



STAR SHUNNED

STARSEED SERIES BOOK 2

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

G A J A J . K O S

STAR SHUNNED

STARSEED #2

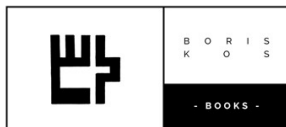
GAJA J. KOS

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KOLOVRAT UNIVERSE

The *Starseed* series is part of the “Future” portion of the Kolovrat universe and takes place after the War that had brought supernaturals out into the open.

Each series (or standalone title) is its own complete work within the Kolovrat universe. You don't need to have any prior knowledge, simply dive into what feels best to you at the moment.

However, if you want to see the larger picture and enjoy the many crossovers peppered throughout my works, I do recommend eventually picking up all the available titles.

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STARSEED

A Steamy Zodiac Reverse Harem Paranormal Romance

Star Kissed (prequel)

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Star Shunned

Star Versed

SAINTS OF SINNERS

A Dark Paranormal Rockstar MFM Menage

Fang Me Hard

Burn Me Deep

HEAT OF THE NIGHT

A Dark MF Urban Fantasy Shifter Romance

PARADISE OF SHADOWS AND DEVOTION

A Mermaid Standalone MF Paranormal Romance

DESTINY RECLAIMED - FREE

Urban Fantasy Standalone Novella

*For those who dare to dream and follow their hearts, even as
the world tries to convince them their visions are impossible.*

CHAPTER
ONE

*A*strology witch, thirty, experiences her very first heartbreak, inflicted purely by her own hand.

There had to be a joke in there somewhere, right?

Unfortunately, the Universe didn't dish out even the tiniest kernel of humor for me to bitterly laugh over.

There was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, fun about the gaping void behind my ribs that had exploded to life like some dark, devouring vortex the instant I'd stepped away from Ezra Störmer three days ago. Its heavy presence spread through my flesh, eroding me from the inside out and riding me so hard it felt as if my chest was going to cave in on itself.

I'd never braved the waters of heartbreak before.

Maybe I was lucky in that department.

Too lucky, more like it.

After all, when you get together with your soulmate at the age of twenty-one, it leaves little room for pining over love lost. Hell, I hadn't even *been* in love with anyone until Roland. The Universe had provided a good time with a few guys, but it had never gone beyond pleasant company—great while it lasted, great when it ended.

Walking away from Störmer, though?

Shit.

“Girl, you seriously need more alcohol.” Val's voice slapped me over the head moments before a whole-ass vodka

bottle found its way into my hand.

I frowned at the drink, then glanced at my friend. She sat beside me on the couch and gazed at my ungraciously sprawled form with a stern expression that almost made me want to laugh, but I just didn't have it in me to muster even a quirk of my lips.

Gods, all of this was so fucked up.

Saying goodbye in that parking lot was the right thing to do. I knew it was.

Ezra Störmer tugged on my soul in ways that were too dangerous. That didn't fit into the life I'd built for myself. His fire called to mine, and it was easy, too fucking easy, to forget about everything in his presence and just surrender to the liberating touch of his flames.

I needed to put an end to it before all that was left of my world was ashes.

But fuck, with every passing moment that stretched with thorny vines from the point of my decision—from the pin in my timeline marking our farewell—the void choked more and more air from my lungs.

I couldn't help but wonder if, by making the right choice, I'd also signed my death sentence.

Wincing, I placed a hand over my heart.

How the fuck did people survive this?

"It fucking hurts, Val." I shuffled upright and set the vodka on the messy club table, half shoving a haphazard stack of magazines aside.

Val looked at me as if I were an idiot who just wasn't getting it. "Heartache. Drink. It's like...law."

This time, a weak laugh did escape my lips. Not that it did anything to lighten the empty weight still clogging my chest.

"Why the fuck does it have to be so hard?" I shook my head and ran a hand through my hair for what felt like the thousandth time today since I got Gina's text—*the* text—then

let my arm flop unceremoniously into my lap. “I should be over the godsdamned moon that all this crap will end. Bye-bye bond. Bye-bye, Ezra fucking Störmer.”

I stumbled a bit over his name. Sadly, it wasn't even the alcohol to blame. Just the damn Sag and his damn stupid attractive face. And body. And energy.

Ugh.

Val's expression softened, those gentler Cancer and Taurus vibes in her chart that always made a person feel at home coming through. She scooted closer and kidnapped my legs until they rested over her thighs.

“Look, you fell for him hard, Alina. If he's a soulmate, I can't even imagine what that must be like for you. But I *do* remember you and Roland. The way you guys clicked from the start, how you were drawn to him even when you were sinking...like he was the fucking light you just needed to get to and everything would be all right.” She shrugged. “I think it's brave that you're breaking the bond tomorrow.”

Well-meaning as they might have been, her words cut straight to my core.

Tomorrow.

Gina had arranged a meeting between Lotte and me tomorrow. With chances being very, *very* high that the half-demon wolf who practically reigned over ICRA's Munich branch would offer up a solution to permanently rid me of Ezra.

“I think I'm going to be sick,” I grumbled in warning to Val to back off a bit from the subject.

Reality was something I'd chosen to face, but somehow hearing it from my friend's lips made everything that much worse. I placed a hand on my churning stomach and breathed through my nose until the nausea subsided to non-rush-to-the-bathroom levels.

My entire body hated the idea of letting Ezra go.

It was...revolting. Like fucking nails scratching against a chalkboard.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

My flesh crawled with the hideous sensation, but I couldn't give in to the whims of my body. It would just have to get on board within the next—I peered at the clock—eighteen hours.

Eighteen hours to clear this damn resistance and claim my bitter-tasting freedom.

Val brushed a rogue strand of teal hair off my face. “Are you sure you want to do this sleepover? I could call Roland. I'm sure he'd come get you in a heartbeat.”

“Nope, nope, nope. Look at me, Val... He doesn't deserve to have a fucking mess of a wife at home because she's mourning the loss of some other guy she fell in love with.”

While I knew it wasn't exactly like that—that *Roland* wasn't like that—I honestly couldn't dump even more crap at his feet. The support he'd shown me through this entire Störmer ordeal went beyond what I deserved and—

Pain flared red-hot at the center of my forehead.

I glared at Val, then at the offensive finger she'd flicked straight at my third eye.

“I can see you running useless laps in that head of yours.” She flattened her lips in a pointed look. “Stop. Drink.”

This time, I obeyed.

I swallowed a mouthful, the alcohol burning all the way down, then let out a bitter laugh when I realized the one thing it couldn't burn away was the heat of Störmer's flames.

Fucker.

I grimaced—half at myself, half in apology to Val because clearly her tactic of getting me drunk wasn't working—then groaned and shut my eyes. Pathetic, weak mess. That was all my identity was reduced to, and all because of a fucking fox shifter that should have waltzed into my life years ago and

saved me from dealing with this entire crap. If only I'd built a relationship with him and Roland from the start...

"Nope," I mumbled to myself, slapping a hand against my forehead for good measure.

What-ifs were irrelevant.

I'd already run through that scenario when I'd been standing in front of Störmer and feeling the weight of what I had to do more and more. Because no matter how beautiful a picture the vision painted, it could never be my truth.

Störmer *hadn't* shown up when Roland had turned my entire world upside down that first night we'd met.

Our fate lines hadn't crossed in the beginning, when monogamy could still be put under a question mark. When we stood a chance of building something different.

Nor did that wretched dream I'd tumbled into not long after getting together with Roland make it clear that the Sun, Moon, and Rising it demanded I find were actually my fucking *soulmates*.

Had I had at least that...

I would have known what I was fucking working with. Fucking informed Roland early on, which could have potentially opened up different paths.

But nope.

It was like the damn Universe *wanted* me to suffer. Show me all I could have, then steal it away from me.

Yep, the fault definitely lay with the fucking Universe.

Which pissed me off even more because I could do fuck all about it.

It didn't really matter that I was the one breaking the bond here in the physical world. The single power I had left was choice, and *that* was what I was acting on here.

Or reacting to, more likely.

This really was nothing more than a watered-down version of what choices in life should actually represent because when you were already backed into a corner...

That wasn't true freedom, was it?

It was just choosing path A or path B.

Roland or Ezra.

Either way, fucking fate demanded payment because there was just no future in which I could be with both.

Supposedly, we always had infinite timelines available that we could hop between, infinite possibilities and pathways for us to travel down and exchange for one another depending on what we desired.

All fine and great in theory, but what happened when, by entering one timeline, you ended up wiping another out of existence entirely?

Mm-hmm, thought so.

The phrase *the path erases behind you* suddenly didn't seem like it only applied to the past. Because I was sure as shit erasing the future.

I didn't even have it in me to think about the third damn guy I was connected to and destined to lose. At least with him, once I severed the bond, there would be no memories for me to suffer through.

Another flash of hot pain struck my third eye.

I scowled, but all that earned me was an unapologetic look from Val.

"Would it help if I confessed that I'm still in love with Ben?" she said with mild annoyance.

My eyes flew wide so hard it was a miracle I didn't snap off my lashes. "What?"

"You heard me. I'm *not* repeating that out loud ever again. And if *you* do... Girl, best friend or not, I'm coming after you like a bitch with a vengeance. But since we're having a total pity party..." Val lifted a single shoulder in a shrug that was

more vulnerable than anything I'd ever seen her do. "I can admit that I never really got over him."

"Wasn't it you who ended things in the first place?" I asked, deciding to just try my luck.

Val and I talked about everything. But when it came to Ben and how their relationship ended back in the day, vague would be a poor description of the things Val had shared. All smoke, no substance.

Actually, even the smoke she'd always dispelled until there was no trace left, and that was it.

"The breakup was mutual." She took a hefty swing of vodka straight from the bottle. Her face scrunched up, but that didn't stop her from doing it again before she said, "Neither of us wanted to settle down. It freaked us the fuck out just how easy it would have been. A bachelor and a party girl living the picket fence life? We ran the hell away from that before it sucked us in."

I smacked her thigh playfully just to lighten the heartache I felt for her—something Val wouldn't have appreciated if I'd shown it outright. "You do realize that life doesn't have to look a certain way, right? That just because the norm of settling down might seem like it's the same for all people, it's far from the only truth?"

Val leveled a stare at me that had me squirming.

"Much like how a married woman *can* get into a relationship with another guy besides her husband and everyone's fine with it?" She arched a brow high.

Worst of all, she wasn't even being mean.

I huffed out a heavy breath. "Okay, since we're discussing matters we're only ever saying once... If *everyone* was on board, then yes, that would be the dream."

At Val's sharp inhale, I flung out a hand to stop whatever more of a reaction she would have gone into.

"*But* I'm also not wrecking Störmer's family. Even if that weren't a huge fucking moral issue on my end, do you really

think he'd be up to sharing me? I mean, who would want to divorce his supermodel wife and get into a brand-new relationship at the age of forty-nine, all to be with someone who already has a husband? I know life is full of possibilities, but I'm just not seeing it, Val. And in all honesty, Roland was great with all this stuff, but I think it was mostly because he knew how much I wanted *out* of the multiple soulmates situation. If I pursued it..."

"Did you even ask either of them? Like legit brought up the subject?" Val poked, though by the tone of her voice, it was clear she already had her answer.

I groaned. "Can we just drop this? I'm meeting with Gina and Lotte tomorrow, and that's that. Back to my life. Back to glitch-free bliss."

"And you have my full support. I just wanted to be sure you weren't making a mistake."

Like I had, was what she didn't have to say out loud.

But Val still had options. Ben's affection for her couldn't have been clearer, no matter how much he tried to hide it. Neither was tied to anyone else. If they chose to get together, at least the logistics of it wouldn't be messy. Simply two people entering a relationship.

I, on the other hand, was about to make sure two people remained in a relationship.

Once I cut off the soulmate bonds to Ezra and the Scorpio, there would be nothing pulling us together. No more magnetism.

Logically, I knew my feelings would change once I was free from these bonds.

I wasn't in love with Ezra Störmer. I was in love with my soulmate.

Once Ezra wasn't a soulmate any longer...

I'd be free.

I just needed to survive the next eighteen hours first.



Val's drunken snores bounced off her blood-red bedroom walls. Part of me almost regretted that I didn't get as plastered as she had during the tarot reading she'd goaded me into doing to *lighten things up*, as she'd said. The cards had thoroughly roasted us, of course, and Val had turned it into a drinking game with no rules.

Except I'd never been much of a drinker.

I should have been lying comatose on the bed, but no matter how fucked life was right now, it couldn't overpower the part of my identity that led me to go for sips instead of whole shots like Val.

Sometimes integrity sucked big-ass hairy balls.

Getting more restless by the second, I reached for my phone on the nightstand and angled the screen away from Val's sleeping form just in case the light would be too much. I checked the time.

An hour.

I'd already been lying here like a corpse in limbo for an hour.

I suppressed a groan.

This wasn't how I'd hoped this night would go.

Admitting to myself that I wasn't about to fall asleep any more than I'd been struggling to all this time, I eased out of Val's bed and tiptoed into the living room. Streetlights flooded the space with just enough gentle brightness for me to easily find my way to the couch.

I plopped my butt on the soft cushion, then opened my go-to social media app. The red number alerted me I had a bunch of notifications, so I clicked on there first to get it out of the way.

Cold sweat broke across my skin when my gaze landed on the topmost line.

Ezra Störmer started following you.

I licked my parched lips and glanced at the time stamp.

Two hours ago.

Ezra had started following me right about the time I kept pulling the Knight of Cups, Three of Swords, and the Devil cards without fault when asking the tarot about the fox shifter. I wasn't even about to go into the fucking Devil with the naked couple chained to the beast—addiction or restriction, both fucking applied in this case—or the Three of Swords with the blades sticking through a heart. I swallowed a snort. A self-explanatory card, if there ever was one.

But the Knight of Cups...

That was the one that flashed through my mind as I gazed at Störmer's name written across my screen.

The way the deck I'd used depicted the image, with a man dipped in moonlight dripping masculine allure while casually holding a cup in his hands—almost in an unspoken invitation that you couldn't refuse...

It was like someone had captured the very essence of Ezra Störmer and laid it upon the card. Hell, imprinted it *into* the card.

Charm. Passion. Attraction.

A card anyone in a romantic relationship wouldn't mind seeing in a reading but felt like a personal curse to me.

The Knight of Cups was magnetic.

And it was that magnetism that fucking hijacked my finger until it tapped the button to follow the Sag back.

“What the fuck,” I muttered, then jumped onto his profile to undo the crap I'd just done.

Right as I wanted to select the damn unfollow command from the menu, my screen shifted, and my heart lodged in my throat.

A video call request was coming through the app.

And it was from none other than Ezra fucking Störmer.

CHAPTER
TWO

My butt flew off the couch faster than my brain could process the action. Not that I even had the luxury to dwell on such trivialities.

I stared at the screen with its incoming video call like it was the apocalypse unfolding and I, for the life of me, couldn't look away.

Worse, it was an apocalypse I was falling right into.

Before I knew it, I was standing by the window at the farthest point of the apartment from Val's bedroom, my treacherous finger pressing the wrong fucking button.

A cold wave of horror washed over me.

What have I just done?

Ezra's handsome face filled the screen, those pretty teeth, highlighted by his smile that widened when he saw me, immediately thawing the cold.

"Ocean Girl."

Shit, the warmth of his voice was a blow straight to the gut.

The gut that was now fucking *burning*.

"Ezra," I choked out, his name barely above a broken but all too husky whisper.

His gaze dipped down, taking me in in a way that lasted a second at most but set every one of my nerve endings alight.

Distantly, I was aware I had nothing on but a white tank top, my nipples hard points against the thin fabric. That right there should have been a clear *fuck no, abort mission*.

Except I was crushing so hard on Ezra, I did nothing but stare right back, drinking him in and basking in his energy that played with mine even through the screen.

He was too godsdamned handsome. Too motherfucking handsome in a black wifebeater that dipped just low enough to show the dusting of dark hair on his chest and showcased those impressive shoulders of his my fingers ached to trace. And don't even get me on the casual, slightly mussed hair...

Ugh.

It. Was. Kryptonite.

His smile only broadened like it pleased him to no end that I was blatantly drooling over him, the emotion dancing even more so vividly in his eyes. But it was the energy—that surge of electrifying satisfaction, so freaking potent and expansive, that got to me the most.

All of my inner fire sparked to life in roaring flames.

Hundreds of floating pieces finally found the match they had been searching for and clicked into all the right places.

Bullshit—all of this should have been bullshit.

A fantasy concocted by a stupid brain that had a crush on someone hot.

Only Ezra seemed just as enthralled as I was...and, fuck me, I couldn't deny the truth of how it felt. The truth of what I was experiencing.

Neither of us required words. The silence that logic dictated should have been awkward instead nourished the space within the bubble we'd fallen into—one where the rules of the world didn't matter and it was within our power to fill the moments of our existence with what felt right to *us*.

Not according to society.

Not by standards people *should* follow.

Then again, with Ezra...

Purely between the two of us, if I erased all else from thought, there had never been any of those shackles guiding our interactions, were there?

That was why I struggled so much. Why it was so hard to let go.

Because Ezra Störmer was a Tower card, wrecking my foundations. But he was also the promise of freedom.

The Sun. The Fool. The Star. With the potency of the Ace of Wands behind it.

Godsdamned Sagittarius.

“Hey, sexy,” he purred.

On a shaky breath, the greeting rushed out of me before I could think twice about it. “Hi, handsome.”

I could have sworn his cheeks reddened, though that surely had to be my imagination. I could accept the charge between us, but making Ezra Störmer blush?

Now *that* was pushing it...

“Late night?” he asked casually as if the previously charged seconds hadn’t just sucked us into a profound vortex where we were each the center of the universe for the other.

Possibly also confirming that the last part truly had been just some weird-ass fantasy.

My recovery wasn’t as fast as his, but it was there nonetheless, supported by the obscenely strong familiarity of Störmer’s energy I continued to feel through the phone.

The warning bells of the danger I was easing into rang too far off for me to heed in light of the magnet of unconventional normalcy that ruled us both.

“Not the standard late night you’d expect,” I said, then, when he quirked a brow, explained, “Sleepover with a friend. Except I couldn’t sleep.”

Because of you.

Because I want nothing more than to give in to this pull between us instead of breaking it off.

Thankfully I had enough control in me to at least not blurt out *that* disturbing truth.

“Is that... Is that her snoring I hear?” Amusement danced in the corners of his eyes.

For a moment, even the ghostly reminders of what a crap situation this was dissolved from this plane.

I chuckled in earnest.

“Yeah,” I said softly. “She’s a snorey kind of drunk, but I love her. Okay, maybe I won’t love her as much tomorrow at work when the lack of sleep kicks in.”

“Can I do anything to help?” Ezra drawled.

Around sixty-nine ideas flashed through my mind of just how he could wear me out to ensure a good night’s rest. Followed by a profound vision of me cuddling up against his warm, naked body. Waking in his embrace.

Shit.

“Ezra...”

Gods, even his name sounded like a plea.

I tried again. “I really should try to get some rest. No one likes a cranky coworker.”

“If you were mine, I’d take your crankiness every day. Or put you on the back of my bike and drive you around until was gone.”

His words tumbled out so fast it was clear there was no rational thought behind them. I wasn’t even convinced Ezra was aware of what he’d said. But I certainly was, going by the heat that infiltrated my cheeks.

Mine.

“Alina...” He propped his chin against his palm, the shadows behind him lightening just enough for me to see a

glimpse of some kind of living room. “I wanted to say that I can’t stop thinking about—”

“I can’t do this. I’m sorry.”

I killed the call and swiped the app closed so fast my phone damn near flew from my hands.

“Fuck,” I said on a shaky exhale.

Deep in my gut, I’d known where Ezra had wanted to take the conversation. Hell, our investigation of that building had been playing through my mind for more reasons than just the farewell we’d shared in the end.

Him, so fucking gloriously naked when he’d shifted. *And* when he’d yanked me up through the window.

After which, I’d landed straight in his still-very-much-naked embrace.

The press of that perfect cock of his against me when we were hiding behind those damn shelves. A cock I’d brushed against with my hand by accident, but holy fuck, did he feel good.

Heat pulsed between my legs.

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, the silent street extending below me. This was, for sure, fifty shades of fucked.

Why did I have to make my life harder? Why the hell had I answered his call?

I wasn’t a masochist, was I?

No.

But I also couldn’t deny that the Sag had slipped so far under my skin he thrummed through my veins right alongside my blood.

It was more than just desire that I felt for him. Yes, my entire body craved to have him moving above me, to have our flesh meet, to come undone from the thrusts of his too-fucking-attractive cock. But it was also just...him.

Fiery tears stung the corners of my eyes.

Ezra was as essential to me as Roland.

Clutching the phone in my hands, I threw myself on the couch and just stared at the ceiling, contemplating what the hell was wrong with me.

Except the more I tried to admonish myself, the more flashes of Ezra's face—the casual, tousled hair and that soft smile of his—kept assaulting my mind.

Gods, seeing him on video call—it was too intimate. It was a moment shared between people who existed on the closest level.

Worst of all, it felt so *correct*.

Like that was what my life was supposed to be like.

That infinite, easy connection, built upon in-person interactions, texts, and calls that wove the fabric of a relationship like a tapestry you didn't really see but existed beneath. Not all that dissimilar to the different energies every single individual carried within them, making them who they were.

Fundamental. Always present. A net of stability—one that wasn't fixed but rather breathed right alongside each new day.

An ache spread through my chest.

People tended to undervalue the beauty of the ease into which you fell with your partner.

I never did.

I cherished it with Roland, always. And getting a taste of it with Ezra...

I knew, I just knew that it was a core piece of a fulfilling life for me.

The ache intensified, burning through my lungs and gnawing at my ribs until they threatened to cave in on themselves.

I shouldn't have answered that call. All the work I'd put so much effort into was coming undone, my resolve wavering.

I couldn't let that happen.

Nor could I allow myself to tumble down the path of questioning why Ezra had reached out in the first place. Because I felt that direction yanking hard on my thoughts, trying to lure me into sifting through all the possible meanings behind the move he'd made.

After all, you didn't just go around making random video calls unless you liked the person, right?

Nope, nope, nope. *Not* going there.

With sweaty hands, I opened up the browser on my phone and typed in Störmer's name. I didn't dare hop back onto social media in case he noticed I was online and attempted to contact me again, so scrolling through his profile was out of the question. But I needed to do this.

While I might have taken a peek into his exceptionally dry records through ICRA, I had never drummed the courage to look him up in earnest. It felt too much like feeding the flames.

Like I cared.

This time, though, it served a different purpose.

The selection of Störmer's photos that popped up above the search results damn near gave me a heart attack. Fuck, why did the man have to look so good?

Hot in person. Hot on a video chat. Hot in photos.

He was like a curse. A freaking proverbial demon I needed to exorcise like the Devil card had suggested.

Despite all the alarms blaring in my head that maybe I wasn't strong enough to do this, that my plan just might backfire, I kept scrolling.

Not taking action was a certain way to fail, right?

This, at least, gave me a chance to obtain my goal.

The pages I looked through mostly highlighted the old bike shop show he'd done, with plenty of brief interviews thrown in. More and more, though, mentions of his wife and son popped up until I had to face the inevitable—the inevitable I'd come on here with the intention of running into but dreaded all the same.

A photo of them all together.

The images my imagination concocted of a vampire supermodel had been superb, but they hadn't even come close to the absolute beauty of Lea Weiß-Störmer. Holy shit. Legs for miles. Skinny with a lovely silhouette.

I liked to joke about how Gina carted me around like a sack of potatoes, but compared to Störmer's wife, a sack of potatoes was precisely what I was.

Their son also inherited all the handsome genes from his parents.

Shit, they looked like a lottery-win family. All smiles. Connected. A unit.

This. This is also why I'm breaking the bond, I reminded myself.

Sadly, even my inner voice sounded bitter.

On a far scarier note, another voice in me crooned that Störmer had called *despite* the wife and son in his life.

It sickened me, but there it was. The shadow side coming out to play, fueled by my Leo Venus that purred at the thought of being irresistible to Ezra Störmer.

I backed out of the article, then dove into the photo tab. Was I playing a dangerous fucking game? Maybe. But at the same time, no matter how tempting the Sag was or how much all this hurt, I needed more proof of just how profoundly I *didn't* fit into Störmer's life.

That was my one lifeline out of these crazy waters.

No matter how much his attention pleased me, being slapped in the face with solid facts of incompatibility had the power to deliver precisely the cold shower I needed.

Except that when image after image of his handsome face bombarded me from the screen, all the mouthwatering shots of his tall, well-built frame, the more irrelevant all the crap seemed.

I just...wanted the man, differences be damned.

I licked my lips and kept scrolling like I was riding a self-destructive landslide, the intentions that had set me upon this path fraying. Another route opened up before me, accompanied by the tingling heat that built between my legs.

I cast a glance over the couch toward Val's bedroom.

Her soft snores continued to weave through the darkness. Shit, shit, shit.

Was I really doing this?

Whatever works, right?

Whatever would get me through to tomorrow. And if I had to exorcise my demons through flesh...

Taking a good look at the image of Ezra Störmer on my screen and knowing I had to be fucking crazy but not caring either way, I let my free hand slip into my panties.

CHAPTER
THREE

Gaze fixed on Ezra's sinfully fine lips, I spread apart my folds.

Wetness greeted my fingers—hell, I'd been wet since the second that ridiculously handsome face of his had filled my screen.

It was what Störmer did. He commanded my body without even trying.

I traced a finger along the center of my core, then let my attention drift up along the photo to those damn warm eyes that halted the breath in my lungs every single time. Seeing how I'd had them gazing at me mere minutes ago, it didn't take long for my imagination to mix reality with visions.

It was easy, really.

Interaction after interaction, memories of the fox shifter played over the canvas of his image.

I slipped my fingers inside my aching pussy while the palm of my hand pressed hard against my clit. My body moved of its own volition to match the stroke. Again. Again.

As if I reached some unseen tipping point, the apartment around me faded, and suddenly it was Ezra shifting atop me, his frame covering mine as his dick pumped into me, stretching me, filling me...

"Ezra," I whispered into the night.

My pussy clenched as vision-Ezra gifted me that heartbreaking, panty-melting smile of his. My gaze lingered

on the curve of his mouth, on those perfect imperfect teeth, then swept up to his cheeks that were gently tinted with a flush that only made me hotter for him. Hungrier.

What was it about seeing a man affected by you that hit so hard?

By the time I reached his eyes, my body was undulating beneath his in the building rhythm of an orgasm.

Our gazes locked, and I reached out with a hand, my mind quickly replacing the air I clawed at with the sensation of Ezra's bare torso. I raked my fingers through the white-and-silver-peppered dark hair adorning his chest as my gaze traveled lower, all the way down to where our bodies met. His cock glistened with my juices as he thrust inside me over and over.

Mesmerizing.

We fit so beautifully. I just knew this moment would imprint into my memory forever.

My back arched, my fingers working me harder, faster. Like we couldn't get enough of each other—like we were the detonation that had been coming for a long while and would blast every last star from the sky.

“Fuck, Alina,” vision-Ezra groaned.

Barely holding on as wave after wave of heated pressure rolled through me and pebbled my skin, I drank him in.

The way he covered me.

The way he craved me.

The way he was coming undone just as much as I was.

“Ezra,” I whispered, too far gone for anything but forming the syllables of his name.

The name that rolled off my tongue with such smoothness I suspected it had been made to be called out during sex.

His dick twitched inside me, thickening—

My pussy clamped around my fingers, but it was Ezra's cock I was feeling—his hard length that thrust through my orgasm until he was pulsing and coming inside me, delivering the final piece of the rapture we had composed.

As I came down from the high, a sickening sensation twisted in my stomach.

The damn living room smelled of sex—of *me*.

Tight nausea replaced the last remnants of bliss.

I shoved the phone away and ran to the bathroom to wash my fingers free of my juices. Of the...evidence.

But even in the low lighting, as the water cleared away the tangible sin, I could see my reflection too clearly in the mirror. A harsh reminder that I could kill myself polishing the surface, but it still wouldn't be enough to stop the poisonous weeds from growing through the cracks in the gleaming marble.

My cheeks were flushed, my pupils were still blown, and my lips were full from the orgasm that had rocked through me because...

Because I fucking masturbated to Ezra's photo.

I masturbated to a godsdamned fantasy of him fucking me.

How had I ever thought this would be a good idea?

Cringing at myself, I ran from my reflection and reclaimed the spot on the couch even as the scent of what I'd done continued to needle me. I buried my face in my hands, just breathing for a few moments until the inner ick somewhat subsided.

I couldn't take back what I did. Nor could I forget.

But I *did* latch onto the original intention, the initial reasoning of it being one last outlet, no matter how dirty the aftermath made me feel.

I wasn't the kind of person to fantasize about someone else when I was in a committed relationship. Then again, I wasn't the person I thought I was anyway, huh?

Not since the second I'd set foot in Ezra Störmer's shop and wanted to grind my pussy all over his face.

No.

I straightened, rubbing my palms down my thighs. This was a blip in my life—and it was ending.

For what felt like the thousandth time, I reminded myself that everything I was feeling now would be gone when the bond was taken away. Störmer would have no hold over me any longer. This whole energetic, soul-linked mess would be dealt with, and I would get myself back.

The Alina who had fucking morals and standards.

Who was loyal. Faithful.

In love with her soulmate and her soulmate alone. My soul

My nails dug into my bare thighs.

What was it that I said to myself before? I wasn't in love with Ezra Störmer. I was in love with my soulmate.

Which...

Fuck, which Roland was too.

Jumping to my feet like my damn ass was on fire, I started pacing the room. The carpeted floor thankfully swallowed my footsteps, although it was only a tiny part of me that still even cared about trivialities like waking Val up when a damn storm was rolling through my mind.

What if, by liberating myself from the two additional men, I lost my bond to Roland too?

I kept thinking of him as exempt from this whole bonded crap, but wasn't it precisely the bond that had brought us together? Yes, we'd built the years of a shared life together, and nothing could take that particular aspect away, but...

Shit.

I worried on my lower lip until a faint hint of blood touched my tongue.

I thought I had a choice, that I was acting from the one place of power I still had left, but would there really be room to pick and choose which bonds went and which stayed?

Had I been living a fucking delusion this entire time?

With the walls starting to close in on me, every breath turned into a laborious effort. I scribbled a quick note to Val for her to see when she woke up and found me gone, then threw on my clothes, grabbed my stuff, and got the hell out.

I practically stumbled onto the empty street.

Maybe I expected the crisp air to lessen the twisting constriction wrecking my insides, but it sure as shit did nothing of the sort.

There was just one pull that promised relief—and that was getting my butt back home to Roland.

Still, like I'd told Val before, I didn't want to dump the whole mess I currently was into his lap, so I forced myself to walk down the pretty much abandoned streets, focusing on my footsteps and my breaths in an on-the-fly grounding exercise.

I was panicking, I knew.

Or maybe it was my ego's attempt to convince me not to break the bonds.

I halted a bit, brow furrowing as I gazed into nothing up ahead while my mind followed different pathways.

Could that be it? Was my own brain writing out catastrophic narratives just to keep me from going through with my plan?

A taxi breezed by, kicking me out of stasis.

I carried on toward home, gladly leaving my frozen state behind—but not the dawning rays of revelation. Holding my intentions like tweezers, I plied apart the jumble of newborn thoughts.

The more I did, though, the more merit this new point of view gained.

Fear could absolutely talk a person into doing plenty of shitty things. Instead of progress, you'd head in the other direction just because it felt safer, giving up on what you truly desired and settling for something less than ideal.

In my case, that would be keeping the bonds.

Just entertaining the scenario of canceling my get-together with Lotte and Gina quieted that frenzied voice, which only further confirmed I was on the right track.

I wasn't about to leave Roland for Störmer, and I certainly couldn't keep existing with the magnetic pull between the Sag and me searing my flesh every single moment of my life.

The severing needed to happen.

As soon as I envisioned that outcome, though, the panic ricocheted through me at full force.

Except this time, I was ready for it.

Wringing up some appropriate affirmation to help calm my nervous system the fuck down while simultaneously fortifying the attempt with measured breaths, I turned my nightly escape into a regulation exercise in earnest.

When I reached the next intersection, I could already appreciate the stars peppered across the dark sky above me.

Everything about my surroundings became a grounding point.

The gentle *tap-tap-tap* of my feet. A couple of laughing voices in the distance. The hum of a car. Then one of what could only be some kind of moped, judging by the rattling sound.

I took in the leafy trees lining the street.

The few rogue windows that still sported lights despite the late—or early—hour.

But most of all, I focused my awareness on my own body, adjusting my posture so that I held my head high, my shoulders straight, and walked like the damn embodiment of someone who owned her own destiny instead of a frenzied

fucking mouse who couldn't see the way out of the maze because she didn't think to actually use her senses.

The longer I kept the practices up, the easier it got to stay on the right side of the mental and nervous system regulation tracks.

I was around halfway home when I dared to weave in some more narrative.

Statements about breaking the bonds.

About the freedom I would experience.

I made sure to focus on the gains rather than on the loss because I knew that was the key to getting your subconscious on board. Though I felt some slight resistance trembling through my body, I managed to get through the statements. Little by little, I build up resilience, each small piece a fundamental building block. I didn't stop until I was able to visualize my desired outcome—the one where I was left with only Roland's bond intact—without any major freakout.

Win-fucking-win.

With this new narrative I took on, even the various pieces of my chart were satisfied.

Liberating myself from the bonds meant freedom, which soothed my Sag. The dignity that went hand in hand with *not* being a ridiculously infatuated mess played well with my Leo stellium in the Tenth. My Aqua Sun was pleased by the fact that nothing would be pushing me into being something I was not or living a life I hadn't chosen for myself.

Sticking to what I wanted for myself for certain meshed with my Mercury in Taurus, particularly since it rested in the Seventh House, which was all about love and relationships. A placement that certainly played a huge part in my life since I *had* found the one—and with him, love had brought more happiness than I could have imagined.

I grinned to myself.

This was fucking excellent.

The more I moved through all the components, through all the elements that energetically made me who I was and gave each of them something positive to gain from severing the bonds, the less and less resistance I felt toward my future actions. Because these were the true benefits.

While I'd be lying if I said no part of me mourned the things I'd be losing, they no longer ruled me as they once had.

I tipped my gaze to the star-peppered sky as I strolled along a darker street, the sky above me that much more beautiful in the absence of light.

Not all that dissimilar to my inner landscape, now that the reframe of my path spread through every cell of my body.

The...softness that had existed within me earlier no longer breathed in my chest or warmed my heart, yet I couldn't deny how empowering it was to unchain myself from the extra soulmates.

A reminder that I was enough.

That I didn't *need* Störmer's flames to make me feel alive.

All he had done was activated parts of my chart—but that was just it.

It was *my* chart.

My energy.

To consider being reliant on someone else to make you feel a certain way, *be* a certain way...

It stripped away your power and made you a slave.

The softness...

I'd get it back. Or if I didn't, I'd learn to live in this new reality. Maybe a better one that I had played in life before.

I'd just reached the outskirts of Prenzlauer Berg with the tentative yet very much present sense of peace pooling in my lungs when energy whisked across my skin.

Although I'd felt it only once before, there was no mistaking the signature. The familiarity of the vibration.

As if the Universe had placed its incorporeal hands on my shoulders, I hesitated.

Near.

The Scorpio was near.

My third soulmate.

And the man who might have caused my crash—or had been the one to bring me back from the brink of death.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Did curiosity kill the witch?
Who knew.

But it certainly led *this* one to change direction.

This was my last chance to see who the Universe had bonded me with. Who my third guy was meant to be.

Phantom hands encouraged me from behind, a soft push of power that made it even easier to follow his trail. Should it have rung alarm bells?

Maybe.

Except the decision to break the connections continued to thrum solidly within me, which was why I was even entertaining this.

I had zero intention of falling into the guy's arms. Zero. Honestly, I wasn't even planning on exchanging a single word.

But he *had* been there at the car wreck.

His energy had touched mine.

Possibly healed me—if my intuition was to be trusted.

But just in case everyone else had been right and I *was* dealing with a bad guy, I wasn't about to risk offering myself up on a platter in the middle of the night. Nor was I willing to get myself neck-deep—or, as was the case with Störmer, pussy-deep—in another complication.

I just...

I had to see who it was.

After a quick glance to make sure a car wouldn't come speeding down the road, I crossed to the other side, then followed the soul call down a narrower street.

There was no one on the sidewalk, and the steering press of phantom hands had vanished from my back, but the Scorpio's energetic imprint was strong enough to suggest he wasn't sequestered in one of the buildings.

Nope, he was out here somewhere, prowling the streets beneath the stars just like me.

Aside from the ever-present celestial transits and echoes of the mostly slumbering collective, there was little to obstruct or muddy the man's signature from my astro feelers. The more ground I covered, catching up to him, the clearer the ambrosia of the Scorpio's unique energetic blend became.

It wasn't just his Sun that matched my Rising that called to me. His Moon also lay in Scorpio, promising those deep, profound emotional waters that weren't available to just anyone, yet so rich, so rewarding when you earned the right to swim among them.

The Capricorn Mercury and Mars in the Eighth House promised a sternness that could play out very much in my favor, even more so if he was guided by his Aquarian Venus to truly embrace out-of-the-box play in the bedroom.

Just imagine, someone who didn't blindly conform to standards, who didn't shy away from unorthodox ways of love, leaning on the dominant Capricorn daddy traits?

I wrinkled my nose.

Maybe diving too deep into his energy wasn't the best idea.

I reeled my feelers back a bit, turned down the volume on all I was picking up, and focused on simply tailing the Scorpio instead—as was the damn plan.

Berlin became even quieter as we ventured into the heart of a thickly residential area, where there truly was no other

soul out here except the two of us.

My breath caught as I rounded the corner of an apartment block and spotted a lone figure up ahead. He turned right at the end of the path snaking between two buildings, but it had been enough for me to spot his tall frame, a flash of dark hair.

I rushed forward, the stars above seeming to shine brighter as if nothing existed beneath them but the hot core of my energy.

Mine—and his.

A deep sense of fate coiled through my gut.

What were the chances of me bolting from Val's just to cross paths with the soulmate I was about to give up tomorrow?

The thought slid down my spine like an ice cube.

Damn it, I could rationalize all I wanted, but this sure felt like falling into the exact same soulmate trap again.

What if, when I rounded the next corner, I found him waiting for me?

Störmer had certainly felt the pull between us.

I might be the one padding behind the Scorpio like some stalker, but that didn't mean the guy was unaware of me. After all, we'd crossed paths once before, in the most uncommon, unpredictable of circumstances. The billions of pieces the Universe was moving every single second had aligned back then for our souls to connect.

Who was to say it wouldn't happen again? Now, when it was that much easier?

Clenching my jaw, I forced my feet to halt.

The draw to meet the Scorpio was damn near unbearable, but I still remembered all too well how honoring that magnetism had led me deeper and deeper into the whole mess with Störmer. How much it *hurt* in the aftermath.

Repeating the same mistake twice?

I'd *deserve* to get my life fucked if I did that.

So, even as my soul wept when the signature became fainter and fainter, melting with the gentle currents of Berlin's energetic ocean once more, I turned around and walked away.

Walked until the Scorpio became just a whisper in the night.

Then nothing.

The panic I'd felt when I'd left Val's hadn't made a comeback, but by the time I reached my house, my soul was fucking battered. Everything ached, and I was just...tired.

I was so godsdamned tired.

Even the spikes of concern that had risen over my reckless actions—like following the damn Scorpio—were muffled under the thick layer of fatigue.

I rubbed my eyes, then made my way to the proper building. To home.

Tugging my purse to the front to fish out my keys, I latched onto that word.

Home.

Despite the turmoil, the thought of crawling into bed, snuggling against Roland's warm body... There was safety there. A steadiness that promised a haven where none of these external storms could touch me—where I could just disappear.

Right as my fingers grazed the cool, round ring of my keys, a collision rocked the world.

I went down hard in a clash of metal and grunts.

Pain laced through my body as I lay sprawled across the sidewalk, my skin burning where the concrete had scraped it open.

The metallic scent of blood mixed with the overpowering reek of beer.

Groaning, I glanced at the guy attempting to untangle himself from the bike that must have been the cause for

sending me flying.

The guy threw me sloppy apologies among a slew of curses, but I was too exhausted to even get angry. I pulled myself up, wincing as every fucking part of me hurt, and walked up to the door on shaky legs.

Faintly, I was aware that my reaction wasn't normal, but I was beyond caring. When I'd landed on that sidewalk, something inside me, something deeper than skin or bones, had shattered.

The guy's voice pelted at my back, but I just unlocked the main door, went up the short flight of stairs, and let myself into the apartment.

Warmth trickled down my legs.

I glanced down to see the glint of blood in the near-dark of the space. My mind spun, as did the room—

Then Roland was there, catching me before I tumbled.

"I've got you," he whispered.

He cradled me in his arms and carried me over to the bathroom. When he flicked on the light switch, the sharp intake of breath told me he must have seen the injuries peppered all over my flesh.

I just kept staring at the wall, numb.

"Alina, what happened?" His touch grazed my skin near one of the wounds.

I shrugged. "A bike rammed into me."

There were words, a whole lot of words coming from Roland that slipped right past me. Eventually, he stripped me of my clothes and cleaned me up, his voice a gentle cadence that continued throughout the process even as I never responded.

It was only when the touches ceased that I looked at him as he knelt before me. There was still an odd distance hanging around me, within me—like everything was stuffed with too much wool yet somehow barren at the same time.

That fissure within me cracked wider.

“I’m not drunk,” I said, for whatever reason, feeling like that was important to share. “It just...hurts, Roland.”

The tears fell before I could stop them.

Much like the words that tumbled from my mouth. “I feel like I’m losing so much. I want this. You know I do...”

“But that doesn’t have to make it easy.” He tucked a teal strand of hair behind my ear and whisked away a tear with his thumb. “I’m not going to even pretend to know what you’re going through, but giving up something as powerful as what I feel for you...”

His compassion choked me up even more.

After what I’d done tonight at Val’s, it sure felt like I didn’t deserve even a lick of it.

“Come to bed, Alina,” Roland said before I could spiral further. “You always say things look less grim in the morning, and you absolutely need to sleep.”

I nodded. He was right.

Maybe with him by my side, I actually *could* sleep.

Roland gave me some space to wash my face free of the tears and brush my teeth again. The motions didn’t give off the impression of being anything profound, but my body craved the normalcy of the routine.

What was it that I read once?

When we were in a shitty place, the foundations were the first to go. Which, in turn, made us feel even shittier.

Though it took up energy I wasn’t sure I had to expand, I did feel marginally better when I crawled into bed fresh—and ended up slipping straight into Roland’s arms. He spooned me from behind, our bodies touching everywhere they possibly could. His scent enveloped me as strongly as his hug, and in it, as I had from the very start, I found the comfort, the anchor I so desperately needed.

Somehow, whenever we were like this, I truly believed I could overcome anything.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He brushed a kiss against the back of my head. “You know I’ve got you. Always, Alina.”

On a mumbled, “I love you,” I slipped under.

As sleep claimed me, I found myself again in the vast universe peppered with stars, but though I could feel its presence, the voice urging me to find my Sun, Moon, and Rising didn’t ring out.

Like it turned its back on me—the same way I had on it by defying its orders.

And that, for some reason, despite the shitstorm of events I’d gotten caught up in, was the most terrifying thing of them all.



“Well don’t you look delightfully hungover,” Finn drawled, earning a scathing look from Gina, who’d sought me out to tell me our get-together with Lotte was definitely on today.

Which was a passably good cover for the real reason she’d come over—to check up on me before she headed home.

Damn wolf instincts.

“Thank you for that lovely, lovely compliment, Finn.” I scowled at him, then mumbled, “Not a hangover, though. Unless you can get one from being a fucking emotional wreck.”

Gina winced, but Finn just mussed up my hair like I was a kid. “No worries, witchy. Booze or feels, if you need it, I can give you a nice energy cleanse and boost.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely take him up on that offer.” Gina propped her butt on the edge of my desk. “He’s saved my ass more times than I could count.”

“Okay, fine,” I relented.

Not that I needed much convincing, given the crap state I was in—even if a part of me still believed I deserved the punishment for talking to Ezra last night. Then masturbating to the fantasy of him fucking me.

Masturbating. To. The. Fantasy. Of. Him. Fucking. Me.

Shit, how messed up was that?

My stomach roiled as the weight of what I’d done hit me again.

I grimaced and looked at Finn. “I’ll be eternally grateful if you can magic me into a better state.”

“Sure. It’s always a pleasure to help pretty ladies out.” He wagged his brows.

Gina just smacked him on the shoulder, and the whole thing caused an unexpected laugh to burst from my lips.

“Meet me outside in twenty?” he asked. “The sun and warm weather will boost everything.”

Coming, at least in part, from one of the OG lines of witches who were connected closely to nature—spring, to be more precise—it made sense that utilizing the elements would produce an even better result.

I nodded. “I’ll meet you there.”

Finn sauntered off while Gina lingered for a moment longer.

In some way, I almost wished I could have just run off with Finn because the vulnerability that opened up the second Gina and I were alone...

It was almost unbearable.

“It’ll be fine, Alina.” She reached out to hold my hand. “But if you don’t want to do this, we can still call the whole thing off.”

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to take her up on that offer. Badly.

But because I now knew that would signify handing the reins over to my ego, all I did was shake my head. “No, I need my life back.”

Gina dipped her chin, then, much to my surprise, left me to my own devices. Or maybe I really shouldn't have been so shocked. Gina was, after all, a good fucking friend, and good fucking friends always knew when to linger, when to push, and when to walk away.

I busied myself with work for the next ten minutes or so, going over a bunch of charts and transits, but I couldn't really focus on anything. The papers in front of me were just smudges of black streaked across the white.

Groaning, I shoved them aside and decided I might as well clear my head for a bit before I met up with Finn. Then he'd work his magic on me, and shit would get better.

The ICRA building was teeming with people, but thankfully everyone seemed to be on their own track, paving my way out free of any unwanted interactions. Then again, it could also simply be my Scorpio rising coming out full force, warning people off.

Sometimes, the so-called negatives of astrological placements weren't all that bad. The gods knew I couldn't handle any chit-chat right now.

I spilled out through the front doors into the sunshine.

As always on days like these, Berlin was bursting with tourists. They kept their distance from HQ, though, leaving me with a tiny slice of solitude I could claim for myself.

I tilted my head toward the sun, focusing on the warm rays caressing my skin—

That turned into an ice storm as the distinct rumble of a motorcycle vibrated in the air around me.

Although it was far enough away that I should have been safe, I didn't dare look in its direction. It felt like I'd be inviting trouble in if I did.

There was, of course, a chance it wasn't even Ezra riding it, except...

Deep down, I knew.

In my fucking soul, I *knew* it was my godsdamned soulmate living the freedom of cruising the streets on his Harley.

The image had no right to hurt as much as it did.

Reminding myself that I only had to get through a few more hours, I kept my back firmly to the sound.

Just a few more hours, and then my heart would stop feeling like it was being cleaved apart.

Or maybe I'd end up with just a third of my heart left.

CHAPTER
FIVE

While a lot of people would probably kill to be standing on the doorstep of a rock star's home with an invitation to come in, the sickness coiling in my stomach had nothing to do with being near someone famous.

Hell, I would have taken celeb nerves over this any time of the freaking day.

Not that my proud-as-fuck Leo stellium in the Tenth would let me stoop so low, but...

Part of me wanted to digress from a whole lot more than just the topic. As in, turn my ass around and march all the way back to Prenzlauer Berg kind of more.

But before I could truly act on the cold feet I was getting, the door to the apartment swung open.

A frown immediately landed on Gina's face.

Yep, I most definitely looked like shit again. The magic Finn had worked on me had been marvelous. It should have kept me, if not at my best, at least fucking together instead of fraying at the seams.

Apparently, not even his juice was strong enough to withstand the long hours that had dragged on in the office, the magic dying out and wilting faster than a metaphorical Libra rising bouquet in a hideous environment.

A dry laugh bubbled from my lips.

"Alina?" Gina's frown deepened.

I waved off her concern, though even to me, the gesture didn't look at all right. "I'll be fine."

Gina, of course, didn't believe me for shit. She wrapped an arm around me, pouring her love into the gesture, and steered me into her and Aric's apartment, not once letting go.

A distant side of me that wasn't entirely gone yet appreciated the wide-open area that greeted the eye. The gorgeous floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Rummelsburger See allowed in an abundance of natural light, highlighting the guitars peppered throughout the spacious living room.

The whole energy of the place was just so right, and I didn't doubt for a second that it had a lot to do with its original creator—the rock star who'd sauntered into the space.

Aric Sutter was the absolute perfect specimen of a rockabilly bad boy designed to steal your breath. He was beyond handsome with his tall build, clad from head to toe in black, night-dark greaser hair and a playful, fiery energy entwined with his essence—yet he did nothing for me.

I certainly liked and appreciated him, a lot at that, but purely in a platonic way.

Gina, on the other hand, damn near melted when he flashed a crooked smile her way.

That, at least, made me temporarily forget about the predicament I was walking myself into.

"Ladies," Aric drawled, "I'm headed to the studio, so you have the entire place to yourself for as long as you need."

The pull between Gina and Aric was palpable, but she was too reluctant to release her hold on me to actually do anything on her own. So I slipped from under her arm and actually smiled in earnest when she sailed across the room to plant a kiss on Aric's lips.

"I'll call you when we're done." She linked her hand with his. "Maybe swing by the studio."

This time, it was Aric who delivered a smoldering kiss.

Seeing the two of them together...

It reminded me of what I had with Roland.

Of what I would do anything to protect.

I eased my butt on the off-white sofa, feeling just a bit more like myself.

“I’d like that,” Aric purred at Gina before turning to me. “Alina, you’ll be coming to the post-award party, yeah?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I admitted.

I knew what a big deal this was for the Whiskey Jet Preachers guys, and honestly, a night of fun celebrating with friends and Roland by my side sounded like precisely what I needed.

It was my turn to be floored by the damn wattage of Aric’s smile—of course, in a vastly different way than Gina.

“See you there.” He winked, then sauntered out the door, grabbing his car keys along the way.

I laughed as Gina remained standing rooted to the spot long after he was gone.

“Girl, you’ve got it so bad,” I snickered.

She turned a playful glare my way. “I’d like to see you date a guy you’ve been worshipping on stage for a decade. Sometimes, I still wonder how the fuck this is my reality.”

With a wave of her arm, she encompassed the beautiful space, but we both knew it wasn’t living in an upscale apartment right next to Rummelsburger See that she was referring to.

Though it was a far cry from her old place in Spandau.

She came to sit with me on the couch, an echo of her smile still playing on her lips. “I don’t think I’ll ever take any of this for granted.”

“Then don’t. Whoever says you can’t be crazy happy about your guy and your life doesn’t know shit. You made your

dreams your reality. You can be as over the moon as you fucking want about that.”

“Speaking from experience?” Gina asked softly, though it wasn’t because she feared she was poking into a subject that would have been better left alone given the circumstances.

No, the gentle tentativeness was for her.

Because the kind of reality I mentioned—it was the reality she desired. Hoped for.

I didn’t need to read her chart to glean the information. That beautiful dream was written all over her face, and I loved her even more for it.

“Absolutely,” I said with all the fierce conviction I felt. “I never really came out of the honeymoon phase with Roland that everyone kept harping on about. As if, for some reason, it should be normal for me to...I don’t know, not be so enthusiastic about my partner any longer?”

I wrinkled my nose, and Gina laughed.

“What a load of crap, right?” I arched a brow at her. “My jaw will always fucking drop when Roland walks around the apartment in nothing but his boxer briefs. My heart will always fucking soar when I look at him because he’s just so damn fine, it’s surreal. I know I’ll always come into our days with gratitude and appreciation that I get to be a part of his life. That I get to witness this beautiful person on his journey.

“I’m with Roland not because I *was* madly in love with him but because I *am* madly in love with him. Time shouldn’t change this shit.”

“That’s how I feel about Aric,” Gina whispered.

I wasn’t entirely convinced she’d said that to me and not just to herself, but I nodded regardless. “Really, fuck how people think things should look like. It’s all just because they’ve never experienced something different before or even questioned it. Because they just keep perpetuating the same crap that had somehow become the norm in society.

“If you ask me”—I sucked in a much-needed breath because, damn, I really got worked up over this—“life is meant to be enjoyed and celebrated. It’s meant to be fun, fulfilling. If it turns into something you’re settling for, something that’s just safe without any fucking excitement, passion, or toe-curling satisfaction, then what’s the point?”

Okay, maybe that was predominantly my Sag Moon and Leo Venus talking, but damn it, it had been the idea of how most people perceived life that had nearly killed all my inner light back when I was still in college.

Back before I met Roland.

Because viewing things through that lens, our time here on earth sure as hell looked like a series of drab events that, honestly, I saw no real reason—or had any motivation—to move through.

Finding Roland had opened me up to a whole different reality, and if other people wanted to participate in a dull, shitty life, I knew that I didn’t have to. That it was my choice how to live out my days.

Something twisted in my stomach at that final thought, but thankfully Gina’s movements lured me into the present moment before I could even acknowledge the small voice calling me a hypocrite.

Or worse, the underlying truth that caused the voice to call me out in the first place.

Gina braced one arm on the backrest of the couch and propped her head against a loose fist. “So,, basically, you’re saying if I want to fangirl every single day of my immortal life over Aric, I should go for it? Won’t the weirdness creep in eventually? Or maybe enough people will point out how ridiculous I am and—”

“Gina...” I said on the verge of my heart breaking for her.

She wasn’t the type of person to really show much insecurity. Or, at the very least, I’d never seen her so... concerned.

“Aric loves you. Hell, he loved you for ten years you spent watching him from the front row, singing all his lyrics, and hanging around at afterparties like the biggest fucking fan you always were. Wouldn’t it be kind of pointless to take that away? If he’d wanted someone else, then he wouldn’t have chosen his wolf girl.”

I winked. “Besides, given how much bad press he got when his past got dragged out into the open, I don’t really think he’s the kind of guy to put much value on what other people say—or shape his life according to other people’s opinions.”

Gina cleared her throat, then glanced at the clock. “Lotte should be here any second.”

It was a change of subject for sure, but I could also tell she needed some time to let my words sink in, and that was fine with me.

She tipped her head to the side, studying me. “How are you holding up?”

The question hit different now that we’d had our talk. I hadn’t even realized how much my fire had burned through the nerves with every point of conviction I’d laid out to Gina. Enough that I gained something resembling clarity about the entire situation.

My current feelings included.

“I’m just afraid of fucking this up,” I admitted. “Actually, I’m *terrified* of fucking things up.”

“That breaking your bond with Ezra will be a mistake?”

“That I’ll accidentally sever the one I have with Roland,” I corrected, although fuck if Gina’s words weren’t also the truth.

What was right and what was wrong flipped on the hour.

It would have been damn nice if there was some sort of intuition detector you could hook yourself up to and see what was genuine gut guidance and what stemmed from a bunch of made-up interpretations from the head. Unfortunately, I had nothing but my own guesses to go on.

“That won’t happen,” Gina assured me—and I needed a second to figure out she was talking about the bond with Roland, about my fear of accidentally breaking it in the process. “Lotte is a mated woman. She would never do anything to jeopardize something as sacred as a *wanted* bond.”

“I trust your judge—”

The energy in the space swelled.

I turned toward the epicenter that burned just on the other side of the coffee table. Except instead of seeing a half-demon manifesting from particle into corporeal form, the power catapulted into overdrive.

I could barely breathe as the magnitude of it saturated every last atom of air.

Shit.

This wasn’t just the announcement bell of a demon taking shape on our plane.

It was the kind of power that could level worlds.

I’d been ready for Lotte.

Instead, who came for me, was death.

CHAPTER
SIX

My brain must have glitched. There was no other explanation for it.

Why would death be here?

It wasn't my time. It didn't *feel* like my time.

Or was this punishment for trying to break the bonds?

An invisible noose coiled around my neck, though the discomfort was secondary to the skull-crushing magnitude of energy that had saturated every last atom of space and pressed against my skin until I thought I was going to burst.

Strands flared to life—thousands of arcane ropes undulating outward like electrical wires. But regardless of their vibrancy, they were barely a blip on the radar in comparison to the sheer fucking power that continued to choke me up.

Divine power.

No, no, this had to be some mistake.

Death didn't just pop up in someone's home.

Except the longer I gaped at the tall, dark-haired figure standing at the forefront of the group—the *group*, a whole fucking group I'd somehow failed to register though I definitely had to have seen them—the clearer it became that the scene wasn't a figment of my imagination.

I swallowed. “Gina, why are there gods in your apartment?”

“And demon lords,” she muttered quietly, not helping the tiniest bit.

Though despite the clear surprise at seeing the new arrivals, there was no fear in *her* voice, only amusement.

Me, on the other hand...

I wasn't handling this well.

The energy that oozed from the group was flooring me. It had only climbed in magnitude with every second that had passed, and my astro senses were working on overdrive to process the information.

It made me dizzy than blood loss.

More disoriented than getting hit by a nasty spell.

Through the fog, my gaze snagged on a familiar figure, her blonde hair and athletic body unmistakable. I latched onto the impression until Lotte came into focus.

I wished I could do the same with her energy, just block everything else out until only her imprint remained, but no such luck.

Everything inside me was still working on overdrive, my feelers for the arcane spinning and overloading.

Even Lotte was falling out of focus again, but not before I saw her frown, then roll her eyes at the people gathered beside her.

“Will you guys tone it down,” she said dryly, like she wasn't at all intimidated by the fucking powerhouse each individual within the group was.

Not that Lotte wasn't formidable in her own right, hell no.

She held the superintendent position at the Munich branch of ICRA. Was a werewolf who had undergone a transformation into a half-demon against her will and survived. And—my gaze caught on another, slightly less but still familiar, figure with long dark purple hair—she was mated to one of the demon lords who'd shown up for this...uh,

gathering. Which effectively made Lotte a co-ruler of a slice of the Shadow World, the native realm of demonkind.

Afanasiy, the mate in question, was the first to pull his energy back. Then the rest followed.

Breath filled my lungs.

“Sincerest apologies,” Death himself said. “Our powers sometimes play off one another, becoming amplified in a way that feels normal to us but might be overwhelming to someone else. Especially, from what I’ve been told, a witch whose specialty is energies.”

I just blinked at Veles, the freaking lord of the freaking underworld, then swept my gaze along the rest of the entourage, at long last truly seeing them.

There were nine of them in total, including Veles, and I honestly didn’t think I would ever, fucking *ever*, be in the presence of so much power.

Even with their signatures dimmed, they were still...a lot for a witch to handle.

“I probably should have given you a heads-up that I decided to bring some additional resources along with me, huh?” Lotte winced, tucking a blonde strand behind her ear. “I just figured that with what we were tackling, more knowledge and experience would serve us better than less.”

“Makes sense,” I said, though my voice still sounded too distant to be anywhere near normal.

Lotte picked up on it, her body language shifting into even more of a relaxed state to put me at ease.

It helped, but only marginally.

“Everyone here has invaluable and specific expertise around magic, soul bonds, and mate bonds,” Lotte said.

Then, with the assertiveness befitting someone who held such a prominent position within the Interspecies Crimes and Relations Agency, she added, “I handpicked them myself.”

While it was another clear attempt to normalize the situation as much as possible, I had to admit the tactic was taking root. Just a bit. I trusted Lotte, and the authority she poured out only fortified the sensation. The lingering issue was that my brain had thoroughly flipped into survival mode.

It was a long climb back to bring my rational brain online.

Still, despite my continuously thrashing heart, bit by bit, the assurances Lotte was giving out formed a ladder for me to tackle one step at a time.

“I know you’re familiar with some of us”—she winked at the clear reference to herself and the times we’d hung out when she came to visit Gina—“and probably heard of a few others, but let me make a round of introductions.”

As great as I was with birth charts, names tended to go in one ear and straight out the other. I forced my mushed-up mess of a brain to pay attention.

I really, *really* didn’t want to accidentally insult any of these individuals.

“This is our trio of deities.” Lotte waved a hand, and my gaze immediately landed on the figures she was referring to.

While us supes here in Germany weren’t quite as exposed to the gods, that didn’t mean something primal inside me wasn’t very much aware of their presence. Or the respect they commanded—because it *was* them who kept so much of our reality going.

Them who’d kept the world from falling apart all those years ago when the supernatural war had broken out and a bunch of ancient assholes had wanted to tweak the world to their liking...which would have ended with humans serving as no more than chattel. Probably the rest of us *lesser* species too.

And because of what the trinity of death had done, what their allies had done when they had unleashed a counter-power across the world, so many beings who believed themselves to be human were awoken to their supernatural heritage.

Meeting Roland was my personal arcane catalyst.

But I couldn't say with certainty that the War didn't have something to do with unlocking those dormant genes that would have otherwise remained buried even upon meeting my soulmate.

Lotte clearly waited for my wandering brain to refocus before she went on with the introductions.

"This guy right here, trying to pull the whole mysterious dark deity vibe, is Veles." She gestured to the black-haired god I'd seen first, who didn't really require an introduction.

He gave Lotte a playful eye roll of all things.

Wait, what?

Was that another brain glitch of mine?

Before I could ponder too much on what the hell just happened, Lotte moved on to the next person. "Next up, we have Morana."

At Lotte's words, the goddess with black-and-white hair gave me a warm smile that was the polar opposite of her wintery looks.

"And, of course," Lotte concluded with a wolfish grin that was promptly reciprocated, "Rose."

Lotte's brothers' pack mate. The werewolf-turned-deity.

Rose offered me a little wave, the corners of her eyes crinkling with unmistakable kindness. But there was also wisdom in her gold-speckled eyes that only a person who'd gone through a lot of shit of their own could possess.

I sucked in a breath and properly took in the three deities.

The trinity of death, they were called.

Morana was responsible for plucking souls from this world when their time came.

Rose was the one whose energy accompanied you to the gates of the underworld.

And Veles was the being who ruled the underworld—and acted as the final caretaker of souls.

A part of me felt like I should be kneeling before them, but Lotte...

She treated them like family, and the energy of that was so strong, the affection between them so prominent, that I couldn't help but ease into the atmosphere even more.

Lotte smiled like she knew precisely what was going on with me, then continued with the introductions. "Here we have Crina and Breccan."

The two demon lords, because there was no mistaking what they were, made themselves known—Crina with a wicked grin that made me instantly like her, while Breccan was more reserved. Though with the ancient feel coming off the man with damn near waist-length, white-blond hair and a scar carving up the side of his face, I knew it wasn't personal.

The immortals who'd been around for a long, long time were...different. Not in a bad way, but their worldview and experiences for sure differed from someone who had barely seen three decades.

"They're also mated," Lotte explained, "*and* bound by a soul bond, not just between the two of them, but one that encompasses Crina's other partner as well."

My brows rose at that—I mean, two guys, hello?—but Lotte went on with her agenda before I could say anything...or pull up the cords that had dissipated from sight as soon as the group had dampened their energetic output.

"This is Simon, Crina's best friend and an absolute genius in non-conventional magic."

"Computer geek but with an arcane twist," the guy who looked like he worked out for a living instead of sitting behind a computer said with a grin.

"Lena"—Lotte gestured to a short, dark-haired woman brimming with badass energy—"who's also a demon lord, but mated to a Perelesnyk, so she knows a thing or two about bonds as well."

A demon mated to an incubus dragon? Not a pairing I'd ever heard of before.

Now that most of the shock had ebbed from my body, I could feel my hope growing.

Lotte had done a phenomenal job assembling this team.

As if she knew, a smug smile tugged on her lips before she turned to the final person in the room. “And Afanasiy, who you’ve met already, if I remember correctly.”

I nodded. It was just one time that I actually encountered the imposing, dark-haired demon lord himself when he and Lotte had visited Gina at ICRA HQ, but it wasn’t something I could have easily forgotten.

Kind of like these introductions.

While my fears of forgetting the names hadn’t been unfounded, especially when being presented in a group setting, it all seemed laughable now. Because with these guys?

An actual laugh tore through my mental tones.

No, you didn’t really forget individuals like these.

“Everyone, this is Alina”—Lotte gestured to me before doing a dramatic wave toward the vamp-wolf sitting on my right—“and Gina.”

Clearly, they must have known a thing or two about us because a round of knowing nods swept through the group.

That they knew Gina, I wasn’t surprised. She was close friends with Lotte—who was deeply embedded in the demonic realm and also sister to two werewolves who ran with the gods.

Me, though—she’d obviously filled everyone in on my case, as Veles’s earlier comment hinted at.

A blessing, really.

It might have gotten easier to breathe since they’d toned their energy down, and the round of introductions had made them somewhat less...intimidating...but I still wasn’t sure just how well I’d be able to explain my predicament.

Nerves and a cool, rational mind didn’t play well together all that much.

Even if I wasn't in full-out survival mode any longer.

Actually, now that I felt better, faint amusement bubbled through me at the sight of us. Gina and me sitting on the couch, the rest of them standing there just on the other side of the club table. Hell, it looked like some sort of supernatural intervention.

Though, in a way, wasn't that precisely what this was?

"I think we need more chairs." Gina frowned as if picking up on my thoughts, then lightly scowled at Lotte. "Thanks for making me look like a shitty host."

"Just testing to see if the Berlin branch is keeping their agents resourceful." Lotte just gave her a shit-eating grin.

Laughing, Gina shook her head and stood—presumably to grab some more seating options. "I feel sorry for the agents under your command."

Lotte scoffed. "I'm the best fucking boss, and you know it."

She wrapped up the sentence with a wink—and almost looked ready to go with Gina to grab the extra seats before she realized it would leave me alone with a roomful of powerful individuals I'd only just met. So, instead of following, she claimed Gina's old seat beside me while the trinity of death trailed behind my friend to help out.

The trinity of death.

Grabbing chairs.

This shit was surreal.

"Lotte filled us in on what's been going on," Lena said, deciding to perch on the edge of the coffee table.

The ease in her posture told me that casually lounging anywhere she damn pleased was a regular occurrence.

I instantly liked her even more.

"We've all had our fair share of either unusual powers, unconventional bonds, or weird af heritages"—she winked at Crina, who barked out a laugh, clearly very much on board

with whatever eccentric parameters she fit into—“so the stuff that’s usually not the norm kind of became our normal.”

Crina squeezed herself onto the corner of the table beside Lena, shoving her—I was sure of it—friend aside with her hip. “It’s been one fuck of a ride for a lot of us, but we all managed to make sense of it in the end. Whatever’s going on with you, we’ll figure it out. Let’s just hope Simon doesn’t get a boner over working with such unique magic.”

He snorted. “Fuck you, Crin.”

Behind them, Breccan released a chuckle I wouldn’t have expected from an ancient demon lord.

Gina and the trinity of death filtered back into the room, each carrying a couple of chairs. Lotte stuck to the spot beside me, and Gina perched on the armrest on my left while everyone else dropped into a free chair.

I noticed they were carefully spaced out, and my gut warned me what was about to happen before Rose even said, “If it’s okay with you, we’d like to scope you out with our powers.”

“I’d like to mark some samples before that to get a better reading.” Simon waved three small gadgets through the air.

Lena whistled. “You brought the good stuff, didn’t you?”

At my confused look, Lotte supplied, “Lena is also big on mag-tech and not just the boring, run-of-the-mill stuff. She was actually the first to introduce me to this whole other side of the arcane.”

“Huh...makes my astro app feel like amateur work,” I muttered, earning a well-meaning chortle from Lotte while both Lena and Simon looked at me like they were dying for more info.

“Later,” Lotte warned us all before we derailed, then turned to me. “You ready?”

When I nodded, Simon approached. He placed one of the machines on the coffee table in front of me and another into my palm while keeping the third in his hand.

“You’ll probably feel just a light sensation as it scans you,” he said in reference to the sleek black device resting in my palm. “These other two will just give me additional readings so that I can get a better grasp of your magic in case the soulmate bonds are tied to your specific brand.”

“Okay.” I steeled myself with a breath. “Go for it.”

Whatever I’d prepared myself for, the gentle, ghostly caress flowing through my body wasn’t it. I relaxed into the sensation, releasing my grip on my astro senses when the device’s power asked for entry and just allowed it to cruise through everything I was.

Unlike being prodded by foreign magic stemming from an actual person, there was nothing invasive about this—though I had a feeling that would change once Simon was done.

I almost lamented when he announced precisely that a couple of minutes later.

He removed the devices, then sat on the chair farthest back, leaving Afanasiy, Crina, Veles, Rose, Morana, Breccan, and Lena in a sort of half circle around me—completed with Lotte on my right.

“Do you need me to move farther away?” Gina asked, glancing among the supernatural gearing themselves up for the next step, if the slight sharpening of the energy was any indication.

Lena waved her concerns away. “You’re fine. Just make sure you’re not touching until we’re done.”

After Gina put just a slightly larger margin of space between us, there was no more stalling.

I gave everyone a nod with confidence I didn’t really feel, then tried to relax to the best of my ability. Resistance only made things more painful, but fuck, it wasn’t easy to drop my guard.

“We’ll be gentle,” Rose assured me.

Though I believed her, intuition also cautioned that with the magnitude of power we were dealing with here, this kind

of exploration couldn't exactly be a walk in the park for me.

Not that there was any turning back now.

Then magic surged, and eight different, beautiful storms flowed through me like a waterfall. One after the other, they sailed through me, touching every single part of who I was—body, magic, and soul alike. They were like the waves of the ocean washing onto the shore, and despite the potency, there was something almost...serene about it.

I just wished it could last, but that was a fool's hope.

After they circled through me one last time, all eight currents slipped beneath my skin at once.

I didn't have the usual arcane defenses witches did—my own powers didn't work like that—but I could feel my astro magic going into a frenzy, trying to fight against something it had no chance of holding back.

“Breathe,” Gina's voice fluttered through to me.

I hadn't even realized that my eyes had snapped shut—or that I was gritting my teeth, my fingers digging into my thighs.

It was too much.

Too much power for a single person to hold.

My skin itched, burned, stretched too fucking tightly, but I did as Gina said.

I breathed.

Again and again, until I overrode my natural response and placated my power. Convinced it to pool within me but not thrash.

It didn't solve the issue of there being too much damn stuff inside the container that was my body, but at least with my own magic quieter, the strain had also lessened somewhat.

Even a marginal reprieve was better than nothing.

Now all that was left for me to do was brave the storm.

After I'd been put through the wringer for what felt like fucking ages, the powers retreated. My vision went dark, and

my head spun so hard I toppled forward—and would have probably spilled right onto the floor if Gina hadn't caught me.

She hugged me close, then kissed my cheek. "Let me get you a glass of water."

I nodded gratefully, worn out and parched from the magic infusion. I pried my eyes open in time to see her hurry off to the kitchen. There was no other movement in the room, the space eerily silent save for my gulping breaths and the distant trickle of water into a glass.

I blinked through the fog until the powerhouses came back into focus.

"Were you successful? Did you see the bonds? Can you undo them?" I rasped.

It seemed every damn person in the room shared a knowing look.

Everyone except me.

"What?" I demanded, though the sound was weak.

Still looking at me like I was a grand puzzle, Rose said, "Your souls...they're connected."

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“Well, isn’t that how bonds work?” I blabbed, not getting why Rose would point out the obvious.

After all, it was why we were here. Because I was connected to two more guys than I wanted to be.

My brain ached, trying to puzzle together what else she could have meant when Breccan cleared his throat.

“Not just connected like bonds between mates, Alina.” He exchanged yet another loaded look with Afanasiy while I still wasn’t getting it. “Mate bonds are pathways. Metaphysical bridges individuals construct between themselves when they accept one another, consciously or not. Rarer bonds exist as well, and even then, they are an offering that turns into a union. Your souls...they are quite literally tied to one another.”

“Why do I get the feeling this is really bad news?” My throat was dry as hell, the words still raspy.

Gina handed me the promised glass of water that I eagerly gulped down two-thirds of before my stomach cramped. It wasn’t just from drinking too fast either.

The tension in the room remained, a living thing that held its breath and put me so much on edge I had half a mind to bolt before hearing something I could never unhear.

Gina reached out and placed a palm on my thigh.

“We all deal with souls,” Rose said, gesturing to herself and the two deities flanking her, “all souls who reside or had once resided on earth. But this feels like...”

“It’s coming from beyond.” Veles’s smooth voice filled the empty space where Rose had trailed off.

“Beyond?” I choked out.

The god dipped his chin but never took his gaze off me. “As in, your soul isn’t ours to command.”

Noticing my panic, Rose smacked him in the chest. “What he means is that the force might release you to us when it’s time, but until then, you are not ours to touch. Whatever this presence is, it’s guiding you. Protecting you.”

“Doesn’t feel much like protection,” I muttered, earning a compassionate look from Morana.

“Death often doesn’t feel like that either,” she said gently, “but once I extend my hand, give a soul over to Rose who brings it to Veles...what that soul gets is eternal peace. Light. People often fear the unknown because there are so many misconceptions about what it may represent. But what stems from fear is rarely right.”

Rose nodded. “You have your own path in this world, Alina.”

More than likely seeing I still wasn’t nearly all right with any of this, Rose went on, “We’ve all had our fair share of unique experiences. I was born a werewolf. Ascended with my pack to an ancient, damn near mythological power that bound our souls together and turned us into immortal protectors of this land. Oh, and let’s not forget that I transcended into a deity along the way.”

“I was returned to this world after being lost to it for ages,” Morana added with a shrug.

“I had a demonic side ingrained into me and somehow survived the change.” There was just the smallest edge of bitterness to Lotte’s voice, as if those nightmares of memories continued to live inside her despite the love for her existence she now had. “And one of your closest friends did the impossible, her werewolf body accepting a vampire’s bite that turned her.”

I glanced at Gina, the genuine, grateful smile gracing her face for the second chance at life she'd been given.

"I'm an impossibility too," Crina offered, releasing a pair of majestic black wings that knocked the breath right out of me.

"Well damn," Simon snarked, "how the hell am I supposed to contribute to this oh-so-special pissing contest?"

Despite everything, I barked out a laugh. Simon's responding grin told me he'd definitely accomplished his mission with the comment, and I was fucking grateful for it.

"Most of us believed we were cursed at some point or another before the beauty of our path made itself known," Breccan said, the reserved demon lord surprising the fuck out of me.

All of them were clearly thriving. There was no denying it. Nor did I doubt for a second they *didn't* go through hell to be where they were now.

But when it came to me, when I considered what keeping these soul bonds meant...

It just broke me all over.

"That's it, I'm bringing out the whiskey," Gina commented and promptly darted off to grab a bottle.

Lotte followed after her, and within a couple of minutes, every single person had a glass of whiskey in their hands—or, in Gina's case, *bloodsky*. I cradled my glass, staring at the amber liquid as a tense silence weaved through the group.

We all knew what their findings meant, but still, when I couldn't take it any longer, I voiced the terror that had become my reality.

"So...basically, what you're saying with all this is that there's nothing you can do to sever the bonds?" My voice broke a bit at the end.

Veles took a long sip of the whiskey as if the failure had affronted him personally. "Even if we could somehow circumvent the force that is currently guiding your life and

were able to intervene, the way your and your mates' souls are entwined... There would be no way for us to break the bonds without breaking your soul."

No way for us to break the bonds without breaking your soul.

Shivers crawled down my skin.

"If you don't want to engage with the other soulmates, you could do it through willpower," Lena offered. "But it takes a lot, and I mean *a lot*, to walk away from a bond."

Crina's brow furrowed. "But even that applies to demons who found a potential soulmate and hadn't already established a connection."

I nodded, understanding what she meant. In my search for answers, I found a few insights into how the demonic bonds work. Demons had more than one person compatible with their energy, more than one person in the pool of potential mates. They got to choose which one they would tie themselves to as long as they walked away fast enough.

I hadn't even met the Scorpio yet—properly, I refused to count the accident as our first encounter—and I'd damn near stalked him through Berlin in the middle of the night.

"We should get back to Ljubljana," Rose said gently to her fellow gods, then to me, "I'm sorry we couldn't be of more help. I truly am."

A knot formed in my throat. "You took time away from your duties to try to help me out. I appreciate that more than I could possibly say, even if the result isn't what any of us wanted."

"A soul beyond our scope," Veles said, not without affection.

"Even if it can only be from afar, we'll keep an eye on you." This came from Morana.

It should have been scary to have the goddess of death tell you she intended to have you in her sights, but I understood

now that the trinity of death—they loved the souls who arrived into their care.

Besides, when my time came, I did *not* want to end up drifting aimlessly through the universe.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

After a few more farewells, Veles, Rose, and Morana linked hands, then *poofed* into thin air.

The whiskey made another round, and as the bottle reached me, Breccan spoke, “Your soulmate connections might not be as catastrophic as you believe right now.”

Not having it in me to argue, I just poured the whiskey and passed it on to Lotte.

Breccan cleared his throat. “I fought hard when I realized Crina was my mate.”

Now that had me glancing up at the demon lord. From the way the two of them were with each other, I never would have guessed any kind of resistance could have ever existed between the pair.

“It’s true.” Crina licked the whiskey off her lips. “I’m pretty sure if he wasn’t my demon lord, he would have ghosted me completely. Well, he tried his damn best anyway.”

On her right, Simon gave a knowing nod.

“And it hurt like fuck,” Crina went on, clearly unbothered by sharing such personal stuff. “I wasn’t actively looking for a mate. Shit, I’d only gotten some measure of agency over my life at that time... But the period when Breccan turned his back on me? It wasn’t pretty.”

To soften the harshness of her words, she slid her hand along his thigh, giving a gentle squeeze to his knee in reassurance.

While I was aware there were volumes of backstory I was missing, it was also pretty damn obvious that Breccan had struggled with the bond for valid, not frivolous, reasons. Reasons that had left a scar—and I wasn’t talking about the visible one running alongside his face.

As if called for confirmation, the cord between them flared, the energy speaking of a turbulent past, of ancient, deep hurts...and healing.

Before I could get too engrossed in the beauty of the energy that made up their connection, Lotte's voice brought me back into the room.

"I was a full-blooded werewolf still when I first met Afanasiy. A werewolf with some serious commitment issues. Let me tell you, this guy hit me like a ton of bricks. The pull between us wasn't like anything I'd ever felt."

"And it certainly came as a surprise," Afanasiy added. "I have been around for a long time and had never come across a single person with compatible energy. I actually offered her a piece of my soul to keep her safe. So that she could call on me."

He glanced at Breccan, but whatever silent communication passed between the two demon lords lightened the atmosphere substantially.

I tried to puzzle out what all that was about, but there was something about Afanasiy when he trained his gaze back on me that captured all my attention and focus.

Hell, I actually found myself leaning forward as he began to speak again.

"Giving someone a soul connection in the demonic realm as opposed to a standard mate bond isn't exactly a practice that's encouraged in the Shadow World. A connection like that could be abused—and similar bonds have a long and dark past that no one has any desire to repeat. But I didn't even think twice about forming such a connection with Lotte. To anyone on the outside, it would have seemed like madness."

"And yet you're not the only one who experienced the desire to form such a bond," Breccan said with a tilt of his chin, reaching out to take Crina's hand in his.

Lena watched them all with a small smile on her face before turning to me. "I ran from my mate. As in, no joke, I legit ran out of his house and right to the closest nightclub. It

terrified the fuck out of me to bind myself to someone when I was still so young. What made everything worse was that I had a whole foolproof system set up for myself.

“If I only ever slept with people once, I could walk away regardless of compatibility. Caz was supposed to be a one-and-done thing, but when we ran into each other again, when we decided to work on a case together...

“Falling for him was easier than walking away, and that freaked me the fuck out. I just dug my own hole deeper and deeper the longer I was around him. But when I ran, I also realized that I didn’t really want anyone else. That I was running from something good, even if I was scared shitless of it.”

Crina chuckled. “What is it with demons and commitment issues?”

Afanasiy snorted and threw his arm around Lotte. “Speak for yourself.”

“Overcommitment could still be classified as an issue,” Crina drawled while Lotte let out a howling laugh.

Breccan shook his head in a kind of fatherly way that almost—almost—made me chuckle before he leaned forward, his forearms braced on his powerful thighs, and pinned me with the full weight of his ancient attention. “What we all want to say is that perhaps you should entertain the possibility that having these bonds is not necessarily bad.”

“Mm-hmm...” I pursed my lips, sloshing what little remained of the whiskey around the glass, as if the liquid could somehow smooth over all that was broken within me.

I raised my gaze to the group.

They all looked so...hopeful.

And it just shattered me that much more.

“Bonds might not be bad,” I said around the tightness in my throat, “but I’m presuming that when all your stories unfolded, none of you were already married to the love of your life either, huh?”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

The silence was so thick, it would have been laughable if I weren't more inclined to burst into tears than anything else.

"I'm...not in a good position," I admitted.

Gina passed me the whiskey bottle that I eagerly accepted. I wasn't drinking much, but gods damn it, I needed that burn to take at least some of my attention away from how profoundly I was crumbling on the inside.

The others seemed just as defeated. The bottle swiftly made another round, no one really talking because...

Well, there wasn't all that much to say, was there?

I could feel their compassion, though, their understanding of the predicament I was in.

Their love stories were stunning despite their complexity. They were the happily ever afters people dreamed of. Destinations that made the path, however scary or unexpected, worth it.

And damn it, it was beautiful.

Except we weren't the same.

We really, truly fucking weren't.

At some point, when the energy almost became too miserable, Crina threw back the whiskey and set her empty glass on the club table with a *thunk*.

“I was never the most optimistic sort of person”—her statement earned a snort from Simon—“but what if your guys can work things out between them?”

The start of a bitter laugh tore from my lips, but Crina raised a hand to stop my protests.

“Just hear me out, okay? When I first started seeing both Breccan and Ilya, I kept waiting for them to fight. For the jealousy to start, the competition—and me having to make a decision. But none of that happened, and for the fucking life of me, I couldn’t wrap my head around them being okay just... sharing me.”

“We both loved you even then,” Breccan commented quietly, but his words carried such strength he might as well have shouted them from the rooftop.

Crina shot him a look that was as gentle as it was heated. “Yeah, but it was still a mindfuck for me. A demon and a crime lord? I mean, with those testosterone levels, you guys should have fought instead of played along...”

The private smile that played upon Breccan’s lips made me think he had a few specific memories of him and Crina’s other partner working together replaying through his mind.

And damn it if that wasn’t a thread of envy curling through my stomach.

“What I wanted to say is...” Crina peeled her gaze off Breccan with one of those parting *you’re unbelievable looks* before landing on me. “I get that you’re already married, that you established a life with your husband. But I also never, not in a million years, would have thought I’d get back together with my vampire ex and my brand-new demon lord *at the same time.*”

“Ilya and I could talk to your husband. Maybe dispelling some misconceptions about what it means to be in a relationship such as ours could make him see it isn’t bad at all,” Breccan offered.

My heart swelled at the sincerity of his offer, but on the wings of that sensation came a far less pleasant one.

“I wish that would help, but...” I shook my head. “Roland is monogamous. The relationship we entered was—*is*—monogamous. And I can hardly see someone like Ezra Störmer, with his Leo Moon and Capricorn Venus settling for sharing me either.”

“There is no settling in sharing,” Breccan said with a sharpness that wasn’t directed at me exactly but clearly conveyed his feelings about the perception I assumed most people had about a ménage like theirs.

Still, I couldn’t help but apologize. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“You did nothing wrong,” he cut me off. “The mortal world, as much as I adore it, is still predominantly ruled by old beliefs and ways that have been passed down without anyone questioning if there are other nuances to them.”

“Not that the demonic is much better in that regard,” Afanasiy quipped.

The two demon lords exchanged an amused look when Lena cut in, “We’re changing it now, aren’t we?”

“The Shadow World was on a downward curve until recently,” Lotte filled me in. “We almost lost the realm at some point, but now... Things are actually looking up.”

I nodded, grateful for the explanation.

The demon lords wrapped up their quick exchange in sync with the one I’d shared with Lotte, and Breccan’s gaze slid back over to me.

“I love Crina. If her loving another is a part of her, then I love that too.”

He said it so simply...like it truly was so simple.

But I just couldn’t see that happening for myself.

As Breccan’s statement continued to ring out in stark contrast to my situation, the whiskey made another round, then our group began to disband. Lotte gave me a fierce hug before taking Afanasiy’s hand and vanishing into thin air, while Crina, Simon, and Breccan gravitated toward one another.

The latter said something to Gina I didn't hear as Lena came over to say her own goodbye. She followed Lotte and Afanasiy's example, disappearing from existence right as Gina returned with a pen and paper.

Breccan quickly scribbled down a number and handed it to me.

"The offer remains. If at any point you need me and Ilya to talk to your men, give me a call."

My fingers wrapped around the phone number, gratitude and tightness warring in my chest. "Thank you."

With that, he rejoined Crina and Simon, who reminded me he still had to look into the readings he'd captured on his devices in case he noticed something the others didn't, then the lot of them vanished as easily as the others.

"And then there were two," I said to Gina.

She wrapped an arm around me. "Come on, I'll take you home. Unless you want to hit my favorite dive?"

I snort-laughed. She knew well enough that I'd well reached my whole drowning sorrow in alcohol limits over the past two days. Adding gin on top of whiskey wasn't about to make my problems go away.

"Home will be fine."

After a quick trip to the bathroom, I gathered my purse and followed Gina out of the apartment, then into the evening-drenched parking lot. We climbed into her car, the Whiskey Jet Preachers blaring from the speakers the second she turned on the ignition.

Gina dialed down the volume and glanced at me. "I'm so sorry it didn't work."

Although Simon had promised he would explore the matter from his arcane computer science angle, I wasn't holding my breath.

No way for us to break the bonds without breaking your soul.

Veles's words kept running on a loop in my head.

"We tried, right?" I said, attempting to keep my tone light, though there was no disguising the heaviness. The sheer fucking fatigue at having to deal with this crap.

I didn't even know what I was going to do from this point on.

I had bet everything, godsdamned *everything*, on ridding myself of the soulmate bonds. I honestly had no other course of action. No idea what steps to take now that the one solution I'd been hoping for had been shot down.

Gina pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the main road. "There might be someone else we can talk to. Are you up for a detour before I drop you off?"

There wasn't much to lose now, was there?

"All right. Who do you have in mind?"

"Vanja. She's an old neighbor of mine—well, technically, she still is."

Right. Gina had kept her old apartment despite moving into Aric's place. Both of them had a fondness for Gina's old home by the Spandauer Forst.

"She's kind of a peculiar witch," Gina went on. "Her real magic lies in her visions, but I swear, her insights have never been off the mark."

"And you think the visions will help me get out of the bonds?"

Gina kept her attention on the thick traffic we'd merged into. "I'm not sure. The gods seemed pretty convinced we can't sever the bonds without risking your life. But even if Vanja can't give you the outcome you want, she could at least offer some answers. And trust me, that often has more value than we give it credit."

It was clear Gina was speaking from her own experiences, so I just nodded and tried to make myself as comfortable as I could for the trip across Berlin.

With the traffic, it took us close to an hour to reach Gina's old place. My mental state wasn't doing that well, though the Sag side of me did end up taking some pleasure in the ride.

In part because I could pretend we could just keep on driving, far, far away from all my problems. But as tempting as that was, I wasn't about to let the shadow side of my placement rule my life. Indulging in a brief fantasy, on the other hand, was perfectly all right.

Even more so if it kept me from losing my shit on the drive over.

Gina took a left turn onto a street lined with apartment blocks on both sides and parked just a bit farther down from her building. As soon as she killed the engine and I climbed out of the car, my gaze landed on an elderly woman like fate itself was pulling me toward her.

Not in the sense my soulmates had a hold on me, but there was...guidance here, for sure.

"Vanja," Gina greeted her. "How are you doing?"

The witch smiled. "Haven't seen you around for a while, girl. Which means you've stayed true to yourself."

"I did. Well, I almost didn't at some point, but your words were the reminder I needed."

"And now someone else needs a reminder?" Vanja peered at me, a playful tone in her voice.

"I do need...something," I grunted, then on a lighter note, added, "Hi. I'm Alina Volkmann. Gina's friend and coworker."

Vanja nodded as if pieces were already falling together.

"I had a dream of teal, astrology child." She gestured to my hair. "You came for assistance, yes?"

When I nodded, she said, "I cannot offer guarantees. My visions come and go, but we can try."

"Maybe we should take this up to my apartment?" Gina glanced around.

The street was pretty quiet, just a quartet of kids out on the playground and a guy in the distance carting groceries toward one of the apartment blocks.

Vanja huffed. “Those stairs are not my friend when my knees are acting up.”

“I can carry you,” Gina offered.

At Vanja’s affronted look, I snorted out a breath. “She does this to me all the time. Always makes me feel like a sack of potatoes.”

“And you would subject an old woman to such treatment?” Vanja teased Gina but stood from the bench nonetheless. “But if my dream was warning me of your friend, it’s best we find somewhere we won’t be disturbed.”

Slowly, we moved toward the entrance to Gina’s building. The ache in Vanja’s knees was clear from her gait, but the witch refused to be carried before it was absolutely necessary. When we hit the stairs, Gina scooped her up in her arms—with far more grace than she ever had me, might I add.

“So, what bothers you, child?” Vanja asked as we started making our ascent.

“I’ve recently learned that I have three soulmates I’m supposed to be with. And even more recently, when I looked into breaking the bonds, I found out that my soul is...” I waved a hand through the air, searching for the right words. “That my soul is on a path of its own. Whoever is watching over me, it isn’t the usual gods.”

Vanja studied me over Gina’s shoulder. “That’s not all, is there?”

“Nope.” I popped the *p*. “Apparently, these three men aren’t just soulmates, but our souls are bound to one another. Tied in some way I don’t understand but would kill me if broken. Basically, I’m stuck with them, and the situation is kind of ruining my life.”

A hum was all the answer Vanja gave me.

Thankfully, we reached Gina's apartment not long after. I wasn't sure if I could have handled the damn suspense—or the questions thrashing around my skull—for much longer than that.

Gina set Vanja down, then pulled out her keys and let us in. Compared to Aric's airy apartment on the bank of Rummelsburger See, Gina's old one was tiny—but it sure as fuck had character. Her old record player was still in the living room by the armchair, creating a lovely den for the blues-loving wolf who'd spent her nights here.

She quickly rearranged the furniture so that the three of us could sit closer together, then gestured for Vanja and me to take a seat on the couch.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked the witch who took the offered seat.

Vanja shook her head. "I would much rather see why the forces that be guided the astrology child to me."

She patted the cushion beside her. I obliged, dropping down beside her—close, but a bit of distance for some reason keeping. It wasn't that I didn't want to be near Vanja. It was more as if something was telling me it had to be like this for now.

I got the answer to *why* soon enough.

"My visions come and go," Vanja explained. "But touch is an excellent conduit if I'm purposefully trying to receive messages about a specific person."

That made sense. I saw people as walking birth charts and felt their energy regardless. Coming into direct contact, though, it was like experiencing everything in HD.

"But as I said"—Vanja raised a hand, palm facing outward—"no promises."

I gave her a tight but honest smile. "Trust me, I've just gone through the biggest disappointment in my life. Even if you see nothing, I appreciate you taking your time to try."

“Good.” Vanja nodded, more to herself than me, it felt.
“Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

She lowered her hand to mine.

Our skin touched, warmth radiating from the seam—
burning hotter and hotter. Scalding.

I sucked in a breath, but before I could ask if this was
normal, Vanja’s eyes rolled back into her head.

Her frail fingers tightened into a death grip around my
hand, her entire body going stiff and oddly...vacant. As if her
physical form was only a shell and she wasn’t truly here
anymore but somewhere far, far away.

Terror sank its claws into me—except I couldn’t pull away.

Couldn’t do a single damn thing as I disconnected from
this world and was dragged into another.

CHAPTER
NINE

The Universe spread around me, the familiar darkness peppered with too many stars and faraway galaxies to count.

My chest constricted at the stark vacuum of silence, but...I felt it.

The presence.

Unlike the last time I'd tumbled into this place, though, the voice seemed to...watch?

It was an eerie fucking sensation.

How could a voice watch? I had no clue.

All I knew was that things were different somehow.

There was no one else here but me, no sign of Vanja either, but that energy I'd always felt, the energy that had turned its back on me last night, it...

Waited.

Observed.

Almost as if it were curious.

Before I could ponder on what it all meant, the sprinkles of light blurred into the darkness until not a single light remained. I hadn't moved a single inch, but it still felt like I was falling, being sucked into a vortex I had zero control over.

My stomach swam in that same weird way it did during plane landings. I still wasn't corporeal, I knew I couldn't really

be, but that didn't change the fact that my body was as present as if I were back in Gina's apartment.

A tug of *something* sparked to life in my chest, then ground solidified beneath my feet—warm, beige stone bathed in sunlight. I squinted into the brightness, but no matter how much I tried, the haze remained. Not strong enough to blind me entirely, it only lent a soft film of golden distortion lay over the sight ahead.

The stones I was standing on were part of some sort of open, square-shaped platform that seemed to be located someplace elevated, if the hints of an unfamiliar landscape beyond were any indication. A beautiful flowering trellis dominated the center, arching over four figures—figures that existed in a way that made no sense.

They were almost more energy than matter, and yet they had shape. Form that was oddly familiar yet entirely unknown.

They were gathered around something that resembled a stone sundial, except there was no gnomon on the flat plate. Instead, an orb of light seemed to hover in the air just above the plate, softly rotating, pulsating.

I stepped closer.

The figures paid me no attention, as if they were unable to pick up on my presence, but...

I certainly picked up on theirs.

Maybe I'd known from the moment I laid eyes on them but had simply refused to believe it.

But now that I'd read them, I couldn't lie to myself, no matter how much I might have wanted to.

These energy forms...

They were *us*.

My gaze immediately sought out the only female energy in the group. She didn't have teal hair, didn't have my body—didn't really *have* a body in the traditional sense, just inclinations of form—yet despite the stark differences, the essence...

It was mine.

She was *me*.

Her energy warmed as she turned to the three masculine entities around her.

Every last atom of air was punched out of my lungs when I recognized Roland, who wasn't really Roland yet undoubtedly was. My brain felt like it was melting from attempting to rationalize what I was seeing, and nausea curled in my belly, but I also couldn't look away.

Transfixed, I watched this ethereal version of myself look from Roland's essence to another. One wrought of fire, even if the placements I was so familiar with didn't truly exist in this world.

Ezra.

Then she turned to the third—the man of deep, dark waters and beautiful caverns, the energetic embodiment of structure meeting flow.

The Scorpio.

Like Ezra and Roland, he didn't match the energy of the actual person who I'd trailed through Berlin last night, but it was him. It was almost as if the astrological energies of the birth chart I knew from my realm were simply extensions of this core. That all of ours were.

There was something so profound, something so much deeper, bigger, giving these core signatures.

And I knew, I knew, it could only be our souls.

The old foundations inside me shattered, and there wasn't a single thing I could do about it as this new knowledge inserted itself into my awareness.

Well, damn.

I'd always believed birth charts harbored our core essences, the energies that were uniquely ours—the be-all and end-all of who we were in the scope of their shadows and their gifts. Now, it was clear that the signs, planets, houses, and

aspects mapping out what I'd once considered to be a person's signature were simply an expression of something so much vaster.

A mere branch carrying traits of the tree.

The four forms linked ethereal hands beneath the trellis, plucking me from my musings. The atmosphere they ensconced themselves in was so peaceful, so loving, I wondered if it wasn't just my brain making shit up. That Vanja's magic had hit me like a drug that fucked with my perceptions.

It would have made far more sense than the alternative.

Because for the fucking life of me, I couldn't marry the sight unfolding ahead to the reality I lived in.

Roland, Ezra, the Scorpio, me. Standing around a sundial that wasn't a sundial, together as if we shared the most intimate, loving bonds. As if we cared for each other—*all* of us.

The orb of bright light pulsed, the white turning into the most beautiful, sparkling gold I'd ever seen.

"We journey toward one another," energy-me said, though I wasn't sure if her words were something I actually heard or simply felt. "We..."

The rest of her statement was lost to me as the golden light erupted, encompassing the entire group. I squinted at the warmth, the brightness—

Then blinked into absolute darkness.

I jerked, shocked from the too-stark contrast, but even as my body moved, nothing else did. The canvas of black didn't become speckled with stars. I...wasn't at my starting point.

But then, where the fuck *was* I?

A hint of white somewhere from beneath caught my attention.

I glanced down, my body weirdly levitating right in the middle of whatever obsidian space I'd fallen into, but that

wasn't even the oddest thing of all.

A bone-white train track extended below me. As in, cutting straight through the black nothingness. The track stretched out into the distance with zero end in sight.

Frowning, I turned around and—

What the hell?

The single, white track snaked in this direction as well, except it didn't continue like that the entire way.

Instead, the track parted.

First into two separate rails, then those branched again, and again, giving the impression of a tree's roots. And as they spread farther and wider out, I noticed these...light gold dots peppered throughout the black spaces gaping between the tracks. Some seemed to rest even beyond the expanse of this unusual root system.

Automatically, I drifted along the single rail, then above the branched-out tracks to get a closer look.

Shit, I wasn't wrong.

There had to have been hundreds of these golden dots, and for some reason, they felt...

I wouldn't exactly say alive, but there was an energy to them that couldn't be denied. As if they encapsulated life.

One of them flashed in a beautiful blaze of gold, and I found myself spearing toward the dot, then *into* it.

My feet connected with a gravel path before I could really comprehend what the fuck had just happened. The previous darkness had been painted over with the lively image of an evening setting over some sort of grassy park.

I had no fucking clue where I was, but the coaches and horses in the distance and—I glanced to the sides—the buildings spanning along the edge of the path I was standing on all hinted this was *not* present time.

Laughter rose ahead before a group of eight people crested the gentle slope. If the surroundings hadn't been enough of a

giveaway, their outfits certainly cemented the fact that this was far, far from the year I was living in.

I took stock of the four men in dapper suits, each with a beautiful young woman looping her arm through theirs. They strolled along the path cutting through the green expanse, clearly on their way to an event of some sort. The excitement was palpable even from where I was standing. Honestly, it looked like history's version of date night.

A gentle sound, just a rustle of fabric, made me turn around.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

A brunette young woman with gentle but plain features stood on the threshold. She was dressed in a simple black dress, the rough fabric neatly cared for but carrying distinct markers of an old, well-worn garment.

Unlike with the group, though, I wasn't able to just observe her.

I *felt* her.

Felt the aching hollow in her chest. The deep well of sadness, resignation—although even worse than that was the faint fluttering of hope within her that refused to die.

Hope that she would be noticed.

Hope that their eyes would meet. That after all this time, they would *see* her.

It was a land of dreams already shattered, but I could feel her holding on to those shards, making her own hands bleed because she simply couldn't let go.

She wanted to.

She wanted to erase the two young men from the group so badly, but they were embedded in her mind, in her heart. Nothing could remove them. They had burrowed into her even deeper than those shards of dreams that would never come true.

Claws of hurt sliced up her insides as she watched the dark-haired man sling his arm around the blonde. *Roland*. As the light-haired one gave his date a blinding smile and she tittered out a girly laugh. *Ezra*.

The two guys, who at most had the vaguest physical resemblance to mine yet carried that deep, core essence that made them unmistakably *them*, glanced at each other. The camaraderie there was plain to see.

They were friends.

If I were to judge from the dynamics of the group, they were best friends.

They seemed so full of life, untouchable.

Whereas she...

She was a shadow.

She was the one existing on the farthest edges, always looking in.

She was *me*.

Her pain rocked through my being, and I stood beside her as I watched the two men live a life where she—where I—didn't exist.

I had no idea where the Scorpio was, but whether she—I—knew him didn't even matter.

There were already two men out of reach.

Two men I yearned for that would never be mine.

As the group wandered into the evening, farther and farther away from the dark little house at my back, I was separated from the heartbroken version of myself and tossed out of the golden dot I'd dove into.

Breathing heavily, I looked over the tracks stretching beneath me once more. The flecks of light among them.

Another shone brighter than the rest, and as if I was in some sort of fucking trance, I went right for it.

An old-school diner flared to life around me, thick with smells of food and cigarette smoke. The train car ambiance struck me as equally cozy as it was cramped, but what stood out most was the familiarity I felt while taking in the sights.

It didn't take me long to figure out why.

The blonde girl who had just waltzed around the counter to deliver the order to one of the booths was me. I watched her go in that blue short-sleeved gingham dress with a wide collar and buttons running down the front, a white apron tied around a slim waist. Hell, she even had that ridiculous tiny hat perched atop my neatly done red hair.

She was the epitome of a vintage girl, except clearly for this version of me, the *vintage* actually translated to modern times.

Faintly, I could feel my brain begin to overheat as it processed the information.

I was...alive in 1940s America?

Despite my shabby relationship with history, the attributes and hallmarks staring back at me were unmistakable.

I was alive in 1940s America.

My mind still reeling from the information, I refocused back on this iteration of myself, watching her do her thing. Right as she moved back around the counter that spanned basically the entire length of the car, the door to the diner opened.

The second the man dressed in some sort of simple beige uniform set foot inside the place, the emotions from vintage-me hit me hard in the chest.

She was smitten as hell—and damn near melted when the guy immediately sought her out and delivered a smile.

Ezra.

In a whirlwind of images, I observed the whole process of him ordering and eating his meal, paying special attention to the oddly discreet flirting that happened every chance they got.

But when past-Ezra paid for his lunch and left, I was damn near ready to yell, “What the fuck was all that about?”

Weren't they together?

Because I *so* wasn't ready for another story with me getting the short end of the stick.

Except the flirting between them, the attraction...

Unlike in the previous vision, there certainly was *something* going on here.

My intrigue was piqued when vintage-me announced to the other girls that she was taking a break and headed outside.

She skirted around the diner, to the side with no windows and the view from the road mostly blocked them, then basically threw herself in past-Ezra's arms. He pulled her to him, kissing her with so much passion, I was half rooting for them to get it on right then and there.

At least until I noticed the ring.

A gold band on her left hand.

None on his.

Vintage-me was cheating on her fucking husband! What?!

Okay, okay, maybe guys just didn't wear rings in that era? I wasn't a fucking expert. But even if that was the case and this version of Ezra was married as well... He, for sure, wasn't with the blonde girl from the diner. Fuck.

Not wanting to just accept that vintage-me was eagerly throwing herself into an affair, no matter how handsome Ezra was, even here, I tapped into her emotions more.

My stomach twisted as the deep well of fear pooling beneath the excitement hit.

She was terrified of her husband.

And not just because she was seeing another man.

She knew that if he ever found out about James—Ezra—he would beat her to death. But since he beat her anyway, and it was only getting worse with every month that passed, she was

banking on the hope that maybe there was still a chance for her to get her happy ending. That one day, she would just sit in James's truck and drive off with him.

She almost, *almost*, asked him to take her with him when their lips parted. But something constricted her throat, and the words wouldn't come out.

Rejection.

James clearly adored her, but there was a primal fear embedded deep within her that made her hesitate. Made her spend more days with her husband—but also more days she could keep her hope alive.

Because if James turned her down...

Then it truly would be over.

"I'll see you next week, beautiful." He traced a finger down her cheek. "Maybe if I come in later, you could convince the girls to cover for you for that last hour? Spend some more time with me?"

Vintage-me nodded, barely holding back the tears James didn't see as he turned and headed for his truck parked out front.

Her heart pounding, she stood in the shade to pull herself together.

I could hear the questions running through her mind. Feel the heaviness crushing her lungs.

Why couldn't she take the leap? Was it truly better to torture herself by watching him walk away? Was holding on to hope worth more than getting her answer?

She squeezed her eyes shut—and I was plunged into darkness with her, no longer observing from the outside but experiencing her body and consciousness as if they were mine.

James had been coming to me for a year.

He'd been devastated when I told him about my marriage and even tried to stay away, but we kept finding our way back to each other until we decided that we would take whatever we

could. If it was a kiss behind the diner, if it was just a smile as I served him food, we collected those moments like treasure.

He never, not once, showed any indication he was just toying with me.

So, why wouldn't he take me with him? Why did my entire body freeze up whenever I wanted to open my mouth and ask the question?

Anger washed through me in a scalding wave. I hated this weakness. Hated the indecision.

Determined that next time would be different, I snapped open my eyes—

But it wasn't a brighter future I saw staring back at me.

It was the barrel of a shotgun.

CHAPTER
TEN

The *bang* ejected me from the memory.

Nausea roiled through me, along with the tremors—
as if I'd carried them with me straight from the vision.

But where vintage-me hadn't let those tears fall, I did.

I was murdered.

I was murdered by my husband.

The only relief I could claim was in knowing that it hadn't been any of my soulmates standing behind that shotgun. The ache, though...it crawled through my flesh, comprised of old terror that made me wonder if it hadn't actually been buried inside me all along and the vision had simply brought it to the surface.

I wore different flesh, but something like that, if these truly were all my personal experiences, it had to linger, didn't it?

Another gold light sparked in the distance.

I wiped away the tears and glared at the little fucker.

Really, I'd just been shot in my damn face. I didn't want to experience another shitshow. Wasn't sure if I could handle it.

Unfortunately, no matter how done I was with this hellish trip Vanja took me on, the trip was far from done with me.

Despite hitting all the damn metaphysical breaks, I traversed the tracks and sank into another vision.

Pleasure hit me before the visual did.

I pried open my eyes, realizing I was *in* whichever body my damn soul had resided in, my legs spread open and a man's head between them.

His energy licked me as fucking good as his tongue.

Roland.

I writhed on the bed, catching a glimpse here and there of the dilapidated, small white-walled room we were in, barely bigger than the shoddy metal bed I was sprawled upon. It was hard to keep my focus, though, with wave after wave of pleasure coming from past-Roland's mouth and no separation between the past version of me and my current self.

My orgasm hit like a freaking tsunami.

As soon as I came on his deviously skilled tongue, past-Roland raised himself above me, his lean body on display beneath an unbuttoned shirt and his hard cock jutting through the open fly of his pants. With three hard jerks of his hand, he came all over my stomach.

The hot streaks of cum damn near launched me into another orgasm. The sensation fell just short, but I shivered nonetheless, loving how my body responded.

I should have felt dirty. Used.

But I never did with him.

Everything he did, every pleasure he used my body for, it gave me pleasure in return.

Past-Roland's dark hair fell down his forehead as he caught his breath above me, still recovering from his climax. I ached to run my fingers through the inviting strands but abstained.

It would be crossing a line—a line that just might have led me to lose him.

No, I was willing to take whatever he could give me.

Far too soon, though, he climbed off. I watched him tuck his cock back into his pants, then work the buttons up the shirt.

With every inch of skin that disappeared, I mourned the loss.

He pulled on a black jacket that had seen better days, then said something curt in a language I didn't understand—Russian, maybe?

Obviously, even being merged fully with my former self didn't offer *all* the perks.

Dry amusement cruised through my mind.

Of course I got the full experience of an orgasm. But translation? That was beyond the fucking realm of whatever magic was at work here.

Releasing my own inner monologue, I refocused on the scene.

Past-me didn't grace that curt statement with a reply. She just watched, and me right along with her, as past-Roland dropped some money on the rough wooden nightstand by the door.

The sight of his back as he walked out of the room was the last impression I got before I flew out of the vision.

Short, but it had been enough. I didn't need a drawn-out film to get the gist of the story.

A prostitute in love with her client.

Fuck my life.

Were there no godsdamned happy endings here?

As if in answer, light flared three dots from the one I had been in just now.

I narrowed my eyes at it but followed the call regardless. Honestly, there wasn't much point in fighting this, was there?

Clearly, I'd be on the journey for however long Vanja's magic kept me here.

A sigh of relief rushed from my lungs when I found myself standing in a cute little garden hugging an equally cute little house. Though I couldn't see it, I could smell the sea in the air,

and the entire atmosphere was pleasantly coastal, which for some reason, put me even more at ease.

But the absolute cherry on the top of the idyllic scene was the version of me I'd come to witness.

Humming a tune under her breath, she gathered lavender stalks from the fragrant bed lining the outer edge of the garden. She tipped her freckled face toward the sun, half smiling at something I couldn't really put a finger on.

Honestly, the serenity of the vision was beyond what I'd ever expected.

Except something...

Something didn't sit right.

The more I took in the clothes past-me wore, the few cars I could see parked in front of the buildings beyond the garden, where an empty road snaked past houses...

Okay, I might have died in the 1940s from a shotgun to the head, but there was no way I could have been a 30-something-year-old in... 1950s France?

Did I somehow get all of it wrong?

I'd thought I was looking at past lives, however crazy that still sounded to me. But what was I supposed to make of an overlap like this?

Before I could think too much on that matter, teetering laughter sounded around the corner of the house seconds before two small girls came running into this part of the garden.

"Maman, maman! Papa est de retour!" the younger one yelled before they both threw themselves at past-me.

She smiled at them, then raised that brilliant, warm expression to the handsome man dressed in a smart suit and carrying a suitcase who'd just rounded the same corner as the girls.

The Scorpio.

He approached the trio, planting a kiss straight on past-me's mouth before the two girls started climbing him like cute little monkeys.

My brain glitched.

It legit fucking glitched as I kept staring at the image.

I had...kids?

The Scorpio and I had kids somewhere out there in the world?

I'd never really wanted to be a mother—honestly, I had *zero* desire to ever have children—but knowing there might be descendants of mine walking the earth?

Fuck, that shook me.

What if... What if they were still alive? What if these children had kids of their own?

I mentally slapped myself straight. All the while, the cute family scene kept playing out in front of me like a movie I'd half-zoned out of.

Yes, this version of me clearly had kids with the Scorpio. But what was I going to do?

Track them down based on damn near zero information and tell them that, what? That I was their ancestor in another life?

Hell, I had enough crazy going on in my own life. I didn't need to bring it into theirs.

Besides, their story wasn't mine. Not really. It belonged to that curly, strawberry-haired woman I'd been.

The only players who remained relevant throughout it all were the four of us.

The Scorpio. Ezra. Roland. And me.

I couldn't shut down the deep knowing that had taken root inside me that this was *our* path and ours alone.

With a parting glance at the family that seemed oddly happy compared to the rest of the visions I'd seen so far, I let

the magic suck me out of the bubble. As the next golden dot immediately flared, I just went along for the ride, pretending all these stops were my choices.

Over and over, I cruised right into the heart of these other realities.

I didn't even keep count of them all—wasn't sure if I could consciously *contain* them all even if I wanted to—but with every figment I witnessed, more awareness settled somewhere deep within me.

The time periods jumped around. Scenery changed. The faces and names were different, but beneath the skin we wore, we were also always the same.

The four souls from the very beginning.

In some visions, I was alone, having never met the guys. In some, I was with one. In others, I met them in various pairings—sometimes they knew each other, sometimes they didn't and it was the past version of me who was the center point.

But despite all the different variations, there was one that never played out.

Not once did I coexist with all three.

With the sheer abundance of visions I'd traveled through, I found myself picking out patterns over sinking too deep into the narrow specificity of each individual scene that was presented to me.

The Lunar Nodes definitely came as one huge-ass surprise.

I'd always looked upon the South Node as the energies an individual was born with and ones we were meant to leave behind, and the North bearing the ones they were meant to evolve into. There was another, far more spiritual explanation some humans swore by, though, that I'd never put much stock into—that the South Node actually represented what we carried on from our past lives.

After all, being a supernatural, I knew souls went to Veles once we passed. We didn't reincarnate.

Now, though...

The visions that seemed to follow in chronological order made it abundantly clear that the themes of my previous life—the gifts, the lessons, the wisdom, and the shadows—truly did translate into the South Node of the next.

Uhm, hello, am I really observing a part of astrology no one has ever been privy to seeing in actual action ever before?

Mind. Freaking. Blown.

But while the Lunar Nodes caught the witchy side of my attention and definitely served as a reminder to look more into my current placements as I searched for guidance and answers, my heart seemed drawn to another pattern.

A pattern I would have wanted nothing more than to ignore.

As I watched yet another life unfold and the pressure within me built, demanding I give that admission to myself, my sight cut off abruptly.

Dull pain lanced through my knees, then arms wound around me the next second, Gina's energy enveloping me as surely as her hold as she helped me back onto the couch.

“Alina, are you—“

I waved off Gina's concern, probably looking drunk as hell with how my whole body seemed to swim in a reality that felt too solid after floating through wherever the fuck that was. But I looked right past the dizziness wreaking havoc on my senses at the witch who'd propelled me onto the journey.

Vanja's eyes were keener than before. Clearer. “You saw it too, didn't you, girl?”

I nodded.

Doubts crawled through my mind, though. Doubts about whether I was interpreting things correctly.

Only when I thought back to that very first vision, the one bathed in golden light that came before the bone-white tracks and the golden dots...

“Your souls made a pact,” Vanja said before I could utter the words.

The idea alone was unnerving, but what truly shook me to the core was the message that fell from her lips next.

“This lifetime is the one where you are destined to come together and rise. You are ready, and all it takes is one final leap for each.”

I got a feeling it wasn't Vanja who was talking to me any longer, but the higher knowledge channeled through the witch.

“It's time, astrology child.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“What if I don’t want this?” I choked out.
The word *destined* lay heavily on my chest.

I’d seen the pact we’d made. Seen what it had been like in all those lives where, over and over again, I’d been left without the guys. Or at least without all of them.

I hadn’t wanted to admit this to myself, but even in those instances, where the story was seemingly happy, where I wasn’t getting a shotgun to the face or being rejected by the guy I was in love with, there was an uncanny sense of missing out on something.

A void I had never been able to put a finger on yet accompanied me as surely and as steadily as my own shadow.

It had been...disquieting, to say the least.

But when I thought about *my* reality, the life I was living now...

Since the moment I’d met Ezra Störmer, it had only been falling apart.

How the hell was I supposed to believe that was a *good* thing?

With panic rising in my throat, I looked at Vanja. Beside me, still perfectly silent, Gina shifted. I hated leaving my friend in the dark, but right now, I couldn’t focus on anything but the witch whose eyes were returning to normal, although echoes of that ancient light remained.

“What if I refuse?” I asked quietly.

Vanja’s gaze speared me, unmoving yet understanding at once. “Would you truly walk away from your soul’s purpose? From your soul’s path?”

“I—I don’t...”

“We both witnessed the visions,” Vanja pressed on. “You cannot deny the experiences of your past lives.”

Memories hit me. Memories that didn’t fit into the neat little puzzle Vanja was trying to sell.

“It couldn’t have been past lives.” I cocked my head to the side, filtering through the data that flowed on the currents of my thoughts.

Not just the 1940s and 1950s clashed. There were other instances, other snippets that didn’t go together.

Like past-Ezra and past-Roland jerking off to me when we all got carried away at some sort of college party... When current-me was already very much present on this plane.

“How could I possibly exist in two places, two lives, at the same time? How could I have been born when the previous me was still alive?” I demanded.

The compassion on Vanja’s face just set me further on edge.

“You know deep within that there’s more than just past lives,” she said calmly, as if I weren’t seconds from blowing. “The Universe is a miraculous place. And can exist in many, many parallels.”

“So not just past lives, but parallel ones too?” A bitter laugh sliced out of me. “We have one fucking reality. And souls come here, then go to the underworld. That’s the world we’re living in.”

A useless statement, if there ever was any, since the trinity of death themselves confirmed my soul was very much out of their reach.

But shit, I was just...so fucking mad.

Why did I have to have the lead role in this crapfest? As if having one-of-a-kind astrology magic wasn't unique enough.

No, I had to defy the fucking laws of fucking reality everyone else abided by.

Well, everyone except my three guys, apparently.

Gina's attention on me sharpened, pieces undoubtedly coming together even without the specifics of the journey through lifetimes and alternate realities I'd been on.

Lifetimes.

Alternate realities.

Fuck, this was insane.

Could I really believe I'd been...what, reincarnating along with the guys? Existing on multiple timelines? Just because we formed some godsforsaken pact to find each other?

Why the fuck would we even do that?

I rubbed at my temples.

Resistance to even believe all this shit continued to undulate through me, crashing against that inner voice that was confirming everything I'd seen, everything Vanja said, was the truth.

"I'm going crazy," I muttered, and Gina immediately wrapped an arm around me.

I leaned against her, barely getting a moment to relax before another aspect of the fucking mess I was facing popped up.

Telling all this to Ezra. To Roland.

Hey, listen, the reason I'm salivating over you guys at the same time is because our souls struck a deal ages ago. Yes, our souls. It's a deal that made us reincarnate after every death, sometimes even exist on multiple timelines at once. Mm-hmm, we've been coming together for centuries. A whole millennium, maybe.

All because we apparently thought it would be intriguing to just throw ourselves into this quest that would only end once we reach our goal—to actually overcome our own shit, the curveballs of our individual journeys and our joint ones—and come together into a unit as we were always meant to be.

I belted out a harsh, dry laugh.

Okay, all of this was officially insane. Even Roland, who was as open to unconventional stuff as a person could get...

Well, this was one “truth” I doubted he’d call anything but bullshit.

A soft hand curled around mine. Vanja.

“Yes, your souls truly have ventured through lifetimes for ages now.”

I wasn’t sure if she was reading my mind or just picking up on the disbelief I was doing nothing to hide.

“You have been seeking each other out. Making choices. Learning. Evolving. Finding your way closer and closer to the truth.” Warmth seeped from her skin into mine, matching her expression, but it hardly made a dent in the chill that had settled into my bones. “There were many opportunities that one or several of you didn’t take.”

Images flipped on fast-forward through my mind.

Past-me, rejecting the Scorpio’s proposal because I’d been afraid to marry someone beneath me. Walking away from an incarnation of Roland because he had already been with another. Ezra refusing to commit.

“So there were never three.”

I snapped my gaze at Vanja as her words unlocked another gate in my mind. Another pattern that became as clear as fucking day.

Whenever we followed the call of our North Nodes, the call of this damn journey we’d put ourselves on, the next life was...

Maybe easier wouldn't be the best word, but there were benefits.

Instead of only coming across one of my soulmates, I would meet two. Sometimes I was even in a relationship with two of them, although never at the same time—unless I counted that jerking-off college party.

I paused on that memory.

There had been no animosity between the guys there. We were all in it for a good time, and hell, what a good time it was.

Could it be that that parallel life had paved the way for this one?

Because while I didn't end up dating the guys, that memory of ours, the night we shared together, was one we all cherished. Was that energy sufficiently in alignment to influence my current reality? To bring all three soulmates into my life?

“Yes, the energies have been accumulating, astrology child,” Vanja said, luring me back into the present while also answering the question I hadn't voiced out loud. “They built upon one another, and now they are in overflow. You can walk away from your destiny. You do have free will, but remember—living out of alignment never comes without consequences.”



No amount of makeup could hide the dullness in my eyes. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, half wishing I could smash it while knowing I'd achieve nothing except hurting myself even more. Since I'd done that enough in recent times...

“Fuck, you look good in this dress.”

I turned to see Roland watching me from the bathroom's threshold. His gaze raked down the short black dress that hugged my curves, then moved to the reflection in the mirror,

taking in the deep plunge lined with a faux silver zipper that really did wonders for my boobs.

With my hair done in a half updo and curled at the ends, I looked like a mix between a pinup and a biker chick.

My stomach churned.

“Alina...” Roland stepped behind me and placed his hands on my hips.

“Sorry, my mind just went somewhere unpleasant.”

Somewhere like a particular bike-riding soulmate I’d been unsuccessful in breaking free from.

A bike-riding soulmate I’d witnessed and interacted with in too many iterations that continued to haunt me.

To say I wasn’t really dealing well would be an understatement.

Soft lips traced a slow path up my neck, grounding me back into my body. An involuntary moan escaped me as the pleasurable sensations flooded my bloodstream, and I arched into Roland, my ass meeting his now-hard dick.

Through half-closed eyes, I watched his mouth on my pulse.

Shit, with how he’d slicked his hair back into a rockabilly look and dressed from head to toe in black, we looked like we were plucked from a different reality.

In the plethora of realities I’d seen, this was one I wished we could construct and escape to.

“Come on, Alina, bring out the Scorpio bad bitch,” he teased. “The wild Sag who will love tonight’s party. That Aquarius uniqueness that lets you flow with the crowd without losing on standing out. Let that Leo stellium roar.”

The niggling of a chuckle tickled my throat, but then Roland’s hands curved up my waist until he cupped my breasts, and all I was capable of producing was another moan.

“You don’t need your soulmates to be fulfilled.” Roland nipped my neck. “You have everything you need right here.”

This time, one of his hands ventured higher to cover my heart.

I damn near choked on tears.

What a fucking roller coaster I was.

I did *not* fucking deserve this man. He hadn't given me crap when I'd come home with the bad news that the bonds couldn't be broken.

He hadn't called me insane when I told him about the soul pact, the past and parallel lives I'd seen, even when I could tell he wasn't entirely sure what to believe.

All he did was protect me from going too deep to someplace I couldn't return from.

Like he was doing now.

“And tonight,” Roland went on, “you get to have fun. Forget about everything. It's just us, headed to a party with your friends.”

“Our friends,” I corrected on autopilot, throwing in a little glare.

Sure, I might have bonded with Gina first, but we all hung out together enough times that I knew she considered Roland a friend too.

Roland smirked like my response was exactly what he'd been searching for. “See, there's the fire.”

I snorted and tried to wiggle out of his arms, but he locked them tighter around me.

“Promise me you'll have fun, Alina. That *we'll* have fun. All the talks, the troubleshooting... It can wait until tomorrow. This moment right here that we're sharing, the present—it doesn't have to be weighed down by things we can't resolve this very instant.

“Because if we can't resolve them right now, if we can't actually take action to create change, what's the point in allowing them to determine how you feel? What you do? How you fucking *exist*?”

“The problems might not go away on their own, but on a weird flip side, they’re also *not going anywhere*. If you ask me, that gives you all the permission in the fucking world to put them on pause.”

He was right. Of course he was.

I’d been looking forward to the Whiskey Jet Preachers’ party since the first time Gina had mentioned it. Not just because it served as a good distraction from the confusing shitstorm my life had turned into, but also because I was genuinely happy that the guys from the band were receiving the recognition they deserved. Landing that music award, Gina explained, was a huge fucking deal.

I *wanted* to celebrate them. Wanted to have a damn normal evening out.

Besides, nothing productive could come from me running useless laps in my head like I’d been doing ever since Gina had driven me home.

It was one thing to share what I’d found out with Roland. One thing to talk about it to him, show him the situation that affected him as much as it did me.

Everything else was rumination. And it had overtaken every waking moment of my freaking life.

I’d always believed in not obsessing over things outside of my control but focusing on the ones that are.

After learning what I did, the soulmate bonds clearly fit into the first category. How I lived my life, on the other hand, fell into the latter.

But at the same time—

Roland pinched the sensitive flesh on the side of my ribs. “Alina...”

“Yes, yes, I promise,” I grunted. “Okay? I promise that we go out tonight like we used to and leave the crap behind for a night.”

Roland hummed under his breath, then brought his lips to my ear. “Now, just to make sure you stick to your word...”

One of his hands snaked down the side of my abdomen, over my hip, fingers splaying toward the inside of my thigh.

“You’re going to mess up my outfit,” I half teased, knowing precisely where he was taking this and loving him for it.

“Fuck outfits,” Roland said darkly. He met my gaze in the mirror. “I want to go to the party with your juices on my face.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“**S**hit,” I whispered...which was about all I could do when Roland was already hiking my tight dress over my hips.

Once it pooled around my waist, he hooked his thumbs into my tiny black thong and pulled it all the way down in a sinfully electrifying move. I was still shivering from the sensation when he placed a steady palm against my spine and forced me to bend over.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

“Perfection,” he muttered as I observed him in the mirror, his gaze pinned on my exposed pussy like he was hypnotized. “I can see you’re already wet for me, Alina.”

He glanced up so that our gazes locked, and the hunger sculpting his face...

I squeezed my thighs together.

Roland clicked his tongue and immediately kicked my legs apart again. “You don’t hide from me. *Or* seek relief. That’s my job. Mine to deliver.”

More wetness seeped from me. I could feel it spreading down my skin—something Roland absolutely noticed because he chuckled like the sex god he was right now.

“I’m going to enjoy eating you out, Alina.” He lowered himself behind me.

I closed my eyes, preparing myself for the brush of his breath against my pussy—

A hard slap landed on my ass.

I startled, my mouth hanging open, and stared at Roland's unrepentant, smug expression in the mirror.

Unlike the last image of him I'd caught, he was upright again.

The bastard.

He'd fucking *tricked* me.

"What, did you think you were going to get away with lying to me that easily?" he drawled.

"I wasn't—"

He laughed, the sound so dark it went straight to my core. "Come on, Alina, I know you too well to believe that half-hearted promise. Luckily for me, I know how to cement it."

Another slap fell on my bare ass.

I shuddered, my pussy clamping around fucking nothing as pleasure rocked through me on the wings of sharp pain.

It wasn't often that Roland and I played it rough, but shit, he knew precisely how to make me walk that delicate line between the two contrasting sensations.

His caress smoothed out the remainder of the ache, fingers coming so close to my core I whimpered—but he pulled them away before I could get even a taste of the touch I so desperately craved.

The third slap was stronger, louder. White-hot pain exploded against my skin, but it wasn't the only thing that detonated.

My orgasm whipped through me, my hands giving out until I was practically lying on top of the sink. My mind reeled, lost to the high of rapture. Shit. He didn't even have to fuck my brains out. Spanking, apparently, held the same effect.

I gasped for breath, then looked up to see Roland in the mirror.

A dark smile stretched across his face. He held my gaze long enough for the delectable, thrilling visual to sink in, then he descended.

I screamed when his mouth came down on my pussy.

He wasn't gentle.

Nor was he taking it slow.

He devoured me with every fucking thing he had. I hadn't even truly come down from my previous orgasm before he was forcing me into another. Pleasure overloaded my senses to the point of pain—it was too much to process, too much to contain.

I couldn't even come because he wouldn't give me that breath of reprieve to let my orgasm bloom.

I squeezed my eyes shut, uncontrolled sounds somewhere between whimpers and moans escaping me over and over.

My entire body was trembling, but still, Roland didn't relent.

What little rational thought was left at my disposal came together in wonder if I wouldn't pass out from the overload.

Just when I was sure I'd have to tap out before something irreparable broke, Roland gave me the needed reprieve.

His gluttonous annihilation turned into a savoring feast. Into slow, long licks that shot a wave of scalding hot chills through my flesh.

By the third, every last barrier had dissolved. I came hard on his tongue, writhing and rubbing myself shamelessly against his face as the waves just kept crashing and crashing against the inner shore of my fucking being.

As I still rode the last of the high tide, Roland pulled his mouth away. I whimpered, but the absence of his touch barely lasted a second before he shoved two fingers inside me.

“Shit,” I whispered, smashing my cheek harder against the now-heated and sweat-slicked marble as the new sensation set off a series of three mini-orgasms through me.

I bucked with each one, my body working itself against his fingers because it felt too fucking good to pass on.

Lost to the sensation, I almost didn't register what was happening when something wet touched my other opening.

I froze.

The movement didn't.

Roland was...

Holy shit, Roland was rimming my ass!

I clawed at the sink, trying to get away, but Roland just banded his free arm around me in a possessive, bruising grip and brought me right back.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

We hadn't been neglecting my butt in our years of marriage, but this...

It felt like I shouldn't like it. That it was wrong to like it.

But I really fucking did.

Roland added another finger into my pussy, and between the stretching sensation and his tongue on my ass, I lost it.

I came with a cry, rocking right into Roland's face as if I hadn't been questioning what the fuck he was doing just moments ago.

He growled, eating me out with even more of a hunger that translated straight into me and unlocked the next level of my orgasm.

I came with a gush, coating his fingers, then sagged against the counter.

Boneless and spent, it was all I could do to peer up at his reflection as he patted my butt and smirked at me.

"Now I believe you'll have a good time."



The Cadillac cruised through the city like a dream. For what felt like the hundredth time, I grinned at Roland, who looked like a '50s wet dream behind the wheel.

Had he successfully orgasmed me into a functional state?

Yes, yes, he had.

The whole rented Cadillac thing he'd told me nothing about beforehand only elevated matters. Even someone who wasn't a big car enthusiast like myself couldn't remain impartial to the sky-blue beauty he'd ushered me into.

The sense of us stepping into a whole other universe had deepened, and I was glad to go along with it.

Especially when it wasn't just us creating an alternate reality.

A broad smile spread across my lips as we pulled into the long rectangular parking lot of the venue the band had rented. Rows upon rows of stunning bikes and vintage cars greeted the sight. By the entrance, a small crowd was gathering, every single one of them going for the greaser, pinup, or old-school glam biker look.

Roland maneuvered the Cadillac into an empty spot at the far end of the lot, right where the parking spaces gave way to a stretch of grass and trees. Given how huge the Caddy was, squeezing into tighter, modern-day spots would have been either impossible or a headache.

I didn't mind the extra distance, though. With how pleasant the evening was, the short walk would be a perk rather than a hindrance.

Once we were parked, Roland killed the engine and reached out to swipe his fingers along my jaw.

"Ready?" he muttered, leaning closer.

I covered the rest of the distance and pressed my lips against his. "Ready."

As soon as we were both out of the car, Roland snatched my hand and led me toward the entrance. I had to admit, I was curious about the change of plans.

Initially, this was supposed to be a small party at the Whiskey Jet Preachers' studio. Gina had sent a text late last night to reroute our path to Die Musikbox, a mid-sized event venue, but hadn't said a thing beyond that except her recommendation to go full-out rock 'n' roll.

Thankfully, both Roland and I had already planned to dress up for the event anyway, so there weren't many adjustments needed.

"You think they plan to play?" I asked Roland, my gaze trained up ahead on another small group that joined the one smoking in front of the entrance.

Kitty heels, swing dresses, victory rolls. It was a downright treat for the eyes.

A burst of teetering laughter exploded from the three girls, then they rushed into the venue like their butts were on fire.

"It certainly looks like they invited some fans," Roland said with a laugh. "Wonder what that's like, to mix friends with fans."

I laughed. "Aric certainly struck gold in that department with Gina."

From fan to friend. The kind of friend you loved romantically too.

And had hot sex with.

I tightened my fingers around Roland's. "I'm happy to be here with you, you know."

"I know." Light danced in his turquoise eyes.

He delivered a smoldering kiss that stopped me right in my tracks. My mouth parted for him, and I moaned at the first touch of his tongue against mine.

It wasn't until a wolf whistle sliced through the air that I even became aware anything else existed.

I pulled away from Roland as Gina approached us with a grin.

“Save something for the after-party.” She brushed a light kiss on my cheek, then hugged Roland.

“The party is having an after-party?” He quirked a brow at her.

She waved a hand. “You know what I mean.”

“I do know that you just confirmed the guys are playing.” I smirked.

Gina narrowed her eyes at me. “It could really be just a party having an after-party.”

But nobody was buying her shit. Even Roland gave her a playful pat on the shoulder that just made Gina glare harder before she burst out laughing.

“Okay, okay, you got me. Stupid concert terminology.” She rolled her eyes. “Can’t get it out of my skin, right?”

She motioned us to follow her inside. We squeezed past the now-different, larger group smoking and drinking beers in front of the doors, then sailed past the almost empty coat check. A couple of leather jackets hung on the racks, but otherwise, everyone seemed more inclined to keep their outfits intact—even ones who went for jackets and blazers despite the warm weather.

And it really was an ocean of jackets in here.

My gaze roamed. The crowd was spread around numerous tall, round tables. It was an explosion of black, mostly for the guys, and a rainbow of colors for the women. And I wasn’t just talking about the dresses.

Hell, for once in my life, I fit in perfectly with my teal hair.

Gina dragged us through the crowd toward a table near the—oh yes, we were for sure getting a concert—stage. We walked past a bunch of unfamiliar-to-me faces, some of which Gina greeted in passing, but also some people I remembered from the couple of times I’d been to the Whiskey Jet Preachers’ gigs. Namely individuals from the crew who’d either wrapped up their jobs already or were having a night off.

I cast smiles and hellos their way but could hardly do more than that with the pace Gina was setting. Beside me, Roland seemed to be drinking it all in, and even I had to admit, whoever had organized this deserved a freaking medal.

Although the main floor consisted of the standard standing tables, the sides were lined with vinyl booths with a couple of jukeboxes positioned between them that made the whole scene seem like something out of an old-school diner—thankfully *not* from the same period I'd seen in my past life.

This was far more '50s and '60s in style than the '40s I'd lived through.

Which was a huge fucking relief.

Though I'd done as much as I could to process the memory of getting shot in the godsdamned head, I suspected I wouldn't have coped all that well with being thrown into a replica of the diner the vintage version of me had spent her final day in. The diner behind which she'd made out with James-Ezra, pining for a different life she'd never claim.

The taste in my mouth soured, and on the wings of it, Roland's attention grazed my face.

I glanced at him while keeping pace with Gina on autopilot.

There was no way Roland didn't connect the dots. I'd told him every detail of what I'd seen. But while there *was* compassion lining his handsome features, the look he gave me also conveyed a *very* clear message.

I promised to leave this crap behind for a night.

With a curt nod to confirm I was okay and would stick to our agreement, I raked through my thoughts to reconnect with that initial appreciation that had filled me when I first took stock of the venue. I could have that. I could admire something as beautiful and well set up as this retro-themed party.

The more the shitstorm clouds cleared from my head, the more I realized this whole switch from the studio to Die Musikbox hadn't been as last minute as Gina's text made it seem.

Clearly, the guys had been going for a surprise with this concert.

Nice touch. Nice fucking touch.

And speaking of the guys...

Once we came all the way up to the stage, Gina took us to the right and through a set of doors leading backstage.

“Thought you’d want to say hi before the chaos starts.” She winked over her shoulder.

Before I could even get a word out, she was opening the door to a comfy lounge room where Ewart, the drummer, and Aric were draped across the armchairs. Leif and Pascal were nowhere in sight, probably getting warmed up or going through their own rituals.

Being friends with Gina gave me a bit of a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes of the music world, but I wasn’t anywhere near as versed in it as she was.

Aric immediately stood upon spotting us. “Alina, Roland.”

We all exchanged hugs.

“Congratulations on the award.” Roland clasped Aric’s shoulder.

The vampire grinned. “It was a long time coming.”

He barely got the words out before Ewart was shouldering his way past him.

The incubus gave me a tight, warm hug, then repeated the same with Roland even though this was the first time the guys had actually met.

“I’m Ewart. The drumming heart and soul of the Whiskey Jet Preachers.” He offered his hand to Roland, all business, as if he hadn’t just hugged the hell out of him.

Behind him, Aric gave a loud snort.

I snickered.

“Roland. Witch and co-founder of Crescent Academy.” He slid his gaze my way. “Also the luckiest fucking guy alive.”

Ewart hummed in appreciation. Not because he was into me, but because the incubus actually gave a shit about love and relationships.

I might not have spent a significant of time in his company, but his chart blazed with those qualities—not to mention the open, warm demeanor that spilled from him in overflow. Especially when he watched people like Gina and Aric together.

We spent a couple more minutes in easy chat, then left Aric and Ewart to their devices with the promise that we'd share a drink after the show. Gina came back out onto the main floor with us, and I didn't miss her eyeing the still-empty space right in front of the stage.

There was no doubt where she'd end up being tonight.

She didn't head there, though. Instead, she guided us to the closest round table and pocketed the *reserved* sign.

“Special treatment, huh?” I teased.

Gina shot me a wolfish grin. “Had to make up for carting you around like a sack of potatoes somehow.”

I narrowed my eyes at her while Roland just laughed at us.

“I'll go get us some drinks.” He pressed a kiss to my temple. “Any preferences?”

“A gin and tonic sounds good,” I said after a moment of thought.

Gina beamed. “That's my girl.”

I would have rolled my eyes, but I also knew that probably the one thing that bugged her since transitioning to vampirism was that she couldn't really indulge in her favorite drink anymore. Apparently, gin and tonic laced with blood wasn't the same.

Then again, since Aric was her maker, I didn't doubt she would regain the ability to consume beverages without the addition of blood. Boons tended to be passed down in vampire lines.

“Gina?” Roland asked.

“I’m fine, thanks. Had some bloodsky in the back with the guys before the guests started pouring in.”

With another kiss, Roland left to grab drinks.

Gina barely turned to face me when someone called out her name. She glanced at the guy a few tables away, then shot me a look that was filled with questions I appreciated but were also redundant.

She’d been there through the worst.

I didn’t need her to babysit me now.

“Go mingle, woman.” I shooed her. “I promise I’m good.”

After another evaluating look, Gina nodded, then peeled away to go say hello. I watched her go, then braced an elbow on the table, content to seek out Roland and ogle his fine ass at a distance.

Literally.

The black jeans he was wearing were fucking killer.

But a tug in my chest made me look another way.

Pulse pounding, I gazed across the space like I was ruled by a magnetic force I couldn’t fight against.

Despite the ocean of tables and people dominating the floor, my gaze easily landed on backswept brown hair, paired with the unmistakable tall, broad-shouldered frame that instantly lit a fire in my core.

Ezra.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

I catapulted from the table, spearing for the group Gina had gone to say hello to, except she fucking wasn't where she should have been.

Frantic, I searched around the space—at first seeing nothing but a blur of faces and bodies blending into one another. Just as hysteria wound tighter around my throat and jammed up my lungs, Gina's telltale long braids came into focus four tables away.

I flat-out sprinted at her.

I didn't even have it in me to put up a calm, polite front for the people she was talking to. I just grabbed her hand and pulled her away like my ass was on fire.

Well, it wasn't really my ass, but something definitely *was* on fire that I couldn't fucking deal with right now. The single person I was supposed to be hot for tonight was my husband.

"Why is Ezra Störmer here?" I panted after I'd dragged Gina halfway back to our table, using a bubble of clear space for at least the illusion of privacy.

Her eyes flew wide. "What?"

"I just saw him, Gina. Isn't this an invite-only event? He can't fucking be here." I winced at the high pitch of my voice, but the panic surging through me had taken the reins, and right now, it felt like there was shit I could do about it.

A deep frown settled between Gina's brows. She looked across the venue, her gaze sharpening into agent mode as she

sought out Ezra like he was a suspect in a crowd.

I didn't dare do the same.

Seeing him had sent a shockwave straight to my core, and even now, despite the trepidation and a really fucking weird onset of claustrophobia, my thong was soaking wet.

So fucking messed up.

"I know I didn't invite him, and Aric wouldn't have either," Gina said under her breath. "I can go investigate if you'd like. Because if he's crashing the party, then he's going to get kicked out real fast."

It took me a second to realize there had been two security guards manning the entrance. I just hadn't really paid attention to them, with Gina ushering Roland and me inside. Clearly, they'd been familiar with her, hence the easy passage, but what if Ezra really had slipped through on his own?

The damn fox shifter had proven he had a knack for getting into places where he shouldn't have been.

"Please do," I finally said to Gina. "I'm not entirely sure if I can handle being near him right now, especially with..."

My attention drifted over to Roland, who'd just returned to our table with the drinks. His brows furrowed when he spotted me with Gina, the panic probably still clear on my face.

It was the wake-up call I needed.

I wasn't the only one in a crap situation here.

Forcing out a breath, I exchanged a nod with Gina that said more than words could, then headed for Roland while she slipped toward the door leading backstage.

The second I reached the table, I wrapped my fingers around the cool glass of gin and tonic, then said with as much neutrality as I could muster, "Ezra Störmer is here."

A tick worked in Roland's jaw, the tension so palpable I wanted to run my fingers along his jaw and massage it away.

I did no such thing, though. This was fragile ground we were treading.

“You spoke to him?” His words were even more painfully controlled than my own.

“I just saw him and told Gina about it. She’s going to investigate if he’s even meant to be here.”

“If he is...”

“We’ll deal with it.” I threw back the gin and tonic in a single breath. “You said this is our night with friends, and I’m sticking to it.”

Even if the tug at my chest was saying otherwise.

But gods fucking damn it, I wasn’t about to let it ruin my evening. Ezra Störmer had left an imprint on enough of my life.

I wanted this night to be mine.

Mine and Roland’s.

I set down the glass and took Roland’s hand in mine. “If Störmer’s meant to be here, well, so are over a hundred other people. He can have his fun, and we can have ours. On opposite ends of the room.”

Roland lifted his gaze from mine, scanning the venue. Hell, even I knew it wouldn’t be that easy, but really, why should our energy fields *have* to intersect with Ezra’s?

I dared a quick glance, relief filling me when I didn’t immediately spot the Sag.

This was a crowd. A pretty damn good crowd. I’d been in spaces with far fewer people and hadn’t ended up crossing paths with them. Why should this be any different?

Gina sidled up to us, her gaze cutting from Roland to me—a silent check if I’d already filled him in on the situation.

When I dipped my chin, she let out a sigh and said, “Leif invited him. Apparently, he got his Harley from Störmer and he always brings it to his shop for tune-ups.”

Well, fuck.

Despite my earlier statement to Roland, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't wished for the fox shifter to be kicked out for crashing the party.

Figures that would have been too easy.

"So, we're stuck with him?" I asked dryly, already knowing the answer.

Damn the bassist for picking Störmer's shop to get his bike from. As if Berlin didn't have a plethora of them available. Honestly, what were the godsdamned chances?

Gina gave me an apologetic look, then glanced over her shoulder toward the stage. "You can come stand with me in the front. I highly doubt Störmer will be going for the thick of it."

True enough, a pair of girls was already standing right in front of the stage.

Frankly, I was a bit surprised it was just two, but maybe because of the informal nature of the event, they didn't want to seem too eager. Gods knew the regular Whiskey Jet Preachers' concerts were a stampede the second the doors opened.

I glanced at Roland. He'd been quiet throughout the exchange, and I didn't want to tap into the astro side of things to get a read on him.

For some reason, I wanted him to voice what he desired to do in the situation instead of me snooping it out.

"I'm good here if you are," he said, his face opening to show the sincerity of it. "I would have preferred if he *wasn't* here, but I don't want his presence to change how our night goes either. If we're still both on board with taking it easy and having fun, then we don't have to do things any different."

I beamed at him, then cocked a brow at Gina. "There's your answer."

"Well then, if you don't mind"—she glanced toward the stage again—"I think I better claim my spot before someone else does. Like fuck am I watching my man from the back."

"Go." I winked at her.

The table we had was pretty close to the stage already, with just a stretch of open floor separating us from the raised platform, but Gina still vamp-zapped to the front—half a second before a whole pack of people made their way over.

Gina, of course, beat them to it.

She shot me a beaming victory grin before bracing her forearms on the edge of the stage. No security rail this time. Made me think the fans who'd been invited to the party had been properly vetted. Trusted. Even if they did kind of look hungry as hell.

I peeked into their charts as the crowd formed, just in case, but found no active troublemaking traits.

When I was done, I saw Roland smirking at me.

“What?” I asked in a perfect display of ignorance.

He wound his arm around me and pulled me into a tight embrace. “I wonder if ICRA knows what a gods-send you are.”

His splayed fingers traveled down my spine, over the curve of my ass.

“ICRA has nothing to do with tonight,” I purred, even though I knew what he was aiming at.

He squeezed my butt. “No, but it just goes to show how much you care for protecting people even when no one asks you to. That’s a damn fine trait. Speaking of ICRA...”

Roland looked past me, and I twisted in his embrace until I spotted Finn several tables away talking to someone vaguely familiar. He noticed me watching and immediately waved me over, his whole damn face lighting up.

I turned back to Roland. “I better go say hi.”

I stood on my toes and pressed a kiss to his lips just as someone called out his name. We both looked in the direction of the shout and saw one of Roland’s former students weaving through the crowd toward us. I waited to say hello to Jonas, then left the guys to talk while I sought out Finn.

He gave me a bear hug like we hadn't seen each other at work just yesterday, then introduced me to the crowd that was more Gina's but he'd become acquainted with through various run-ins.

While I wasn't much for small talk, the superficial conversations flowed easily until tingles ran down my spine.

I stiffened and, doing my best to not be obvious, scanned the surroundings.

"Hey, I got to get back to Roland, but have a nice night," I squeezed out, stuffing down the overflow of emotions.

A slight narrowing of Finn's eyes hinted the change in my mood hadn't escaped him, but luckily all he said was, "I'll catch you after the show, yeah?"

I nodded, then got the hell away from the table that had suddenly become way too close to a particular fox shifter I wanted nothing more but to press my body up against.

No, fuck.

A fox shifter I wanted nothing more than to ignore.

Cursing myself under my breath, I cut through the thickening ocean of people. When Störmer had closed so much distance, I had no idea, but the fact that he'd been just two tables away from Finn's made me think it wasn't a coincidence.

I could practically feel his gaze burning into my back.

Willing some more speed into my legs, I pushed past a couple more tables, then heaved out a sigh of relief when I finally reached Roland. The lights dimmed at that exact time, saving me from explaining the frightening near call I'd had, and the Whiskey Jet Preachers took the stage.

The whole venue went up in whistles and cheers.

I settled next to Roland and let the music wash my convoluted reality away.



Not all that long after the gig ended, our table became a kind of home base for the band. Gina had joined us almost immediately, with Ewart, Pascal, and Leif dropping by at regular intervals to get a breather from all the people hungering for their attention—and maybe throw back a drink in relative peace when we didn't get the passers-by stopping for quick convos.

Sure, this was an invite-only event, but familiar faces didn't mean mingling *couldn't* get exhausting.

Honestly, I admired the guys for handling so many energies in such a short time. To deal with this on a regular basis would be my personal nightmare.

The more time passed, though, the more the band decided to stick around and let the stream of people trickle past our table. One permanent fixture we gained was Ewart's friend Manuel, the guy as easygoing as the incubus, who read the room like a pro and somehow always managed to keep the stream flowing when it threatened to get stuck.

Roland and I engaged in some of the convos, but for the most part, I was content with being slightly more on the periphery and just observing things play out.

I wasn't sure where Finn had disappeared to, but the last time I'd seen him, the warlock had been chatting with a girl in enviously tight leather pants. I wondered if he was even still at the party or if they'd started their own somewhere else. Gods knew the warlock had some smooth charm.

After an hour or so, even Aric managed to battle his way over to us.

"You were brilliant," I said to him once he pulled from one of the quick, in-passing convos that had held him on the other end of the table.

He tucked Gina under his arm. “Can’t give anything but the best when I have this one looking up at me.”

“Shut up.” She hip-bumped him.

I bit back a laugh. Seeing Gina all flustered would never get old; I just knew it.

“It’s true. The quality of the live gigs definitely went up in the last decade.” Pascal grinned over his glass of scotch. “At some point, I wondered if Aric wasn’t going to dislodge a fucking hip with all the moves and guitar jumps the old man was pulling out.”

“Fucker,” Aric half-heartedly snapped at the guitarist.

A pair of girls I’d spotted in the front row earlier—and had been orbiting us for quite a while now—approached the table.

“Hi. Could we maybe get some pics with you?” the smaller one with jet-black hair asked.

She addressed the entire band, but the heated spark in her eyes, one her friend mirrored, was meant solely for Aric.

I did a quick check on Gina to see how she was with their not exactly hidden attraction, but apparently, she didn’t need me looking out for her. Aric’s hand squeezed her hip, tucking her even closer against him before he answered the girls.

“Sure. Let’s head over there.” He pointed to an empty spot near the wall where there was enough room to maneuver all of them into a picture.

Manuel offered to take the group shot, and the black-haired girl eagerly handed over her phone.

“Can we get selfies too?” the other one asked right before they moved out of earshot.

Amused, I watched the guys pose, but before they even wrapped up, another group of girls had moved in.

And another right after until there was basically a line.

“I can’t imagine being with someone so popular,” I blurted out before my stupid brain registered how shitty that was to Gina.

But she just laughed—while Roland placed a hand over his heart and shot me a wounded expression.

“I’ll have you know that I’m very popular at the Academy,” he said indignantly.

I cocked a brow. “Are you telling me I have to go fight off the college-aged portion of your students?”

While I was joking about the students, Roland absolutely was hot professor material.

“Just for the record,” Gina cut in, sliding her gaze to Roland, “if you’re ever in the mood for a change in career, you could totally join the guys.”

She gestured to the damn good greaser look he was rocking.

“Then I wouldn’t be the only one panting over her man in the front row among all the fans,” she concluded, like that made all the sense in the damn world.

“There wouldn’t be any fans in the front row once they heard me sing,” Roland deadpanned.

“Hey, decorations matter too, witchy man.” She winked, and we all fucking lost it.

We barely recovered when Aric vamp-swooped into our little bubble and buried his face in Gina’s hair.

“Are the girls getting to you?” she teased.

He groaned. “It’s the guys. They keep insisting we do a shoot with you as well.”

“Why?” She twisted out of his grip just enough to meet his gaze.

“So that I can do all the dirty poses the others would want but can never get.”

I could have sworn I heard Gina swoon.

And pant.

“I’d pay good money to see that,” I commented, just because I could.

Gina shot me a look that clearly said *traitor*, but with how eagerly she marched away with Aric, it was clear she just needed the extra push. And that, I'd always gladly provide.

I watched the band go all conspiratorial as Aric led Gina right past the line, and I turned around to cock a brow and a grin at Roland—except I never made it that far.

With all the fun I'd been having, I'd completely forgotten to keep track of a particular energetic constellation in the room.

Before I could stop the train wreck from happening, my gaze met Ezra's.

A foxy smile spread across his face, then the fucking Sagiterrorist set a course for the one destination I'd dreaded the most.

Me.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

My skin flamed.

All my inner alarms were going off and screamed to fucking abort. Fate had a shitty sense of humor, though, because, for the life of me, I couldn't help but be captivated by the fox shifter.

It wasn't fair that someone could look so damn handsome.

Störmer's tall frame made my fucking panties melt, and the fiery, playful energy brushing against mine knocked the breath right out of my lungs long before the panic could.

Instead of running, I was falling.

Instead of daunted, I was bewitched.

"Alina," Ezra called out and came straight at me, his arresting grin even broader now.

To my right, Roland stiffened for a heartbeat before he forced his body to relax, probably not wanting to give away that he knew way more about Mr. Steam-On-Legs Sagittarius than he would under normal circumstances.

Me, though, I had long broken up with *normal* and just stared at Ezra Störmer like the biggest lovestruck fool.

"Ezra," I said perilously breathless—then nearly fucking died when the Sag reached out and yanked me into his embrace.

Legit *yanked*.

One moment I was standing in my spot. The next, I was colliding with Ezra's impressive chest, his arms banding around me and pulling me much, much closer than two casual acquaintances would ever hug.

And, shit, if I didn't hate myself for how good it felt to surrender to him like this. How natural. Like...

Like coming home.

With a gentle brush of his hands against my body, Ezra released me, but regardless of the physical separation, he didn't free me from the blazing heat of his attention.

His gaze dripped, taking in my biker dress, the deep V of the neckline...

"You look incredible."

Ezra's words slid across my skin like summer wind.

When his gaze locked on mine again, the appreciation in his warm brown eyes would have slayed me if my soul hadn't already left my flesh from the pure energetic overload that came from simply standing between Ezra and Roland.

This was...

This was worse than being hit with the presence of freaking gods.

Maybe a wiser witch would have foreseen that if *one* soulmate had such a strong impact on her, being surrounded by two would be *devastating*. But even my usually proud Leo stellium agreed that when it came to these men, *wise* wasn't in my toolkit.

Ezra peeled his gaze off me after what felt like the sweetest yet most terrifying eternity and redirected his attention to Roland. There was nothing outwardly hostile about it, but I could tell Ezra knew—he fucking knew—who Roland was and was measuring him up.

That upward tilt of his chin that only pronounced the extra inches he had on Roland was unmistakable.

Fuck.

“Ezra Störmer.” He offered his hand.

To his credit, Roland didn’t hesitate. “Roland Richter.”

The intensity of the handshake—again, seemingly normal from the outside—was enough to bring the damn foundations of the building down.

I stood there frozen, wondering why the hell I had allowed us to get into this mess. Roland and I should have left the damn party the second Störmer had shown up.

Honestly, with my luck, was there really any other way this could have gone?

Or had I, on some messed up subconscious level, *wanted* this to happen?

I was just about to groan, but the brush of Ezra’s hand against mine when he released the handshake with Roland sent such a jolt of electricity through my flesh that I would have ended up producing a whole other sound altogether had I dared to open my mouth.

Which would have been catastrophic.

This was enough of a disaster on its own. It certainly didn’t require an extra dose of fucked.

“Alina saved my ass with her astrology magic,” Ezra said into the thickening silence, his hand still very clearly rubbing against mine.

Why I wasn’t moving *away* from the Sag, only the Universe fucking knew.

“Never thought I’d go through something as crazy as a break-in and witches setting up a ritual inside my bike shop. I’m not sure if I’m allowed to talk about the specifics”—he cut his gaze to me without truly expecting an answer—“but let’s just say that stuff was seriously messed up. I wasn’t sure how the whole thing would even go down, but I do know that I’ll be forever grateful Alina came rolling in with the other agents when I called ICRA. She cleared me of any involvement from taking just one look at the ritual, *and* she cleared my shop shortly after so that it was able to run again at full capacity.”

I could have sworn Störmer was even closer to me than he'd been a second ago. His fingers touched mine in a gesture that I couldn't even kid myself wasn't deliberate.

And again, I was doing fuck all to break the contact.

"I have a gut feeling that entire mess would still drag on today if it weren't for her and the brilliant way she sees things," he concluded.

"Yes, Alina is exceptional like that," Roland said smoothly.

Uh oh.

I looked between him and Ezra, the guys locked in another silent battle.

Whatever game Ezra was playing, Roland had obviously decided to participate. I just wasn't sure if they were aware that my panties were getting the short end of the stick here.

If they continued to make a competition out of praising me, I might orgasm on the spot.

Bad, Alina. Bad, bad, bad.

I really shouldn't be turned on right now. This was like... worst-case scenario material. If I had any sanity left, I would take Roland's hand and get us the fuck out of here.

But what was I doing?

Standing between the two guys—with Roland's palm against the small of my back and Ezra's fingers continuously touching mine.

And I was fucking *swooning*.

Utilizing those few cells of my brain that weren't flooded with endorphins, I constructed a mental barrier to zone out the two guys for a bit—as much as I could, given the powerhouses they were—then searched the space for someone to cut into this ridiculous bubble that had formed around the three of us.

Everyone I knew or had at least met tonight was too damn engaged in their own business for me to flag down. The guys from the band were spread out across the venue, Ewart and

Aric still posing for selfies, while Leif and Pascal had ended up in their own respective groups.

Worst of all, Gina was nowhere in sight, and Finn had probably left the party a while ago with the hot biker chick.

Fuck. My. Life.

The two people who needed to take just one look to know what a crapfest I'd found myself neck-deep in were absent and...

I honest-to-gods didn't have it in me to resist for much longer.

"You're Whiskey Jet Preachers fans?" Ezra asked, his gaze moving from Roland to land heavily on me.

I cleared my throat. "We kind of got pulled into the scene through Gina. She's—"

"Aric's girl." Störmer grinned. "Yeah, I didn't put two and two together when you came to investigate the ritual, but it clicked for me later that she's the one Leif talked about. Well, he mostly said how relieved he was that Aric got his head out of the gutter and actually went for the girl."

Heat invaded my cheeks.

There was no mistaking the double meaning at the end of that sentence.

"Made life so much easier for everybody," Ezra finished on a lighter note.

"Excuse me." A guy with a professional-looking camera walked up to us. "Mind if I take a photo?"

I agreed to it without even thinking and turned toward the photographer. It wasn't until a small pause, like an inhale from the Universe, claimed the moment that I picked up on the tension running between Ezra and Roland before they flanked me.

Flanked me.

Seamlessly, hands landed on the small of my back, their bodies pressing along the length of mine.

As soon as we connected, it was like a valve released all the pressure it had been fighting to keep in.

Holy fucking shit.

I'd never done drugs in my life, but I was pretty sure this was what a hit felt like.

I hardly even registered the camera I was smiling at as the sensation of both Roland's and Ezra's generous touch against me—*at the same freaking time!*—propelled me to such heights nothing but bliss existed in my mind.

Because, in that moment, we fit.

We were the perfect alignment, coming together without fault. So smoothly that for the duration of the shot, I couldn't even comprehend why we were ever at odds. Why this wasn't our normal. Because it sure as shit felt like we belonged.

The photographer thanked us, breaking the moment—and with it, the connection.

Roland released me first while Ezra took his time, squeezing me tight around the waist before finally putting a modicum of distance between us.

I wasn't sure if I was imagining shit, but it certainly seemed like there was more color to his cheeks than before.

"I'm going to grab us another round of drinks." Roland pressed a kiss to my temple before turning to Ezra. "Ezra, you want anything?"

"Thanks, but I'm good."

"I'll be right back." Roland's words were light, yet there was something to them I couldn't put my finger on.

I frowned at his retreat, but within a second, all my senses became flooded with Störmer's presence. He was standing even closer to me now, his body fully facing mine the instant I turned.

The slip of empty space between us was so charged it would have probably zapped anyone who tried touching the field.

“I have a confession to make,” Ezra drawled, that half smile that always wrecked me dancing on his sinful lips. “I was hoping I’d run into you here.”

“And if you hadn’t?” I cocked my head to the side.

He skimmed his fingertips down my upper arm. “It would have been like going to the beach but not having the ocean. I like the ocean.”

When those same fingertips began to play with the curled strands of my hair, I fucking forgot what breathing was.

Ezra towered over me like he was a second away from bringing his lips to mine, and every part of my body screamed for the contact before freaking sense slammed back into my fucked-up brain.

Moving back a step, I swallowed heavily. “Ezra...”

“It’s really good to see you, Alina,” he said with a gentleness that shook me more than his playful advances ever could.

It felt like willingly condemning myself, but...

“It’s good to see you too, Ezra,” I gave in. “How have you been?”

“You mean aside from a sexy teal-haired witch ditching me during a video call?” he teased.

Fighting the blush brought on by the memories of what went down after the call, I countered, “You know why I did that.”

“Because we would have ended up having a half-naked conversation consisting mostly of moans and you calling out my name even louder than your friend’s snores?”

Shit, shit, shit.

Worst thing of all, he was saying all this crap in such a carefree, lighthearted way that it skirted right around any red flags it would have otherwise raised. Like it all really was just harmless fun.

And I hated, I absolutely *hated* that that was precisely how I perceived it too.

“Shut up,” I blubbered, then peered up at him from beneath my lashes. “You’re such a fucking Sagiterrorist.”

Ezra grinned like I’d given him the biggest compliment.

I snorted and shook my head, but at least the moment *actually* lightened the entire atmosphere.

“I had a new shipment of bikes come in a couple of days ago, and I got orders to customize four of them.” He scratched the nape of his neck, the gesture carrying the faintest undercurrent of shyness.

As if he wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear about his life. If I’d find it interesting.

“It’s been a while since I could do what I love second most,” he went on, “so I’m really looking forward to it.”

I was for sure falling into a trap, but I couldn’t resist asking, “What do you love most?”

Those devious corners of his lips quirked up, and his gaze did a slow appraisal down my chest.

“If you say boobs, I swear I’ll punch you,” I snarked, though my voice came out too raspy for anyone to take me fucking seriously.

“I *did* enjoy how they felt pressed against me when you were riding on the back of my bike.”

This time, I knew I wasn’t mistaking the blush creeping into his cheeks, and shit, if I wasn’t in love with it.

Ezra Störmer could tease all he wanted to, but seeing the evidence of how much I affected him...

It was worth more than any comment that could have come out of his mouth.

When I’d first met him, I berated myself for being naïve and falling for compliments and seductive phrases he probably dolled out to plenty of women like playboys tended to do.

Except *those* guys didn't blush.

Ezra...

He looked like he couldn't help the flirty remarks. Not because he was coming on to me like I was a conquest—

But because he *liked* me so much.

The realization blasted through my body. It should have landed long ago, right along with the whole soulmate knowledge, but the doubts had remained a persistent presence, gnawing away at every positive thought about Ezra I'd had.

Seeing him now, through this lens...

Ezra Störmer liked me. He truly fucking liked me.

And it shouldn't matter.

Still, a smile bloomed on my face as I peered up at him.

Glimpses of the numerous past lives we'd shared rushed through my awareness. It had always been him, that unmistakable fiery essence being reborn time and time again, but the Ezra right here, in this lifetime...

It was as if I was getting all of him.

All the brilliance that made him *him*.

Shit, no wonder this was the lifetime where we were supposed to come together. Vanja hadn't been kidding when she said the energies were in overflow.

If the past lives had been offshoots of us, echoes, foundations and building blocks, paths of expansion...

Looking at Ezra now, feeling him—he was *everything*.

And I knew, I fucking knew, that no matter how hard I struggled, the pull would always be stronger.

My throat closed off, unease slipping beneath my skin.

Where the hell was Roland with those drinks?

I glanced around the space, my eyes narrowed as I scanned the freaking masses for my husband, the man I'd actually

chosen to be with in this lifetime—and spotted him right as he
marched out the fucking doors.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Roland disappeared into the night, the doors swinging shut behind him, and my pulse leaped into my throat.

I shot a panicked look at Ezra. “I’ve got to go.”

His voice reached after me like vines, but I failed to register a single word, too freaked out over the fact Roland had just left.

Roland had *left*.

Cursing the chunky heels I had on, I broke into a sprint, ignoring the displeased comments I left in my wake as I shouldered, none too gently, through the throng of people. I punched open the double doors and staggered onto the sidewalk.

Cigarette smoke curled around me, and voices danced through the evening, but none of them belonged to the person I was so desperate to see.

I shoved past a group to give myself some more space to work with.

With as little light as there was—just a couple of subdued reflectors hanging over the entrance—thick shadows dominated the huge parking lot, making it next to impossible to spot a figure dressed in black with dark hair to boot.

The only real assistance I had was the nearly full moon shining above and the distant lights of the main street running along the far edge of the lot, but they were barely enough to

cast a glow along the silhouettes to distinguish them from the night.

Row after row of cars, I scanned the disturbingly large space but spotted no moving shadows. Not a single wisp of movement to indicate where Roland was. Shit.

When a car engine started up, I swore my heart stopped beating. Dread strangled my spine until the flash of headlights made me realize the direction was all wrong.

It wasn't Roland driving off.

Shaken, I forced out the toxic breath poisoning my lungs. As the worst of the fear filtered out of my system, I remembered that wretched emotion was good for one thing—making legs stronger, while the brain was left dumber due to the body funneling all that energy into allowing us to physically escape.

Right now, I needed my wits, not the strength to go running across Berlin like a headless chicken.

So, despite the urge to go look for Roland now, I went for some more measured breaths instead.

Gradually, my mental faculties came back online, and as they did, the car that had scared the crap out of me turned from a former threat to an idea.

I headed in the direction of the Cadillac. It was the safest bet, right?

Roland wouldn't leave the car, and he certainly wouldn't just disappear on me.

Except those strong Aquarian traits of his worked *against* my hypothesis instead of for it.

I stilled.

What if there was an even better course of action?

Reaching within me, I opened my sensors to the max. I might not have been able to see Roland, but there was a chance I could feel him.

With my eyes closed, I sifted through the signatures. Those closest to me were the brightest, and the building itself, with its mass of invitees, acted like a hotspot that seeped into the energies of the entire fucking area.

Frustrated, I started taking apart the signatures when something in my awareness shifted.

My eyes flew open, and, for what was probably the first time, I heaved a sigh of relief when the world gained an overlay of threads.

I ignored the numerous smaller ones flowing from me and felt for the main three instead. The one leading back into the building was clearly Ezra's, and of the remaining two, one felt more distant than the other.

I latched onto the last one and followed it into the dark.

A small park stretched along the side of the venue, the rich foliage of trees making it pitch-fucking-black. The cord, though, shone so bright it illuminated the ground beneath my feet and kept me from tripping as I continued to walk.

The moment I cleared the thick copse giving the park some shelter from urban life, I saw him.

Bathed in the light of the cord, Roland was tragically beautiful—but there was also something harder, stronger shaping his features and energy.

“Roland!” I shouted, running the rest of the way.

My impulse to throw my arms around him experienced an instant death when Roland leveled his gaze on me.

“What the fuck, Alina?” His words sliced into my flesh. “What the fuck was that?”

Worse than the anger rolling off him was the disappointment.

My lips parted and closed on repeat, the sudden lack of words strangling any and all sounds.

“You should have stayed inside with Störmer,” he spat before marching right past me.

For a too-long moment, all I could do was stare at him before I stammered, “What? No!”

“It’s clearly where you want to be.”

Roland stormed off past me. I fumbled my way through the dark behind him, no longer blessed with the bright guidance of the cord that had flicked out of sight.

“Roland, stop,” I pleaded, but he just kept marching farther and farther away.

When my feet finally hit the paved parking lot, I broke into a sprint to catch up with him. By the time I did, he’d made it nearly all the way to the Cadillac. Roland cast a look over his shoulder, no doubt hearing the frantic patter of my heels and the ragged breaths from sprinting like a madwoman, but the expression didn’t just make me come to a swaying halt.

It shredded my heart to ugly ribbons.

“Roland, please, just talk to me,” I choked out.

He barked out a bitter laugh laced with so much hurt, it physically pained me to hear it.

But at least he’d stopped instead of sealing himself in the car. At least he was looking at me.

Even if there was nothing at all kind in his gaze.

“Talk? There’s nothing to talk about. That right there”—he pointed at Die Musikbox resting in the distance behind me—“said everything.”

“I—I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand.” He dragged a hand down his face. “That fucking guy flirted with you right in front of me, and you *liked* it.”

Gods, I had fucking liked it.

But just because it was Ezra.

“It’s the bonds,” I whispered. “You know Ezra is my soulmate.”

The disgust on Roland's face was plain. "Well, fuck soulmates like that. Do you know how disrespectful that is? I'm your husband. Your *husband*, Alina. We might not share the same surname, but there's no way in hell Störmer didn't know that we were married. Didn't see that you're my fucking *spouse*. And he just shat all over it."

I sucked in a sharp breath, but Roland wasn't done.

"He isn't even aware of this whole fuck up with the bonds. He just acted like it was a-fucking-okay to go after my wife right in front of me. And I get it. I really fucking do. Because you gave him *everything* he needed right back."

Tears stung my eyes as lash after lash of Roland's reality fell upon me.

Because it *was* his reality.

I was the one with the visions. The one who saw and felt the cords.

For Roland, without the metaphysics to lean on, Störmer could only be a man who was hitting on his wife—a man his wife *desired*.

Nausea punched me in the gut.

"I'm trying, Roland," I hiccupped. "You know I am."

As a tear I failed to stop tracked down my face, the anger fled from Roland's features, replaced by a softness that dismantled the rest of my barriers until I was crying in earnest.

"Shit, I'm not mad at *you*, Alina. Not really." He pulled me into an embrace.

I went so fucking small in his arms that he easily rested his chin on the top of my head.

"This is why I went to cool off," he muttered against my hair. "I didn't want to fight with you because I *know* you didn't really choose this."

I thought back to that original memory, the pact our souls had made. It sure fucking seemed like all of us had chosen this, pushing the guilt right back in.

Roland drew away to meet my gaze. “I know you want to break the bonds. I know you’ve been trying. But it just...”

He raked his hand through his thick hair, messing up the perfect rockabilly wave as he gazed up at the moon.

The waxing moon in Aries.

A beautiful energy for fresh starts, for harnessing the natural drive to take action, make your dreams happen. On the downside, an Aries Moon also delivered a hefty dose of powerful feelings, emotional directness, and impulsiveness.

Which could be easily navigated with self-regulation and grounding...neither of which I had in abundance recently.

As if that wasn’t enough, the transit was forming a sesquisquare with my tight natal stellium—Jupiter, the planet of luck, Venus, the planet of love, and Mars the planet of passion and aggression. While only a minor aspect, the sesquisquare did carry a certain “fuck my life” quality I’d been experiencing this evening.

I should have known better than to drop my guard.

Except I’d been too caught up in my own shit to pay attention to the transits.

Rookie fucking mistake.

On the wings of a long sigh, Roland ran his hand down the length of my arm, then said, “It just pissed me off, the way Störmer acted. Alina, I just can’t respect a guy who’s married and openly flirts with another man’s wife right in front of him.”

I personally thought it would be much worse if Ezra did that behind Roland’s back rather than out in the open, but I bit my tongue before that very unhelpful comment could stir up crap.

Totally not the point Roland was trying to make.

He started walking toward the rest of the way to the Caddy, but this time, there was an invitation in the slowness of his movements that led me to fall in step with him.

“If I’m entirely honest, I didn’t expect shit to hit me so hard.” He glanced at me before training his gaze ahead. “Knowing about the bonds and seeing them play out are two very different things. If you’d seen the way you and Störmer looked across the room...”

He shook his head, a touch of anger returning to his energy.

He clenched and unclenched his fist before loosing a breath. “I saw the fire in you that doesn’t come out when you’re with me.”

“That’s...” *Bullshit.*

But it wasn’t.

I did have my fire with Roland, but Ezra stoked it in a different way. Neither was better or worse because *I* felt my best with...

With them both.

The sadness that swelled in Roland’s eyes all but murdered me.

“You looked like the perfect couple, Alina. Even the biggest dud for sensing energies could see the attraction between the two of you. And I... I admit that I was—I *am* jealous.”

He clamped his hands on my waist and spun me around until my butt hit the hood of the Caddy.

“I’m jealous because you’re mine, and someone else wants you for himself.”

I was fully seated on the hood now, with Roland wedged between my legs. He pushed my dress higher up my thighs, then pulled off my panties and tucked them in the back of his pocket like a trophy. The move was so discreetly filthy I could feel the liquid heat gathering in my core.

Roland smirked like he knew precisely how he was wrecking me, then reached for his zipper.

Mesmerized, I watched him take his cock into his hand.

“Roland...”

“You’re mine, Alina,” he said with a long stroke that made my mouth water.

I damn near got lost in the intensity of his body, in the magnetism of the gaze he’d fixed on me, traveling between my face and my exposed pussy.

But then I remembered...

“You didn’t put up a barrier,” I whispered.

The last time we’d done this, we’d been in some empty industrial area—*and* he’d protected us with his magic, even if only when a car had driven by.

Thrilling but also safe.

Where we were now, though, was far from empty. The party was still going strong inside Die Musikbox, and there was nothing in the air, absolutely no ward or spell to keep us from being seen—only the natural cover of darkness consuming the parking lot between our spot and the venue.

A wicked smile slashed across Roland’s face. “No hiding this time. I want the world to see just how mine you are.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

My heart thundered against my ribs.

Was I really about to get fucked on top of a rented vintage car where anybody could walk by and see the display?

Gods, this was wrong on *so* many levels.

I was an ICRA agent, for fuck's sake. I was supposed to be an upstanding citizen, not a horny mess getting her brains fucked out in public.

Except the very fear of getting caught, the idea of doing something so illicit, sent a shot of excitement straight to my pussy.

I didn't dare look, but I was fairly certain my juices were already marking the sky-blue hood of the Cadillac.

"You have no idea how much I love seeing you like this, Alina," Roland purred.

I glanced up—because yes, I had absolutely been staring at his hand moving along the length of his cock this entire time—and had to bite my lip at the intensity of Roland's desire etched in the stunning planes of his face.

"I'll ask you this now because there will be no turning back." His lids fluttered as he squeezed the tip of his dick just right, the movement once more luring my attention south.

Somehow, I managed to look up in time to see the brilliant turquoise of his eyes darken when he surfaced from the clear wave of pleasure that had overtaken him.

His gaze found mine. “Do you want me to fuck you, Alina? Do you want me to show everyone who you belong to? How your body is mine to command?”

The way he was craving me right now pushed all the right buttons and effectively obliterated those pesky morals I’d been holding on to.

My Leo Venus practically purred at seeing him this possessive, at feeling the kiss of his burning need to mark me as his.

It was vain as hell, but I couldn’t even give a shit as I nodded eagerly.

Roland’s lips parted, the blatant hunger on his face even starker. The sight itself was all-consuming, but when he fisted his cock at the base and leaned in, finding my slick opening with his tip—

My head fell back on a moan.

Roland’s slow entry turned into a hard thrust that bottomed me out.

Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around him, but he just pushed them apart before I could lock my ankles, forcing me into a vulnerable, exposed position that almost made me come.

“This pussy”—he punctuated every word with a punishing thrust—“is mine.”

Fuck.

“*You*”—he slammed dick even deeper—“are mine.”

My back arched, moans spilling from my lips and into the night, sailing on the hard slaps of our flesh coming together.

“If you keep that up, celestial girl, you’re going to draw attention,” Roland warned.

The dangerous edge in his voice, however, told another story.

He *had* said that he wanted the world to see just how his I was.

Part of me was horrified at the very real possibility of being caught like this, with my legs spread open and my husband railing me like I was his personal fuck toy, while another—

Ah fuck, who was I kidding?

The wet sounds coming from my pussy were more than telling enough.

“You’re clenching around me so good, Alina,” Roland growled and worked his hips even harder. “You like being mine, don’t you?”

“Y—yes...” I moved my body greedily against his as much as the position allowed it.

Between the Cadillac rocking beneath us, Roland ramming into me with deliciously maddening force, and my own hips meeting his, the waves of pleasure continued to crash through me ever higher.

“Good girl,” he whispered, his voice sharp and lethal—

Then he unleashed himself.

If I’d thought he’d been merciless before, it had been nothing compared to the primal lust and hunger he bared to me now. He fucked me rougher than I’d ever been fucked in my entire life.

Pain married pleasure with every deliciously cruel thrust of his hips, and faintly, I was aware I was screaming my release into the night moments before Roland bellowed his.

When I came down from the high, rogue strands of hair were plastered to my sweat-slicked temples, my chest heaving with hard breaths.

I locked my gaze with Roland’s, and I saw...everything.

His love for me.

His fear of losing me too.

The hurt he’d experienced.

And the comfort he'd taken in the surrender I had given him so willingly, reaffirming that I was his.

"I love you," I whispered.

He bent over, his cock half hard again already, and brought his lips to mine.

In stark contrast to the sex, the kiss was languid, intimate. I curled my arms around him, submerging myself in the gentle yet potent sensation of his lips moving against my mouth as I was blanketed by the heat of his body.

When he pulled away after what must have been minutes, the softness in his gaze all but undid me.

"I love you too, Alina."

He slid from my pussy, earning himself a groan when the sudden emptiness struck me like a damn punch to the gut, but it was worth it for the boyish smile that danced on his lips alone. He tucked himself back into his black jeans, then offered me a hand to help me slide off the hood.

With affection lacing every move, he lowered himself into a crouch and fixed my dress back into place, his thumbs skimming and smearing the traces of our joint release on the inside of my thighs.

When he leaned in to press a kiss to each of those spots, my eyes fluttered shut—

Then snapped open at the faint rustling coming from the shrubs.

Roland straightened, and the darkness behind him stilled.

I frowned. There was nothing out there, but I could have sworn...

I could have fucking sworn I'd caught a glimpse of a fox tail disappearing into the bush.



“Come on, you’re with me.”

I glanced at the fresh cup of coffee I’d barely snagged from the coffee machine, then at Mara, who was watching me with thinly veiled amusement on her face. I sighed and passed the coffee to Roth, who’d just walked by.

My boss glanced at the cup in confusion but walked away with it just the same.

Mara chuckled softly. “I’m sure someone at the scene will fetch coffee. Lina is already there since she hitched a ride with Gina and Finn, and you know how she is about loitering around with nothing to do *and* without a cup to keep her content.”

She wasn’t wrong. Lina was incredible but could also become the wild, cranky opposite if the situation called for it. Not having anything to do certainly came high on that perilous list.

“How come she’s calling in reinforcements?” I asked as Mara and I made the detour to my desk to grab the necessities.

“Apparently, there’s a ward that refuses to be disassembled.”

I snatched my bag and frowned at her. “And she called for us, not Resi?”

Resi was the resident spell genius, after all. She’d be perfect for the job. Unless...

“Are we dealing with a curse?” I grimaced as the word rolled off my tongue unpleasantly.

My face sparked a small laugh for Mara. “No nasty curses. Resi is just on another job she can’t get out of right now. Besides, don’t act like we don’t make a good team. I can serve as the second, fresh pair of arcane eyes, and you as the expert on magic that isn’t behaving quite as it should.”

I huffed out a laugh. “I’m the go-to witch for weird, huh?”

With a smile, Mara leisurely strolled toward the elevator that would take us down to the garage.

“And we’re not in a rush?” I asked.

Usually, getting called to a crime scene also meant riding out like our asses were on fire.

“Not a crime scene,” she said like she’d read my mind, though her answer only piqued my curiosity.

It wasn’t every day we were called out to investigate something that had zero links to a crime. And now that things were somewhat more back to normal between Roland and me, I found myself more attuned to magic—and actually capable of experiencing excitement around it once more like I used to.

I had no idea just how much I missed the feeling until it had returned.

A quirky ward we were going to investigate purely because of its wonkiness definitely stirred that good hunger for arcane exploration.

“Okay, I think you need to tell me more.” I kept my tone dry but couldn’t really conceal the amusement tugging up the corners of my lips.

Mara tapped the call button, then leaned against the wall while the elevator made the ascent to our level. “ICRA got a call from some fresh property owner. He bought a series of interconnected warehouses with storefronts—”

“Why is it always warehouses?” I grumbled.

Mara snort-laughed before marching into the elevator that had just *dinged* open. I followed suit, pressing the basement-level button along the way.

As the doors slid shut, Mara said, “The thing is, there were plenty of wards set up around the premises. The previous owner had passed away before the property went on sale, so naturally, all the protections remained. This new guy called in a crew of witches to take everything down, and they did... Except for one.

“He tried more specialists, but apparently, none had any more luck than the original crew in tackling the ward. So he called us as his final resort. It’s been a long while since ICRA

has taken on jobs like this, but it *was* part of the original intention. To assist people in potentially dangerous situations.”

The elevator *dinged* again, opening up into the garage.

“Is the ward keeping him out? Or is it doing anything else?”

“It’s preventing him from entering one of the central areas, yes.” Mara guided me toward the car that flashed its lights. “But it’s not purely repellent. He said, and I quote, it fried the damn hairs on his asshole.”

I burst into laughter—then laughed even harder when I realized Mara was being serious.

“Well, shit.” I slid into the passenger side, still chuckling like a damn dick. “But fried butt hairs aside, I can see why a ward like that can’t remain untouched.”

Mara put the car into gear and peeled out of the parking spot. “Lina was unable to unravel it herself.”

“So she called for us.”

Now that I had more info, I had a feeling we were Lina’s first choice anyway, not Resi. While curses weren’t run-of-the-mill spells, having the kind of insight Mara had allowed her to see things and aspects of magic people normally wouldn’t even consider.

And I wasn’t really joking about me being the go-to witch for weird. With my astrology feelers, I’d be able to see if the celestial energies at play had somehow made the ward more than what it was supposed to be.

“Why are Finn and Gina there?” The thought suddenly crossed my mind.

If this was purely witch business, it wasn’t exactly normal for regular field agents to attend a scene.

“Finn refused to let Lina go alone in case the situation wasn’t quite as the owner presented it.” Mara took a left, then merged with the thick traffic as easily as if she were slicing through strands of a spell. “Like I said, it isn’t every day that

someone calls for help without there being a crime. Finn didn't want to take any chances.

“Gina, on the other hand, pointed out that if the ward had been deliberately created to be damn near unbreakable, it could be hiding more than just empty space.”

A shiver rushed down my spine. “Let's hope that's not the case.”

Mara just barked out a laugh.

Right, ICRA and situations being easy rarely went hand in hand.

“How are you with your magic upgrade?” she surprised me by asking.

“What do you—oh...”

With all that had been going on, I had actually forgotten I basically had the whole HQ examining first Roth, then me, when I had that episode of seeing the cords for the first time.

“I'm navigating it,” I admitted as truthfully as I could. “It doesn't feel foreign to me any longer to see the strands, but I'm mostly still exploring what it all means and how to use the insights.”

Tracking down Roland had definitely been a plus, but I knew there was more to seeing the bonds and connections than that.

After all, when I tapped wholly into the second sight, the entire world consisted of nothing but energies entwined with one another.

“If you ever need a sounding board, I'm here for you,” Mara offered, then focused back on the road.

With a sincere thank-you, I slipped into a comfortable silence while we drove the rest of the way. Gina and Finn's car was parked right in front of the entrance to a sprawling complex that actually didn't look *that* much like a warehouse. I really had enough of those already—especially when my super helpful brain kept producing snippets from the last time

I found myself among some industrial shelves, a particular fox shifter pressed up against me.

I shook off the images right as Mara killed the engine.

The second I opened the door, Finn and Lina came out of the central storefront.

“The cavalry’s here.” Finn grinned while our witchy coworker just looked pissed.

She shot me a suffering look. “Can’t believe I couldn’t dismantle the damn thing.”

Though she didn’t produce a single sound, I could feel Mara’s amusement at Lina’s grumbling. I wound an arm around the latter and pulled her into a quick hug before all of us marched into the empty store. Finn led us through a back door that opened up into what was possibly the store’s respective storage area before we spilled into a far bigger space.

“Why do I feel like I’d need a blueprint to navigate this,” I said dryly, taking in the numerous doors leading from this part of the complex.

Through an open entryway, I could see another larger space, and beyond it, something that faintly resembled conveyor belts. Having a production line, warehouse, and storefronts in a single area...

Yeah, I could definitely see why the owner wanted this whole operation up and running.

Not having to outsource anything definitely seemed like the dream if they had all the assets available.

“Anything about the ward we should know?” Mara asked as we moved into a whole new section farther back.

As Finn turned right and guided us down a corridor, Lina said, “It looks like a standard barrier ward to keep unauthorized people from entering the space. I couldn’t see anything different about it than the thousands I’ve already dismantled.”

“But it’s unresponsive?” I peered at her.

Her lips flattened into a tight line. “I couldn’t even latch onto the first thread to dismantle it. I don’t think I’ve ever failed so hard in my life.”

I snorted just because she was purposefully acting out the despair—which also earned me a wink.

“Any idea what it’s protecting?” I asked on a more serious note.

Up ahead, a glimpse of Gina’s back flashed into the narrow field of vision the metal doorway offered.

“The owner didn’t have all the details mapped out on the blueprint, but he’s fairly sure it’s the former CEO’s office,” Lina said. “I’m inclined to agree. The type of ward that’s used here is usually found where money or valuables are involved. But we can’t really reach the door to open it and peer inside to make sure.”

Mara let out a pensive hum. I glanced at her, catching the intensity with which she studied the area ahead. In pairs, we slipped through the last door and found Gina with a young-looking human guy. On instinct, I tapped into his energy.

Lots of Capricorn in all the right places, including his North Node. Even more of that stable earth energy was entwined into his design through the Virgo placements—and sprinkled just a dash of Leo to produce a somewhat more fiery drive. The faintest but still prominent thread belonged to Pisces, which gave the guy the kind of edge that confirmed he had the knack for business with vision.

Honestly, I hadn’t really thought he was setting us up in any way, but the look into his chart just confirmed the only thing he desired was to get this business up and running.

After a quick exchange of introductions with Helmut Kunz, Mara and I approached the ward. She went perfectly quiet as she concentrated on the threads and stepped back to give me room.

“I sense no danger.” She waved a hand at the spell that really did look like a standard barrier. “You’re good to go.”

“Thanks.” I turned from her and closed my eyes, feeling Mara’s energy fade in the background.

As soon as I opened up my celestial feelers, new information flowed in.

I huffed out a pleased breath. It all made sense now.

Sometimes, the astrological weather or signature of the witch visibly changed the very construction of the ward—and that was something Lina would have seen right off the bat. But this...

“It was done during a damn strong solar eclipse,” I told everyone in the room, the delight of working with something so unique seeping into my voice. “The change is internal, not external. We have to dismantle it from the inside out.”

Right as I readied myself to step aside and let Lina or Mara do the work, one of the threads...reached out to me?

There was no other way to explain it. The design didn’t unravel itself, but with my attention homed in on that beginning piece of the puzzle, the piece kind of offered itself up to be undone.

“No, wait,” I told my colleagues when I felt them moving in. “I’ve got this.”

The pause was thick with questions since this *definitely* wasn’t the norm for me, but the threads continued to unravel with just the gentlest nudges of my awareness.

I probably should have been spooked because this wasn’t how wards behaved. It wasn’t how my magic behaved. Everything about this was so different from the role I usually played.

Yet at the same time, with the pathway from the eclipse laid out and me tapping into celestial energies it responded to, the threads dismantled with minimal effort, making the process feel...normal.

When there was just one final knot at the end left, I could see now why Lina hadn’t been able to tackle the design from

that side. It was the final destination and had to be undone in a specific order. Otherwise, the knot simply tightened.

I lightly nudged the celestial energies coating the base magic of the ward.

As it unraveled, the faintest spark of power that hadn't been there before stabbed my senses.

“Oh fu—“

I barely had time to throw up a hand as that marble of concentrated magic vibrated—

And blew up straight in my face.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Consciousness flitted in and out of my grasp as millions of burning needles jabbed into every part of my body. I groaned as I rolled across the floor, agony lancing mercilessly through my flesh.

If it weren't for the rush of healing power pouring over me from the outside like a broken dam, I would have probably chosen to just let go.

Screw awareness when my veins were boiling from the inside out.

As the feeling of being torn apart intensified, I seriously questioned my decision to remain conscious.

Why was I doing this again when there was the awesome option of blacking out?

Right as I started edging toward the dark oblivion, cords flickered into existence. The backdrop of reality was barely more than a blur of colors as the healing power battled the destruction blooming within, only lending more strength to the magnitude of the energetic tapestry that had opened up and held me in the present moment.

Three strands were prettier than others, practically shining with ethereal light, but what truly captivated me was that I noticed something I'd never seen before.

Maybe because they'd never been so bright.

Or maybe because I'd never been quite so out of it while observing them.

I focused on the cords—it was the only thing that captivated my mind enough to at least push the pain down to a level beneath unbearable while the war raged on—and observed the new phenomenon.

While the three strands belonging to my soulmates were all very prominently attached to me, there were lines running among them too. I couldn't see the person at the end of the cord, I was definitely too messed up for that kind of focus, but I *could* make out each individual cord's end clearly—and see the two other bonds that branched out to the sides.

Like a web, binding them together.

Without even meaning to, I brushed phantom fingertips over the glowing cords attached to my essence, seeking...

I wasn't even sure. Comfort?

As soon as I touched them, though, they dispelled, and the tangible—and still *very* blurry reality—locked into place all around me.

Shouts were going off somewhere in the distance, muffled by the force of agony and shield of magic that kept pouring into me.

Whatever Mara, Lina, and Finn were doing, it turned down the dial on the pain enough for me to let out a bitter, agonized laugh as some of my more rational faculties returned. And with it, the awareness of what the hell had just happened.

Another cruel laugh rasped from my lips.

Just my damn fucking luck.

“Alina, come on, look at me,” Mara demanded.

I was so done. So fucking done.

“Alina,” she snapped, and this time, I pried my eyes open to find four concerned faces staring down at me.

“This. Sucks. Balls,” I rasped.

Mara let out a long breath, flicking her gaze up at the sky. “She's going to be fine.”

“I can snark even if I’m half-dead,” I choked out—then actually choked on a hacking cough.

Gina blinked out of existence, then shoved an unscrewed bottle of water into my shaky hand. I hadn’t even realized I’d reached out to grab it, but clearly, my body was determined to take care of itself while my mind continued to spew curses at this fuckup of a situation.

If it weren’t for the eclipse energy changing the direction of the design, a witch of Mara’s caliber would have undoubtedly seen the damn kernel of power.

Instead, the fucker blew up in my face.

On another surge of power coming from the three magic wielders healing whatever damage I’d sustained, I managed to prop myself on my hands.

“So, that went well.” I glanced at the now-visible cozy office that looked almost like a small apartment—visible because the blast had torn the door straight off. “Huh. I get the feeling *that* wasn’t part of the design.”

“You’re really talking business already?” Gina drawled.

I shrugged. What else was I supposed to do? Because letting my thoughts spiral deeper into the damn hole of complaints they wanted to wouldn’t be useful to anybody.

Least of all me.

“From what I felt,” Mara said, frowning, “that extra power was supposed to freeze the person touching the ward. Not...”

“Have the whole thing explode?” I snorted and shakily climbed to my feet.

Finn grabbed one elbow before I could come crashing right back down, with Gina assisting him on the other side. As soon as I was moderately steady on my feet, Lina pushed some more magic into me to aid with the healing.

I probably should have been taken to the med bay, but I honestly appreciated that we were doing this on the go. I kind of had my fill of that place.

A thought niggled at the back of my brain, but it was too obscured for me to catch.

I shrugged it off. “So the hidden spell was supposed to hold the person long enough for the previous owner or the authorities to come get them?”

Certainly didn't *feel* like that, but hey, if the result I got was an arcane bomb going off, then obviously, things had turned out far from intended.

Mara hummed. “Actually, I think it was an extra measure in case anyone got through. It would have stopped them on the way out.”

“Great,” I agreed, then muttered, “Fucking eclipse malfunction.”

As soon as I said it, the room tilted. I would have landed flat on my ass if Gina and Finn hadn't once more jumped to my aid.

“Why don't you let Finn give you one more boost?” Gina said, looking between me and her partner.

Finn nodded, and since our only other option would be for me to drop right back to the unpleasantly hard ground to let him work his magic, he led me into the now-ward-free office instead.

I assumed someone had checked for more spells.

I wasn't in the mood to get blown up again.

Nothing arcane went off, thankfully, and Finn eased me onto a couch that shot up plumes of dust the second my butt landed on the thick cushion. My nose wrinkled as the damn motes tickled it like a bitch.

“Maybe we should find another spot,” he said, his own nose wrinkling.

I could have sworn I heard Lina mutter, “For fuck's sake,” before a shot of magic glued all the dust particles to the fabric. I tilted to the side to grin at her around Finn's body that was blocking my view but ended up face-planting on the couch.

At least Lina's spell held true.

Not a single speck of dust stirred in the wake of my fucking embarrassing, dead-weight fall.

I curled up on my side and watched as Gina prowled into the area, alternating between regular and vamp speed, Mara fast on her heels. Right as I caught a glimpse of the owner—I'd totally forgotten the name of...Kunz, maybe?—accompanied by Lina, Finn's rejuvenating energy filled my body and wiped everything from existence.

I groaned in pleasure as the magic washed over the remaining damage the initial healing hadn't smoothed out.

Maybe it would have been useful to know the magnitude of injuries I'd actually sustained, but I really couldn't bring myself to ask as I continued to feel better—eventually surpassing even the state I'd arrived in.

“Thank you,” I whispered when Finn gently pulled the magic back into himself.

“Anytime.” He winked. “Though I'd prefer it if it were just a hangover I was curing.”

I grabbed a cushion off the couch and smacked him with it.

Still no dust. Damn, Lina really was good.

“Are you okay staying here for a while?” He glanced over his shoulder toward the door leading into another part of the previously protected sector the others had already ventured into.

I opened my mouth to tell him it would probably be wiser to have me with them in case they ran into another complication but decided to do a quick check first instead. With the way Finn had charged me up, my senses were as keen as they could get.

“Give me a sec,” I told him, then felt through the area for any potent signatures.

I had to actively block out Finn's since he was the closest, but before I could even follow Lina's into the next room, a

caress of a very specific Scorpio's energy brushed against my senses.

"Is anyone else here aside from us?" I frowned at Finn.

His whole body went on alert. "The building is supposed to be empty."

I checked again...but the signature was gone.

"Never mind. Sorry." I winced. "I think I'm still recovering."

He didn't look like he believed me, but he also knew me well enough to know I'd never endanger anyone.

The Scorpio's signature really was gone, making me think he must have just passed by. It wouldn't surprise me if my senses were extra sharp when it came to my...soulmates. After all, I'd picked out Ezra's signature in a whole venue of people without even trying.

"I'll stay here and rest," I assured Finn. "You can go."

He gave me one mildly skeptical look, then went on his way.

Blowing out a breath, I made myself comfortable on the couch. Might as well take a couple of extra minutes for all the magic inside me to settle, even if I did feel fine. Remembering how hard I'd landed, I pulled out my phone to check if it survived the blast.

The screen—mercifully uncracked—lit up with seven missed calls from Roland and three additional text messages. One to call back as soon as I could. The other asking if I was all right. The third basically begging me to return the call.

I quickly dialed him, almost startling when he answered on the first ring.

"Alina—"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"What's—Alina, shit, you were the one who wasn't answering." He sounded out of breath.

“You know I’m at work...”

“Shit.”

I could practically see him running his hand through his thick hair.

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry if I spooked you. I just got this impulse to check on you. A feeling that something was seriously wrong...”

I swallowed.

“I’m fine,” I told him steadily because he was already freaking out enough without me diving right into the deep end. “I really am fine. But something did go wrong. A spell. I’m okay, though, Roland.”

“Thank fuck.” His harsh exhale brought a prickle of tears to my eyes. “It was...not a good feeling, Alina. And when you didn’t answer...”

I was barely keeping my emotions leashed as I whispered, “I’m okay.”

That was about as much as I could push out without losing it. For some reason, hearing Roland’s concern, scaring him this much—I hated that he’d been terrified out of his mind. And I was floored by the love pouring from him.

Yes, we’d been better after that whole sex on top of the Cadillac thing. Better than I could have hoped for. But there had still been something just slightly reserved within him.

Right now, though...

No barriers existed between us.

“I love you so much,” I whispered.

He groaned. “I love you too, Alina. You promise you’re fine?”

“I promise.” A ghost of a smile tugged on my lips.

“Okay.” He huffed out a breath like he was hyping himself. “Okay, if you’re sure, then I got to get back to the meeting. I sort of...ran out.”

I laughed—a true, unburdened laugh I couldn't control.

Roland snorted. “You laugh now, but wait until the damn assholes don't let me live down sprinting out of that room like a fucking princess being hunted through the woods.”

No one would make fun of him if he told them what had prompted the action. But Roland also had a sense of humor. I assumed he'd let his colleagues have some fun on his account.

“I'll see you tonight,” I told him.

“You want me to come pick you up from work? If you need me to, I could get out of my meetings early, and we could go for a drive...”

“Ugh, I'd love that, but raincheck? You're probably not the only one working late tonight anyway. I might have to write up a report on what happened here, and I'm not sure when we'll even be ready to head back to HQ, so it could be a while.”

“Okay, raincheck it is. I love you, celestial girl.”

I grinned. “I love you too, baby.”

When the call ended, I tapped the phone against my thigh and took in the weird office. It really did look like a small apartment. The desk and filing cabinets took up most of the space, but the artwork on the walls, the couch I was sitting on, and a, I shit you not, collection of records sitting on shelves beneath a record player gave it more of a domestic than a corporate vibe.

From what I could see in the room ahead, there was something like a...dining room set up?

It wasn't that unusual for someone to have a place to stay at their seat of business. The previous owner might have even had this place as his *only* residence—which would just further explain the need for additional protection. Living in a location that could potentially be a high target for theft wasn't exactly the safest.

I craned my neck a bit more, scanning the dining room. The team was nowhere in sight, and no sounds indicated they

were close by. The apartment-office clearly sprawled even farther on.

While I was curious if this was all there was to it or if some safe truly did exist in the bowels of this place, I wasn't about to go blindly traipsing after them—especially since that would also mean breaking my promise to Finn.

With nothing else to do, I drummed up the courage to open up my social media. After all, I had a malfunctioning ward blast me backward. I could face existing in the same cyberspace as Störmer—

—who was very much in my inbox.

Upon reading the visible line of text, I didn't even think before I opened up the chat.

Alina, I got this weird feeling... Are you all right?

My brows climbed up. Roland *and* Ezra? Not to mention feeling the Scorpio's energy nearby like he'd been drawn here before rushing away?

What were the chances?

I...

I'd touched the cords, hadn't I? When I'd been rolling around in agony, I reached out for the comfort of the bonds...

Had I somehow sent them a signal that I was in danger?

I pushed the thought to the back burner before I could fall into the trap of overthinking. Right as I wanted to type out a note to Ezra, telling him I had a minor accident at work but was well, my gaze caught on the message he'd sent through *before* the ones today's mishap brought on.

One he'd written the night of the Whiskey Jet Preachers' party.

My cheeks flamed.

That was quite a show, Ocean Girl. But I think you would have looked even better spread out beneath me on my Harley.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

For some reason, thinking I saw a fox tail disappearing into the bushes hit extremely different from *knowing* Ezra had watched Roland and me have sex on top of the Cadillac.

That was quite a show, Ocean Girl.

I was turned on way more than I was mortified, though whatever shy part resided within me damn near tucked her head among the couch pillows like an ostrich as the entire memory of that night replayed in my head—this time, from an outsider’s point of view.

Ezra might not have been able to see all the details with the way Roland had freaking railed me against the hood, but he’d definitely seen...a lot.

I chewed my bottom lip.

Common sense warned me not to reply at all, just swipe out of the conversation and be done with it. But feeling the worry seeping through the messages Ezra had sent today...

Not only did it make me *want* to reach out to put him at ease, but it also spurred a whole other, new realization within me.

I’d been so hell-bent on breaking the bonds this entire time, I had no idea just how relieved I was to still have them.

I was *relieved*.

Not entirely sure what to do with that bit of information just yet, I filed it away for another time, then typed out to Ezra

that I had a minor accident at work but that everything was all right now.

His answer came through before I could even navigate out of my inbox.

I'm glad to hear that, Ocean Girl. I barely held back from shifting into my fox form and hunting you down.

I filed that away as well, though I couldn't quite leave it be.

This was the first time I'd actually interacted with the bonds to the extent of getting a response from the guys. I would have loved it far better if it hadn't been fear for my well-being that I'd sent over to them through the ethereal channels, but I'd take it if it meant discovering this new development.

Wait...

What if it wasn't the negative aspect itself but the *strength* of the emotion that spurred the connection to life?

The lows certainly packed a mean punch. Made sense they would serve as the easiest key to activating the channel by accident.

It didn't mean it had to end there.

Another memory knocked at my awareness.

I let it rise from the depths, observing it with the fresh knowledge I'd gathered.

When I'd been lost in that *Find your Sun, Moon, and Rising* dream, that night when I'd first seen the cords flowing out of me even in the star-speckled space, I'd been begging, fucking *begging* that Roland would pull me free from the nightmare. But the dream had held me in place—until I'd reached out to touch one of the cords.

I couldn't recall if the touch had connected, but...

It sure felt like I'd brushed the strand the moment before Roland had woken me up.

Had I called to him even back then? Had I sent him some sort of signal to save me?

Because once could be a coincidence, but twice was *always* a pattern.

The cords truly were a means of communicating with my soulmates.

Which also opened up another question: Could *all* threads be utilized in such a way? The others that extended from me? The ones that had nothing to do with me but energetically tied other people together...like the ones I'd seen running from Roth?

Because if there was more to this other-sight I'd gained than me merely seeing the connections among people, if they truly were pathways through which information traveled, then this magic just might prove to be invaluable.

Aaaaand I was distracting myself from replying to Ezra.

After I skimmed through the messages again, I decided the correspondence had veered far enough away from the whole fucking me on his Harley talk, so I typed back: *I'm sorry for the scare. It wasn't intentional, trust me.*

How did you manage it, anyway? Because it felt like more than just instinct...

I huffed out a breath. I couldn't exactly spell out that we were soulmates and had a cord attached between us.

I was raking my brain for a plausible explanation when Ezra sent another message.

Then again, I'm not surprised. I seem to feel you more keenly than any other person I've ever come across.

Again, I was stumped as to what to write back.

All the options seemed to open up doorways into subjects I really wasn't ready to discuss with Ezra Störmer. Especially through a damn chat.

A damn chat that was letting him know I'd seen the messages, I remembered.

I groaned, then started typing.

I genuinely don't have a good answer for that.

Which was the truth.

Until I knew for sure how the threads between us worked, I wouldn't dare claim anything with certainty. Speculation... Well, that was something best avoided when sensitive subjects were involved.

For some reason, though, I didn't leave it at that.

All I know is a ward blew up in my face and I was in and out of consciousness for a while there, I tacked on.

Shit, Alina. That doesn't sound like a minor accident.

The team was here, and they jumped into action. They're such overachievers that I'm actually in better health now than I was when I'd arrived on scene.

Physically, maybe. What about mentally?

My brows rose in surprise. Why I was so shocked, I didn't know.

After all, just because someone had a carefree attitude didn't mean they lacked depth or awareness.

Still, the question caught me off guard—and seriously fucking warmed my heart.

I'm still processing that, to be entirely honest.

Because shit was for sure going to catch up with me at some point. The anger had already passed, and though I was currently swimming in an ocean of indifference, I wasn't about to delude myself that things were over.

Quite possibly, the reason I was so neutral right now was because I got saturated with magic to the point of a slight high.

Another bubble of text popped up on my screen.

If you want to talk, I could take you out to lunch, get you whatever your favorite food is. Or if you need to take your mind off things, a ride around town.

That warmth that had begun to bloom in my chest now well and truly blossomed. I had no idea why Ezra's offer touched me so much, but it did.

As if in answer, a replay of Val coaxing the truth out of me overtook the inner projector of my thoughts.

The dream, the ultimate alignment, the version of freaking life that made my soul soar and produced an inner sense of bliss, consisted of being with both Roland and Ezra.

I could see it plainly now.

Neither Roland nor Ezra lacked anything. I wasn't lacking anything.

It was similar to how astrology worked. There was no sign, no placement better than the other. We all carried the entire chart within us. Some aspects were simply more pronounced than the rest, combinations formed that were unique to a person.

And that was how I saw the guys.

They were each a perfect whole.

As was I.

While I wasn't in a relationship with Ezra, simply talking to him gave me a powerful insight that, coupled with my experience with Roland, flooded me with so much clarity, there was no way I could keep denying the truth of our dynamic.

Roland had said Ezra brought out the fire in me that he couldn't, but while that was true to a degree, I knew now that I wasn't searching for something within Ezra that Roland couldn't provide.

Each connection was unique.

Each guy was a singularity that called to me on a level that had absolutely nothing to do with lack but came from a place where fulfillment already existed.

There were no substitutes here. No talk of better or worse.

I simply liked them for...them.

The scene from that golden-bathed vision I'd experienced under Vanja's touch made so much more sense now. Because how I perceived Roland, how I perceived Ezra...

To me, they truly were that brilliant, bright energy. And the physical form they manifested into in this lifetime was a beautiful, unique constellation that allowed that very brilliance to shine through.

I tipped my head back and groaned.

Shit, I *was* in love with Ezra.

Just as I was in love with Roland.

But the two guys together...

Being in their energy had filled me with rapture, taken me to such heights it had felt like the most intoxicating, euphoric hit. For them, though...

It just didn't work.

So, with a heavy fucking heart, I thanked Ezra for his offer but also politely declined. I navigated out of the app as soon as the message went through, then laid my back flat against the couch, feet propped up on the armrest.

I couldn't banish the hurt I'd seen on Roland's face after he'd witnessed my interactions with Ezra. I couldn't banish how I'd felt with Ezra either.

How could something that caused so much pain for someone else at the same time feel so right for me?

I'd never, fucking *never* force Roland to enter a relationship he had no desire to be in. Even if he'd somehow conceded, the guilt of putting him in a position where struggle ruled over content would eat me alive. Besides, Ezra's silent posturing had openly indicated that he would much rather push Roland aside, steal me for himself, than embrace both me *and* my husband.

It wasn't even silent posturing. Hell, he'd flat-out written I would have looked better beneath him than Roland.

Except...

Maybe I was delusional, but for the fucking life of me, I couldn't shut up the inner voice insisting things would be far better than any of us could even imagine—if the guys only got on board. If they released their societal conditioning, the preconceived notions of what sharing me would mean.

The damn voice hit harder than any ramblings of my own brain could even come close to, and it terrified the crap out of me.

Especially since it didn't waste words, simply delivered every single one with stark conviction that seemed to saturate every atom of my body.

There *was* a life for us together. There *was* a future where all our threads existed entwined with each other. And it was far richer, far more expansive, far more satisfying than even I could comprehend.

It just...

Shit, it just didn't seem possible.

How could it be?

Roland and Ezra as best friends? Who enhanced each other's lives?

Come on, didn't that sound like a load of crap?

Besides, Roland had made a very fucking valid point—Ezra knew I was married. *Ezra* was married. And shit, the Sag just really didn't give a fuck.

Regardless of the warmth and security I felt while chatting with him, didn't that make him a damn awful person?

No amount of benevolent bonds between the guys and me, bonds between the guys themselves, had the power to just erase that.

Snorting at my own stupidity for even considering a reality where all of us worked out—no matter how much my body seemed to contort in protest—I pushed off the couch and went in search of the team. Despite my efforts, though, my mind continued to churn in a battle between two forces.

Logic, delivering a long list of bullet-pointed reasons as to why having both men in my life would be wrong.

That intangible, deep knowing rooted in my body, painting a vision of a fucking profound union that filled me with a sense of rightness.

The relentlessly clashing waves of polar opposites made it impossible to concentrate, which, in current circumstances, sucked.

The sprawling complex had more corridors and rooms than I could keep up with. I felt like a kid left alone in a huge-ass shopping mall. Even though I'd wandered where I'd seen the team go, there was no sight of them, and the apartment-office area had now given way to more storage spaces, empty save for some bare shelves.

Grunting, I backtracked my steps and tried again. Unfortunately, the more I walked, the more lost I ended up in the damn maze.

I could have tapped into my celestial sight, but I was afraid that tuning into the part of me that was so fundamentally tied to the energetic plane would tip the scales of my inner battle.

For some reason, whenever I detached from the physical world, even by just a margin, the energetics swooped in, making it harder to remain rooted in logic.

Right now, I did *not* need to empower the visions of an alternate life that were plaguing me. Because they *couldn't* be true.

Waking up between Ezra and Roland. The sight of them laughing at something together while hanging out on the couch as I walked into the living room with a cup of coffee in my hands. The three of us hanging out at a WJP gig, their hands roaming along my spine as we chatted with Gina backstage.

Catching an easy dinner under the canopy of a summer evening with the guys bathed in the last rays of the sun. Kissing Roland before climbing up behind Ezra on his Harley. The three of us attending one of Roland's Academy events, at ease, together, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Nope, nope, nope.

Dealing with the unwanted imagery was hard enough without giving it even an ounce more power.

Because infinitely more than the visual, it was the *energy* those scenarios created that captivated me—the energy that I felt so vividly I almost ended up convinced I could have it.

In the end, though, all I'd get was a broken heart.

So I kept walking, trying to use my very normal human senses to locate the others.

After I got turned around for the fifth fucking time, I decided to give up the search and get some fresh air instead. I was fairly sure I could find my way out, at least.

The open door at the end of the corridor seemed familiar, and if those machines I was able to spot from here were part of the production area of the complex, then I was headed in the right direction.

A medley of shouts bounced off the walls, Gina's voice barking commands among them unmistakable.

I whipped around, unease shooting a jolt down my spine, but before I could take as much as a single step toward the commotion, a man-shaped blur came running straight at me.

My scream died on my parted lips as hands forced my head to the side—then all there existed was the burning agony of fangs ravaging my throat.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Worse than the frenzied panic that ripped through my flesh was the cage of stillness my body had fallen prey to.

I couldn't fight against the vampire binding me with his arms. I couldn't even scream as he pulled back, then latched harder onto my neck with a sickening, vicious bite.

A hot wash of liquid spilled down my shoulder, my chest...

It was too much.

Too much pain. Too much blood.

Too much loss.

Color leeches from what I could still see of the hallway in front of me, and my neck...

My neck felt *wrong*.

I could have sworn I felt the tender skin flap.

Nausea curled in my stomach.

At least I wouldn't have to suffer this for long. After that damn car accident, the sensations plaguing my flesh were too familiar to misinterpret.

I was dying.

The single thing that mattered—mattered enough that somehow even the agony became a thunderstorm in the background while gratitude and resolution flooded the

forefront of my thoughts—was that I'd retained my control over the cords.

My guys didn't have to feel this. They didn't have to suffer through my torn throat, subjected to the experience without even understanding what the fuck was actually going down. As I thought of Roland, of Ezra, finding out what had happened, as I thought of them learning it had been the attack they had felt, but had done nothing to help, *couldn't have* done anything to help as the life bled from me...

I'd never traumatize them like that.

I loved them too much to scar them, even if... Even if I would have desired to savor the beautiful nuances of their energies one last time.

But I had something to hold on to now.

The burden those past lives had first represented—I could now recognize them for the gifts they were.

This wasn't the end.

I'd get to meet my guys again.

We'd have another chance. Maybe an even better one than what this lifetime had set up.

The vampire pulled more from me, the eerie, telltale lightness taking root and lowering a dense curtain over my awareness.

Not long now...

"Stop," someone shouted—a voice I'd never heard before but struck a chord of familiarity within me. "Phillip, STOP."

A bolt of power electrified the vamp, echoes of it skimming across my skin.

The vampire unlatched from my throat.

"Alaric?" he rasped.

I blinked through the daze, the pull to open my eyes feeding strength into my body, but it wasn't enough to keep me from sagging right into my attacker's arms.

My legs were jelly, my muscles grasping for a form they just couldn't hold. But I could have sworn I saw a flash of long black hair before a different brand of magic swelled in the air. It locked around my captor, prying his arms off me and forcing him back—

Leaving me without support.

I free-fell to the ground and would have splattered if it weren't for Gina catching me a breath before I made contact with the vinyl tiles.

Boneless, I trained my blurry gaze on the hallway now packed with our team—and only our team.

No hint of dark hair. No touch of that deep water energy that felt like the ocean beneath a moonlit sky.

“Finn, Mara,” Gina yelled, and that was the last thing I heard before I succumbed to darkness.



“I’d threaten you into bed rest, but I have a feeling no sanction could keep you from walking out of this room,” Leoni Brunner, the half-succubus doctor who’d tended to me last time I’d landed in the med bay, said dryly—as I was already halfway up from the bed. “You’re lucky you received healing before the attack happened. If it weren’t for the surplus of magic in your body, you would still be knocked out right now.”

Had I even survived, the look she’d tacked on said.

It wasn't that I was taking this lightly, but the restlessness cruising through my veins painted an outcome I had zero desire to invite into my life—an outcome I'd for sure get if I conceded to lying in bed even for half an hour more.

I grabbed the pile of fresh clothes someone had brought for me from the nightstand. “But all the checks came back fine, right? So, why would I keep resting when all it would do is make me agitated?”

“Because getting attacked by a vampire isn’t something you just brush off.” Leoni leveled another heavy gaze at me.

I was stacking up trauma like fucking Jenga blocks, I knew. It was only a question of time before the rickety tower tumbled.

“Look, what if I promise to talk to a therapist?” I offered.

While I’d gained plenty of self-help tools over the years, my recent track record revealed I wasn’t that great at actually *using* them. Hell, when was the last time I’d regulated my nervous system with yin yoga?

Honestly, since this whole soulmate business started, my rituals and routines had gone to hell right alongside the normal factor of my life.

Arms crossed, Leoni tapped a nail against her chin and studied me with piercing autumn-colored eyes.

I damn near squirmed under her gaze.

The doctor and I might have been on friendly terms, but my Scorpio rising had *nothing* on her stellium. She could flip the switch to a person you did *not* want to fuck with real fast.

Needless to say, I had no intention of falling out of her good graces.

I almost, almost backtracked and agreed to bed rest when Leoni sighed.

“Fine, I can agree to that.” She gave me another one of those looks that dripped authority. “But it has to be someone ICRA-approved, and I *better* see your session marked in your file within two weeks.”

“Thank you.” I clutched the clothes to my chest.

Once it became clear I wouldn’t disobey, Leoni’s entire demeanor shifted. A small victory smile quirked up the edge of her lips. She topped it off with a wink, then left me alone in the room to get changed.

Although someone must have already cleaned me up, given the visible absence of bloodstains on my skin, I still hit

the shower and washed my face, grounding myself in the motions before throwing on the fresh clothes. I pulled up the cotton panties, the comfy jeans with the perfect amount of stretch, then reached for the tank top—which was the final piece of the wardrobe.

I groaned.

Really? Not even a damn sports bra?

Not that my boobs minded the freedom, but I strove *not* to go for the whole damn nipple-brigade look at work.

Especially since the tank top was *white*.

Snorting, I pulled it on, then mussed up my hair so that it fell over my boobs and gave me some coverage. I checked myself in the mirror.

Good thing: I did *not* look like I'd just gone through a vampire attack.

Bad thing: With all the healing I'd received, I could have sworn even my boobs looked perkier.

I tossed my hair back.

No point in hiding, really. I'd be better off just embracing the look.

After a quick pep talk that was probably absurd for me to focus on with all the other shit that had transpired, I went back into the room. I grabbed the old, worn pair of biker boots I kept as backup here at ICRA, grateful someone had the foresight to stick socks into them.

Given that the single thing missing was the bra, I wouldn't be surprised if it was Finn who'd put together my outfit.

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand, relieved when I saw no missed calls or texts. I'd talk to Roland eventually. Right now, though, I wanted to claim some answers for myself. I shoved the phone in my pocket—not for the first time lamenting why *all* jeans didn't have front pockets this good—then eagerly left the med bay behind.

Not much time had passed since I'd lost consciousness in the warehouse, so I swung by Finn and Gina's desk first. My luck panned out for once because both of them were precisely where I'd hoped they would be.

"What are you doing up?" Gina immediately asked.

Finn, on the other hand, just grinned. "Glad you found the clothes I brought."

"I knew it was you." I snorted and pointed a finger at my boobs. "Had to make shit harder on the girl who'd just gotten viciously attacked."

"Nah, just thought you'd appreciate living a bit more after that whole ordeal."

I barked out a laugh. Finn was one crazy ass warlock—who often made sense.

Because, on some level, I did appreciate not sticking to what was proper, especially when those things were constraining as hell.

I grabbed an empty chair and rolled it up to the pair, first saying to Gina, "I got the all-clear from the doc. That's why I'm up."

Though she must have already known I'd come out of my med bay stint feeling just fine since the concern coming from her tasted more of the attack than my current health status.

"I want to know who the fuck the bitey vamp was and what the hell he was even doing at the property." I arched a brow.

Finn ran a hand through his thick strawberry-blond hair, his lips pulling in a devious lopsided smile. "Then buckle up and get ready for one of the freakier tales from the ICRA files archives."

"Oh gods." Gina rolled her eyes and snorted. "Maybe I should be the one filling in Alina on the details of her fucking *attacker*."

"It's cool," I said honestly.

Finn's dramatics would keep the situation light—or, at least, *lighter*—and that sounded quite appealing right now.

Because yes, Leoni was right. I'd need to work through this with someone if the tightness in my stomach that spurred to life as soon as I'd briefly flashed back to the whole “fangs ripping out my neck” event was anything to go by.

Finn's lopsided smile morphed into a grin.

“Imagine this.” He threw out his hands in a grand reveal gesture. “Four ICRA agents and an unsuspecting new owner of a property businessman's wet dreams are made of explore a previously blocked-off area of said establishment. They had expected a safe. A vault. Immense valuables. Instead, what they found was an apartment nestled at the heart of the complex. Room after room, they searched, only to find nothing out of the ordinary. Not a single thing that would warrant the ward a young celestial witch had so aptly dismantled.”

It was my turn to snort.

“Eventually, the unsuspecting owner stumbles on the edge of a rug.” Finn wagged his brows. “Cliché, perhaps, but an effective one. Because as the corner of the rug lifted, all five explorers saw the floor was not entirely how it was supposed to be.”

“You found the safe?” I warranted a guess.

Finn nodded with lips pursed and a solemn expression on his face, still caught up in the act.

When he spoke, though, the dramatics didn't make a reappearance in the cadence or tone of his voice. “Our resident goth curse breaker checked for wards, but there were none. So we moved to open it... And that was when a shadow came flying out.”

Ah, that would have prompted the shouts I'd heard.

“We rushed after the vamp,” Gina jumped into Finn's narrative, “but we didn't have a clear shot until the hallway. By then...”

“He’d already sunk his fangs into my neck.” I nodded, then pursed my lips. “So the guy was...locked in the safe?”

“Freaky, huh?” Finn asked, earning a smack on the shoulder from Gina.

She swirled her chair back toward me. “After securing the vampire, healing you, and calling in reinforcements to clean up the shitshow, we went to check out the place. There was an entire basement down there. Plenty of cash, gold, valuables. The standard stuff that belongs in a safe. But there was also a cell. I have a feeling it used to be warded, but maybe the magic died with the owner, allowing the vampire to escape.”

A prickle of unease traveled down my spine.

“What if the ward I exploded had something to do with it?” I asked. “I mean, it was meant to keep someone from breaking *out*. We assumed it was a second safety measure against thieves, but what if it had been there for the vampire?”

Gina and Finn exchanged a look before the latter said, “We considered that. It doesn’t explain why he hadn’t exited the safe before, though.”

“Unless the perimeter ward had an echo or offshoot of itself covering the safe,” I mused. “When the main ward blew, the other would have been removed as well.”

Not the wisest choice, in my opinion. But if someone was confident enough in their work, cocky even, then I could see how they would just keep the two magics linked instead of creating entirely separate magical structures.

“So, what’s the guy’s story anyway?” I asked, knowing the wards were the lesser issue here.

A vampire locked in a basement?

People didn’t do shit like that for no reason.

Gina sighed. “He hasn’t been entirely coherent so far, mostly just rambling about the attack itself. But from what little information we did get from him and what we managed to uncover in our database... The vampire’s name is Phillip Taffel. Reported missing and presumed dead ten years ago. He

has no criminal record. Not even as much as a parking ticket. He's..."

"A victim," I finished for her, my stomach twisting into a heavy knot. "Phillip Taffel is a victim."

CHAPTER
TWENTY

“He didn’t really have a choice in feeding on me, did he?” I looked between Finn and Gina. “He was starved.”

Gina nodded. “The owner, Theodor Heger, had passed away from natural causes just over a year and a half ago. Heart attack. No rightful heirs. The property was supposed to go to a beneficiary—who had apparently disappeared off the face of the earth. There were some questionable things there, hinting the beneficiary was deeply embedded in criminal activity, but I won’t bore you with the details since they don’t really matter.

“What it all boils down to is that the property was kind of in limbo until the court decided to release it to the state. That’s when Helmut Kunz swooped in and bought the complex. Of course, he hadn’t been able to access all of it until today, which means that Phillip Taffel has been locked down there for over a year and a half with only a few bottles of blood still left from Heger to sustain himself. He was right on the edge of his body giving out.”

“Which would also put him right on the tail end of a feeding frenzy.” I leaned back in the chair, blowing out a heavy breath.

Fuck, what a mess.

Vampires tended to have excellent control over their blood cravings. If anything, they were *more* disciplined than us human-food eating species. But like everyone, they grew hungry. A human would die in roughly two months. Without

water, a couple of days. Witches with healing powers and shifters could hold on longer, but weakening and death were inevitable.

Vampires, on the other hand...

Vampires starved.

They could starve for painfully long months, even up to two years. And before the weakness kicked in, their instincts took over their entire body, their entire awareness—with one sole mission in mind.

Find sustenance.

Because if they didn't, they would carry on living like a husk. If *living* was even a correct word for being trapped inside a nonfunctional body, with only your awareness working on overdrive.

It was hell.

I couldn't blame Phillip Taffel for attacking, even if the memory of having my throat ripped open would haunt my nightmares.

Another piece clicked into place. "That also explains why Taffel hadn't exited the safe immediately. If he was already fighting the weakness, he wouldn't have moved until he sensed taking action would improve his situation."

"Why not attack us, though?" Finn drummed his fingers against the desk. "If he was starving? That's the one thing I can't make sense of. I mean, we were right fucking *there*."

Gina rolled her tongue over her teeth, as if sensing the ghost of fangs she was currently keeping tucked away. "I can think of two options. Either his inner predator sensed we were the *bigger* predators in that scenario. Or he tried to control the hunger. Freedom can be a powerful driving force. Maybe all he thought of was escape—because if he did, he'd be safe. He could feed..."

"And possibly not harm anyone in the process," I whispered.

Shit, this was an even bigger mess by the second.

I still had a hard time marrying my emotions. On one side, fury and fear over the attack twisted into a combustible blend. On the other, I wanted to fucking hug the vampire for what he'd been through.

“If he really was holding on to sanity,” Gina carried on, “if he truly was trying to do the right thing, then us chasing him had to have tipped the scales, empowering the predator rather than the man.”

“Or maybe I was simply too much of an easy prey to resist,” I added in a soft tone, dropping my gaze to my lap.

Alone. Caught off guard. And standing right in his way—presumably right when his instincts were being ramped up due to the chase.

I reached out to touch the now-healed skin of my neck, then wrung my hands together in my lap.

The memory lashed out through my mind like a fucking hurricane, but in the eye of the storm wasn't the attack itself.

It was a single, rasped name.

“I have another question...” I glanced up from my lap. “Was there anyone else there when I was attacked? Because I could have sworn—”

“Alaric.”

My gaze snapped to Gina's.

“I told you we couldn't get much out of Taffel, but this was the one thing he kept saying on repeat. That it was his old friend who appeared like a ghost and stopped him from killing you,” she explained. “The guy ran before we even got a good look at him—honestly, all I saw was nothing more than a shadow I couldn't even say with certainty had been a man—but Taffel was positive it was his old friend that he'd seen. His old friend who'd intervened. And here's where it gets even more interesting...”

“Taffel's case file noted there was an Alaric Gesner who kept pressuring the authorities to do more. I actually called the detective who'd worked the case. He said the guy hadn't

stopped searching for his friend for the entire three years the detective had still been on the force.

“He also confessed that the police had marked the investigation as a cold case pretty quickly when no leads had shown up, but he personally kept an eye open because of Alaric, who’d never given up hope. Of course, once the detective retired, the police never assigned a new person to the case...”

And ICRA would have still been too new at that point to either waste resources by looking around old files—or wrestle a supernatural case away from the police when the investigation had actually kicked off.

Even now, not all cases fell under our jurisdiction, though from what I could tell, the lines weren’t all that clear-cut. Some cases went to the police, some were ours. The more violent the crime, the surer we were the ones covering it. Beyond that, though, I never quite figured out the system. Then again, politics really weren’t part of my job.

“You’re thinking Alaric kept looking regardless?” I asked.

It was Finn who answered. “Three years is a long time to keep persisting and persevering in the face of zero results. He wouldn’t have given up just because he didn’t have a contact in the police department anymore.”

I pursed my lips. “What is he anyway? Alaric?”

“Alaric Gesner,” Finn read from a folder that had been sitting on the edge of his desk. “Age forty-four. Records have him marked as human. His mother was human as well, died in a drowning accident right before his birth.”

A shiver rolled down my limbs. “Posthumous birth?”

Finn nodded. “They saved him just in time. The woman had no family left alive and wasn’t close with anyone for them to know who his biological birth father was.”

“But we’re thinking Alaric is not entirely human, right?” I asked, picking up on his telling undertones. “I mean, could a mere human really stop a vampire?”

“Taffel said something jolted him out of the feeding frenzy,” Gina added.

I dipped my chin. “I felt some sort of magic rush through his flesh like electricity.”

“I think I’ll go see if our vampire has recovered some more and can explain a couple of things.” Finn rose from his chair and left the bullpen faster than the situation warranted.

After all, we hadn’t even touched upon *why* Taffel had been imprisoned. Or who the fuck was this Theodor Heger guy who’d owned the complex before.

I had a hunch that while Finn absolutely intended to interrogate Taffel, he was also giving Gina and me space.

A hunch she confirmed the moment she rolled her chair closer to mine and engulfed us in an intimate atmosphere.

“There’s something else, Alina. Something you have to know. We had another search come through this afternoon while we were working. About your car accident. We wanted to be one hundred percent sure it had been your magic that caused it and not something else. So, we’ve been trying to track down the guy who’d been there when you crashed...”

“What did you find?” I gripped the armrests of the chair.

Gina’s features turned heavy even as her voice went soft. “What are the chances that the mystery man who saved your life after the car accident and the one who kept you alive today are both named Alaric?”

Crap.

I hadn’t told Gina about the energy I’d picked up on, how familiar it had felt.

Hadn’t even told her about what I’d suspected of the man who’d saved my life the first time around.

Now would be a great time to spill my secrets, but...

It wasn’t so much that I didn’t trust my judgment—deep down, I knew it had been the Scorpio both times—I did, however, want to hear Gina’s take on it.

So I asked, “You suspect it’s the same person?”

Gina dragged her teeth over her bottom lip. “The surnames are different. Alaric Gesner. Alaric Blum. And the photo ID... It’s not just that Gesner’s photo is over a decade old. If you held a gun to my head and demanded I said with certainty it’s the same man in both images, I wouldn’t. Although similarities are definitely there, there are also too many details that don’t fit. But most of all, the file on Alaric Blum, the one who saved you from the crash, it’s sparse. *Too sparse.*”

A change in appearance could be due to magic or plastic surgery. Alone, that wouldn’t have raised any flags. People could do whatever they wanted to do with their bodies with zero explanation.

Combined with the name, though...

“No surname change noted in the records, I presume?” I checked in with Gina.

“None.”

“Hm...” I wasn’t sure why this was bugging me so much, but it was.

By the look on Gina’s face, I wasn’t the only one. Though I suspected our reasons might not have been entirely aligned.

I dragged my tongue over my top teeth, trying to pinpoint what exactly my intuition was trying to communicate. When I came up blank, still only that vague feeling to go on, I figured I might as well bounce off ideas with Gina.

You never knew when a conversation proved to be precisely the sounding board you needed—even if it sometimes clicked later on.

“If Alaric wanted an identity change, wouldn’t it be more advantageous to switch the whole name instead of just going from Gesner to Blum?” I asked.

“Precisely,” Gina drawled, the frustration coming through. “It isn’t exactly conducive to have two versions of you existing either, although it *is* possible he didn’t consider his old identity actually coming into play ever again. If he’d

cleaned up his old life, why would it? But with Phillip Taffel recognizing him... Let's just say we'll *absolutely* track down Alaric Gesner for some questions. Meanwhile, one of our agents has already talked to the Blum version of Alaric."

She rolled back and grabbed a folder off her desk, then offered it to me.

I stared at the damn thing like it was going to bite my head off.

"I don't think I can do this right now." I lifted my gaze to Gina's.

Adding a third soulmate to the mix when I was barely handling two might just be the thing to tip me over the edge. Gina gave me one of her agent looks, the kind where she was looking at me like pieces of a puzzle she was determined to put together.

Honestly, there was no real reason why I hadn't told her about my third soulmate theory.

Maybe I just had to know...

"What did the investigation show? Was Alaric Blum in any way involved with my crash?"

Gina placed the file in one of the drawers beneath her desk. "He truly was just a bystander. Right place, right time. Why he bailed, though, remains a mystery—aside from the potential new identity thing, of course. He gave some bullshit excuse about seeing the ambulance coming and not wanting to get in the way, but since he was innocent—we found a street cam shot of him as well, simply walking down the street when the crash happened—the agent didn't push it."

Just for a moment, I allowed myself to bury my face in my hands. Why the fuck couldn't things be straightforward for once?

Two Alarics, who I was fairly certain were the same person.

One who'd never stopped looking for his vampire friend—a friend who'd been imprisoned in a basement-level safe of

some fucking warehouse complex and ended up making a vicious meal out of me. Something that would have resulted in my celestial ass being sucked dry had Alaric Gesner not interfered.

Then we had the other Alaric, the one who happened to be on the same street as I'd been when I'd crashed the car.

The common denominator aside from the energetic signature—both had fled the scene after saving me from the brink of death.

A headache began to pound in my temples.

I rubbed at the pain, then straightened to look at Gina. Tackling everything at once seemed like an impossible feat, but there was *one* answer I could offer.

“There might be another explanation for why Alaric Blum ran after saving me...” I released a long breath that expelled all the air from my lungs before I filled them with fresh oxygen.

Here we go again...

“I'm almost positive he's my third soulmate.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

The shock on Gina's face mixed with understanding—like I'd confirmed something she'd suspected but honestly had been too wild to accept as fact.

I got it. I really did. Here I was, dropping new soulmates left and right, and it looked like there was definitely something cagey going on with the latest one.

But I also just plowed on because sometimes, allowing space for the information to sink in was less productive than riding the flow.

“If the accident was the first time Alaric had felt our soulmate connection, I can see why he'd bail. Hell, I thought I'd been *cursed* the day I met Störmer.” A bitter-sweet laugh tumbled from my lips at the memory. “Honestly, the magnitude of the feeling is so far from anything I've ever experienced that I can't even put it into words.

“Regardless of what it spills into”—like in my case with Ezra, severe lust—“for a moment there, the whole universe seems to halt, and everything narrows down to the person in front of you who strikes chords so deep your damn spirit seems to spread its wings and soar. If Alaric got hit with the full power of our connection while I was dying right in front of him...”

“He wouldn't have known what to make of it.” Gina nodded slowly. “Having the authorities mixed in a situation he didn't understand, or was even potentially freaking out over,

could provide enough of a cause for him to run. It still doesn't explain how he healed you, though."

Valid point.

After a small pause, I said, "Maybe he was born human but received his powers after the War, like I had? You know I didn't gain my astrology magic immediately after the power-wave, when most previously human individuals had. It took meeting Roland for my magic to activate. Maybe Alaric had his own catalyst at a later time. Maybe that was also why he decided to change his surname, put some distance between his old and his new self."

I shrugged because all we really could do was speculate at this point, but at least this particular explanation made some sense.

Gina let out a hum of agreement, although the note it ended on hinted she wasn't entirely sold. "Why keep it a secret, though? What's he hiding? More importantly, *how* did he intervene *twice* when your life was in danger?"

"I don't know about the hiding part, but I might have the answer to your last question." I chewed on the inside of my cheek for a moment, letting my thoughts organize since this revelation was new for me as well. "Okay, so with the soulmate bonds, there's a certain pull. We're drawn to each other. But it isn't just physical attraction I'm talking about. Now that I look back... Don't laugh, but I think fate has a lot to do with organizing shit in our lives."

Gina gave me a flat look—not because I was talking about fate, but because I even considered the possibility of her not taking me seriously.

I gave her a sheepish smile, then said, "The way I met Roland was crazy. I was on my way to a party. I was running late, and Val was already on my case, so I headed down an alley I normally wouldn't to save myself a couple of minutes. As I was rushing down the sidewalk, a very drunken Ben came tumbling down the stairs of the building I was passing and rammed straight into me.

“If that constellation of events hadn’t happened, Roland wouldn’t have jumped in to save me before I splattered on the concrete. He wouldn’t have escorted me to the party I was going to. That walk led to us talking and, well...”

I flashed the wedding band on my finger, my lips pulling into a smile as gratitude for having Roland in my life filled my every cell.

That softness and warmth remained even as I ventured into the next point of this whole speech.

“With Ezra, I’m starting to think it was no coincidence that I got pulled into an investigation that just so happened to unfold in his shop. After all, it isn’t like I get called to *every* ritualistic scene, you know. Besides, Ezra knowing Leif while I’m connected to the band through your relationship with Aric? Those aren’t just coincidences.

“So when it comes to Alaric... What if fate has been doing the same damn interventions? It could have guided him to walk down the street when I’d crashed. It could have been why I was called to a warehouse where his missing friend was being held.

“When that ward exploded in my face, I tugged on my soulmate cords, Gina. Both Ezra and Roland reached out to me, wondering if I was okay. I don’t doubt Alaric felt the same...”

He might not have acted on the impulse immediately since his energy disappeared after I’d initially picked up on it, but whatever he was feeling, it must have led him back to that building—right in time to save me again.

“That actually...makes a lot of sense.” Gina relaxed in her chair. “It doesn’t explain everything. here are way too many holes in the narrative for me to just let them go...”

Like Alaric’s magic and identity, no doubt.

“But I can see why he would keep showing up where you were involved,” she agreed, then warned, “I’m still going to look more into him, Alina. Especially since we have a vampire in holding who’s an untold story in itself.”

Right on cue, Finn walked into the bullpen. “Ladies. Our vampire guest is doing much better now. He also has one request.”

Finn’s gaze slid over to me, and I knew what was coming before the words even left his mouth.

“He wants to apologize to you, Alina. But only if you’re up for it.”



The vampire’s throat bobbed when Gina swung open the door to the interrogation room.

Not in hunger, though.

In regret.

Although my body locked up for a second at seeing my attacker, the fact that he looked like he was on the verge of tears stunned me more than anything else could.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, the sound so broken I just dropped into the chair opposite his. “I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

When the first tear fell on a sob, I reached out and took his hand. “I understand. It was scary, I’m not going to lie. But I can’t hold it against you. I don’t want to.”

He lifted his wrecked, bloodshot gaze to mine. “I almost killed you. If Alaric hadn’t shown up... I—I would have killed you.”

“But you didn’t,” I said simply.

I didn’t exactly have it in me to do much more since I really did need to process all of it, but there was one fact I prized above all else. I was alive. This was the outcome we got. What-ifs didn’t really matter.

“Thank you,” Taffel whispered, and as I let my hand slide from his, I took the first good look at the vamp.

He seemed to be in his early thirties visually, though I sensed a decade or so more in his energy. As Gina and Finn claimed the remaining two chairs, I quickly peeked into his chart. So many of the softer astrological placements greeted me, I began to think the attack had almost truly been harder on him than me. Hell, if I needed to see a therapist, he definitely had to as well.

I made a mental note to let Finn and Gina know, then observed the energies some more.

Once I was done—having clearly noticed what I'd been doing—Finn braced one arm on the desk and asked Taffel, “Are you up for answering some more questions?”

“You can stay if you want to,” Gina offered to me when the vampire nodded in answer to Finn.

Since I was genuinely curious, I kept my butt firmly in the seat.

“Let's begin with the most important thing here”—Finn opened up a folder and placed it in front of Taffel—“is this the man who kidnapped you?”

When the vamp went white as a sheet, we didn't really need a verbal answer.

Theodor Heger, the previous owner of the complex, had been the one holding him captive.

“I don't know if he was the one who took me, but he was definitely the one who kept me locked up in that basement.” Taffel swallowed. “It was only ever him who came. Until he didn't...”

“He died,” Finn explained. “Which makes us think no one else knew where you were. If Theodor Heger had been working with someone, they would have come to check up on you.”

Unless that someone had dropped off the face of the earth.

There had been a beneficiary, after all.

But that was more for the back end of the investigation than for Taffel to deal with.

Gina leaned forward. “I understand this is hard for you, but do you have any idea why you were taken? Did anything happen while you were in captivity? Any experiments or...”

“I blacked out often when he came for me. That much, I know. I think he... I think he was testing magic on me?” He huffed out a frustrated breath. “I hope I get more memories back. Right now, it feels like my brain is riddled with holes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gina quickly said. “Your captor is dead, but we still want justice for you. We don’t have to rush anything here. You’ve been starving for a long time and have gone through something traumatic. It’s normal to have memory gaps in the beginning as you’re still healing.”

“Maybe we can try with a couple of other things,” Finn offered, leading the topic into the more nitty-gritty side of the investigation, where they’d gather every small, seemingly insignificant bit of information Taffel could provide in hopes of puzzling together the larger picture.

Which was also my cue to go.

Not because I wasn’t invested. The opposite, actually. I wanted to head to my personal station and put all my thoughts and observations on paper.

I slipped out of the observation room and headed up the stairwell to the witches’ floor.

Like Gina had said, the asshole who’d held Taffel captive might be dead, but it wouldn’t feel right to leave the vampire without answers.

His story, even what little he managed to provide, combined with how the magic on the ward had felt, gave me a modicum more insight, and if anything useful at all came up from my findings, I’d want the team to have it. I needed to write up a report on the ward anyway, so why not go the extra mile?

It could all accumulate to nothing, but on the off chance Heger *had* been testing out magic, then anything could help produce a better picture of what had actually happened.

Since I suspected he'd been behind the ward that had blown in my face, I could sift through my memories some more for any additional traits that jumped out.

I didn't know how long I sat at my desk, spilling out train after train of thought and then sifting through them for a more concise and coherent report. But by the time I was done, my wrist was aching. Wrapping my fingers around it, I massaged away the pain when a familiar blonde I certainly wasn't expecting to see within ICRA's walls marched up to me, a visitor's pass around her neck.

"Val, what are you doing here?" I leaped out of my seat and hugged the hell out of her.

The fierceness of her hug surpassed mine. "Gina called. She told me everything that went down today. I texted Roland ___"

"Did you tell him?" I blurted.

Val looked at me in mock offense before her expression softened. "Gina mentioned he hadn't been notified of the incident. No point in stressing out the man when you're obviously alive and well."

The heaviness in her eyes made it clear which event had swirled through her thoughts.

The car crash.

When I almost *hadn't* been alive, and I had certainly *not* been well.

Roland had camped in the med bay the entire time I'd been out. He'd also let Val know what had happened, and neither of them had quite moved on from the fact that they had almost lost me.

"I think the choice to tell him, when or if you tell him about the vampire attack, is yours to make," she added, then brightened up. "Anyway, I *did* let your dashing husband know that I was stealing you away for the evening. He was just glad I was pulling you away from the desk, especially since he mentioned he might be running late. Personally, I think some girl time is precisely what the doctor ordered."

I laughed, her infectious energy seeping into mine. “Girl time sounds amazing, thank you.”

After a quick sweep of my desk to make sure my papers were in order, I grabbed my stuff and headed out with Val. We walked alongside the Spree for a short spell, then Val led us to a new boat bar that had opened up the previous month.

The only reason I knew about it was because several of my coworkers had been thrilled to find a new break spot since ICRA employees got a discount on the food and drinks. Apparently, the Agency had helped the owner in the past and she wanted to repay the favor.

I hadn’t gotten a chance to check it out before now, so I eagerly padded behind Val when she took the lead.

We’d just climbed on deck when my gaze landed on the godsdamned handsome figure leaning against the bar we were headed for.

I tugged hard on Val’s hand. “Abort, abort, abort.”

Already spinning on my heel, I tried to drag Val off the fucking boat, but she just *had* to take a look.

“Ohhh, fuck, he’s even hotter in person,” she gushed, but at least she took a step away from the fox shifter. “Girl, you really fucking struck panty-melting gold in the soulmate department.”

Mortified, I looked from her to the presence that had unmistakably gotten stronger in the past second. Yup, Ezra Störmer was strolling toward me.

Why the fuck had I even believed I could have avoided him?

Hadn’t I learned my lesson by now?

“Alina,” he drawled with that killer smile of his that should have been fucking illegal.

I did the only thing I could. Practically shoved Val at him.

“This is my friend, Val.”

The pair exchanged introductions, but if I thought the distraction would save my ass, I'd been so fucking wrong.

Ezra turned and gave me that chin-up look that made him even taller, his eyes hooded in a way that made my panties immediately a wreck.

“So”—his gaze swept to my lips before rising to my eyes again—“I’m your soulmate?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

I stared at Ezra in sheer fucking horror.
So, I'm your soulmate?

His words bounced against my skull, but the amused, almost smug expression on his face didn't match the reaction I'd been expecting.

Who the hell was on board with someone they barely knew calling them a soulmate? What the fuck?

Val, the traitor, just said, "Guess I'll leave you two to talk."

Then she bolted off the boat like she was a fucking Olympic sprinter aiming for gold.

I was still processing the whole thing, blinking from the now-empty spot where my friend had been to the Sag, who was looking at me with an even more amused smile painted upon those too-damn handsome features.

Brains could break, right?

Because right now, I wasn't sure I had a single cell firing the way it should.

I wasn't some badass astro witch. Hell, I didn't even feel like a thirty-year-old adult. Had my vocal cords been operational, I was pretty sure I'd just squeak like a damn mouse as shame, terror, unease, but also a thread of immense, unbridled hope lay waste upon my inner landscape.

My connection with Ezra's gaze deepened, and it was then that I sensed it...

Something that existed outside of the frenzied bubble I'd gotten locked into.

I latched onto the sensation and realized it was the magnitude of our gaze, slicing open a rip in the barrier that had imprisoned me in my own mind and thrown me into survival mode, where I'd been unable to as much as sense a single thing beyond the stories and worst-case scenarios my ego produced in a misguided attempt to protect me.

As soon as I surrendered to the pull, Ezra's warmth, affection, that damn energy that made me feel so free and safe—all of it crashed over and through me in a wave that somehow washed away every last bit of tension, every single voice of bullshit, and disabled the hard-wired beliefs of how things were *supposed* to unfold.

Instead of following Val's example and running for the fucking hills...I yearned to move closer.

Ezra's energy stroked threads of lightness and optimism within me, and fuck, if it wasn't precisely what I'd needed.

The last invisible wall fell, and I felt like...

I felt like I could breathe.

I felt like I could *be*.

"I guess I really do have a couple of things to explain, huh?" I said gently, the corners of my lips curling up as Ezra placed a hand on my hip.

He leaned in, almost as if going for a kiss, except his mouth stopped short of mine. "And I guess I finally get to treat you to a drink."

Fucking hell, playful fire soared through my veins, and even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to hold back the grin that bloomed in a direct mirror to his.

As Ezra shifted his hand from my hip to the small of my back, it was all too easy to let him lead me to an unoccupied spot at the far end of the boat. Unlike the majority of the tables, this one had a bench on one end and a couple of chairs on the other. Ezra scooted onto the bench right alongside me.

Our knees touched as we both turned toward each other, every single movement saturated with the pull that now bloomed between us without restrictions.

We were still smiling and staring into each other's eyes like we'd had the biggest love spell dumped upon us when a waiter approached to take our order. Even then, Ezra dropped his hand and sought out mine, entwining our fingers so fucking lovingly I could have sworn my temperature went up several degrees.

Gods, it felt too fucking good to be with him.

He felt too fucking good.

Somehow, I managed to ask for a beer—same as Ezra. Nice to know my lips were capable of more than just grinning. Especially since the pressure to spill it all to the handsome Sag was ready to blow the lid off if I procrastinated any longer.

It was time.

I felt it in every atom of my being.

It was time.

“Uhm...” I tucked a strand of hair beneath my ear, but the wind just blew it back into my face.

Ezra reached out, repeating my motion with more success, then traced his thumb down my cheek.

My lids fluttered shut at the intensity of the touch.

“Shit,” I muttered before looking at him with hooded eyes. “If you keep doing that, I won't be able to say what I want to say.”

Ezra, of course, looked fucking delighted by the power he wielded over me.

And it was precisely what I needed to let out a snorting laugh that kicked me out of this whole Störmer trance I'd fallen into.

“Remember how I told you my magic is different from most?” I began with the only opening I could think of that

wasn't straight out blurting how we were soulmates—like Val fucking had.

“How could I forget?” He winked. “You're Ocean Girl. And like the ocean, you connect with the moon.”

I play-scowled at him, which backfired because, holy shit, seeing his entire face light up when he was messing with me had to have been one of the most breathtaking things I'd ever seen.

The corners of his eyes crinkled with even more warmth. “You see people's astrological energies and also how all the planets and whatever else celestial things influence magic. You can also reverse-engineer a birth chart from a person's signature, which gives you the date and time of birth so that your colleagues can hunt them down more efficiently.”

I nodded. Damn, he really had remembered all of it.

“That was also all the magic I had—until recently.”

Seeing the waiter approach with our beers, I waited until he set them on the table before picking up the story. I had a feeling that the more I'd let it flow, the better it would go over for both Ezra and me.

Maybe a tiny part still expected him to think I was fucking crazy, that hearing me talk about soulmate connections would be what drove him away—I hated the thought. More than that, though, with the openness Ezra was displaying toward me, it was impossible to really envision a scenario where he would do such a drastic flip.

It seemed like the times I thought I was reading too much into his affections toward me truly were over, and it gave me that extra dose of determination to go for the truth regardless of how crazy it all sounded.

“Roughly nine years ago, when I first got my magic,” I said, “I also received a dream. I was in space, and there was this vast, disembodied voice telling me to find my Sun, Moon, and Rising.”

I could feel Ezra's attention sharpen with every word that left my mouth.

So far, so good.

I took a sip of beer, then blew out a breath. “It repeated a couple of times, then eventually tapered off until I had several consecutive years of peace. It stuck with me, though, the dream. There had been something so profound—and, in a way, terrifying about it—that I could never really shake it off. Still, I didn’t think *too* much of it. I mean, people had recurring nightmares, right? And aside from being unique in my magic, everything in my life was pretty normal...until I walked into your shop.”

Ezra’s energy sparked, bathing me with flames that matched the fire in his eyes the memory must have stirred.

My cheeks heated up, and I quickly drank some more beer to cool off a bit.

I really did want to get through this without getting distracted by something like climbing into his lap. Gods knew more and more of our bodies touched with every passing second already.

“It was that day, after I left your shop, that I saw...threads. Like metaphysical ropes flowing out of my boss. I raised the alarm, but the witches found nothing wrong with him. Which meant there had to be something wrong with me. They thought... They thought I was cursed, Ezra. And, shit, I did too. But when all the tests came back clear, I started to fear something worse...”

“You questioned your sanity?” he asked gently, skimming his fingers along my arm.

“I did,” I admitted. “I thought I was losing it. And then I fell into that dream again... Except this time, it *looped*. I was stuck in space, with that too-large voice demanding I find my Sun, Moon, and Rising, with no fucking way out. I... I almost broke. Then I saw the cords. Except they were flowing out of *me*.”

“I couldn’t see where they were going. All I knew was that three were more profound than the rest, and they captivated me. I was determined to figure out what the hell all this was

about, but then I woke from the dream, and the fear that something was wrong with me returned in full force. Roland, though. He had a different opinion. He suspected seeing these cords might be some new manifestation of my powers, and, well, he wasn't wrong. It just took me a while to get there.

"I won't bore you by going on a magic tangent"—I smiled, catching my breath—"but I eventually learned that the strands I was seeing were connections between people. To be entirely honest, I still don't understand *all* of it, but one thing is clear. The three prominent cords that pulled me in... Well, they're unbreakable ties to men who...who are my soulmates. And one of them belongs to you, Ezra."

"I—You have two more?" There was a hesitancy in his posture that warred with the clear impulse to wrap me up in his arms.

I chewed on my lip, keeping the distance between us to not push him into anything he wasn't ready for.

"Yes, there's two more. Alaric, a guy I haven't actually met yet, though he's saved my life two times"—Ezra's brows rose at that—"and Roland."

His eyes narrowed. "Your husband is your soulmate too?"

My heart raced.

Shit, what if I'd been lulled into a false sense of security? What if those old fears had been right, and Ezra learning I was meant to be with three guys would put him off a relationship with me entirely.

My past self would have rejoiced at the thought. This version of me, though...

I couldn't think of a worse outcome.

"Yes, my husband is my soulmate," I said with far less zest than I had before. "There was something deep inside me that just *clicked* when we first met. It wasn't rational, but it was also so powerful that I couldn't ignore the pull. I thought that was it for me...until I experienced the same with you."

Ezra ran his hand through his hair before letting out a heavy breath. “Are you sure about him? I have to admit, I didn’t exactly get the best vibes from him at the party. He seemed to have a stick up his ass.”

I stared at him for a long second, my jaw hanging, then threw up my arms. “What did you expect? Shit, Ezra, you’re a married guy who was flirting with his wife right in front of him!”

I wasn’t sure what reaction I thought I’d get, but Ezra letting out a full-body laugh wasn’t it.

He ran his fingers through that gorgeous hair of his again, then drank a generous amount of beer, softly shaking his head as he set the glass back on the coaster.

“Okay, I admit that was an asshole move.” He peered at me, so fucking boyish I...melted.

I just fucking melted.

“I knew he was your husband, and I was staking a claim,” Ezra admitted. “I guess I was jealous he got to have you when I didn’t. That he could kiss your lips every fucking moment of the day. Put his arm around you and pull you to him whenever he chose. That he got to take you home and spend the night wrapped around your body. Maybe I—I wanted him to see that I wasn’t just some nobody to you. That you mattered to me, and I mattered to you. That this”—he gestured between us—“exists.”

“You have to understand, Alina, you’re the most beautiful, captivating, amazing woman I’ve ever met. I won’t even pretend to understand all the metaphysics, although I’m hoping you’ll be up to explaining more because I’m interested, but the bottom line is that I’ve never, *never* wanted someone the way I want you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

How it was that my heart survived Ezra's statement would forever remain a mystery. Hearing the words from his lips...

The bottom line is that I've never, never wanted someone the way I want you.

Gods, there was no way to even describe what it did to me.

But there was one shadow, one weight I needed to address first.

I was spilling my romantic guts to a married man. *A family man.*

"What about your wife, Ezra?" I asked softly. "Your son?"

"Ah, I was wondering when that would come up." He ran his fingers through his hair, but when he must have noticed me stiffen, he quickly added, "We're getting a divorce. I've already started looking for a new place to live."

The knot in my throat tightened despite what should have been good news.

I dropped my gaze to my lap before lifting it to look into the warm brown of Ezra's eyes. "Is this recent?"

The thought that I'd caused them to split...

Shit, I wanted Ezra Störmer all for myself. I wasn't about to lie. But at the same time, being the cause of their divorce didn't sit right with me.

It felt...filthy.

Ezra's gaze turned soulful, like he fucking knew the turmoil raging inside me.

“Yes, Lea and I agreed to divorce after I'd already met you. But you're not a homewrecker, Alina. The marriage was over long ago.”

Something about that statement didn't compute.

“If the marriage was over long ago, why wait until now?” I frowned. “I mean, you've been together for decades, right?”

As soon as I said the words, I wondered if I was overstepping, but Ezra didn't seem to mind.

He shrugged. “A little over twenty-five years, actually.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. Twenty-five years. Shit, that was a damn huge chunk of time to spend sharing your life with someone.

“I get how intimidating that might sound.” Ezra gave me a half smile. “But for the last twenty years or so... Honestly, if Lea hadn't gotten pregnant, we probably would have split up a long time ago. But she did, and we got married instead. It wasn't long after Mats was born that it became clear that Lea and me—we weren't really in love. We functioned, but we weren't in love. So we stayed together for our son.

“Contrary to the somewhat shittier home lives we had as kids, Lea and I got along so well that it made sense to give Mats a normal home. One where he got to have both parents and where there were practically zero fights. We were good friends who lived together, supported each other. And it worked. It worked so well that even when our son became an adult, we just kept on doing what we did.

“It was Lea, actually, who brought you up. She saw how much you meant to me, how different I was when I talked about you...”

Holy shit, he'd talked about me? To his wife?

Though I understood now their marriage hadn't been how I'd imagined, the shock of speaking to your spouse about another person you were interested in still rocked through me.

Maybe a bit ironic, given what my life had been like for the past month or so.

Probably seeing I'd fallen down a hole, Ezra gave me another of his warm, boyish smiles. "Yes, I talked about a teal-haired witch with intriguing magic who'd marched into my shop. I was fascinated by you. I couldn't keep my mouth from running. Lea saw it for what it was, though, even when, maybe, I hadn't wanted to admit it to myself. I mean, when you never felt for someone the way I'd fallen for you, you tend to pretend what your gut is saying isn't real."

I snorted. "Don't I fucking know it."

We both laughed at that and simultaneously reached for our beers. With another chuckle, we clinked glasses, toasting to the totally useless game of shutting your eyes from the truth as if that would make it go away.

Just as I set my glass back down, Ezra said, "It was Lea, also, who suggested that it was time we both move on with our lives. I guess, in a way, there never would have been a forever for us anyway since she's immortal and I'm not... But even so, while our friendship was—is—something we both cherish, we'd both be settling for a life that's less than what it could be. I see that now."

"What about your son?"

After all, spouses might separate amicably, but that didn't necessarily translate to how their kids handled it—even if they were adults.

"We're having dinner next Sunday. Lea and I plan to tell Mats then, but she's confident it will go over well and...maybe I wasn't as sure as her, but she made enough valid points to convince me that it shouldn't be a big deal. He'll still have both of his parents, we'll still get along, and it isn't like we were living together anymore anyway."

Chewing on my bottom lip, I allowed my thoughts to run through my head, thinking if there was something I hadn't covered. It was...a lot to take in, I wasn't going to lie. More

so, since I'd gotten more crap than good news lately, I was highly suspicious of things being so easy.

A wife happily divorcing her husband?

Things going over well with their kid?

Ezra finding his own place and entering the divorce process?

It all sounded a bit too good, didn't it? Kind of like every wish coming true with zero drama attached?

Yeah, I was suspicious as fuck.

"Are you okay with that?" Ezra gently caressed the outer line of my thigh.

When I looked up, confused, he explained, "Are you okay with me being friends with my soon-to-be ex-wife? Hell, are you okay with me having a son? I mean, clearly, you knew about that, but I think where we're headed is different from just being attracted to someone..."

I put a pause on the latter part of his sentence and focused on the first question instead.

"I'm not bothered that you'll stay friends," I said honestly. "But the fact that you have a son... Shit, how do I say this without sounding like a complete asshole?"

Ezra's warm, rumbling laugh filled the space. "You can't be a bigger asshole than I was at that party."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He narrowed them right back in challenge.

Eventually, I couldn't fucking hold my composure. I release a liberating laugh before shaking myself straight.

"Okay, okay, shit... The thing is that I never wanted kids. Roland and I were always on the same page about that, and I was so thrilled that I managed to land not just the perfect guy but also one who wanted to remain childless. Now, I don't have anything against people who decide to have kids"—I lifted my hands in an innocent gesture, though clearly Ezra wasn't judging my perspective and there was nothing to

defend myself for—“but I know that it’s not for me and I want to keep it that way.”

Not for me in this lifetime, at least, I thought as my mind flashed back to that family scene I’d witnessed in one of my past lives with Alaric.

But it was *past* for a reason.

In my current reality, merely thinking of having children set off that familiar buzz warning me it would be a misaligned path to take.

“So you can imagine that I normally wouldn’t even consider being with someone who...you know, is a dad,” I wrapped up, scrunching my nose as those final words came out because, fuck, I really didn’t want to shit on something Ezra was no doubt grateful and thrilled to be.

He cocked his head to the side. “But you’re considering it with me?”

“Fuck my life,” I muttered and threw my head back for a moment before leveling my gaze on Ezra. “I’m afraid, okay? I know he’s an adult, I know I’m not going to be a parent, but fuck, he’s still your kid. For some reason, I’d rather bolt for the fucking hills than meet him. I mean, I’m what, less than a decade older than him?”

Ezra smirked. “Eight years. Mats is twenty-two.”

It took everything not to fucking shriek as I whisper-shouted, “That’s what I’m fucking talking about. If we do this, Ezra, whatever the fuck this is, I can’t spend the rest of my life avoiding your son.”

“No.” He clasped his hand in mine. “But we can take things one step at a time. I don’t expect you to flat-out start dating me—not that I’d mind.”

I huffed out a laugh.

“And I sure as shit have to process that you won’t be just mine.” He quirked a brow. “But Alina, I’m in for the ride. Doesn’t matter how long it takes or how the fuck it unfolds.”

Guess there's a reason for all of it, even if I might not logically get it."

"So, you're really not questioning this whole soulmate thing, huh?" I had to ask.

"I'm not." He swiped his thumb across my bottom lip. "When you walked into my shop... I can't even explain what hit me. And it wasn't how incredibly sexy you are. Something locked in place not just in me but in my fox as well.

"Like I said earlier, I tried to write it off as the fact that I wanted to bend you over my counter and fuck you right there, but it was more than that. It *is* more than that. Foxes aren't supposed to have mates in the same way as most shifters. There are too few of us in the world for that. But, fuck, I could have sworn that was how I saw you.

"Shit, Alina, I couldn't stop thinking about you. You were in my head. You were in my senses... I can't tell you the number of times I detoured with my bike around ICRA in the fucking hopes I'd catch a glimpse of you. So no, I'm not fucking questioning the soulmate thing because nothing else could explain why this"—he motioned between us—"feels like coming home."

Damn it. I choked back my tears.

"So, we're taking things slow?" I managed to ask.

Ezra's gaze dipped down to my lips in a whisper of a kiss we weren't ready to share. "We're taking things however they go."

The sun had dipped well beyond the horizon during our conversation, and though I wanted nothing more than to stay on the boat and talk for hours, I did need to get home. Ezra paid for our drinks, refusing to even let me flash my ICRA ID for the discount, then we headed off the boat, exchanging numbers during the short walk to his Harley.

Ezra glanced from his bike to me. "I'd offer you a ride..."

"I have the helmet and jacket at the office," I said softly, loving how his entire face lit up.

He swept an arm in the headquarters' direction. "Lead the way."

As soon as we started moving along the Spree, our hands grazed—and kept bumping into each other. We weren't pushing it, but those small flutters of contact...

They carried so much value for me.

And I could tell without a shadow of a doubt that Ezra felt the same.

Because right now, it wasn't about sex. It wasn't about jumping into anything. We were both grateful to have this much, and all it did was confirm Ezra had been telling the truth.

He was in it for the ride.

This, being casual with each other, existing in each other's proximity... I had a feeling it was more than either of us could have imagined, especially given the circumstances. So while I wasn't deluding myself we'd skip off into the sunset, I did let myself relish the blissfully serene moments where, just for the time being, in our energies, in the way it felt, Ezra and I already had it all.

When we reached HQ, Ezra waited downstairs while I rushed up to grab the helmet and jacket. Thankfully, I didn't run into anyone who was in the mood to chat and came back out in record time. As we backtracked to his bike, I belatedly realized we could have just met up at ICRA. Although, on second thought, it was too fucking nice to just walk side by side with light conversation flowing between us to give it up.

This time, after we both geared up and Ezra swung his leg over his bike, I didn't hesitate. I climbed up behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist.

We fit together seamlessly.

Only the barest hint of daylight painted the sky as Ezra navigated the streets toward my place in Prenzlauer Berg. I'd told him where to go beforehand, so when he took a detour or two, instead of worrying he'd forgotten the direction, I simply

welcomed the extra minutes spent with him pressed against my body and the Harley rumbling beneath me.

Fuck, I could get used to this.

Images of him coming to pick me up from work flooded my mind, blending with the reality I was currently living. My intuition hummed in agreement, confirming this wasn't merely wishful thinking.

It could be my reality. Would be.

Though the time for going back had long since passed, it was in that moment that I realized I'd truly crossed the line and stepped onto a trajectory that couldn't be stopped. I could have sworn the first stars peppering the sky above us shone brighter in agreement.

I started walking the path I'd been meant to.

I curled myself just a touch tighter around Ezra.

His energy flamed in response, all the beautiful fire caressing my own aura, my body—as if he knew. With the way our bond seemed to open up even more, I wouldn't have been surprised if he, indeed, had picked up on everything I was feeling.

Speaking for myself, I certainly felt a far deeper connection with Ezra than ever before.

Part of me craved to keep this evening going. To curl up against him in bed and fall asleep with my head on his chest and his arm wound around my waist.

I wanted it all.

I fucking wanted it now.

And for once, I didn't judge myself for it. Because every fiber of my body knew this was how it was meant to be.

I'd just have to wait a little while longer.

Taking comfort in the knowledge, I enjoyed the last of the ride as we entered my neighborhood. Smoothly, Ezra cruised through the final few turns, then pulled onto my street.

I'd surrendered to the ride so completely I didn't notice the figure sitting on a bench by the short flight of steps leading into the townhouse until the bike had come to a stop.

Turquoise eyes locked onto my helmet—and the serenity shattered.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Roland unfolded from the bench like a shadow. His turquoise eyes remained devoid of any warmth as he continued to stare at me, eerily unblinking.

I hadn't even realized I'd clutched onto Ezra like I was holding on for dear fucking life until he asked low enough for only me to hear, "Do you need me to stay?"

It took a second for the words to register.

"No, no, I'll be fine," I assured him, though the words felt like a lie.

While Roland wouldn't hurt me, I also wasn't a fool enough to believe this evening would be fine. That I would be fine.

My stomach had twisted into too many knots to ever undo. Tremors were wreaking havoc upon my body, my mouth paper dry, heavy with the taste of dread.

Still, the longer I clung to Ezra like a damn koala, the more uncomfortable the situation would get. Right now, I was on the precipice.

So, even as the Sag side of me urged me to stay on the bike and just drive off, my Fourth House Sun placement prevailed.

I wasn't about to break my home life just because running would be the easier option of the two.

Claiming one last moment of feeling the comforting heat of Ezra's body, I dismounted, then took off the helmet. As soon as my face was visible, I offered Roland a mini-smile

that certainly did nothing to alleviate the situation, misplaced as it was, and though I was aware I might make the whole thing even worse, I turned toward Ezra.

Because shittier than whatever crap I'd just stepped into would be to ignore the fox shifter entirely.

“Thank you for the ride, Ezra,” I said sincerely.

He'd flicked his visor up at some point, giving me the full effect of the warmth that captured his eyes when he looked at me. “Anytime, Ocean Girl. I'll talk to you soon.”

That last part was barely more than a whispered rumble. Ezra tipped his chin at Roland, then raked his gaze over me one last time before lowering his visor and driving off. I watched him go just for a spell, then faced Roland.

“We should go inside,” he gritted out, gaze flicking to the helmet I was cuddling in my hands and the jacket that very clearly bore Störmer's name.

I padded behind him. “What were you doing outside?”

“Needed the air to think through a business decision,” he tossed over his shoulder, the sparse information clearly indicating he was not happy with me right now.

But the true punch in the stomach—it was the flash of disdain in his gaze when he looked at me.

Tension between us climbed, and it felt like forever until Roland unlocked the front door and we both piled into the apartment. As soon as it snapped shut behind me, though, I almost wished we had stayed outside.

Out there, at least, with the melodies of the city, it didn't feel like a fucking cage. Roland marched into the living room and threw his keys on the table with aggression I wasn't used to him displaying.

“Really, Alina?” He whipped around. “Really? You're having Val cover for you now while you're off with Störmer?”

Oh crap. Oh fucking crap.

I hadn't even considered what it must have looked like from Roland's point of view. I thought he was pissed because I'd been with Ezra. But having Val tell him she was taking me out...

Shit.

Shit-shit-shit-shit.

It looked like I'd lied.

Worse—like he'd caught me red-handed.

How I'd frozen on the bike for a second would have only added merit to the story.

Fuck.

"I *was* with Val, Roland." I padded closer to drop the helmet onto the armchair, then slung off my messenger bag and shrugged off the jacket. I didn't see how having something of Ezra's on me right now would do me any good. "She ambushed me at HQ, and we went to get drinks. It was there that I ran into Ezra."

He snorted. "You really expect me to believe that?"

My lips parted, the answer at the tip of my tongue, but Roland was far from done.

"Where's Val now, huh?" he demanded. "Or did she oh so conveniently leave you and that fuck-ass alone? Did you bring him here to fuck him, Alina?"

My jaw dropped.

I could *not* believe those words had actually left his mouth.

"Are you hearing yourself right now?" It was an effort to keep my voice level, but I managed. "First, you're treating me like I put up a front with Val so that I could be with Ezra. Now you're accusing me of bringing who you think is my lover *to our home* to fuck? What the hell, Roland? Am I some deceiving bitch or just plain stupid?"

"You knew I was working late," he muttered like that explained everything.

But on the wings of those words, such a pang of hurt blasted out of Roland that the anger building up toward him dispersed.

“And it *is* late,” I said softly. “Ezra gave me a ride home because of it. We just talked, Roland.”

“Like at the Whiskey Jet Preachers’ party? Where you were practically holding hands? Or did you think I hadn’t noticed that?” he snapped.

Another wave of hurt pulsed from him, and my mind flashed to all the affection I’d shared with Ezra. Not just at that party but tonight.

Guilt swirled in my stomach.

Roland must have seen it on my face because he let out a derisive laugh that sliced across my skin in a thousand blades.

“Mm-hmm, I can see how you talked, all right. Isn’t that what people usually say? *Nothing happened. It didn’t mean anything.*” He gave me a seething look. “Do you honestly think it’s just sex that counts? That as long as you’re not riding his fucking dick, everything else is fine?”

“What do you want me to say?” I half shouted. “You know I can’t shut off the attraction. That’s not something I have control over. But we didn’t overstep, Roland. Neither of us. We really did talk. Ezra had—”

“Fuck, why do I have to deal with all this shit?” He bent over, placing his head in his hands like he wanted to fucking scream, but no sound came from him.

Only a bitter, broken laugh as he straightened before pinning me with a hard stare.

“I have to deal with all this bullshit while *Ezra*”—he mocked my use of the name—“just swoops in to have all the fun. I wonder if he’d be so interested if he knew the fucking baggage you came with.”

Something inside me snapped.

“Fuck you, Roland. *Fuck. You.*” I snarled. “If you climbed out of your fucking ass for long enough to let me explain,

you'd know that the reason why I was with Ezra was because I. Told. Him. Everything. *Everything*. Because if I truly can't break the bonds, I can't keep people in the dark."

"So he knows he's your soulmate. Amazing."

My temper crept toward a dangerous edge. "He knows he's one of my *three* soulmates, yes. I explained the dream, the cords. He understands now why he's so drawn to me, why fucking fate seems to be pushing us together."

"So, what did he say?" Roland crossed his arms.

Maybe if I weren't so pissed, I would have worded it better, but right now, I was fucking done tiptoeing around.

"He said that he's in it for the ride, three soulmates or not. However it unfolds."

"Well, isn't that just great for you?" Venom dripped from Roland's tone. "Störmer is the perfect guy, isn't he? Fun, understanding, giving you everything you want, huh? Almost like he knows he'll get all the competition out of the way if he just plays his fucking card right."

"Like you did?" I crossed my arms even as hot tears prickled against the back of my eyes.

A frown momentarily broke the anger twisting on Roland's face.

"I was transparent about everything, Roland. You were there for every fucking freak out, for all the fears, the hurt, all of it..." A traitorous tear slipped down my cheek. "You know I did everything I possibly could to sever the connections, and when I found out the only way to rid myself of my soulmates would be to destroy my fucking soul, *you* were the one who held me and promised we'd find our way through this. Did you mean it? Or were you just saying things I wanted to hear? Painting yourself into this fucking good guy no one could ever come close to?"

"Was it all just a tactic for you? Shower me with enough support that I'd feel so fucking guilty I'd rather ruin myself, going against fate, than ever let another one of my soulmates into my life? *Was. It. All. Fucking. Bullshit?! Were you ever*

truly on my side, or did you just manipulate me for your own benefit?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Hurt mixed with anger as Roland processed my words. His tone flamed with ice-cold fire as he demanded, “Is that what you think of me?”

“How is it any better than what you think of me?” I volleyed back, unable to extract myself from the toxic currents we’d fallen prey to.

But shit, if Roland believed all the worst about me, if he could even consider that I’d been manipulating him...

I might have wanted to dig my head in the sand and pretend the soulmate bonds weren’t there, but at the same time, I’d been fucking honest about all of it. I had every intention of breaking them. Shit, it had been my biggest fucking wish to reclaim the life I’d had with Roland—and only him.

All the conversations we’d had rolled through my mind, all the vulnerability I’d shared...

Yes, Roland had lost it when he’d first seen me with Ezra, but even after that night, he’d been so damn *understanding*.

How the hell was I supposed to accept those moments had been real when I had tears streaming down my cheeks as he made me feel like the worst human scum on the planet?

“For nine years, it was just us. Nine years I believed that this”—he pointed a sharp finger at me and himself—“was it. I don’t know how to just fucking get on board with the fact that you seem to have a *deal* with another guy. Did you even think

about me? Did you even consider how it would feel that you were discussing having a fucking *relationship* with someone else without involving me?”

Fury licked through his energy, but more than that, it was grief and confusion that played through the notes of his aura and darkened his eyes.

It wasn't enough, though.

And no matter how hard the hurt rode him, all it twisted into were lashes that sliced me open worse than I'd ever expected Roland's blows to land.

“Fuck, the more I think about this, the more sick it all gets.” All the beauty fled from his features as something sinister took over. “You really fucking grabbed a drink with a guy you're wet for and thought it was okay? Shit, don't you see how messed up that is?”

“Yes, I was with you. I was with you all the way when you dropped the soulmates bomb, and I fucking believed that you really wanted to get rid of the bonds—even that we'd work through stuff together now that they're here to stay. But, shit, Alina, the first chance you got to hang out with Störmer unsupervised, you fucking took it! What am I supposed to think about that? Or are you just really that hungry to get your pussy stretched by another dick?”

“Fucking hell, Roland—”

“Are you bored with me, Alina? Is that it?” he shouted, the brokenness returning to his voice even as his energy remained painfully sharp. “Am I not enough for you?”

Shit, this was getting messy fast.

I swore I had whiplash, not just from his accusations but mine too.

How did we end up stooping this low?

I angrily brushed the tears off my cheeks.

“I'm not bored with you, Roland, and I'm not looking to *get my pussy stretched by another dick*,” I threw his earlier words back at him, my temper getting the better of me for a

moment before I reined it in. “I’m sorry, Roland. I’m so sorry, but I can’t control the way I feel. I know how unfair that sounds. Trust me, I do. But this connection I have with Ezra doesn’t diminish the one I share with you.

“I wish I could tell you that he doesn’t mean so much. But guess what? He does. And I can’t run forever. I can’t pretend Ezra doesn’t exist. As much as I want to do this with you every step of the way, don’t you see how impossible that is? Imagine if every time we talked, I needed to press pause on it and pull someone else into the conversation. It doesn’t work like that. Either you trust me that I’ll do things for the highest good of all people involved...or you don’t.”

“Trust is a pretty big word to throw around right now, don’t you think?”

The quiet way he said it was worse than if he’d shouted.

Tears welled up in my eyes again. “You know I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m not even doing anything behind your back because I would have told you what happened as soon as I got home.”

“So that means I just need to get on board, huh?” He huffed.

“I had to, Roland. Just like you. I didn’t choose this—not in this fucking lifetime, at least. But do you honestly think I can fight something that’s been unfolding for an entire damn age? That you can? We’re *destined* to come together. All four of us.”

Roland gave me a look I did *not* like one bit.

“The more you say that,” he drawled, “the more and more it sounds like a fucking excuse for a free pass on the guy you want to fuck.”

Silence snapped taut between us. Everything in the apartment went so fucking still, but all it did was highlight the blazing fury thrashing in my body.

“I think we should pause,” I said steadily. “Before we end up saying too many things we can’t take back.”

Roland snorted. “What more could you possibly say to make this worse? No, I don’t think we’re pausing this conversation, Alina. You made your decision when you *talked* with Ezra about things we haven’t agreed on. Things we haven’t even fucking touched upon. If you could run your mouth with him, I’m sure you can spare me a few more minutes.”

Shit, I didn’t want to do this now. Not with Mars and Pluto clashing overhead in a square and sharpening the atmosphere as well as our respective charts.

But the point of my magic, of my inner knowing of the cosmic forces, wasn’t to evade the hard shit.

It was to navigate it.

I breathed in, then out, even as Roland kept muttering crap I probably didn’t want to hear anyway, and refocused myself.

The other side of every challenge was growth.

I had to believe that now because Roland and I...

We needed to get through this.

Maybe the planets weren’t on our side right now to smooth out the jagged edges of our conversation, but if everything *did* happen for a reason, then maybe the hardship was here for us to well and truly evolve beyond the mess that was keeping us stuck.

Because this wasn’t us.

We didn’t fight. We didn’t lash out at each other when we were hurting.

The longer we dragged this with us, the harder it would get. My soulmates weren’t going away. My love for them wasn’t going away either.

No, Mars and Pluto could go fuck themselves—or serve us for our greater good. Their choice.

But Roland was right about this one thing.

We were having this conversation now.

I steadied myself. “It’s not just *my* soul who made a pact, and you know it. Remember the vision I told you about? We were all there. We were all in agreement to embark on this shitfest of a path for whatever stupid reason.”

“It’s funny, though, isn’t it, how it’s only *you* who’s feeling the bonds.” He laughed, the sound so ugly I flinched like I’d been slapped.

That fury that had been building inside me broke from its chains. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“I mean, you *are* the only one here who claims she has three soulmates... You say I’m supposed to be connected to Störmer, but let me tell you, I couldn’t be more repelled by the guy.”

“So what, now you’ll start doubting my magic? The fucking *cords* I see? The cords that made me crash the damn car when they overtook me?” I seethed.

Shit, I hadn’t even told him I’d nearly died today. Again.

And right now, he certainly wasn’t the kind of person I wanted to share a vulnerability with.

Or get fucking sidetracked—even if I was certain that without the soulmate bond in place, Alaric wouldn’t have showed up when he had...and instead of yelling at me, Roland would be crying over my corpse in the morgue right now.

Maybe I should have told him that, but then why did it feel like such a cop-out?

No, that was wrong. I knew why it felt like a cop-out.

It shouldn’t have to take a life-and-death event for Roland to acknowledge my soulmates. For him to get that I wasn’t fucking making shit up.

No, I needed him to get there without pulling out the damn dramatic stops.

Because even if it weren’t for the fact that Alaric had saved my life twice, I’d *still* be attracted to Ezra. I’d *still* want to be with my Moon.

Because that was the nature of the soulmate cords.

I looked at Roland, really looked at him, and something cracked in my chest.

Fuck, I could see how much this was hurting him. It was written in every single muscle of his body, in every nuance of his energy. So many of the things he'd said, I understood.

I *had* talked to Ezra about our relationship without discussing it with Roland beforehand. Or at least in a group freaking setting. Instead, I'd excluded him from something he should have been a part of.

If all of us were in this together, then yes, it was *all* of us in everything.

Except...

I didn't know how to navigate this. No amount of astro knowledge would just provide me a handbook to deal with a situation that went so far beyond normal relationships—I thought back to Breccan and Crina—even the ones who did have multiple partners hadn't gone through.

The only guidance I had was my intuition, and I hadn't gone against it when I decided to come clean to Ezra.

So why was this so hard?

Why was doing my fucking best not enough?

“Do you think it's fun for me? That I'm the only one who has to carry this burden of remembering the pact our souls made?” I asked, blinking through tears. “Do you think I *want* to be the only one feeling all this?”

“You seem to be doing just fine with feeling shit when it comes to *Ezra*,” Roland sliced right into me.

“Because he's not being a fucking dick about it!” More tears scalded my cheeks. “He even admitted he pulled a shitty move at the party, posturing like he had.”

“And you're so naïve you're going to fall for that, aren't you?” He fisted his hands in his hair, tugging the strands as he faced the windows before spinning back toward me. “The guy

is a fucking asshole, and he clearly knows damn well how to play you. He probably promised you he'll divorce that pretty wife of his, too, huh? Ditch his family for the sexy, younger witch who's clearly smitten."

I reared back a step, feeling Roland's volatile energy swell and offer an acrid taste of what was to come even before the next words fell from his mouth.

"Fucking hell, Alina, how dumb are you? Störmer will say anything for a fuck, then drop you like yesterday's trash once he gets bored of his new conquest. That's how guys work. All he needs is to turn you against me for long enough that you'll spread your legs, and he'll swoop right in for a bit of fun."

"I think you're doing a damn fine job of that yourself," I fired back, not sure if I even regretted the words.

Shit, I was tired of this.

No matter what I said, Roland would stand his ground. To him, Ezra was a villain. And I'd just about fucking had it with being his punching bag.

He could act all he wanted like this was all on me, but just because I was the one with the knowledge of the past lives, his damn soul was no less responsible for this whole mess than mine. Gods, it would be easy to be fucking ignorant.

"Get off your fucking high horse, Roland. You're not morally superior to anyone," I snapped, even as I cried harder.

"Morally superior? I'm not the one with questionable morals here, Alina. Just put yourself in my shoes. Imagine I went out with a girl you knew I wanted to fuck. Imagine I came home, beaming like I never did with you, then told you that it's fine because the girl and I talked about having a relationship and we're cool with taking it easy. Oh, and she's my soulmate, just so you know. I mean, you are too, but so is she. Which makes everything a-fucking-okay."

He shook his head. "You and your Sag belong together. You don't need me and my *moral superiority* dragging you down."

Wind slapped my face as Roland marched past me, and the slam of the front door rocked through the empty apartment, leaving nothing but shards of my broken heart behind.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

I collapsed to my knees.

The rug only marginally cushioned the blow, but I welcomed the sharp jolt of pain shooting up my bones. Anything was better than the ravaged landscape my heart had turned into.

How had things gotten so ugly?

Hot tears continued to stream down my cheeks and pool at the tip of my chin.

The entire exchange with Roland replayed over and over in my mind as I fell to fucking pieces.

I'd thought I was better than letting the shadow side of my fire placements roar like a wounded animal in the heat of an argument. But fuck, the more Roland had escalated, the harder it became to just swallow all the shit he'd thrown in my face.

Because it hurt.

It hurt so fucking much.

Having him question me, doubt me—worse of all, though, had been the hideous, disgusted way he'd looked at me.

Of course, I'd lashed out.

I didn't think I would have even survived this long otherwise.

A low buzzing cut through my quiet sobs.

I crawled over to my discarded messenger bag and rummaged around until my fingers wrapped around my phone, the display glaringly bright against the darkness.

My pulse hammered in my ears as Roland's name flashed across the screen.

Palms slick with sweat, I unlocked the phone and read the two simple lines of text.

Headed to Ben's. Need to cool off.

I stared at the message longer than it warranted.

This was a good thing. If he'd texted me where he was, then that slam of the door hadn't been as final as it had felt.

Just a way station instead of the end of the line.

Ok, I typed back, then slumped with my back against the couch.

Hugging my legs, I rested my cheek on my knees and just allowed myself to drift into a numb abyss.

Empty.

I was so empty.

All of my energies rested muted somewhere deep within. No life, no spark flowed in my veins or pulsed with the beat of my heart.

My whole body was just mechanics.

Mechanics operating a shell in which nothing existed.

It wasn't a state I was unfamiliar with, but I had hoped it was also one I would never have to suffer through ever again.

Maybe I really was fucking naïve...

I didn't know how long I just existed, huddled up between the table and the couch, with nothing but the occasional sounds from the street keeping me company. But the deeper I sank, the more an eerie sense of neutrality spread through every atom of my being.

It started small, lifting the weight of the abyss—then engulfed me whole.

It chased away the numbness, the darkness.

I still didn't feel anything. But I also didn't feel *nothing*.

Frowning, I sat straighter and crossed my legs beneath me as I observed this unfamiliar condition. As a stark sense of calm closed around me, I breathed it in, and on my exhale, line after line of clear messages unfolded.

This wasn't working.

Whatever path I had been following, the actions I had been taking...

They weren't working.

Which meant they needed to change.

Continuing to flow in this spaced-out, undefined, yet weirdly focused state, a reminder came to me. One I had given myself after the experience with Vanja.

I tapped into my chart with ethereal fingers, reaching for my Lunar Nodes.

I recalled how they had played out in the past lives I'd seen. The North Node had always been a pull, a guiding star, while the South formed a constellation of patterns and energies I had been familiar with from my previous life—ones that felt comfortable, even natural to me, but also ones I was meant to transcend.

Cocking my head to the side, I sunk deeper into the axis marking my current incarnation.

My South Node in Libra swirled with deep pools of dependency and fulfillment through relationships—without previously finding fulfillment in myself. It certainly matched the past life I believed was the last one I'd had before coming into the world as Alina Volkmann.

I might not have seen *all* of it, but that deeply rooted need for validation through my relationships was a point I hadn't missed either.

Opposite Libra, my Aries North Node shone with snippets of my childhood, like the independence I'd had as a kid with

my predominantly absent parents, and even the themes that had spilled into my twenties, such as figuring out how to forge my own path, being on a journey of self-discovery. I'd believed I had fulfilled that part of my North Node, especially when my astrology magic had manifested, marking me not only as a witch but a *different* witch at that.

Now, it was obvious that I had only begun to embody my North Node's energies.

As I was also called to transcend the South.

Libra's fear of judgment, that urge for acceptance, to be perceived as normal—it directly tied to the belief that *normal* was not something one would label me as unless I camouflaged my true self.

I had embraced myself as an astrology witch.

I hadn't done the same with my relationships.

How had I been so oblivious?

The fear of conflict, the fear of the fallout if I were to stand up for myself, had made me run to find solutions on how to break the bonds. But had I ever truly wanted that?

Being scared of change was normal. Feeling unmoored when life shifted drastically was part of the deal.

But had I truly, *truly* desired to rid myself of my soulmates?

Had that come from my heart?

Or had I simply been aiming to take what I perceived to be the safest path, the one that would keep me loved and maintain Roland's acceptance of me...even if it meant trampling all over something fate had decided was my destiny?

Without useless chatter clogging my brain, I knew the answer.

I would have done *anything* to keep Roland by my side, to keep thriving on his approval.

It didn't diminish the very real love I felt for him. But the frantic Alina searching all over the place on how to break the

bonds?

Those actions weren't fueled by love.

They came from fear.

As I let the knowledge settle, another series of observations rolled through my mind. I simply witnessed them, watching at a distance how my life had been unfolding since learning of the soulmate bonds. Namely, the incidents I'd been experiencing.

The cyclist knocking me off my feet. The ward exploding in my face. Getting attacked by a vampire the same day.

I'd written them off, some as mere accidents, some as part of the job, but life never got shitty without a reason, did it?

It couldn't have been a coincidence that mine had taken a less-than-desired road precisely when, instead of embracing the soulmate bonds, I strove to break them.

When I wove in what I'd seen through the past and parallel lives, then included all the encounters with my soulmates in this one, how fate kept pushing us together...

The glowing marble of clarity grew brighter, larger. The more I allowed it to unfold, the more it cast light on my entire inner landscape, on the path I'd been thrown on.

Thousands of pieces that hadn't fit together now suddenly made sense.

If this was my destiny, if the Universe was punishing me for resisting—or perhaps my own natal energies had been the ones that reared up as I blatantly dismissed and discarded their guidance...

Then the message was even clearer.

I couldn't throw my life away because of others.

Nor could I people please my way into having all my guys.

I could bend myself over backward, but short of betraying myself and entering another life where I turned my back to my purpose, to the calling I now had no chance of ignoring any longer, I'd never get Roland on board.

It didn't just apply to him, though.

It had to be up to the guys if they wanted to live out the soul bonds in physical reality or not. And if they decided to embrace the path, they *still* had to meet my standards. Treat me the way I desired and deserved to be treated instead of using me as an outlet for their own issues.

I wasn't some prized possession. I wasn't a toy to be fought over.

And I certainly wasn't here to mold myself into someone I was not just to please another person.

They all needed to make the choice.

The only one that was left for me was to choose myself. Choose my path.

Because with or without the guys, I could feel it in my soul that making the decision to be true to myself was the key.

It was the one currency I had.

The one thing that was in my power.

And I was done giving it up.

CHAPTER 27

ROLAND

I felt like the biggest fool. Here I was, slumping on my best friend's couch after I'd walked away from the person I loved most in the world.

A person I'd *hurt* because I couldn't get my damn emotions under control.

I didn't even know what had come over me.

Seeing her on the back of Störmer's bike had nettled something dark inside me. The darkness rumbled until a fucking vortex of fear burst from the volatile surface and pulled me into an abyss I couldn't get out of.

It had felt like I'd been stuck behind a glass wall, unable to do anything as this...this *thing* that was me but also wasn't spewed all that shit at Alina.

Who the fuck talked like that to the person they loved?

Who the fuck let their own hurt excuse hurting another?

It wasn't who I was. Fuck, it wasn't.

But I also couldn't run from the fact that nobody had possessed my body.

That Roland...

Shit, it *was* me.

I did that.

Because I was so fucking scared.

I was scared and betrayed. All the foundations I'd based my life upon had been shattered, and I feared I wasn't going to survive the rubble. That Alina would walk away. Exchange me for someone better, someone who lit her up, who made her laugh. Who she fucking shone around.

Unlike the asshole who made her *cry*.

Maybe I could have shut that shit down. Maybe, if I'd been wiser, I would have seen this clusterfuck coming and acted like the guy she deserved. Like...like fucking Störmer. Who didn't give her grief over her feelings or actions.

But I couldn't.

It terrified me too much because Alina was it for me. She was the woman of my fucking dreams.

I just wasn't the man of hers.

"Now that's a load of crap." Ben shoved a beer into my hand before he sat into the armchair set perpendicular to the couch.

I glanced at the bottle and grimaced, then quickly placed it on the table.

I was too wrecked to even entertain the idea of alcohol.

"You *are* the man of her fucking dreams," Ben said, making it clear my inner monologue hadn't really stuck to the inside of my damn skull like I'd intended.

A bitter laugh rolled from my lips. "Except there's two more just like me out there. She doesn't need me, Ben. She *shouldn't*. Not after tonight."

"I think you've made enough choices for her, don't you think?" He peered at me over his own bottle.

"Fuck, whose friend are you?"

"Yours." He shrugged. "And it's *because* I give a fuck that I'm telling you this."

Sighing, I leaned back and dipped my chin. "Lay it on me."

“You fucked up tonight, okay? I get that you thought she was doing shady shit behind your back, but this is Alina we’re talking about. It’s your damn amazing wife who’s never, never given you any reason to distrust her that you judged without even having the whole story,” Ben said.

At least he didn’t look thrilled to be drilling into me, but it also didn’t sway him into toning the lecture down.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he went on, “I’d freak too. But it isn’t like you randomly caught her with some guy. You knew about Störmer.”

“I was there with her the entire way,” I mumbled, remembering what Alina had said.

Fuck, they were both right.

I’d been aware of the soulmate bonds. I knew what it had been like between her and me when we first got together. No amount of self-control could have stopped me from loving her as much as I had even then. She was a magnet nothing could counter.

I *knew* all that.

Maybe I was just hoping, like some damn asshole, that these new bonds would be different. That mine would...shit, be stronger or something?

Or maybe I just wanted to be enough for her.

Because she sure as fuck was enough for me.

“She’s navigating unknown territories as well,” Ben picked up after giving me some space to process the mess. “She kept you in the loop. I don’t think she expected you to have that much of an issue with it. I mean, you said it yourself that the two of you were doing really well after that party thing.”

“Fuck, she questioned if I’d been manipulating her. I wasn’t, I swear. But...” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “I think I might have been lying to myself. I wanted to be supportive. Instead, all I was was one stupid-ass fuck.”

“I’m not going to argue with that. If you led her to believe you were handling the bonds, that you were by her side no

matter what...”

“Fuck.”

I blasted from the couch to pace the room.

That Whiskey Jet Preachers’ party had been more of an accurate show of how I truly felt than what came after. I really did want to be okay with it. I genuinely wanted to be there for Alina. But I was also smarter enough to realize those volatile emotions that had cropped up when I’d seen her interacting with Störmer couldn’t be dealt with so quickly.

And now, because I’d been throwing sand in my fucking eyes, the lid had popped, and there was no fucking way I could take it back. No way to redo the past, to fix my mistakes.

“How?” I asked, looking at Ben, then dropped back onto the couch. “How does she imagine this working? How can she have a relationship with Störmer when she’s with me? We have an established life... I mean, would she just skip out on parts to be with him, or—”

“I don’t think I’m the right guy to ask for advice.” Ben flattened his lips in a sympathetic line. “Bachelor, remember? One who can’t get over the girl he broke up with for this bitter freedom.”

I barked out a broken laugh. “Aren’t we two miserable fucks, making shit harder than it has to be?”

“We might be, but there’s someone who’s not.”

I frowned, and Ben rolled his eyes.

“Come on, man, remember how you told me Alina gave you that demon’s number? After she failed to break the bonds? He’s the one you should be telling all this right now.”

Fuck. It had totally slipped my mind.

Alina had given me Breccan’s number the night she told me the bonds were here to stay. She wanted me to have someone to talk to in case things took a turn for the, obviously inevitable, worse.

We'd spent the rest of the night discussing the visions she'd seen of her past lives, which was a hefty thing to process on its own, and, shit, she'd also been so heartbroken that she'd failed to sever the connections, that I'd entirely forgotten about the slip of paper I'd stuck into my wallet.

I pulled the wallet out of my back pocket and fished out the number. The paper seemed to have a weight to it beyond what it should.

"You think I should call him then?" I looked from the handwritten digits to Ben.

"What else are you going to do? You're caught in a loop of your own thoughts."

Ben's words struck a damn harsh cord.

That was usually Alina. With me being the one to free her from whatever ouroboros of thoughts she'd gotten locked into.

Shit, how the tables had turned.

I thrust my fingers through my hair. "I don't even know if I'm on board with this, Ben. Sharing Alina with someone else? Fuck, just the thought of him kissing her, sharing those small moments when she has all her fucking love written in her gaze... It makes me physically sick. I don't think hearing another guy's perspective can change that?"

It was meant to come out as a statement, not a question.

Clearly, wanting something and actually achieving it wasn't my strong suit lately.

Ben crossed his legs at the ankles, getting way more comfortable than the situation warranted as he cocked his head to the side and asked, "Why does it bother you so much?"

"Because she's fucking mine!" My hand balled into a fist around Breccan's number. "I don't want another guy pissing all over it, and I know he fucking will. You should have seen Störmer at that party—"

"Störmer is Alina's soulmate too," Ben pointed out calmly—too fucking calmly. "You know I'm not one to blindly defend some guy I don't even know, but Roland, man, look at

how you're acting. You're jealous. He was probably jealous as well."

"And you don't think that's a recipe for disaster right there?" I shook my head, lifting my gaze to the ceiling as hundreds of scenarios rolled through my head. "It's fucking toxic, that's what it is. I can't trust him with Alina. Shit, I can't even trust *myself* if I'll always feel like it's a competition between Störmer and me."

Ben drummed his fingers on the armrest. "Look, I don't mean this in a bad way, but... Störmer and you, from what I've seen and learned—you're in a weird way both kind of traditional guys. You're viewing shit from that perspective too.

"If someone else wants your girl, they're pissing on your territory. They're working against you. Blah, blah, blah. Like it's some sort of personal attack, a competition to prove that one's better than the other. I don't think Alina's bonds are about that at all..."

"I don't feel them." I fiddled with the now somewhat more crumpled slip of paper. "I mean, I feel it with Alina. But Störmer? There's nothing about the guy I like."

"Have you given him a chance?" Ben shot back. "Don't go into a dick-pissing competition with someone who was firing on the same possessive cylinders as you. If you're saying that you aren't some jealous dickhead, but *still* acted like one, what makes you think he wasn't going through the same thing? I can't believe I have to be the one to say this to you, but...man, you know how important the benefit of the doubt can be."

"And what, you're telling me you would just easily share Val?" Even though he'd mentioned Val's name voluntarily earlier, I knew I was walking a slippery slope, bringing her up now.

Ben just leveled a no-bullshit look my way. "I'm not the one with multiple soulmate bonds. I'm not even the one with the girl."

We lapsed into silence.

All of this was such a clusterfuck.

Eventually, Ben asked, “You love her, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Then stop being a coward and call the fucking demon lord.”



I rushed back home.

I wasn’t kidding myself that I could just make everything right, but fuck, I had to tell her. I had to apologize.

Breccan’s voice continued to flow through my brain, delivering such valid fucking statements I had half the urge to break every speed limit just to get home faster.

Breccan and I hadn’t solved everything, my case was way too unique for a cookie-cutter solution, but I also couldn’t deny the truth of the things he’d left me with to mull over.

If a higher force deemed you worthy of being together, it wouldn’t have made it so that you suffer.

Soul connections don’t punish. They enrich.

Do you love Alina or just an idea of her? Why would her capacity for equally loving three men tarnish her heart? No, you don’t see it as tarnished? Then why would you condemn her for it?

The only way you lose her, Roland, is if you refuse to embrace her. Hearts are more abundant than you think. But if you continue to see her affection as a zero-sum game, it’s you and only you who will create that reality for yourself. Don’t turn your fears into a self-fulfilling prophecy unless that is what you truly wish.

I still didn’t know how to navigate all of this, but damn it, I wanted to try.

Not just because I refused to be the dick who fucked up Alina’s destiny.

I wanted to try because I loved her.

All of her.

However many conversations it took—with her, Breccan and his bond-mate Ilya, even Störmer... I never, fucking never, wanted to be the kind of person I'd been to Alina tonight.

Running on automatic, I slid the car into the first parking spot I found and rushed for our building. I wasn't even sure if I'd locked the damn Mercedes, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

All that mattered was Alina.

I unlocked the door on the second try and practically fell into the apartment. Despite the dark, my gaze immediately landed on the figure sitting on the couch.

Alina looked devastatingly beautiful.

I couldn't understand the overwhelming sadness that knocked the wind from my lungs until she rose and wrapped her fingers around the two suitcases resting beside her.

“Roland”—she wheeled them forward, her movements graceful yet harboring a silent strength that locked up all the words I'd wanted to say—“I'm leaving.”



Thank you so much for reading STAR SHUNNED! If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a review, it would mean the world to me!

Alina and the guys will return in STAR VERSED! Make sure to sign up for my newsletter or follow me on social media/Amazon/Bookbub to be notified when it releases :)

If you're looking for some more books to pass the time until then, I've totally got you covered:

- [ROCK THIS WOLF](#): Set in Berlin (with Alina making an appearance in the third book!), RTW delivers a scorching hot, slow-burn rockstar romance between a blues-loving werewolf and the vampire rockabilly singer she's been crushing on for years—who just so happens to find himself right in the middle of her murder investigation.
- [FANG ME HARD](#): A dark MFM paranormal rockstar romance between a succubus FMC who delivers a lethal dose of nightmares with the lust. Alina also makes an appearance in this one, if you're in the mood for an extra treat!
- [SHADOW WORLD](#): A steamy menage romance with an assassin heroine, a demon lord who she finds too hot for her own good, and a charming vampire ex she finds herself still very much drawn to.
- [WINDSTORM](#): Do you have a taste for heroines with rare magic? Then you'll love Liva and her enemies-to-lovers paranormal romance standalone featuring a mildly alphahole—and totally hot—Fae ;)

And don't forget—if you haven't read [STAR KISSED](#) yet, make sure to pick up the prequel and see how Alina and Roland first met!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oh man, that was a journey, huh?

I'm kind of sorry to leave you hanging on a cliff but at the same time...I'm also not. The entire premise of the Starseed series is me tuning in and listening to where the books want to go.

Star Shunned very clearly wanted to end with Alina choosing herself.

At the same time, I also find the ending extremely fitting.

Personal journeys are unpredictable. They're like the Fool card in tarot. You don't really know where the path leads, but you simply have to trust that it is for your highest good—and that's how it will unfold.

Which is also precisely the energy I desire to leave you in.

Even when things are hard, even when they are perceived as negative, so much beauty can wait for you only a few steps further down the road.

Yes, I'm absolutely talking from personal experience.

But I'm also talking about the next chapter of Alina's life.

I promise you, *Star Versed* will absolutely deliver!

On that note, I can't believe this is the thirty-ninth book I've written. What?

Sometimes it still blows my mind what an impact dropping out of my master's degree to become a writer had on my life. I trusted my heart, trusted my desires, my intuition...

And now here I am, thirty-nine (!) books later, and absolutely in love that I get to let my creativity run free.

As always, I have my list of usual suspects to thank—the key players in making this process as enjoyable as it is:

- Michelle, you are an absolute editing queen! Forever and ever grateful that the Universe guided me to you at the exact right time!
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- Merkaba, my darling doggo, we've really been through it, losing Leeroy as we had just before I began working on this book. But we went through the hurt and grief together, and I couldn't be happier to see how much you now thrive.
- My incredible readers, I adore you guys SO MUCH! It blows me away every time that I get to share these pieces of my imagination with you. It's my sincerest wish that it's as fulfilling to you as it is to me.

Until next time!

Love,

Gaja

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today Bestselling Author Gaja J. Kos writes steamy urban fantasy and paranormal romance, rich with sizzling tension and soulmates who come in pairs, menage, or reverse harem constellations. Why choose, right?

As a Zodiac enthusiast and shameless summer babe, she thrives on finding magic in everyday life. She loves binge reading high-heat series, seeing her favorite rockstars live in concert, and spending time with her husband and their Chinese Crested dog.

For more information on Gaja's books, you can download your free guide and reading checklist at gajajkos.com!



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