You must not be from around here," a deep voice says from behind me.

"Is it that obvious?" I ask, turning to face whoever spoke.

My jaw drops open at the sight of a man who has to be six-and-a-half feet tall with shoulder-length hair that is such a light blonde it is almost white. His shirt hugs the well-defined muscles of his chest and arms. I meet his icy blue eyes and feel like I'm being sucked into a black hole. I can't seem to make myself look away.

His eyes move up and down me, and the world stands still.

"A little bit, yeah," he answers. "I'm Kenric, moved here several years ago from the States."

I reach out and shake his hand.

"My friends and I are trying to get some food, but no one is coming to the counter to take our order." I shrug and force my eyes to rove around the cafe again.

"Did you find a table?" he asks.

"We did. Outside."

"Care if I join you? I'll show you how to get a server to your table to order," Kenric asks.

“I—we—won’t mind at all,” I answer as Izzy laughs beside me. “Oh, this is Izzy. She’s traveling with me.” She laughs again as Kenric turns to face her for the first time.

“Hello, Izzy. Nice to meet you.” He holds out his hand to shake.

“You too,” she answers, taking his hand. “Thanks for offering to help us. We would have been stuck here for who knows how long without you.”

“I’m sure it is no problem with such wonderful company. Shall we head outside?” he asks, turning toward the front door.

Izzy grabs my arm and pulls until I look at her.

“OMG!” she mouths. “So hot!”

I nod my agreement and pick up the pace to catch up with him at the door.

Dennis stands as we approach the table, pulling out a chair for me. “So what did you order?” he asks before noticing Kenric. “And who’s your new friend?”

“This is Kenric,” I introduce as we settle around the table. “He is local and has agreed to help us with ordering since no one came to the counter. Guess he’s our knight in shining armor.”

“Nice to meet you...” Kenric trails off.

“Dennis.”

“Dennis,” he finishes. “I couldn’t leave two gorgeous women hungry and in distress. I had to offer my assistance in

getting them sustenance. The button in the middle of the table will let a server know that you are ready for service or have a question.” He reaches forward and pushes a button set into the table.

I don’t hear anything when he pushes it, but a few minutes later a server in a white button-down and black slacks approaches the table. She says something in French, to which Kenric responds, and then she leaves.

“She’ll be back with English menus in a moment for you all,” he tells us.

“That’s neat!” I say.

“Does this stop someone from coming and asking how it is when my mouth is full?” asks Dennis. “Somehow, it’s always when you take a bite.”

“Yep,” Kenric answers. “Other than bringing the food out, she’ll only come over when we buzz. People expect their privacy even when eating out.”

The server returns and passes each of us a menu before walking away.

My eyes scan down all the dishes. Toasties, cheese plates, sandwiches, pastries, caviars. This place has it all.

“I don’t know where to start,” I say. “I want it all.”

“It’ll take days to eat through all these items,” Izzy agrees.

“And we don’t know how long we’ll be here for,” I remind her.

She pouts a little but doesn't respond.

“My favorites are the toasties for a lighter choice or the fish. It's caught fresh daily and brought in. Or they have amazing hamburgers if you're missing home. I know it sounds weird, but they are worth it. And of course, the wine here is excellent. You can get a vintage bottle or something that has just hit the shelves. I don't know if you are aware, but Bordeaux is the wine capital.”

We decide on a variety of dishes to share, including the hamburger, a cheese plate, and a few others. We pass on the wine, since it's still mid-day, but we do order some lattes. As we wait for our orders, we chat a little and get to know each other.

Kenric was born in England, but moved with his family to the States when he was five. When he graduated from university, he picked a job with offices around the world and transferred here.

“So what brings you all to this side of the world?” he asks.

“We're on a treasure hunt of sorts,” I answer. “We aren't sure if we are in the right area or not, but we're planning to take some time to try to find what we need. But we may need to move to another city or country...”

“And what are you looking for?” he asks. “I may be able to help you find it or at least know if it is in the area... Wait, are you geocashers? I know people like to hide those things everywhere, but aren't there normally clues?”

With a chuckle, Dennis answers, “Not geocashers, although I’ve thought that sounds fun...” He looks at me, and I shrug. “We are hunting some relics related to the Constellations.”

“The first is a locket with a large onyx stone on the lid. It would be a silver metal or maybe pewter. Antique old. It’s been here since magic began,” I say. “I’m thinking maybe in a museum of some kind or antique store, but other than a feeling that I’m in the area, I’ve got nothing to go on.”

Kenric taps his chin with his long fingers while thinking. Our food arrives, and he still is sitting quietly, his mouth scrunched up to one side as we start to eat. The food distracts me as the first bite of flaky pastry melts on my tongue, and I moan. Both men lock their eyes on me.

“Sorry,” I say, even though I’m not really. “I’ve never had anything this tasty before. It’s so buttery and melts in your mouth, and...” I trail off, taking another large bite.

“Keep making sounds like that and it may delay us from looking for this locket,” Dennis says, his eyes hooded as he watches me lick the flakes of pastry off my lips.

“It is quite distracting,” Kenric agrees.

“Ew,” Izzy says. “I’m trying to eat. I don’t want to be privy to any three-ways you two are planning.”

My cheeks heat at being called out by my friend, but the thought of being the meat in a Dennis and Kenric sandwich has my belly warming.

Trying to change the subject before I end up doing something that could get me arrested, I ask, “So, have you heard of anything like the locket?”

“Maybe,” Kenric answers, pulling out his phone and typing on it. He turns it to show us the screen. “There’s a castle a few hours from here that has several display cases of family jewels. Well, at least they did. It was closed to the public the year I got here, but I remember a lot of onyx in the pieces. I think it was the family’s favorite stone or something. I only went once before it was closed, and I’ve heard they have abandoned it since. But I never heard what happened to their collections. No museums boasted about buying or receiving a donation around that time.”

“Can you give us directions?” I ask. “Even if it’s not there, it may give us a starting point on where to look.”

“I can do you one better,” he answers. “I can drive you up there after we finish eating.”

## Chapter 9

### Fight or Flight



**K**enic drives us through the countryside to the castle. We pass vineyards and cottages. We drive through small towns with people working in their gardens. Everything seems so peaceful, and I wish I could take the time to slow down and explore.

The car stops in front of wrought-iron gates, and Kenric looks over. “We’re here.”

We all look at each other and back at the gate.

“Should we try to go in?” I ask. “I don’t see any no trespassing signs.”

Dennis shrugs and pops the backdoor open. “May as well see if the gates are locked. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” He

climbs out, the rest of us quickly following.

Reaching the gates, I push some vines aside and look through at the estate beyond.

“Wow,” I say.

The rolling lawn appears to be well-maintained. A few smaller buildings are dotted around the walls, which I guess are greenhouses, sit between beds of flowers. The cobblestone drive disappears over a hill, where I can see the top of a building peaking over.

“The yard is gorgeous. I can’t believe they have abandoned this place since it closed. It’s in too-good shape.”

Everyone else moves closer, reaching for the vines to peer through. Kenric stands in the middle near where the two gates touch. As he pushes the vines out of his way, the gate shifts, opening enough for people to enter.

“Guess we could have just tried to open the gate,” Izzy mumbles. “Well, are we going in?”

We have a quick discussion and decide this is the best lead we have, so we may as well. I pull the case with my rapier out of the car, removing the sword and strapping it along my spine. Returning to the gate, I lead the others through in single file and onto the estate.

We walk silently up the driveway, listening to try to find out if anyone is around. The wind whistles, rustling the flowers and blowing my hair into my face. We reach the front door without hearing anything. Not even birds.



The hairs on the back of my neck tingle like I'm being watched.

"I don't like this," whispers Izzy.

"I mean, it may be my lack of power, but something seems off. Almost like we're being watched," whispers Dennis.

We all nod and look around the empty lawn like someone is going to pop out and yell 'boo'.

Kenric looks at the door. "Should we knock?" he asks.

"Guess it's best to be polite," I say, grabbing the larger knocker and banging it on the door.

The thump echoes through the space beyond. I step back and wait to see what will happen.

"Oh well, looks like no one's home. Guess we should head back to the car," says Izzy, turning to leave.

The doors slowly swing inward, revealing an entryway that would have been grand a long time ago. The floors are white marble, with streaks of gray running through it. Two large wooden staircases are in opposite corners, leading up to higher floors. A fireplace of at least twenty feet tall is on one wall, once upon a time warming the space and welcoming guests. Electric torches that look like they could be from when the castle was built sit every ten feet along the wall in sconces covered in cobwebs.

"Well, it's not breaking and entering if the door opened itself, right? It's just entering?" I ask with a strained laugh, taking a tentative step forward.

The floor creaks, and I reach back, grabbing the handle of the rapier. When nothing else happens, I release my grip and walk a few steps forward. Looking back, the other three are still standing in the doorway, staring at me.

“Seriously?” I say. “Come on! The quicker we get in here and check, the quicker we can get out.”

Kenric enters next, moving up to stand next to me, followed by Dennis.

“Don’t leave me out here alone!” Izzy hisses before scurrying in and tucking herself between Kenric and Dennis.

I snicker before turning and moving down the hall. There are four closed doors on one side and three on the other. Each doorknob is coated in dust, like it hasn’t been turned in months. A swinging door, set between the staircases a small window, allows us to see through to a kitchen. Moving closer to the door, I notice an area of empty space in the dust on the door.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, switching on the flashlight to see better.

“Is that a handprint?” Kenric asks leaning closer.

“That’s my guess,” I say. “It looks like someone has been using the kitchen recently, unlike the rest of these rooms. What are these rooms, anyway?”

“Best I can remember, a sitting room, a library, a ballroom... Mostly places you would host other people in,” answers

Kenric. “I think they were full of books, instruments, and crafts. Things to show what life was like.”

“And upstairs?” I ask.

“Those were the private rooms. Bedrooms, the nursery, the Lord’s office. They had cases of clothes, jewelry, and children’s activities for people to see.”

“Jewelry?” says Dennis. “Like maybe a locket with an onyx stone?”

Kenric reaches up and runs a hand through his hair, thinking. “It’s possible. I didn’t pay much attention to the girls’ or women’s rooms. But if it’s here, then one of those rooms would be my guess.”

“Then up we go,” I say, moving to the closest staircase and starting to climb.

As I near the top, the feeling of being watched returns. I reach back, grabbing my sword, and slowly, silently sliding it from its scabbard.

The landing creaks as I step onto the second floor. Freezing, I listen to see if anything will respond. A minute later, when nothing has come out to get us, I continue lowering the rapier to my side. Kenric, Izzy, and Dennis follow. We stay close to the wall, hoping any more creaking boards are in the middle. Ahead, the doors on both sides of the hall are closed, but none of the knobs have dust on them.

“Any guesses on which door?” I whisper to Kenric. “We could keep going up, but my gut says we’re close.”

Kenric's eyes swing up and down the hall before he shrugs. "It's been years. We could split up and check the rooms."

I grimace, looking at Dennis and Izzy.

"Don't worry," she whispers. "My panther and I can protect him." She tips her head at Dennis. "Or you can, but I feel like this is a time my senses will be better than your fae senses." Looking at Kenric, she adds, "You can watch each other's backs."

I hate to leave my mate, but Izzy is right. Her animal can increase her speed and hearing, and she has wicked sharp claws if she needs to fight. I can sense some magic on Kenric, but I have no idea what he is capable of and don't want to risk a mate or my best friend. Keeping him with me is my only option.

"We'll take the left. You two take the right," I tell them. I meet each person's eyes, waiting for them to nod their agreement.

I move to the first door, checking that Kenric is ready, before twisting the knob and swinging the door inward.

We stand shoulder to shoulder, scanning the room. We don't see anyone hiding, so we step inside.

The room appears to be a sitting room. Two couches face each other with pillows that look hand-sewn on them. One couch has a basket of fabrics near it and needlework displayed along it. The other has an autoharp and some sheet music. A

few chairs are placed near the window, and a small table is laden with books, quills, and candles.

“I don’t think this room has jewelry,” I whisper. “Ready to check the next one?”

“Sure,” Kenric answers, moving out the door.

I enter the hallway, gently shutting the door behind me before joining Kenric at the next door down. At my nod, he opens the door, and we again scan the room for anyone waiting to attack us.

This room has a large canopy bed centered on the far wall. A chair sits near the window, and the curtains are drawn. Glass covers shelves of items lining the walls. Entering, I move toward the largest shelf. I see dolls, blocks, and balls. Not where jewelry would be kept. I turn and head to Kenric on the other side of the room.

“Any luck?” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “Next room?”

Before I can answer, a crash sounds across the hall, followed by a low growl. Kenric and I take off at a sprint.

A door farther up the hall is open, and the sounds coming from it make my heart stop. I push myself faster, grabbing the door frame, and spinning myself into the room.

A large tiger is facing off with a black panther. Both animals’ teeth are bared as they growl back and forth.

My eyes spin wide until they lock on Dennis standing in the corner. I let out a shaky breath and turn back to the threat in the room.

Lifting my sword, I creep up next to Izzy, facing the tiger. He's crouched in front of a case, his tail slowly swishing back and forth as his eyes move between both of us. It's almost like he's trying to figure out who's the bigger threat.

He locks on me, and the growl gets louder. I bend my knees, placing both hands on the hilt of my sword and preparing to fight a tiger.

He lunges forward. I angle the sword, hoping for a quick clean kill.

Before he reaches me, a white blur comes between us, knocking the tiger off course. They land with a thud, rolling across the floor and crashing into a glass display case by the window.

I look at Izzy, still crouched in front of Dennis. "Thanks, girl, but you two need to get out while he's distracted. I'll find what he's guarding, then come meet you at the car."

She dips her head before looking over her shoulder.

Dennis looks at me. "Sia, I don't want to leave you here," he says.

"I'll be right behind you! Go! I'll be fine, I promise!" I hope that's a promise I can keep.

He slowly edges his way across the wall. Izzy keeps pace in front of him while the white blur, which I can now see is a

white wolf, and the tiger continue to throw each other around the room.

Dennis reaches the door, and he and Izzy head into the hallway, their footsteps speeding up as they retreat downstairs.

I look around the room. The floor is littered with glass and paper from books that have been knocked from the shelves. The tiger and the wolf seem evenly matched, both dipping and dodging. Taking swipes at each other. The wolf's back leg is scarlet where the tiger swiped him with his claws, but the tiger seems to be favoring his front leg and not wanting to put it down.

I sidle toward the case the tiger was originally standing in front of. I can see the glint of jewels as the sunlight hits them.

My hope soars as the feeling inside me pushes me forward. I reach the case and look down. There are multiple rings at the end of the case. I turn my head to look further into the case. Necklaces sit on the far side.

I look over my shoulder and see the wolf has moved to stand behind me as a guard, like Izzy was doing for Dennis earlier.

He's got a pool of blood spreading below him, but the tiger seems to not be attacking and is instead arching and waiting.

I reach the far end and spot several locket lying on the velvet inside. My eyes land on a silver locket in the middle with a large black stone glittering in the front. I grab the lid of the case and pull up.

Nothing happens.

I try again, bending and using my legs to try to get it to open, but it doesn't budge.

Getting frustrated, I slam the handle of the sword into the case, shattering the top. As I reach inside, a growl rips through the air.

I whip my head around and see the tiger lunging forward. Two of his legs seem to collapse with each step, but he doesn't seem to notice. The wolf jumps between us, swaying slightly. The tiger doesn't slow.

I reach through the top, wrapping my hand around the locket and pulling it out.

I hiss as the glass slashes through my arm. The wolf turns, his nose twitching.

I flip the locket over, seeing the same almost triangular design on the back. I throw the chain over my head and race back to the door.



## Chapter 10

Beorn



I burst into the hallway and run down the stairs. My vision starts to spot, but I can't stop. The sound of paws hitting the floor follows me.

I push harder. Run faster. I yank the front door open and stumble down the steps. The world spins, but I keep going.

I hear something hit on the gravel behind me. I twist to see who it is, tripping over my own feet and almost hitting the ground.

I fight the spots pushing toward the gates. Harder and harder, but moving slower and slower.

The gate comes into sight, and I let out a sigh of relief. Safety is so close, if only I can make it. My feet tangle against

each other. The ground comes at me quickly, and all hope of escaping seems to slip away.

I close my eyes, accepting my fate but not wanting to see myself become food.

The impact on the driveway doesn't come.

Gravity reverses, and I feel myself flying up through the air, landing against something solid and warm. But not furry...

I crack my eyes open, seeing the pale skin of the chest I'm leaning against. I track upwards, my eyes landing on Kenric carrying me bridal-style toward the gate.

I lift myself enough to glance over his shoulder, seeing the tiger gaining on us as he charges down the driveway.

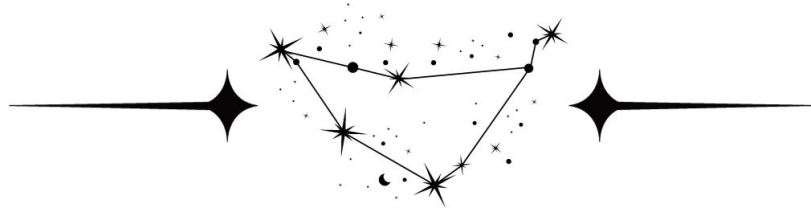
"Kenric," I mumble, trying to force urgency into my voice, but fading fast. "Going faster would be good." I sink back down, laying my head against his chest.

"Trying," he grunts out.

My eyes drift close as I feel the off-balanced way he is running toward the gate. Almost like he can't properly put weight on one side.

I faintly hear Dennis's voice, "What the fuck did you do to her?! And why are you naked?"

I don't hear the reply as I drift into the welcoming darkness.



Sound returns first. Two low voices arguing and one slightly higher-pitched voice interjecting every so often. I try to open my eyes, but my lids are heavy and uncooperative.

The next thing to return is the pain. My arm throbs in time with my heartbeat, and a whimper escapes.

The voices stop. I feel hands on my cheeks. Thumbs slowly stroking back and forth.

“Sia?” Dennis’s voice sounds hesitant. “Can you hear me? You’re okay. I’ve got you. Everything is okay now.”

I try to open my eyes, but my lids still refuse.

“What are you doing to her?” another gruff voice asks.

“Nothing,” Dennis answers. “She made a noise, and I wanted her to know she’s not alone.”

“But why are her eyes doing that? It looks like she’s having a seizure. You must have done something!”

I want to correct that second voice. Dennis didn’t hurt me. He wouldn’t. I try to tell the second voice that it isn’t his fault. I make some sound and both of them stopped talking. I’m not even sure they are breathing.

“Is she okay?” the second voice asks. It sounds familiar, but I can’t quite place it.

“I would hope so. You were the last one with her yesterday before she lost consciousness,” Dennis snaps back.

“I didn’t do anything to her,” the angry voice answers.

I fight against the pull of darkness and force my eyes to open a slit, seeing both Dennis and Kenric on either side of me.

“Where am I?” I mumble, hoping they can understand me.

“We came back to my house,” Kenric offers, stroking my hair back from my face.

“What happened?” I mumble, blinking to bring the room into focus. “I remember getting the locket, but then it all goes fuzzy.”

“The glass cut your arm when you got the locket out. You were bleeding pretty badly, but luckily we had a doc on hand, and he stitched you right up,” Kenric answers.

I glance down at my arm and see the gauze wrapped from wrist to elbow.

“At least you had the foresight to wear the locket,” Dennis says. “It is on the coffee table, if you were wondering.”

I turn my head and see the locket just where he said it would be.

Another thought enters my head, making me sit up right fighting off a wave of dizziness.

“You’re the white wolf!” I yell at Kenric.

He nods. “Yes. I’m a white wolf.”

“No.” I shake my head but have to stop quickly. “You’re THE white wolf. The one from my dream... You’re my mate.”

“I have distant memories of a dream. It’s what made me want to stop and help you in the cafe,” he says. “I knew there was some connection between us. Was there more I should know about the dream?”

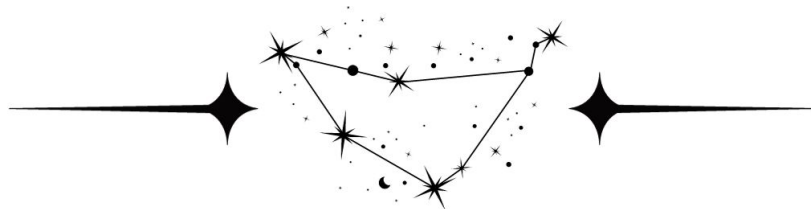
“Yep,” I say. “We have to find the four relics: sword, locket, cup, and combs. Then find the temple to Capricorn and perform a ritual on the Winter Solstice to stop the council from consuming all magic and bring balance back into the world.”

His eyes grow wide as I speak.

“Oh, shit!” I shout. “We have to go back to the house!”

“No, we don’t,” Dennis answers. “You were almost killed the last time we were there. We have no reason to go back.”

“Yes, we do,” I say. “The tiger that attacked us is my third mate, and we need to figure out what his problem is.”



**A**fter some yelling and a lot of convincing, we load back up in Kenric’s car, and head back to the castle.

The drive seems to take longer than the first time, and my leg jumps around nervously. Kenric rests a hand on my knee,

stilling the anxious movement.

“It’s going to be okay,” he rumbles.

“Is it?!” I snap. “One of my mates, who I need to finish this quest, just tried to kill me. And you, if you remember correctly. Wait, how are you not hurt? I saw the blood on you.”

“Shifters heal quickly,” he answers with a shrug. “Luckily, the wonky magic hasn’t affected that yet.”

We stop the car farther from the gate than last time, hoping for the element of surprise.

Exiting the car, we walk up the driveway, looking around the curve toward the gate. Movement catches my eye and makes me throw my arm out and stop all of us.

A tall man paces back and forth inside the gate. The sun reflects off hair that looks more orange than red, almost matching his tiger’s fur. He’s slim, his plaid shirt and jeans hiding the lean muscles I know must be hidden under them. I’ve never met an out-of-shape shifter and doubt he’d be the first.

He stops at the opening, his gaze locking in our direction.

I take a small step forward, clearing the bend and staring back at his blue-green eyes.

“Hello?” I call.

He reaches up and runs a hand over his short beard.

“I’m Sierra. What’s your name?”

He cocks his head to the side, watching as the other three step up next to me.

“This is Dennis, Izzy, and Kenric.”

“Maybe he doesn’t speak English,” Izzy whispers. We wait, watching him watch us.

“Beorn,” he finally answers with a thick English accent.

“It’s nice to meet you, Beorn,” I say. “Do you want to come out here and talk to us?”

He looks at the gate, looks at us, and shakes his head.

“It’s safe out here. We don’t want to hurt you.”

He takes a hesitant step forward, lifting his hand to the gate. I can hear the pop from where we are standing as he jerks back away from the exit. When his face lifts again, his eyes are blank.

“Beorn,” I call again. “Can you tell us why you’re here?”

He looks at each of us in turn, like one of us will give him the answer. When we don’t, he turns and looks behind him.

“Where is here?” he asks. “How long have I been here?”

“You’re at Clement Castle,” Kenric supplies. “As for how long you’ve been here, I don’t know, but we can find out.”

“Do I know you?” he asks. “Something about you seems familiar, but I can’t figure out why.”

Kenric chuckles quietly. “Yeah, we’ve met. Can we come in and talk to you about it?”

Beorn scrunches up his eyes like he's trying to figure out what the correct answer is before finally nodding.

I smile, stepping toward the gate and my confused mate beyond. By our second step forward, Beorn lets out a low rumble. When we keep moving forward, it turns into a menacing growl. I freeze, throwing my arms out to halt the others. The sound continues at the same volume. I take a small step back, pushing the others back as well. The growl softens. I nod and continue to back up the others with me. When we are back where we started, the sound stops.

Beorn looks at us and wrinkles his brow. "I thought you were coming in to talk?" he says. "I was going to make you tea."

"Dude, you just started growling at us," Izzy answers, shaking her head.

"I did?!" he asks. "I'm so sorry! I normally have better control over my tiger than that. I don't know why he would do that."

I smile gently. "I'm sure it was an accident," I say gently. "But I would like to know more about you. What's the last thing you remember before being here?"

I sit on the ground, and Beorn does the same. May as well be comfortable while we figure out what's going on here. The other three take a few steps back, talking quietly. I listen in while also listening to Beorn's life story.

"What's wrong with him?" whispers Dennis.



“I don’t know, but something happened to him. It’s like he keeps losing time. How can he live here and not know where it is?” Izzy answers.

Kenric hums quietly. “It’s almost like he’s being controlled by someone else...”

“I was excited to have a holiday over in Paris. It had been forever since I’d had a holiday, and I was excited to take a few weeks off and to go exploring.”

“Did you make it to Paris?” I ask.

His lips twist to the side as he thinks. Finally, he nods. “I remember reaching the train station and wanting to get food before checking into my hotel. I stopped at a local pub, thinking it would be a quick stop. A large, bald man in a trench coat came over and sat next to me. We talked about a footy game that was on over a pint or two. Then I was standing at this gate. Something made me stand here, but I don’t know what. Just that I needed to be here. Then you lot turned up.”

“And when was this trip to Paris planned?” I ask.

“For the summer holidays,” he answers.

“Beorn, it’s almost the winter solstice,” I say.

“You mean I’ve lost months?” he asks.

Kenric passes me his phone, and I glance at the article, a small gasp slipping out.

“I think you lost years.”

## Chapter 11

### Missing Person



“Why do you say that?!” he barks.

I toss the phone through the gate. He picks it up, his face going pale as he looks over the missing person flyer Kenric found. It shows a picture of Beorn looking the same as he does now. The last known location was Paris, France. The date of the report is what caught my attention. The report was filed two years ago when he didn't return from his holiday.

Beorn falls to the ground, clutching the phone to his chest.

“How?” he asks quietly. “How could I lose two years?”

“We think someone was controlling you,” Kenric says. “Maybe the man at the pub did something. It couldn't have been a drug for it to last this long, but maybe a spell.”

I feel an ache in my chest, looking at Beorn in distress. I shift forward, wanting to go to him and comfort him. The low growling warning starts up.

“Sia, don’t,” whispers Dennis. “We don’t know that it’s safe.”

“He’s my mate, and he’s hurting,” I snap back, inching forward a little more.

“Sierra,” Kenric says. “Last time he forgot what had happened after we were too close. We don’t want him to forget again.”

I sigh, defeated, but back up until the sound stops. “We will find a way to help you. There has to be a way, and I won’t stop until I find it!”

I turn and run for the car, fighting the tears that want to run down my face. A hand lands on my back, gently rubbing up and down, offering me the comfort I can’t offer Beorn.

“It’ll be okay, Sia,” Dennis says softly. “We’ll figure something out.”

I feel the other two standing behind him, watching us.

“But that’s the problem. I don’t know how. None of us have the magic to see if it’s a curse, let alone to undo it! We need a witch, not shifters or fae!” I yell before quickly lowering my voice. “And we don’t know anyone here to try to find one!” I lose the battle, and my tears slide down my cheeks.

Dennis pulls me against his chest slowly, rocking back and forth.

“*We* may not know people here,” Izzy starts, “but you’re forgetting that Kenric lives in this country.”

I jerk back from Dennis and blink at Kenric. “Do you know a witch? Or a warlock? Or someone who can find us one?” My words speed up as a glimmer of hope takes root.

He scratches his chin, thinking before nodding. “Maybe. Let me make a call.” He steps away from us, pulling out his cell phone and pacing while he has a conversation too quiet for me to hear.

My teeth grind together, and my fists clench, nails digging into my palms. My fear gives way to anger. I hate being helpless and unable to help my mate. My palms start to tingle, and I have to breathe deeply to keep them from igniting with flames.

After what feels like forever, but is probably closer to fifteen minutes, Kenric lowers his phone and comes back to us.

“So...” I ask.

“I have a... friend.” He stumbles over the word friend before continuing, “Who is going to come and see if she can help? She’s part of the local coven.”

“Friend or fuck buddy?” asks Izzy. “Because the way you said it makes me think the latter.”

Kenric’s cheeks turn pink, and I reach over and smack her on the arm.

“Not the time, Izzy,” I snap.

“What? I’m just curious,” she shrugs. “Friend isn’t a hard word.”

I ignore her, turning back to Kenric. “And she’s coming now?”

He nods. “She said she’d head this way, but it’ll be a few hours before she makes it here.”

I take a deep breath, feeling the anger and panic recede now that there is a plan. “Then I guess we have more time to get to know Beorn until she arrives.”

The hours pass quickly as we all spend time sitting on either side of the gate sharing stories and getting to know each other better. As long as Beorn focuses on the time before his holiday, everything is clear. I learn he worked as an accountant and is the youngest in his family.

The sound of tires on the road behind us has us all jumping up and looking back.

A tall, thin woman rounds the bend in the driveway. Her skin is so pale I’m surprised she isn’t glowing. Her raven black hair falls in messy waves to the middle of her back. The most striking thing about her, though, is her eyes. They are a light purple that seems to glow with the power she contains.

“Miranda,” Kenric greets, stepping forward. “Thank you for coming out to assist us. This is my mate, Sierra. Her other mate, Dennis, and their friend, Izzy. And”—he points to the gate—“this is Beorn. He is who we need your help with.”

She locks her eyes on him, stepping forward. Beorn starts to growl as she crosses the invisible line in the road. She makes a small noise and takes another step forward. The volume increases.

“Interesting,” she mutters.

“What?!” I snap.

“I can see it,” she answers, not moving her eyes from Beorn. “I couldn’t at first, but when I got close enough to trigger it, it appeared. It’s like a black snake wrapped around him from torso to neck and down both arms. The closer I got, the darker the thing is. I’ve never seen a curse manifest like this.” She takes another step forward. “It’s slithering up him. It’s almost like it’s getting ready to strike.”

I reach forward, grabbing her arm, and tugging her toward the safe distance. She glances at where I’m holding her, taking another step forward. Beorn’s mouth opens, and he lets out a full growl.

“Stop!” I cry. “You’re hurting him!”

“I’m trying to help him,” she says, shaking off my grip and taking another step forward.

Beorn drops to his knees, his skin starting to shift as his tiger fights for control. Miranda tilts her head to the side, pursing her lips. She watches for a moment longer before nodding and stepping back a few paces to join the rest of us.

Beorn blinks slowly before looking up at us.

“Hello,” he says. “Have we met? Would you like some tea?”

I whimper softly at how much my mate is struggling.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, climbing to his feet.

“So he doesn’t remember anything,” Miranda says. “It looked like the curse moved up his body as I moved closer, squeezing his head and neck. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Can you help him?” Kenric asks.

“I can try,” she says.

She turns and heads back up the driveway. My chest tightens as I watch her retreat, hoping she will return.

A car door opens, and I forget to breathe. Waiting and listening. Hoping I don’t hear the engine turn over and her drive off.

A few minutes pass before a door closes and the sound of footsteps on the pavement grows louder. She rounds the bend, a large canvas messenger bag slung over her shoulder. I release a shuddering sigh, leaning back into Dennis.

“What can we do?” he asks.

“Just stay out of my way,” she answers, dropping the bag to the ground and digging through it.

Kenric comes up to my side, grabs my hand, and laces our fingers together. Izzy takes my other side.

Miranda pulls out some leaves, crushes them in her palm, mumbles a spell, and blows them toward Beorn. Next, she pulls out a few crystals, placing them in a triangular shape.

She retrieves a vial of liquid oil, lifting it and saying a few words before pouring it into the middle of the triangle. A few candles join the shape, turning it into more of a circle. Miranda turns to look at us.

“I need blood from one of you,” she says. “I don’t care who.”

I break the hold of Dennis’s hands around my waist, moving to stand next to the witch. She draws a long golden dagger out of her bag, catching my hand in hers and drawing it across my palm. I hiss quietly, telling myself the pain doesn’t exist. She closes my hand into a fist, squeezing and dripping my blood onto the ground in the middle of the circle.

Miranda starts chanting in another language, moving my fist over the circle. Heat builds around us. She doesn’t stop chanting. Her words come faster and faster. I feel like I’m being burned alive. I grit my teeth and watch for something to happen. Finally, the candles burst into flames, and Miranda drops my hand. I lean back, panting slightly, looking between the candles and Beorn behind the gate. Kenric rushes forward, pressing a handkerchief he pulled from somewhere to my wound.

“Let’s hope that worked,” Miranda says. “If it didn’t, I’ll have to get the coven involved.” She and Kenric share a look at that, making me wonder if the coven may not be on our side.

She steps toward the gate, pausing and squinting her eyes. Beorn doesn’t make any noise or seem in distress. She moves



a few more steps, repeating the process. After a third time, she turns back to us.

“I’d call that a success. Why don’t you come on out and join us?”

Beorn lifts his hand up to open the gate before I call out, “Wait!”

He freezes, waiting for me to continue.

“The gate electrocuted him earlier when he tried to follow us out.”

“Oh, that’s easy enough,” Miranda says. She waves her hands without speaking for a few seconds. “All done, come on out.”

Beorn pushes the gate, looking around almost timidly as he steps across the threshold and back into the world for the first time in years.

## Chapter 12

### Goon Squad



**W**e stop for food at a local diner about halfway back to Kenric's apartment. Beorn has been quiet, processing both the fact that he was a prisoner for two years and now he is free.

Izzy, Dennis, Kenric, and I talk, laugh, and try to keep topics light. We leave pauses for Beorn to join in, but he listens and stares into space. My heart breaks for him and all that he's gone through in the last few years. Especially since we don't know who put him under that curse and why. Reaching over, I squeeze his hand and give him a soft smile, which he returns before turning back to stare out the windows.

The bell jingles, and the sound in the diner stops. Shivers trace down my spine as I fight the urge to turn and look at who

had this effect.

I furrow my eyebrows at Izzy and Kenric across from me, facing the door. Izzy drops her gaze and shrugs, grabbing her slice of pizza and taking a bite. Kenric's pale skin somehow goes paler, making him look like a corpse before he ducks his head, letting his white blonde hair fall forward and hide his face. Dennis turns his head to look at the door before looking back at Kenric.

“Who is it?” I whisper, not wanting to draw too much attention to us but wanting to know who could cause this much of a reaction in my mate.

He shakes his head and holds a finger up to his lips. Weird, but whatever. I twist my head to the side, trying to glance behind me. I see a group of men in trench coats have entered and are moving toward us. Looking around, every table is having the same reaction as Kenric; heads lowered and voices quiet.

The men move to the corner booth, filling the booth made for large groups with the six of them. I lower my head, glancing through my lashes to watch them. They are close enough to our table, we can listen in while finishing our food.

One server approaches their table timidly, head lowered and the hand holding the notepad visibly shaking. I hear the other customers asking for their checks and see piles of money on tables as most people make a hasty exit.

The server at the other table walks away on shaky knees.

“I can’t believe we have to come all the way out here to deal with what’s probably a false alarm,” the man in the middle gripes. He has an accent like English isn’t his first language.

“The Council ignores it when it’s only the one, but there have been four triggered yesterday and today. We’ve never had that many at this location. And the operative isn’t answering any of the inquiries. This one’s never gone rogue before,” the one across from him answers. That man has the tone of someone in charge and the stature to back it up. He sounds like he grew up in the Southern United States and is wide enough to take up half the booth by himself.

“Can we at least do something fun?” Whines a scrawny man at the end. His nose is long and pointy, giving him almost a bird-like appearance. He also sounds like he isn’t native to France.

“What the fuck is there to do out here?” barks the first man. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. Let’s just go make sure everything at the castle is as it should be and get the fuck out of here!”

I gasp, hearing them talk about the castle. I’m no expert on French monarchies, but I don’t think castles are built close together. They must be talking about the Clement Castle where we found Beorn.

Their conversation stops, and all six men turn to look toward our table. I lower my face further and try not to look like I am listening in. Kenric kicks me under the table. I grimace.

“Are you okay, Miss?” the one who sounds like he’s in charge asks. “Are these men here bothering you? We could handle it for you if you need.”

“I’m fine,” I say to my lap. “But thanks for checking.”

“You aren’t from around here,” another man at the table answers. His brown hair is long enough to fall over one eye. “You sound... American. What brought you this far from any of the cities?”

I shrug. “We just wanted to explore while here for a holiday. We heard there was an old house out this way that you can tour.” I shrug. “Do you know anything else we can do this way?”

One of the other henchmen laughs. “That house was shut down about two years ago. It wasn’t structurally safe for people to be inside.”

“Oh, no!” I whine. “I hope we didn’t come all this way for nothing! Are there any good vineyards out here?”

Dennis chokes on a laugh, reaching out to squeeze my thigh.

“Sorry, love. You better head back the way you came. There’s nothing out this way but old houses and small towns.”

I give a small pout but nod. “Okay, thanks for saving us some time.”

The man nods and focuses back on his group as their food arrives.

Noticing that everyone has stopped eating, I whisper, “Should we get going?”

Dennis and Kenric nod. Izzy slides out of the booth, turning slightly to look at the men who I’m sure are bad news and probably work for the Council of Supernaturals. Kenric and Dennis follow, but I’m still stuck with Beorn sitting on the edge of our seat.

“Beorn,” I ask quietly. “Are you ready to go? We could ask for a box if you want to take the extra food with you.”

The table across from us goes quiet, and all the men sit up straight.

“Beorn,” the largest man says. “Isn’t that the name of the operative we were sent to check on?”

The scrawny man nods. The others following suit. The large man turns in the booth. His eyes are so dark they appear black.

“I’m not buying your poor helpless tourist act. What were you really doing out here?”

“Oh shit,” murmurs Izzy. “I think we should run!”

I push on Beorn’s side, trying to get him out of the booth. If we can get to the car, we have a chance of losing them. He doesn’t flinch, seeming to not notice me shoving against him.

The six men pile out of their booth, cracking their necks and stretching out their arms like they are expecting a fight. I hear the bell jingle above the door as the rest of the customers who were left and all the staff decide to leave.

“By order of the Council of Supernaturals, you are going to need to come with us,” the large man says. “If you resist, we will use physical force to ensure compliance.”

Kenric finally takes pity on me, grabbing Beorn’s shoulder and pulling him out of the booth, dropping him on the floor.

“Like hell we’re going with you!” Izzy yells turning and running for the door. She reaches back, grabbing Dennis’s hand and pulling him with her.

I scramble from the booth as three of the men take off after them. The remaining three spread out, facing Kenric, Beorn, and me.

The bell above the door jingles as I raise my arms, reaching to the well of power inside me. I picture the warmth of my fire pulling it. I don’t know what type of magic they have, but if I can burn them, we can end this fight quickly.

Focusing on the leader, I push the power through my hands. A stream of water shoots out, dousing the man in front of me.

“What the fuck?” he yells, raising his hand and throwing a ball of power back my way.

I throw myself to the side, landing in an empty booth.

The sound of snapping bones fills the restaurant. I glance around to see both Beorn and Kenric in mid-shift. One of the Council’s goons is also shifting into what appears to be an enormous snake.

The other goon is making a fireball in his hands, his eyes locked on Beorn. Jumping up from the booth, I put myself

between him and them, protecting my mates while they were vulnerable. I pull my power up again, focusing on the cooling effects of water. I direct the energy at the scrawny man and a ball of fire shoots from my hands, catching his sleeve on fire.

“Seriously?!” I huff, watching the man flail about before grabbing a cup off a table and pouring it over his arm to douse the flames.

A growl rips through the air as Kenric and Beorn come to stand on either side of me. A snake that must be at least fifteen feet long and as round as a tree slithers up between the two men.

Kenric lunges forward, his jaws locking onto the snake, who twists his body around. I scream, pulling the sword from my back and running forward, slashing and hacking at the snake. Part of my mind wants to feel guilt for the shifter, but as his body falls limp, uncoiling from my mate, I don't feel bad.

Beorn locks onto the leg of the man with the long nose. Dragging him to the ground and raking his claws over the man's stomach. I grimace slightly as parts no one but a surgeon should see fall out onto the floor.

The leader backs himself up to hide in the doorway to the kitchen. He raises his arm and motions like he's throwing a spell of some kind. Nothing happens.

“God dammit!” he roars, running forward and throwing himself like a spear.



I jump sideways, knocking into Kenric. The man lands with a thud on the floor, hopping up and spinning around to try again. His phone dings in his pocket. He pauses, and it dings again. He changes his direction and heads out the front door.

I scramble up off the floor, racing toward the door and my other mate. I burst outside, looking left and right for Izzy and Dennis, Kenric and Beorn right behind me. Noise catches my attention, drawing my focus to the left.

A shape shifts on the ground at the edge of the lot. It's big enough that I think it's a person. I raise my sword and move toward whoever or whatever it is, jumping backwards as a blacked-out SUV comes flying past, thumps and thuds echoing in its wake.

The shape moves forward enough I recognize the dark brown hair of the man lying in the parking lot. Running as fast as I can, I reach Dennis's side, rolling him onto his back.

"Are you okay?" I ask, fluttering my hands up and down, checking for injuries.

He gasps and coughs before answering.

"They took her! They took Izzy!"

## Chapter 13

Is it a trap?



“**W**hat?!” I cry.

“I don’t know how they got the jump on us,” Dennis says, sounding clearer as he gets his breath back. “We were okay holding them off. It was three to two, but something was wrong. They kept doing something with their hands and getting more and more frustrated. Izzy shifted into her panther and had injured one of them. I was fighting one of them. He was awful at hand-to-hand. Then Izzy went after the third. She lunged forward and went down like someone had tranquilized her.

“I got distracted, and the bastard got a few lucky hits in, knocking me to the ground and kicking me in the ribs a few times. They scooped up Izzy and threw her into the SUV.

Someone came running by and then they were gone. I thought they would run me over with how quickly they were pulling out of the lot.” He coughs a few more times, grabbing my arm and pulling himself upright. Wincing, he wraps his arm around himself. “We need to go after her.”

Reaching out, I tug his hand free. “The car is long gone. We do need to go after her, but we have to be smart about it. And you’re injured and human. We need to make sure you’re all right.”

“It’s just my ribs. Probably a few cracked, but I’ll live,” he answers.

Kenric has shifted back to human form and helps lift Dennis back to his feet.

“Let’s get you into my car and then we can devise a plan,” Kenric says, leading the way.

We cross the lot, reaching the car and carefully lowering Dennis to the back seat. I round the car and climb in beside him. Beorn and Kenric open the front doors, sliding into their seats.

“What can we do?” I ask. “We could go that way”—I point the direction the SUV was heading—“and hope we see them. We’d need to go fast, but there’s a chance.” My voice cracks at the end of the sentence.

“I don’t think that will work,” Beorn says. “They have a head start and know where they are going. I doubt they will have left the car parked on the side of the road for us to find.”

“Could one of you track her by scent? Wolves have good noses, don’t they?”

Kenric winces. “We do have an increased sense of smell, but I don’t think that’ll work. One, she’s in a car, and two, my wolf doesn’t want to come back out right now. He’s getting harder and harder to call forward.”

I purse my lips, trying to think of any other way we have to track Izzy and the goons.

“I have an idea,” Dennis says. “But first, could you two at least find pants to put on? It’s super distracting having a conversation with your dicks out.”

Both shifters look down and shrug.

“Sorry,” Kenric says. “I sometimes forget others aren’t used to nudity like shifters are. I think there are some extra clothes in the boot.”

I climb back out of the car and dig through the trunk, finding a pair of sweatpants and a pair of shorts. I also grab two shirts for good measure.

Entering the car, I toss the clothes into the front and turn back to Dennis. “What’s your plan?”

“Does Izzy have her phone on her?” he asks.

“She should,” I answer. “She never goes anywhere without it. Why?”

“Have you two set up Find My Friends? I know a lot of people in the city do as a precaution,” he says.

I move forward so fast I bump my head on the seat in front of me, finding my phone and pulling it out.

“You’re a genius, Dennis!” I shout, opening the app and seeing the dot labeled Izzy moving up the road. “Thank God, she’s obsessed with that thing! We’ve got her, let’s go!”

Kenric pulls the shirt over his head and then starts the car.

We follow the dot on the screen. I direct Kenric through the turns, urging him to go faster. The dot is keeping a lead on us. Dennis reaches over and places a hand on my thigh, giving a reassuring squeeze.

“We’re going to find her,” he says.

“And hopefully before it’s too late,” Beorn adds.

I suck in a sharp breath.

“Not helping,” Kenric says, smacking Beorn on the side of the head.

“Just saying,” he shrugs, rubbing his head.

“They stopped!” I announce. “It looks like they are down a side street, but it’s been still long enough. I don’t think it’s a light.”

Kenric pushes hard on the accelerator, speeding down the road.

“Turn here!”

The tires screech as Kenric swings the car onto a small dirt road in the middle of nowhere. He drives the car fast enough

that I bump into Dennis a few times as we travel the rough road.

“Slow down,” I tell him. “Her phone is just ahead.”

He pressed the brake, bringing the car to a crawl. I look between my phone and the surrounding area.

“There it is.” I lean between the front seats, pointing to an even narrower road on our left. At the end of the road sits the SUV from the diner. A small, rundown, concrete hut sits on the side of the road.

Kenric starts to turn onto the road, but Beorn calls out, “Wait, we shouldn’t drive up behind them. They may have sensors on the road. Let’s park out here and walk up.”

Kenric backs up, parking the car near the turn but hopefully far enough away to not trigger any alarms. We all climb out and move to the edge of the road.

“Dennis, I don’t want to sound mean, but I think you should wait here,” I say. “I’d feel terrible if they hurt you more.”

“Izzy is important to you,” he says, “which means she’s important to me. I’m going.”

“It will probably be a magic fight,” Beorn replies. “We had two magic users and a shifter inside the cafe. Although there’s one less wizard now.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he answers, moving down the road. We hurry after him, positioning ourselves around him. “I’m not a damsel in distress,” he gripes. “I realize I’m out-matched

here, bringing fists to a magic fight, but don't get yourself hurt trying to protect me."

I hmmm but don't agree or disagree.

We walk down the dirt road silently, watching our steps.

The building is smaller than I would have expected. It is maybe ten feet by ten feet. The roof is sagging enough that I'd be worried about being inside in the rain. A rusted door is centered on the wall. I don't see a lock.

"Something seems off," whispers Kenric. "Even if it's only the goons from the diner, they'd be squished inside. Let alone a panther."

"I don't like it," I answer. "The Council has a ton of money. Why would they use this as their base?" I pull my sword out of its sheath, raising it in front of me. "Ready?"

When the men nod, Beorn reaches out and jerks the door open. It squeals, and I flinch. Blinking furiously, my eyes adjust to an empty room.

"What the hell?" Kenric asks, leaning in the doorway.

"They have to be here!" I say. "There's nowhere else around. Surely they didn't just abandon their vehicle."

I turn back to look up and down the road. No buildings magically appear, just the empty road with the SUV and the slightly wider dirt road we left our car on.

Humming under my breath, we step inside. The walls appear damp, and the room smells musty. I sneeze, stirring up more

dust.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s been here for weeks or months,” I say.

“But there’s nowhere else they could have gone. There’s nothing around. Not even trees for them to have gone and hidden in,” Kenric says. “We have to be missing something.”

“Like a trap door?” asks Beorn, pointing at the floor in the middle of the room.

We all move closer to the little divot, just slightly off-center.

“Good catch,” says Dennis. “This part of the floor does seem unlevelled.”

Beorn places his finger in the hole. A click sounds. The floor shifts, revealing the outline of the trapdoor Beorn predicted. He grabs the handle that appeared and pulls up, grunting with the effort. The door swings upward, revealing a set of steep metal stairs.

“Woah!” breathes Dennis. “I guess we are going down there?” he questions with a shiver.

“Yes,” I answer, “but once again, you can wait here or in the car.”

“Not going to happen,” he answers.

I roll my eyes but don’t argue.

A light from somewhere down below guides us down the stairs. Beorn climbs down the stairs last, pulling the trapdoor shut behind him. A hallway opens off the stairs. The floors are



a shiny, white tile. The doors each have a keypad set into the wall beside them. Everything looks sleek and new.

“This is more what I was expecting,” I murmur. “Now let’s go find Izzy.”

We creep forward, trying not to make any noise or alert anyone to our presence. I’m slightly surprised no alarms went off when we entered, but maybe luck is on our side.

The first few doors we pass are closed and don’t have windows, so I have no idea what’s behind them. The hallway ends in a T. We look at each other, pointing and having a silent conversation before Dennis and I head to the left, and Kenric and Beorn head to the right.

Voices up ahead make me freeze. I glance at Dennis, then we tiptoe to the open door, pausing to listen again. A laugh track sounds. I peek around the doorframe, my eyes landing on the TV across the room playing an old sitcom.

Glancing around the room, it appears to be a kitchen-living room combo. Couches surround the television and coffee table that’s piled high with board games. Bookshelves line one wall with more games and movies and a few books carelessly piled on one shelf.

The other side of the room has two stainless steel refrigerators. The rest of the appliances looked older but functional.

A loud snore draws my attention back to the couches. Focusing on the one facing away from us, movement makes

me realize someone is asleep on the couch. Guess this building isn't as abandoned as we hoped, but if this is their security, we are in good shape.

Grabbing Dennis's hand, we move farther up the hallway toward the doors without keypad entry. I point to one and shrug. Dennis nods. I pull my sword from my back as he rests his hand on the knob. Twisting the handle, he pushes the door open.

The room is pitch black beyond. We make eye contact and shuffle inside, pausing to listen. When the only sound is the hum of the air conditioner, I feel around the wall, hunting a light switch.

The light floods the room, making me blink. When my eyes have adjusted, I see a bunk room. Bunk beds are spaced out evenly around the room like a cabin at camp. Each bed has a trunk at the end, probably to store belongings.

We move through the room, finding it empty, before heading back to the hallway.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh reaches my ears.

"We should go!" I tell Dennis. "The others may need help."

I take off at a run, desperate to reach my mates. A grunt from behind me has me looking over my shoulder. Dennis has both arms wrapped around his chest, supporting his injured ribs while trying to keep up. I slow my pace, feeling like an ass for forgetting so quickly he was injured.

I slow enough for him to catch me as we pass the T and head to the others. The sounds seem to be coming from a room on the right.

Turning into the doorway, I stop.

“Maybe I brought fists to a fistfight.” Dennis laughs.

## Chapter 14

### Rescue Mission



Several of the Council's goons are attacking Beorn and Kenric, but the part that surprises me the most is no one has shifted. It looks like an old-school magic-free brawl.

Scanning the room, my eyes land on Izzy. She's chained to the far wall with her hands stretched high enough she's standing on tip-toe. I grimace and reach for the well of power inside me. Nothing responds. Not my fire, earth, or water... I lift my sword higher, gripping it with both hands before running toward the fray.

One man turns to face me. I bring the rapier down on his arm, leaving a slice to the bone. He doesn't stop coming. Spinning and throwing a punch to his other arm. I dodge getting sprayed in the face with blood for my efforts.

Twisting, I move, hoping to place myself closer to Izzy. Her eyes are closed, and she's not reacting to any of the noise.

The man lowers his head and roars like he's a bull. Dropping his shoulder, he charges at me. I jump to the side at the last minute, bringing the hilt of the sword down on his head. He collapses into a pile.

I move farther into the room.

Beorn and Kenric are standing back to back, facing off against four more men. Apparently, they didn't all come to the diner. Turning, I slide around the edge of the room, wanting to check on Izzy. I'm close enough to see her chest rise slightly and release a breath I didn't know I was holding.

Movement to the left draws my attention. I turn and see someone running faster than I can track straight at me. I brace for impact, pointing my sword toward the attacker.

Dennis flies from where he was standing, tackling the attacker and taking them to the ground. A crack sounds as the attacker's head bounces off the floor. They fall still.

"Thanks," I breathe, paying more attention in case anyone else is hiding in the shadows.

"Ow!" he grunts. "Glad I could help." He pushes himself off the would-be attacker. "Huh, guess the Council has girls working for them, too. Guess that's why she went down so easily."

I snort a laugh. Not seeing any new threats, I start moving back toward Izzy.

Kenric and Beorn are holding their own in the middle of the room. One of the goons they were fighting is on the ground, the other three stepping over him as they continue to circle and try to attack my men. The fight is sloppy, and I am grateful to my parents for making me learn hand-to-hand and other skills that don't require my magic. Despite the prophecy predicting magic's disappearance, it's surprising how many supernaturals still heavily rely on their powers.

Reaching Izzy, I put my fingers on her neck, relieved to feel her pulse flutter beneath my fingers. I look up at her restraints, hunting the best way to free her. Shackles. Damn. I'm not going to be able to deal with these easily without hurting Izzy, but hurt is better than dead or tortured. Lifting her slightly, I tug her away from the wall. Her hands don't slide out of the cuffs. I huff a sigh and look around, hoping the goons left the key sitting somewhere obvious.

"Need help?" Dennis asks.

"We need to get the shackles off her," I say, "but I can't find a key or get her hands to come out. Maybe if we break her thumbs, we can slide her hands through them. As long as she's got her panther, she'd heal quick enough."

"Do you have a bobby pin?" Dennis asks.

I side eye him, but pull one out of my hair. "Are you about to tell me you know how to pick a lock with this? Were you a criminal in your younger years?"

"Yes and no," he answers, taking the pin from me and sticking it in the first lock. "Yes, I can pick the lock, no I

wasn't a criminal, just a bored kid who decided to learn a lot of things from the internet.”

“What else can you do?” I ask.

“Maybe you'll learn one day soon, assuming we survive this adventure.”

I'm curious but glad for the reminder that we aren't done here just because we found Izzy and are about to free her from the wall. We still need to get back out of here, get to the car, and find somewhere safe for us to lie low and figure out the next steps.

I turn my back on him, facing the others and protecting my mate and friend.

Beorn and Kenric have another man on the ground and are down to two left, standing. I scan the room again, checking for anyone hiding in the corners who could come after Dennis or Izzy if I move.

Seeing no one, I move toward the fight, stepping lightly and hoping neither of the men are shifters and hear me coming.

Hefting my sword, I wait until Kenric is grappling with one man before sneaking behind him and sliding the sword into his side. He screams and falls to the ground. I fight down the feelings of guilt for attacking him from behind, but it was him or us, and I will always pick us.

The man facing Beorn turns at the sound of his companion's screams. I lift the blade and lunge at him. He jumps backwards, right into Beorn, who wraps an arm around his

throat and squeezes. When the man is limp, Beorn lets go and lets him slide to the ground.

We are all panting. We split our attention between the door in case anyone else comes in and Dennis's progress with the shackles. The first one pops free, and Izzy tips to the side.

Kenric rushes over, picking her up against his chest and holding her in a way that won't strain her shoulder. That helps Dennis, and he gets the other shackle open in less than a minute.

"Let's go!" Kenric states, shifting Izzy so her head lands on his shoulder.

We move to the door as a group. Beorn takes the lead with Dennis and Kenric in the middle, and I bring up the rear. My gut tells me there are more people down here, and we need to be prepared. I haven't seen the man who was sleeping on the couch again yet.

We hurry down the hallway. If luck is on our side, we can get out before anyone else arrives here. As we near the T in the hallway, something in me tells me I can't leave yet.

"I'll be right behind you," I say, turning and heading back up the hallway.

Kenric looks over his shoulder, opening his mouth to say something, but I shake my head.

"Go. Get Izzy back to the car. I'll just be a minute."

Spinning, I head back up the hallway, stopping at one door with a keypad lock. Something or someone important is in



there. I just have to figure out how to get to it. I reach out and try the knob. No luck.

The keypad is metal and doesn't have any faded numbers. Guessing the code won't work. I lift my sword and smash it into the keypad. It buzzes and sparks shoot out of the broken keypad, but I hear the lock click.

I twist the knob and slip inside the room. The lights come on automatically. The room is full of boxes and crates. All unlabeled. I search inside, hoping that gut feeling will help me out. If I take too long, one or all of my mates will come back for me, and that would put them in danger.

I trust my feeling and move to a stack of boxes in the middle of the room. Opening the top one, I find old books. I lift the top one and sneeze when a cloud of dust comes with it. *A History of Supernaturals* is printed on the front in gold lettering. The next one in the box is *The Supernatural Wars*. I wonder why the Council are hiding these down here, but they aren't what drew me to the room. I put the book back into the box and move it to another pile.

I open the next box, finding shredded paper and straw. Digging into the materials, my hand hits something hard. I close my hand around it and pull out a crystal and metal goblet. It feels warm in my hand, and I spin it slowly. The almost triangular shape catches my attention. The lead goblet Capricorn told us about.

Three down and one to go. Maybe I can do this before it's too late.

Holding it close so it won't break, I grip my sword and run back toward the stairs and the fresh air beyond.

## Chapter 15

Goodbye is the Hardest



I slide into the backseat, and Kenric hits the gas and starts us down the road. I look over at Dennis supporting Izzy in the back seat. Her eyes are still closed, but I can see her chest rise and fall.

I reach out and recheck her pulse. Still steady. I gently turn her arms over, pushing up her sleeves.

“There has to be a reason she isn’t waking up,” I say to myself, searching for any unknown injuries.

“She’s got a knot on the back of her head,” Dennis answers. “Maybe it’s just the knock to her head.” He tips her head sideways so I can see for myself.

Izzy's hair is matted with blood, but a lump the size of a golf ball is visible through the mess. I reach up and gently push her hair aside to check her wound. My eyes land on a red mark on her neck. Reaching out, I stretch the skin and take a closer look.

"What did you say happened when she was taken?" I ask Dennis.

"We were both in our own fights. She shifted into her panther form and lunged at the guy. It looked like she was about to bite him, and then she was on the ground. I didn't see anyone hit her, but I was also trying not to get my ass beat. But they must have," Dennis recounts.

"Could she have been tranqed?" I ask.

"I don't think so," Dennis answers. "I didn't see anyone with a Tranq gun or any of those brightly feathered needles."

"What does this look like?" I ask, my fingers still near the mark I found on her neck.

He leans over, looking at Izzy's neck.

"A needle mark," he answers. "Tranquilizers would explain why she's still out. Don't shifters heal quickly? We hardly ever have them in the hospital."

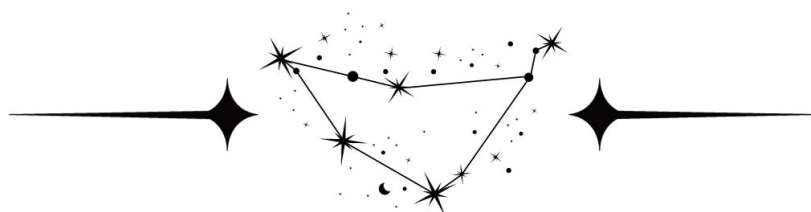
"We do," Beorn answers, "but if they had the dart for me or Kenric, it would have been more than needed for Izzy's panther."

"I've also heard of people healing almost at the speed of humans. I don't know anyone personally, but the rumors have

become louder these past few months,” Kenric supplies.

“I wonder if that has something to do with the magic issues Sia was telling me about,” Dennis says, leaning back into his seat.

“Another problem to another day,” I say. “If we are successful, hopefully everyone will heal like normal. But for today, I just want Izzy to wake up.”



We stop by Kenric’s flat long enough to collect our things before leaving and finding a villa to rent for a few days, a few hours closer to the coast. We use fake names to check in, and only Beorn and I go in to get the key.

Beorn carries Izzy inside, laying her across the couch. I sit in the armchair next to her, my eyes locked on her chest as it rises and falls.

What feels like years later, but was closer to an hour, Izzy lets out a low moan. I put aside the sandwich Beorn gave me to eat and drop to my knees next to the couch.

“Iz,” I say, reaching up and brushing her hair from her forehead. “You’re safe! We found you, and you’re safe.”

Her eyes flutter behind closed lids, and she takes a deep breath. I grab her hand and squeeze.

“Wake up, Izzy,” I urge. “You can do it. Open your eyes and join us.”

She squeezes my hand back before her eyes finally crack open.

“H-h-hey,” she murmurs with a smile.

“Izzy!” I shout, lunging forward to hug her. “Thank the Constellations!”

The men pile into the room from wherever they had been, quietly keeping an eye on us.

“Welcome back, Izzy,” Dennis says. “It’s good to see those eyes of yours open.”

“I was starting to wonder what I’d do with all the quiet I was suddenly surrounded with.” Kenric laughs.

Beorn doesn’t say anything but walks in with a glass of water, which he holds out to Izzy.

I help her sit up slightly so she can sip some of the drink. She coughs as the liquid hits her throat, before recovering quickly and drinking half the glass. She smiles at Beorn.

“Thanks for that,” she whispers, and he blushes. Then she looks at Kenric, “Were you implying I talk too much?!”

“A little,” he answers, “but it’s entertaining as hell.”

She glares at him, but he shrugs.

“Iz,” I say, drawing her attention back to me. “You scared me.” I look at the men surrounding her. “Us. All of us. I know you want to help, but I think you need to go home.”

She sits up, glaring daggers at me.

“He got hurt, too,” she says, pointing at Dennis. “Are you sending him home, too?”

I sigh. “No,” I answer. “Capricorn said I need my mates to finish the trials and perform the ritual. She didn’t say my best friend and sister needed to come with me.”

She huffs and crosses her arms over her chest.

“I know it doesn’t seem fair, but losing you would break me. It almost did today when they took you. I didn’t think about the relics or saving magic for everyone in the world. I only thought of finding you and getting you back.”

She continues to glare, but her lips twist to the side in her tell that she’s thinking hard.

“You were unconscious for hours,” I tell her. “If you were human, I doubt you’d have survived whatever they gave you to knock you out. And the lack of magic seems to be getting worse.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“I mean, when we were in the headquarters or hideout or whatever, only one person’s magic seemed to be working. No one shifted, and it felt like the well of power inside me was empty. Even now, I can barely feel a flicker of my power.”

Her eyes go unfocused as she searches inside herself. Her mouth pops open.

“I can tell my panther is there, but it’s like there’s a wall between us. She’s never been this far away from me.” She reaches up and absently rubs at her chest.

“I’ve heard others talking at work,” I say. “If you lose your animal with all this magic stuff going on, It might not come back. Could you live with yourself if you lose your panther?”

“That won’t happen,” Izzy states. “I just won’t shift, but I can still help.”

“Will you really be able to keep from shifting if they attacked us?” asks Kenric. “I know my instinct is to shift to protect my mate. I don’t know if I would be able to stop myself if they attacked again us. And let’s face it, we will be attacked again.”

“We’ve tried to buy time by coming to a new location,” Beorn says, “but these are the people who stole two years of my life. If they can do that, who knows what lengths they’d be willing to go to to serve the council’s will.”

Izzy sighs and chews on her lip. “I don’t like it,” she says, “but I can see your point. I don’t know who I’d be if I lost my panther, and as much as I think I could control my shifts, if my life is in danger, she’d sacrifice herself to save me. But what about you four?”

“We’ll figure it out,” says Dennis.

“We only have one more relic,” I tell her. “Then we have to find the temple and the clearing, perform the ritual on Winter Solstice, and ta-da, save the world.”



She smiles slightly. “You make it sound so easy.”

“Hopefully, it is,” Beorn says.

She sighs heavily before nodding.

“I’m not happy about this, but okay.” She nods. “I will go home. Mystic Treasure needs to be checked on, too. Maybe we can get lucky and your last relic will have found its way there while we were gone.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” I say with a laugh. “You’ll have to let me know.”

We spend the afternoon relaxing in our temporary villa and letting Izzy’s healing slowly bring her back to full health. Kenric uses his phone to look up plane tickets, booking Izzy a trip home with several layovers and a leg after she made it home to throw off anyone trying to track her.

When the sun sets, we load into the car and drive Izzy to the airport. I fight back tears as I hug her goodbye, hoping this isn’t the last time I get to talk to my best friend.

## Chapter 16

### The Missing Piece



We head back to the villa, piling into the living room collapsing onto the couch and chairs.

I sigh, feeling the ache of loss but knowing it was for the best. If my mates weren't needed to finish this mission, I'd send them away too. The council seems to not follow any moral code to keep the prophecy from coming true.

"Any ideas on where the last piece is?" asks Beorn.  
"Because I, for one, am ready to leave France behind me for a while."

We laugh softly.

"Can't blame you there," Dennis answers.

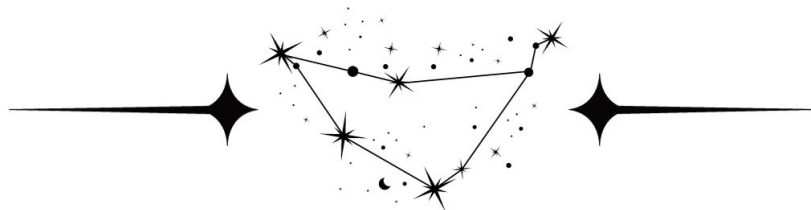
“I’m thinking near water,” I answer. “It’s a hair comb set with pearls. Maybe if we look up lakes near old cities or towns, something will ring true.”

“Seems easier than randomly traveling the world and hoping to find one hair piece,” Kenric says.

We pull out our phones and start searching. The guys call out different lakes, occasionally showing me pictures. All the lakes that seem likely are in Ontario, Canada, so we decide to head there and start moving between. Maybe luck will be on our side and get us to the right one quickly.

Packing our bags and making sure not to leave a trace of who was here, we head out.

We make a few stops on our way to the airport. First to meet up with someone who owns Kenric a favor and was good at forging papers. He creates an ID and passport for Beorn. His have been lost at some time over the past two years and we don’t have the time to go through the proper channels to get replacements. Second to pick up warmer clothes for everyone. Errands done, we drive to the airport and hopefully the last leg of this journey.



**W**e land in Sault Ste. Marie and step outside into the freezing air. I shiver as we head to a kiosk to rent a

car. I laugh when the only car they have available is a minivan, but beggars can't be choosers.

We climb in and crank the heat as high as it will go. It isn't snowing, but it feels like it could soon with the gray sky and bone-chilling wind.

Pulling out my phone, I search for lakes near me and direct Dennis toward the closest one. We drive for a little while before pulling into the lot and stepping out of the car.

The wind is stronger closer to the water, but no feeling of being near something important comes to me.

"It's not here," I say, reentering the car.

We find the next closest lake and repeat the process. Same result. By the tenth lake, I'm getting discouraged.

"Maybe I was wrong about coming here." I sigh. "Maybe we should find somewhere to stay and see if there's anywhere else that seems like the right place."

"You haven't been wrong yet," Dennis says, reaching over and giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm not saying it's not possible, but I'm saying I believe in you."

"We all do," Kenric says.

"You found the others by relying on your gut," Beorn says. "Don't give up now."

I smile sadly but nod. "One more for now, and then we will find somewhere to regroup and rethink. Deal?"

They nod in agreement, and we pull up at the eleventh lake of the day.

The minivan turns into the parking lot, and a small flutter in my gut makes me gasp.

“You okay, love?” Kenric asks.

“I don’t want to get too excited yet,” I start, “but I think we may be close.”

Dennis parks the van, and all four of us climb out. Moving toward the edge of the water, I stop.

“Guys, look!” I yell.

“You found it that quickly?” Beorn asks, moving toward me.

“No, but there’s snow here!” I point to the land surrounding the lake as proof.

Dennis laughs at my enthusiasm. “Sometimes that happens around the lakes. Something to do with warm water, cold air, and some other science-y things. But yes, snow is fun and exciting.”

“It hasn’t snowed in the city yet. The first snow is always the most magical. This must be a sign,” I answer.

I look both directions before picking the right and walking to the edge of the parking lot. I see a sign about ice caves, and the feeling in my gut grows stronger.

The guys stay at my back as we hurry down the path. I’m practically running as the path dips down toward the water. A barrier across the path causes us to stop.

## **Ice Caves Closed. Do Not Enter.**

We look at each other.

“We need to head that way,” I say. “But it may not be safe. You don’t have to come with me.”

I step off the path, winding my way behind the closed sign and continuing down the path.

“Wait,” I hear Beorn call, as three steps of footsteps crash through the woods.

“We’re coming with you,” Kenric calls.

We follow the path downhill until we reach an ice bridge spanning out to what appears to be an island. The ice has a thin layer of water on it.

“Does this look like it’s melting to you?” asks Dennis. “Because that water looks way too cold for a swim today.”

“Guess we know why it is closed right now. Let’s hope it is still solid enough to get us across, but maybe one at a time,” Beorn suggests.

“I’ll go first,” I say. “But once again, feel free to stay here. What are the chances the caves have been boobie trapped?”

Before anyone can answer, I step carefully onto the bridge, listening for creaks. It holds, and I make it to the other side. Looking back across the space, I can barely see the far side. I yell out, hoping they hear me before heading farther up the island and through the round openings ahead.

Walking into the cave is a sight to behold. Ice surrounds the limestone room. Stalagmites and stalactites poke out, covered in ice. The floor is slick, and ice climbs up the walls. I stare around the room for so long that Dennis showing up startles me.

“Any luck?” he asks, resting his hand on my shoulder.

“I haven’t looked yet,” I admit. “I was distracted. Just look at this place.”

He looks around before nodding.

“It’s nice, but it’s cold,” he answers. “Why don’t we start looking? The bridge was making some weird noises when I crossed, and I don’t know how long it’ll last.”

I nod and move farther into the room.

“It’s here somewhere,” I mumble. “We just need to find it.”

Dennis moves in the opposite direction from me.

“Do you even know what a hair comb is?” I call out.

“No,” he answers, “but I know what pearls look like. I’m just going on that.”

I laugh, moving closer to the walls, continuing my search.

Beorn comes across next, calling out “Anything?” as he arrives.

“If we found it, do you think we’d still be looking?” I ask.

“Guess not,” he answers, moving to the middle of the room and starting to look himself.

Kenric appears a few minutes later. “No luck yet?”

I look over my shoulder but don't answer.

“Do you think the caves always look like this?” Kenric asks.

“It's magical, isn't it?” I answer.

“But like during the summer,” he says. “Would they still be covered in ice or does it melt?”

“It would melt,” Dennis answers.

“So how do we know that the piece is above the ice?” Kenric asks.

“Wait, are you saying you think it's buried in the ice?” Beorn asks.

Kenric shrugs. “I'd guess there's more time than not without ice, so the best guess is yes.”

I cock my head to the side, considering. “That makes sense.”

Approaching the wall, I run my hand over the wall, dusting off the snow and finding little shelves lining the wall. The guys join in, searching various spots around the room. We find pottery and bits of fabric. Silverware and boxes with lids.

“How is all of this still in here?” asks Beorn. “It's not marked off or anything, yet no one messes with it.”

“We didn't know it was here until Kenric suggested looking under the snow,” Dennis answers. “I'd guess most people don't think to do that.”

We open the boxes and find jars and bottles inside. A few contain jewelry, which the men bring over to me, but none are



right.

Opening the lid on a black metal box, I squeal. “Found it!” I lift the comb out of the box. The silvers reflects the light.

“And we found you,” a low voice answers.

A shot rings out.

I clutch the comb to my chest and dive sideways, landing with a thud. I glance around. All the guys have moved as well. Dennis and Beorn are hiding behind stalagmites, but Kenric is on the ground.

His skin ripples as white hair begins to sprout up and down his arms.

“Kenric, no!” I gasp.

His crystal blue eyes lock on mine as his wolf takes over and forces the shift. My heart breaks a little, hoping this isn’t the shift that pushes him over the edge.

Three more men appear in the doorway, each dressed in black tactical gear, including helmets that cover their eyes.

I only see one gun at the moment and can’t tell if he was shooting tranquilizers or bullets. Beorn lunges out from behind the spike, tackling the man on the end of the back row. They land with a thud, but the man quickly twists, so he is on top, then he rains blows down on Beorn.

I scream and run at them. The man in front raises his weapon, and I jump to the side, crashing into a stalagmite,

causing it to shatter. The man steps forward, moving closer to me.

A white wolf springs from the ground, knocking the man off balance. Some stalactites fall from the ceiling, shattering onto the ground below.

I push myself off the ground and sprint for the entrance. Dennis lunges, jumping into the man on top of Beorn. One of the remaining guys joins in as well, while the other jumps on the back of Kenric's wolf.

These men seem better trained than the ones we fought in France. I wonder if they are the mythical hit squad trained to kill the Zodiacs and those who believed in us.

I look back and forth, torn between which of my mates to help.

Kenric clamps his jaws around the gunman, twisting and throwing him across the cave. Now that's he's only fighting one person, I like his odds.

I run toward Beorn and Dennis and the two men they are fighting. I pull my sword from my back, sliding my way up to the group.

Arms are flying, and grunts fill the air. I watch, hoping for an opening. The helmets pose a slight problem, as I can't knock them out, but I don't want to let that stop me. I jab forward at the man on top. He hisses but doesn't stop swinging at my mates.

I swing my sword, but the pile shifts, and I have to pull back rather than risk my mates.

A black clad body goes sailing past me, thumping as it hits the wall and slides to the ground. He doesn't move, and a proud Kenric comes over, licking his lips. I run my fingers through the fur on his head, looking back at the others.

Kenric lets out a howl, and the man on top freezes long enough for Dennis to push him off. I take the opportunity to swing my sword down, severing the man's hand.

He screams, clutching his stump to his chest. Kenric tackles the man on top of Beorn, knocking him farther into the cave and away from the entrance. Beorn doesn't stir on the floor.

"We need to go," I say, looking at the carnage in the cave. "Kenric, go first. Dennis, help me get Beorn up."

Kenric pauses only for a moment, looking at the men lying around the cave, before bounding out of the cave and onto the ice bridge.

Dennis and I lift Beorn off the floor, wrapping his arms around our shoulders. He groans as we move him. His eyelids flicker as he slowly regains consciousness. He takes some of his weight, staggering as he tries to free himself.

"Dennis, you go next. I'll help Beorn across. I don't trust the bridge to hold all of us," I tell him.

Dennis walks next to us as we make our way to the edge of the bridge.

“I’ll be quick, and if anyone comes out, don’t wait for me. Just get across.” Dennis leans down and smacks a kiss on my lips before taking off at a run.

I grit my teeth, watching between the cave entrance and the bridge.

A flicker of movement catches my attention. One of the hitmen stumbles to the door, leaning against the entrance as he scans the space beyond. His eyes land on us, and he smiles.

I tighten my grip on Beorn. “Time to go!” I say, pulling him forward with me.

We stagger our way onto the bridge, sliding slightly as the water seems to have increased since we crossed the first time.

The bridge creaks as we cross. I glance behind me, seeing the man reaching the end of the bridge, and push Beorn in front of me.

“Go, go, go,” I encourage, trying to push him forward.

He reaches the end as I feel the ice give way beneath my feet. I push off the bridge, hoping I make it as the splashes of the ice landing in the lake surround me.

## Chapter 17

Find the Clearing, Save the World



**D**ennis lunges forward, grabbing my arms and pulling me safely to the edge of the path. I let out a heavy breath, sinking into his warmth.

“That was too close,” Kenric says coming over and plucking me out of Dennis’s arms. “Let’s not do that again.”

I nuzzle into his chest, feeling his warm skin on my cheek. Glancing down, I realize his shirt isn’t his only missing clothing. “I’d say I agree, but if this is what happens after a near death experience, I may have to repeat it.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ll do even better than this if you don’t take years off my life by nearly dying.”

“Is that a promise?” I ask, licking my lips.

He leans down, answering with a lick of his own. I shiver, turning to look at my other two mates. The heat in their eyes has me clenching my thighs.

“Damn being on a time crunch to save the world,” I say grumpily. “It’s like the universe forgets a girl has needs.”

Dennis laughs, and Beorn makes a sound between a laugh and a groan.

“We can reward you for saving the world,” Dennis suggests.

“Promises, promises,” I sing-song, looking back at where the ice bridge was. “Maybe we should get out of here. It would be just our luck for their suits to be wetsuits and they can just swim across.” I look over Kenric in all his glory. “And you need clothes. I’d hate for him to get frostbite before I have a chance to take a ride.”

“Now, who’s the one making promises?” he asks, reaching down to adjust his growing erection. “When is this deadline? We could be quick.”

Looking at the sun, I frown. “We have to find the temple and get all the relics in their spot, and say the prayer by the Solstice tomorrow. And if I remember my geography classes, it can take a day to cross each province of Canada. God, I hope we are in the right province.”

“What do you mean, drive all day and still be in the same province?” Beorn asks. He’s propped against a tree and I can see the bruises already rising against his pale skin. “I grew up day-tripping to other countries.”

“Yeah, that’s not how it works over here,” Dennis answers. “Things are much farther apart than most people would like.”

We head up the path, Dennis supporting Beorn, and Kenric and I holding hands.

“Sierra, I need to tell you something.” He leans down and whispers to me. I turn and look at him, noticing the sadness that shines through his eyes. “I think my wolf is gone.”

I jerk to a stop. “What?! What do you mean, gone?!”

He shushes me gently. “I don’t want to worry, Beorn,” he says, “but the space I can normally sense him is empty. It’s like there’s a hollow pit where he used to live.”

“But how?” I ask, tearing up at the pain this must be causing him.

“I don’t know,” he answers. “He forced the shift when we were attacked. It was like I was in the passenger’s seat watching what he was doing. When we made it across the bridge, he let me take back over, but he didn’t go back to his spot. He just vanished.” He shrugs sadly. “I wanted you to know, in case it changes the way you feel.”

I squeeze his hand. “Of course not. You are my mate, with or without your wolf.”

We finish walking to the car in silence. Dennis helps Beorn into the back, and Beorn promptly falls asleep. Hopefully, his tiger can help him heal before we face the last step on this journey.

“Where to?” Dennis asks starting the engine.

“East,” I say. “Let’s go East.” He nods and pulls the van back onto the road.

When the silence stretches too long, I reach up, turning on the radio and scanning through the channels. The trip passes slowly. Dennis and I take turns behind the wheel, continuing east and sometimes turning south.

We drive through the night and into the next morning. I’m exhausted, and my eyes burn. Beorn’s bruises have mostly healed, and Kenric has sat silently in the back, sometimes sleeping, sometimes staring out the window.

Dennis encourages me to sleep when it’s his turn behind the wheel, but I fight the need. I’d hate to sleep so deeply I miss needing to switch directions. The window to fulfill the prophecy is quickly closing, and I still have no idea where to go.

My stomach lets out a loud rumble.

“We should stop,” Dennis says. “We need to find food, and you need to rest.”

“We don’t have time,” I say. “We need to keep going.”

“You won’t be any good to anyone if you are running on empty,” Dennis answers, steering the car off the highway.

We pull into a large city that is holding onto its small town roots. Picket fences line the front yards. Sidewalks bustle with people walking up and down the road.

“Well, isn’t this cute,” Beorn says, blinking his eyes open and stretching his arms. “What did I miss?”



“Nothing,” Kenric grunts.

“We are stopping for food and rest,” Dennis answers.

He finds a spot and parks the van. We walk up the street until we find a take away restaurant. Dennis and Beorn look for a table while Kenric and I wait in line. We order sandwiches and chips for all of us, then find the other two.

“This place seems nice,” Beorn says. “It’s called ‘The Forest City’. Too bad we don’t have time to hike.”

I tip my head to the side. “What was that?”

“‘The Forest City’” Beorn answers. “They are well-known for their hiking trails and outdoor adventures.”

“Maybe we should check them out,” I say, standing up.

“Can we at least get our food first?” asks Dennis.

“Only if we take it go,” I answer.

The guys agree, and when our food arrives, we grab the boxes and head out onto the streets.

“What do you remember about the location of the dream?” I ask.

“Trees,” answers Kenric listlessly.

“And a river,” says Beorn. “And wasn’t there a clearing just before the river?”

“That’s right! That’s where Kenric found me, in the clearing.”

“So we just need to find a clearing in the woods in the Forest City?” Dennis asks. “Well, that shouldn’t be hard...”

“We should get going, then. I hope you wore comfortable shoes.” I lift my sandwich and take a bite, heading to the nearest trail marker. I hear grumbles behind me as the guys pick up the pace to keep up with me.

We spend the rest of the day walking through the paths around the town. I know we are close to the temple, but we haven’t found it yet.

As the sun sets, we leave the trails, and I follow my gut instinct farther into the trees. A few times, we have to backtrack, as I feel like I am getting farther away.

When there is barely any light left in the sky, I step out of the thick trees and into an open space. I pause, looking around.

“Did we find it?” Dennis asks wearily.

I shake my head. “No, but I think we’re close. Listen.”

“Is that the river?” asks Beorn.

“One way to find out,” I say, picking up my pace and hurrying toward the sound of rushing water.

I break through the trees onto the bank of the river and feel my waning energy renew.

“This is it!” I yell as the guys trudge out behind me. “We just need to find the temple. It’ll be marked by a statue of Capricorn. Let’s spread out and look.”

I turn right and hurry up the bank, not looking back to see where the guys went. I look back and forth between the river bank and the woods, seeing nothing. After about fifteen minutes in one direction, I turn and head back. The sun has fully set, and the only light is coming from the stars that are starting to peek out from behind the clouds.

I alternate between running and stumbling down the bank. My gut tells me if I don't find the temple soon, we won't have time to solve the puzzle of the ritual.

"Sia," Beorn calls out. "Can you come here?"

I pick up the pace, skidding to a stop next to Beorn. "Yes?"

"What's that?" He points across the river. The clouds move, and a beam of moonlight lands on a statue. I gasp and grab Beorn, giving him a quick kiss.

"You're brilliant!" I praise. "I hope you're ready to go swimming!"

I slip my shoes off and sit on the bank, letting my legs dangle over. The guys look at each other before copying me. I remove the locket from around my neck and pass it to Dennis, who slips it over his head. Beorn is handed the comb, and Kenric lifts the goblet out of his pocket before putting it back and zipping it shut. I pull the sword from the sheath, holding it in one hand and pushing off the ledge with the other.

The water is icy cold and freezes all my muscles when I drop under its surface. It takes all my willpower not to suck in a

breath. A few seconds pass, then my muscles unlock, and the water feels like I'm swimming on a warm summer day.

I kick my legs, breaking the surface and sucking in lungfuls of air. The current pulls at me, but I cross easily. Looking back, I see all three guys struggling as the current sweeps them downstream.

Instinct takes over. I dive under the surface and use the current to my advantage. I pass Kenric and reach Dennis first. I pop up beside him. He lets out a strangled yelp before inhaling water and starting to cough. I wrap an arm around his chest, and together, we kick toward the shore.

Once he's safe, I pass over the sword and kick my way to my remaining two mates. Kenric is next. He doesn't jump when I pop up next to him and shakes me off once we are through the strongest current. By the time Beorn and I reach the far side of the river, I am tired, and we are at least a mile from where we entered.

We trudge back up this side of the bank, my feet feeling heavier with every step. I yawn, and Beorn wraps an arm around me, helping me to keep moving forward. We reach Kenric and Dennis and approach the statue together.

"Anyone know how long until the solstice?" I ask.

Dennis looks at his watch. "Ten minutes," he answers.

"Then we need to get busy."

We search for the statue of a woman in a long flowy dress. There has to be something to mark where to place the relics.

“I think I found mine,” Dennis says.

He takes my hand and places it where the collarbone would be. There’s a divot that feels the size of the locket. Dennis pulls it over his head and places it on the neck of the statue. It lands in the space and seems to stick in its spot.

“I guess I should check the hair, then,” says Beorn.

He reaches up and feels around the statue’s head until he lets out a triumphant yell. He lifts the comb, and it clicks into place.

“Would putting the sword in her hand be too obvious?” I ask.

I study both of her arms. One hangs down by her side. The other is raised straight in front of her. I step onto the base of the statue and feel her hand. The space in her palm feels to be the correct size. I take the sword from Dennis and slide it into her grip.

“Three down, one to go,” I say. “Any guesses on where a goblet would go?”

When no one does, we all move closer to the statue, running our fingers over her, hoping to find a spot somewhere that would match the goblet’s base. My hope wanes as we don’t find anything. I climb onto the base of the statue, hoping the extra inches will help me find something the guys have missed. My toe catches on something and I hop back down.

“Ow! What was that?” I move closer to the spot. There’s a small indent between her feet. “Kenric, try here!”

He places the goblet down, and it snaps into place. A buzz of magic fills the air.

I look at the moon. It's almost at its fullest. Reaching out, I grasp Kenric's hand on one side and Beorn on the other. Beorn reaches out, grabbing Dennis and completing our chain.

I speak the words that fill my mind.

*Divine Constellation, hear my plea*

*Four relics of Capricorn I bring to thee*

*To undo the selfish wonder*

*That has torn the sky asunder*

*I draw upon your divine magic*

*I worship at your altar*

*The wrongs are most tragic*

*But still I do not falter*

*My heart is pure*

*My soul complete*

*Take all that I give*

*So a new world we can meet.*

The world seems to hold its breath and then the sky lights up like it's on fire.

## Chapter 18

### The Fall Out



“Is everyone okay?” I ask, looking up and down the line.

Before anyone can answer, movement draws my attention toward the statue. It seems to have come to life.

Her face is clear, and she’s smiling softly at us.

“Dear child,” she says. “You’ve done it. The rift has been sealed, and magic has been saved. At least for now.”

“For now?” I ask.

“The Council is full of corruption. They will try to take more than they need again if given the chance. But for now, all magic is being withheld from the world. Everyone will live as humans. Then, as they prove trustworthy, they will be given back what is theirs and only what is theirs.

“You are the exceptions. Sierra, you will lose your access to my gifts. They shouldn’t be needed again, but you will retain your Earth and Fire Fae powers. Beorn, you will be more connected to your tiger and will be able to shift into any form of cat you wish.” He smiles happily. “Kenric, I will restore your wolf and only your wolf, but he will be with you again.”

“Thank you, Capricorn,” he says reverently.

“And, Dennis.” She turns to look at my first mate. “You have a choice to make that no one else has made before.” He swallows hard enough to make his Adam’s apple bob. “You are being given the opportunity to become a supernatural. You can pick what power you want, and it will be granted.”

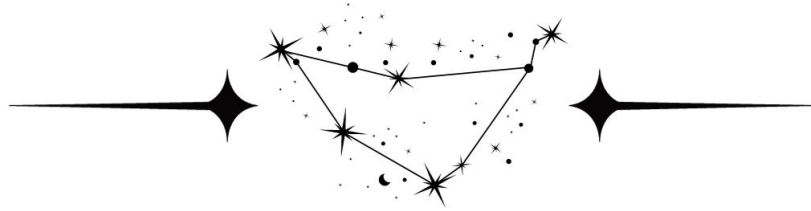
Dennis frowns, stepping out of line and closer to the deity before us.

“That is a great honor, Capricorn,” he begins, “but I have never known a life other than as a human. As long as Sierra will continue to have me as I am.” I nod when he looks back at me. “The problems started when people took more than they deserved of magic, and they almost destroyed the Earth. If anyone found out I suddenly had magic and they did not, I think it would lead to more problems than it would solve.”

“Well said,” she answers. “In that case, I will take my leave. I hope you each live a long and prosperous life. I’ll be watching.”

I blink, and Capricorn is gone, the statue back in its place.





**W**e arrive back in the city exhausted and ready to get back to normal.

Well, as normal as a world without magic can be.

My first stop is to Mystic Treasure to check on Izzy.

The bell chimes from our entrance.

“Welcome to Mystic Treasure. I’ll be with you in a moment,” I hear her call out from somewhere in the store.

“Iz!” I shout.

“Sia! You’re back!” She comes flying around the corner and tackles me in a full body hug! “And you’re alive!”

I laugh, squeezing her back.

“I’m glad to see you in one piece,” I tell her.

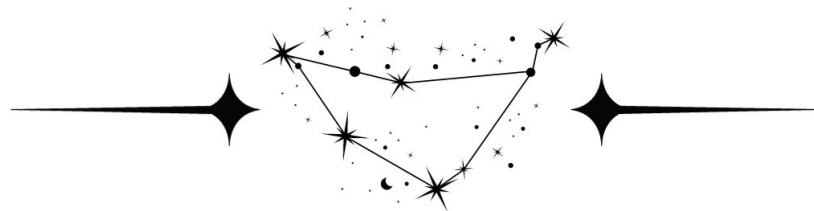
We catch up on the few days we’ve been apart. The store was still here when she got here, and her employees seemed to have done a decent good of keeping sales going. The only issue was that she always had the items people wanted, but today, she seemed to be missing things as often as she had the right thing.

The news reported global lights, the reappearance of Mars, and everyone losing their magic. The biggest story was on the missing magic. Some people are still blaming the Zodiacs, but

the fact is that the rift disappeared with the magic. Some are saying it may not be the worst outcome. Granted, most of those people are humans who had no magic to lose.

Izzy tells me that the thing that was blocking her from her panther is gone, and while she doesn't seem able to shift, she can feel her in her rightful place.

We tell her we will see in a few days after we catch up on sleep and figure out how this four-way romance is going to work.



Unlocking my apartment, I have to laugh at the hay still spread around the kitchen. We all enter my home; the guys taking the chance to look around.

Moving toward the couch, I sit down before looking at each of them.

“So,” I say, “what do you two have planned for the future?” I ask, looking at Kenric and Beorn. “Are you going back to Europe?”

“I’m happy to be done with the place for now,” Beorn answers. “A new country is a fresh start for me. I’m staying.”

“I’ll go wherever you are,” Kenric says, looking at me. “You are my mate, and I will follow you to the ends of the earth. We all will and have. I’m not going anywhere unless you do.”

My eyes well with tears.

Beorn sits next to me and pulls me into his chest, kissing the top of my head softly. I nuzzle into him.

“Would this be the wrong time to ask if I can call in those promises now?” I ask, sitting up.

Dennis laughs, but Kenric’s and Beorn’s eyes fill with hunger.

Kenric circles the back of the couch, grasping my hair and pulling my head backwards. He seals his lips to mine, nipping my bottom lip. I gasp, and he takes the chance to slip his tongue into my mouth, thoroughly tasting me.

Hands tug the bottom of my shirt up, forcing us apart for a moment. Kenric returns, plunging his tongue in and out in what I hope is a promise of what is to come.

One of the others unhooks my bra, sliding it down my arms. My nipples pebble. I moan as a mouth attacks each breast. One licking and one sucking. A shiver races up my spine as teeth gently scrape across me, and warmth spreads between my legs.

I clench my thighs together, hunting relief, but a hand land on each leg forces them open.

“Why don’t you do the honors?” I hear Dennis murmur before a hand is sliding under the waistband of my pants and panties. Long slender fingers reach down, running through my folds.

“So wet,” Beorn praises, “but I bet we can do better.”

He plunges one, then two fingers, into me. Pumping slowly. His thumb finds my clit rubbing circles. It doesn't take long for my orgasm to cause me to cry out into Kenric's mouth.

"That's one," he murmurs, pulling away. "Why don't we move to the bedroom and see how many more we can get before you tap out?"

I nod, unable to find my voice. Beorn scoops me up, carrying me as Dennis leads the way to my bedroom.

By the time I'm laid on the bed, my clothes have disappeared. Lifting my head, I find the men all standing around, staring down at my body.

"I thought there were more orgasms to come, but I'm still the only one naked." I pout.

"We'll get there, but first I want my turn with you," Kenric states, pulling his shirt over his head. He climbs on the end of the bed, pushing my thighs wide.

"So beautiful," he says, leaning forward and licking me. "Mmmm," he hums, sending a jolt up to my clit.

He licks me again, pushing his tongue slightly deeper to collect more of my juices. I start to squirm, not sure if I want to drag him closer or push him away. His hand lands on my stomach, holding me still, and a hand wraps around each of my legs.

My arousal spikes as I open my eyes and see Dennis and Beorn on either side of me, holding me open for Kenric. His tongue finds my center, pressing in and swirling around. I

scream, feeling my core start to tighten. The hands grip harder. Dennis's free hand reaches down, finding my slit. He collects some of my juices before rubbing my clit.

I thrash my head back and forth, my orgasm growing closer and closer. Kenric's tongue reaches deeper than before, like he's trying to get every drop he can. Dennis pinches my clit, sending me over the edge. My eyes roll to the back of my head, and I temporarily leave my body.

Kenric sits up, his face shining from my release. "Two," he says. "Ready for more?"

I'm not sure I can move, but I make a noise in the affirmative.

"What order do you want us in?" Beorn asks.

"All of you," I answer. "I can't pick, so all of you."

They nod in agreement and have a quick discussion about who will go where.

After stripping, Beorn lies down beside me on the bed. He reaches to the side pulling a condom out of the drawer and rolling it onto himself. Kenric helps move me so I'm straddling him. Beorn holds his dick straight up, and I slowly sit fully onto him, groaning as I feel the delicious stretch.

"Lean forward," Kenric whispers, pushing between my shoulder blades.

I do as I'm told, leaning forward and putting my boobs in Beorn's face. He takes advantage, pulling my nipple into his

mouth and sucking on it. We both groan as I tighten around his shaft.

The sound of a bottle popping open pulls me back to the present.

Something cold touches my ass, and I flinch.

“Relax,” Kenric soothes.

Dennis reaches out and rubs my shoulders.

A finger pushes the lube into my ass, carefully working its way in and out until I feel knuckles. He pulls out, and I groan. It's quickly replaced with two fingers. He twists and stretches them, making me cry out in my third orgasm of the night.

He keeps adding fingers and lube, slowly stretching me to accommodate his cock without too much pain. After fitting four fingers into me, he pulls his hand out. I hear the lube bottle open again, waiting for the cold, but it doesn't come.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Kenric's fist slicking up and down his dick. He moves onto the bed, straddling Beorn's legs. He uses one hand to hold me open while the other aims his erection at my puckered star.

He pushes forward; the pressure increasing until my body lets him in. He pauses as I clench down.

“Deep breath,” he reminds me.

When my body relaxes, he slides in another inch. We repeat the process until he's fully seated and I can feel both him and Beorn filling and stretching me.

They start to move, alternating between one pulling out and one pushing in. Dennis kneels at the top of the bed, moving so his dick is the right height for my mouth. I lean forward, opening my mouth and sticking my tongue out. He moves closer, and I lick his tip, tasting the salty precum. I hum happily.

He slides himself into my mouth. I seal my lips and hollow my cheeks. He presses deeper, causing me to gag. He pulls out of my mouth so I can catch my breath.

The filling of my cunt and ass becomes too much, and I yell out as the strongest orgasm I've experienced rips through my body. I see stars.

When I come back to the room, the guys are still pumping away. I move my head to the side, taking Dennis back into my mouth. I lick up and down his shaft, sucking hard, hoping to bring him to completion.

The thrust of all three men starts to become erratic. I clench my muscles, pulling Kenric and Beorn over the cliff as Dennis spills himself down my throat.

I come again with all my mates. Happy and satisfied.

We collapse into bed in a tangle of limbs and panting. I'm not sure if this is Heaven, but it's at least Heaven on Earth, and I wouldn't change anything that happened. I've found my happily ever after.

## About the Author

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my book. I am Rachelle Bonifay, an indie author who has been publishing since 2021.

I have lived in Alabama my whole life and spent much of high school filling up notebooks with stories instead of notes. (Oops). I still spend my days molding young minds and then come home to write with my fur baby, Luna. And yes for anyone wondering she was named after my favorite Harry Potter character. I love all things coffee, chocolate, and long soaky baths.

When I'm reading, I love everything from dark romance to rom-com an M/F to RH.

When I write, I follow where the characters lead and plan to write in both RH and M/F but have stuck to romance so far.

Reviews are an easy and free way to help authors out so if you enjoyed this book please consider leaving a review for all the virtual hugs.



## Also By

### **Moonlit Garnet**

What do you do for fun in a town full of tourists?

You start leading tours and get to make people's dreams come true. If only I could find my way to my own dreams.

I'm Garnet and I moved to Moonlit Falls several years ago to be closer to my cousin. Then she had the nerve to move away a year ago. *Sigh.*

At least this place is about as perfect as you can get for small town life until things start going off the rails. After a long day of work, I just want to sit down with a cup of coffee and vent, and suddenly I have mates:

Bear, a bear shifter.

Jaxson, a big city detective who moved back for a slower paced life.

Orin, a vampire with a mysterious past.

As if figuring out a relationship isn't hard enough, mysterious gifts and notes keep ending up in my house! Has my ex found me again or is there something else going on?

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My parents lied to my sister and me about the fact that we are mages!

Now we have to finish our schooling at Mystic Arts Academy. We are starting way behind in learning this whole magic thing. Some people who want to see all the supernaturals eliminated are after us. And I'm stuck with a surly, know-it-all, and a way-too-good-looking shadow.

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Once upon a time, she found solace in taking care of the archives that were rarely visited by the living, but when an old family curse threatens her livelihood she knows she has to act.

Drawn back to Spells Hollow, Morrigan will have to listen to both the living and the dead to undo the curse and save her sanity.

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