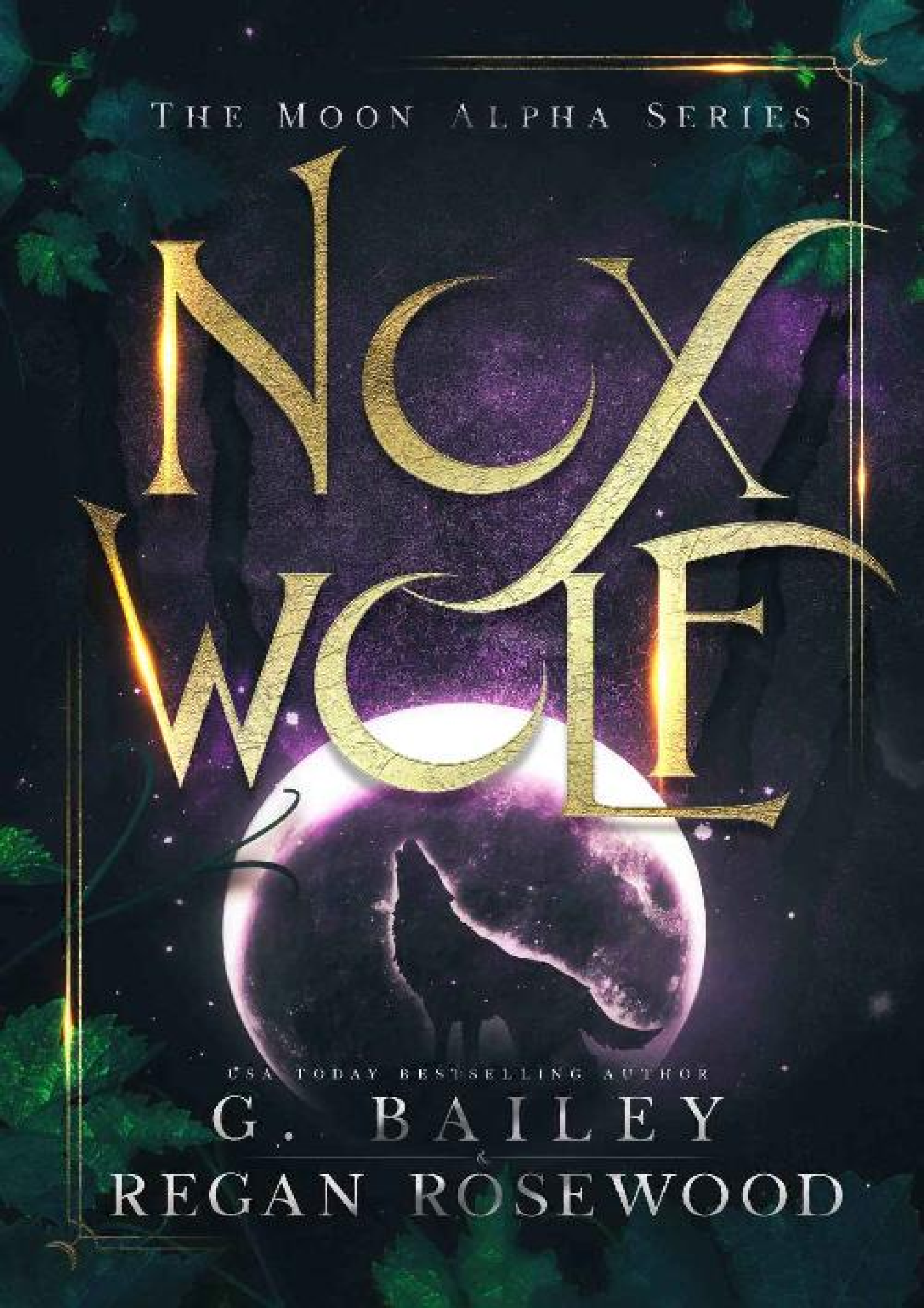


THE MOON ALPHA SERIES

NOX WOLF



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

G. BAILEY

REGAN ROSEWOOD

Nox Wolf

G. BAILEY
REGAN ROSEWOOD



OTHER SERIES BY G. BAILEY & REGAN ROSEWOOD

SUPERNATURAL SHIFTER ACADEMY

THE MOON ALPHA SERIES



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This book is written in British English, therefore some spellings might differ.

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About Regan Rosewood

21. Supernatural Shifter Academy.

Description



I'm rejecting him—even if my heart doesn't agree.

Atlas Arcturus is trouble. I knew it from the start. I knew it from the second he kissed me after I agreed to be his pretend girlfriend.

But I seriously underestimated how one alpha heir could take my heart and destroy it.

Now I have to pick up the pieces and survive what the academy throws at me.

There is a traitor in the academy, someone who is feeding information to the werebears. I'm tasked with working with Atlas to find out who it is.

The more time I spend around him, I realize he should have always stayed my enemy.

My tutor. Off-limits to me.

Because once I gave Atlas Arcturus my heart, my body, and my soul, I should have known he wouldn't ever give it back.

This is a full-length trilogy full of sexy alpha males, steamy scenes, a strong heroine and a lot of sarcasm. Intended for 17+ readers.

Chapter One



“You sure you want to do this?” I ask, rolling my shoulders back as anticipation builds within me. Butterflies flood the pit of my stomach, my muscles are all so tense that they’re practically electrically charged, and I wonder—not for the first time—how the fuck I’ve managed to get myself into this situation.

Atlas’ eyes gleam like jade fire in the low light. “I could ask you the same thing, Nyx,” he says as he turns to face me, his muscular arms tense at his sides. The corner of his mouth twitches up in his characteristic half-smile, making my stomach tighten even more. It’s been months since I found out about his destined mate, and I walked away from whatever we shared. Atlas, on the other hand, seems more determined than ever to piss me off every second he can get with me. Like in these training sessions, where I can’t avoid him, and I hate how much he affects me. He lied to me. He slept with me, and I was a fool to think anything we had was real. He is an alpha, and I am not even a real wolf.

The tease brings out my usual sarcasm, and I can’t resist a jab in return. “Better watch that bravado, Atlas. It might be the death of you one day.”

“You’ll be the death of me,” he retorts, holding up his hands. “Now, enough talk. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Nodding, I raise my own arms in a posture that’s been drummed into me since my first day at the Wolf Witch Academy. Bracing my torso, I reach for the warmth that pools in my belly every time I look at Atlas, setting aside my nerves

and allowing the power to infuse me, flowing up through my chest and down into my fingertips, which immediately start to glow with light magic. I try to focus on the good feelings I once felt with Atlas, and maybe still do under all the anger. Just to focus on the power. Just to do this. One, I count in my mind, steeling myself. Two... The light building in my hands glows even more brightly, lighting up our corner of the training yard. Three.

I unleash the ball of magic, hurling it at Atlas with everything I have. This part always makes me nervous—the thought of accidentally hurting him is more terrifying than anything else my newly-discovered magic might do—but, as always, there’s no need to worry. Even if hitting him with a sphere of light magic would be something the lying ass deserves. The other students don’t call him the best at the Academy for nothing. Atlas, who has been busy summoning his own swirling sphere of dark magic, hurls it at me before mine can connect with his chest. The twin magic balls collide in the air between us, exploding into a burst of sparks and smoke before disappearing completely. They’ve neutralized one another, as I knew they would; light magic is the antithesis of dark magic, and within moments, it’s as if neither of us cast a spell at all.

Still, the small explosion is enough to draw the attention of Addison Brighton, who is practicing her own spellwork not far from our corner of the field. She turns to look at us, raising an incredulous eyebrow as her blue eyes breeze over me and settle on Atlas. If she knows I know he is destined to be her mate, she hasn’t said a word. Sometimes I catch her staring at me, but she has always hated me, so it’s nothing new. At least I know why she hates me now. “You ever want to work magic with someone who won’t cancel out everything you do,” she calls to him, “I’m here.”

Atlas gives her a disinterested glance. “I’ll pass.” He grunts, already summoning another burst of magic.

“You mean you’re not going to up and leave me in the middle of class?” I exclaim with mock surprise. “There go my plans for the rest of the day.”

Atlas snorts, rolling his eyes as he throws his own spell my way, but I don't miss the look of affection that crosses his face. I narrow my eyes and steel my back. This is training, nothing more. I make sure of it every time I come here and train with him. "You'd better quit while you're ahead, Nyx."

This time, I don't unleash my magic, instead allowing it to cover my lower arms and hands before swatting Atlas' spell into the ground where it dissolves in a burst of black tendrils. "Or what?" I tease. "You'll give me a demerit, tutor?"

Atlas comes closer to me, pausing to brush a strand of blonde hair out of my eyes, and I jolt backward. "Keep it up," he murmurs, his green eyes darkening with desire and pain at my rejection. My heart races as I tuck my shaky hands behind my back. "and I'll give you a lot more than that."

To my left, I hear Addison let out a low scoffing sound, and when I glance her way, her expression is cold. "Right, sure," she snarks. "I forgot. You think you're hot shit."

Anger wells inside me, extinguishing the power of my light magic in an instant. This is the problem with being the only light magic user in a school of dark magic users. The minute negative feelings come up, I lose my connection to my power. I know it's something I need to work on, but I can't resist a final jab. "Stay out of this."

"Don't tell me what to do, Nyx." Addison shakes her head.

"Uh, Addison?" asks Ivy, the buxom blonde's student mentee, who also happens to be one of my best friends at the Academy. "It's your turn."

Addison starts, scowls, and throws a rage-fueled spell in the petite redhead's direction. In a split second, Ivy's summoned a barrier of dark magic, which absorbs Addison's imprecise attack without any difficulty. It's amazing to me how quickly she's gone from timid reject to one of the most skilled new students, but then again, she wasn't kicked out of her pack for lack of skill... unlike yours truly. In a school for rejected werewolves, I'm one of the few, if any, who can't shapeshift for shit, and I also happen to be the only one incapable of using dark magic. While the Academy Master,

Alice Ombres, seems to consider this a benefit rather than a detriment, I'm still not sure.

Hell, I remind myself, you should be counting your blessings. It's not often that rejects get the chance to become supernatural guardians.

"Can we talk?" Atlas asks, letting his hand hover near my arm, like he wants to reach out and touch me, but he knows it wouldn't go well for him. A shiver goes up my spine, and I'm struck by a familiar wave of frustration that I can't train with anyone else.

That it has to be him, and he has to be so...Atlas.

"No," I bite out quietly, not wanting anyone to listen in. It's bad enough Tobias knows how much of a fool I was, thinking Atlas could have actually been falling in love with me, but the rest of the academy doesn't need to know. "You're my tutor and nothing else to me."

A low growl rumbles in his chest. "We are never nothing, Nyx. Not you and me."

"Just don't, Atlas," I reply, his words cutting through my chest and straight into my heart which is all too willing to fall for him.

"Fine, but I know that look," Atlas insists, pulling my chin up so he can look me in the eyes. I don't push away his touch this time, and I should have. "You're ruminating."

"Is that your word of the day or something?" I gripe, as much to evade the question as to be prickly.

"Nyx." He firmly says as I step away from him. "If there's something wrong, tell me."

"It's nothing," I reply. "Just thinking, that's all. About my magic. I..." I clear my throat. "I don't want to lose control again."

"You're kicking ass," Atlas tells me without a hint of sarcasm. "You've come miles since it first came out, and that's not even considering the fact that no one here knows jack shit about light magic."

“Flatterer.” I give him a playful smile. This is why I fell for him in the first place. He is my best friend and understands me in a way no one else ever has but it doesn’t mean I can ever let him into my bed again.

Atlas doesn’t blink. “I’m serious.”

“He’s right,” Ivy calls from where she and Addison are wrapping up their training. “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself, Nyx.”

Eavesdropping wolves.

“Yeah,” I acknowledge, shrugging my shoulders. They have a point, and I know it, but ever since developing my powers, I can’t help but feel like I have to work twice as hard to master them, if only to compensate for my lack of shifting ability. Is my logic faulty? Probably. But then again, so is pretty much everything else about me.

Our magic class winds down just as the sun starts to sink behind the horizon, leaving us tired but more or less satisfied with our day’s training. Things have returned to some semblance of normalcy in the academy in the aftermath of the kidnapping of Atlas’ father, the alpha of the Blood Moon Pack, but despite that, there’s a general sense of unease that pervades the student body. The dynamic between the scattered werewolves and the destructive werebears has shifted in a way that none of us can wrap our heads around, and that likely spells trouble. The only question is how much... and whether or not this new magic of mine will prove useful when push comes to shove.

“Listen,” Atlas says, turning to me as we start making our way inside, “the Master mentioned wanting to see me in her office when we finished.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Any idea what about?”

“None,” he replies, his handsome features drawn in thought. “Knowing her, it can’t be anything good.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask. I’m already planning my way to my room, where I hide after my lessons every day,

even if I know Atlas could walk through shadows to my room if he wanted.

“I’m never lying to you again,” he starts, and I open my mouth to ask him to stop, but he carries on. “I fucked up, Nyx. I should have told you everything because it was never fake for me.”

My heart pounds. “It’s not enough, Atlas.”

“I’m yours, Nyx,” he replies with a smile that suffuses me with warmth.

“Addison is yours,” I thickly whisper back.

I walk away from him, not for the first time or the last, and look around me at all the students discreetly watching us. Listening. Atlas has, by my understanding, been considered something of an enigma among the student body: heartrendingly handsome, a powerful Wolf Witch who was set to become the new alpha of the Blood Moon Pack until he was disinherited... and more or less off-limits to the other students. I’m sure our closeness has gotten people talking, but so far, it hasn’t been enough to cause a stir—Addison not included.

I look back, watching his muscular form retreat toward the castle housing the Wolf Witch Academy and feeling so lost, but the feeling dissipates as Ivy catches up with me, having finally escaped the clutches of her mentor. “Everything all right?” she asks.

“I hope so,” I reply.

We’re just striding through the wrought-iron doors when Tobias, the golden-haired guy who befriended me on my first day, falls into step next to me after separating from his group of more senior students. “I’m surprised Atlas hasn’t made another excuse to walk you to the dinner hall,” he suggests, raising an eyebrow.

I shake my head. “Master Ombres wanted to see him.”

“Yeah?” Tobias frowns. “Did he finally decide to pull his head out of his ass?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s a good guy despite our personal history. Be nice.”

“Yeah.” He runs a hand through his blond locks, his expression unreadable. “If you say so. Seems like your standard standoffish alpha bastard to me.”

I bite down on my tongue, the need to defend Atlas itching to explode from my chest. Tobias told me the truth, and he is my friend. He can hate Atlas, but I don’t like hearing about it. I am angry and heartbroken, but I still believe Atlas isn’t all bad. Just shit at relationships, perhaps.

And people, for that matter.

Tobias sighs when he sees my expression, clearing his throat and looking away.

“Does it seem like they’re gearing us up for something to you guys, or is it just me?” Ivy suggests as we enter the cafeteria.

“Could be the training’s just getting harder now that we’re getting the hang of our magic,” I point out.

Tobias shakes his head. “I’m not so sure,” he replies. “They worked us to death today, and we’ve been here a year already.”

“Sounds like something’s up,” Ivy agreed. “Maybe that’s why Atlas got called in. He is one of the best students here.”

Tobias snorts but doesn’t reply.

“What?” Ivy asks, shrugging her shoulders. “He is. And considering how things left off with his former pack...”

“Oh man, don’t even get me started,” Tobias replies, running a hand through his hair. “If they’ve decided they want our help after all, I swear, Ombres ought to just tell them to fuck off.”

I shake my head, my attention already turning to the buffet table. “I doubt it,” I say. “They’re too proud. Too set in their ways.” That’s the truth no one at the Academy except me knows. Atlas wasn’t exiled for lack of skill. Far from it. He was rejected because he believes in a future for werewolves

that isn't governed by the Traditions, a set of tenets so rigid that it causes parents to cast off their children and alphas to reject the help of the Wolf Witches, possibly the only hope our species has against the werebears. Those Traditions are what got every student here kicked out of our packs—whether for the inability to find a mate by eighteen, like yours truly, for hooking up with a human, like Ivy, or for breaking any of the other arbitrary rules set in place by our ancestors. It's enough to make any wolf go crazy.

“That's going to be their downfall,” Ivy replies quietly, shaking her head. “Hell, it's going to be all our downfalls, if we keep getting resistance from the other packs.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. The smell of dinner is wafting over to us from across the room, and it's only now that I realize just how hungry I am. “Maybe,” I acknowledge, “but it's not a problem we'll solve tonight. It can at least wait until we've gotten some food,” I add jokingly. “Now, come on; I'm starving.”

What goes unsaid beneath my quip is just how true that statement really is. It may not be a problem we'll ever solve, and if that's the case, there's no point in Wolf Witches existing at all. Our species is doomed already.

Chapter Two



I don't arrive back at my dormitory until late, and I'm a little surprised to see Atlas is waiting for me outside my door by the time I arrive. "You're here," I observe stupidly.

He nods, getting to his feet. "Where were you?" he asks, a hint of the possessive alpha heir I know so well. I'm tempted to tell him to fuck off, and that I can be anywhere I want without having to tell him anything, but I don't.

"Just hanging out with Ivy," I coolly reply. "And Tobias."

Atlas scowls. "Him?"

"Yeah, why?"

His green eyes burn as he takes a step closer to me. "I don't like the way he looks at you, Nyx. He told you about Addison so he can be your hero and make me your villain. I bet he is counting the hours until you run into his open arms."

I cross my arms. "Come on, Atlas. It's not like that. He's my friend, and I don't owe you an explanation."

Atlas doesn't smile. "Do you think he sees it that way? He practically undresses you with his eyes every time he looks at you. Especially when he thinks you're not looking."

"He still told me the truth," I reply, and my words feel like daggers as his eyes flash with pain.

I shake my head, snorting, and push the thought away. "Can we change the subject to why you're outside my room?"

"Maybe," Atlas says. "I want to talk."

“No,” I say, cocking my head to the side, “at any rate, I should be asking you where you’ve been. You were gone all the way through dinner.”

Atlas smirks. “So you noticed, huh?”

I shake my head. “My meeting with the Master took a while.” Seeing my incredulous expression, he chuckles and closes the distance between us, pulling my body flush against his. I hate that I don’t push him away, that I love how his body presses against mine, how every memory of our night together flashes into my mind and changes my scent. He takes a deep breath, his chest rumbling with a possessive growl as he pushes me into the door.

“You should go,” I whisper, watching his eyes carefully, breathing in his scent, hating that my body is reacting to his. He lied to me.

“That so?” Atlas leans down so his forehead is touching mine, a smile playing on his soft lips. He leans down so his mouth is nearly touching my ear and adds in a low murmur, “I’m going to make it up to you, Nyx.”

“What did you have in mind?” I say, my heart leaping into my throat at the feeling of the heat pouring off his body.

“Give me a second,” Atlas says, just as his lips brush mine, “and I’ll show you.”

We stumble into my room in a blur of feverish desire, unable to keep our hands off one another for longer than it takes to breathlessly fumble the door shut and locked. I push away all thoughts of his past, of Addison, of everything but a need to be with him. Our clothes fall to the floor in a pile around us, and we collapse onto my bed, Atlas peppering my face and neck with kisses as his strong hands explore my body. His touch is gentle but passionate, and I suck in a breath of pleasure as his lips move to the junction of my neck and shoulder, sucking a spot there that will likely turn into a hickey. I hardly care; I’m lost in the feeling of him, and desire is already pooling in the pit of my stomach. I like him marking me as his, like this could be permanent. Like we could have forever.

One of Atlas' large hands wanders up to my breast, his fingers deft and warm, while the other settles between my legs, stroking me open and teasing out a moan of pleasure that I can only stifle by pressing my face into his shoulder. He chuckles, a low rumbling sound that reverberates through his chest and mine, and even as my pleasure starts to grow, he backs off, sliding down my body in a way that's almost predatory, his green eyes locked with mine. "Fuck, Atlas—" I begin, only for my mouth to fall open as his face drops between my legs, his tongue setting to work on my clit as I tangle my hands in his dark hair. A finger slides into me, and my eyes practically roll back in my head, all words vanishing from my mind in an instant.

I catch myself bucking against him, helpless to do anything but embrace the sensations he's causing in me, and it isn't long before I'm falling over that edge, overcome with bliss as my orgasm comes crashing down on me. I collapse under him as Atlas slows his pace, one hand on my hips as he kisses my inner thigh. I stare up at the ceiling in a daze, but I can feel his eyes settle on me in the darkness of my room, and when he speaks, his voice is coloured by lust and affection. "You're so beautiful," he murmurs, moving back up my form to press his lips to mine.

I push him back on the bed, climbing on top of him and hovering above him. He watches me in the darkness, his eyes locked on mine. His hands tighten on my hips as I slowly sink down onto his cock, taking him fully inside me. It feels perfect. Too perfect. He groans, his fingers digging into my hips as I roll them, a shockwave of pleasure building within me once more. He sits up, moving with me, kissing me deeply and then there is only the sounds of our pleasure as he stills, filling me with his cum and I cry out his name as I crash into a second orgasm at the same time as him. I breathlessly stare at him, and he cups the side of my cheek with his rough hand.

He is still inside me as I whisper. "This is why you're breaking my heart, Atlas. This feels so real. Too real, and I'm never going to be more than this for you."

Atlas kisses me softly, gently. “Nothing in my life has ever been as real as this for me. I don’t give a shit what some witch told me; I don’t want her. I only want you.”

“Really?” I ask.

He pulls me down on the bed, holding me closely to his side and pulling a sheet over us. His deep voice fills my room. “Hate me, push me away, but don’t tell me this isn’t real, Nyx. I’m never giving up until you tell me to leave.”

The problem is, I won’t ever tell him to leave, and we both know that. It would destroy me, and I’m starting to suspect maybe it would hurt him too. “I can’t just get back together with you. You lied to me.”

“I didn’t tell you about it,” he agrees. “I should have, and I am sorry. These last few months have been hell, being close to you but not being able to really touch you. I’m addicted to you, Nyx.”

“I can’t say it didn’t affect me, too,” I admit. I blow out a long breath. “No more lies, Atlas. I don’t know what we will become, but if you don’t want Addison, and really believe she isn’t your fated mate, then I can move past it.”

“I don’t believe she is my fated mate,” Atlas firmly states. “Fated mates are meant to be obsessed with each other, die for each other. Real, true love. That isn’t what we share—if anything I want to be as far away from her as possible. The only reason I tried dating her was for my father, to please him.”

“I always assumed it was her amazing looks,” I mutter.

He laughs low, rolling over on top of me and looking down. His body presses against mine, well a certain hard part does. “Let me show you how beautiful I think you are.”

And he does.

* * *

We lie there, tangled up in each other's arms, for a long time, but it isn't long before the tell-tale white glow begins to emanate from my skin, bathing us both in a silvery glow that illuminates the space around us. This happens every time I'm happy, and although I've gotten better at using my powers since they first emerged, I have yet to find a way to control this one side effect. It's not been happening since we broke up, but apparently my powers are all for Atlas being back in my life. My pet theory is that it has something to do with positive emotions, those being the source of light magic, but without any angels around, there isn't exactly a way to confirm it. According to the instructors at the Academy—all of them demons—angels haven't been seen in years, and unlike demons, they've never taken much of an interest in the wars between lycanthropes. Still, that doesn't explain why I've been gifted with light magic when every other Wolf Witch uses dark magic. Sometimes I can't help but wonder...

No, I think, stopping myself before I can take the thought further. Don't be ridiculous.

"What is it?" Atlas murmurs, brushing the backs of his knuckles over my cheek. "You've got that look in your eyes again."

"Do I?" I shake my head, sighing. "Sorry. I guess I've been brooding a lot today, haven't I?" A grin spreads across my face. "Just following your example."

"Easy, now, Nyx," Atlas replies, raising a teasing eyebrow.

I elbow him playfully. "Is it just me, or are you smiling?"

Atlas snorts, but now his grin is on full display, making my stomach do a flip. "I have you back, why wouldn't I smile?" He sighs, and we lapse into silence once more.

"What did Master Ombres say?" I ask finally, once we've fully caught our breaths after the third round. I've never been so happy to have no sleep.

Atlas' brow furrows. "She wanted my recommendation on something."

I sit up on an elbow, tracing his toned chest with a finger. “On what?”

He purses his lips, his crescent-shaped scar gleaming in the light I’m giving off. “She said she and the scouts may have a mission in mind for us. And no, she didn’t tell me what,” he adds, a little teasingly when I open my mouth to ask the question. “All she wanted to know was whether I had any classmates in mind whose names I wanted to put forward.”

“And?” I press, all sleepiness disappearing.

Atlas stares up at the ceiling. “I mentioned the other senior students, obviously. In terms of raw skill, they’re it. Ivy, too. But...” He trails off, avoiding my gaze.

“But what?” I ask, settling my chin on his shoulder to look him in the eyes.

Atlas sighs, running the hand that’s not around my waist through his dark locks. “Master Ombres asked about you specifically.”

“Yeah?” I frown. “Did she say why?”

“I can only imagine it’s because of your light magic,” he replies. “She thinks it could be an asset against the werebears, especially if they’re changing tactics, but...” He turns to me, his emerald eyes gleaming. “I told her to forget it.”

“What?” I exclaim. “How come?”

Atlas grumbles, pressing his lips to the top of my head. “I don’t want you getting hurt again, Nyx. And I’m not going to let you, if I can help it.”

I frown, thinking back to the time I was almost killed by a werebear. “That’s not...” I pause, shaking my head. “I’m stronger now. You know that, Atlas.”

“I know,” he agrees. “But that doesn’t change how I feel. I don’t want those bastards getting their paws on you, especially if your magic is enough to draw their attention. I’m sure they’re talking by now about the Wolf Witch in training who can use light magic. The safest place for you right now is here, at the Academy.”

“Come on,” I reply, chuckling, “don’t tell me you’re going all possessive on me.”

Atlas’ expression is somber when he looks down at me. “Nyx, I’m serious. It was bad enough they sent you with me to check in on my former pack. I’m not letting that happen again. You’re safer here. End of story.”

I snort. “You know, you can be an alpha asshole sometimes,” I tease. “How am I supposed to get experience if I’m not allowed out on missions?”

Atlas narrows his eyes. “Look, it’s not just that, okay?” he says. “Think about it, Nyx. Yours are the only powers in this place that aren’t constrained by the rules governing dark magic. Don’t you think that’s a gift we should be protecting from the werebears?”

“You know I don’t like the idea of you going out there on your own either, right?” I point out. “It’s not like you’re immune to their violence.”

“No,” Atlas says, his expression unreadable. “I guess none of us are.”

I want to disagree with him, but deep down I know he’s right.

Chapter Three



The first thing I'm met with when I start the video call is a chorus of my name that's so enthusiastic, I can practically feel it from the other side of the state. Seeing my mother, father, and sister, Claire, on the other side of that tiny screen is almost hard to believe, even though I've only been away for a few months. The shameful thing is that this is the first opportunity I've had to contact them... or rather, that they've had to contact me. Although there's no rule prohibiting rejects from staying in touch with their loved ones in their former packs, it carries an unspoken taboo that's enough to make your blood boil. Those who have been cast out are untouchable, practically lepers in lycanthrope society, and if you're unfortunate enough to have violated the Traditions in a way worthy of exile, you can't expect much other than contempt from your former packmates. I've heard stories of rejects who have successfully assimilated into human culture, leaving their wolf shifter roots behind, but those are few and far between. It's easy to see why dark magic comes so easily to students at the Academy: the pain of being forcibly cut off from everything you know and love cuts deep.

"I take it Sebastian's still got a stick up his ass, then?" I ask after the greetings, salutations, and fawning are all over with.

"Nyx..." Dad exclaims, laughing.

"Well, you have to admit I have a point," I protest. "This whole business of self-imposed isolation is so last century. We're living in the age of smartphones and teleconferencing."

Mom rolls her eyes. “Tell that to the guys who wrote the Traditions.”

“Yeah,” I agree, snorting. “And the guys who follow them.”

There’s a moment of silence on the line, and I flush when I realize how that must have sounded. “Not you guys, obviously,” I rush to backpedal. “You wouldn’t have kicked me out if you’d had a choice. I know that.”

Dad sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s all right, Nyx. You have every right to be upset, given how things have turned out.”

“Sometimes it’s still hard to believe you’re gone,” Mom muses, her tone going melancholy. “The house isn’t the same without you. Neither is the pack.”

“I’m gonna have to disagree with you on that last part,” I quip. “The pack probably threw a party when I left. Although,” I add, “come to think of it, with me gone, they’ve basically lost their group punching bag.” Not that they’d get away with that shit these days, I want to add. Part of me gets a certain joy out of wondering what would happen if they tried to hassle me now that I have access to magic. They’d probably piss themselves.

Claire snorts, running a hand through her short brown hair. “Same assholes, different day.” She mutters. “Sometimes I wonder if there will ever be a way past this collectivism.”

“As the new beta, you’ve got more power to fight it than most,” Dad reminds her.

My eyes go wide. “Sebastian made you his beta?”

Claire nods. “A couple weeks ago, actually.”

“Holy shit,” I exclaim. “Claire, that’s awesome. You’re next in line to lead.”

“Assuming Sebastian doesn’t settle down and start popping out a bunch of pups,” my sister jokes. “Besides,” she adds, her expression growing somber, “with the way things are

going, I'm not so sure any of us will live long enough to see a new alpha."

I grimace, stealing a glance around. The castle courtyard is empty, and the only other sound is the chirping of birds nestled in the trees. I'm seated on a stone bench not far from the door, and I can't help but lower my voice, my curiosity getting the better of me. "Has something happened?" I ask. "Something with the werebears?"

Claire grimaces, exchanging a look with my parents. "There have been some... incidents with the other packs," Dad replies after a moment. "We probably shouldn't be talking about it..." His voice trails off.

He doesn't have to finish the sentence for me to know what he was going to say. We probably shouldn't be talking about it with a reject.

Are you really surprised? a voice in my head snarks. You're a persona non grata now. Sebastian's head will explode if he finds out they're letting you in on pack secrets. Still, I can't resist replying. "I won't tell if you guys don't. Besides," I add, gesturing around at my surroundings. "Who will I blab to, anyway? It's not like my voice has much sway around here." Not entirely true, considering my connection to Atlas, but I'd rather not muddy the waters further. This is my first opportunity to learn what's happening outside the Academy walls, and I'm not about to squander it. Plus, telling them about Atlas means telling them he is an alpha heir, and our relationship is impossible long term unless we run away from our entire race. Atlas might be a reject, but he cares about his father's pack, and I would never let him run away from everything.

Mom and Dad look at each other for a moment, indecisive, but it's Claire who finally speaks up. "Other packs are being attacked," she says, not meeting my eyes. "The werebears are organizing. Hell, one of the scouts reported they've even been setting up communes."

I feign surprise. "Really?" I know damn well that they've been building settlements; Atlas and I broke into one in order

to rescue his kidnapped father, but the fact that that wasn't an isolated incident doesn't bode well.

Claire nods. "That's not all, though," she continues. "They're..." She clears her throat. "They're taking prisoners now, too. At least three wolves have gone missing from the other packs, and those are just the ones we know about. Four from our pack."

Again, not a surprise, but I sure as hell can't mention that; everything we find out at the Academy is strictly confidential. "I thought the werebears wanted to wipe us out."

"They still do," Mom interjects. "But their strategy has changed. They're looking for something. Something they think we can give them."

"We all know what that something is," Dad says, his tone dark.

"Honey," Mom begins, "I really don't think we should—"

But Dad is already blazing ahead. "All the kidnappings and attempted kidnappings have involved members of protected packs."

I blanch. "Protected, as in...?"

"As in, protected by Wolf Witches," Claire finishes, her voice low with fear and secrecy. "I think they've set their sights on you."

"That's just speculation," Mom protests.

"You have to admit, there's a correlation," Dad points out, looking from her to me. "Look, Nyx, just be careful, okay? If the shit hits the fan soon, there may be a lot of lives on the line." A shadow crosses his face. "I swear, though, if they're not taking care of you at that Academy of theirs—"

"They are," I assure him, trying to sound positive. "Don't worry; we're safe here." I lower my voice while still trying to keep my tone light. "The whole magic thing was a bit of an adjustment, but seeing as now I can do light magic, I figure I'm in pretty good shape."

It's like a pall has been draped over the four of us. My parents fall silent. Dad glances away and Mom, looking especially uncomfortable, swallows hard. Claire stiffens like she's just received an electric shock, and for a moment it's all I can do to eye them all in confusion.

Mom is the first one to speak, not looking me in the eyes as she says, "Nyx..."

The magic, I realize after a moment. They're afraid. The Graymoon Pack has never had a resident Wolf Witch, and misinformation likely still runs rampant, even now that we've become more commonplace. This is exactly the kind of mentality Atlas wanted to change when he became alpha of the Blood Moon Pack, and they kicked him out for it. So much for this being the twenty-first century.

Clearing my throat, I hurry to change the subject, not liking how uncomfortable they've gotten. "I'm guessing the fact that the bears are targeting protected packs hasn't done good things for our image."

Mom sighs, averting her gaze. "Wolf Witches have always been controversial," she reminds us. "Only the most progressive alphas have chosen to allow them into their packs, and Sebastian is... Well..."

"Pretty damn far from progressive," I finish for her, shrugging my shoulders. "I guess we'll just have to start a PR campaign or something. Either that, or resort to bribery. Do you think Sebastian would go for cookies, or is he more of a cold, hard cash kind of a guy?"

Claire snorts, and the mood seems to lighten. "I'm glad you've kept your stupid jokes, at least."

"You know me," I reply with a grin. "If the people around me aren't groaning, then I haven't done my job."

"Speaking of groaning," Claire responds, her own wicked smile spreading across her face, "met any cute guys over there?"

Mom scrubs a hand down her face and turns to Dad. "Maybe we should give them some space. I sense girl talk on

the horizon.”

“Right behind you,” Dad agrees, getting to his feet and moving to follow her. “We love you, Nyx. Don’t forget that.”

“I love you guys too,” I reply, turning to each of them in turn. “Behave yourselves. I know it’s hard without me to keep you in line, but do your best.”

My mom chuckles, throws me a wave, and turns to leave. Dad follows a moment later. Claire waits patiently for them to close the door before turning back to me. “Well...?”

I snort and shake my head, trying to fend off the blush that’s creeping into my cheeks as I think about what Atlas and I got up to last night. And this morning.

“Look, my lips are sealed.”

“Yeah?” Claire raises her eyebrows. “You’re sticking to that, aren’t you?”

Grinning, I make a zipping motion across my lips, prompting a laugh from her. “At any rate,” I say, ready to change the subject before she realizes how bashful I’ve gotten, “I doubt we should be wasting our ‘girl talk’ on boys, anyway.”

Claire’s smile fades, an odd look crossing her face. “No,” she replies, stealing a glance over her shoulder toward where my parents went. “I guess not.” Clearing her throat, she brings the computer closer, her voice lowering. “Listen, Nyx, there’s something I need to talk to you about. Without our parents around.”

I swallow, my brows pulling together. “Yeah?”

“I don’t have much time to go into the specifics,” Claire continues, and I notice that her eyes have gone dark with secrecy. “I just need you to listen to me, okay? Your scout, Charles, paid me a visit a while back.”

“Charles?” For a moment I’m sure I’ve misheard her; Charles is the recruiter who first found me as I stumbled blindly through the forest in search of the Academy, desperate for salvation in the aftermath of my exile. He was my first

friend in this place, and without his guidance, I probably would have died of exposure within the first couple days of being on my own.

Why the hell would he go visit my former pack?

I shake my head, stunned. “Claire, you’re scaring me.”

“Good,” she replies, her tone dead serious, “because you need to know that—”

But before she can get the words out, the door swings open, and in strides Atlas, his expression hard. “There you are,” he says when he sees me, obviously relieved. “I was looking everywhere for you, Nyx.”

“I...” I glance from him to Claire, my cheeks going red when I notice how intently she’s looking at him now that he’s within view of the camera. “I was just on a call. Why?”

Atlas’ expression darkens. “It’s Master Ombres,” he says after a moment. “She wants to see us.”

Chapter Four



I may not have been here longer than Tobias, but I know Atlas well enough to be able to tell when he's pissed... and right now, he's practically steaming. A horrible feeling settles into my gut as I follow Atlas through the winding corridors leading to the Master's office, and I can't keep a handle on the adrenaline this time.

She knows, I think, stealing a worried glance up at Atlas as we go. She found out we're involved somehow, and now we're in for it. Horrible possibilities are already flashing through my mind: What if she separates us? Worse yet, what if she kicks me out? Hell, kicks both of us out? Dating between students might not be out of the question, but a mentor and a mentee? God, I've probably fucked myself over... and Atlas, too.

His expression is unreadable as we stride down the administration hallway, his handsome features strained with anger... and what might even be mistaken as fear. That only worries me more, and I can't even bear to ask him what this is about. I'm shitting bricks by the time we round the corner, only to pause and frown when I see who else is waiting in the hallway.

Outside Master Ombres' office is a cluster of faces, some of them more familiar than others. Ivy and Tobias are by the door, their shoulders hunched as they murmur in hushed tones. On the opposite side is Quinn, one of the senior students, a quiet girl with tousled brown hair and glasses. Her mentee, Colton, is nowhere to be seen, but Nick, one of the other

students who joined at the same time as me and Ivy, is standing in her shadow, his mousy hair pulled back into some kind of man bun.

And last but not least, standing by herself toward the end of the corridor, is the Queen Bee herself, Addison Brighton. She's looking about as put-off as usual, her arms folded over her ample chest as she eyes the others with a look of distant disdain. As they always do, my hackles go up, but not even I can hide my confusion. "What the hell...?"

I turn back to Atlas, and that's when it clicks. "Is this about the mission?" I ask. "The one Ombres was asking you for recommendations on?"

Atlas' brow furrows deeper, and for a moment he doesn't seem like he's going to reply. "Yes," he says at last, seething, and doesn't elaborate.

Tobias is the first of the waiting students to notice me, and he takes on an odd expression as he looks my way: a mixture of hope, discomfort... and something else, something less easy to put my finger on. The look he gives Atlas is unfriendly, to say the least.

"Hey," I say, shuffling over to where he and Ivy are waiting. "What's this all about?"

"You don't know?" Addison replies loudly, making me bristle. "Considering you're in bed with the star student, I would've expected better of you, Nyx."

"Believe me, Addison," I retort, "I don't know jack shit. Just ask my former pack. Hell," I continue, "maybe you'll get lucky and I'll end up mauled by a werebear. Seeing as I'm the root of all your problems, right?"

"Nyx," Atlas grunts, folding his muscular arms and looking down at me. I sigh and look away.

Addison scoffs, but I don't miss the way her eyes rake over his body, and an angry flush creeps into my olive-skinned cheeks. Atlas puts his hand on my lower back, and although the gesture is subtle, it still fills me with a warmth that's hard

to describe. "I'll be right back," he murmurs, pulling away and slipping into the Master's office.

"You think she'll ever let it go?" Ivy wonders aloud, still eyeing her blonde mentor with some discomfort.

I shrug my shoulders. "Doubt it. She's had it out for me since day one but at least I know why."

"You don't think that's a sign?" Tobias asks, turning to me.

"A sign?"

"Yeah." He crosses his arms, taking a doubtful glance at the office door Atlas just walked through. "A sign that fated mates are always going to end up together."

"Are you trying to hurt me, Tobias?" I ask, looking away.

"Never," Tobias says, that odd look passing over his face once more.

I open my mouth to ask him what he means, but that's when the door swings back open and Atlas emerges. "She's ready," he says, his eyes lingering on mine for a long moment.

One by one, all seven of us file into the Master's office, each as confused as the others about what the hell she wants from us. Atlas moves to stand behind me, his posture possessive as he wraps an arm around my shoulders. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Tobias glance away, while Addison stiffens.

Master Ombres turns away from the windows, her arms crossed. She's a lanky woman with black hair and the characteristic all-black eyes of a demon, which contrast her warm smile in a way that's almost uncanny. "Thank you all for joining me," she says, looking around the room at the surrounding students. "I'm sorry to drag you away from your free time like this, but there's something I need from you, and I'm afraid it can't wait."

Quinn clears her throat, her expression stoic. "This wouldn't happen to be an assignment, would it?" she asks.

Master Ombres nods. "Indeed, it is," she acknowledges. "This has been a long time coming, for better or worse, and

the fact that you were chosen for this task speaks volumes to each of your abilities as Wolf Witches.” Her black eyes drift over to Atlas. “You’ve received the highest recommendation of our brightest student since the founding of this Academy, so make no mistake: You should be proud.”

Atlas bristles, moving to step in front of me. “Nyx wasn’t part of it,” he says, his anger palpable. “We’re talking about real danger here, Master. I don’t want her walking into—”

Master Ombres holds up a hand. “I’m aware,” she states, “but consider this an executive decision.” She turns to me. “Nyx’s light magic is an anomaly, yes, but it’s also the only magic capable of neutralizing dark magic... Which brings me to why I’ve summoned you all here today.” Clearing her throat, she takes a step back, her expression darkening. “I’m sure you’ve all heard the rumors.”

Tobias, who has until now been making a point to avoid looking at me or Atlas, steps forward. “You’re talking about the werebears.”

“Wait,” Ivy interjects, holding up a hand, “so it’s true? They’re looking into Wolf Witches?”

“Of course they are,” Addison replies, rolling her eyes. “It took them long enough.” She grins. “Not super bright, are they?”

Master Ombres ignores her. “Our scouts believe so, yes,” she replies. “They’ve been liaising with other protected packs, and a disturbing pattern is emerging. Those who haven’t made all-out kidnapping attempts on Wolf Witches in the field have been asking questions about dark magic. How it works, who uses it, what we teach at this school.”

I swallow hard. “Does that mean they’ve got their sights on the Academy?”

The Master shakes her head. “Our magical fortifications are sound,” she replies. “They can’t harm us here as long as we stay on school grounds. Other werewolves, however, are another story.”

A silence falls over us, and Nick is the one who dares to break it, his brow furrowed. I can practically see the gears turning in his head. “We don’t know what they want with us, do we?”

“Not exactly,” the Master concedes. “Just that they’ve taken a sudden interest in dark magic, and that’s concerning. What isn’t clear is how they hope this will help them in the war. Do they want to teach it to themselves? Find a way to immunize against it? Try to figure out how to break through to the Academy and take us down from within?” She shakes her head. “That’s the part that isn’t clear. What also isn’t clear is why they seem to have settled here in New England. This behavior isn’t normal, and we need to understand their logic to develop a strategy.”

“So what do you want us to do?” Addison demands, crossing her arms. “It’s not like we can just waltz into the nearest settlement and ask nicely.”

“Hardly,” Master Ombres agrees. “Besides, it’s unlikely they would know anything, anyway.”

“So who would?” I ask, emboldened.

Atlas bristles, putting a hand on my waist.

“Their leaders,” the Master replies simply. “We have reason to believe they’re organizing, and that their strategies are coming from their biggest clan, a contingent calling itself the Black Omen. They wouldn’t share their motivations with their peons, which means...”

Atlas’ tone is dark. “Which means we need to go to the source.”

Master Ombres nods slowly. “Precisely. Our scouts have tracked the Black Omen to Hartford, Connecticut.”

I blink. “You mean the Hartford? As in, the city?”

“Yes. Our sources indicate that this is likely a staging area for their higher-ups. They’re the biggest liability among their species, which explains why they’ve chosen an urban environment; they’re trying to isolate themselves from werewolves. Specifically, from Wolf Witch espionage.”

“Which is exactly what we’re going to give them,” Ivy says, her face lighting up.

The Master smiles. “It is, indeed. Find them, determine their strategy, and we may be able to anticipate their next move.”

“So that’s it, then,” Atlas growls, and when I glance up at him, I see that his face is drawn with rage. “You’re just sending us to Hartford, with no backup. And you’re putting Nyx directly in the line of fire.”

Master Ombres pinches the bridge of her nose. “Atlas,” she says, sounding exasperated, “we’ve been through this.”

“What if they turn their attention on Nyx next, huh?” Atlas demands, taking a step forward, his green eyes flashing. “What if they see her magic and decide to kidnap her instead?”

“That’s a fair point,” Tobias acknowledges grudgingly. “This could get her hurt.”

“Killed, even,” Addison adds, shooting me a dangerous look. “Or she could give them ammunition to change tactics again.”

“Since when do you care?” I demand, rounding on her.

“Since you decided having light magic made you special,” Addison retorts. “You’ve been here how many months? And you still can’t even shift. You’re as liable to fuck up this whole operation as you are to help us. Besides,” she adds, shooting Atlas a coquettish look, “I’m sure Atlas and I can handle this on our own.”

“That’s enough, all of you,” the Master snaps. “No more playing naive. Nyx’s magic is a failsafe that we can’t afford to keep locked up here. If there were ever a time we’d need it, that time would be now, especially if the werebears manage to successfully capture a Wolf Witch.”

“Why don’t we just ask Nyx what she thinks?” Ivy ventures timidly.

All eyes in the room suddenly fall on me, and I swallow, feeling put on the spot.

“Well, Nyx?” Master Ombres asks, crossing her arms. “Since we’re apparently all putting our two cents in, what about you? Is this something you want to do, or would you rather sit this one out?”

I take an unsteady breath, no longer certain of anything. I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye to Claire, let alone hear what she had to tell me, and now I’m being asked to go on a potentially life-threatening mission to Hartford.

But if it’s life-threatening for me, then it’s life-threatening for Atlas, too, and that, more than anything, is what makes up my mind.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn to face Master Ombres.

Tobias reaches out a hand to me. “Nyx...” he begins.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, giving him a reassuring nod before taking a deep breath. “If Wolf Witches really are in danger, then it’s not even a discussion,” I say before turning to Atlas and looking into his emerald eyes. “Besides,” I add, “there’s no way in hell I’m letting you guys walk into the fire without me. I’m going.”

Chapter Five



I glance up from my suitcase to see that Ivy has straightened up from her place on the floor. Her own bag is only partially packed, and although the morning is already dawning bright and beautiful, she's stopped getting ready altogether. Her cell phone is in her hands, her brow furrowed in concentration as she taps out a feverish text message.

"All good?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

"Hm?" she responds, jerking her head up as if I just startled her. Her red waves bounce around her face, and her cheeks flush with sudden embarrassment. "Oh, yeah," she adds with an uncertain smile. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Really?" I ask incredulously, crossing my arms as I get to my feet. "Because you look like I just walked in on you with your pants down." I nod in the direction of her phone. "Who're you chatting with?"

Ivy looks back at her screen. "My girlfriend," she replies after a moment. "I've been doing my best to keep a distance, you know—I don't want her getting dragged into wolf shifter politics, especially if the war is getting worse—but if this mission is as dangerous as the others are saying, I don't want her to think..." She swallows, her red cheeks going pale in an instant. "If something happens, I don't want her to think I've ghosted her."

Now it's my turn to stop grinning, and I venture to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Hey," I say. "Don't talk like

that. We're all going to get through this without a scratch on us. Guaranteed."

Ivy gives me a small smile in return. "I'm sure you're right," she replies, and then sighs, running a hand through her hair. "I guess I'm just nervous. You and Atlas have already gone into werebear territory, and you kicked ass, by the sounds of it. But this is all new for me. I can't afford to get complacent."

"Since when have you ever been complacent, Ivy?" I tease, giving her a playful nudge with my elbow. "Besides, Atlas and I were winging it. We've got a plan this time, and we'll have numbers on our side. It's going to be fine."

Even as the words come out, I bite the inside of my lip, wondering how true that really is. Atlas has been quiet since our meeting with the Master, and it's no mystery why. Still, I'm convicted in my decision. I spent eighteen years of my life being useless while everyone else in my pack fought the good fight in the name of lycanthropes. Now it's my turn to throw my hat in the ring, and I'm not about to squander it.

Ivy clears her throat and frowns down at her travel bag as she pockets her phone. "Any idea what the weather's like in Hartford, anyway?"

I shrug. "You got me. I've never been to Connecticut. Actually, I've barely ever been outside our pack village."

"Really?" Ivy asks, eyes widening.

I nod. "The one time I went into the city with my sister, I ended up getting wasted and losing my shoes. They're probably still somewhere in the Atlantic as we speak." I shake my head at the memory. "Anyway, unfortunate alcohol-induced incidents aside, I wouldn't know Hartford from my left elbow."

Ivy blinks. "I'm surprised. You're so..." She shrugs sheepishly. "Worldly."

I grin in a desperate attempt to hide my own wave of self-consciousness. "That's the secret, Ivy," I say, tossing my long

black locks over one shoulder with a put-upon air. “Fake it till you make it.”

She stares at me for a minute and then bursts out laughing. “I guess you’ve made it work so far.”

“Damn right,” I agree as I return to my suitcase. “And I’m not even dead yet. Go figure.”

We continue our packing in silence as the sunlight steadily brightens my dorm room. There’s not much to be done for me, in all honesty. My wardrobe is little more than a collection of curve-hugging t-shirts, torn jeans, and a couple pairs of worn boots, but I’ve always been more about comfort than style, and if there were ever a time for that philosophy, it’s now. I’m just throwing a couple extra hair ties onto the pile when there’s an urgent knocking at my door.

I stand up immediately and creep over to it, tensing up. Ever since Addison broke in the night after Atlas first kissed me, I’ve been skittish about people in my room, light magic or no light magic. But when I glance through the peephole, I immediately relax. It’s just Tobias, his hands in his pockets and a look of guarded anxiety on his warm features.

I swing the door open. “Long time no see!”

That seems to break the ice, and a grin spreads across his face. “Nyx, it’s been five hours.”

“Uh, yeah,” I reply as I step aside to let him in. “Like I said, long time no see.”

Tobias laughs, but he doesn’t remove his hands from his pockets. “So you guys are packing then, huh?”

I nod, blowing out a breath. “Not much to pack to be totally honest. I didn’t leave my old pack with much.”

“Join the club,” Ivy laments from the floor, where she’s holding up a pair of baggy sweatshirts. “And I’m getting the feeling none of what I brought is right for espionage.”

“I mean, it’s not like they give us a uniform,” I reason, crossing my arms. “It’s a bummer, really. I feel like I would’ve looked good in a latex catsuit.”

Tobias snorts. “That’s probably for the best,” he jokes. “I’d probably sweat my ass off.” He shakes his head, his playfulness turning pensive. “Hard to believe we leave today,” he says.

“I’m trying not to think about it too hard,” Ivy says, wrapping her arms around herself. “God knows the second we get to Hartford I’m going to forget everything I’ve learned here.”

“Fake it till you make it,” I insist.

“Right,” she agrees, exhaling. “Fake it till you make it.”

Grinning, I turn back to Tobias. “So what’s up? You finish packing already?”

“Not yet,” he replies, “but there was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Okay.”

Tobias glances from me to Ivy and then back, running a hand through his shaggy golden hair. “Listen, please don’t take this the wrong way, okay?”

I cross my arms. “That’s usually what people say before they say something insulting.” Seeing his dismayed reaction, I smile and swat his arm. “I’m kidding! What is it?”

Tobias swallows, straightens up, and says, “I don’t know if you should come with us, Nyx.”

I blink. “Seriously?” He nods, and I groan, putting my face in my hands. “Oh god, not you too.”

“I’m not saying this because I don’t think you’re capable,” Tobias says, taking a step closer to me. “Hell, with your magic, you could probably kick all of our asses. But that’s exactly why I think you should stay here.”

“How come?” I protest, crossing my arms. “Don’t you think it would be good to have that on our side?”

“What did Master Ombres call it?” Ivy puts in. “A ‘failsafe?’ ”

“Look,” Tobias says, putting his hand on my shoulder, so he can look me in the eyes. “I don’t want you walking into Black Omen if it means they end up turning on you. Atlas was right; it’s too dangerous. I—we—can’t afford to lose you.”

I stare at him, chewing the inside of my lip. “Is this really about the mission, Tobias?” I ask him finally, Atlas’ warning to me ringing in my head. “Or is it something else?”

Tobias stares at me, looking like he’s on the verge of blurting something out, but that’s when the door to my room opens again from where it stood ajar, revealing Atlas. He stops dead in the doorway the moment he sees Tobias and more importantly Tobias’ hand on my arm. A deadly growl echoes from his chest. “What is this?” he asks, suspicion coloring his deep voice.

Tobias rubs the back of his neck. “I was just talking to Nyx. Is that not allowed?”

“About?”

Tobias sighs, turning to face Atlas. “If you really want to know, I was trying to get her to stay here instead of coming to Hartford.”

“That right?” Atlas asks, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow.

Tobias nods, but when Atlas doesn’t respond, he throws his hands up. “Look, I agree with you, okay? It’s too risky for her to come with us, especially if we don’t know what the werebears want with our magic. I thought if I could just talk to her—”

Atlas scoffs, shaking his head as he stalks into the room. “I’ve been trying to talk her out of it since yesterday,” he gripes. “What makes you think you could?”

“Uh, excuse me?” I say, moving to stand between them. “‘She’ is standing right here.”

Atlas smirks, looking down at me. “I’m well aware, you’re mine after all.”

But now it's Tobias' turn to look angry. "Right, I forgot," he says, taking a step back, "you think Nyx is your property now, right?"

A shadow darkens Atlas' features, and when he speaks, there's murder in his voice. "My property?"

"That's what I said." Tobias stares him down. "One of us had to, right? You can't just have one fated mate, could you? You had to take her and screw over Addison."

Atlas' lips pull back from his teeth, and he comes to stand behind me, putting a protective arm in front of me. "Why don't you just say what you're thinking, and we can cut this mind game shit?"

"You want to know what I'm thinking?" Tobias stalks forward, his eyes burning with anger and not leaving Atlas. "Fine, I'll tell you. I don't think you're good for Nyx. I think you're going to hurt her and break her, and fuck if I'm going to let it happen."

My jaw all but hits the floor.

Ivy, who has been edging toward the door, blanches. "Maybe I should go..."

"No, don't," I protest, my hand flying out to catch hold of her wrist. I can sense things escalating, and the last thing I need is for the only neutral party to take off.

Atlas shakes his head, as if he were expecting that response from Tobias. He moves right in front of Tobias, his body tense, and the room shimmers with threatening tension. "And who do you think would be better for her? You?"

"That's not what I said," Tobias insists, but his eyes dart over to me, meeting mine for the briefest of moments.

"You didn't have to," Atlas growls. "I've seen the way you look at her."

"Guys—" I protest, trying to get their attention.

"Do you really think you're making her any safer?" Tobias demands. "Your pack is the strongest in North America, and your father is the alpha. Hell, you might as well have a target

on your back, and every second you spend with her, you're risking her safety!"

"Have you forgotten these walls?" Atlas demands. "They can't touch us while we're in here."

"And have you forgotten that they're trying to learn dark magic?" Tobias fires back. "The Academy can't protect us if that happens, and you know it as well as I do. Hell, maybe it's already happened."

"Guys, stop," I protest. "I can speak for myself, and I've already decided I'm going."

Tobias sighs, rubbing his forehead. "Yeah," he acknowledges, "I guess you have." Clearing his throat, he backs away from Atlas and heads to the door, his expression unreadable. As he's on his way out, he pauses and turns back around. "Look, Nyx, regardless of what your boyfriend here thinks, your safety is all I care about. And there's no guarantee things won't go down badly in Hartford."

"I know, Tobias," I reply, my brows pulling together as I detach from Atlas to go put a hand on Tobias' shoulder. "But that's a risk I'm willing to take. Hell, it's a risk we all take when we become Wolf Witches, right?"

My friend sighs, giving me a melancholy smile. "I hope you're right, Nyx," he says earnestly. "And that you're not making a huge mistake with him. You're worth so much more."

He walks out, and the three of us who remain watch him go, each of us stunned to silence.

Chapter Six



“So let me get this straight,” I say, my hand in Atlas’ as he, Ivy, Quinn, Nick, Addison and I pick our way through the forest surrounding the Academy. “Our magic lets us fly—literally fly, like Atlas and I did on our way to the Blood Moon Pack—and we’re stuck hiking our way down to the road anyway.” I glance from one shifter to the next. “Someone make it make sense.”

“Look,” Addison snaps, slapping at a particularly aggressive mosquito, “I hate marching through this bug-infested forest as much as anyone, but bitching about it isn’t going to do us any good.” Her foot—clad in what might be the least hiking-friendly high heel I’ve ever seen—catches on an exposed root, and she nearly falls on her face, barely regaining her balance in time.

“Nyx has a point,” Ivy speaks up from her place on Atlas’ other side. “It’ll take us at least another hour to reach the cars, and that’s assuming we can even find them. Figure another three or four hours on the road, and it’ll probably be evening by the time we actually get to Hartford.”

Tobias, who has been tagging along some distance behind us, his hands in his pockets and his brow furrowed, speaks up for the first time since we left the campus. “It’s safer this way,” he points out, making Ivy and I look back. I feel Atlas stiffen next to me. I know the only reason he hasn’t beaten the shit out of Tobias is because it would upset me. “The werebears have been zeroing in on New England for years now, and given what the two of you saw with the Blood Moon

Pack, they're probably trying to keep the Academy in their sights. If their scouts notice half a dozen people zooming through the sky with dark magic, I doubt we'll be able to stay under the radar." He frowns. "And that means no more infiltrating the Black Omen, unless they really are as stupid as they seem to be."

"Hey, we can always hope, right?" I joke, relieved he's finally talking again. Doubt and confusion have been warring inside me since his fight with Atlas this morning, and considering what he all but stated back there, I can't be sure what's in store for our friendship. Hell, maybe this trip will be a good distraction; I would almost rather get mauled by a werebear than have to confront the possibility that he still has feelings for me.

The air grows cold almost out of nowhere as we reach the boundaries of the school property, and I brace myself for the wave of terror that I know is coming. It's the dark magic enchantment that I encountered during my search for the cairns marking the path to the Academy, and although I have a better understanding of it now, that doesn't change the discomfort the spell instills in me.

Atlas pulls me closer against his side as our group passes silently through the barrier, his own dark magic swirling around him in a cloud. I lean into his touch, basking in the warmth of his muscular body next to mine, and in an instant, I've begun to glow, tendrils of light magic driving back the black mist as it fends off the fear spell.

As we reach the other side, Ivy raises her eyebrows at me. "Damn, Nyx," she remarks. "You're glowing."

I grin, allowing my magic to dissipate. "To be honest, I'm kind of surprised that actually worked."

"Why wouldn't it?" Addison gripes, stalking past us and throwing me a disdainful look over her shoulder.

I shrug, unperturbed. "I don't want to rule anything out. You know, considering that I'm already a freak of nature."

The blonde bombshell snorts. "At least you can admit it."

Nick, the long-haired underclassman, eyes me as we press onto the rapidly-narrowing path. “So it’s true, then?” he asks. “You really don’t know where your magic came from?”

I shake my head. “No clue. I didn’t even know light magic existed until I came to the Academy.”

“Most people don’t,” Quinn says, her brow furrowed in concentration as we cut through a strand of trees and onto the cliffs facing the sea. “Hell, most people aren’t even aware of dark magic, but that’s less of an anomaly. Demons took an interest in earth; angels basically told humanity to fuck off.” She shrugs her shoulders. “Maybe it’s a genetic thing.”

“What, like a mutation?” Nick says, brow furrowing. “I thought it was only innate for demons—”

“Oh god,” Addison mutters, cutting him off. “You know what? Forget I brought it up. If I have to hear another word about light magic today, I’m going to scream.”

Atlas grunts. “If you’re that pressed that Nyx got light magic and not you, Addison, then you might want to rethink your priorities.”

“Believe me,” Addison replies, shooting him an obvious wink, “my priorities have always been elsewhere.”

Self-conscious, I tighten my grip on Atlas’ hand. He gives mine a reassuring squeeze, his green eyes meeting mine as we work our way down the coastline. Just a few months ago, I almost plunged to my death into the ocean right around here somewhere. If Charles hadn’t given me my first taste of magic then and there, my body would probably still be decomposing on the beach below. It’s strange to think how much has changed in so little time... and even stranger to think that the recruiter has been in contact with Claire since my arrival.

Pursing my lips, I glance down at my cell phone in my jeans pocket... and then think better of it. Maybe it’s better not to know.

* * *

My feet are aching in my battered combat boots by the time we reach the edge of the wilderness area, where a nearly-deserted parking lot awaits our arrival. Of the few cars that are parked here, one of them stands out like a sore thumb: a big, shiny SUV—a Cadillac Escalade, if I had to guess. “Did the scouts put this here?” Ivy asks, her eyes widening.

“That’s what Charles said,” Tobias replies as the seven of us gather around the vehicle. “They’ll have procured it specially for this mission, if I had to guess.”

“Looks new,” I say as I peer into the tinted window then grin. “Perfect for getting potato chip crumbs all over the seats.”

Atlas raises his eyebrows, the ghost of a smile on his face. “Why do I get the feeling you’ll have made a mess before we even reach the state border?”

“Because that’s exactly what I plan to do,” I reply gamely as Quinn pulls out the keys with which she’s been entrusted. “First gas station we see, I’m loading up on as many Pringles as I can get my hands on.”

Addison makes a scoffing sound as she climbs into the front seat, not bothering to ask our preferences.

“I’ll drive,” Quinn announces as she skirts around to the other side. “Someone will have to spell me when we get to Connecticut, though. I start to get sleepy after a while.”

I open my mouth to tell them not to look at me—I never got a driver’s license—but Atlas beats me to it. “No problem,” he says. “We can take shifts.”

“I take it we’re not stopping until we get to Hartford?” Tobias asks as the rest of us pile into the back seats. There’s a weird tone in his voice, and his expression is apprehensive as he pulls the door shut.

“You okay?” I ask, leaning forward from where I’m sitting with Atlas in the back to peer at him.

“For now? Fine,” Tobias replies with a half-anxious smile. “I get carsick, though. Have since I was a kid.”

“Roll down a window,” Addison advises him dismissively. “You’ll be fine.”

Tobias frowns, looking like he’s going to reply, and then sighs and takes her advice. We pull out of the lot and onto the gravel road, heading in the direction of the highway as the forest becomes a blur around us. Soon enough, the dirt turns to pavement, and as we pull onto the main road, I realize that I can’t blame him for his discomfort. Riding in a car has always felt strange to me, even if not in a queasy way; although the Gray Moon Pack’s village had cars for supply runs and other occasional trips into human settlements, driving was never a regular occurrence. I have to wonder—not without a touch of melancholy—what other aspects of human life I missed out on growing up so far away from civilization.

All in the name of the precious Traditions, I think, scowling.

The passing cars on the freeway are the first taste of human society I’ve had since that one unfortunate bender with Claire, and I can’t help pressing my head against the window to watch the world go by, probably looking like a dog on its first car trip. At one point, I catch Atlas watching me with an amused half-smile on his face, and a fresh surge of butterflies passes through my stomach.

The others spend the first leg of the trip badgering one another, speculating on the mission, and arguing over the radio station. Even Ivy gets in on it, striking a surprising contrast to Tobias, who is still staying relatively quiet. He does look a little pale, I realize, and I eventually lean forward again to tap him on the shoulder as the others are carrying on a heated debate on pop music versus rock.

“I’ve heard it helps if you put your head between your knees,” I tell him.

“Yeah?” Tobias gives me a crooked smile. “Not the most dignified posture, but I guess if it keeps me from hurling all over the seat...”

“Or just look out the window,” I say, nodding at the glass. “Lots of interesting stuff to watch, like... Well, trees. Oh, and

telephone poles!” I add. “There was that male with the flat tire a few miles back. Hell, if we’re lucky, maybe we’ll even see a hitchhiker.”

“That’s scraping the bottom of the barrel,” Tobias says, the color returning to his face slightly.

“Hey,” I protest, “I’m having fun. You guys are lucky I’m easily amused, or I’d probably be on my tenth round of ‘I Spy’ by now.”

That gets a full laugh out of him, and he gives me a genuine smile, his eyes meeting mine for a long, heavy moment. There’s something intense and unspoken in his gaze: words he wishes he could say, secrets he wishes he could disclose, and, underpinning them all, a desire so strong it makes my heart lurch. That’s when Atlas puts his hand on my thigh, watching the exchange with a dark look on his face, and Tobias is the first one to look away.

I pull back, lean into Atlas’ lean form, and can’t help feeling a twinge of regret.

We’re on a quiet stretch of highway, nearly at the Connecticut border, when Quinn suddenly slams on the brakes, nearly sending us spinning out. I’ve been dozing in the protective cradle of Atlas’ arms, and I nearly jump at the sudden stop.

“What the hell?” Addison demands.

Quinn’s eyes have gone wide. “I thought I saw something,” she says.

“What was it?” Ivy asks.

“I’m not sure,” Quinn admits, pressing her lips together and pointing out the windshield at the forest surrounding the freeway.

The rest of us turn to follow her gaze but there’s nothing along the highway except trees. To the west, a slow-moving stream cuts through the sparse forest, and no cars pass on either side of the SUV. “I don’t see anything,” Nick says after a moment.

“What do you think you saw?” Atlas prompts her, his green eyes scanning the horizon.

Quinn just shakes her head. “Movement.”

“Could’ve been a deer,” I suggest.

“Yeah,” she replies, but she still sounds doubtful.

We linger there for a minute longer, hazard lights flashing as we scan the area for signs of anything amiss. I don’t realize just how quiet it’s gotten—not just in the car, but outside of it—for another few moments. That’s when it strikes me that, despite it being almost midday on one of the busiest freeways in the state, we haven’t seen another vehicle for miles.

A chill of terror washes over me.

“Guys...” I begin, but it’s already too late. A split-second later, there comes a heavy crashing sound from among the trees that’s so loud we can hear it from inside the vehicle. The next thing I know, three werebears are charging out of the forest, ready to kill.

And they’re coming right at us.

Chapter Seven



“Holy shit—” Addison begins, but she’s interrupted when one of the werebears lets out an ear-splitting roar.

I clap my hands over my ears, a chorus of confused shouts filling the car around me.

“How’d they find us?”

“What do we do?”

“Get out of the way!”

Quinn grabs the steering wheel just as the trio of beasts closes in on us. “Hold on,” she says, and then steps on the gas.

“What the hell are you doing?” Addison demands.

Quinn doesn’t reply. The SUV speeds forward, heading straight for the nearest werebear, and at the last second, I realize that she’s summoned a curtain of dark magic around the front end of the car. Like a missile, the Escalade plows through the enemy group, knocking them to either side like bowling pins. We’ve gone careening off the road and onto the bumpy ground, the wheels bouncing in the ruts as everyone inside holds on for dear life. Atlas has pulled me against his chest, shielding me with his arms, and it’s a good thing, too, because a moment later, the front end of the car tips forward and we end up nose-down in a ditch.

“Fuck,” Quinn exclaims, already putting it in reverse. The wheels spin in the mud around us, sending up a spray of dirt, but it doesn’t do any good, and one glance out the back window shows the werebears rejoining their attack formation.

They're incredibly fast, each one like a living battering ram, and we're trapped in a thousand-pound steel box.

I don't think; I'm already leaning into Atlas, grabbing hold of the power I know is there, and immediately my arms begin to glow.

"Nyx—" he begins, but I've already unleashed a blast of light magic, exactly the way I did when we were practicing together a few days ago. It strikes the back windshield with full force and shatters it, sending bits of glass flying into the oncoming werebears. The one at the front of the group takes the brunt of the impact, roaring in rage as it staggers back, bleeding from multiple cuts.

Atlas and I exchange a look with one another, nod, and scramble out the broken windshield, ready to fight. The others seem to have had the same idea, as Ivy has already sent her side door flying open with dark magic, leaping out of the car and shifting into her red wolf form in one seamless movement. Nick follows behind her, snarling and snapping his fanged jaws just as Addison staggers out of the front seat, once more nearly turning her ankle on her high heel. Tobias lingers for a moment, looking indecisive, and then throws open the side door and clambers out of the car.

The six of us face down our attackers, and that's when the adrenaline takes over. Atlas shifts into his shifter form—sleek, black, and green-eyed—and charges the nearest one, dark magic swimming through his fur to augment his physical strength. Ivy joins him without hesitation, replicating his attack perfectly as she sinks her teeth into the werebear's side.

Addison and I exchange a glance, and to my astonishment, her hostility seems to have vanished in favor of our shared enemy. Letting out a frustrated sound, she pulls off her high heels, tosses them to the side, and growls, "Cover me," before running forward and letting loose a bolt of black magic that connects with the white werebear flanking the one Atlas and Ivy are attacking. It goes stumbling back, giving her an opening to attack as she shifts smoothly into her own silvery wolf form. The next thing I know, they're colliding in a blur of white fur, but I don't have time to watch; she's fighting this

one solo, and the farthest werebear, the one at the back of the group, has turned his sights on her, no doubt hoping to pick her off before the rest of us can intervene.

“Hey,” I yell, and fling a fresh jet of light magic at it. This catches it in the flank, and the werebear growls in surprise, rounding on me just as I ready myself for another attack. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a blur of dark brown fur that must be Nick, but he latches onto the throat of the attacker Addison is fighting, leaving me to deal with the straggler myself. Another burst of light from my hands makes it pause, momentarily blinded, but I realize my mistake not a moment later, when it starts to sprint indiscriminately in my direction. Fear grips me for a fraction of a beat, dampening my access to my powers, and in that split second, the enormous beast bowls me over, knocking the wind from my lungs.

I gasp under the crushing weight of the werebear’s body, but the combat techniques we’ve been taught at the Academy are only good for non-shifted werebears; they’re simply too big to fight off by hand. It feels like every bone in my body is about to snap, the air pushed from my lungs and white spots bursting behind my eyelids. Where’s Tobias? Where’s Atlas?

Atlas.

Gritting my teeth against the crushing force and lack of oxygen, I recall the feeling of his hands on my body, his lips against mine, and my light magic comes back to me in a rush. I’ve never bolstered my strength with magic before, but if it’s similar to using it to attack...

With a muffled yell, I suffuse myself with light magic in a blinding blaze, and suddenly, when I push back against the mountain of flesh and fur, I actually feel it budge a little. With renewed hope, I lean into the spell, screaming with exertion as I shove the creature off of me. The werebear tumbles to the side as the magic dissipates, giving me just enough time to scramble to my feet before Atlas comes charging at it out of nowhere. A moment later, so does Tobias, and between their snapping jaws and the pale glow of my magic, it’s not long before the werebear’s hold on his transformation falters. The next thing I know, he’s shrinking back down to human size,

revealing a heavyset bearded male with an expression of pure hatred on his face.

The sudden shift makes Tobias lose his balance, but Atlas keeps his hold on the male's arm. "What are you doing?" the male screams. "We can't leave until we've got them!" It's a moment before I realize who he's looking at. Behind us, Addison and Nick have forced their target back into human form as well, and are chasing him as he runs back toward the tree line.

Ivy snarls as she's shaken off by the remaining werebear, losing her form in the process as she's sent tumbling to the side. Alarmed, I race over to her, and it's a good thing, because that's when the SUV comes hurtling over the spot where I was just standing, once more powered by dark magic as Quinn drives it straight into the last attacker. He's sent flying, shifting back to human and landing in a mangled heap at least twenty feet away. He lies there, unmoving, as Quinn slows the vehicle to a stop and clambers out.

"You okay?" I pant, helping Ivy to her feet.

"Yeah," she says, dusting the dirt off her clothes. "That was close."

"Too close," I agree, turning back to Atlas, who's still got the bearded male by the arm.

"Guys," a panting Tobias calls to Nick and Addison, "stop! It's not worth it."

Addison slows to a stop, turning on all fours and shouting back across the field. "Like hell! These assholes just tried to ambush us!"

Tobias straightens up and cups his hands around his mouth. "And what the fuck do you think they'll do if you follow them back to their camp?"

That's enough to get Nick's attention, too, and he shifts back into human, hesitating to catch his breath as the escaped werebear disappears back into the trees.

"Damn it," Addison says, trotting back to the car after a moment of hesitation.

“Who sent you?” Atlas demands, shifting back into human form and seizing the bearded werebear by the shoulders. Dark magic wafts around his muscular arms, ensuring the mae can’t wriggle free.

“Fuck you,” the werebear spits.

Atlas’ lips draw back, and when he looks at me, I see a flash of genuine fear. It’s only now that I realize how close I must have come to being crushed to death by this guy, and my hands ball into fists at my sides.

“How did you find us?” Atlas demands, shaking him by the shoulders. “Who sent you? I won’t ask again nicely.”

The male just laughs, spitting blood.

“He’s not going to tell us anything,” Tobias says, coming to a stop beside me and giving me a worried glance. “He’s got no reason to.”

“How about a broken neck?” Atlas growls. “That reason enough for you?”

“Believe me,” the male replies, his eyes burning as he stares defiantly up at Atlas, “that’s nothing compared to what they’ll do to me if I say shit to you Wolf Witches.”

“You were sent to take us in?” Ivy asks, crossing her arms. “Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” the male rasps. “Now, are you going to shut up and kill me, or are we just going to stand here?” He spreads out his arms. “Who’s it gonna be, huh?”

“The Master herself said the higher-ups don’t talk to their subordinates,” Tobias points out.

“Who gives a fuck?” Addison demands. “They could’ve killed us. Or worse, taken us captive.”

“But what are we supposed to do with him if we don’t let him go?” Ivy prompts.

Addison shoots her a withering look. “You don’t really need to ask that, do you?”

But even as the bickering continues, Atlas is already extending a hand, allowing a wisp of dark magic to wrap around the bearded male's face. He drops to the ground in an instant, leaving the rest of us to stare. "Unconscious," Atlas confirms, taking a step back with a disgusted look on his face. "He should stay that way for the next ten minutes or so. Plenty of time for us to get off the highway."

"And if he goes straight back to his clan and tells them where we are?" Addison demands.

Atlas shrugs his broad shoulders. "They must have already known we were coming, and the one who got away is probably on his way to do the same thing." He turns to me, brushing his fingers down the side of my face. "You okay?" he murmurs quietly.

I nod. "You?"

Atlas gives me his trademark lopsided grin. "If you're good, I'm good."

That's when the door to the battered SUV swings open and Quinn steps out, her glasses askew and her hair a mess. "Are we getting out of here, or what?"

Chapter Eight



“I don’t understand,” Nick says for what feels like the hundredth time as we slow our pace and enter the outskirts of Hartford. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Addison gripes, her head thudding against the passenger side window. Outside, the first Colonial-style houses are coming into view, while on the horizon, the modern, glossy skyscrapers delineating the start of downtown hurtle toward us. It’s going from late afternoon to dusk, and the sun is glistening beautifully off the water in the distance. “Someone majorly dropped the ball.” She sniffs. “Bet it was one of the scouts. Charles, maybe.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask, bristling. The thought of anyone blaming the kind older gentleman who saved me from death by exposure is practically inconceivable. Addison shrugs, unperturbed. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? They’re the ones constantly moving around outside school grounds. Maybe they drew the attention of the werebears—hell, it could even have been the same clan that took Grant.”

Atlas’ hackles go up at the mention of his father, his expression turning dark.

“I don’t see how that tracks,” Quinn says, peering out the cracked windshield as we wind our way out of the suburbs and toward the more upscale neighborhoods. “If they’d followed a scout back, they would’ve just ended up running into the barrier. Besides,” she adds, slowing the SUV as we pull into a parking garage just off the main drag, “they already know

where the Academy is; they've known that ever since they killed Seth."

I swallow hard. "You think it was an ambush?"

"Seems that way," Atlas says, his brow furrowed in thought. "Did you guys notice how we were the only ones on that stretch of highway? It wasn't like that a few miles earlier. Almost like..."

"Like they cleared it off," I finish for him, my grip on his hand tightening slightly. "Like they knew we were coming."

"Not to mention, it sounded like they were working on orders to capture a Wolf Witch," Tobias puts in, not pulling his eyes away from the broken window.

Quinn pressed her lips together. "The Master is going to want to know about this," she murmurs as we pull into a spot and begin clambering out of the car. Atlas hauls open the trunk, slinging my bag over his shoulder and taking my free hand in his. I give him a grateful smile as the rest of us finish unloading, and in response, he squeezes my hand. Behind us, Addison gives an exaggerated eye roll, but otherwise behaves herself.

The car is a sight to behold, as battered as a used up prop from a bad action movie, and I can only hope it doesn't get hauled away while we're here. There's not much use thinking about it, I suppose; we have bigger problems on our hands than a busted up Escalade.

My mouth drops open as soon as we're out on the street, wary after a day of driving and eager to get settled. Still, I can't hide my wonder at the surrounding city: skyscrapers so high you have to crane your neck to see them, pedestrians bustling busily down the street on either side of us, enormous flocks of pigeons, and more bridges, arches, and clock towers than I can even fathom. If we hadn't just been the targets of a failed assassination attempt, my jaw would probably be on the floor, and I'm struck with a pang of embarrassment when I remember Ivy's words. You're so worldly.

Stealing a glance at the redhead, I can tell she's thinking the same thing. Fake it till you make it, right?

Atlas holds me close as he leads the group down the street to a posh hotel in the city center, and it's only as we stroll through the revolving door that I realize just how far the Academy's influence must reach. This is easily a five-star place, like something out of the Roaring Twenties, and on some level, I feel stupid not to have thought to bring fancier clothes. "And here I was expecting a Motel Six," I mutter, eyes wide as I take in the crystal chandelier and suit-wearing bellhops.

Atlas glances down at me. "You didn't think the Master skimped on her field agents, did you?"

"Oh, so we're field agents, now?" I reply coyly. "I didn't realize we'd been promoted."

Atlas snorts, running a hand through my hair as we wait for Quinn to retrieve our reservation. A couple minutes and a pair of bellboys later, and we're stepping out of the elevators onto the seventh floor where four presidential suites await us in a shared hallway.

"I take it we're pairing up?" Nick asks.

Quinn nods. "Someone's going to have to be the odd one out."

"Dibs," Addison says curtly. "Now where's the key? I need sleep, and I'm not about to get it flapping my gums out here."

Quinn sighs. "Anyone else?"

"It's fine," Ivy says, waving her off. "Tobias and I can share a room, right?"

Tobias shrugs, hands in his pockets. "As long as there's a pull-out couch, I'm in business." His eyes drift over to me. "Unless..." Once more, I'm struck by how melancholy his expression is, like he's waiting for a tragedy that he knows is unavoidable. The desire on his face is clear this time, and to my surprise, my heart gives a little lurch in my chest, my stomach doing a flip.

Is it possible that I...?

I don't dare to finish the thought.

Atlas glances down at me. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

My eyes dart from him to Tobias, doubt briefly plaguing me, and then I nod, giving Atlas a smile. "Mentees have to stick with their teachers, right?"

Atlas raises an eyebrow, his expression darkening, but doesn't reply. Ivy rubs the back of her neck while Tobias clears his throat, his gray eyes dropping to the floor. "Right," he says quietly, turning away. "Makes sense."

Quinn distributes the keys. "Everyone should try to get some shuteye while you can. We're meeting at nine sharp tomorrow morning in the restaurant to strategize, and then it's down to business. Rest up and lock your doors. I've had enough unpleasant surprises for one day."

The rest of us murmur our assent and disappear one by one into our rooms, with Addison slamming her door behind her.

Atlas and I drift into our shared suite, but I can tell from his body language that he's not happy. The tension only grows the longer we stew in silence, and finally, I can't take it anymore. "What?" I ask, turning to him after I dump my suitcase by the bed.

Atlas runs a hand through his dark hair. "Nothing."

"Come on," I protest, throwing my arms out. "It's not 'nothing.' I know you better than you think, Atlas."

"Yeah?" He looks up at me, green eyes flashing. "You really think so?"

I stare at him. "What... What's this all about?"

Atlas scoffs, looking away, but I can sense his barely-contained anxiety. "Mentee and mentor," he mutters finally, his hands coming to rest on his lean hips. "Student and teacher. Is that really all this is to you?"

“Huh?” For a moment all I can do is stare at him, dumbfounded, until what I said in the hallway comes back to me. I blanch. “Are you...?” I begin. “Atlas, I was just joking. You know me. I do that when I’m uncomfortable.”

I realize the implication too late and curse myself under my breath. You really do have a thing for putting your foot in your mouth, Nyx, says a voice in my head.

“Yeah,” Atlas replies, the hurt in his voice unmistakable. “That’s what I figured.”

“I...” I fumble for a response, half-frustrated that he’s reading so much into this and half-worried about what it means for me. The look on Tobias’ face returns with a vengeance: regret and yearning and bitterness, all etched onto his warm, boyish features. This is followed by another memory, as clear as can be: how kind he was to me on my first day at the Academy, how friendly and outgoing and funny he was. Where did that Tobias go? More importantly, why do I miss him so much all of a sudden? “Look, I was just trying to ease the tension,” I say finally. “Tobias is a good friend. I know the two of you have been butting heads, but I care about him, and I don’t want to hurt his feelings, okay?” It’s not a lie, really. What I leave out is the fact that the tension goes both ways.

God, I’m such a fucking hypocrite.

Swallowing hard, I move toward Atlas slowly, like I’m trying to approach a frightened animal. He turns to me, hope and desperation in his eyes. “You know how I feel about you, Atlas,” I tell him, not looking away. “You’re more to me than a mentor. More than a fake boyfriend or mate. Hell, you always have been. Even when you hated me and I pretended to hate you.” I give him a shy smile, suddenly self-conscious.

That’s enough to melt through the ice, and he turns to me, reaching out to cup my face in his large hands. “I never hated you, Nyx,” he murmurs gently, moving close enough to touch his forehead to mine. “I’ve wanted you since the day I met you. I—”

But I don't give him a chance to finish, pressing my lips to his with a feverishness that I can only hope will drown out the confusion that's suddenly gripping me. My feelings for him are overflowing, consuming me like a tidal wave, and the desire is nearly impossible to control. Atlas grunts in surprise and then relaxes, wrapping his strong arms around me in a cradle as he kisses me back, his passion coming off of him in waves.

We practically trip over our own feet in our haste to get onto the bed, our clothing dropping to the floor around us in our haste to feel one another's bodies again. Atlas peppers my face and collarbone with kisses, his urgency growing as he sucks a bruise onto my neck with a grunt. "So everyone will know you're mine."

That sends a flood of arousal through me. "I'm yours," I echo.

"Fuck, Nyx," Atlas hisses, overcome with passion.

I'm like clay in his arms as he turns me over, wrapping an arm around my waist as he slides into me from behind. The angle hits me differently, sending a wave of pleasure through my midsection that makes me keen in ecstasy, and as he starts to move, my pussy gripping him even more tightly than usual, it's all I can do to wrap an arm back and around his neck as he buries his face in my shoulder.

Within minutes, it's like a storm of pleasure is surging through me, Atlas finding his rhythm above me as he picks up the pace, one hand gripping my hips while the other runs through my dark hair. I'm riding the wave, overcome with passion and desire as our bodies become one and he murmurs in my ear, "Say it again."

"I'm yours," I whisper.

"Mine." Atlas groans and goes still, drawing my mouth up to meet his as he wraps his arms around me. Pulling out, he pulls me into his embrace as we pull the covers over ourselves, his lips pressing gently against the back of my neck.

“Tell me what wakes you up at night,” I whisper. “The nightmares.”

I turn to face him, looking at his handsome face and the crescent scar laced down it. “My brother...when I was young, he did this.”

He pauses to point at his face, the terrible mark there. “He cut me for being stronger than he was. My father let him get away with it and sometimes I dream about that moment. It’s the only time I prayed to the gods for my mother to be alive.”

“Atlas,” I thickly whisper, tears falling down my cheek. I lean up and kiss the scar, once, twice and finally three times. “Your brother will rot in hell for doing that to you, and one day, I’m going to help you prove to your father and your pack that he was wrong.”

“Sometimes I hate that I still want to protect them,” Atlas murmurs. “When they treated me like shit under their boots for years.”

“You can love them but still not let them ruin you,” I softly remind him. He pulls me in close, holding me like he always does. I shiver at the contact, still riding the pleasure he gave me not so long ago, and as we drift off to, I’m reminded again of why my feelings for him are so strong. Amidst all of the confusion and the questions, all of the sudden uncertainty surrounding my relationship with Tobias, Atlas is here, and that means something. It has to, doesn’t it?

Chapter Nine



Atlas is still asleep when I wake up the next morning, and that's not a surprise, considering it's only seven in the morning. I try and fail to get back to sleep for the next fifteen minutes, but it's no use; I'm too wound up about our mission today, amongst other things, and I'd rather get a head start on the day than spend the next two hours tossing and turning. I take care to avoid jostling Atlas as I quietly dress; I'm loath to wake him, especially given how peaceful he looks while he's sleeping. When I trace the perfect planes of his face, his prominent cheekbones and strong jawline, I can almost see the kid he was before he fell from grace and was cast out of his pack by the ones he cared about the most. It hurts to see, but then again, if he hadn't been kicked out, I wouldn't have met him, so I guess there really is a silver lining to everything.

The suite is sprawling and luxurious, unlike anything I've experienced before, and I can't help but feel a little out of place with my torn jeans and bomber jacket as I try to figure out the coffee maker. It's a wonder to me that I'm powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with werebears and take on missions for the Academy, and yet I can't work a freaking espresso machine to save my life. After several false starts, I eventually throw in the towel and boil the water using a controlled burst of light magic, spilling a not-insubstantial quantity of water all over the counter in the process. Still, it does the trick, and after chugging a mug and a half of coffee, I'm wired enough to creep out into the hallway and downstairs to the restaurant. It's a spacious atrium lined with potted plants and crystal statues,

and when I slide into one of the seats in the back, I can't help but feel like the few other guests are all staring at me.

I give the waiter a blank look when he approaches. "Sorry," I say after a moment of further stupidity. "I'm early. The rest of my group should be here soon."

"No problem, ma'am," he replies. "You're with the Ombres party, right? We have instructions to put your group on her bill."

"Damn," I mutter, shaking my head in disbelief. "I feel like I should be sending a thank-you note."

"I think succeeding in this mission will be enough of a thank-you," comes a familiar voice, and I turn to see Tobias approaching, a relaxed grin on his face. "I wouldn't mind some coffee," he tells the waiter, who nods and retreats just as the blond slides into the chair next to mine.

"You should've just asked," I tease, turning to him. "I made a mean espresso today using my magic."

"Yeah?" Tobias grins, raising his eyebrows. "Just for the hell of it?"

I shrug. "Couldn't get the damn machine to work, so I had to brute-force it."

"Wish I could do that," my friend replies, running his hands through his hair with a yawn. "Dark magic doesn't ever get hot."

"Right." My brows furrow. "I always forget about that."

We lapse into silence for a moment, each of us in our own thoughts, but I can't help but wonder whether he's asking himself the same questions I am. His silver eyes meet mine for a long, charged moment, and when the tension becomes too much to bear, I clear my throat. "How's Ivy?"

"Sleeping like the dead," Tobias replies. "I think she's happy she got through to her girlfriend."

"Really?" I can't help a smile at that. "I'm glad she's okay."

“Me too,” Tobias replies, looking away. “It’s always hard leaving the people you love behind.”

I feel my face beginning to heat up, but curiosity overpowers my sheepishness. “You know,” I say, sitting back in my chair, “you’ve never told me much about your old pack. Did you...” I swallow. “Did you leave loved ones behind when you came to the Academy?”

Tobias takes a long breath, and for a moment I wonder if I’ve crossed a line, but then he relaxes a little. “I guess there isn’t much to talk about,” he admits. “They’re a small pack — fewer than a dozen adult werewolves, all told.”

“The Harvest Moon Pack, right?”

Tobias nods. “Although you can hardly even call them a pack, in my opinion.”

“Why so small?” I ask. “I thought that was the whole point of Mating Day. A deadline to find a partner to propagate the species. A way to pressure pack members to contribute to the survival of the group.”

“Yeah, of course,” Tobias agrees, “but we weren’t always this small. That’s where the whole ‘Mating Day’ thing falls apart, I guess.”

It’s a few seconds before his words sink in. “Wait,” I say after a moment, my eyes going wide. “Does that mean...?”

“Werebears,” Tobias replies, nodding. “They attacked after I’d already been exiled.”

“You mean...” I look away. “When your girlfriend left you?”

Tobias goes rigid, pressing his lips together. “Right. Toward the end of my first year at the Academy, before you arrived. If I’d still been there, they probably would’ve gotten me, too.”

“Hey.” I straighten up in my seat, peering into his silver eyes. “You shouldn’t feel guilty for surviving, Tobias.”

“No?” He sighs. “Maybe not. But I do. They took full advantage of the fact that we had never been a huge pack to

begin with—fifty members, give or take. After that day, they damn near wiped us out. It was a massacre. My...” He pauses, taking a breath to compose himself. “My family barely made it out alive. That’s why I’ve always wanted so badly to succeed at the Academy,” he adds, meeting my eyes again with fresh determination on his face. “If anyone can keep something like this from happening to the rest of my pack, it’s the Wolf Witches. Our magic may be the secret to saving them.”

“Tobias...” I reach out to put a comforting hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea.” It feels like a hollow consolation, like all I’m doing is rubbing salt in the wound, but it’s the only thing I can think to say.

He gives me a half-hearted smile. “Hey, what can you do, right?” He chuckles ruefully, still not looking my way. “I guess it’s not all bad, though,” he adds, a smile breaking through the darkness on his face. “If I hadn’t decided to stick it out, I never would have met you.”

Tension crackles between us once more, and I can feel my face heating up. “Tobias—” I begin.

“Oh, sorry,” comes a familiar ditzy voice from the other end of the table. “Am I interrupting the Nyx show?”

I bristle. “You know, Addison, if you don’t like it, you can always change the channel.”

“I wish it were that easy,” the blonde says, sliding into the chair across from us and glancing around. “Where the hell is everybody? It’s almost nine.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Ivy says, hurrying to the table after her. “I overslept.”

Addison scoffs but says nothing as we wait for the others to arrive. I can feel Tobias watching me uncertainly out of the corner of his eye, but I don’t dare say anything with Addison breathing down our necks. One by one, the others filter into the room, ordering breakfast as they gather at the table. Atlas is the last to arrive, and although his eyes are still bleary from sleep, he can’t hide the affection on his face as I stand up to embrace him. “Was there a break-in that I didn’t hear, or did

you make a disaster of the kitchen while I was in bed?” he murmurs in my ear.

“Guilty as charged,” I respond playfully, pressing a kiss to his cheek as we sit down.

The conversation dies down as we finish up our breakfast, and Quinn clears her throat, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “Glad everyone made it,” she says, pushing her glasses up on her nose. “Now that we’re all caffeinated, I think it’s time to discuss our game plan.”

“Since when do we need a game plan?” Addison demands.

“Since there are seven of us, and we can’t have too many cooks in the kitchen,” Quinn responds, glancing around the table. “Besides, we’re not talking about some Podunk werebear encampment in the middle of nowhere,” she adds. “The Black Omen is holed up in the middle of downtown, which means eyes everywhere, and a hell of a lot more risk if we’re caught breaking into their hideout.”

“So what happens now?” I venture to ask, looking from her to Atlas.

Quinn rummages in her pocket in response before withdrawing her cell phone. “Our orders from the Master are here,” she says, stealing another glance around the restaurant. The only others here are a pair of tired-looking businessmen in the far corner, but we’re otherwise alone. Clearing her throat, she begins to rattle off the plan. “Charles will meet us here to bring us to the Black Omen hideout,” she explains. “It’s going to be heavily-guarded, so expect resistance, and possibly conflict. The key will be not to alert them while we’re in there. That’s where Addison, Tobias, and I come in.”

“How?” Addison demands.

“Lookouts,” Quinn replies flatly. “Ivy, Nyx, and Atlas will be the vanguard, with Charles there to give you information from the scouts. Remember, we’re here to gather information, not to fight, so no looking for trouble unless it’s unavoidable. As for Nick,” she finishes, turning to him, “we’ll need you here as a backup.”

“Wait, what?” Tobias sits up in his chair, looking at me. “I’m not going in with the others?”

Quinn shakes her head. “Master’s orders.” Seeing the incredulity on his face, she sighs. “Look, it makes sense, okay? There need to be enough of us to give you guys a head start if the shit hits the fan, and someone to report back to the Academy if...” She trails off, glancing at Nick.

“If they overpower the rest of you,” the dark-haired boy replies, somber. “I understand.”

The others erupt into nervous discussion, and I can understand why. The prospect of death has crossed my mind before, but now that the moment has arrived, I somehow feel worse than I did the last time I waltzed into the proverbial lion’s den.

Atlas turns to me, his hand coming to rest on my thigh under the table. “Are you okay?”

“Me?” I force a smile through my nervousness. “Of course. It might even be fun, right?”

I can tell the joke doesn’t land because the worry on his face only intensifies. “I don’t want you taking one for the team if this goes down badly,” he murmurs.

I swallow, staring defiantly up at him. “You don’t get to say that,” I reply. “Not if you’re planning to do the same thing.”

“Nyx...” He trails off, his expression tumultuous. Our conversation last night roars back to life in my mind, and a shiver goes up my spine.

I’m halfway to blurting something out—not even I know exactly what—but then Tobias scoots out from the table, his chair squeaking, and crosses his arms. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” he says, “but I’d rather get this over with. Especially the whole ‘potential for a violent death’ part.”

Nodding, I follow his lead, getting to my feet with my hand in Atlas’. “All right, then,” I say, squaring my shoulders. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Ten



Even I have to admit, the werebears were smart to make their base in the middle of downtown Hartford. There are apartments and skyscrapers everywhere, and by all accounts, the Black Omen hideout is just an ordinary office building, complete with security guards at the entrance. We stick to the shadows as we creep through the parking lot a few doors down, by all appearances just a group of young adults out for a day of shenanigans.

Charles is waiting in the shadow of the warehouse next door, his distinctive black clothes giving him away despite keeping a low profile. I can't help but run over and hug him, my nerves momentarily put at ease. "Nyx," he exclaims, chuckling as the others gather, talking to one another in low voices. "Fancy seeing you here."

"You can't seriously be surprised," I tease. "I'm willing to bet you had a hand in putting this whole plan together."

"I can't take credit for it," the older male replies, smiling. "That was all the Master."

Atlas bristles. "I figured as much," he mutters, looking at me. "Only Ombres would put Nyx in the vanguard after everything that's happened."

Charles gives him a patient smile. "You've got to give your girlfriend some more credit," he advises Atlas. "She's more capable than you think. Isn't that right, Nyx?"

I flush beet-red, aware of the way Atlas' green eyes are locked on me. "I mean, I don't think we're technically... You

know..." I rub the back of my neck, suddenly uncomfortable.

Charles laughs. "Whatever you say," he says, his eyes twinkling.

Tobias, who has been listening, clears his throat. "Maybe we should go over the building layout," he suggests, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Not a bad idea," the scout acknowledges. "Our schematics aren't complete, but they should be accurate enough for your purposes," he continues. "The back entrance is where you'll be making your move; it's the least heavily guarded, and there shouldn't be much foot traffic once you get inside. You'll want to steer clear of the main office floors. See if you can find a way up that won't force you to cross paths with other werebears."

"Such as?" Atlas asks.

"An air duct, a maintenance tunnel, an emergency stairwell, you name it." Charles shrugs his shoulders. "You'll want to get as high as you can, as quickly as you can."

"Any idea what we should be looking for?" Ivy asks.

"According to my scouts," Charles replies, "there should be an information center on the third floor, toward the north side of the building. Werebears aren't exactly known for being fastidious record-keepers, but it's the only alternative to a full-force interrogation, and we can't risk putting them on alert. Look for any information on their endgame, especially when it comes to Wolf Witches. Remember your training; recon only, unless you have no other choice."

I nod, a surge of adrenaline coursing through me. "Understood."

Addison, who has been examining her fingernails, mutters, "Are we going to keep chatting, or are we going to start?"

Quinn nods curtly. "Thank you, Charles. I guess we'll see you back at the Academy. The rest of us can head for the main building."

One by one, the others begin to follow her, but I linger for a moment, my mind racing as I think back to my conversation with Claire. “Charles,” I venture after a moment, “did you go visit my former pack?”

Charles, ever level-headed and quick on his feet, actually freezes for a moment, his expression turning tense. He clears his throat. “Nyx, I don’t know if…”

“Nyx?” Atlas has turned back around to look at us. “You okay?”

I glance from him to Charles, conflicted, and then, seeing the uncertainty on the scout’s face, back off. “Yeah,” I call to Atlas. “Be right there.”

I’m half-hoping that Charles will read my mind and come right out and say it, but instead, he just gives me one of his charming grins, his momentary lapse in certainty vanishing as quickly as it came. “You’d better get along,” he recommends. “The Master wanted you on this mission for a reason.” And with that, he’s turning to walk away, putting his hands into the pockets of his trench coat.

I watch him go for a moment before turning and hurrying to catch up with Atlas, my mind in pieces.

* * *

We come to a stop outside the neighboring building, taking a moment to assess the entrance. Charles was correct; there’s only one male outside the back door, a bored-looking werebear whom I can only assume is a low-ranking member of the Black Omen. At least, I can only hope that’s what he is.

I start forward, but Atlas stops me, holding out an arm. “What?” I whisper, confused.

“We can’t just go in guns blazing,” Addison hisses. “Do you want him to shift in the middle of a crowded urban area?”

I grimace, but have to concede her point. That would be about as far from keeping a low profile as it gets. “Fair enough,” I reply. “What do we do?”

“Knock him out,” Quinn replies. “But we’ll need to disable the security cameras first.”

“And just how do we do that?” Tobias asks.

“Hang on,” I whisper, taking a step forward. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Nyx—” Atlas begins, but I give him a reassuring smile.

“It’s okay,” I reply. “Trust me.” Extending an arm, I aim a burst of light magic at one of the cars in the parking lot, allowing it to glance off the surface of the windshield like a blinding beam of afternoon sunlight that’s emerged from behind a cloud. It looks natural, or so I hope—the question is whether it will look natural enough to fool whoever’s watching the security feeds. The others look away from the light, but I keep my gaze forward, gritting my teeth in concentration as I adjust the angle ever so slightly so that the reflection shifts in the direction of the camera. “Now,” I say, nodding to the others. “Take him out and get him out of sight while I maintain this.”

“Got it,” Quinn says. “Everyone at once; we’ve only got one shot at this.”

In response, the others extend their arms, their dark magics intertwining into a black tendril of energy that snakes around the corner of the other building and collides with the guard in a powerful burst. He lets out a muffled cry, and Atlas intensifies his spell, stifling the sound before it can tip off anyone on the street.

A moment later, the guard slumps to the ground, unconscious, and one by one, the others steal across the parking lot to the back door while I maintain the glare blocking the camera. From a distance, I can see Ivy fish the key card from the guard’s pocket as the others move him out of sight, opening the door a moment later. Only once we’re out of view of the camera do I dare to let the light die down, moving into the doorway with a sense of anxious trepidation. “You guys good?” I ask Addison, Quinn, and Tobias.

“Just peachy,” Addison gripes from where she stands in the shadow of the building.

“Fine,” Quinn replies.

Tobias nods, but his expression tells a different story. “Be careful in there, Nyx,” he says, his eyes meeting mine.

Atlas bristles next to me. “Come on,” he urges. “We need to go.”

“Right,” I agree, turning away from the others as we let the door drop closed. On our own in the back hallway, it takes us a moment to get our bearings. This seems to be a maintenance area, although from elsewhere on the floor I can hear bustling footsteps and the faint chime of an elevator.

“Now what?” Ivy asks as we peer down the hallway.

“We need to find a way up,” Atlas replies. “We can’t—” He freezes dead in his tracks as a door opens around the far corner; the three of us dart behind the adjacent wall, waiting with bated breath as a set of footsteps draws nearer... nearer still... nearly on top of us... and then, miraculously, begins to fade.

I exhale sharply. “Come on,” I whisper, turning to the left. “Let’s keep moving before I freak out.”

Ivy is already a few paces ahead of us, peering around corners and glancing through windows as we make our tense way down the hall. There’s no sneaky way of obscuring the security cameras this time, so we do our best to keep our heads down, praying there’s enough through traffic that we don’t draw attention.

“What about in here?” Ivy asks, coming to a stop in a corridor outside a janitorial closet. A dimly-lit maintenance stairway snakes up into the building behind a locked door. She tries the handle, but it doesn’t budge. A moment later, Atlas comes striding up, extending a hand. A burst of dark magic escapes his fingers, blowing the door open as the lock splits under the force of the energy.

Turning to him with raised eyebrows, I cross my arms.

Atlas shrugs. “What did you call it? ‘Brute force?’ ”

I laugh. “And here I was thinking you were my mentor.”

“Don’t get used to it,” he replies dryly, ruffling my hair affectionately as he steps through. “Now let’s get up to the third floor.”

We emerge onto the landing in a single-file line, me in the middle with Atlas standing protectively in front of me. Although we’re on the right side of the building, it’s obvious that this is a more populated area, and it’s just as we’re approaching a door marked “Records Room” that our luck finally runs out.

“Hey!” My heart drops to my stomach as I turn to see a security guard standing at the far end of the hall. “Who are you?” he demands, taking a step toward us. “This is a restricted area. What are you doing in this side of the building?”

Atlas and I exchange a glance. “Maintenance,” he replies easily, somehow managing not to lose his cool despite the situation. “We got a call that the climate control was down on this side of the building. I was told to speak to the janitorial supervisor.”

The guard doesn’t reply, continuing toward us and then coming to a dead stop, his eyes narrowing as he looks us up and down. “Like hell,” he spits, and the next thing I know, he’s pulling out his walkie-talkie. “I’ve got unauthorized visitors by the records—” he begins, but he doesn’t get to finish; Ivy has already shifted into her wolf form, tackling him and sending his radio flying across the floor as she pins him to the ground.

“Go,” she calls to us, even as the security guard starts to shift into his werebear form. Dark magic ripples through her fur to augment her strength as she levels us with a determined stare. “Get in there and get the info!”

I hesitate for a moment, worried, but Atlas is already pulling the same trick on the door to the records room, blowing it off its hinges with dark magic and striding into the

cramped space. It's lined from floor to ceiling with shelves, all of them overflowing with haphazard piles of documents.

"Where the hell are we supposed to start?" I ask, panicked, as I shut the door behind us.

"Anywhere," Atlas replies, already starting to sift through one of the piles on the desk. "We have to hurry. If another guard shows up, Ivy might not be able to hold them off on her own."

I don't need telling twice, beginning to rummage through the folders on the shelves with unsteady hands. Nothing's organized in here, and the seconds on the wall clock are ticking steadily away, each second bringing more danger—not just to Ivy, but to the two of us.

"So much for finding a folder labeled, 'Top-Secret Evil Plans,' " I quip, my fear bringing out my stupid jokes. "I guess this is what happens when your group suddenly decides to organize, right? Paperwork is always the last thing to get sorted out."

But Atlas doesn't respond, and one glance up is enough to tell me why. He's staring at a memo on the desk, his brow furrowed in consternation, confusion, and yes, fear. Cold, icy, paralyzing fear.

"What is it?" I ask, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Nyx," he murmurs, his eyes not leaving the document in front of him, "you're going to want to take a look at this."

Chapter Eleven



“What?” I reply, working my way through the stacks of papers to rejoin him at the desk. “Did you find something?”

Atlas nods, still unable to pry his eyes away from the paper, and that scares me more than anything.

Struggling to fend off a sudden wave of unease, I peer over his shoulder at the document. It’s little more than an office memo, scrawled in a messy hand—or paw—by someone too lazy to file it correctly. It looks like Atlas has pulled it from a stack of similar messages, and by all appearances, there’s nothing special about it. On it is written:

Alexander—

Contact has confirmed the presence of light magic at the Wolf Witch Academy, manifesting in one of their new recruits. If true, she’ll have to have been taught by an angel. That or have angelic heritage. Further investigation is needed.

Warren

The memo is dated for mid-April, approximately a month and a half after I joined the Academy.

I turn to Atlas with my brows furrowed. “What does this mean?” I ask, picking up the paper.

Atlas pushes another page aside, revealing a memo sent the following day.

Warren—

Cassius says he's considering a change of tactics. Debating targeting dark magic. Keep this among the upper ranks for now. If it spreads to the Academy, they will take countermeasures.

Alexander

My frown of consternation deepens as I process this, continuing to thumb through the correspondence. A couple of the messages are missing, but the next one in the sequence is longer, and when I read it, my heart damn near stops in my chest.

Warren—

Orders are in from Cassius. New directive is to capture a Wolf Witch for investigation and interrogation. Put the word out to your cadets, and tell them Cassius wants them ALIVE. There's no point taking them if we can't gain access to dark magic. If they've got someone with angel blood on their side, then we're fucked if we can't counter.

Alexander

The final message in the correspondence is from two weeks ago, between Alexander and Warren:

Noted. Tell Cassius the Dark Ember Clan is behind him for now. We'll work out an arrangement for the girl once we have more information. This could be our trump card.

For a moment, it's all I can do not to let my knees buckle underneath me. The room seems to spin a little as I try to process what I've just read, and there are a few fearful seconds when I'm sure I'm going to faint in the middle of the records room. Atlas puts a steadying hand on my lower back, his green eyes glinting in the dark.

"Does..." I begin, my throat dry, and swallow again. "Does this mean...?" But before I can finish the question, a racket from out in the hallway makes both of our heads snap up. "Guys," comes Ivy's muffled shout. "They've brought backup!"

"Shit," I exclaim, scrambling to gather up the messages and stuff them into my bag. Atlas and I meet one another's

eyes for a brief moment, and something unspoken passes between us before another cry from out in the hallway pulls us back to the door. Part of me hopes we've gotten enough information to satisfy the Master, while part of me is praying that we haven't, that this isn't what it appears to be, that the implications that are already racing through my mind don't actually have any basis in fact. It's almost a blessing to sprint out the door, skid to a halt at the end of the hallway, and turn to face the oncoming werebear guards; at least it's a distraction.

Ivy is still grappling with the security guard at the other end of the hallway, a dark magic barrier in front of her. She's doing an admirable job of keeping the three additional security guards at bay, but even I can tell her magic is flagging. All four of them have shifted, and they're ramming up against the barrier with roars loud enough to make me cover my ears, the force field buckling a little more each time.

"Get down," I yell to Ivy, giving her a split second to duck before I unleash my own blast of light magic to reinforce her barrier. She shoots me a grateful look as she allows the wall of darkness to fade while I continue to hold off the other guards, but that's the opening the guard underneath her needs; now shifted himself, he flings her off, sending her flying into the wall.

Atlas has already shifted, and he charges forward into the werebear on our side, propelling forward like a dark magic-powered torpedo. He tears at his enemy with a ferociousness unique to him, somehow managing to keep him pinned while turning to call to me and Ivy. "Get back into the office!"

"What?" I demand.

Atlas just points his snout at the door to the records room. "The window!"

Now comprehending, I grab Ivy by the hand just as she shifts back into human form, and the two of us duck into the room. There's a snarl and a thud, and moments later, Atlas follows us. I have to struggle to maintain the barrier without

being able to see it, and I turn to Atlas as we stumble toward the window, silently signaling my question.

He gives a silent nod, and without missing a beat, I clamber onto his back, tangling one hand in his fur while I use my other to keep the force field up. “Thanks,” I murmur, my grip tightening ever so slightly, and he turns briefly to look at me, his green eyes piercing against the darkness of his fur.

Ivy is already sending a ball of dark magic through the window, making glass fragments shower down onto the street outside like glittering snowflakes. She propels herself out the gap on a platform of dark magic, gliding down to the ground, where she lands deftly.

“Hold on,” Atlas warns me, and then he’s doing the same thing, still in his wolf form, carried on a wave of darkness that brings us sailing easily down to the parking lot. Only then do I dare to let the barrier down, but by now alarms are already going off in the building, commotion visible through every window.

“Come on,” Ivy yells, beckoning to us as we dart around the corner to where the others are waiting.

“What the fuck is going on?” Addison demands.

“We’re getting out of here,” Atlas replies coldly. “That’s what.” He gives me the chance to slide off of him so he can shift back, and the next thing I know, we’re taking off down the adjacent alleyway in the direction of the hotel.

The streets are crowded, and we get more than a few looks from the passersby as we sprint crazily through downtown Hartford, but I’m more concerned with what’s behind us. Werebears have made no secret of their disregard for human lives; the only reason they haven’t gone for broke on society at large is that other lycanthropes might step in... although, if those memos are anything to go by, that’s not much of a guarantee anymore. We sprint down the streets and weave through alleyways with an urgency that borders on panic, and every passing ambulance or police siren makes my heart drop into my stomach. It’s only when we reach the hotel unharassed that I allow myself to relax a little, although

something tells me I won't have peace again for a long time to come, no matter how safe I am.

* * *

"This can't be," Ivy says for the hundredth time, glancing down at the memos spread out on the table again. "I mean, how can they possibly know?"

"There's no reason to doubt it, is there?" Quinn replies. She's pacing back and forth by the windows of her suite, where the rest of our group has gathered to debrief on our findings. I can't help but notice that everyone else has—consciously or unconsciously—chosen to sit at the opposite end of the table as me... with the exception of Atlas, who's in the chair next to me, his strong hands closed around mine. He's rubbing absent circles on my knuckles, his expression pensive, and the fact that I can't tell what he's thinking only makes it worse.

"She's right," Nick says, crossing his arms. "I mean, what would be the point? Plant these messages on the off-chance that one of us finds them? The werebears aren't smart enough for that kind of gambit."

"Besides," Tobias adds, "they've already proven that their agenda matches what's written here." His eyes dart briefly to me before he looks quickly away. "They've been trying to take a Wolf Witch prisoner. Now we know why."

"You really think this is it?" Ivy presses, shooting me a concerned look. "Would they really have changed their whole strategy because of Nyx?"

"If they think she has angel blood," Quinn says, "then yes."

Unable to stand it anymore, I straighten up in my chair. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here."

All the other eyes in the room turn to me. "Nyx..." Tobias begins, starting forward.

“Please,” I say, looking down at the table, “don’t. Just... don’t.”

“Hey.” Atlas squeezes my hands. “We don’t know any of this is true.”

“Don’t we?” I retort, turning to him. “I mean, we’ve heard it from the demons themselves since day one. The only beings with light magic have historically been angels.” It’s a truth I’ve been afraid of speaking out loud, especially in the aftermath of our mission, but there’s no avoiding it now.

“That’s just the working theory, though,” Ivy puts in. “I mean, angels haven’t come to earth in centuries; isn’t that what they always say?”

“That’s true,” I admit, latching on to what she’s saying for all I’m worth. I don’t want to consider the possibility that there’s something wrong with me: that I could potentially be not just an outcast from my community, but an outcast from the closest thing I’ve had to a home since the Gray Moon Pack kicked me out.

“I’d go as far as to say your heritage isn’t the more pressing issue,” Quinn says, turning away from the windows to look at me. “Unless there’s someone else at the Academy that we aren’t aware of who uses light magic, the werebears know you have it. More than that, it sounds like they’ve built their new strategy around finding a way to counter your powers, Nyx.”

“Great,” I mutter, putting my head in my hands. “So I’m not just a freak; I’m the freak responsible for bringing the werebears straight to our doorstep.”

“How did they even find out you had light magic to begin with?” Addison asks, for once sounding more curious than vicious.

“Maybe the guys from the compound where they were holding my dad told them,” Atlas replies.

But Nick is already shaking his head. “That doesn’t make sense, though,” he says. “Wasn’t that the whole point of

kidnapping him in the first place? To get access to dark magic? And now we know why.”

“They mention a ‘contact’ in this message,” Tobias says, pointing to the first page in the stack.

“And it’s dated to before your mission to the Blood Moon Pack,” Ivy adds, moving to look over his shoulder.

“So...” I begin, afraid to even finish the thought.

I don’t have to. “So this means we’ve been made,” Atlas fills in for me, and any sense of ease in his expression evaporates in an instant as he looks around the room with dark eyes. “There’s a traitor in the Wolf Witch Academy.”

Chapter Twelve



There's a moment of silence around the table as Atlas' words sink in, and then everyone is talking at once, chair squealing as people get up from their seats and curses flying as our group struggles to process what Atlas' just said. I'm the only one who remains seated, torn between two equally-terrible revelations and unable to fully process either of them.

"...can't be possible," Nick is insisting, his lips pulling back from his teeth as he looks from Quinn to Ivy.

"What else could it be?" Addison fires back, drawing away from the table as if she's suddenly realized we're all poisonous. "It had to have come from within the organization, right?" Her eyes dart manically from Atlas to me. "Unless it was Nyx," she adds after a moment, the fear on her face morphing into accusation.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Atlas demands, getting to his feet.

"Just saying, if she's not really a shifter—"

"Why don't you cut the bullshit and come out and say it?" Atlas growls, his tone low and dangerous as he stares his ex-girlfriend down. "Go on. To my face."

Addison stands her ground. "Say what?" she says.

"You've been dancing around it for months," Atlas fires back, his arm snaking possessively around my waist as I swallow back my fear. "You almost got Nyx killed once already. Now you're trying to get me to turn on her; is that it?" The platinum blonde opens her mouth to reply, but Atlas is

quicker. “Addison. It’s never going to happen. The witch was wrong, we both know it, and even if we are fated, it would be a miserable life. This isn’t Nyx’s fault, or mine or yours. She is mine and I am hers. That is the end of this.”

She is mine and I am hers.

Addison turns from him to me, glaring daggers at both of us. “You think this is about us?” she demands, her cheeks red and tears filling her eyes. For a moment, I actually feel sorry for her and wonder if she has any friends to talk to. Someone to make this better for her. “This is about the Academy, Atlas. And if someone here is the mole, we ought to know about it.”

“I don’t think now’s the time to start pointing fingers,” Tobias interjects, trying to muscle in between them. “We don’t have enough information.”

“Like hell we don’t,” Nick puts in, shoving past him to round on me. “I want to know what the fuck is going on, and it starts and ends with her.”

I can feel Atlas’ grip on my waist tighten ever so slightly. “You guys can’t be serious,” I say, putting my hands up. “You think I have something to do with this?”

“This isn’t—” Ivy begins.

“Stop it!” Quinn protests, slapping a hand against the table. “Now’s not the time to lose our cool!”

“How come?” Addison demands, rounding on her. “Someone tipped the werebears off that we were on the highway. How do we know it wasn’t someone in this room?” Her blue eyes dart briefly up and to the left, and there’s a moment when her expression turns suddenly uncertain. It’s so quick that I can’t even be sure what it means, but it gets my attention, and I bristle as an even more unpleasant possibility dawns on me.

What if it is someone in this room?

Slowly I look between the others, overcome with a sudden uncertainty. How could the werebears have known what route we would take to Connecticut? It was beyond a coincidence; who’s to say their contact isn’t someone who came with us on

this recon mission—perhaps in an effort to stay as close to the action as possible? Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity?

I swallow hard as I look around the room. Quinn was the one who chose our route... but then again, she also got us the hell out of Dodge when we were ambushed. I know next to nothing about Nick, but he seems pretty eager to pin this on me... Although, then again, so does Addison. It's not out of the question to think she would try to turn the others on me in order to get back at me for getting between her and Atlas. But doesn't assuming the worst of her in return just make me a hypocrite? What if it's someone else? My heart plunges into my stomach at the thought of the other possibilities. Charles, who's been keeping tabs on everything happening both within the Academy and outside of it? Sweet, empathetic Ivy? Tobias, who lost nearly his whole pack to the werebears?

...Atlas?

Feeling suddenly sick to my stomach, I disentangle myself from my lover's arms and take a step back.

"Shouldn't we be waiting to bring this to the Master?" Ivy is protesting, but her pleas go ignored.

"I guess we'll have to, won't we?" Addison asks, folding her arms over her chest and snorting haughtily. "If whoever it is doesn't take us out, first."

"Why are you so convinced it's one of us?" Tobias asks, his eyes meeting mine from across the table, and I can tell he's thinking the same thing I am: Awfully quick to jump to conclusions.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," I quip in agreement, staring at Addison, and despite my disbelief at the situation, I can sense my own suspicion growing, intensifying a little more with each second and each accusation that gets thrown my way.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Atlas' ex demands.

"Guys—"

"You really think we're in danger?"

“Stop jumping to conclusions, for crying out loud!”

The bickering reaches a fever pitch, and Atlas puts himself between me and the others, as if on some level he’s afraid they’ll all decide to turn on me as a result of what was written in the werebear correspondences. I wish I could say it wasn’t a valid fear.

Ivy has retreated to the windows, clearly running out of ideas to defuse the situation. Following suit, I’ve already started moving toward the door, ready to be out of the line of fire, but that’s when the sound of Quinn’s cell phone ringing cuts through the heated argument. The room falls silent all at once, and when the brunette answers, she puts the caller on speaker.

“Hello?” Charles’ familiar voice comes through on the other end. “Everything all right?”

Charles!

“Oh my god.” Quinn puts a hand to her forehead, blanching. “Charles! I’m so sorry; I forgot to give you the update. We completed the mission and made it back to the hotel.”

The scout sounds relieved as he replies, “Good; that’s why I was calling. I was starting to get worried. Did you get a chance to update Alice?”

“We found some concerning information,” Nick chimes in. “The werebears seem to be devising a strategy around countering light magic...”

But even though he’s still looking at me like I have two heads, that’s not the reason I stop listening. My mind has been sent hurtling back to my conversation with Charles before we broke into the hideout, to the uncertainty on his kind features when I asked about his visit to my former pack. The words on the memos follow, as searing and damning as hellfire, and in that moment, a mission debrief with the Master is the farthest thing from my mind.

I don’t even realize I’m moving until I’m turning away from the others and heading for the door, feeling like I’m in a

trance.

If they've got someone with angel blood on their side then we're fucked if we can't counter.

I'm aware of Atlas calling after me as I drift through the door, but I don't stop, and I don't turn around. If there's truly someone here who's feeding information to the werebears, then the truth—the whole truth, not just speculation—is the only weapon I have left on my side. And there's only one place where I can find it.

My hands are shaking as I close the door to the suite I'm sharing with Atlas, my palms clammy as I fumble my phone from my pocket and dial Claire's phone number. I need to get ahead of this—whatever this is—before anyone else here. Even Atlas, I realize, tears making my eyes sting. The idea of him being the mole is abhorrent, nearly unthinkable, but if it's not him, then it's someone else in the group, and I can't risk putting him in danger if he happens upon information that the mole will find useful. Things have gotten out of control so fast, and I can no longer be sure where to turn.

I guess sometimes we really do have to go back to our roots.

Please pick up, I think as my phone rings once, twice, three times. Pick up, pick up, pick up...

Claire sounds disoriented when her voice chimes through. "Nyx? What's going on?"

I swallow hard. "Claire, we need to talk. All of us—not just you and me."

Maybe my question is obvious from my tone, or maybe she's been expecting this conversation for a long time... perhaps even since she first raised the subject during our last call. Either way, Claire sighs, and she doesn't need to ask why I'm calling. "It's about your recruiter, isn't it? Charles?"

"Yes," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. "Claire, I can't..." I take an unsteady breath. "I don't know how much I'm allowed to say. We're on a mission."

“And...?” my sister prompts, that same somber tone from before returning to her voice.

“And...” I sigh. “We found something out. Something about why the werewolves are targeting protected clans. It has to do with me.”

There’s a long, tense moment. “You’re wondering about the light magic,” Claire says at last. It’s not a question.

I nod, realizing too late that she can’t see me, and, in the absence of something more eloquent, simply blurt out, “Claire... Am I an angel?”

What follows is a silence so long that I start to wonder whether the connection has gone dead. When Claire finally replies, I have no doubt that those three little words are the hardest she’s ever uttered. “Yes,” she whispers. “Sort of.”

“Sort of?” I echo, nearly letting out a hysterical laugh. The response is borderline absurd, and at this point, I’m so wound up that I feel like I might explode. “What do you mean, ‘sort of?’ ”

Claire hesitates again, as if she’s trying to choose the right words. “Nyx,” she says slowly, “you need to know that no matter what else has happened—what else will happen—you’re still my baby sister, and I love you. You get that, right?”

“Of course I do,” I reply, unease threatening to take over. “Claire, what are you saying?”

“Your friend,” my sister explains slowly, “Charles. He suspected it; that was why he came to the Gray Moon Pack. He said that the only way for someone to learn light magic is to be taught directly by an angel or have angel heritage; they’re similar to demons that way, apparently.” She gives a dry little chuckle, like she can’t even believe she’s talking about this.

“Claire,” I plead, “are you saying our parents have angel blood?”

“Not ours,” she says. “Yours.”

That stuns me into silence, and for a moment, my heart is racing so fast that I can't hear anything over the thundering in my ears. "What did you just say?" I ask finally.

"Listen, Nyx," Claire replies. "I don't know much, okay? I was only a couple years old when it happened. But I remember Mom and Dad talking about you before you were born, trying to figure out how it was possible."

"Claire, please don't talk in riddles," I reply, practically begging at this point. "That's the last thing I need right now. How what was possible?"

"For a shifter and an angel to have a baby," Claire responds after a moment. "Nyx, I don't know how else to tell you this. Dad isn't your real father."

Chapter Thirteen



I close my eyes, gripping the phone so hard that my hand hurts, but I hardly notice the pain. It's all I can do to keep from seeing stars, the world around me spinning and the sounds in the hotel room temporarily muted by the ringing in my ears. My stomach feels like it's been twisted into a knot, and I'm overcome by a horrible combination of despair and adrenaline as my sister's words sink in.

Dad isn't your real father.

How many times has that question, a possibility so horrible that I hardly dare to think it, let alone give voice to it, crossed my mind over these past few months? When did I start wondering whether there was something my parents weren't telling me? When Atlas and I uncovered the documents this morning? When I first gained light magic? Hell, maybe, on some level, I wondered as far back as my departure from my old clan.

Like a moment from a forgotten dream, that first, cryptic warning comes back to me in a rush, uttered by my father in the aftermath of my exile with a darkness behind it that I couldn't have possibly understood then. Trust me, Nyx, some things aren't worth believing.

How could I have not seen it?

"Nyx?" Claire's voice is tremulous over the phone, and I can tell she's worried about my reaction. "Nyx, are you there?"

"Yeah," I rasp. "I'm here."

“I’m so sorry,” she says, sounding like she’s holding back tears. “I didn’t know whether I should even—”

“I want to talk to Mom.” The words barely sound like they’re coming from my own mouth.

“Nyx...”

“Claire, please.” My hand is trembling now, the phone threatening to clatter to the floor. “I’ve come too far to keep pretending. I need to know the truth.”

There’s a long pause on the other end, and then, clearing her throat, my sister—or should I say half-sister?—replies, “Let me go get her.”

There’s a long, tense moment when the introductions and pleasantries (such as they are) are over with, and I think my mother can sense that something’s wrong almost immediately. Hell, I’m not even sure what to ask.

“Honey,” Mom says, finally daring to break the silence, “what’s going on? What’s this about?” There’s a pause. “Are you okay?”

I take a rattling breath. “I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth when I do, okay? No hedging, no lies, no stalling. It’s...” I swallow, aware of the need to keep our activities confidential. “It’s important. More important than you can even imagine.”

“Of course, honey,” Mom replies, although I can sense the hesitation in her tone. “What is it?”

I hesitate, aware of her waiting on the other end, and then say, “Who’s my father?”

“Sweetheart—” Mom begins.

“Mom,” I interject, struck by a sudden bout of frustration. “I need to know.”

Mom heaves a heavy sigh, and if that’s not confirmation enough, I don’t know what is. “I take it you talked to Claire,” she says, her voice sounding far away.

“Yes. Mom, why did you hide this from me?”

There's a pause. "You know the Traditions as well as I do, Nyx," she says finally. "Relations between werewolves and non-lycanthropes are forbidden. Honey, you have to understand—when I found out I was pregnant with you, I wasn't even sure your father wasn't a wolf shifter. And by the time I knew who he was—who he really was—I couldn't bear to give you up. I already loved you more than I can even express."

"Who is he?" I ask, staring out the suite window at the cityscape beyond.

"His name is Michael," Mom replies. "And yes, he's an angel."

I suck in a breath. "How did you... I mean, why did you...?"

"Look, this isn't easy to talk about, okay?" Mom says. "Your father and I made the decision a long time ago not to ever reopen this wound. But if it's about the werebears..." She clears her throat, and her next words hit me harder than I'm expecting. "Your dad and I went through a rough patch after Claire was born. We were separated for close to six months."

"Really?" I can't disguise the shock in my voice. Mom and Dad, the two most stable forces in my childhood, separated? In some ways, that part is harder to believe than the part about my dad not being my dad.

"Mating at eighteen isn't easy on any of us," Mom explains. "You would be surprised how many werewolves choose their mates before Mating Day, only to end up miserable together. We made a vow before we were even old enough to legally drink. You can go on about the Traditions all you want, but at the end of the day, it's not easy."

"So you split up," I reply slowly, already putting the pieces together.

"Yes." Mom's tone softens. "I needed some time to think things over. I knew if we ended things, one of us—or both of us—would be rejected, and Claire was just a baby. I wanted to make things work, but I didn't know how."

“You left the pack,” I finish for her.

“I needed distance,” Mom says, although whether she’s trying to justify it to herself or to me, I can’t be sure. “I went into the human cities. Got a job as a bartender. That was when I met him. He was...” She pauses, as if trying to find the right words. “He was so different. Worldly. Wise beyond his years, but also playful. Charismatic. So much like you.” She laughs affectionately. “I had never lived beyond the pack before. I thought all humans were like that, and I think...” She sighs. “I think I did fall in love. For a time, anyway. But no matter how much I cared about him, I couldn’t leave your father and Claire behind. They needed me. The pack needed me. So I left. It wasn’t until I returned that I found out I was pregnant.”

I close my eyes, and it’s a moment before I feel hot tears tracing their way down my cheeks. “And you thought Michael was a human.”

“Yes.” Mom hesitates. “Strange things started happening during my pregnancy. Lights. Temperature changes. There was a time when my stomach would light up whenever you started to kick.” She chuckles, half with love and half with melancholy. “When I realized you might not be... Well, all shifter, I tried to contact Michael. I even went back into human society to look for him. But he was gone.”

“So he just vanished?” I ask. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Mom echoes.

“I thought the angels had all disappeared.”

“I wish I had more answers for you, honey,” Mom replies. “Sometimes I can almost convince myself it was all a dream, that I imagined the whole thing. I came close while you were growing up. But then you told me you’d developed light magic, and the rug was pulled out from underneath me all over again.” Her voice thickens with emotion, and I can tell she’s tearing up on the other end. “Nyx, I’m so sorry. I never intended any of this for you. You know that, right?”

I’m tempted to reassure her, to tell her not to worry, that I understand completely, but I can’t make the words come out.

Am I angry? Confused? Depressed? All of the above?

“Honey,” Mom presses, “I love you, and so does your father. You and Claire have always been our top priority, and no matter what else may have happened, our commitment to you and the pack is stronger than any affair. We’re in this together; we always have been.”

I close my eyes, wiping feverishly at my cheeks, but all I hear myself say in response is, “I hope you’re right, Mom.”

I hang up the phone, feeling like I’m in a trance, and when it starts to ring again, I decline the call.

* * *

Elsewhere on our floor, the rest of our group is in the midst of a heated debriefing session with Charles, and likely the Master as well. Atlas is nowhere to be seen as I creep out of our suite, and perhaps that’s just as well; I don’t want him to see me like this, with my hair a mess and my face red and blotchy from crying. I need to carry on as if nothing happened, and yet the idea of pretending my world hasn’t just been turned upside down is laughable. All I can do is wipe my cheeks and pray the others don’t decide I’m too much of a liability to have around.

“Nyx?”

Tobias’ voice breaks the silence of the hallway, making me jump, and I turn to see that he’s been leaning against the wall opposite the suite I share with Atlas. “Hey,” I reply, plastering on what might be the fakest smile in history.

“Sorry,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s all good,” I say, shrugging and putting my hands in my pockets. “Are you... Is everything all right?”

Tobias sighs, glancing over his shoulder at Quinn’s suite. “God only knows. I had to take a breather; I can barely hear myself think in there.” His brows pull together as he peers at me, moving a step closer. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say, rubbing away a stray tear. “It’s just been a long day.”

“No kidding.” He sighs, shaking his head, his gray eyes meeting mine. “It’s crazy how easily things come apart the second something unexpected happens. You’d think we’d have been trained for something like this.”

“You mean...” I clear my throat, aware of the burning desire in his gaze. “Something like finding out I might have angel heritage?”

“Right,” Tobias says, chuckling ruefully. “Something like that.” There’s a long pause, and he looks like he’s debating something before he says, “Listen, Nyx, I’m here for you, okay? I know that sounds like bullshit, and I wish there were something else I could say, but...” He shrugs. “Words are all I’ve got at this point.”

“That’s not true,” I insist, lifting my gaze. “We’ve got each other’s backs, Tobias—we all do. You know that.”

“Do we?” my friend replies, and when he reaches out to brush a stray strand of hair out of my face. “I don’t see Atlas around. He’s too busy going off on everyone within a ten-foot radius.”

“That’s not fair,” I protest, pulling away from him. “He’s sticking up for me. You saw the way things fell apart in there.”

“Sure, right.” Tobias runs a hand through his hair. “Because he thinks you’re his.”

I feel my cheeks flame red, my stomach tightening at the implication. “What are you saying?” I ask, too fraught to beat around the bush any longer.

“You don’t know?” Tobias reaches out again, his hand brushing my cheek, and I realize how close he’s gotten to me in the narrow hallway. “Nyx, I don’t know how else to say this, but with the way things are going, I might not get another chance. I have feelings for you. More than I ever thought was possible, after what happened between me and my ex. I...” He takes a breath. “I want to be with you. As more than friends.” The yearning in his eyes is unbelievably intense. For a

moment, the doubt is back in full force, strong enough that it threatens to throw everything into question, and it all boils down to one seemingly-impossible question.

What would it be like to be with him?

But then my eyes find Quinn's suite, where at this moment Atlas is defending me from the accusations that accompany our revelation, and my mind is made up.

"Tobias," I say, moving his hand away from my face, "I'm sorry, but I'm with Atlas. I can't. You know I can't."

There's a moment when it looks like he's going to protest, frustration clouding his features, but it vanishes as quickly as it arrives, giving way to disappointment and heartbreak. "Right," my friend says, sighing as he backs away from me. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You guys are really something, aren't you?" he adds, giving a dry chuckle.

"Tobias..." I trail off, at a loss for an appropriate response. I can't shake the feeling that I'm watching my best friend pull away, that there will be no coming back from this, no matter what I say.

"Atlas' a lucky guy," Tobias tells me with a sad smile, and before I can say anything else, he's turning away, moving back in the direction of Quinn's room. "I'll see you later, Nyx."

"See you later, Tobias," I echo sadly, and this time, when the tears come, there's nothing I can do to stop them.

Chapter Fourteen

THE TRAITOR



Hartford isn't exactly the most happening city in New England, especially for someone who's spent their entire life moving from place to place up and down the East Coast, but that suits my purposes just fine, especially in the darkness of the early morning. It takes a decent amount of discretion to slip down to the hotel lobby without alerting the others in the group, especially given the level of mistrust boiling between them in the aftermath of the mission to the hideout. It's a damned shame I couldn't get a message through to Cassius ahead of time, but better late than never, and I'm too far in it at this point to back out now. This is becoming a pointless mission.

That's all it's ever been.

It's raining when I drift out through the revolving doors and head away from downtown, toward the outskirts of the city. The werewolves were right about the holding area, but they have no idea just how far the werebears' reach extends, especially in the urban areas. Hartford might as well be ground zero, and their influence just keeps spreading. The encampments in Massachusetts are just the first symptoms of a terminal disease. Wolf Witches are an experimental treatment—hyped up and nicely-packaged, but ultimately useless in the grand scheme of things. The Traditions are too pervasive, and even if all the lycanthropes could somehow rally behind dark magic, they still wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell against the werebear clans. All any of us can do now is take cover. It's every male for himself, and sooner or later, they'll realize it too.

I steal a glance over my shoulder as the sleek skyscrapers begin to morph into the more rundown buildings of the city limits. There's always the chance that one of the others decided to follow me, but they don't have their shit together enough to give chase. They're too busy eating one another to see what's right under their snouts.

I come to a stop outside a building that couldn't be more different from the office: little more than a hovel at the edge of the highway, it's the kind of place most authorities wouldn't spare a second glance... including the Wolf Witch scouts.

Perfect.

Two sloppily-dressed men stand at either side of the entrance, blending in perfectly with their surroundings. "I'm here to see Cassius," I state, crossing my arms as I look from one to the next. "It's about our agreement."

The werebears exchange a look, and one of them turns a sneering stare on me. "He's not gonna be happy to see you," he grunts. "You were supposed to send a report twelve hours ago."

"I was held up," I reply stiffly and don't elaborate further. "If he wants the latest, he's going to have to hear it in person."

The guard on the right grunts, still sizing me up, and then gives a lazy nod to the doorway. "Be quick," he snaps. "He's resting."

"Believe me," I reply with a humorless grin, "this won't take long."

The guards move aside to allow me to enter the hovel, a sparsely-furnished room with a mattress in one corner and a rickety desk in the other. Cassius is at neither of these, instead sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor, a book open in front of him. He's surprisingly put-together for a werebear, with a head of sleek brown hair and a well-trimmed mustache, his clothing pressed and well-tailored. I guess it's all part of the image he's trying to sell; rallying the werebear clans under his banner can't have been an easy task, and I'm guessing

they're as surprised to have competent leadership as the Wolf Witches were.

Cassius looks up when I enter the room. "You're late," he says, not bothering to get to his feet.

"So they keep telling me," I reply shortly.

"I suppose I should be glad you've decided to grace me with your presence," he replies, gesturing to the place in front of him. "To be honest, I was beginning to wonder if you'd decided to double-cross me." A sinister smile spreads across his face as he adds, "That's the thing about traitors. You can never trust them to stay on your side."

I shrug my shoulders, hesitating for a moment before moving to sit across from him. "Apologies," I say stiffly. "It took me a while to get away from the others."

"Is that so?" Cassius raises his eyebrows. "May I ask why?"

I stifle a grimace. "It's getting too hot for me in there. They've figured out someone's turned on them. I couldn't risk doing anything that would come across as unusual."

Cassius flaps a dismissive hand my way. "That's none of my concern," he states flatly. "Our agreement has nothing to do with you and your allies. What matters to me is the information you provide... information that, believe me, will be quite valuable for you and me, both."

"I hope you're right," I reply, shifting back onto my haunches. When it becomes clear the werebear is waiting for me to continue, I sigh and brace myself. "I'm sure by now you've figured out what happened at the staging area."

"Indeed." Cassius frowns. "Your allies put one of my security guards out of commission."

"I'm sorry that happened," I lie. "I wasn't able to get a message to you in time."

"I couldn't give a damn about the guard," Cassius replies. "What I care about is what information your group found."

“They were trying to figure out your strategy,” I tell him curtly. “It’s mostly conjecture at this point, but they got a hold of some of your men’s correspondences.” I take a breath. “They know you’re looking for a way to counter light magic.” My brows furrow together as Nyx’s face flashes in my mind. “There’s speculation that she has angel blood.” It takes everything I have not to snark, No thanks to your goons’ loose lips. It’s not like it would have taken a rocket scientist to figure out, but whatever doubts they might have had before are gone now.

Cassius heaves a sigh, as if this whole conversation is little more than a nuisance to him. “To that end,” he says, “you and I need to talk about dark magic.”

“Again?” I bristle, aware that I’m getting into dangerous territory. “I told you where we were headed before we even got to Hartford. You didn’t send enough forces.”

“I would be careful if I were you,” Cassius says, his eyes flashing in the dimly-lit room. “You’re as much of a Wolf Witch as any of them; I could just as easily have my men bring you in.”

My heart jumps into my throat. This was what I was afraid of; they have the upper hand here. Dark magic or no dark magic, I’m outnumbered, and he knows it as well as I do. “True,” I reply, thinking on my feet, “but then you wouldn’t have access to the Academy’s information.”

Cassius snorts. “For all the good it’s done me. You promised you would have actionable intel for us when you brokered this... arrangement, and all you’ve gotten us instead is wounded cadets. The protected packs are all on high alert now.” He levels a pointed glare my way. “My advisors warned me against trusting one of your kind, and now I understand why.”

“And just how is any of that my fault?” I demand, bristling. “I don’t decide your strategy for you. I just tell you what I know. If you want to go in guns blazing and tip off the Wolf Witches in the process, that’s your problem.” Realizing my mistake, I rush to course-correct. I might not have much

left to lose, but I still have something, and I can't afford to let the tide turn against me now. "Look, maybe you're going about this the wrong way."

"Is that so?" Cassius folds his arms. "And I should take advice from a wolf... why?"

I square my shoulders. "Because I've seen first-hand what Nyx can do," I reply. "She's something else, and the damage she's capable of is like nothing I've ever seen. Still," I continue, "she's only just started to harness her power. Now's the time to strike. Think about what she could do in the right hands."

Cassius' eyes narrow. "What are you suggesting?"

"That all this time you've been trying to learn the secrets to dark magic to counter Nyx," I reply. "But why stop there? Everyone knows light magic neutralizes dark magic, so why not focus on learning Nyx's secrets? Then you can counter all Wolf Witches, both at the Academy and outside of it."

Cassius' lips pull back in a sneer. "Awfully bold of you to pitch strategy to me," he says. "How do you know I won't turn it on you next?"

"I don't," I reply, pushing back my fear, "but we had an agreement, and for all your faults, Cassius, you're a male of your word."

The werebear leader snorts, shaking his head, but his posture relaxes, and as a result, so do I. "You've got moxie, I'll give you that," he says. "It's a shame you weren't born a werebear. You would have done well in the Black Omen. Still," he adds, his expression darkening, "my word is only as good as yours."

"Believe me," I reply, seizing the opening, "I plan to keep mine. Better, even." I lean forward, my own eyes growing bright with inspiration. "Our group returns to Massachusetts in the morning. Give me until then to figure out a plan, and have your best soldiers ready to move. I can give you Nyx on a silver platter, and believe me when I say that once you have her, you'll be able to raze the Academy to the ground. Hell," I

add with a humorless smile, “if that doesn’t do it for you, I’ll teach you dark magic myself. Consider it a bonus.”

Cassius nods thoughtfully. “Tell you what,” he says after a moment. “You have a deal. And if this doesn’t go through,” he adds, flashing his own sinister grin, “I’ll pry the dark magic out of your corpse myself.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I say as I extend a hand. Not for the first time, the guilt I’ve felt since turning on the Academy rears its ugly head, but I push it away. I can’t afford to second-guess myself now.

“Indeed,” Cassius says, shaking it without bothering to mask his distaste. I get to my feet and start toward the door, only for the werebear leader to speak up again, making me turn around. “Don’t disappoint me, Tobias.”

“I won’t,” I reply coolly.

With that, I stride from the hovel and don’t look back.

Chapter Fifteen



Outside the hotel window, the cityscape goes from black and blue to purple and gray, and finally to pale pink as the sun makes its steady ascent past the horizon. The alarm goes off before six, and although the beeping on the nightstand is obnoxious as all hell, I actually catch myself feeling relieved.

I'm still curled up in the armchair, watching the colors change outside when Atlas begins to stir in bed, and it's not until he snakes his strong arms around me from behind that I pry my eyes away from the window. He presses his lips to the back of my neck, inhaling my scent, and murmurs, "You didn't come to bed last night."

"I know," I say, still not meeting his eyes, and bite my lip. "I couldn't sleep."

"It's about yesterday, isn't it?" Atlas asks, his arms tightening around me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Would it make a difference if I said no?" I reply, only half-kidding.

Atlas sighs, straightening up and resting his chin on the top of my head. In the glass of the windows, our reflections stare back at us, looking decidedly more exhausted than they ever have before. "I figured as much," he says, sighing and running a hand through his black hair. The gesture alone is so him that it makes my stomach twist; the possibility that he might be the traitor rages in my mind once more, and I swallow hard, fighting the sudden thickness in my throat. I don't give voice to the fact that that's why I wasn't able to sleep last night—

that somewhere in the back of my mind, I was aware that he could kill me when I was at my most vulnerable... or worse, hand me over to the werebears. The idea that this all could have been a ploy to get close to me, to manipulate me straight into the hands of our enemies, is like a knife to the heart. I don't want to believe it's possible, but I didn't want to believe it was possible that I'm an angel, either. I guess I don't understand the world nearly as well as I thought I did.

Atlas turns to get dressed, but lingers a moment longer, his hand on my low back. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, raising my hand and allowing a sphere of light magic to dance between my fingers. "I'm fine."

It's a lie, and he knows it as well as I do.

* * *

The SUV is still in the garage where we left it, the most damning evidence we have of the highway ambush. Whereas before it was exhilarating, now I feel nothing but dread as I watch the others clamber into the car, either oblivious to the danger or deliberately trying to ignore it. Quinn gets behind the wheel, and the image of her ramming us into a tree, or driving us straight into a werebear commune, flashes through my mind. Addison wordlessly sidles in next to her. What if she's the mole, and her contacts are waiting for us the second we get onto the turnpike?

The anxiety is so intense that for a moment I wonder if I should just walk back to the Academy, but that's when a familiar voice breaks through the fear. "I guess I'm not the only one who's freaked out about this."

I turn around and force a smile when I see Tobias, his gray eyes tempestuous as he sizes up the others. "Maybe I'm just paranoid," I reply, wrapping my arms around myself.

"But if someone here knows something..." My friend finishes my thought for me, his expression somber. "...Then we might be heading straight into an ambush, or leading a tail right to the Academy gates." His eyes meet mine, looking

drained, and I can't help but think back to our conversation yesterday, to the heartbreak on his face when I told him it wasn't going to happen...

But then Atlas is opening the backseat door for me, his green eyes burning with suspicion as he stares Tobias down. "Let's get moving," he says. "We're sitting ducks here."

"We're sitting ducks anywhere, if the mole is someone in this group," Tobias retorts, but he doesn't protest when I climb into the back seat next to Atlas, allowing him to wrap a protective arm around my shoulders.

A few minutes later, we're in motion, but gone is the excitement of the first leg of our trip. Dread is the only thing left, and the others must feel it too, since they're silent as we drive away from Hartford and make our way back onto the freeway.

Tobias is the first one to break the silence. "Are we taking I-84?"

Quinn glances at him in the rearview mirror, her eyes narrowing behind her glasses. "We'll see," she replies stiffly.

"Why do you want to know?" Nick asks, turning to stare at him.

Tobias holds up his hands. "Just making conversation."

"I'm improvising," Quinn replies after a moment. "I don't think oversharing is a good idea right now. Do you?"

"Wait a minute," Addison protests. "You're not telling us where we're going?"

"That's not—"

"How the hell are we supposed to know you're not driving us into another ambush?" "That's a fair point," Tobias admits with a wince.

Quinn's grip on the steering wheel tightens. "Are you guys turning on me now? Is that it?"

Addison folds her arms. "I'm just curious why we're letting you drive when we got jumped last time you were

behind the wheel.”

“Are we really doing this again?” Ivy asks, putting her hands over her face. “We’re never getting anywhere if we can’t trust each other!”

“And what makes you the judge?” Nick demands, rounding on her.

“You guys aren’t—”

“Enough.” Atlas’ voice cuts through the bickering like a knife as he stiffens next to me. “Quinn, pull over. I’m driving.”

“Putting yourself in charge?” Addison asks, incredulous.

But Quinn is already slowing the SUV as she eases onto the shoulder. “Fine by me,” she says. “I’ve got nothing to hide. If this goes sideways, Atlas, it’s on you.”

“Fine by me,” Atlas echoes. There’s a determined edge to his voice that would, in other circumstances, send butterflies through my stomach, but this time, it just fills me with a sense of dread.

If he’s the traitor...

Atlas gives me an affectionate smile as he maneuvers out of the car and slides into the driver’s seat, changing places with Quinn. I try to return it, but I don’t quite manage, and the sight of his crooked grin melting off his face makes me want to hide my head in shame. Still, he doesn’t say anything, and in a moment, we’re back on the road. Although we lapse back into silence once more, I can feel Atlas’ green eyes on me in the rearview mirror. A shiver goes up my spine, although whether it’s from fear or desire, I can’t tell.

To my surprise—and probably that of my companions—we make it back into Massachusetts without incident, most of the trip spent in tense silence. Little by little, my fear begins to abate, and I’ve never been more relieved than I am when that remote parking lot in the wilderness area comes into view between the trees. It’s as quiet as it was before; the only difference is that Charles is waiting for us at the trailhead, his hands in his pockets and his expression serious. Given the debrief, I can’t say I’m surprised.

I practically melt into Atlas' arms when we finally emerge from the car. "I'm sorry," I say quietly as he pulls me close. "I was starting to think you..." I swallow hard. "You..."

Atlas presses his lips to the top of my head, stroking my hair with the hand that's not around my waist. "It's okay," he murmurs. "We're okay."

"Are we, though?" I ask, pulling back to look into his green eyes.

Atlas hesitates for a moment and then nods. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you, Nyx," he says, and the conviction in his voice sends a burst of renewed hope through me. "One day, I'll take you to the human cities of the world to enjoy them. To spend time together. We can get through this."

One by one, we start back in the direction of the Academy, Addison in the lead and Tobias bringing up the rear, his gaze lowered. I nod for Atlas to go ahead of me, and after a moment's hesitation, he returns the gesture, leaving me to talk with Charles out of earshot of the others.

My relief only increases when I reunite with the scout, giving him a friendly hug as our group makes its way up the trail. "I see you made it back in one piece," he observes as we fall in behind the rest.

"I see you did, too," I reply. "Not sure why you met up with us here, though."

"The Master wanted to make sure you had an escort back to the campus," the older male replies. "Considering... everything, I thought it was the smart call."

I swallow hard, peering up at him as we round a corner, leaves and fallen pine needles crunching under our feet. "I guess the others updated you," I say glumly.

Charles doesn't look at me, but his brows pull together. "They did," he confirms. "I can't say it was a pleasant surprise, but I... had suspicions. Ever since the werebears started targeting us."

I fall silent for a moment, almost afraid to bring it up, but eventually bite the bullet. "I'm guessing you had suspicions

about more than a traitor.”

Charles sighs. “I take it you talked to your sister.”

“Only after we found the documents,” I say.

It’s only then that he looks at me, coming to a stop even as the others continue on ahead of us. “I’m sorry I didn’t come clean with you,” he says. “I wanted to be sure before I spoke to the Master.”

My eyes widen. “Does she know about this?”

“Only what you uncovered at the hideout,” Charles replies, and I can sense he’s not lying. “As for your parentage, that’s between you, me, and your family.”

“Right.” I look away. “Thank you, Charles.”

He gives me his characteristic kind smile. “You’re welcome, Nyx.”

We continue onward, our eyes on the road ahead. “It’s funny,” I say after a moment. “I spent all my life thinking that I was a reject because I couldn’t shift. Turns out I’m a reject because my mom cheated on my dad with a literal angel.” I chuckle ruefully, shaking my head. “Same problems, just with added magic.”

“I suppose you’ve figured it out, then,” Charles says after a moment.

“Figured what out?” I ask, already worried there’s some new, unpleasant surprise waiting for me. I’ve had enough of those for one week, I think.

“That having angel blood inhibits your shifting abilities,” Charles replies, not without a hint of discomfort. At least he has the decency to look me in the eye when he says it. “Hybrids between lycanthropes and demons or angels are rare in the literature, but based on the research I’ve done, they all have one thing in common. As powerful as they are—and believe me, they are powerful—none of them can shift.”

“So that’s it, then,” I say, a lump forming in my throat. “I’ll never be a real Wolf Witch. I’m marked by this.”

Charles opens his mouth to reply, but that's when shouts from farther up the trail draw our attention away. We exchange a look before sprinting after them, only to come to a stop. Fear washes over me, and all thoughts of my heritage vanish in an instant.

Waiting for us at the top of the next rise, razor-sharp teeth bared, are more werebears than I've ever seen before. There must be at least ten of them—possibly even more—but I don't have time to count, since the next moment, they're charging straight for us.

Chapter Sixteen



Things start to happen very fast at that point. Adrenaline surges through me, and despite everything that's happened, my first thought is of Atlas, who's a hundred feet ahead of me and Charles on the path. I reach for my magic, all disappointment about my heritage going out of my mind in an instant, and I keep Atlas in the forefront as I feel the tell-tale warmth spread through me. A moment later, magic is blazing out of me at all angles, lighting up the forest around us just as the two werebears leading the charge crash into Addison and Quinn, knocking them off their feet.

"Atlas," I yell as another attacker emerges from the trees beside him. He turns to look, shifting in a blur of black fur and dark magic, and collides with the werebear. It topples off balance, lurching to the side and giving me enough time to sprint over to Atlas, still glowing with a light so bright that it's nearly blinding.

"Get behind me," Atlas yells over his shoulder as the werebear moves forward to strike, one massive paw slamming into his shoulder and sending him reeling to the side. I cry out his name, launching a ball of light magic directly into the beast's eyes. It roars with rage, giving Atlas enough time to regain his footing, but by then two more are already on top of us. On the trail ahead, I'm vaguely aware of the sounds of screams and blasting magic as the others do their best to hold off the contingent that's set upon us, but I'm too busy dealing with the newcomers to spare them more than a passing glance. I have just enough time to wonder where Tobias is—little more than a brief moment of confusion—before Atlas comes

sailing over my head in his wolf form, using dark magic to propel him into a werebear that's advancing on me from behind.

A wave of fear crashes over me when I realize just how dire the situation is; they seem to be coming from everywhere at once, and the trail is blocked from all sides. They must have been planning to cut us off before we could get to the Academy, and without reinforcements, it's clear they've outmatched us. Desperate, I begin indiscriminately throwing lances of light magic. I don't have time to charge them fully, but at this point, it's just damage control, and it's all I can do to keep them from overwhelming us completely.

Ivy, who's holding one of the attackers at bay with the same kind of barrier she conjured at the hideout, turns to shout back to us, her snout streaked with blood. "We'll never be able to take them all down!"

"We have to get back to the Academy!" That's Addison, who has one of the werebears pinned beneath her while tendrils of darkness snake out to batter at the others.

Charles, who until now has been in his human form helping me fend off the werebears who have us flanked, shifts easily into his wolf form: brown eyes and black fur that's going gray around his snout. "We just need to get past the barrier." He grunts, drawing back on his haunches to dodge an incoming strike. "If we can fly the rest of the way..."

"And lead them straight to our front door?" I demand, feigning left as a werebear charges and then delivering a light magic-powered strike to its flank, making it growl in rage.

"We're out of options," Atlas yells in response, disengaging from his attackers to sprint over to me. "If they take one of us, it's all over."

There's a split second when I look into his emerald eyes, and despite his lupine features, in that moment I see nothing but affection in them. I don't have further time to doubt his intentions. Climbing onto his back, still glowing with magic, I extend both my arms to blast the encroaching werebears away from where we're standing.

Charles and Addison are already lifting off the ground. Nick and Ivy exchange a look and then follow suit, propelled by the dark mist of their powers. Atlas leaps into the air, borne on a burst of his own dark magic, and it's a moment before my blood runs cold and I exclaim, "What about Tobias?!"

I glance frantically around, my eyes inevitably drifting back down to the forest floor, and what I see is enough to make my heart stop in my chest.

The werebears are following us into the air, carried by the same platforms of dark magic that we use to fly above the treetops. One by one, they drift upward, assembling in a rabid, angry circle around where the rest of us are hovering.

"What the fuck?" Nick yells.

"That's not possible," Ivy breathes.

"I don't..." Atlas begins and then trails off.

For a moment, I'm consumed by fear and confusion.

How...?

But an instant later, the answer is looking me right in the eye. From farther up the path, between us and the area of the forest where the cairns leading to the Academy start, Tobias rises out of the trees, his expression stony. Shadowy tendrils emerge from him on all sides, and it's another moment before I realize where they lead.

Tobias is the one lifting the werebears.

"What are you doing?" I cry, but one look into his gray eyes is enough to tell me everything I need to know.

Tobias turns to me, his ears dropping back against his skull and his golden fur bristling. Even still, I could swear I see something else on his wolfish face, something frustrated and perhaps even sad. "I'm sorry, Nyx," he says, his voice hard with conviction.

"It was you," Atlas snarls, already propelling us forward in a wave of rage, and I have to cling to his neck to keep from tumbling back to the earth. Tobias lifts a paw, blasting the two of us back in a pulse of dark magic that seems almost lazy.

“What the fuck have you done?” Addison demands, skirting close to him, but that’s when Tobias unleashes the levitating werebears, and all hell breaks loose. It’s amazing to me how he’s able to keep tabs on all twelve of them, but somehow Tobias manages, bringing their platforms close enough for the werebears to continue their assault, manipulating each of them as easily as a puppeteer manipulates a marionette. Two of them close in on Addison while three surround Nick and Ivy. A moment later, Charles is buried too, and even Quinn isn’t able to fly quickly enough to evade the werebear Tobias launches at her. He saves the largest cluster for Atlas and me, and it’s only when three more surround us that I realize why.

With a yell of devastation, I hurl a bolt of light magic at the werebear closest to us, hoping to buy us an opening to escape, but Tobias is quicker, sending his own blast of magic my way. Just like it did when I was practicing with Atlas, the dark magic neutralizes the light magic, our attacks dissipating in a burst of charged energy. Atlas throws up an attack of his own, but it’s just enough to blow the werebear back a bit, and then it’s drifting closer again, its jaws snarling and foaming with rage as it comes to a stop within range of me and Atlas. The fact that they don’t move to murder us outright, despite the battle going on in the sky around us, only confirms my fear.

He’s going to take us, I think, my eyes widening as I turn desperately toward my friend.

“Tobias,” I plead, my grip on Atlas’ fur tightening as the carnage rages around us. “Why are you doing this?”

My friend turns to me, a look of sudden and profound pain flashing across his face. “I’m sorry,” he repeats.

“When did they get to you?” Atlas demands, and I can sense the anger in him, his dark fur standing on end under my fingertips. “Have you been planning to throw us to the sharks ever since you got to the Academy? All this time, right under our noses?”

“You think this is easy for me?” Tobias demands. “They came to me, not long after I finished my first year of study. You don’t just say no to werebears, Atlas. You’d know that if you ever had to suffer a day in your life.”

“You think I haven’t suffered?” Atlas demands, advancing on him a step. If I weren’t on his back, he’d probably be lunging for him right now, and to hell with the consequences.

I look at his eyes. “I’ve suffered, Tobias. It made me stronger, and I survived my rejection without turning into a two-faced bastard like you.”

To my surprise, Tobias’ expression softens for a moment. “Think what you like, I guess,” he says. “You can’t possibly understand how hard this was for me. I finally thought I was ready to lead the Black Omen to the Academy... and then you came along, Nyx.” He turns to me with an expression of tortured affection. “There I was, thinking I’d never love anyone again after my ex. Thinking I could cut ties with the Wolf Witches and never look back.” He chuckles humorlessly. “I guess that’s what they say about the best-laid plans, right?”

I swallow hard, desperately trying to process the fact that he more or less just told me he loves me. “Tobias...”

“It doesn’t matter now, though,” my friend says, his face falling. “It never does, in the end. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Bullshit,” Atlas snaps. “You always have a choice!”

“Easy for you to say,” Tobias says, rounding on him. “The Blood Moon prince. Wolfkind’s little darling, former alpha-to-be of the most powerful pack in the world. Do you know what will happen to my pack if the werebears get their way?” He advances on us. “They’ll wipe us out, and my pack will be the first to go. There are barely any of us left as it is. My parents...” He trails off, looking away as his voice catches. “This was the only way to ensure their safety.”

“That’s what Wolf Witches are for,” I protest, still in disbelief that one of my best friends has turned out to be the traitor. “We can take them down together!”

“Can we?” Tobias scoffs and shakes his head. “The Academy’s been saying that for years, and things have only gotten worse. You really think Wolf Witches can solve this, when half the packs in the world won’t even accept our help?”

“That’s not true,” I protest, anger and devastation warring within me, the negative emotions making my light magic falter. “We can still fight!”

But Tobias is already drawing back. “We have to look out for our own now. That’s all any of us can do.”

“You’re a fucking coward,” Atlas snarls. “Is that what helps you sleep at night? Must be easier than admitting it’s all because you couldn’t get your paws on Nyx.”

Tobias freezes, momentary fury flashing in his eyes as he brings the werebears around us closer. “That has nothing to do with it,” he says. Whatever doubt might have been there before vanishes, pushed out by his determination, and when he straightens up, his fur bristling, I realize with a sinking feeling that his mind is already made up. “Nyx,” he says, “you’re coming with me. I promised the Black Omen light magic, and I have to deliver. There won’t be any more second chances.”

No, not us, I realize, my eyes widening. Just me. He’s going to take me.

“Tobias,” I say, “you don’t have to do this. There’s still time to back out. We can protect your pack. Whatever this is, we can still undo it.”

Tobias gives a melancholy smile but shakes his head. “I wish that were true,” he replies, and when he meets my eyes again, I can tell that this is as painful for him as it is for me. “I wish things could have been different between us, Nyx,” he adds quietly. “But you chose your path; now it’s time for me to choose mine.”

“No,” I yell, but it’s too late.

The werebears close in on us in a rush, and it takes everything I have to unleash a wave of light magic to knock them off course. Atlas grunts in pain as one of their massive paws connects with his shoulder, leaving three enormous

gouges in his flesh. Alarmed, I cry out, nearly losing my grip on him in the process, and although he manages to move us out of the way, Tobias is on top of us, bringing their platforms surging back toward us.

“Nyx,” Atlas grunts through gritted fangs, “do you trust me?”

“Of course,” I reply without hesitation.

“Then whatever you do,” he says, “don’t let go.”

I nod my assent, sending a fresh surge of magic through my arms to keep my hands locked around his wolf neck just as the dark magic-propelled werebears close in on us once more. In the split second before they’re on top of us, Atlas allows the platform of energy beneath us to disintegrate, sending the wisps in all directions the same way I just did with my light magic. It doesn’t push them very far, but it doesn’t have to, because at that point Atlas and I are already falling, dropping like rocks as we careen back down toward the earth. The treetops rush up to meet us, knocking the wind out of me as we plunge through the canopy. Twigs scratch at me and batter my face, neck, and arms; for a moment my sense of orientation is totally lost.

All I’m aware of is a thud and a grunt as one of the branches connects with Atlas’ head, and moments later, the forest floor is rushing up to meet us as the sky disappears above the blanket of leaves. There’s a split second of pain after we hit the ground, but then everything goes dark.

Chapter Seventeen



I can't be sure where we are or how much time has passed. Hell, for the first few moments—minutes? hours?—I can't even be sure if I'm still alive. The world around me is black and foggy, and it's only when a throbbing pain breaks through the fog of unconsciousness that I realize I'm not dead. Cold night air rushes through my nostrils as my body begins to register more pain, piercing through my back and shoulders and making my head spin. Opening my eyes doesn't help, and as I thrash around in a feeble attempt to get my bearings, my ears begin to ring. It's another moment before I process what I'm seeing. Above me, the forest canopy is like a black silhouette against the gray sky, and only the faintest specks of light between the leaves give me any indication that it's still daytime.

I can't have been out for very long, I think. It's the first coherent thing to go through my head. The sun is still high in the sky behind the thick gray cloud cover, and the forest is surprisingly peaceful. There's no sign of the others, no sounds of battle in the sky, no growls or howls or cries of pain or victory. It's nothing but silence, and that somehow makes it all the more ominous.

I struggle to sit up, which is a big mistake. A wave of nausea crashes over me, making me reel to the side, and if I'd eaten anything for breakfast, it would probably be coming up right now. The memories of what happened come back to me in a rush, and the sudden fear they instill in me is the only thing that keeps me from passing out again from the pain alone. I must have only been unconscious for a few minutes;

the werebears were right overhead when we fell, and they're likely on their way to find us right now. The only saving grace is the others; maybe Tobias having to lift each werebear separately has bought us some time. I can only hope.

Still getting my bearings, I reach a tentative hand up to the back of my head, only to hiss in pain. My fingers come away bloody, and I can taste more blood in my mouth. I must have hit my head, and if I hadn't been holding on to Atlas...

Atlas!

All thoughts of my own pain vanish in an instant as I glance frantically around for him, ignoring the searing in my skull. The forest is dimly-lit this far off the path, and for a moment all I can make out are tree trunks and low, dense bushes. Panic and worry make my throat tighten, and for a moment, I'm sure he's gone, that the werebears have already tracked him down and taken him.

That's when my eyes happen across the heap of dark fur amidst the scrub bushes ten or so feet away from me. There's no mistaking that color. "Atlas," I cry, scrambling over to him, already fearing the worst. "Atlas..." I trail off, my breath hitching in my throat as I place my hands on the fallen shifter, his blood sticky and warm against his matted fur. I don't need to be a healer to know that it's bad. The werebear's strike hit hard, even up in the air, and the gashes are bleeding freely. More blood is seeping from his head where he hit the ground, and although his flank is moving, his breathing is shallow and rapid. "Atlas," I repeat, touching his snout. "Atlas, it's me. Please wake up."

A low growl emits from Atlas' throat, and I shake him a little harder, but his eyes don't open.

"Come on," I insist, nearly frantic now. "Don't do this. Please. You have to wake up." I glance around, my heart picking up speed in my chest. "The werebears can't be far from here. They'll be looking for us, and they're not going to give up just because we fell. We have to move."

It's no use; Atlas isn't waking up, and if his bleeding is anything to go by, I'm going to need to think on my feet if I

want to help him before he loses too much blood. Desperately, I reach for my light magic, but summoning it when I'm this scared and in pain is nearly impossible. Tears well up in my eyes, but I bite my lip and fend them off, stroking a hand through the soft fur behind his ears and allowing my eyelids to fall closed. Slowing my breathing, I think back to the last time we made love, to the way he held me in his toned arms as he pressed his lips to my skin, and slowly but surely, the magic starts to come back to me. Seizing it, I direct it into my hands, building the light up until it's nearly blinding.

"I'm sorry about this," I murmur to Atlas, and then hover my hands directly over the wound on his shoulder. It's not a magic bullet, but if I can get the temperature high enough...

Pressing my lips together, I dial up the intensity until the heat from my palms is radiating in all directions and then press them to the claw marks. The smell of burning flesh fills the air, bringing a fresh wave of queasiness with it, but it does the trick. The wound begins to cauterize, the blood flow slowing and then oozing to a stop. Atlas lets out a grunt of pain as his green eyes fly open, and I can see the panic on his face as he tenses up... only to settle when he realizes it's just me. "Nyx," he rasps, lips pulling back from his fangs as I finish my work and draw away. "You're... You're hurt."

"I'm fine," I mutter, running a hand over his face and doing my best to give him a playful smile. "I've got a hard head." I glance around as I get to my feet, taking a moment to seal the gash on my head just as Atlas shifts back into human form. It's damn near agonizing, but my skull is miraculously intact, and I can concentrate significantly better without blood running down the back of my neck. Atlas, too, seems better for wear now that he's no longer shifted. His t-shirt is torn at the shoulder, but it's easier to see now that his only big wound was the one I sealed up. Thank god for small favors. "We need to get out of here," I reiterate. "You bought us some time, but we were out for a while. I don't know how long it will take the werebears to find us, but if Tobias was serious about handing us over, then I'm not sure I want to stick around and find out." I frown, extending a hand to him. "Can you walk?"

Atlas hisses in pain as he gets to his feet, somehow managing to maintain his balance. "I'll manage," he grunts. "I'll have to, if we want any hope of beating the werebears to the barrier." He surveys our surroundings, and then, as if seeing me for the first time, pulls me into his arms. "God, Nyx, I'm so sorry."

I bury my head in his chest, inhaling his scent, and for a moment I can almost pretend we're safe, that everything's going to be okay. "I'm sorry," I reply. "I thought..." I shake my head, unable to finish the sentence. "I feel like such an idiot."

"Don't talk like that," Atlas says, pulling back to touch my cheek. "You're alive. That's all that matters. If anything had happened to you... If that bastard had laid a finger on you..." "Hey." I tangle my fingers in his, indulging in another moment of his presence before we have to flee. "I'm here. You're here. We're okay. Well," I add with a doubtful glance up and down his form, "more or less."

Atlas straightens up, wincing as he puts his weight on his left heel. "I think I might've broken something. You need to run ahead."

"I don't know if light magic is good for that and there is no chance I'm leaving you," I confess. "Here, lean on me." Atlas hesitates, and I roll my eyes. "Come on, alpha. Let me help."

After a moment's hesitation, he concedes, slinging his good arm around my shoulders as we make our way through the trees. His face contorts with rage as we move, and I can guess the next words out of his mouth. "I'm going to kill that son of a bitch."

A fresh burst of sadness strikes me. "I can't believe he sold us out like that. You were right to be suspicious of him. I..." I shake my head. "All the time I spent thinking he was my friend..." A lump forms in my throat. "It was meaningless. Just a ploy."

Atlas is silent for a moment. "I'm not so sure," he says finally.

I look up at him, my brows furrowing. “What do you mean?”

He lets out a long breath, and I can tell that this admission is as difficult for him to make as it is for me to hear. “Maybe it started out that way, but it didn’t end that way. Otherwise he would’ve handed us over a long time ago.”

I stifle a fresh bout of tears. I know he’s trying to make me feel better, but the idea that Tobias really did have feelings for me, and that my rejection was what tipped the scales in favor of this final act of betrayal, is worse. Much, much worse.

“Come on,” I say, doing my best not to let my devastation show. “We have to keep moving.”

Chapter Eighteen



“What do you suppose happened to the others?” I ask, taking a careful step over a fallen log and keeping one hand on Atlas as he does the same. We’ve been picking our way through the forest for what feels like ages, and although we’re making progress in the direction of the Academy, it’s tedious and slow-going given both of our injuries. Despite my improvised first aid, head wound care isn’t just about stopping the bleeding, something I’m learning the hard way as we fight the exhaustion and brain fog accompanying our various other scrapes, sprains, and bruises. I’m starting to suspect I have a concussion, and Atlas might have one as well. I’ve heard of dark magic being used to heal serious wounds before, but only ever by demons. There’s no knowing whether either of us even has the capacity. Besides, it’s a moot point—Atlas’ lost too much blood to do more than the most menial of magical feats. He can’t even fly in his condition, and I’m not much better. We’re stuck walking and praying that we can make it back in time. All in all, it makes for a shitty hike through the woods, made worse by the fact that the werebears might catch up with us at any moment.

Atlas’ expression hardens. “If they’re lucky,” he replies slowly, “then Tobias was telling the truth, and they’re not his priority. It’s possible he let them go in order to focus the werebears on tracking us down.”

“By ‘us’ you mean ‘me,’ right?” I ask, not without a hint of bitterness.

Atlas gives my hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm with you, Nyx," he tells me.

"That's not an answer," I say ruefully, but seeing the pain on his face makes me let it go. He's clearly upset that I've been put in danger; I'm just lucky we're both still alive. Sighing, I add, "And what if Tobias was lying?"

"Then we'll just have to hope the others were able to hold them off long enough to get to the Academy," Atlas says. "If that's the case, then we may have more of a head start than we thought. Not that I like the idea of having one at their expense."

"Me neither," I say, frowning and dropping my eyes to the ground. It's gotten harder to navigate as it's gone from afternoon to evening, and I can feel myself getting paranoid. Every shadow along the trail is a possible threat; every breaking branch or rustling leaf might be a werebear ready to spring out at us. The only thing keeping me sane is the knowledge that we'll be safe once we get past the barrier around the school grounds... that, and Atlas' steady, warm presence beside me.

Atlas exhales, his eyes narrowing in thought, and his next words hit me hard. "He wouldn't have had any reason to lie."

Don't say that, I want to beg him. Please. It hurts enough already. Swallowing, I ask, "What makes you say that?"

"If he had any interest in capturing one of us, he wouldn't have set his goons on the others like he did," Atlas replies. "He would've wanted one of them alive. But he didn't, which means..."

"Which means they're cutting their losses," I finish for him, my tone glum.

"They've put their sights on you," Atlas agrees.

I come to a stop, panting from the exertion and panic, fighting off a fresh ringing in my head. "Shit," I mutter, wincing as I lean forward and put my hands on my knees. "Sorry, one second."

Atlas is already shaking his head, pulling away. “No,” he says, his tone brokering no argument. “You’re exhausted. We need to rest.”

“No way,” I insist, glancing up at him with vision that’s still slightly blurred. “We just passed the first of the cairns. We just have to make it a little farther, and then we’ll be on Academy grounds.”

“If you keep pushing like this, you’ll pass out,” Atlas replies, crossing his arms. “It could still be three hours walk to the academy at this pace.”

“We’ll be sitting ducks if we rest here.”

“Then what does that make us if we black out again?”

I sigh, straightening up and pressing my hand to my forehead. “Dead ducks,” I concede.

Atlas gives me a humorless smile. “Exactly.”

I glance around at the darkening forest and then follow him as he makes his way to a clearing in the midst of a stand of trees. “I’ll take first watch,” he says.

But this is where I put my foot down. “Uh-uh. Not happening.”

“Nyx...” he begins, his emerald eyes flashing warningly.

“You need to recuperate,” I tell him as he clears a spot for us on the leaf-blanketed ground. “If you can walk on your own, we’ll move faster, and I won’t have to support you. Not that getting to be the one saving you isn’t a nice change of pace,” I quip, grinning.

Atlas chuckles, running a hand through his hair. “You’re a piece of work, Nyx. You know that?” He sighs. “But you have a point.”

“I know,” I reply, grinning. “Get some sleep. If anyone shows up, I’ll wake you.”

Atlas hesitates for a moment before pulling me close, pressing his lips to mine in a passionate kiss. “You’d better,”

he murmurs against my mouth when we break apart. “I’m not letting anyone take you. Werebear or otherwise.”

“Scout’s honor,” I say, raising a hand before glancing back toward the ring of trees. “I’ll find a place to park just over there. Wake you in an hour or so.”

Atlas looks at me for another moment, clearly conflicted about letting me out of his sight, and then nods. “Fair enough.”

We share a charged glance before I draw away from him, moving to stand just beyond the clearing as he settles onto the ground with a grunt and closes his eyes. Watching him fall asleep always makes my heart swell, but this time it brings fear and uncertainty with it. His earlier words—they’ve put their sights on you—ring in my mind like a dire warning, and this time, when the familiar tears fill my eyes, I’m helpless to fend them off.

They’ve put their sights on me. The messages we found in the hideout were right.

The werebears are willing to pull out all the stops, even going as far as collaborating with a shifter, to capture me and bring me in. They know my magic is the only thing that can counter Wolf Witches, and if the protected packs lose their edge, then our species is truly doomed. But that’s not why I’m crying.

I’m crying because, if the werebears have turned their attention to me, then everyone around me—especially those I know and love—is in danger by proxy. Tobias already knows who I’m closest to. Ivy, Charles, and, most of all, Atlas.

I drop slowly to the forest floor, tears running down my face, as I think about how close we came today, how dire our situation was. If it hadn’t been for my magic, Atlas might have bled out on the forest floor with me lying uselessly beside him. What if we’re not so lucky next time? What if the werebears don’t find us? Will they go after my family, my old pack? How many other people will end up in the line of fire because of my angel blood?

Is that a risk I can allow myself to take?

I know the answer even before I get unsteadily to my feet, my head still spinning a little in the aftermath of my fall. I don't give myself time to think it over; if I do, I know I won't be able to go through with it—maybe a little head wound is useful once in a while, after all. Feeling like I'm in some horrible dream, I walk slowly over to where Atlas lies sleeping, my eyes swimming with tears, and dare to brush his cheek with my fingers. He stirs a little in his sleep, nearly making my heart rend in two, but I don't dare wake him. If I do, he'll come after me. He cares about me too much to let me do something like this, even if it's in the interest of the ones I love.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, dreading to think of how worried he'll be when he wakes up and finds me gone, but this might be my only chance to draw the werebears away from him—and the Academy.

I have to leave now. Getting reluctantly to my feet, savoring those last few moments of my skin against his, I draw back, my footsteps crunching on the dry leaves. It's fully dark by the time I retreat from the clearing, and although the night is warm, I'm cold as I turn away from my lover and disappear into the trees.

Chapter Nineteen



We were even closer to the campus than I thought—within a few minutes, more of the cairns signaling the border of the Academy property appear, as solid and reassuring as they were when I first stumbled through the forest on that fateful day after my pack’s rejection. This bodes well for Atlas, at least. With any luck, he’ll be back at the Academy in under an hour after he wakes up. With the werebears on my tail, that gives him more than enough time to get to safety, and if someone as bad with directions as I am can find the marker stones, he should have no trouble.

I stare at the nearest cairn for longer than I’d like to admit before squaring my shoulders and turning to head in the opposite direction, drawing farther into the forest despite my heart screaming at me to turn back, to find Atlas and not let this unrealistic romantic idealism be my guide. But I can’t. Much like Tobias, I’m past the point of no return.

The forest grows thick and dense the farther I get from Academy property, and without the cairns as a guide, I resort to stumbling blindly through the trees, my head throbbing and my legs quivering with exhaustion. I don’t have much of a plan beyond drawing the werebears away from the Wolf Witches, but I can only hope I’ll figure something out before I reach civilization. I struggle to fight off my sadness as I move, but it’s difficult, and as I come to a stop on the bank of a raging river that breaks through the trees, I can’t hold back the tears. Letting out a choked sob, I collapse against the trunk of an old oak, desperate to convince myself I’ve done the right thing.

No turning back now, I tell myself.

The words ring hollow in my head. It's as I'm pressing my hand to my mouth, trying to stifle my sobs, when a heartbreakingly familiar voice draws my gaze upward. "Out for a midnight swim?" Atlas asks, his hands in his pockets as he emerges from the trees. My heart lurches in my chest, and my stomach tightens with renewed affection as his green eyes glint out at me from the darkness.

I swallow, my expression hardening as I straighten up and turn to him. "Did you follow me here?" I ask.

Atlas shrugs. "It wasn't hard. You're not as stealthy as you think, Nyx."

"I..." I clear my throat, crossing my arms defensively. "I thought you were asleep." "Yeah." Atlas gives a rueful smile. "I figured as much. Turns out, it's not as easy to sleep on the hard forest floor as you'd think."

I can't help but return an uncertain grin. "Who would've thought?"

"Who indeed?" Atlas approaches me, his footsteps crunching on the soft grass, and reaches out to put his palms on my arms. His touch sends goosebumps over my skin, and it's all I can do not to melt into him here and now. "You were trying to run," he says, his voice husky in the quiet forest.

"I'm sorry," I reply, my voice trembling, and I look away. "I can't stay here, Atlas; you know I can't. The werebears are after me and my magic. If I stick around, all I'm doing is putting the other Wolf Witches in danger." My breath hitches in my throat, fresh tears welling up in my eyes. "Putting you in danger."

"You think I don't know that?" Atlas asks gently, reaching out to brush a stray tear away. "Nyx, I've figured as much ever since the hideout."

"But that doesn't change anything," I protest, covering his hand with mine. "I can't stay with you. Not if I want to keep you safe from Tobias and the Black Omen."

“I don’t care about staying safe from them,” Atlas tells me without missing a beat.

“But the Academy—”

“Listen to me, Nyx.” Atlas leans forward, his forehead touching mine. “You can’t take this all on yourself. I won’t let you. If you’re leaving the Academy, I’m coming with you. I’m never leaving you.”

“I...”

“Nyx,” Atlas says, his eyes piercing into mine, “I would follow you to the ends of the earth. I don’t care where you go or who comes after you. I...” He hesitates for a moment. “I love you.”

My eyes go wide as I suck in a breath. “You do?”

“Yes,” he says seriously. “Nyx, I’ve loved you since the beginning. All these months of training, all this time we’ve spent together... All I can think about is how much I want to be with you.” There’s another pause, and it looks like he’s deliberating something before he adds, “How much I want you to be my mate.”

How much I want you to be my mate.

His words grab my heart and don’t let go, and in that moment, I know there will be no running away from him. Not now, not ever. After all the time I spent worrying about finding a mate, about being rejected by my pack, I’m now looking into the eyes of the wolf shifter who’s just confessed his love to me, who wants to take me as his mate.

And I love him too. I don’t know when it happened, or how, but none of that seems to matter.

“What about the Academy?” I whisper, hardly daring to hope. “I can never shift; Charles confirmed it. You’re an alpha heir and having a mate who can’t shift...” I take a shaky breath as the truth spills out. “My mom had an affair while she and my dad were separated. She got pregnant by an angel, Atlas. That means I’m a hybrid, and that takes away all my lycanthrope abilities. I might as well be a shifter in name only.”

Atlas' eyes widen in surprise, but to his credit—and my indescribable relief—the affection in them doesn't dwindle. "But you're still the best weapon we have against the werebears," he says. "And the best thing that's ever happened to me." He takes a ragged breath, his eyes burning with desire. "I don't care if you can never shift. I don't care if you have angel blood, and I don't care if the Academy or my father don't see how special you are. I see it, Nyx. And I'm never letting you go. Not if I can help it." His large hands frame my face, and I can feel adrenaline and affection flood my stomach when he says, "I've wanted to ask you this for ages, Nyx. I know this isn't exactly the perfect time, but I'm not about to wait any longer. I want you. So this is me asking. Will you be my mate?"

"Yes," I reply in a whisper, my heart fluttering in my chest, and in that moment, it doesn't seem to matter where we are or what else is happening around us. "Yes, I'll be your mate, Atlas."

Atlas' green eyes search mine for a moment, and then his lips crash into mine, his hands tangling in my hair as his tongue finds mine and our bodies press together where we stand. For all the moments we've had like this, this one seems somehow more profound, like we've crossed a line that we've been dancing around ever since the moment we met.

Atlas' arm snakes around my waist, picking me up as I lock my legs around his hips. I can feel his arousal against my thigh, and when I shift ever so slightly against him, my pelvis rubbing against his, the moan he lets out sends a bolt of excitement through my belly. He carries me backward, knocking over one of the cairns in the process, and as we sink onto the ground, the river babbling next to us, all I can do is get lost in the feeling of him. I'm already working on his belt buckle as he pulls my shirt over my head, discarding it in a fever of passion. I'm careful to avoid his wounded shoulder as I do the same, and despite being on the ground in the middle of the New England wilderness, I can't help but feel like we couldn't have picked a more perfect place to consummate our relationship.

Our clothes land in a heap around us, the sound of the brook raging in our ears, and I can feel the familiar light magic warming me, bathing me in a soothing glow. I have to temper it when Atlas slides a finger inside me, desperate not to draw the attention of the werebears like I did last time, and it takes everything I have not to blind us both when his lips close around my nipple.

“Atlas...” I moan, my breath coming in short gasps.

“Fuck, Nyx.” He grunts, drawing back to part my legs and position himself between them. I’m already wet, and when he sinks into me, he hisses with pleasure. “Fuck—”

I whimper, tangling my hands in his hair as he begins to move, gripping my hips hard enough to leave marks as he returns his lips to my breast, covering it with marks as he repeats my name like a chant. On some level, I’m aware that nothing between us will ever be the same after this; I’m bound to him, and he’s making me his with every kiss, every thrust, every moan that he draws from my lips. I’m at a loss for words, lost in an ocean of pleasure, and my orgasm hits me harder than any of the ones that came before.

I cry out Atlas’ name, but I’m not sure if he hears me, because he’s already falling over the edge himself.

I’m not sure how long we stay like that, trembling in each other’s arms on the forest floor. It could be minutes or hours, but it doesn’t matter, and as I look into Atlas’ eyes—my mate’s eyes—there’s only one thing either of us can say.

“I love you, my mate,” Atlas murmurs.

“I love you too, mate,” I reply, and for the first time in what feels like a lifetime, I feel a surge of hope. The words lace around my heart, like an unbreakable rope binding us and I feel nothing but Atlas in the happiest moment of my life.

Chapter Twenty



I wish I could say that everything was clear now, that things have suddenly fallen perfectly into place now that it's official. I wish I could say that being bound to Atlas as his mate makes it all easier, but it doesn't. If anything, it only makes things more complicated... but even that pales in comparison to the euphoric affection I feel for him in the aftermath of his confession.

The pale light of the full moon emerging from behind the clouds is what wakes me up from my light sleep, and despite our surroundings, I can't resist burrowing my face further into Atlas' chest. By now, the sky is twinkling with stars, and as much as I would like to stay curled up in his arms until dawn breaks, I know we need to move. Despite everything that's happened, there are questions that need answers, and even with him at my side, I can't shake a fresh feeling of anxiety as I press my lips briefly to his chest and sit up. The grass is soft and plush beneath us, and it somehow doesn't stick to my skin despite having been lying in it for god knows how long.

Atlas' eyes are already open, one arm behind his head as he stares up through the trees at the stars glistening above us. He gives me his trademark crooked smile when our eyes meet, prompting a chuckle from me. "I guess rolling around in the dirt does good things for morale," I joke, leaning over him to press my lips briefly to his.

Atlas catches my hand in his own and kisses my palm. "You're beautiful," he says, and then, after a pause, "even when you're covered in grass."

“Hey!” I swat playfully at him as I roll to my feet, brushing a few stray blades off my legs. “It’s not silk sheets and feather pillows, but it’ll do.”

Atlas chuckles, a low rumbling laugh that makes me shiver with desire, and sits up. Although our banter is playful, there are plenty of unanswered questions running through my mind as we rise from the forest floor and glance around the clearing. There are too many to count, so I settle for the simplest one. “What do we do now?”

Atlas turns to me as he gets dressed. “I meant what I said. If the Academy doesn’t want you anymore because you can’t shift, then we’ll find our own way to protect shifter kind.”

I grimace. “Easier said than done.”

“Yeah,” Atlas agrees. “But that’s why we need to go back, Nyx.”

“I don’t see how that’s a good idea,” I insist as I button my jeans. “They call us Wolf Witches for a reason. That doesn’t make much sense without the ‘wolf’ part.”

“I don’t think you’re giving Master Ombres enough credit,” Atlas replies cryptically.

“What do you mean?” I ask, sliding my hand into his as we start along the path carved out by the river. By now we’re both leaning heavily on one another, but the brief respite did us both good, and the going is easier than it was before.

“She’s no idiot,” Atlas replies as we round a corner. “She’s a demon, just like the rest of our instructors. She understands angels better than any of us. I’m sure she had suspicions, even if she didn’t know for sure. Why would she have kept you around if she didn’t think you could still be a Wolf Witch?”

I swallow. “But that doesn’t change the werebears’ strategy,” I argue. “They’re going to come after me, and if we go back to the school, they’ll have the Academy in their crosshairs.”

“The Academy has always been in their crosshairs, Nyx,” Atlas tells me, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. “Getting back there is our best shot at keeping you safe until we can

figure out a way to strike back. Besides,” he adds, his face darkening, “Tobias has shown he’s willing to pull out all the stops. The Academy has been in danger ever since the werebears turned him.”

“I...” I trail off, unable to respond. “I guess you’re right. Shit, I hate that you’re right.”

“Yeah,” Atlas acknowledges, his tone somber. “Me too.”

That settles it, and as sadness at his betrayal threatens to overwhelm me again, I have to bite the inside of my lip to keep the tears from starting back up. “Well,” I say, forcing a self-deprecating grin, “now I just feel like an idiot. That whole detour was for nothing.”

“Hey.” Atlas comes to a pause, turning to press his lips to my forehead and murmur, “It wasn’t for nothing. Not if it meant getting to make you my mate.”

“Yeah?” I give him a teasing smile. “So what exactly does that mean, anyway?” Atlas’ expression is intense, his grip on my waist tightening. “It means you’re mine, Nyx, and I’m yours. I’m never letting you go. Our bond will get stronger over time, and we will be able to find each other. Sense each other.”

“I like the sound of that,” I reply, turning up to kiss him. As I pull away, I’m only half-joking when I add, “Let’s just hope you still feel that way if the Master decides to kick me out.”

“I will,” Atlas says, and I believe him.

* * *

The cairns reappear as we draw closer to the Academy, bringing with them a strange mixture of relief, anxiety, and dread, and yet there are still no signs of the werebears. At this point, I’m almost too exhausted to wonder where they are. The thought of a trip to the infirmary and a day spent in bed next to Atlas—my new mate, I think wonderingly—is heady, and I

don't think I've ever been more glad to run into the fear barrier delineating the boundary.

Atlas raises a hand, dark magic wisps surrounding him in a weak mist as we pass the enchantment. The terror is there, as it always is, but this time I meet it with happiness; at least on the other side, we're safe from the werebears. I allow my magic to deflect most of the dark magic as we cross over, but just like Atlas, I'm flagging, and I nearly keel over from exhaustion when we're at last on the path. The floating lights that greeted me during my first journey up the road are waiting for us again, practically making my knees buckle with relief, and as the silhouette of the castle looms farther up the slope, I allow myself to relax for the first time in days.

"Home again," I muse, taking a moment to stare up at its jutting turrets. "I can't believe it."

"Yeah," Atlas agrees. "It's weird."

"How so?" I ask, turning to him.

He shrugs his muscular shoulders as we round a corner. "It just seems a bit strange, that's all. Tobias must have had ten werebears with him, and we didn't land far from where they were fighting the others. But it's been nothing but quiet since we fell. No sign of any of them."

"Are you sure about that?"

My blood runs cold as Atlas and I come to an abrupt stop just around the bend in the path, finding ourselves face-to-face with none other than Tobias. He's waiting for us in the middle of the trail, his arms crossed over his chest and a look of cold conviction on his face.

No.

I don't think about it. I throw my arms up, sending out a bolt of light magic just as Atlas launches one of his own. I should have known better than to think that would be enough to stop Tobias, who throws up a shield that absorbs both attacks.

"Get down," Atlas growls, lunging away from me and shifting into his wolf form as he charges Tobias. The wound

on his shoulder hobbles him a little, and he grits his fangs against the pain as he leaps toward the other wolf shifter. Tobias shifts at the same time, gold fur colliding with black as they crash into each other ahead of me on the trail.

“Get to the Academy,” Atlas shouts, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to abandon him again. Digging deep, I reach for whatever reserves of light magic I have left, letting it charge through my body like an electric current. My strength is wavering, as is Atlas’, and it takes concentration to generate the power I’ll need to take him down. I should have known this would happen—how could I have been so stupid? Tobias was a Wolf Witch before he was a werebear agent, and if there’s anyone on their side who can get past the barrier, it’s him.

Atlas snarls, sinking his powerful jaws into the spot at the base of Tobias’ neck. My former friend yells out in pain and rage, the barrier dissolving only to re-manifest as a circling wisp of power that slams into Atlas’ chest. Now it’s his turn to cry out in pain, and my mouth drops open, my hold on my magic flagging momentarily.

Tobias hurls them both to the side, weakening Atlas’ already-weak grip on him, and turns to me, barking through gritted fangs, “I’m sorry about this Nyx. I can’t let you go back to the Academy.”

“Fuck that,” I shout back, sending a fresh burst of light magic his way. He ducks behind Atlas, who is forced to let go of his neck in order to dodge my attack, and to my dismay, that’s exactly the opening he needs. Tobias hurls a ball of dark magic directly into Atlas, making him fly into me and sending us both tumbling back down the path. Pain shoots through the back of my head where I was injured, nearly making me see stars, and the negative sensation is so intense that it extinguishes my building light magic like blowing out a candle. I scramble to my feet, only to see Atlas still on the ground, struggling to get up after being hit head-on by Tobias’ attack, and that’s when I realize it’s all over.

I try in vain to summon another spell, but the agony has cut off my access to my magic. Tobias takes full advantage

and charges into me, shifting back into his human form and seizing me by the shoulder. The next thing I know, he's lifting us up on a wave of his own dark energy, and although I struggle, his magically-charged grip is no match for my kicks, elbow strikes, and knees. I'm left to watch, fighting tooth and nail for freedom that's just been taken from me, as the ground—and the Academy—shrink away from us far below. I have enough time to see Atlas struggle to his feet, leaping into the air on a failing burst of dark magic that dissipates before he can get off the ground. He's too weak, and so am I.

“Nyx,” he shouts from far below, trying and failing again to get enough lift to pursue us.

“Atlas,” I yell back, but by now we're too far away for him to hear me. All I can do is watch as the Academy, along with my new mate, disappear from view, and then Tobias and I are hurtling away through the night sky.

Epilogue

ATLAS ARCTURUS



I am, first and foremost, a survivor. I survived the contempt of my father and my former pack, survived their rejection of me, survived being scarred by my experiences—both figuratively and literally. I survived years at the Academy, in one of the most rigorous training environments that exists, and I survived countless fights in the name of winning the insurmountable war against the werebears. The years and hardship have pressed the weakness out of me, have taught me to find a way through even the most hopeless of circumstances...

But never in my life have I felt as helpless as I do now.

One day bleeds into another, and although the pain in my shoulder eases more each hour, the pain in my heart that I feel whenever I think of Nyx only grows worse. My hands are tied, and not even the knowledge that the others made it safely back to the Academy is enough to ease the sting.

She's my mate. I've protected her and trained her and been inside of her, claimed her as my own, and in the end, none of it mattered. Maybe I was never as strong as I thought I was.

"Hey," Ivy says, reaching out to put a comforting hand on my shoulder as I pace outside Master Ombres' office. "Are you okay?"

"As good as can be expected." I sigh, running my hand through my hair. "I'm fucking sick of being here."

The redhead shrugs, still looking a bit battered but otherwise okay. "I know," she replies. "I have to believe Tobias wouldn't kill Nyx. He is in love with her."

The thought that she might be dead is too much to bear, making rage and worry surge through me and my hands clench into fists at my sides. The thought of her alone with that bastard Tobias isn't any better. She is my mate. I fucking love her, and I couldn't protect her. Maybe I am a failure as a wolf, like my father and brother told me. "We're going to get her back, Atlas," Ivy tells me. "I promise."

I give her a stiff nod.

I turn to Master Ombres' door, my jaw tightening in conviction. "I'll see you later." Ivy's eyes dart toward the door. "Let me know how it goes in there, okay? You know I'm ready to help, whatever you need. She was my friend, too."

That draws a half-smile from me, and I nod my affirmation before slipping into the Master's office. She's seated at her desk, brows furrowed as she looks over a report from one of the other scouts—likely not Charles, who's still recuperating in the infirmary. "Atlas," she says, sitting back in her chair and giving me an irritatingly pleasant smile. "Have a seat."

"I'll pass," I say, too restless to waste time, and stare at the demon from across the room. "I want to know what we're doing about Nyx."

Master Ombres sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Atlas, we've talked about this," she says. "You're the best trainee we have at the Academy right now. I can't afford to put you, or any of the other cadets, in the line of fire. Not until we have a firm plan."

"So that's it?" I ask, gritting my teeth. "'Go fuck yourself, and have a nice day?'"

"Atlas, be reasonable—"

"This is about Nyx! She is my mate," I nearly shout, leaning forward to press my hands against the desk. "Don't you get that? She's our best chance against the werebears, and you've done nothing but let her rot!"

"I understand your concern," Master Ombres insists. "And I'm fully aware that you and your mentee have grown... close during these past months. But that doesn't change anything,

Atlas. We've been ratted out by one of our own, and our first ever light magic-wielding cadet has been taken. We can't afford to play the wrong hand now. Another slip-up and we might lose even more."

I stare at her, seething. It must be the tenth time we've gone through this same song and dance since I got back to the Academy, and somehow, I just manage to get more pissed off each time. "The longer we spend fucking around with strategy, the less likely it is that we'll bring her back safely," I reply in a low voice. "You understand that, don't you?"

But I can tell the battle is already lost; Master Ombres' face has gone cold, her hands folded on the desk in front of her. "I'm sorry, Atlas, but I have to think of the Academy. And right now, that means gathering information. Anticipating the werebears' next move and countering it. They'll be on their guard now that they have the upper hand, and we can't afford to make stupid mistakes. Not now. I'm sorry," she repeats for the millionth time, "but that's final."

I open my mouth to reply, but I can tell there's no use. She's already turning her gaze back to the papers in front of her, infuriatingly calm despite everything that's happened—everything that will happen if she doesn't get off her ass and do something. Burning with rage, I turn on my heel and stalk out of her office, my mind reeling. Ivy has slipped away by now, and in the silence of the corridor, the last of my patience—what little there was in the first place—slips away.

I don't care if the Master approves. I don't care if she's half-angel. I don't care if I'm not yet healed. Hell, I don't care if the Academy decides to kick me out and never let me back in again. Nyx is out there somewhere, taken prisoner by the werebears and that bastard Tobias, and I meant every word I said to her that night by the river. I love her. I'll go to the ends of the earth for her, move mountains if I have to in order to keep her safe. Whatever it takes.

I don't need anyone's permission. I'm not going to stop until I get my mate back.

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Afterword



Thank you for reading Nox Wolf! The third book, Lux Wolf, will be out in May 2022.

[Link here.](#)

Please continue reading for a small excerpt of Supernatural Shifter Academy also written by us!

About G. Bailey



G. Bailey is a USA Today and International Bestselling Author of fantasy and paranormal romance.

She lives in England with her cheeky children, her gorgeous (and slightly mad) golden retrievers and her teenage sweetheart turned husband.

She loves cups of tea.

Chocolate and Harry Potter marathons are her jam and she owns way too many notebooks and random pens.



About Regan Rosewood



Regan Rosewood is a new author from England, where she lives just down the road from G. Bailey.

She has a cute cat and an addiction to reading.



Supernatural Shifter Academy



Sometimes when I look into the light of the sun, I can only see the shadows around the edges, waiting for their chance to smother what brightness is holding them back.

But looking up at the sky, as I make my way down the sloping drive, I can only see big black thunderstorms forming on the horizon. I'm only just past the top of the hill on Bowery Street, and considering how quickly the weather is going sour, the odds of getting home before it starts to rain are slim to none.

"Damn," I mutter, pulling my backpack up higher on my shoulders and shaking my head. It's times like these when I really wish Central High's bus route included my neighborhood. Well, *our* neighborhood. *Their* neighborhood. Whoever's neighborhood it is, it's too far outside the city center for the school bus to reach, and since I don't have a car, I'm what some might call shit out of luck. Normally I don't mind the long walk home—in fact, I usually enjoy it. It's a chance to listen to some music, stretch my legs after eight hours of sitting at a desk, and, most importantly, it means less time spent around Mark. When the weather's bad, though...

Kicking myself for not thinking to bring an umbrella, I continue down the road, hoping I'll get lucky and not end up soaked by the time I reach the house. Doubtful. All I can reasonably do at this point is try not to get water all over the front entryway and pray that Mark won't be in one of his moods when I get in. I can practically hear him snapping at me already, slurring his words as he gestures at me with an empty

beer bottle: *Damn it, Millie! You couldn't even dry off before getting mud all over the front porch? What's wrong with you, huh?*

I shake my head, feeling the first raindrop plop down on my shoulder like a warning. *Yeah, I know, I think. It feels like I'm on my way to the gallows.*

Okay, maybe that's a little overdramatic. But not by much. I've been living with my most recent foster parents, Mark and Tonya Stone, for going on a year now, and things haven't been peachy. It's not like I'm not used to bad foster family situations—in fact, that's basically all I've ever known, with a few exceptions. It's like the start of every fantasy story I've ever read: a baby girl, abandoned at the hospital when she was born by parents she never knew, drifting from one abominable living situation to another and wondering why she was put on this planet. Except if this was really a fantasy story, a fairy godmother would have appeared at my bedroom window a long time ago to whisk me away on some whimsical adventure.

Instead, the only things that have ever appeared at my bedroom window are the eggs thrown by neighborhood pranksters and the occasional crow.

It hasn't been all bad, though; I think as the ground levels out beneath my feet. The raindrops are coming more frequently now, and I see the horizon light up briefly with the flash of lightning. Mollie, the foster mother I lived with from when I was nine to when I was eleven, was easily my favorite of the bunch. *Mollie*, I remember her saying when she first introduced herself. *It's only one letter away from your name, Millie. It's like it was meant to be.*

And for a while, I almost believed it. With Mollie, I actually felt like I had a home, not just a place to stay. She showed me how to cook, let me watch her TV programs with her, and actually seemed interested in me as a person, not just a source of government-provided income. She even gave me a necklace—a little sterling silver pendant in the shape of a crescent moon—that I had worn until the clasp broke. Now I keep it tucked into the worn combat boots that I wear every

day, no matter the weather. If I can't wear it, then at least I can keep it—like a good luck charm, or something.

But, as I've been forced to learn again and again as I'm passed from one set of strangers to another, nothing good is meant to last. The economy took a hit, Mollie had to close down her bakery, and it was determined that she was no longer fit to support me. So off I was packed, to a new family, a new set of introductions, and a new set of disappointments. Rinse and repeat.

With every good thing in my life, shadows seep into the edges and make it impossible to stay good for long.

As I turn off the main road and into Mark and Tonya's neighborhood, I remind myself to stop ruminating. What has that ever gotten me, other than resentment? Feeling the reassuring pressure of Mollie's necklace against my ankle, I speed up a little, motivated to at least minimize my time outside in the rapidly increasing downpour. Once I get home, I'll have to finish my trigonometry homework, as well as work on the English paper that's due this coming Monday.

It's as I'm contemplating my schoolwork that I'm hit with an increasingly familiar new wave of anxiety. I turned eighteen last month, which means that not only am I in my last year of high school, but my days in the foster care system are numbered. One would think I would be happy to be finishing the endless cycle of lousy living situations, and I am, but I'm not blind to what this next transition will mean: I'll be on my own, for better or worse. And given my luck so far, my money's on worse. I'm going to have to decide what to do about university, about getting a job, finding a place to live... the training wheels are coming off, and I'm in no way prepared for it.

I guess that's something every foster kid has to face, I reason, feeling the raindrops now pelting down on me. I lift my backpack and hold it above my head like a shield, aware that my papers are going to get wet but hardly caring at this point. But not every foster kid has had as hard of a go of it as I have. I know I'm just feeling sorry for myself, but it's almost impossible not to.

The truth is that I've never really felt at home anywhere, with the exception of those two wonderful years with Mollie. No matter where I go or who I live with, I've never really felt a sense of belonging. I've made friends here and there, but by the time I'm ever really starting to find a niche in one place, it's time to pick up and move somewhere else. It's like my life has never really begun, leaving me with a lingering sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction everywhere I go.

By now, my blonde hair is beginning to dampen, and I pick up my pace, practically jogging now in a desperate attempt to stay dry. *That's enough chewing the cud*, I tell myself. *Just take things one day at a time. That's all you can manage.* By the time I reach Mark and Tonya's old, single-story house, I'm thoroughly soaked and shivering. Like a lost kitten... or something. It takes me a minute to fumble my house key out of my dripping backpack, but eventually I get the front door open, pausing on the threshold like one wrong move will set off an explosion.

And for all I know, it will.

"Tonya, honey, is that you?" I can hear Mark's voice coming from the kitchen. Good. If I'm lucky, I can get down to my basement room and change my clothes before he's any the wiser.

"It's me, Mark," I call back, hoping my tone comes across as jovial and unbothered.

"Hmph," he says, and then goes quiet. Judging from the sound of his voice, he's been hitting the bottle for at least an hour already. Ever since losing his job at the factory on the other side of town, he's been taking full advantage of the unemployment checks and letting Tonya put food on the table by herself.

Tonya, a mousy woman who probably won't ever have the gumption to divorce her deadbeat husband, pulls odd hours at the diner down the street to support his drinking habit. Funny how they should take me away from someone like Mollie and then stay silent when I end up in a legitimately dysfunctional living situation. But what do I know, right?

I manage to slip out of the entryway and down the basement stairs, doing my best not to drip water on the grimy linoleum floor. The basement is half-finished, with a pull-out couch serving as a bed and my meager possessions all crammed into the closet by the back wall. It's more or less a glorified storage area, but at least nobody comes down here to bother me. Down here, I can re-read my worn copies of *Narnia*, the *Harry Potter* series, and yes, even *Twilight*, in peace, daydreaming about being swept away into a life full of purpose and magic, where tragedy and boredom were always just the precursors to a grand new adventure.

The grimy mirror on the back of the door makes me pause, looking at my blonde wet hair falling around my shoulders, dripping rainwater onto my drenched clothes. My very dark blue eyes stare back at me, daunting me with how much they look like the very water that smothers my clothes. Not for the first time, I wonder what my parents looked like. Do I look like my mother or father? Or neither of them.

But the mirror doesn't have answers for me. Of course it doesn't. No one does.

I'm just pulling on a dry sweater when Mark's gravelly voice shatters the silence into a million pieces. "Millie, what the hell?!"

My eyes go wide. "Yeah, Mark? What's wrong?"

"Get up here," he yells, and even from down here I can hear the alcohol in his voice. Swallowing hard and bracing myself for the worst, I pad back up the basement stairs to find Mark standing in the entryway. His hulking figure makes me feel even smaller than I normally do, and with his shoulders hunched, his beer gut sagging over the top of his trousers, he looks more like a troll than ever before. "What the fuck is this?" he demands, pointing down at the floor by the welcome mat.

"What...?" I begin, taking a step closer, and then I see it. A set of streaky, damp boot prints leading to the basement door. Shit. Why the hell didn't I take my shoes off?! "Oh," I

say, blanching as I turn to look at him again. “I, uh... I’m sorry. It’s pouring outside.”

“Yeah?” Mark rounds on me, his bloodshot eyes flashing. “Is that right? And why the hell didn’t you think about that before you went and got mud all over the floor?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, inching back as he takes a step toward me. “I’ll clean it up. I didn’t even think about it—”

“Of course you didn’t, because you don’t think, *period*,” Mark says, swaying slightly on his feet, and I can smell the stench of booze coming off him. Not beer this time, either. Something heavier. Whiskey, maybe. And there’s something in his voice that floods me with unease. Have I ever seen him this drunk before? “Sometimes I wonder why the hell we’re even keeping you,” Mark continues, running a hand through his thinning hair. “I mean, you’re useless, do you know that? We spend all this time and money providing for you, and what do we get?” He advances on me, making my heart jump to my ears. The unease is turning into full-blown fear. “Nothing,” he finishes. “That’s what.”

“Mark,” I say, my voice coming out embarrassingly small, “please... I’m sorry. Really. I’ll—”

“Did I say you could talk?” he roars, and then he does something I’ve never seen him do before, no matter how drunk he’s been. He takes a swing at me. It’s sloppy and uncoordinated, and I’m able to duck out of the way. His fist connects with the wall, and he roars in pain. “You little...” he begins, winding up to throw another punch.

Where’s Tonya? She won’t be back until dinner time, at the earliest. It occurs to me that he could do whatever he wanted to me right now, and no one would be the wiser.

He’s going to hurt me, I think, heart thundering as I continue to back up. *He’s actually going to hurt me*.

In that instant, with that realization, I feel something strange welling up in the pit of my stomach, something cool and insistent—a feeling I’ve never experienced before. For a moment it’s enough to draw my attention away from Mark,

away from school, away from everything. The *novelty* of it makes me wonder if this is how newborn babies feel.

I can feel something in me waking up, something I couldn't put my finger on even if I tried. And one thing becomes clear to me, a truth I think I've known for a long time but was unable—or unwilling—to face until now.

I need to get out of here.

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