

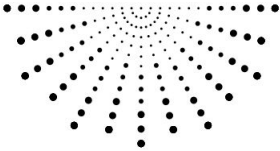
CHANDELLE LAVAUN



THE  
WOLF  
WITCH

THE COVEN: SHIFTER MAGIC

THE WOLF WITCH  
THE COVEN: SHIFTER MAGIC



CHANDELLE LAVAUN



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CHANDELLE LAVAUN



THE  
WOLF  
WITCH

THE COVEN: SHIFTER MAGIC

# CHAPTER ONE

INEZ



“THE *DEATH* CARD does not mean you’re dying. *No es la Muerte.*”

“It doesn’t?” Suzanne sighed so hard she slouched in her chair across the table from me. “I’ve never pulled that one, and I hate it. They should call it something else then.”

I laughed and continued to shuffle my deck of tarot cards. *Diosa mía.* “You’re not wrong. It is poorly labeled. *Pero ...* I think the shock of seeing it plays into the meaning.”

She arched one blonde eyebrow. “And what meaning is that?”

“Change.” I shrugged one shoulder and tapped my neon-yellow-painted fingernail on the top of the tarot card labeled *Death*. “Not quite as forceful and traumatizing as *The Tower* card, *pero ...* change nonetheless.”

She scowled and ran her fingers over the rose quartz beads on her necklace. Those blue eyes of hers were so full of fear it was practically written in her irises. “Change?”

“*Sí. Cambia.*” I nodded.

Tarot cards weren’t my favorite, I preferred making potions and working with amulets and crystals, but my clients loved having their cards read. And I was a businesswoman

who knew happy clients made return clients. Suzanne was one of the few friends from school I still kept in contact with. For that, I read her cards whenever she wanted.

I nodded and sat the deck facedown on the table I'd covered in a purple velvet cloth. "It represents an end in something to make way for change. A death of something in your life —not *someone*. It comes to you as a major arcana card because it's powerful and met with fear and apprehension, like maybe you wouldn't have changed this thing without being forced to. But it's needed. It's for growth. You will be better on the other side of this change, however bittersweet it may be."

"So ... does it tell me what kind of change?" She leaned forward and tapped on the other cards lined up. "What do these mean?"

"What does it mean that three majors leapt out at the same time?"

She narrowed her eyes on me. "The cards are sassing me enough without your help."

"*Lo siento.*" I chuckled and tapped on the second card. "Three majors jumped out at you, Suzanne. *Sabes esto.* You're a witch, so you know that means you're about to be called the fuck out."

She groaned and ran her hands through her hair. "I know, I know. That's why I'm here. Just break it down for me? Tarot was never in my skill set. I can never remember what the cards mean."

"The pictures help." I winked. "*Death, The Moon, and The Fool.* Honestly, it means *new hair, who dis?*"

Suzanne threw her head back and laughed. "*Inez, stop it!*"



Making my clients laugh during their readings was a priority. It lightened the mood, especially on readings like this when I knew in my gut I was about to flip her world inside out. I knew what Suzanne's problem was, but she needed to realize it for herself. This reading was merely a tool. We were both witches. We both knew. She just needed someone to say it out loud.

“*The Moon* represents the deepest parts of ourselves—the parts the sun does not shine on ... the parts we have to dive deep to inspect.” I smiled at the next card. “*The Fool* means you're going on an adventure. But those are just the jumpers. Let's get into the actual spread.”

Suzanne nodded and leaned forward so her chest was pressed against my wooden table. Her blue eyes focused on the deck of cards lying between us. “I'm ready. Rip me apart.”

“*That's what she said.*”

Suzanne snorted and then rested her forehead on the table, her whole body shaking as she laughed. When she finally sat upright, she had to wipe tears from her eyes. “You're terrible, Inez.”

*Y por eso me quieres.* “All right, ready for me to flip?”

She bit her bottom lip and nodded.

Some tarot readers liked to spread the deck of cards out across the table and have their client pick them. Some just flipped cards off the top of the pile for each. Since the reading was about *them*, I did whichever my clients preferred. I needed *them* to connect to it. In my experience, most of my clients who were witches like me preferred to have me just flip the cards off the deck. They knew the Goddess would put the right ones in their path.

“Okay, past, present, and future here we go.” I flipped three cards off the pile one after another, lining them up in a row.

Suzanne’s face paled. “Oh boy.”

“For your past is *Eight of Swords*. Present is *Four of Swords*. And future is *Six of Swords*—”

“Sounds like a war.”

“Well—”

“Pull clarifiers. For each of them. Please.” She scrunched her nose like they smelled bad.

I nodded and flipped three more cards. “*Eight of Cups* in reverse, *Six of Cups*, and *Ace of Cups*.”

If possible, Suzanne’s face fell even more. “Cups are the emotions ones, right? Like romance and stuff?”

“Well—”

“Oh Goddess, I’m at war with my heart?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. “Actually ... yes.”

She groaned and buried her face in her hands. “Don’t sugar coat it, Inez. Give it to me.”

“You came in here wearing rose quartz—”

“*I know, I know.*” She whimpered.

“*Inez?*” My little sister Marta had her head poked through the doorway. She glanced nervously between me and Suzanne. “Can I watch?”

I arched one eyebrow. “Marta—”

“You already pulled the cards, so I won’t interfere! C’mon, it’s just Suzanne, not some human—”

“*Marta, shhhh.*” I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “*Sí. Entra aquí.*”

Suzanne laughed as my twelve-year-old sister skipped over to take the seat beside me. “Your sister is about to tear my life apart.”

“I know! I want to watch!” Marta grinned and danced in her seat. Those golden eyes that matched mine twinkled with excitement. “I’m just gonna be a spectator. I promise.”

*Diosa mía* “I’m going to test you on the card meanings later so I know you’re actually learning.”

“I’m ready.” She nodded excitedly. “Carmen and I have been practicing.”

Suzanne winked to Marta, then turned her attention back to me. “Okay, hit me.”

I knew she had to break up with her boyfriend, but I didn’t want to outright say that. “All together, it means you’re about to embark on a new phase of your life that will be more fulfilling for *you*.”

She waved her finger in front of me. “No, no, no. That’s your *human* tarot reading answer. Gimme the witch one. The one we both know you know. Do it in Spanish if you must, Marta will translate.”

Marta giggled.

“*Eres imposible.*” I sighed. “*Vale. Te has sentido atrapado. Atado. Indefenso. Pero te has cegado ante el fácil camino hacia la libertad que tienes delante de ti—*”

“*Espera.*” Marta waved her hands in front of her. “I don’t want to say *that* to her. I’m here to watch, as a spectator. You’re hurting her, not me.”

“I don’t think I want to hear it either.” Suzanne giggled. “Please, Inez. Continue.”

“*I said*, you’ve felt trapped. Bound. Helpless. But you’ve blinded yourself to the easy path to freedom right in front of you.” I pointed to the clarifying card. “You’ve been overwhelmingly afraid of letting go even though what you had was bad for you in so many ways. You’ve been so afraid of the unknown of the future and its uncertainties that you’ve clung to the supposed safety and comfort in what you had. But really, it’s just familiar, not good.”

“*Whoomp! There it is*,” Suzanne whispered.

“You’re resting right now. You’re reflecting, recharging, and preparing because you already know life has to change, so you’re bracing yourself for it. But with this *Six of Cups*, you’re also finding yourself looking back at the good memories and happy times. That nostalgia needs to remain just that though—nostalgia. Don’t forget to remember the bad memories that led you to where you are.”

Suzanne’s eyes were wide, and her lips smashed into a line. She just nodded.

“Now, for your future, *Six of Swords*—”

“Does not look like a happy card for her future,” Marta said under her breath.

I smirked and playfully nudged her with my elbow. “On the contrary, in this context, with these cards for past and present, this is a great card. It means you’re moving away from the things that hurt you and headed toward a new life. Look at this image. This girl has dropped her weapons. The war is over. She’s marching into that glorious horizon with her head held high.”

“Oh.” Marta sat up straight and then looked to Suzanne.  
“That sounds nice!”

Her cheeks flushed. “That does sound nice.”

“And you’ve got the *Ace of Cups* and *Three of Cups* to remind you what’s in store if you just listen to your gut and your own intuition.”

“*Ace of Cups* is new love? So, like a new boyfriend?” She grimaced. “I’ve still got the other one.”

I arched one eyebrow and just stared at her. *No me hagas decirlo. Ya lo sabes.*

Marta snorted. “You’re gonna have to say it for her.”

Suzanne closed her eyes and nodded. “Dammit.”

“Carmen said that *that* card doesn’t have to mean romance.” Marta turned her confused gaze to me.

“She’s right. That doesn’t necessarily mean new romance. That new love could be for yourself, for a time where you find *you* again, which is why *The Moon* and *The Fool* jumped out at you.”

Suzanne opened her mouth, then shut it and frowned. She exhaled roughly and then nodded. “You’re right. I know you are. I knew these cards were going to tell me to break up with him. I’ve just been resisting it.”

“It’s not easy to do. I know.”

“Unless you wear moldavite.”

I gasped and turned to my sister. “*Marta. ¿Qué haces?*”

She grinned and wagged her dark eyebrows. “If you don’t think you can make yourself tear your life apart, just let the stone do it for you.”

My jaw dropped. “Who taught you about moldavite?”

She shrugged. “Carmen.”

*ESA CHICA. ¿QUÉ VOY A HACER CON ELLA? ACABA DE APRENDER SU MAGIA Y YA ESTA DANDO CONSEJOS PELIGROSOS. ¡QUÉ BRUJITA MÁS TONTA!* When they both laughed I forced myself to take a deep breath, then looked to Marta. “Your sister and I are going to have a long, long conversation about that.”

Suzanne burst into laughter. She clapped her hands. “Ya know, I have no idea what all that Spanish meant but I might take Carmen up on that. Maybe I need a swift kick in the ass.”

I hung my head and laughed. *Voy a matarla.*

“I just saw a gorgeous pendant with it,” Marta said with a cheery voice. “Carmen was just telling me about it a few minutes ago. It’s like fate.”

I leaned back and peeked out the door to where my sixteen-year-old sister, Carmen, was helping people with the crystals. Only Carmen was old enough to actually work for me in my store. She always liked to hang around but when her magic came finally came out she never wanted to leave. She insisted having an older sister who owned a witch shop gave her an advantage in magic school. And I liked having her around ... Marta was like the free toy that came with the happy meal. Not why you got it, but exciting to have.

Until they told my clients to wear a volatile crystal that tended to traumatize people before things got better. There was power in crystals, and since I was a witch, I knew that to be one-hundred-percent true. There were certain things I just didn’t play with. *Diosa mía.*

I exhaled roughly and scooped my tarot cards back into my hand. “I told Carmen that case is only sold by me. She needs to not sell that to people, especially unsuspecting, innocent humans.”

“*Poor unfortunate souls!*” Marta sang in her best Ursula impersonation.

“Marta.”

“She isn’t selling it, just told me about it.” Marta took the deck of cards out of my hands. “We’ve started learning about crystals at school. I’m on my way to being just like you, Inez. By the time I’m old enough to work here, I’ll be your best employee ever.”

I stared at my little sister and just shook my head. She reminded me far too much of myself. Our sister Carmen was quieter and more reserved, like her mother, so it took a lot to get her temper to flare. She wasn’t the hot-headed troublemaker like me and Marta ... and our dad. Sometimes I forgot that Marta had a different mother than me, that was how much alike we were. Whereas Carmen inherited their mother Gabriela’s calmness.

“Can I try a reading?” Marta started shuffling the cards.

“Marta,” I chuckled and shook my head, “we’ve been over this. Inside my store, you’re only allowed to read for me or Carmen.”

“*Inés, me estás matando. Sólo es Suzanne. Es una bruja. No tenemos que fingir con ella.*”

“*No, Marta. Tengo normas por una razón. Si te dejas romper una ahora querrás romper más después.*” I arched my eyebrow at her. It was hard to be so strict when she was so

excited to learn but it was a slippery slope. “*Dale una galleta a un ratón ...*”

Marta sighed in defeat. “*Pide un vaso de leche.*”

I smiled and booped her on the nose. “*Lo siento, hermanita.*”

Suzanne leaned forward and glanced back and forth between us. “I have no idea what either of you said, but I’m guessing that was a no.”

We nodded.

“Well, guess my reading is done then.” Suzanne looked to Marta then nodded her head toward me.

Marta gasped. “Oh! Yes! Inez I’ll read yours!”

“Oh, let her!” Suzanne clapped her hands like she hadn’t just encouraged this. “It’s good practice!”

I smiled down at Marta, then playfully tugged on her wavy brown hair that grazed her shoulders. “Okay, that’s fair and fits my rules. Go ahead. Let’s see what you’ve got, kiddo. See if this school is paying off yet.” I winked.

“*Oh*, that’s right! Little Marta ...” Suzanne leaned forward with mischief in her eyes and wagged her eyebrows. “I hear you’ve enrolled at the new *School of Magical Arts* here.”

Marta let out a squeal and wiggled in her seat beside me. She leaned forward with an identical expression as Suzanne’s. “Carmen and I started in January! The students call it *SOMA* and it’s ... it’s ... the best thing ever.”

“What’s your favorite part?”

“Seeing all the different types of magic.” Marta frowned as she tried to shuffle the cards the way I did on the table, but cards exploded all around us. Her face fell. “*Mierda.*”



“You don’t have to shuffle like that. You can do it slowly and carefully. There’s no rush.” I pulled my wand out of my jacket pocket and flicked it, making all of my cards she’d dropped fly back up into my hand on their own. I smiled and handed them back to Marta. “Just relax and do what feels natural for you. *Este es un espacio seguro.*”

She bit her bottom lip and frowned but took the deck back with gusto. It was still so surreal to me that my baby sisters were witches. I wished our dad had lived long enough to see it come out. For so long it was just me and Dad who had magic. My stepmother found out when she moved in and handled it like a champ, but she was entirely human. I’d had magic since I was in diapers, and my parents had the stories to prove it. Carmen and Marta hadn’t shown any signs of it at all ... until dad died. The trauma of losing him brought it out. All it took was one mean girl bullying Marta too far at school and her magic rushed to the surface. Carmen’s took a little longer – it waited until her emotions finally snapped and she tore her entire room apart with magic. Their magical awakening had taken me—and their mother—by surprise.

Suzanne and Marta had launched into a lively discussion of the new magic school on the Upper West Side, but I stopped listening. I was still trying to reconcile that my baby sister was getting so big. It felt like yesterday that I’d escorted her to kindergarten with Dad ... and now I was the one enrolling her at magic school over Christmas break. Granted, Carmen being enrolling at the same time was the only thing keeping me sane.

I was watching Marta attempt to shuffle, but then she began to bend my cards and a literal hiss left my lips. I cringed and shuddered, then yanked my cards from Marta and shuffled them for her. “*SERÁS MI MUERTE, NIÑA.*”

“Hey! I have to learn—”

“*No destruyendo mis cartas. Pero*, I’ll buy you your own deck to practice with. But these are my favorite to use on clients, so I don’t want you to bend or rip them. ¿Lo entiendes?”

Marta’s eyes lit up. “Why are these your favorite? Also, can I pick any deck I want?”

“Yes, any deck on the shelf. We’ll take it home tonight.” I split the deck, then reshuffled. “And I like these because the images convey the meaning really well, so it helps my clients feel connected to what’s happening. They can look at the images and follow along. Plus, they’re super pretty.”

“*Tan bonita.*”

“*So pretty.*”

The door flew open, and Carmen rushed inside—then stopped short and sighed. “Dammit, Marta. TELL ME WHERE YOU’RE GOING! I thought you were stolen out the front door.”

Marta grimaced. “Sorry!”

“*VAS A SER MI MUERTE, NIÑA,*” Carmen groaned and rushed back out to the main part of the store. Though we could still hear her grumbling in Spanish down the hallway, “*Eres tan malo como un cachorro. Te compraré una correa o podría estrangularte.*”

I chuckled because maybe Carmen and I were more alike than I thought. “Oh, good. You’re torturing both of your older sisters by vanishing from our sight.”

Marta’s eyes widened. “My bad?”

*Note to self: get the girls in martial arts classes.*

“All right, Goddess, show us what lies in Inez’s future.” Marta sat the deck on the table, then flipped the first card over. “Oh shit.”

I swatted her arm. “*El lenguaje, Marta. Diosa mía. Tu madre me culpará.*”

“Sorry, Inez.” She squirmed and pointed to the card she’d flipped. “But you drew *The Tower* card.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. “*Mierda.*”

Marta smacked my arm. “*Language, Inés.*”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “*I’m an adult. I’m allowed to say much worse. Why don’t you pull a clarifier since we all know what *The Tower* means.*”

“*Inez?*” Carmen shouted from the hallway. “*Can you come out here? ¡No me muero pero esta señora es rara!*”

“*Coming! ¡Pero no llames raros a nuestros clientes!*” I stood up and ruffled Marta’s hair. “You two read my cards and let me know which part of my life is going to shit when I get back.”

They both giggled and whispered like they were conspiring against me as I slipped out the door. My sixteen-year-old sister stood just at the edge of the hallway, curling her already curly black hair around her finger. There was a blacklight hanging on the corner that made the neon-yellow nail polish she wore glow crazy bright. I wanted to point them out to her, but she was gnawing on her bottom lip and watching the store.

My anxiety kicked in instantly. “You okay? What’s wrong?”

Carmen sighed and subtly nodded her head toward a short woman in a neon pink faux fur coat. Her pink hair was still pinned up in rollers and I was fairly certain those were house slippers on her feet. “Um, so this lady is a little strange.”

“Strange how? Like Jillian earlier?”

“No, no. Jillian I admit turned out sane just desperate. Them old biddies seem awful.” She nodded her head toward the store behind her. “This one is bat shit crazy. But I didn’t want to yell *loca* out loud.”

“Well, I do appreciate that—”

“Just see for yourself.” Carmen stepped aside.

I rolled my eyes at her. “You have to learn how to handle all your clients, Carmen.”

“I’m sixteen, these are *your* clients still.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Unless you want to give me a raise.”

I cackled. “Come on, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

When I walked up, the lady with her hair in rollers turned to me and pressed a shaking hand to her chest. “Are you the owner?”

“Yes, I am. I’m sorry, she’s new to working here. I’m Inez.”

She shook my hand. “Donna.”

“Nice to meet you, Donna. How may I help you?”

She exhaled a deep breath. “I’m here for Lola.”

“Okay, who is Lola?”

“My cat.”

I blinked. “What’s wrong with your cat?”

“She’s a mess! They went and opened up a dog daycare in the shop directly below me and the barking is terrorizing my little Lola!” She whimpered and shook her head. “You’re a witch. I need you to give me something to protect Lola.”

*Okay, so not crazy but desperate.* In all honesty, desperation tended to be the reason most of my Uptown customers came to me the first time. I cleared my throat and gestured to my sister. “Carmen is an expert with crystals.”

“What are crystals gonna do? She eats ‘em and poops ‘em out and then it works?”

“Oh no.” I turned to Carmen. “Take her to the crystals and – well, you’re good at knowing those so you can pick which stones. Just get one for protection and one for calming. Then put them in one of those little pouches we keep in the drawer on the bottom left. There’s thick black velvet ribbon in there, so put the pouch on it and make a collar for Lola to wear.”

“OH.” The woman clapped her hands. “Yes. I like that. It’ll go well with her jingle bells. Can I put the pouch on the collar she has?”

“Of course. And if it doesn’t fit, just bring Lola back with you and we’ll figure it out for you. Then I’d like to—”

The jingle bells on the front door rang as the front door opened, pulling my attention away from Donna just as a man stepped inside with a young boy. I glanced at him, then did a double take. My jaw dropped and my eyes widened. He was ... he was ... *dios mio, es guapisimo*. The lights from the street shined through the still open doorway, making his sandy blond hair almost glow. He was tall with broad shoulders and long legs. He wore a beat-up leather jacket and dark jeans with black leather gloves. When he stepped inside, a small gasp slipped out of my mouth. His eyes were amber, like a soft,

warm orange color. I'd never seen eyes that shade. He got more beautiful the longer I looked at him.

Donna gasped and literally clutched the strands of pearls hanging around her neck. Her cheeks flushed as her eyes drank him in. Not that I blamed her. I didn't think people who looked like him existed in the real world, not outside of Hollywood. The kid with him looked nothing like him. He had dark hair and dark eyes. He seemed no more than Marta's age and exactly the kind of boy my sister found cute. It almost made me call out for her.

Behind me, Carmen whistled under her breath and shook her head. "*That boy is too pretty to not be trouble.*"

I chuckled and swatted at her. "*Pórtate bien.*"

His amber gaze swept across the store from left to right until he landed on me, then a warm smile spread across his face. "Good evening. Are you still open?"

I smiled back, or at least I tried to—I hoped I did. *Good Heavens, Inez, he's just a pretty boy. Get ahold of yourself.* I cleared my throat and nodded. "Yes, we are. Do you need help with something?"

"Um ..." He glanced down to the boy with him, then back to me. "Actually, yes?"

At that, I grinned. He looked a little like a lost puppy. "Okay, I'll be right with you. Have a look around?"

"Of course. Take your time." He nodded his head and then led the boy to the far wall on the right.

I shook myself, then turned back to Donna. "Sorry about that. But Carmen here will get those crystals for Lola."

"Is that all Lola needs?"

I gave her a sad smile. “Unfortunately that is all the help I can give you from the store. However, Carmen is going to give you a business card to the veterinarian we use for our cats. She’s a lovely, wonderful woman who is affordable but will be able to give you something to help ease Lola’s anxiety. She’s been a tremendous help for ours. Tell her I sent you and she’ll give you a discount. And then Carmen will give you a business card for Gabriela Alvarez. She’s a real estate agent who specializes in tenants with pets in Manhattan. Tell her I sent you and she’ll find you an apartment away from all doggy daycares.”

Donna blinked then licked her lips. She looked to Carmen. “You have business cards for both of them?”

Carmen smiled wide. “Absolutely. I can get all of those things for you.”

Donna sighed with relief. “Thank you.” She waved me off then turned and hobbled toward the section of crystals.

I arched one eyebrow at Carmen. “*¿Lo ves? No está loca. Está asustada y desesperada.*”

“*Por supuesto, Inés. Nadie está loco.*”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “I’m going to help them. You good?”

“Yep. Thanks for the direction, I know how to do crystals.”

“Yes, you do. You already know more than me.”

“So humble.” She rolled her eyes. “Go on, help the hottie.”

I pointed to the hallway “If Marta comes out, send her over to pick out her own tarot deck. I’ll be back, but let me know if you need anything.”

She gave me two thumbs-up and then skipped over to stand behind Donna at the crystal wall. I smiled and sent a silent prayer to the Goddess. *Please let this lady actually call the vet and Gabby. Poor Lola.*

I turned and hurried across the store to where the guy and the kid were looking at the book selection. I cleared my throat. “Hi! Sorry for making you wait.”

The man spun around and gave me a dazzling grin. “Not a problem at all.”

He was too pretty to look at and think clearly, so I pretended to look at the books that were in front of him. “Are you here for a certain book?”

“Actually ...” he rubbed his hands over the blond stubble on his jaw. His voice was rough, like he was in desperate need of a glass of water but in a good way. “We’re here for a potion.”

I frowned. *Dammit. Of all the things.* “We don’t sell potions here, unfortunately.”

He cleared his throat and stepped closer, glanced around, then said, “Billy here is attending the new School of Magical Arts starting Monday. Caroline Davenport told us this should be our first stop?”

I gasped. “*OH.* Oh, oh. Right. Sorry, absolutely. Of course. *That* I do have. Follow me.”

*Oh my God. Diosa mía. He’s a witch? Un brujo muy guapo.* He didn’t give off witch vibes, but he knew Caroline, so that meant something. I glanced to Carmen and waved to get her attention. “Going in my workshop if you need me.”

She nodded.



I turned to Mr. Handsome and Billy, then nodded my head toward the door in the far-left corner. “Right this way.”

Mr. Handsome gestured for Billy to go first but over his head his amber eyes met mine and the intensity in them made my breath catch in my throat. I shouldn’t have been shocked to find he wasn’t human. Those eyes seemed to hold the flicker of flames within them. He arched one eyebrow and smirked and my steps stumbled.

He chuckled behind me. The sound made my pulse skip.

*Dammit, Inez. Get your shit together.*

*Dios en el Cielo. If THIS is my Tower Card, then I am in trouble.* No one wanted a boy to be the thing that uprooted their entire world. Boys were kind of like moldavite—pretty, destructive, and would ruin your life if you hold them for more than five minutes. I warned both my sisters to stay away from that stone. And then he walked into my store, and I became a hypocrite.

I’d never been happier to see the door to my workshop. It meant I’d have to shake this off and focus on making whatever potion they needed. Magic required concentration or people got hurt. I opened the door and then stepped inside, flicked on the light, and held the door open for them. Billy bounced right inside.

Mr. Handsome, whose name I’d yet to get, slowed at the threshold and stopped right beside me. He smelled like fresh cut grass, and for a girl in a concrete jungle it was a dream. He shoved his gloved hands in his front jeans pockets and rocked back on his heels. With a smirk, he looked inside and then back to me. “I wasn’t expecting an actual light switch.”

I snorted, and then before I could stop myself, I *shoved him inside*. Sure, it was playful, but I'd never shoved a customer before. He laughed and went with the movement until he stood in the middle of my workshop. I closed the door behind me, then pulled out my wand and tapped the handle with it.

"Ah, there it is," he said with his rough voice.

I shrugged. "I have humans that work in my store, so I have to have a human-appropriate light switch. But I loathe overhead lights, so ..." I pointed my wand to the ceiling and flicked it in the pattern I knew so well. The overhead light went out, but little orbs of soft golden light lifted off the ground to hover up by the ceiling.

Mr. Handsome chuckled. "That's more like it."

"Sorry my human façade bores you." I winked and shoved my wand in my pocket. "I'm Inez Alvarez."

"I'm Billy Smith!" Billy bounced back over to me and shook my hand. "I'm a shifter. I'm so excited to be starting at SOMA. So, you're a witch?"

"*Billy.*" Mr. Handsome sighed and shook his head. "Bring it down a notch, kid."

At that, I laughed. "It's all right. My little sister Marta is about your age, Billy, and she also just started SOMA. I'm used to all this ... this giddiness."

Billy gasped. "Marta is my age? Is she here? I'd love to make a friend already!"

"She is here. She's doing a tarot reading for a client, but I'll introduce you before you leave, 'kay?"

He nodded and bounced in place. I suspected he didn't *stop* bouncing.

Mr. Handsome looked exhausted, like he was over this shit already.

“Let me guess, *not* his brother?” I gestured between them.

He hung his head. “That obvious?”

“When your sibling is this age, you're used to it. And you don't look used to it.”

He grinned and it lit his whole face up. He held his still gloved hand out to me and I wondered why he still had them on. “I'm Foster Logan. Billy here is a close family friend. I'm doing his parents a favor escorting him here while they take care of his four younger siblings.”

“Oof.” I shuddered. “That's too many kids.”

He laughed and then glanced around the room. “So, what is this room? I couldn't help but notice the door was a secret doorway.”

“This is my workshop. To any human that comes in here this just looks like where I make some of the stuff I sell in the store. But I'd rather them not come in here, hence the sneaky door.” I slid my jacket off, then hung it on the hook on the back of the door. “The rest of the store has products that are safe for humans to use. *This* room is the real magic. For the rest of us. Books, crystals, spell kits, and just about everything else real witches may need, including the potions I brew here.”

“What kind of potions do you have?” Billy eyed the back wall where two rows of black cauldrons sat on shelves. “Is that a big stove? Or do you have a fireplace?”

I chuckled. “That *is* a fireplace. I used magic to manipulate the mantle so I could sit as many cauldrons on the flame at the same time as possible. I turn them on as needed. As you can see, I’m brewing a few as we speak. And I brew all kinds of stuff. I don’t keep many potions bottled and ready to sell because I like to cater each one to the user, but what I did have I sold over the holidays. I have SOMA and Caroline Davenport to thank for that.”

Billy cocked his head to the side and his brown hair fell into his face. “Don’t they have stores like this at school?”

“Not yet. The school is so new they wanted to get things moving before they had a magic store on campus. They’re planning one now, and I’m helping them get set up for that.”

Foster frowned. “Will that kill your business?”

“They want it to be like a franchise of mine. A sort of partnership. I’m familiar with the needs of the local witches in this city, so I can help them stock appropriate stuff that’s safe for kids.” I grinned as a rush of excitement raced through me. “I am pumped for it. *However*, that’s not what brought you here. So, you said you need a potion? What exactly do you need?”

Foster licked his lips and rolled his shoulders. “We know you’re about to close. We hit some unexpected traffic on our drive in tonight. We don’t want to cause you to stay late. He just needs a potion for anxiety and to help him sleep. Can’t have him shifting from nerves.”

I blinked. “Oh, that’s it?”

Foster gave me a sideways grin. “For tonight. We’ll be back once we meet with the school tomorrow to see what he

might need. Caroline's suggestion was to get these two tonight."

I nodded and pulled my wand out and aimed it at two of the cauldrons, turning their burners on. "Caroline knows what she's talking about. Okay, a potion to soothe anxiety and a potion to help you sleep."

Foster eyed me curiously. I liked the way his amber eyes seemed to dance like a candle flame. "Are you used to making potions for shifters?"

"Oh, I got a crash course in December." I chuckled as I crossed the room to my bookshelf of supplies for making potions. "Have no fear, all of the shifter professors were here. We spent *hours* going over how to cater to shifters' needs."

Foster smiled and looked to the ground. I wasn't sure what I said to warrant that expression, but I liked it. Granted, he was probably trying not to laugh at me. Marta said I acted like a little kid in a toy store whenever the shifters were around or whenever I talked about them. But I couldn't help it. A person shifting into an animal was one of the coolest things I'd ever heard of. For most of my life, I'd assumed they were a myth. Of course, I still hadn't *seen* it."

Billy bounced over beside me. "So how do you make potions? When I was little, my friends and I would make potions with stuff from the fridge and plants and stuff."

I grinned and leaned down to whisper, "*Wanna know a secret?*"

He nodded and his eyes lit up.

"*That's all witches do really.*" I winked and stood upright as he laughed. "Now, let's brew, shall we?"

Billy pushed up on his tiptoes and peered over the edge of the black cauldron I was about to use for his potion. “Can I help?”

I pointed to the bookcase on the far left. “Can you grab me two of those mason jars with the pale-green ribbon tied around them?”

“On it!”

Foster slid into my peripheral vision and leaned his hip into the bookcase on my right, just a foot away from me. “And you’re sure we’re not inconveniencing you at this hour?”

“I’m sure. These two potions are super simple to make for me as they’re my most requested. Who would’ve thought?” I chuckled but the sideways grin he gave me had a strange effect on my breathing abilities. I cleared my throat. “This won’t take too long, but feel free to grab a seat. There’s a chair behind me over—”

“I like the view I have,” he said softly.

My cheeks burned. I was probably bright-red. *¡Vaya!*

“Got them!” Billy sat the two mason jars on the mantle beside me. “Can I pour them?”

“As a matter of fact, that’s a great idea since they’re *for you*.” I picked one jar up and held it to him. “Take this in your hands. Close your eyes and picture yourself sleeping comfortably, then open your eyes and pour it into the cauldron on the right.”

Billy didn’t hesitate. He squeezed his eyes closed so hard he might’ve bruised his eyelids.

The smell of freshly cut grass drifted over my shoulder a split-second before I felt a wave of heat roll across my back.

“*What’s in the jars?*” Foster whispered against my ear, making goosebumps cover my arms.

*Joder, qué bien huele.* I swallowed roughly. “*Moon water. I charge it myself during full moons to use on my clients.*”

Billy opened his eyes, unscrewed the lid, then poured the moon water jar inside.

“Okay, now take the second jar and do the same thing except imagine you’re in your favorite spot to just hang out and relax, then pour that one into the other cauldron.”

“Got it.” Billy did this step even faster. Despite the nonstop bouncing, he managed to get the instructions correct without slipping up or spilling. “Okay, now what?”

“Now—”

“Inez, I want th—*oh.*” Marta stopped short just inside my workshop. Her brown eyes widened as her gaze landed on Foster. “Sorry, I didn’t know you had customers in here—”

“*Entra. Cierra la puerta, Marta.*”

“*Necesitas un cartel de no molestar, Inés.*” She slammed it shut behind her with a blush, then she looked over to Billy and frowned in confusion. “Hello. Sorry to interrupt.”

“*Gracias, Marta. Es una buena idea.* Guys, this is my little sister.” I chuckled. She’d just given me a great idea, a do not disturb sign was needed. “Marta, meet Foster and his friend Billy. Billy here is starting at SOMA—”

Marta gasped and spun on him. “Really? I just started there! It’s the coolest place ever—”

I pulled my wand out and flicked it in the air. “*Bind this air in my sight, conceal the noise if thy might. Take the voices down a notch, a manageable sound on my watch.*”

The volume coming from my sister and Billy decreased by at least eighty percent. We could hear them talking, but it no longer pierced my eardrums. Nor would it distract me while I worked on the potions. I shook myself and spun back to my cauldrons now full only of moon water.

Foster chuckled and crossed his arms over his chest. “I need to learn that spell. Damn.”

*No tienes ni idea.* I snorted and glanced back at the tweens. They hadn’t noticed what I’d done. I reached up and twisted my long black hair around my wand to pin it up off my neck. Foster’s eyes tracked my every movement. I leaned closer to him. The air seemed to flicker between us like smoke on a bonfire. It was definitely the heat radiating off of him ... or maybe the fire in his eyes. *Focus, Inez, or you’ll burn up your cauldrons and all your moon water.* I exhaled a rough breath.

*Right, okay, what do I need? ¿Por qué no puedo pensar ahora? ¿Qué le está haciendo a mi cerebro? Sé cómo hacer estas pociones. Puedo hacerlo mientras duermo. Ignora la cara bonita.*

*Necesito ... crystals. And Salt. ¿Qué más? Ah, sí. Salt.*

“Are you all right?”

I jumped and looked up only to find him standing right beside me. “What?”

He leaned down and his shoulder pressed into my arm. “I asked if you were all right ... You were just staring into space and mumbling in Spanish. Your accent is very lovely, by the way. Where is it from?”

“*Oh, muchas gracias.* I’m from Spain but my sisters are from here.” My face felt like it was on fire. I bit my bottom lip



and nodded. “I was um ... uh ... *mierda*. I was preparing my thoughts to make the potions.”

“Is my presence hindering you?”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. *Por supuesto que sí. Was I that obvious? Goddess, making a fool of myself that quickly?*

He cleared his throat and pushed off the counter. “I mean, if you normally work in here alone and—”

“Oh, no, no. *Diosa, no.*” I waved him off. “My clients always come in here with me. It’s important for new customers to do exactly as Billy did.”

“What does *diosa* mean?”

“Goddess.” I grimaced. “Most people are used to hearing *dios mío* or just *dios* but since witches have a Goddess—”

“*Diosa.*” He nodded. “It’s pretty.”

“Thanks. Anyway, I was just going through my *enciclopedia de cristales y hierbas* in my mind.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Is that the name of an actual book? Because if so I will buy it. Everything sounds so much prettier in Spanish.”

I opened my mouth then closed it. “I said that in Spanish. Right. *Estoy perdiendo la cabeza*. No, it’s just a figure of speech for the encyclopedia of crystals and herbs in my head. Sometimes I say things in Spanish randomly because my sisters learned English as their first language as their mother wanted them to assimilate easier. English is a bitch to learn.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “So let me guess, they speak English with all their friends and you intentionally speak Spanish with them?”

“Especially Marta.” I glanced at my sister. “They’re completely fluent, don’t get me wrong, but I just have this fear they’ll lose that part of themselves without my father around.”

“I understand that. Wait, did you say encyclopedia? Dating yourself there. I don’t think Billy has ever seen one of those.” He chuckled and gestured to the bookcase he’d been blocking by leaning on it. “But you can just shove me aside when I’m in your way. No need to stop now.”

I grinned and playfully shoved him as I headed to the shelves that held my bowls of crystals. For the potion to help keep Billy calm, I grabbed blue lace agate, howlite, black agate, and black tourmaline—because one could never go wrong with that one. One of each went into both cauldrons, since calmness was imperative for both needs. To ease anxiety, I tossed in a lithium quartz, green calcite, citrine, and clear quartz. Then, to help him sleep, he needed soothing blue calcite, ametrine, smoky quartz, jet, and a little petrified wood and abalone shell.

“That’s a lot of crystals.” Foster stood *right* behind me, close enough for his breath to brush over the bare skin of my neck and shoulders. “Do you melt those down?”

“*Diosa*, no.” I picked up my bone-white wand that I used specifically for making potions. With a twirl of my wrist, little pink flashes of magic rained from my wand into the cauldrons. I flicked my wand to stir the water around. “I throw in the crystals with the properties needed to charge the potion. Now I add in herbs.”

“Which herbs do you use?”

“Well, for both we need lavender and chamomile. To aid with sleeping, I’m going to use valerian root, milky oats, limeflower, and since he’s young, just a half dose of

passionflower because it's a bit of a sedative but not much." I grabbed the herbs off the shelf and tossed them in as I called out their names. "A pinch of kava since he's a shifter and that's a safe one for them. Then we need lemon balm, ashwagandha, rhodiola rosea, and hops."

"Oh, is that all?"

I chuckled and shoved him again, but this time my hand pressed into his stomach and the heat radiating through his shirt from his skin was intense. *Don't pay any attention to the muscles you felt under his shirt. Abs are dangerous enough when you can see them. Ignore it.* "And don't forget the salt."

"And the spoonful of sugar."

I looked over my shoulder at him. "Now who's showing their age?"

He grinned. "I'm going to be quiet and let you work."

"You just want to enjoy the brief silence with Billy."

"Is it like Beetlejuice? If you say his name three times, he shows up?"

"Wanna test it?" I wagged my eyebrows. "*Bil—*"

Foster pressed his finger to my lips, stopping me from speaking the rest of his name. "Let's not ruin the moment prematurely."

I'd just met this man yet the only objection I had to his finger on my lips was that he still wore a glove. I wanted to feel the heat of his skin. I wanted to know the texture of his hands. Were they soft? Were they calloused from working with them? He must have been thinking the same things I was because we both looked down at his dark, leather-gloved hand. My gaze shot back up to his face only to find those amber eyes

already on me. I inhaled air to clear my thoughts, but my breath was shaky. Neither of us moved. The smoke and steam from the cauldrons of Billy's potions billowed into our faces.

"I'm going to leave you to work now." Slowly, he lowered his finger off of my mouth. "By the way, I like your tattoos."

I spun away from him to hide the blush painted on my face. "Thank you. I did them myself."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah. We witches have all kinds of tricks." I winked at him then pointed to my wand tied up in my hair. "Painlessly with my wand, and they can be easily removed."

"That's epic. Do they do anything magical?"

I smiled. "For me, they're just a fond memory. But most people work all kinds of tricks into them. A built-in compass is a huge hit."

"I didn't know you could do that. Bad ass."

"Yeah, it is very bad ass. I give myself temporary ones all the time then remove them. But I think it's time for more."

"Well the ones you have are really nice."

This cauldron was for soothing anxiety and calming, so I sucked in a deep breath of the smoke and let it seep into my lungs. Lots of people complimented my tattoos. Foster was no different. There was a sleeve of flowers on my right arm, then a matching cluster on my left shoulder and collarbone area. But the one on my back was my favorite and it was the logo of my store. Just below my neckline was a black crescent moon sinking beneath the current of water before tapering off into a string of stars down the center of my spine.

"Thank you."

Foster's breath swept across the nape of my neck and my pulse skipped. "Especially the one on your back, *moonchild*." His fingertip traced the line of stars down the center of my back.

I gasped as heat exploded inside of me. I spun around, fisted his shirt, and dragged his mouth to mine. My pulse thundered through my veins. He groaned and gripped my jaw with both hands, hauling me closer to him. I slid my hands up his chest, then pushed his leather jacket off his shoulders and down his arms. It landed on the wood floor with a thud. Our bodies were flush against each other. We stumbled back and crashed into the counter. His grip on my jaw was tight, but I needed to feel his skin on mine, so I pulled his hands off and then yanked the gloves from his hands. He reached down and squeezed my hips, lifting me up to sit on the counter. I wrapped my legs around him—

"*FOSTER!*" Billy shouted.

I gasped and jumped back—and my wand clattered to the floor in front of the fireplace. *What?* I glanced over my shoulder and found Foster three feet away, leaning against my bookshelf on the far wall with a book in his hand. He paused while flipping pages and looked up to Billy. He still had his leather jacket on *and* his gloves.

*What just happ—OH. Soy tan estúpida.* I looked down at the cauldron below me, not the two I was brewing for Billy but the one for Mrs. Tidwell right beside it. I'd gotten so lost in Foster's aura that I hadn't realized the steam from Mrs. Tidwell's potion was billowing into my face. I exhaled in a rush and waved my hand in front of my face to help clear the air. Mrs. Tidwell had been one of my very first clients when I opened my store, so when she came to me with her request, I

didn't think twice on it. She'd started menopause and was having trouble feeling ... lustful. Her husband was one of the good guys, the genuinely good ones who'd always been patient with her, she'd just wanted a potion to help her get her body in the right mood when she needed the help.

And it clearly worked. The fumes alone had sent me into a fantasy of passion with a complete stranger. Luckily, I hadn't actually acted on those thoughts. That would have been mortifying. I cursed under my breath and scrubbed my face with my hands.

*Note to self: warn Mrs. Tidwell about the strength of this potion.*

*Actually, I should probably tone it down a notch. Eso es demasiado fuerte. Muy fuerte.*

"Foster! Foster!" Billy shouted with excitement. "Did you hear me?"

I flinched as that sound barrier spell I'd made snapped, and his voice went full volume again. The haze of Mrs. Tidwell's potion left me feeling hungover and sluggish. *Definitely water that down a bit. Más agua. Más calma. Damn, Inez.*

"Yes, Billy, I hear you," Foster said with a chuckle. "What's up?"

"Marta says Steve goes to *SOMA*. Did you know that?"

Foster chuckled and ran his gloved finger over his bottom lip. "Yes, I knew that. The younger dragons are attending *SOMA* for its initial semester."

"Steve is *so* funny." Marta giggled.

I cleared my throat as I moved Mrs. Tidwell's cauldron off the burner and onto the back rack, then quickly put a lid on it.

*Change the subject. Anything. Just don't embarrass yourself with Foster.* “Steve is a dragon? Why did I expect the dragons to all have more unique names?”

Foster gave me a wry grin, which only brought my attention to his lips. “You mean names like ... Kothari, Yaluk, Silas or Neka?”

I smiled and nodded. “There’s a story to *Steve*, isn’t there?”

He nodded. “But I would hate to rob you of the opportunity to hear that story the first time from Steve.”

“You’re too kind.” I giggled and wiped a few loose hairs off my forehead. “I’ll be on the lookout when I drop her at school.”

And then I realized Marta was in here. I frowned and turned toward her. “Where’s Suzanne? And why’d you come in here?”

“Suzanne’s husband called so she left to meet him at their favorite diner over on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue.” Marta bounced over to me and I had the gut feeling she and Billy were going to be good friends. “I came in here to ask about tarot cards for me.”

Billy’s jaw dropped. “You read tarot cards?”

“I’m learning. Inez said I could pick out my own deck to practice with.” Inez held her chin high like this was her proudest moment. “So, Inez, can I pick any deck from the store?”

I sighed and let out a chuckle. “Yes, Marta. Any deck. But then go to Carmen to get some crystals to charge them with.”

“Come on, Billy, wanna help me pick?”

“Yeah!”

The two of them slipped out the door like dust on the wind.

Leaving me alone in the room with Foster ... and the echo of my fantasy in my mind.

Foster chuckled and headed for the door. "I think I better go supervise Billy and leave you to focus on the potions."

I nodded. "I'll be right out with them."

He opened the door, then paused. "Can I go ahead and pay with Carmen so I won't hold you up any later?"

"Um ... yeah. Yeah, that's fine. Just tell her I made you two level-one custom cauldrons. They're a set price, and she'll get that settled for you."

"Will do." He nodded and then disappeared into the main part of the store.

The second the door clicked shut, I groaned and dove for the little fridge tucked beside the fireplace and grabbed one of my moon water jars I'd used purified water to make so that I could drink it. I had these for this exact reason—when a spell or potion I was working with affected me on accident. Three sips of ice-cold moon water and that potion sealed up, and I could feel my body was calming down. *Gracias, agua de luna.*

It took me about five more minutes to get Billy's two potions into two big vials for him to take home. And of course, I had to label them since he'd never remember just by the color of the vials alone. By the time I walked out of my workshop, I found Carmen locking the front door and flipping the open sign to say *CLOSED*. That made me sigh with relief. It'd been a whirlwind of an evening.

Carmen spun away from the door and spotted me. She grinned and shook her head. "Dude, Donna called mom while she was paying."



*Donna? Mom? OH, RIGHT.* I'd almost forgotten about worried cat mom. "She seem okay when she left?"

"Okay? Nah, bro. She was beaming. So excited. Apparently mom – not that Donna realized it was my mother – has this perfect apartment for Donna that just came available. Oh and she left a voicemail at the vet's office *and* she bought herself a matching collar of crystals." Carmen shook her head and held both of her hands up, the moonlight and streetlights shining through the windows caught on the silver and gold bands of rings on her fingers. More than she'd been wearing when I went into my workshop. "I'm just saying the *money doesn't buy happiness* thing is a load of shit."

Foster snorted.

My pulse quickened. I glanced over Carmen's shoulder and found him watching me from the wall where the tarot cards were. I went to the register and grabbed one of the paper shopping bags to put Billy's stuff in.

Carmen shook her head, and it reminded me of our father. "All right, well, Donna paid and is going to come back to report how it all works for her, Suzanne says you owe her a girls' night soon, but she left, Mr. Hottie over there paid for their stuff as you instructed, and I've got the store closed up and ready for us to go home."

That made me smile. "You're my best employee, Carmen, even if you snagged fifteen new rings on your shift tonight." I winked and bumped her with my hip as I headed for the guys.

"They're just on loan," Carmen yelled after me. "Like the crown jewels!"

"Well, remember, I don't have monarchy kind of money."

Carmen cackled.

Marta looked up from the cards fanned out in her hands and grinned. “I need these, Inez.”

Billy nodded. “Yeah, these are the best ones. A girl was using them at SOMA when we were there tonight.”

Foster smirked. “They’ve already exchanged phone numbers and a bunch of social media platforms I’ve never heard of. Billy is all set with a new friend to start school with.”

“And I’ve got your potions.” I held the bag up. “Don’t worry. I wrote down instructions and tips too.”

Billy hopped over and took the bag, peeking inside with a grin on his face. “Thanks, Inez. I can’t wait to see what other stuff I have to get.”

Foster pushed off the counter he’d been leaning on and rubbed his gloved hands together. “On that note, we’re going to get out of here now so you ladies can go home. Billy and I will be back tomorrow after our meeting with the school.”

“We’ll be here.” *Oh Diosa mía, estoy en un lío. Este tío es demasiado guapo. Estúpidamente guapo.*

“Bye, Marta. I’m sure we’ll see you around.” Foster ruffled Billy’s hair. “Carmen, It was nice meeting you.”

Carmen looked up from the rings on her fingers and smiled. “Be sure to come back to Moonchild anytime!”

Marta smiled and waved. “Billy, see you at lunch Monday? Remember where to meet?”

Billy nodded. “See you then! Foster, can we get McDonald’s?”

Foster rolled his eyes. “Maybe. Let’s go. Start walking.”

“And don’t hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions,” I looked up and met Foster’s gaze, “about anything at all.”

He stopped in front of me. “You’ll be seeing me again soon.”

“Is that a threat?” I arched one eyebrow and grinned. *A threat? ¿Estás flirteando con él?*

“It’s a promise.” He chuckled mischievously. “Good night, Inez.”

## CHAPTER TWO

## INEZ



“MARTA, put those away until we get home.” I locked the door to my shop, then shoved my keys into the zipper pocket on my coat. “Carmen, put your phone away.”

Neither one of them moved or acknowledged me.

“*Hola? ¿Estoy hablando solo?*” I snapped my fingers in front of Carmen’s face. “*¡Presta atención! Guárdalos. Ahora.*”

“But I only wanna look at the pictures!” Marta whined, still holding her new tarot card deck in her hands. “I just got them.”

“*Inés, por favor, dame un respire.*” Carmen typed with both thumbs on her phone like it was an Olympic competition. “I didn’t text anyone all night at work. My boyfriend just wants to know where I am. *Porque se preocupa por mí.*”

I sighed and shook my head as I buttoned up the last few buttons on my coat. The air was sharp tonight. Any sliver of bare skin burned as the icy temperature hit it. I pulled my faux-cashmere beanie down lower on my head since the tops of my ears were already stinging from the cold. *¿Cuándo llega la primavera? Hace mucho frío. Estoy harto del frío.*

The Upper West Side was my favorite neighborhood in Manhattan. During the normal, functioning hours of the day, it was a neighborhood full of families and children. There were big dogs everywhere you looked. The volume was on at a level-four compared to the rest of the city, which was definitely a level-ten. But that quietness was the downside to the neighborhood late at night like this.

The streets were empty.

The shops were all long since closed because all the people who lived around here went to bed before ten. There were no crowds on the sidewalks, no bustle of taxis searching for clients in the streets, there weren't even street vendors trying to make a buck on the corner.

It was just me and two young girls ... and the shadows of New York.

My shop was just around the corner from Central Park West, which I'd done specifically so we'd have an easy and quick walk to the nearest subway station to get home. Before my father had passed away, I'd had a fancy midtown apartment with all the bells and whistles. But after, I moved in with my stepmother to help her with my sisters, which I was happy to do since we were all grieving. I'd wanted to be there for them and support them.

Except in this exact moment, I wanted to reach out and strangle them. Or maybe slam their heads together. It was mid-February. Late at night. I didn't have to pull up my weather app on my phone to know the temperature was nearing single digits ... and these two were just *standing* there. *¿Qué voy a hacer con vosotros dos?*

“NO, DON'T SHOOT!” I screamed and threw my hands out.

Marta and Carmen shrieked and leapt into sprints. I cackled and turned to follow them just as they glanced over their shoulders—and froze.

Marta clutched her chest with her free hand and bent over at the waist. “*Diosa*. I thought we were dead.”

“*Eso ha sido muy mezquino*.” Carmen glared at me. “What the hell, Inez?”

“What?” I grinned as I caught up with them two stores down.

Carmen shoved her phone in her coat pocket and shook her head. “That was messed up.”

“Good. Maybe you’ll start paying attention to your surroundings now.”

Marta threw her head back and laughed. “Savage.”

“Come on.” I shrugged and waved for them to follow me around the corner and onto Central Park West, the only slightly busy street up here at this time of night aside from Broadway. “I may not be your mother, but I have rules for a reason. If you’re looking at your phone and texting or playing with your tarot cards—or anything that’s got your sole attention—then you won’t see danger before it gets to you.”

Carmen grumbled a string of curses in Spanish.

“Your boyfriend knows you’re alive. Next time, just text him before we leave the store. The rest can wait until we get home, unless Cinderella is going to change back into a troll at midnight—”

“*Inez*,” she growled. “He’s a nice guy!”

I rolled my eyes. “*Por supuesto*. Jury is still out on him.”

“Mom likes him.”

“Your mother is nicer and more trusting than me.”

She groaned more in Spanish, but I let her have her moment. Her mother Gabriela was far, far too nice. Gabby saw the best in everyone and everything, the optimist at all times. My father had been the realist. It was a trait he’d passed on to me. But when you saw just what lurked in the shadows of the world, it altered the way you saw life.

I opened my mouth to reassure her that I was in support of her no matter how much I wasn’t sure of her boyfriend when I noticed Marta was still playing with her tarot cards. “Marta? *¿Hablas en serio?* What did we just talk about?”

“I’m watching around us!”

“With your cards fanned out in your hands?” I scoffed and purposely stepped over the metal grate in the ground as the subway roared beneath us, soaking in the second of heat that fanned through the gate. “Put them away, Marta. You can look on the subway—*watch out!*”

She stopped short two feet before a guy was hosing down the sidewalk, just missing getting splashed. “Oops.”

“*Diosa*. Come on. Let’s cross.” I grabbed both of them by the elbows and half-dragged them across the street. The rest of the block had clearly been hosed down by this guy and was probably already turning to ice, which meant that was an accident waiting to happen. “Why in the Heavens is that guy doing that *now?* Makes no sense. *¿Está loco?*”

“Ew, ew, ew! It’s blowing water over here too!” Marta squealed and ran ahead of us. “*It’s cold, it’s cold, it’s cold!* *¡Deja de rociar el agua!*”



“Dude, what is wrong with you?” Carmen shouted at the man who’d looked up at Marta’s squealing. “You tryin’ kill somebody? Where’s your damn brain?”

I snorted. Carmen was the most *New York* out of all of us. She was always yelling at taxis and such. I loved that part of her, but I hoped it didn’t get her into trouble in the future. “Marta, where are you going?”

Carmen was still grumbling about the moron hosing down a sidewalk at night in single-digit temperatures, which honestly was warranted, but we weren’t going to get anywhere with that. And I didn’t like how far ahead of us Marta ran.

“*Marta!*” Carmen shouted and skipped to catch up. “*¡Vuelve aquí!*”

Thankfully, her sixteen-year-old legs had seen no wear and tear, so she was going to catch up to Marta in a few seconds, and I was still trying to get myself moving. There was no such thing as an out of shape sixteen-year-old, at least not when they were slender in build. Meanwhile, I was twenty-eight and hadn’t seen a gym since I was her age. My thighs burned and felt like rubber before I’d made it halfway to them, then sharp pain laced through my ribs and stomach. I hissed and slowed my pace. *Inez, you shouldn’t get cramps that fast. You’re too young to feel this old.*

“Guys, wait for me. *Mierda.*”

Marta stopped at the corner and spun around just as a massive gust of wind ripped up the street and slammed into her. She squealed and cringed at the near arctic blast rolling off the Hudson River from just a few avenues over. The streets of Manhattan created a tunnel effect with the tall buildings, especially on the west side. It was like New Jersey was literally trying to blow us farther away from them.

I knew the second the wind hit Carmen because she cursed and spun, causing her wild curly hair to wrap around her face. She clawed at the long strands to pull them away before they strangled her. “*WHY DO WE LIVE HERE?*”

*She’s right. We should’ve moved south.*

Marta turned to me and yelled, “Can we just take a cab tonight?”

I snorted and gestured to the *empty* street. “Sure, grab any of them you see—”

Marta squealed as another hurricane-style gust of wind slammed into her. She tried to turn her back to it, but the wind caught those damn tarot cards *still* in her hand and swept them right out of her grip. I cursed.

“NOOOO!” Marta shrieked and dove after the half a dozen cards flying toward the wall bordering Central Park.

“Oh, c’mon, Marta!” Carmen threw her hands up as she chased another dozen that were headed straight for the street. “WHY WERE THEY STILL OUT?”

*“I’m an idiot!”* Marta screamed back.

I sighed and shook my head. I’d only told the girl several times to put them away. It was like she was new here and didn’t know we got slammed with Hudson River wind gusts daily. The two of them scrambled in opposite directions. Normally I didn’t use my magic out in the open but the last thing three young females needed was to be diving into the shadows of the poorly-lit street. I yanked my wand from my jacket pocket and flicked it. All of the tarot cards stopped moving. Carmen scooped up the cards and beelined for Marta ... who looked at me with a grimace.

“I don’t tell you these things to hear myself speak.” I rolled my eyes and shoved my wand back in my coat pocket. “Do you know how much energy talking takes?”

“I’m sorry, Inez.” She shoved the rest of the cards into the box they came in, then held her hand out to take the stack from Carmen. It took her two seconds to put the rest away. “But the box doesn’t fit in my bag, it’s too full—”

“Oh, give it to me.” Carmen snatched the box, then pulled her backpack off her shoulders and slid it around to the front. “How much stuff do you have in there?”

As Carmen fought with the zipper of her backpack, Marta leaned back against the wall to Central Park to prop the weight of her bag on top of it. I frowned and made a mental note to see why her bag was so heavy. *Dammit. Where is a taxi when I want one?* I glanced over my shoulder and gasped. There was one coming right for us. I leapt to the edge of the sidewalk and threw my hand up—as the taxi sped by.

Carmen groaned. “Why do we live here? Can’t we move somewhere we can just drive places?”

I smirked and spun back around. “And leave your new magic school? I’d say no. Marta, come on.”

She shoved off the wall and a long black arm followed her. Long, slimy talons stretched out.

“MOVE!” I screamed.

She dove forward, but it was too late. The demon lunged for her. There was a flash of glowing red eyes in a sea of darkness and then its talons sank into Marta’s backpack. I screamed and leapt toward her just as the demon yanked her backwards and over the wall. She shrieked and vanished into the darkness of Central Park.

“MARTA!” Carmen screamed.

It happened too fast. My legs just didn’t move that fast. But Carmen and I were already charging forward. We lunged over the wall like track and field stars after them. This spot of the park, the grass was only a few feet down on the other side.

“MARTA!” Carmen screamed again. “*What the hell is that?*”

“DEMON!” I shrieked. “HURRY!”

A demon. It was a demon. There were many, many, many kinds of demons, but this one had a similar form to a monkey. Carmen kept screaming as she ran beside me. All of that *out of shape* problem I had vanished into adrenaline. The demon dragged Marta across the field by her backpack, dragging her body along with it. She kicked and thrashed to try to break its hold, but her arms were pinned by the straps of her bags.

My heart lodged in my throat. My lungs were on fire. I wasn’t breathing. I knew that. My body seemed to forget how. All I heard was the echo of both my sisters screams. I dug my heels into the ground, pushing my legs to move faster, praying to the Goddess to just let me get to her in time. That was a demon, and it was going to kill her the first chance it got.

*Think, Inez, THINK. What did they teach you at school? Magic school taught all students some methods of demon self-defense for just these moments, but I’d graduated ten years ago. I’d never even seen a demon in real life until recently. The demon attacks had gotten worse since Halloween. I knew that. I knew there’d been many attacks right here in Manhattan since Christmas. WHY DID I GO NEAR THE PARK? My stomach rolled. STUPID. STUPID.*

*Please, Goddess, just let me save her. PLEASE.*

We were catching up.

Almost there.

It was dragging her into the shadows of the trees. *Over my dead body.* I didn't take my wand out. I didn't know offensive spells for this, and I needed to tackle them, which meant I risked dropping my wand. That I couldn't do. I would need it after. In motion, I could've hit Marta with a spell. I was a Wand Suit—a spell-caster, not a warrior. I hadn't trained for *this.*

But then the demon took a sharp left turn like it was going for the tunnel, and I saw my chance. Carmen must have had the same thought because at the same exact time we cut between some trees to intercept.

“*Tackle!*” I yelled to Carmen as we zipped through the trees. “*Three, two—NOW!*”

We both dove forward. Carmen was much more athletic, so she collided with Marta first. But I knew better. A second later, I tackled the demon head-first. Its feet lifted off the ground, and we flew *over* my sisters who were rolling in the grass. The demon growled in my ear, then sank its talons into my back. I screamed out in pain but then we flipped and my body slammed into the ground, knocking all of the wind out of my lungs. Sharp, razored edges sliced my skin through my thick coat as gravity sent us soaring across the pathway.

“INEZ!” Marta screamed, and it sent a rush of tears stinging my eyes. She was alive. I'd done my job.

*Thank you, Goddess!*

The demon reared back and locked those glowing red eyes on me. My heart stopped. This was it. This was how I died. The damn thing growled and showed off three rows of shark-

like teeth. Venom oozed from its front fangs and scorched a hole through my coat. My sisters both screamed my name. I heard their footsteps rushing closer. *No, no, no. RUN.* But I couldn't get my mouth to work. The demon lunged for my throat. The only self-defense training I'd ever had taught me how to fight off humans, not monsters. But my body reacted. My arm shot up. I used the palm of my hand to slam into its chin and deflect the bite like it was a snarling dog.

My hands trembled as we thrashed. Carmen and Marta's faces appeared within the darkness over the demon's shoulders. They were coming in hot and fast. I wasn't going to hold it long. I had to do something, or it would kill me and turn on them. With shaking fingers, I dove into my coat pocket over my chest and pulled out my wand. Except my mind went utterly blank. Every single spell I'd ever learned just vanished into thin air.

Venom dripped onto my palm and down my arms. I screamed as it burned like lava, scorching layers of skin in an instant. The smell of burning flesh made my stomach turn. And then my hand slipped and those fangs dove for my throat. I panicked and thrust my wand straight up—and into the demon's eye.

It screeched and threw its head back.

“INEZ!”

“RUN!” I screamed. “TO SOMA!”

“INE—”

“RUN—!”

The demon slammed its paw right on my throat, cutting off my voice and my oxygen. But I saw Carmen dragging Marta away by the elbow. The smell of maple syrup slammed into

my senses a split-second before black demon blood splashed down on me. My fingers were slippery from its blood, but I managed to yank my wand out of its eye. It bellowed and swung for me. I flicked my wrist and a pillow appeared on my face just in time for the demon's talons to tear it open in one fell swoop. My whole body was shaking and burning. I needed air. My vision was starting to tunnel.

*THINK! What do demons hate?*

This was it. I was about to die. The light at the—*SUNLIGHT!* Darkness crept into my vision. I pointed my wand at the demon's face. *In the dark my need is dire, to save my life give sun to fire.* Bright, golden light burst from the tip of my wand, blasting pure sunshine right into the demon's face. It hissed and bellowed—and pulled its arm back to shield itself.

I gasped and choked on the rush of air to my lungs. My throat was raw and tight. My eyes watered. I held my wand on the demon as I took desperate gulps of oxygen. The demon's body smoked above me. I pulled my leg up and kicked it right in the chest. I scrambled out from under the beast just as my sunlight spell gave out. My magic wasn't strong enough to hold that more than a few seconds. When I jumped to my feet, my balance faltered, yet I stumbled forward.

Up ahead, I saw the silhouette of Marta and Carmen jumping over the wall at the edge of Central Park. I made it three more feet before they were out of my line of sight all together. That was good. They were fast. The School of Magical Arts wasn't far. They would make it to safety. I'd done it. I'd saved them. I just needed to save myself now. That demon growled behind me, and my stomach sank. Without slowing down, I glanced over my shoulder and flicked my

wand. Sunlight poured out of it again, knocking the demon onto its back.

*Run, Inez, RUN.*

I turned and sprinted forward just as a dozen wolves lunged from the shadows between the trees. Their eyes glowed and reflected the light from my wand. My feet slid to a stop. They were coming right for me. My breath caught in my throat. There wasn't a spell in my brain to fight off a dozen wolves, so I did all I could think of: I dropped down and tucked my body into a ball.

A massive white wolf leapt right over me. It landed just behind me and kept running without missing a beat. Dirt flew up in its wake. The rest of the wolves were only a few steps behind it. None of them slowed around me. None of them even seemed to notice me. I jumped up to run and then I spotted it, the wolves' targets.

Two dozen pairs of red eyes glowed from the tree line.

The same tree line that demon had been dragging Marta toward.

My breath left me in a rush. My balance faltered and I stumbled back a few steps. I had no idea where the wolves had come from, but they descended on those demons with snarls and growls. I wanted to be as far away from this show down as possible, so I spun and sprinted. Each breath I took seared my throat. My legs felt like Jell-O. Every inch of my body screamed in pain. I didn't want to know the extent of my injuries yet. I just needed to get to my sisters at the school. They had healers there—

A demon flew over my head and crashed into the park bench five feet in front of me. I tried to stop, but my feet slid



on the gravel. My knee buckled and slammed into the ground, sending sharp pain shooting up my leg. It leapt for me. I fired sunlight into its face. It hissed and then a gray wolf lunged through my sunlight and tackled it. Black demon blood sprayed in an arc. The heavy scent of maple syrup sent bile up my throat. I gagged and tried to swallow it back down.

Then the gray wolf turned on me and lunged.

I gasped and braced myself just as its paws landed on my chest and slammed my back into the ground. My head smacked the ground so hard I saw flashes of light in my eyes. My ears started to ring. I tried to move, but the wolf's paws still had me pinned down. I gripped my wand and tried to lift my arm but I had no strength left. My body was spent. Every nerve ending in me was on fire. My pulse thundered through my veins like a drumroll before I was to be hanged.

*No, no, no. Don't you DARE give up!* I cursed to myself and blinked until my eyesight cleared. The wolf wasn't trying to hurt me. Hell, it wasn't even looking at me. Its green eyes were locked in the distance, its lip curled back in a snarl.

I tried to move, and pain exploded inside of me. A broken cry left my lips and the wolf flinched. It looked down, then seemed to do a double take. I squirmed beneath its paws. It jumped off of me and huffed. I had no idea what that meant, but as a rush of cold air swept through my lungs, I realized I'd been struggling to breathe.

The wolf looked down at me, then threw its head back and howled.

I rolled onto my side to try and escape but that took all of my energy. The only thing I could move were my eyes, and when I did, I saw a path of blood on the gravel of Central

Park. *Black* blood ... the blood of demons. The wolves had killed the demons. I whimpered.

That massive white wolf, the one that first had leapt over me, almost seemed to flinch at the sound I'd made. Big, glowing amber eyes locked on me. It snarled and let out a vicious growl, and my heart stopped.

That gray wolf dove down and sank its teeth into the collar of my coat. I felt my body being dragged toward the ferocious growl of that white wolf ... and then everything went black.

## CHAPTER THREE

## INEZ



MY EYES FELT like they were glued closed, like there was sludge caked in my eyelashes, pinning them to each other. My mouth was so dry my tongue was sticking to the roof of it. My throat was raw and burned. Every inch of my body hurt. It was heavier than my eyelids. And hot. So hot. Like I'd fallen asleep in front of the fireplace or with my heated blanket on—or both. But my back was cold, like I was lying in the snow. Except ... it was firm, more like ice. It took all of the energy I had to wiggle my fingers enough to feel dirt beneath my hands.

My pulse quickened and my chest grew tight. *Why am I lying in cold dirt? Why does everything hurt? Where am I? Don't panic, Inez. Use your other senses.*

I took a deep breath through my nose and frowned. I smelled dirt and the hint of smoke from burning wood, like perhaps there was a bonfire in the distance. And a dog. Definitely smelled like that time I went camping with my friends and their Great Danes.

Trees groaned and creaked all around me. In my mind, I pictured towering pine trees swaying as the wind whistled through their branches. The air was refreshingly cool but then a huge gust of wind swept over me, and I gasped. It was *ice-*

cold. My whole body sighed with relief as it soothed the burning heat in my skin. And then it was gone. *No, no, no. Come back.* When a second gust of wind ripped through, I actually whimpered.

There was a rustle on my right side. It sounded like a rabbit under a bush. Then I heard skittering and little screeches from squirrels above me, as if they were in a canopy of branches looking down at me and wondering what the hell I was doing. There was a small choir of birds singing gentle lullabies like they were trying to put me to sleep. Judging by the lack of warmth in the air and the softness of the birds' caws, I assumed it was nighttime.

Something cold and soft landed on my face like powder or —*SNOW. That's snow.* It hadn't felt cold enough for snow except for when the wind rustled from my left side, almost like snow was just a few feet away. I concentrated until I thought I heard the sound of snow falling from the sky. It was a distinct yet subtle sound. The cracks and pops of the trees seemed louder to the left. Even the wind was louder. It echoed through the trees like howling wolves.

*Wait. HOWLING. From a WOLF. Eso es un lobo.*

The memories slammed into my mind like a tsunami. I forced my eyes open and sat up—and the world spun for a second. When it finally stopped moving, I wiped my eyes with my hands, then blinked about a hundred times. I looked up to see where I was, and my heart stopped.

I was at the edge of a clearing in a forest I did not recognize.

In front of me were *wolves*.

Massive, snarling, growling wolves. They were huge. Bigger than any wolf I'd ever seen. And there had to be fifty of them or more. Except they weren't actually snarling or growling ... they were just staring. At me. *¿Por qué me miran?*

I wanted to scream, to jump up and run away as fast as I could, but there were too many of them. *¿Qué hago?* Running away was futile. I wasn't foolish enough to think I could outrun a wolf, let alone an entire pack. And there was no point in screaming, it could rile them up.

My pulse thundered through my veins. I only sat there staring back at them for a few seconds total before I moved. It was a pathetic and desperate attempt at survival, but I wasn't about to accept my fate, so I scurried backwards until my back slammed into a tree and then I leapt up and climbed the trunk of it as fast as I could. I paid no attention to the type of tree. I just knew the branches were thick enough to hold me. A few of the wolves ran up to the base of the tree and looked up, so I climbed even higher. Wolves couldn't climb trees, so I prayed I would be safe up here until ... until ... well, I had no plan after that.

The wolves snorted and then looked to each other ... then back to me, like they were confused.

Wind rushed through the tree I was in, making the branch sway and dip. I screeched and hugged my hands tighter around the bark. Something moved above me in my peripheral vision, so I flinched and turned to look, expecting some demon to be dropping down on top of me—instead, I saw a massive pale-gray dragon fly over my head.

I gasped and leaned back to look.

“*Dragon?*” I whispered to myself. *¿Era un dragón?*

Above, the sky was a velvety navy-blue with big white stars twinkling like diamonds. *Did I make that up? Did I really see a*—two more dragons flew over me, one was emerald-green and the other was chocolate-brown and had a spiked tail. I was trying to sit up straight when a colossal black shadow blocked my view from the sky. My stomach dropped like I was on a rollercoaster. *Demons*. It had to be. I leaned down and wrapped my arms around the branch as wind slammed into the tree. There was a wave of heat as the demon landed right beside the tree. The damn thing had to be nearly as tall as the tree. I squirmed and the branch creaked.

The demon's head snapped up and glowing purple eyes spotted me in an instant.

*Wait. Purple eyes? Demons don't have purple eyes.* I loosened my grip enough to lean forward just as five dragons landed beside what I thought was a demon. I'd never seen a creature as black as a demon. It took a step forward and my breath left me in a rush. It wasn't a demon. It was a black dragon. I sighed and rested my forehead on the tree branch, squeezing my eyes shut.

*My heart can't take much more of this.*

*Demons. Wolves. More demons. Dragons—hold on.* The trauma of the night's events must have already warped my brain. I'd never seen a shifter in person. Sure, I'd seen some of the students at SOMA when I dropped Marta off. I'd seen Steve the dragon, but in his human form. All of them had been in their human forms. Even Billy from my store earlier. I'd learned all about the shifters in the last few months since they'd started helping The Coven. Everyone in our community was talking about it. Hell, there'd been so many attacks in Manhattan by demons that the dragons had saved our asses on.

Especially the giant all-black dragon with purple eyes.

*Okay, brain, calm down. Just take a step back. The dragons aren't going to hurt you.*

I opened my eyes and looked down and found a young man standing just beneath the branch I clung to. He was so tall that there were only a few feet between his head and mine. Some distant part of my brain registered that he was also unbelievably handsome with that long multi-toned brown hair, scruffy beard, and dazzling purple eyes that glowed in the dark.

Except it wasn't actually that dark. My brain was not working properly. I probably had a concussion. My thoughts were fuzzy and slow. Now that I looked around again, I realized the entire clearing held an orange glow that was bright enough to let me see that the pale-gray dragon had turned into a stupid pretty guy with intricate black tattoos swirling around his neck and shoulder.

*Oh, that bonfire smell must be here.*

Mr. Long Hair shoved his hands into the front pockets of his worn-out blue jeans and rocked back on his heels. Power radiated off of him in waves of heat. It was like I was standing in front of an open flame. And he didn't look the least bit surprised to see me.

“¿EN QUÉ ME HE METIDO?” I muttered to myself in Spanish.

“A tree. You've gotten yourself into a tree,” the man answered back from below me. Then in a perfect Spanish accent, he said, “*Como un gato.*”

“Like a cat?” I heard myself repeat back.



The man chuckled like he had no cares in the world. “I don’t have firemen in my land to call to get you down with their ladders. Well, I suppose that’s not entirely true. We are technically fire-men. Sort of. But I fear that tree branch isn’t strong enough to hold us up.”

I frowned. *My land. Fire-men. Dragon. The confidence and power.* I gasped as it clicked. I peered over the edge of the branch until my gaze landed on his glowing purple eyes. “King Kothari?”

He nodded. “Wanna come down now? I promise you’re safe.”

I whimpered and glanced to the horde of wolves.

“Those are not wild wolves. They’re shifters, Inez.”

I flinched. “You know my name?”

“Being King has its perks.” He grinned. “Why don’t you come down so we can talk easier? They’re not going to hurt you.”

I tried to let go of the branch, but my fingers were locked in place. My stomach turned. “You might need to peel my hands from this branch.”

“Heard.” Koth chuckled. “Elan?”

*Elan? What’s that mean? Why have I heard that word before?*

The tree rustled and then my branch bounced. I squealed and dove to hug the branch again when an eagle landed beside me. It was *huge*, the largest eagle I’d ever seen. Suddenly, orange smoke swirled around it. A second later it vanished—and left a guy in its place. My eyes widened. *OHHH. So*

*THAT'S what that looks like.* I sat up but my hands were now practically part of the tree.

The man was younger than I expected, also about my age or less. He had the tightest ringlet curls I'd ever seen on a guy, and they were definitely a range of colors. A few of them even had beads braided into them. He gave me young Jack Sparrow vibes. Except for his eyes. Those were the least human eyes I'd ever seen. They changed color rapidly.

He grinned and leaned forward. "Hello, I'm Elan. The Shaman."

"The Shaman?"

"Mmhhmm." He reached out and pressed his palm to my forehead. "This isn't going to hurt."

Cold air washed over my skin—and then the pressure was gone. Pressure I hadn't even realized was there was suddenly gone. That haze around my thoughts vanished. It was like he'd vacuumed all the dust out of my head. My body still hurt like hell, but the pain in my head was gone. I sighed and sagged forward.

"Nasty little concussion you had there. That should take most of it away, but I'll heal you properly ..." he gestured to the ground, "once you're out of this tree."

I groaned. "You're the Shaman ... for the shifters?"

"I am indeed."

"That's kind of like the High Priestess for The Coven?"

He pursed his lips and frowned. "More like The Hierophant. We're both in touch with those who guide us."

"Like The Goddess?"

“Exactly.”

I exhaled in a rush. “Okay. My brain is working better now. Thank you.”

“Not a problem!” He arched one eyebrow and pointed to my hands. “May I?”

“Please.”

With surprisingly gentle fingers, he peeled my hands off the branch in two quick movements. But before I could move or thank him, my body slid right off the branch and into a free fall. I sucked in a breath to brace myself for impact when two large arms caught me right out of the air. I opened my eyes again and looked up to find myself cradled in King Kothari’s arms.

“Thank you.”

He grinned. “You’re welcome. You okay?”

“Nope. *No estoy bien.*”

“Been a long night?”

“What gave it away?”

“Maybe how you just had to be peeled out of a tree? Or it was how you didn’t even try to break your fall or even brace for it? That suggests a certain level of apathy.” He looked down at my body. “But really it’s all the blood that was a dead giveaway.”

“It was a demon.”

“I know. It died, along with its friends.”

“Good. Good.” I licked my lips and gagged at the bitter metallic taste of my own blood. “My brain is kind of in slow-motion right now.”

Elan landed on his feet right beside us. “That’s the concussion. If you’ll allow me, I have a potion to help clear it some more?”

“O-okay.”

King Kothari nodded. “I’m going to sit you down now, okay?”

*Diosa. ¿Me estaba abrazando?* I nodded.

He carefully and gently sat me down on the cold ground, which I was surprised to find was dirt despite the fact that I’d felt it in my fingers. “Inez?”

I looked up into his purple eyes and frowned. “Did I feel snow?”

“Ah, yes.” He gestured to his right, my left, and smiled. “It does not snow often within the borders, but we’re close to the edge, so you can feel it right there.”

I followed his point and found heaps and heaps of fluffy white snow covering the ground on the far side of the clearing. All of the trees on that side and beyond had ice clinging to its trunk and branches. Snow weighed them down. It was beautiful.

I nodded. “Where am I?”

King Kothari smiled. “Welcome to Issale, Inez.”

“*Mierda*. Was I supposed to bow to you?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “We’ll all pretend you did. It’s the least we can do given your evening and state of arrival.”

I turned back to meet his stare, which was calm and friendly. “So, I look as bad as I feel then?”

He grimaced. “A lot less demon blood than you might be expecting?”

I blinked. “I don’t like that that’s the good news.”

He laughed full-out at that, then he pushed his long hair back out of his face and sighed. “All jokes aside, Inez, I am sorry you’ve arrived here so frightened and injured. I would like to know the why for this as much as you. But I promise, you are safe here.”

“In Issale.” I swallowed roughly and eyed the five or six dozen wolves still staring at me. “The home country of shifters ... because these are all shifters here.”

The crowd of wolves parted in the middle to make way for two new wolves to join the welcome party. The first one was the largest of all of the wolves. Its fur was a pretty light-brown color and it had big green eyes. The other one was right on its flank and almost as large—just from the sheer size of them, I instantly knew these two wolves were important somehow. The second one had gorgeous white fur like fresh fallen snow ... and amber eyes.

I gasped and sat up straight. “*You*. I remember you from Central Park. You were the first one there. *Me has salvado*.”

King Kothari smirked. “That tracks for him.”

White mist wrapped around the white wolf’s legs. Without missing a step, the white wolf shifted. One step he was an animal, the next he stood a couple inches over six feet tall on two legs in human form. He had sandy blond hair and the exact same amber eyes. He wore a leather jacket and jeans ... and leather gloves.

My breath left me in a rush. I held onto the ground to steady myself. “*Foster?*”

“Oh, good. You two did meet.” King Kothari turned to Foster.

“Yes, my Lord, we did.” Foster bowed to his king, then turned to me with a smile as he stopped a few feet in front of me. “Hello again, Inez.”

“H-h-h-i?” I shook my head. “You’re a shifter. I thought you were a witch. Why didn’t you say you were a shifter like Billy? Is Billy here too?”

Foster smiled wider. “Billy is at SOMA, that was one hundred percent truthful. I just left out some details on myself.”

My head spun so I pressed my blood-stained fingers to my temple. *¿Esto es real?*

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke but I had to go get our Alpha. You woke sooner than I expected.” He grimaced but then gestured to the brown wolf beside him. *The Alpha*, as he’d referred to him, was the other large wolf he’d walked over with. “This is Clayton Logan.”

The Alpha, who had stopped beside Foster in wolf form, chose that moment to shift into his human form. The delay was strange but perhaps he liked to make an entrance. The man, Clayton, looked like your classic all-American white guy with his brown hair and green eyes.

Foster gestured to me. “This is Inez Alvarez.”

Clayton cleared his throat and waved at me with a smile. “Good evening, Inez.”

I waved to him, then frowned at Foster. “You know my name?”

“You told me in the store.”

“I said my last name?”

Foster opened his mouth, then shut it. His cheeks flushed. “I’m actually not sure. But Marta told Billy, so maybe that’s why I know it?”

“Oh.” I frowned. “I’m so confused.”

“Yes, me too—”

“Excuse me, Mr. King Kothari, sir—”

“Please, call me Koth.” He chuckled.

“Koth. Right. Just gimme a sec?” I nodded and reached up to unbutton my coat. My fingers were still trembling, so they kept slipping on the zipper on the inside. I groaned. “Can someone help me please? I need this pocket open.”

Koth crouched down and quickly reached into my coat and unzipped the pocket I pointed to. I thanked him and slid my hand inside to pull out one of my hidden vials. The wolves all frowned and looked to Koth, except for Clayton who cocked his head to the side like a confused puppy. Foster was the only one who kept his eyes on me, but I didn’t like how concerned the others looked.

“I’m a witch.” I uncapped the vial and then tossed the potion back like a shot of tequila. “This is normal.”

Koth eyed the empty vial. “What was that?”

“Listen, I have anxiety problems, okay? A witch who lives in the biggest city with little sisters who just started magic school ... and have I mentioned all the new demon activity in New York? Oh, I don’t have to. You’ve been there. You saw. Well, unfortunately, I saw too. My therapist—also a witch—recommended I carry these emergency anti-anxiety potions around at all times. I brewed them specifically for myself

because I'm a witch and that's what witches do. Ya know?" I shoved the now empty vial back into my pocket. "It helps."

"And this will as well."

I jumped as Elan knelt down beside me. "What will?"

He held a vial out to me and grinned. "This is for your concussion. Step two of what I already did in the tree." As soon I took the vial from him, he pulled a blanket off of his shoulders and wrapped it around mine.

It was soft and cozy and did more for my frazzled nerves than for the chill. Then I sniffed the potion. It smelled legit but I had no way of really knowing. I looked to Koth. "I'm going to trust you on this and take it, and then someone is going to explain *what the hell I'm doing here*. Okay?"

Koth grinned. "Okay."

I looked to Elan, then to Foster. When they both nodded, I drank Elan's potion. It was warm and soothing like hot tea. The witch part of my brain instantly tried to identify some of the ingredients, but I got as far as honey and lavender before the taste was gone. As soon as I swallowed the last drop, the shooting, sharp pain in my head vanished. I closed my eyes and sighed. *Es una buena señal*.

"Better, right?" Elan asked softly.

I opened my eyes and handed his vial back to him. "Later I want to discuss what's in that. But yes, better. Thank you."

Elan and Koth exchanged glances that would have sent my pulse flying had it not been for the fresh anxiety potion I'd just taken. I licked my lips and stared at them. Foster cleared his throat, his eyes locked on Clayton—who said something to Koth in a language I didn't speak.



“So, you know who I am, but these are my warriors—the other dragons. Silas, Finn, Tyce, Dace, and Yaluk. In that order from the light-gray to the brown. They’re still in dragon form because they’re watching our backs in case any demons followed the pack home.”

I shuddered.

“Don’t worry. Demons can’t get inside Issale borders. But we don’t want them close either.” He gave me a reassuring smile. That playful side of him was gone. In its place was every bit the King: calm, confident, and entirely in control. He exhaled and his breath left him as smoke. “Well, Inez, I’m not going to lie or sugarcoat it. You’re a New Yorker, so you’re a blunt person, right?”

*Mierda. No me gusta esa pregunta.* I nodded.

“The truth is there is a specific reason you’re here. However, it wasn’t supposed to happen the way it did.” He gestured to Clayton, Foster, and the other wolves. “The pack was supposed to handle it differently.”

Clayton rubbed his jaw. “They were indeed. Foster, can you explain what happened?”

Foster’s amber eyes shot to me. He grimaced. “The plan was to introduce myself tonight at your store. Billy may have served as my excuse for being there, but it was more killing two birds with one stone. Like I said, I didn’t lie to you, I simply left out some information.”

“You said you were going to meet with the school and Caroline tomorrow and then come back to the store.”

“Not a lie. Granted, I won’t be doing that at this point.” He shrugged. “The plan was to come in tomorrow and explain why I was there. But then you and your sisters were attacked

by demons, and we had to intervene. We couldn't let them kill you. Still, my plan was to see you home safely and confront you tomorrow. Unfortunately, one of our teenage wolves misunderstood the assignment and tackled you when he thought you were fleeing. That's when you passed out from your injuries."

A teenage boy with acne groaned from ten feet behind him. He tugged on his red hair, then hung his head. "I'm so sorry. I panicked, okay?"

Despite it all, I felt bad for him. "It's okay, I understand. I'm alive ... right?"

Koth chuckled. "You are alive. You have some injuries, but Elan will finish getting you healed up quick. He may not be a witch, but we are quite good at healing potions and tricks of our own."

"Okay." I pulled the blanket tighter around me. "But why am I here? You keep saying you had a plan to talk to me and to explain but to explain *what*? What could the shifters need from me? You're friends with The Coven. I know you are. I'm nobody. No bullshit, please. Just tell me."

"No bullshit?" Foster gave me that sideways grin he'd given me back in my store. "There's a prophecy we were given, and it led us to you."

I sat up straight. "A prophecy? And it led you to me? Weird. What's it say? ¿*Quiero saberlo?*" I looked to Koth.

"We just received this prophecy on the winter solstice, but it's taken us this long to track you down." Koth gestured to Elan. "Please read it for her."

Elan reached into the brown leather satchel hanging by his hip and pulled out a piece of parchment paper—like he'd been

holding on to it for centuries and not just two months. He cleared his throat as he unfolded it, then licked his lips. “*Watch for the Mark in the Moon, it shall sing a song of Arcana rune. On this night the time has come, for Issale needs a magic thumb. First make a potion for her to drink, to lure the form from the brink. A wand in hand and form to shift, her first change will be swift. But this soul must be found, send the wolves, snout to ground. Within a city never to sleep, where the Hudson wind ever sweep. Seek the sign of the Moon Child, Sense the wilderness in her wild. For on the wall and on her skin, Marked is the crescent thin. Her role is crucial to the war, The Goddess sends her to your shore. In her veins power will sing, bring her to thy dragon King. Find in kind and bring her back, to take her crown as Priestess of the Pack.*”

Silence.

I blinked and stared at him. “I’m sorry ... what?”

That was intense. There was a lot to unpack there. A lot of words and clues. My stomach tightened into knots. No one else made a sound, they all just stared at me like they were waiting for my reaction. I glanced to Koth who gave me a small, confident smile. Clayton grinned and wagged his eyebrows when I looked to him. But then I looked to Foster, who grimaced.

“*Okay ...*” I pulled the blanket around me tighter. “So you need a witch to be your priestess, right? That’s what that means? *Arcana* is us—witches. Right?”

Elan chuckled. “That is correct.”

Silence.

“What am I missing here?” I glanced around at all of them. “I don’t see why I was needed? It said, *send the wolves*, so I

get that part.”

More silence. The silence was actually deafening. No one was telling me anything. Elan gave me a weird side-eye that I didn't want to linger too long on. Koth wasn't the slightest bit nervous. He just stood there patiently waiting. The other dragons were watching me as if I was going to lunge for Koth with a dagger. The wolves, on the other hand, stared at their Alpha, which made me look back to him. He was an attractive man who held an aura of confidence, but he smiled at me like I was the answer to all of their problems, like I was a gift from the Goddess. Beside him, Foster cringed. He seemed to be the only one who understood that I had no idea what was going on.

So, I focused on him. “Foster?”

“No bullshit ...” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Exactly, no bullshit. I don't understand why you needed me—” I stopped as it clicked. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. My stomach sank. “Wait. No. No, no, no. You can't think that's *me*.”

“We do,” Foster said softly.

I shook my head so fast I was about to give myself another concussion. “*No, no puedes. No soy yo. No puedo ser esa persona. Te has equivocado de chica. Debes de estar confundido. Esto no es posible. Sólo soy una bruja, eso es todo.* I'm not a shifter. I'm a witch. I went to Edenburg. I'm a Wand. I've never shifted before.”

“We know that.” Koth's voice was soft but firm. Patient. “But you are.”

“No, no, no.” My stomach rolled. I held my hand out to Elan. “*Dámelo.* Let me see that.”

He placed the parchment in my hand, then tapped the top. “See that image? That’s the Mark the prophecy refers to. Do you see it?”

“Yes. It’s a crescent moon that melts into the water—*oh my Goddess*. No. No, no, no. That has to be a coincidence.” I pressed my fingers onto my back, right over where a tattoo that matched the Mark was inked into my skin. “It’s a common tattoo. It’s just the moon! I saw the picture on Pinterest and copied it.”

“We saw this Mark painted on the moon on the solstice.”

“*For on the wall and on her skin, Marked is the crescent thin,*” Foster all but whispered. His amber eyes glowed like flames. “*Seek the sign of the Moon Child*. That’s you and your store. Moon Child is capitalized because it’s an actual place. The logo is on the wall and on your skin. It’s you.”

“*No, no, no, no.*” I shook my head and braced my hands on the cold dirt for stability, but then words from the prophecy replayed in my mind. “*Wait a second. Make a potion for her to drink?* What did you just give me—”

“A healing potion for your head.” Elan held both palms up. “The potion this refers to I would never give without your consent.”

“We don’t lie to our own people, Inez.”

I whimpered. *Our own people ... because he thinks I’m one of them.* “It’s never happened. I can’t do it. I can’t shift.”

Koth just nodded. “You have to drink this potion first.”

“That’s crazy. This is crazy. I’m just a witch—”

“Listen, Inez ...” Koth knelt in front of me and pressed his palm to his chest over his heart. “I give you my word, as King

of shifters, that if you drink this potion and we are wrong, it will not harm you in any way. If you are not the Priestess of the Pack, this potion will be nothing more than water. If that happens, I will personally fly you home to your healers and get you fixed up.”

Silence.

Those big purple eyes just watched me.

“But if we are right and you are the Priestess of the Pack, this potion will draw out the shifter gene and allow you to become the full extent of who you were meant to be.”

“Oh *diosa*. You’re serious. You think it’s me.” I groaned and pressed my hands to my eyes until I saw flashes of colorful light. “I have so many questions. *Esto no puede estar pasando.*”

“Well ...”

There was something in Elan’s voice that made me look back up to him.

He grinned and held a purple vial out between us. Black lines shot across his face. “Drink first. If you’re right, there are less questions to ask.”

“If I’m right, then you’ll take me home?”

Koth nodded. “But if *we’re* right—”

“Then welcome home.” Elan grinned and more of those black lines shot across his face. It was nearly the creepiest, most unsettling thing I’d ever seen. Part of me wanted to ask, the other part of me was on overload already. But Elan just held the vial closer to me. “Overthinking and hypothesizing don’t get anyone very far.”

I cursed and took the vial from his hand. “*Diosa, vela por mí.* Please don’t let me regret this.”

“Remember ...” Koth leaned down to catch my gaze again, “if we’re wrong, this won’t hurt you.”

I exhaled a rough breath. “*AQUÍ VA NADA.*”

I licked my lips, brought the vial to my mouth, then tossed it back just like I had with my own potion. It tasted like one of those Capri Sun drinks from when I was a kid. It was so sweet and fruity. It was almost sour but not quite. I closed my eyes as the flavor burned my sinuses. When I reopened them, I found everyone watching me.

I coughed and they leaned forward.

Waiting.

Expecting.

But nothing happened. It was just a strange, over-flavored drink. I felt bad for them, they clearly thought they had the right girl. Not that I blamed them, those lines did sound like they could’ve meant me ... but I wasn’t a shifter.

Yet *still* they stared.

Clayton scowled. Foster wasn’t even looking at me, he was looking at his watch—he peeked up at me and arched one eyebrow. *Oh, he’s timing it. Well, this is getting awkward.* I glanced to Elan only to cringe at the sight of black lines dancing across his face. I’d heard stories about the Shaman of the shifters being psychic and connected to their higher power. But I didn’t like that knowledge when he was looking at *me* like *that*.

Then I turned to Koth.

A smile pulled at his lips. Those purple eyes flashed with light. He held his hands up. “Just breathe through it, okay?”

“Breathe through what? Nothing’s happening.” I glanced to Foster. He smirked and nodded. “Guys, breathe through what? I don’t feel a—”

Heat exploded inside of my body, sucking every ounce of oxygen from my lungs. I felt my eyes go wide. My body went weightless, like I was floating off the ground. I tried to dig at the dirt, but my fingers were tingling.

“*Breathe, Inez,*” Koth growled.

My body obeyed his command instantly. I sucked in a ragged gasp of air that scorched a path down my throat and into my stomach. My legs trembled and twitched. My pulse beat so fast it was practically one beat. I dug at the dirt for support, but it gave way under my nails. Pink mist exploded in front of me like someone lit off a firework in my face. I leapt backwards but my foot slipped on a root of a tree and my legs flew up over my head—covered in black fur.

Four legs. All covered in black fur.

I screamed—and it came out as a howl.

*WHAT IS THAT? WHAT—WHAT—THAT’S NOT—WHAT IS—WAS THAT—I flailed my arms and legs to try and get away, then somehow was suddenly standing. On all four legs. I looked down. My legs were gone. I tried to lift my hand to my face, but it came up as a paw. With claws. I screamed in my head, but my ears heard it as a howl. NO, NO, NO, NO. THIS IS NOT HAPPENING. IT CAN’T. I’M NOT. THIS ISN’T. NO, NO, NO, NO.*

“Easy, Inez.” Koth stepped up in front of me, still towering over me. He was still holding his hands up with that same



smile on his face. “Breathe.”

I sucked in a deep breath, but the panic resurged instantly. I spun around in a tight circle, looking for an answer, but all I saw was black fur and a black tail.

“Inez, look at me,” Koth ordered in a firm voice.

My body stopped instantly. I looked up at him and whimpered. My whole body trembled. Orange light flashed and flickered. Scents and sounds I hadn’t been hearing moments ago were now overpowering me. It was sensory overload. Someone had turned up the dial. It hurt.

*No, no, no, no, no. Make it stop. This isn’t real. This isn’t happening.*

“Look.” Elan hopped in front of me and held up a mirror. “See?”

Unable to stop myself, I looked to the mirror, but where I should have seen *me*, I found only the image of a big black wolf ... with *my* golden eyes. My heart stopped.

Clayton grinned. “Welcome to my pack, Priestess.”

And then everything went black.

## CHAPTER FOUR

INEZ



I GASPED AND JUMPED UP—

“Whoa, whoa, easy—”

“What’s on me? ¿*Qué es esto?*” I swatted at whatever was pressed to my eyes and blocking my sight. “Get it off, get it off—”

“Here, let me.”

I froze, my breath caught in my throat. I recognized that voice. “*Elan?*”

“*Yes, it’s me,*” he whispered back. “*Just breathe. It’s bandages. I’m taking them off in three ... two ... one ...*”

Bright light pierced my eyes. I hissed and swatted at my face—and felt *skin*. Not fur. I gasped again and forced my eyes open, then whimpered at the sight of my hands. *My hands*. Human-looking hands. I saw my gold rings and my neon-yellow nail polish. My breath left me in a rush.

“*Gracias, Diosa. No soy un lobo. Soy una humana. Tengo piel, no pelaje.*”

Elan chuckled. “You’re all right, Inez. I’ve closed the curtain so it’s not so bright in here. You can open your eyes fully.”

I blinked and opened my eyes, then looked up to find him sitting directly in front of me. He held two regular-looking gauze bandages in his hands. We were in some kind of log cabin. The walls seemed to be made of wood. The wall across from me had a large white curtain covering most of it. On the right were two closed wooden doors. On the left, closest to me, was a rolling rack with three shelves holding vials, crystals, and bandages. On the other side of it was a desk of some kind littered with blood-soaked linens and bandages that I chose to not acknowledge just yet. The room was well-lit by torches on the walls and there were rays of sunshine streaming in through the window on the far left side of the room.

“It’s daylight.” *Veo el sol.*

“It is.” Elan lifted his wrist up higher. “Two in the afternoon.”

My breath left me in a rush. “Wasn’t it dark before? I’d only just left my store at eleven—”

“You arrived in Issale around four in the morning.”

“*Issale.*” I groaned and buried my face in my hands. “So all of that was real?”

“Yes, quite so.” Elan chuckled. “You’re in my infirmary right now.”

*Claro que era real, Inés. Estás hablando con Elan y no le conocías antes de anoche.* If Elan was here then that was a dead giveaway that last night was real. I dropped my hands and really looked at him for the first time. His skin was smooth and deeply tanned, which made me wonder what his heritage was. That wild hair of his was even wilder. Those ringlets were wound so tight, and they were in so many shades of blond and brown. I had the sudden urge to take a flat iron to

them to see just how long his hair would be straight. Probably to his elbows. With the brighter light, I realized he looked even younger than I thought. Except for in his eyes though, there was wisdom in those eyes—in each of the colors as they changed.

“Do your eyes always change colors?” I slammed my hand over my mouth. *Muy bien, Inés. Sólo invade su intimidad.* “I’m sorry. That’s rude and invasive. Word vomit.”

But he just chuckled. “I’m used to it. Can’t have these eyes and not get asked. And yes, they always change, but not at the same speed. I’ve gone hours with one color at a time. It’s tied to my magic and how much of it I’m using.”

“So you’re using a lot right now?”

At that, he grimaced. Then he held up some more bloodied bandages and tossed them to the rolling rack. “To heal you, yes. I apologize, but I had to remove your coat so I could treat your wounds. Normally, I would never undress someone without asking but with demons—”

“It’s okay. Thank you for tending to me. How bad do I look?”

“Oh, you’re completely healed.”

I jumped and then held my arms out to inspect my body.

“Well, you could use a shower to rinse the evidence off, but the wounds themselves are healed.”

My jaw dropped. He wasn’t lying. And the pain was *gone*. “¿Cómo? How did you do that so quick?”

“Magic.” He shrugged. “We heal fast.”

“What do you mean?” And then those images from right before I passed out flashed through my mind. Images of four

legs and black fur. *El lobo*. “Elan ... Elan ... when you say *we* —”

“The magic that allows us to shift into animal form also allows us to heal quickly. It’s sort of imperative in our line of work.” He grinned and those black lines flashed across his face. I must’ve made a face, because he shook his head. “Those just mean I’m having psychic visions, and it’s best not to ask.”

I shuddered. *Entonces no preguntaré*. “So, you saw me coming.”

“Yes and no.” He rubbed his hands together. “I saw your arrival but not your face. Quite interesting and infuriating at times.”

I nodded and bit my lip. “Did I shift into a wolf last night?”

“A big, beautiful black wolf.”

The whole room spun. I groaned and lay back down. “This isn’t real.”

His face hovered over mine, a shit-eating grin firmly in place. “As real as the magic you wield in your wand.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “*Muy divertido*.”

“I mean, I suppose I figured this would be easier for you to handle since you’re already aware that you’re a witch.”

I sighed and pressed my fingers to my temples. “That’s fair. Hurts a bit, but fair.”

He giggled. “But imagine if I had to explain the magic bits too.”

A chuckle slipped out. “Dammit, Elan. I’m trying to be freaked out right now. Don’t come at me with all your logic.”

“Sorry, sorry. What may I do to assist in your freaking out?” He pursed his lips and looked off in the distance. “This sounds intriguing.”

I snorted and sat up, then shoved him playfully. He was just an easy person to be around. “You may *help* by answering my questions.”

He snapped his fingers, leaned back in his chair, then crossed one leg over the other and propped his hands behind his head. “Answers I’ve got for days.”

“So, I was born a witch ... to witch parents ... Are you saying I had the shifter gene buried deep in my genetic makeup, or you forced me to have this ability with that potion?”

“Definitely the genetic part.” He nodded slowly, looking more like a therapist than a mischievous shaman. “There are a surprising number of witches with the dormant gene, but with witches the gene becomes active either at a young age or as a result of extreme trauma.”

I frowned. “And that potion was my extreme trauma?”

He arched one eyebrow at me. “Wasn’t it though?”

*Sí, sí que lo era.* I groaned and scrubbed my face with my hands. “Okay, okay. So, who did I get the gene from?”

“Sadly, that I cannot tell you. Somewhere in your bloodline was a shifter, but that person could have been several generations back. Your own parents may never have known what they could have been.” The humor left his face. He glanced at me with such a soft expression I knew what he was about to ask.

“They’re both dead.”

His face fell. “I am sorry.”

“But I have two half-sisters. We share the same father. Should I be worried?”

“Well, that’s the fun part of genetics. Just because you inherited those gold eyes doesn’t mean your siblings did, so *you* have the gene, but they may not. Are they both witches?”

“Yes. My father’s death was the trigger to bring out their magic. They’re both now at the new School of Magical Arts in Manhattan.” I nodded and wrung my hands together. My stomach turned. “I’m kind of freaking out about them right now, I have no idea if they even made it home.”

“We shall talk to Koth about them to make sure they are safe. If I know my King like I think I do, he ensured their safety before you even arrived here. But we’ll ask. As for the shifter magic? We’ll discuss with Koth about sending a discreet note to the shifter teachers at SOMA to watch them until you get settled in more.” He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. “We have a much more subtle version of the potion you drank last night that we give to let us see if the shifter gene is even present. It won’t trigger anything, just let us know if it’s possible.”

I gasped and sat up straight. “OH. So, we make them both drink it, then we’ll know. And if they do, then we can force their first shift like you did for me?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. “Koth does not like to play with fate like that. He believes the gene awakens if it is needed and meant to be. However, since you are the Priestess of the Pack, he may be willing. May I give you a suggestion though?”



“Yes, please.”

“Be patient.” His eyes darkened and his voice dipped low. “These are the worst of times for our world. The war with Lilith is coming. As you may know, she is evil and darkness incarnate. Her ill-will seeps into every crack and crevice she can find. She tricks and manipulates, seeks out weaknesses and then weaponizes them for her own gain. The Coven has seen this firsthand themselves already.”

The witches who made up The Coven, the people who ruled the magical world, had been fighting off Lilith’s attacks since August. Several of them had already died. Lots of civilian people had died at her hands, both witches *and* human. Every witch was on edge, awaiting the apocalypse Lilith would bring to our doors.

Elan put his hand on my forearm. “You are safe within the borders of Issale. And we have direct contact with The Coven should anything arise. But Koth is stressed. Right now, he’s particularly worried about *you*, so we’ll ensure your sisters are safe and then we’ll focus on getting you settled with us. *Then* we’ll discuss your sisters and their genetics after. Deal?”

“Promise?”

He held his hand out for me to shake. “Promise.”

“Okay, deal.” I shook his hand. “So, I’m a wolf. And a witch—wait, am I still a witch?”

“Oh, very much so.”

“Am I the only witch here?”

“No. We have one other. Her name is Amelia English.” He grimaced and for the first time showed signs of stress. “She is young. Fifteen. Her story is traumatic and not mine to tell. Her

cousin Deacon is in The Coven. He is quite powerful, and Amelia will be too.”

“But she’s not Priestess of the Pack.”

“She is not. She’s not a wolf, either. Amelia is young. Even as a witch she was new to magic. Her role with us is very much on the battlefield—or it will be.” He turned his blue eyes—no, orange—to me. “The role of the Priestess is quite different.”

“What is it?” I leaned forward. Butterflies danced in my stomach. “What am I?”

“As the prophecy states, *Issale needs a magic thumb.*” He exhaled roughly. “I don’t want to overwhelm you, and to be honest, I don’t have specifics to give you, per se. But we, as shifters, have very limited magic. What we’ve been given is to be used for specific reasons, much like witches.”

“And what is that reason? Why do shifters exist?” I pulled my legs up and crossed them under me. “I know that when the Garden of Eden fell and chaos rained on this realm, Heaven created witches to kind of police the world, to act as justice. To destroy all the demons and any other non-human threats. We’re here to protect the people of the world from everything *else.*”

“Exactly!” He grinned and rubbed his hands together excitedly. “But what about the Earth itself?”

I frowned. “I’m not following.”

He jumped up and ran to that big white curtain, then yanked it open. Bright sunshine slammed into my face like a brick wall. I hissed like a vampire and shielded my face.

“Oh, sorry. Sorry. Let me fix—”

*No, no me gusta.* I reached into my boot and pulled out the miniature wand I kept tucked in my sock for emergencies and flicked my wrist in the motions I needed to fix this. “*I see thy light but make her dim. For mine eyes, bright is grim.*”

My magic vibrated through my wand, humming against my fingers as that familiar pink flash filled the air. Instantly, the bright sunlight dimmed down to match the soft warm glow in a bedside lamp. It was just magic. I hadn’t affected anything permanently. I sighed and blinked my eyes.

“I was *not* ready for sunshine.” I chuckled and shook my head. “Sorry about that. Hey, did you find my other wand? I keep it in a pocket in my coat.”

“Yes, yes. It’s still in that pocket. I hung your coat on the hook by the door to your right. Though I do believe we need to replace it. The demons slashed it up pretty good.” He smiled down at the wand in my hand, then glanced to the window. “But I do believe that was a perfect example of what we need you for.”

“Huh? For that little spell?”

“We’ll circle back around to that.” He chuckled and leaned against the wall right beside the window. “But I was asking about the Earth itself. The witches are tending to the people who live here but not the *where* they’re living. The land. The dirt, the soil, the gravel, the ground we walk on, the oceans, lakes, and rivers, the air we breathe, the trees that give us that air, the sun shining its light on us ... who is tending to that?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. *Mierda. Buena pregunta.*

“Let me put it this way ... imagine you’re married. You have five children, three dogs, a grouchy cat, and your mother-

in-law above the pool house. You have a big house, two cars, a yard, and a pool. You with me so far?” When I nodded, he continued. “Now you do your job as the mother to keep the kids fed and bathed. You take them to school, ballet, soccer practice, and the doctor when they fall off the jungle gym. You take the dogs to the park and buy your cat one of those fancy tower thingies for your house. Your cars get constant gas, washes, and the necessary service updates. You tend to your mother-in-law’s needs. You keep the pool chemicals balanced. You make sure there’s dinner on the table and clean clothes for everyone to wear. You even take care of yourself, despite all that.”

I frowned. “This all sounds awful. Where are you going with this?”

He smirked. “Well ... who’s cleaning the house? Who’s fixing the leaky sink or the bathtub that won’t drain? Who’s taking the plunger to the toilet with clogs? Who does the dusting? Who vacuums and mops? Who handles the busted roof or the basement if it floods? Who puts lawn seed out to grow new grass? Who trims the dead branches off the trees? While you’re taking care of the people living on your property, who is tending to your property? Because no matter what you thought when you bought it, you can’t do it all, which means you either hire someone else or sacrifice yourself to do everything.”

I whistled under my breath. “That’s ...”

“Exactly.” He shrugged and gestured out the window. “The Coven learned long, long, *long* ago that they had too much on their plates. While they were overworked trying to tend to the creatures that lived here, *here* was struggling to survive. We were born to keep Earth alive. You just got here, so I won’t

bombard you with *how* we do that as it's complex, but our job is both sacred and crucial to the world's survival."

I exhaled and stared at the birds flying across the bright-blue sky. "And because the world is going to shit from Lilith, you need people who are both witch and shifter to keep the balance."

"YES!" He pointed his finger at me, then fist-pumped the air. "I knew you'd get it."

"No pressure or anything."

He walked back over and sat on the chair across from me. "Do not worry. This is not a task that lies solely on your shoulders. I am the Shaman of Issale. You are *my* Priestess. You have been sent here to help me. You and I are going to work closely together, much in the way that The Coven all works together."

"That sounds great, Elan. Really. I am happy to help. I just wish I knew what I was gonna be doing."

"Magic, my dear. Magic." He pointed to the wand still in my hand. "I suspect much like the work you do in your store, *Moon Child*. I can't give you specifics because we'll address them as they arise, but you were sent to us for your skill with magic."

"So not to fight demons?"

"Only if you want to," A deep male voice said from suddenly right behind me.

I gasped and leapt off the little bed—and landed on all fours in the corner. *OH MY GODDESS! THAT WAS REAL!* I'd known it was, Elan had said it was, and yet the shock I felt at seeing four paws covered in black fur had me wobbling like I was going to faint again.

*Oh no. No, no, no. Make it stop. Go back. Turn back.* I shook my paws out one at a time, trying to force them to change back. *Shift back! Dammit! How do I do this? ¡Perro malo! ¡Perro malo!* My pulse was flying fast. I whimpered and spun in a tight circle, then a dark cloud slammed into me. I froze in place.

“Inez, look at me,” that same deep voice echoed through my mind.

But I listened without hesitation, like my body didn’t really have a choice. When I turned toward the newcomer’s voice, I gasped. It was *Koth*.

Koth smiled patiently. He held both hands up, then crouched down so our eyes were level. “I’m sorry I frightened you.”

*It’s okay. I’m okay.* But I wasn’t speaking words, it was coming out as a ferocious growl. My stomach tightened into knots. *Oh DIOSA, I’m growling at the King. He’s gonna think I’m growling at him. How do I speak like this—*

“I know you’re not growling at me.”

I flinched. My eyes widened. *Can you hear me?*

“Yes, I can hear your thoughts while I’m in human form. It’s a King thing.” He smirked. “So rest assured, no other shifter will hear your telepathy while in human form.”

My stomach sank. *Wait. You can hear my thoughts? Like all of them? All the time? Everything I’m thinking at all times?*

He chuckled. “Well, we have to be able to speak to each other while in animal form, so we have telepathy, but it’s not all of your thoughts unless you want to send all of them.”

*Oh boy, that has embarrassment written all over it.*

“Yeah, it gets a little sloppy sometimes for the kids.” He sat on a stool on the other side of the bed. “But we will teach you how to control that so you only share the thoughts you want to share.”

“It’s like one of those spells you do.” Elan tapped on his temple. “It’s willpower. Sounds hard now but I promise it’s not once you learn.”

*Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool. No me estoy asustando. En absoluto. Esto está bien.*

“Now, I’m going to force you to shift back into your human form. It won’t hurt. Just breathe.”

I nodded and then closed my eyes. Heat washed over me, covering me from head to toe. It was gentle yet firm, almost like cuddling into a fuzzy blanket.

“You can open your eyes now.”

I peeked with one eye and found I was now looking down at Koth. With both eyes I glanced down at my body to find I was back to looking like *me* again. I exhaled in a rush and leaned against the wall. “Damn. What the hell just happened?”

“You lost control.” Koth shrugged. “That’s what I’m here to talk to you about.”

I sat back down on the bed but propped myself against the wall, then pulled my knees up to my chest. “Am I in trouble?”

He frowned. “No, of course not. We forced your first shift mere hours ago. No one expects you to know how to shift back and forth. It’s something every shifter has to learn and master.”

“Oh.”

“I let Elan explain your role as Priestess and our role as a species, because he’s much better at that than I am.” Koth

chuckled as he cracked his knuckles. “But I was listening outside for a smooth opening and then naturally messed that up entirely.”

Elan shook with laughter.

“But like Elan said, we’re a team here, so we will help you handle your new role and whatever tasks will come your way. We don’t want you freaking out.”

“So does this mean I live here now? I can’t go back home to New York? Can’t return to my store? My life is in Issale now?”

“That’s, unfortunately, not an easy question to answer. In theory, you won’t be required to be in Issale twenty-four-seven in the long run. No shifter is required to live here. But I do require all of my shifters to be able to control their shift before they leave.”

I nodded. “So I won’t get startled by a barista and wolf out in the middle of a coffee shop full of humans?”

“Preferably.”

I laughed, but it was a strained kind of sound. “So, in theory, if I master control of my shifting and prove it to you, I can go back to my life in New York?”

“In theory.”

“But?” I glanced between him and Elan. “There’s a *but* there.”

Koth grimaced. “As Priestess of the Pack you may be needed here ... a lot.”

My heart sank. “*Oh*. I didn’t think of that.”



“In the meantime, I’ve spoken with Claudia Davenport and she promises she is going to run your store until we figure this all out.” He gestured between us with one hand. “There’s never been a Priestess of the Pack before in our entire history. This means that, *one*, we have no idea what you’re actually gonna have to do. And *two*, that the war with Lilith is probably a lot closer than any of us realized.”

My stomach rolled. *Diosa mía*. No one liked to hear doomsday with the mother of all evil was on the doorstep. I never imagined I’d be on the front lines of the war. It always seemed like something I’d try to survive in a bunker, like it was a zombie outbreak. This was a reality check I wasn’t prepared for.

“So, I’m here.”

Koth’s face fell. “We don’t want you to feel trapped here, Inez. We just have to hash out the details together as we go. It usually takes new shifters a few months to a year to master their control, but you’re not a child. You have full control of your arcana magic, so I suspect you’ll have this sorted in weeks to months. Or less. In that time, we’ll get you settled into your role and your life here, then if things are peaceful you can return to New York.”

I looked at Koth, and not for the first time, wondered how old he was. His face suggested early twenties, but like the Shaman, there was wisdom in the eyes that only time could give. He was nothing like I’d expected. “You’re not what I thought the King of shifters would be like.”

He smirked and shook his head. “I’ve heard that before.”

“I meant that as a compliment.” I cocked my head to the side and let my witchy side read his energy. It was pure and

kind. “You have a calming presence. Did you know that? You’re surprisingly fair and kind.”

His cheeks flushed a soft pink. “Well, thank you.”

“Okay, well, if I’m this Priestess of the Pack, then that means you’re my King now too.” I pushed my long hair out of my face. “Do I need to report this to The Coven?”

“I’ve already notified them. I’ve become quite close with their Leaders. Tegan Bishop is one of them and she assured me that once you’re more settled here she’s going to come up and meet with you.” He laughed. “And trust me, you’ll want to be comfortable here before that one rides into town.”

Elan threw his head back and laughed.

I’d never met any of the witches in The Coven, but I’d heard plenty of stories. Especially about the ones in it now. They were all mostly teenagers and more powerful than any of their predecessors. I’d heard some of the older witches in town saying the Goddess was stacking her team against Lilith, but I wasn’t sure if that was comforting or terrifying.

“So what do I do now?”

“I’ve put a little of my magic on you, so you won’t shift again today. I want to give your nerves a break.”

I sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “Foster is outside. He’s going to escort you down to where the wolves live, and more specifically, the place we’ve set up just for you. The wolves don’t quite live like everyone else in Issale, but I’ll let Foster explain it since he’s the Beta.”

“I’m surprised the Alpha doesn’t want to show me around,” I said before I could stop my mouth from saying it.

“Clayton thought you’d feel more comfortable with Foster since you met him before.” Koth shrugged, but he gave me a sideways grin. “But also ... okay, I’m going to warn you. Word has gotten out in Issale, and everyone is throwing you a big welcome bonfire feast.”

My eyes widened.

Elan snorted. “*Everyone.*”

“Oh ... boy. *Eso suena a amenaza.*” I licked my lips and nodded. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.” Koth looked like he was trying not to laugh, which meant my panic was showing on my face. “At sunset.”

“Sunset. Right. Um ... what time is it now?” I patted my pockets in search of my phone. “Where’s my phone?”

“Your phone is in your purse, which is hanging beneath your coat by the door behind Koth.” Elan was smiling but then he frowned. “But you won’t be able to use your phone here—”

“*What?* Why not? Is that a rule? No talking to outsiders? Is it so I won’t tell—”

“It’s our magic,” Koth answered with that calm patience I was coming to know as *him*. “The magic that allows us to shift blocks modern technology, so no phones, lights, television, radios—”

“*What?*” I squealed. “How ... oh boy, I’m about to sound like a bratty privileged teenager with first world problems ... but do you do ...?”

“We do have modern plumbing.” Elan wagged his eyebrows. “I can’t imagine what it was like here without toilets and showers. Or sinks.”

Koth shuddered. “I can.”

Hearing they had modern toilets was more of a relief than I was going to express out loud to two men I'd just met. "What about cooking?"

"Grills." Koth gave me a lopsided grin. "We rigged pseudo-stoves in people's kitchens. Everyone here is pretty comfortable with fire, especially since we use torches for light."

My jaw dropped. "Okay. Wow. We need to get you some technology."

Those black lines shot across Elan's face. A wide grin spread next. "Perhaps our new Priestess will be able to help us with that."

"I will definitely try. For entirely selfish reasons." We all laughed. "Okay, so, um, I can't contact my family? Wait, my sisters—"

"Perfectly safe." Koth pulled out a very modern iPhone, then turned the screen to face me. "The phone doesn't work here, but you can see my text message thread with Caroline Davenport. Your sisters arrived at SOMA before Foster even got you out of the city. In fact, two of the wolves followed them to make sure and then informed Steve—one of our younger dragons—who called me. Caroline and her mother escorted Marta and Carmen home and sat there until their mother Gabriela made it home."

I sighed with relief. "Were they freaked out?"

He chuckled and shoved his phone back in his pocket. "Apparently, little Marta did not accept the initial basic answer of assuring them you were fine so she demanded the truth."

I snorted. "That tracks. So, they know?"

“We did not want Caroline or her mother to explain the whole situation to them as they’re not shifters, so they said you were rescued by The Coven and taken back to homeland with them. Also, that you’re safe and will contact them as soon as possible.” I must have made a face because he held up one finger. “When you get to your room here, ask Foster. He will let you call them and tell them you’re safe, but I would prefer if you kept everything else quiet for now. We don’t like to share such details over the phone. I ask that you give us some time before you tell them.”

“You’re my King, so if that’s your wish, then I will follow as you say.” I tucked my hair behind my ears and stood up to stretch my arms and legs. “I’ll just make a quick call with Foster to say hello and that I’ll see them as soon as I can. Yeah?”

He grinned and stood, towering over me. “Thank you for being so understanding, Inez.”

“Oh, I’m still not sure I’m even awake—”

“C’mon, let’s get you out of here.” Koth turned and grabbed my coat and purse off the hook and then handed them to me. “Foster is waiting.”

“Thank you.” I stopped and glanced back at Elan. “Want me to undo that spell on your window?”

He scoffed. “Never.” Then he winked.

“All right. Well, thanks? I’ll see you later?”

“At the bonfire.”

I waved and then hurried out the door—and slammed into Koth’s back. “Ouch.”

He chuckled and stepped aside. “Do you have sunglasses in your purse?”

“Oh, I don’t like that question.” I dove for the case in my bag that held my shades. “Why?”

“Your senses will be stronger now, even if you do still have to learn how to use them. Got them on yet? As you experienced already, the sun will be brighter than you’re used to.”

I grumbled and dug through my bag until my hand landed on the velvet case. Koth put his hand on my upper back to guide me toward outside. We stepped out a door and onto a gravel pathway just as I slid my sunglasses onto my face. Bright sunshine hit my eyes like laser beams. I cursed and threw my hands up to cover my eyes—darkness fell over my face.

“*Oh.*” I looked up and froze. Foster stood directly in front of me holding a baseball hat to block the sun. Heat rushed to my face and my pulse quickened at the sight of him. I cleared my throat and tucked my hair behind my ears. “Hi, Foster.”

“Good morning, Inez.” He grinned, and I was struck by how dazzling he was again. He nodded to his hand. “Somehow I knew we’d need a little help. May I?”

*Absolutely. Whatever you want.* Koth snorted. I gasped and spun to face him. But he wasn’t looking at me. *I have to learn that brain thing.*

“Inez?”

I flinched and then looked up to find Foster’s amber eyes watching me. My face got even hotter. “Yes. Yeah, thanks.”

He gently placed the baseball hat on my head, then pulled the bill down low in front. “Try to pace yourself with the

sunlight for today.”

Koth cleared his throat. “Right, so I have some things to tend to. Foster, show Inez around pack zone and fill her in there?”

“Sure thing, my lord.” Foster grinned and slightly bowed his head to Koth. “I think Clayton was looking for you.”

“Thanks.” Koth nodded to both of us, then leapt into the air—and shifted into a black dragon faster than the blink of an eye.

“That was so fast.”

Foster chuckled. “You have no idea. With everyone else you can see the shift process, but not Koth. Just boom—dragon.”

I smiled and craned my neck back to see Foster, but that let sunlight into my eyes which caused me to hiss. “I feel like a cat with all this hissing. That’s not right for a wolf.”

“Just turn those into growls and you’ll fit right in.” He held his elbow out toward me. “Might I recommend you hanging on while I walk us down there?”

I slid my arm around his, noticing he still had on the same leather jacket and dark leather gloves. It’d been freezing cold in Manhattan, but the temperature here was comfortable. Probably around thirty degrees. After single digits in New York, this was like summer. “Lead the way, my sneaky little friend. I’m not gonna look up, so I’m trusting you here.”

“Oh boy.” He laughed as he led me onto a gravel pathway. “I’ve got some making up to do for that.”

“Maybe a little.” I bumped him with my shoulder.

“We were all nervous to approach you. Elan warned us you wouldn’t believe the prophecy was about you, so I just wanted one friendly conversation before I dropped that bomb on you.”

My mind replayed that fantasy from Mrs. Tidwell’s potion. *Friendly conversation* didn’t quite cover it. But I sure as hell wasn’t about to tell him about that. Foster was stupid pretty—meaning he had the possibility of making me stupid over how pretty he was. The last thing I needed was to add *annoying crush* to my now overflowing plate of things to handle.

This whole Priestess of the Pack thing was a lot of pressure. And although I knew diamonds were formed under pressure, I just wasn’t sure I was diamond material. I felt more like cheap rhinestone or plastic bead.

“You okay?”

I shook myself. “Yeah, it’s just a lot to take in.”

“I can only imagine how this feels for you. That’s why Koth wanted you to have this tour before the bonfire. We want you to have a moment to collect yourself before the crowd descends.”

“That’s supposed to be comforting, but it’s not.”

He laughed.

“So where are you leading me exactly?”

“Where the pack lives.” He coughed and then cleared his throat. “So, Issale is basically an entire mountain in Vermont right off Lake Champlain, right?”

“Sure, totally knew that.”

He chuckled. “Well, there are a lot of us who live within its borders, spread out around the mountain. But the wolves live at the bottom.”



“Why?”

“Because there are so many of us. Many generations ago, the king at the time realized that after his dragon warriors the wolves were his biggest population, and they were fierce, so he entrusted the wolves with the honor of border patrol.” He stopped to help me walk across a narrow wooden bridge over rushing water because it was still too bright to look up. “Our job is to keep everything else out. If our enemies managed to get through the border, they’d stumble upon us *first*. When humans unknowingly walk through, we get close enough to scare them away.”

“That’s intense. Do all the different breeds have jobs like that?”

“Nope, only the wolves. It’s why we’re permitted to have an alpha. Granted, the Alpha still bows to the King and the other dragons, but we have to have someone who guides us on a one-to-one basis.”

“That makes sense. So, I’m part of the pack because I’m on team defense not offense.”

He laughed and I found I really loved the sound. “I like the reasoning.”

“So where the pack lives—”

“It’s dorm living. Watch your step.” He waited until I ducked under the tree branch, then continued to lead me down the path. “We have our own rooms—well, some people share, especially families with kids. Then there’s a shared kitchen, which is huge, and a shared common area. Also big.”

“Because wolf packs are a close knit group like all the rumors say?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“And bathrooms? Showers?”

“Private. Thank God. Apparently, Koth is the one who gave the pack some privacy.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how any of us survived before him.”

“He seems like a wonderful king.”

“He is.”

“What’s Clayton like as Alpha?”

He exhaled a long breath. “He’s my adoptive father, so I may have a biased opinion, but he’s definitely got a set way he likes things done. But don’t worry, he’s patient with newbies.”

“Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool.” I bumped my shoulder into him again. “So tell me about the pack.”

It took twenty minutes for us to get all the way down to the pack zone since I wasn’t looking *up*. Although, as we got lower down the mountain, the tree coverage was much denser, so I was able to look around near the end. It was mostly green. Everything was green, which Foster explained was a product of our magic, because just outside the border the forest was covered in inches of snow.

The whole time we walked, I let the soft rumble of Foster’s voice chip away at the anxiety roaring inside of me. He was giving me all the tea, all the hot gossip about the pack. My brain was not retaining this information, but it was nice to be hearing it since I’d be meeting everyone later.

About twenty minutes after that, he was finally guiding me toward *my* room. The pack building was legit just like dormitories—reminded me a lot of the ones I had at the magic school in Eden. The building itself was only three floors high, but it stretched fairly long to allow for all the rooms they needed. Actually, it was built in the shape of a *U*. It was all

connected as one, but because it curved in on two sides, it gave us a nice little courtyard tucked safely into the building. Each segment was separated by the type of resident. On the left were the rowdy wolves and young singles. On the right, anyone with kids or couples. Then the perpendicular side was for the wolves who were older than thirty-five and just liked quiet. Each of the three segments of the building had their own kitchen and common area.

*So the young single wolves could make out on the couch without worrying about children,* Foster had explained with a laugh and roll of his eyes.

Clayton and Foster's rooms were smack in the middle of the quiet side. Clayton was by the front doors, but Foster was on the courtyard side. I definitely noticed that my room was next to Foster's. I tried to pretend that didn't make me giddy. This stupid crush on Foster was growing by the second, and it needed to stop. I didn't have time for a boy to interfere with my concentration.

Even a pretty one.

We stopped outside my room. He pressed his hand to the handle and tried to open it, but it was locked. "You try."

I frowned and gripped the handle—it swung open. "OH. Like at Edenburg! Our magic opens our rooms."

"Right, I forgot you went to magic school. I was expecting to explain how that works but this was easier." He chuckled and pushed my door open all the way, then gestured for me to go in. "Go ahead. Take a look."

I walked in and froze. It wasn't like I was expecting. The dorm rooms at school had a desk and a bed with a dresser built into it, with an identical setup three feet away for a roommate.

But *this* wasn't so bad at all. I was on the first floor, which I definitely liked. My room had sliding glass doors that led out into the courtyard, but I had my own little chair and table area right outside my door. Inside my room, I had a full-sized bed in the corner and a little loveseat in the opposite corner.

“Your bathroom is on the left. We share plumbing.” He chuckled. “I meant the pipes and stuff.”

I grinned and sat down on my bed, then looked up at him. “That makes sense.”

“Right.” He scratched his jaw and then pointed to the door on the other side of the room. “That’s your walk-in closet.”

My eyes widened with excitement until I remembered I didn't have a single thing I owned. “Um, are there, like, stores in Issale?”

“Yeah, for sure.” He leaned against the desk I hadn't seen. “We're basically just a really small town, but the stores are up the mountain a bit. There's a grocery store, a bookstore, and two clothing stores—one per gender. OH, that reminds me. When we shift into animal form, the only clothes that shift with us are items made of natural materials. So, if you're wearing polyester, let's say, when you shift back to human, you'll be naked.”

I gasped. “Oh my. Um ... Well, that's good to know. Granted, I don't have any clothes.”

He grimaced. “Because we're all animals, no one feels comfortable killing animals for their hide, so our inventory is sourced from the deceased animals we find in the area. This means there's a cap on how many items you can buy at once from the store. While you were sleeping this morning, I went to the store and grabbed a few things for you. They're in your

closet. I guessed your size as best I could. I figured you'd be wanting a shower and clean clothes."

I groaned and kicked my boots off. "You are a smart man, Foster."

He grinned. "All right. Well, you've got about two hours before the bonfire starts, so I'm going to leave so you can shower and relax. If you need anything, I'll be next door. Otherwise, I'll knock on your door at four-thirty to head to the party. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect." I grinned up at him. "Thanks, Foster."

## CHAPTER FIVE

INEZ



“YOU READY FOR THIS?”

“Totally,” I lied.

“I believe you,” he said back with a smirk, clearly lying.

I huffed and playfully smacked his arm. “Hey, I’m not shy. I run a store. I have no problem talking to people. *Odio llamar la atención.*”

“I’m gonna have to get a Spanish dictionary.”

I bit my lip and tried to to groan. “Sorry, I will try to stop that from slipping out.”

“No, no. Don’t. It’s beautiful. Maybe you can teach me your language so I can speak it back to you?”

“I’d be happy to teach you. Does anyone else here speak it?”

“Isabella does, actually. I’ll introduce you tonight.”

“Hey, one person is enough for me.”

He laughed. “Well, Isabella is the only one in the pack who speaks it. There are probably others, people who weren’t born in Issale and moved here later. Like you.”

“Where’s Isabella from?”

“Southern California. I know you’re about to ask me and I don’t know where her family is from. Her full name is Isabella Morales, does that narrow it down?”

“Not at all.”

“Glad I can be of service.” He chuckled then gestured ahead of us to where the bonfire welcome party had already started. The orange glow from what had to be several massive bonfires flickered beyond the trees of the forest standing between us and the party. The voices and laughter echoed. “But in all seriousness, this is super overwhelming. I get it.”

“Good. Someone gets it.”

He gave me a soft smile. “You’d be surprised how many of us actually *do* get it. But we get excited by a newcomer, and then that newcomer is a witch who shifts? It’s a big deal. Add onto that she’s the prophesied Priestess of the Pack? Huge.”

“Yeah, *that* is kind of my problem. I’m apparently a huge deal, and I have no idea what I’m doing. *Por eso tengo pánico. Éste es el problema. No me gusta que me presten atención cuando estoy confuso.*”

“Hmm ... I heard panic, problem, attention, and confused. I think that sums it up well enough.” He bumped my shoulder with his arm. “I’ve seen you at work in your element. I have zero doubts this role will be natural for you.”

“Thank you.” I groaned and tugged on the hem of my shirt. “How do I look? Do I look okay? Everyone is going to be staring at me, and I’m not even in *my* clothes.”

I looked down at the outfit I’d put together from the clothes Foster had purchased for me. I was super grateful he’d been so thoughtful. To be fair, he’d done a pretty good job. Tonight, I chose a denim jacket with fluffy stuff lined inside



like an Ugg boot. Despite the jacket being new, the material was distressed in a way that made it super soft and comfortable. I chose an oversized white long-sleeved shirt with a camisole underneath for layers. It was pretty cold out on this mountain, and the stress of it all made the chill worse. The pair of jeans I had on were two sizes too big for my waist, but my thighs and ass took up enough room to make them fit a little baggy. I was comfortable *AF*, and I'd thought it was pretty cute in the mirror. At least I had on my boots from home—the combat style that was waterproof on the outside but lined with fluff on the inside.

But then I realized Foster hadn't answered me, so I looked up and found his gaze looking me up and down. His amber eyes danced with the orange glow of the bonfires. Butterflies danced in my stomach. I liked the way he looked at me. I liked the way the dim lighting made his eyes glow like neon signs and how it made the sharp angles of his face even sharper.

He caught me watching him, and his cheeks flushed. He looked straight ahead and cleared his throat. "I think you look lovely."

"*Thank you.*" Heat rushed to my cheeks. I bit down on my bottom lip to try and hide my smile. "You look lovely too."

The smile that spread across his face took my breath away. He chuckled. "I don't think anyone has ever said I looked *lovely.*"

"Oh—"

"But thank you." He turned that smile on me, then winked. "So, I saw Koth a little while ago, and he asked if you'd contacted your family. Was I supposed to show you to the phone zone?"

I opened my mouth and then frowned. “Phone zone?”

“Technology doesn’t work within the borders, but we built our house right on the edge so that the far edge of the courtyard and both common rooms get cell service.”

My jaw dropped.

“No electricity yet, but we’re working on it. It’d be nice to get television or stream music.”

“Well, I’ll see if I can help with that.” My sisters’ faces flashed in my mind, and my heart sank. “I thought I was ready to call them. That’s why Koth told me to get you to help with that. But in all honesty, I’m not ready.”

He stopped short, tugging lightly on my elbow to stop me. “Are you okay? I know this is a lot to take in, but I’m here if you need to talk. Koth is intimidating as hell, and Elan is ... well, Elan. And Clayton doesn’t exactly give off *tell me your problems* vibes. But I’m here and I’m a good listener. So is Isabella, if saying it in Spanish would be easier.”

Every part of me wanted to kiss him on the cheek for everything he’d done for me so far, but I resisted. We stood alone in the middle of a dark forest with flickering flames as our only light source. It was too romantic and this crush too new. If I wanted to keep my heart intact and my head on straight, I needed to pump the brakes on this infatuation.

Even if I *was* dying to rip those leather gloves off and feel the texture of his skin.

*Oh Goddess, Inez. You need to cut that shit out right now. If you shift, then everyone will hear these mortifying thoughts.*

“Inez?”

I flinched—then realized I’d just been staring into his eyes this whole time. “Yes?”

He gave me a small smile as he tucked my hair behind my ears. “Are you okay?”

“Oh. Right. Um ... *qué pregunta más pesada.*” I rubbed my hands together and glanced at my feet, which I could see perfectly despite the darkness thanks to my new heightened senses. “Honestly? Kinda yes, kinda no. I’m overwhelmed and intimidated. Nervous as fuck.”

He snorted.

I gasped and looked at him with wide eyes.

He threw his hand over his mouth in a sad attempt to conceal his laughter. “Sorry, sorry. I just was not expecting that last part.”

I made a goofy face and used the too-long sleeves of my jacket to whack him in the stomach. “Shut up. Take me to this party before I make like a runaway bride and flee.”

We laughed as we started walking again. If I was being honest with myself, a big part of why I was taking this so well was Foster. Perhaps it was my crush, perhaps it was those minutes we chatted in my store ... or perhaps it was just *him*. He had an aura and energy that was calming, at least for me. And he’d called it right: Koth intimidated me. I couldn’t imagine going to him and voicing my neurotic thoughts when he was trying to keep an entire species alive. Elan was funky and kind, but I got the sense no one really related to him that well. And Clayton, he reminded me of the old Headmaster at my school—supportive but not the kind to be the shoulder to cry on.

“Oh, Foster?”

He glanced over to me. “Yeah?”

“Thank you ... for asking.” I gave him the best smile I could. “You’ve been a huge help in this transition, so thanks. I’m not quite sure I’m *okay*, but I may need some time to sort out how to talk about it.”

“Well, when you’re ready, just bang on the wall.”

I giggled. “You’re gonna regret saying that.”

“I did as soon as it left my mouth.” He sighed. “Clayton tells me I’m too nice.”

“No, you’re not—”

“No, it’s true. Most of the pack calls me *Mama Foster*.”

I threw my head back and laughed so hard it brought tears to my eyes. It was the defeated expression on his face, like he’d just given up the good fight and was ready to live, laugh, and love all of them.

“Well, don’t worry. You don’t make me think *mom*.”

“That’s good. Adoption at such an old age can make it difficult to assimilate—”

I snorted and shoved him hard enough that he stumbled sideways a step.

We walked about another ten feet to the edge of the forest where the trees had been cleared away. In the middle were two bonfires raging into the sky. There were people *everywhere*.

All of that lighthearted playfulness vanished in an instant. “*Mierda*.”

“Hey! I know that word!” He grinned and gave me a wink. He nodded his head toward the crowd. “I recommend putting

that New Yorker resting bitch face back on. If you give them nice face from the jump, you'll be their second mother."

"Oh, is that where you went wrong?"

He sighed. "No, I fucked up when I let them know I cared."

"The horror."

He looked down and stuck his tongue out. But then he held up one finger and took a deep breath. When he lowered his hand, his face wore a mask of seriousness. "You're about to be crowded. Game face time."

I nodded and took a few deep breaths, then I held my chin up and pushed my shoulders back. "Power pose. I'm ready. Lead the way."

Together, we stepped out of the forest and into the clearing. The noise level was intense. My eardrums groaned in protest. The bright orange light of the flames was probably going to give me a migraine in about twenty minutes, but it was rather soothing for the moment. I liked the smell of burning wood and the way little glowing embers floated through the air. But my favorite part was the way the smoke swirled and curled like magic above the flames.

*"In three ... two ..."* Foster whispered, *"one."*

"HEY! She's here!"

The crowd gasped. Every pair of eyes in the clearing snapped right toward me. People leapt out from behind bonfires and other people to stare at me.

Then it was silence.

Just a few hundred people looking at me light a deer caught in headlights.

My stomach turned. Panic surged inside of me.

“Thanks for handling this well, everyone,” Koth’s booming voice echoed through the clearing, though I couldn’t see him anywhere. And then he stood up from directly across the clearing from us, and it was like his aura was a magnet, sucking in everyone else’s. His purple eyes flashed with annoyance as he glared at his people. For the first time, I saw the terrifying dragon-King. And then he turned his gaze to me, and it vanished in an instant. He smiled and waved me forward. “Everyone, this is your Priestess of the Pack, Inez Alvarez.”

Foster placed his hand at the small of my back and subtly urged me forward.

*“Por el amor de Dios, ¿por qué yo? ¿Puedo meterme en un agujero y morirme ya? Hijo de puta,”* I cursed under my breath, then hurried across the clearing toward my King. But everyone was staring, so I waved and smiled. “Hello, everyone.”

They waved back. The energy rolling off of them was pure curiosity and excitement. There wasn’t a single sour note in the group, which made my nerves calm a bit. Well, except for a dark-haired guy standing directly behind Koth with eyes like actual sunshine they were so yellow. The black swirl of tattoos on his neck and peeking out from his T-shirt made him look menacing.

Koth smiled. “Welcome to your party, Inez.”

“Thank you. I’m honored?”

He laughed. “I like the question in there.”

I glanced around to the hundreds of eyes still watching me. “I’m cool. This is cool. Everything is cool. Except for maybe

that guy, he looks like nothing is cool at all. Ever.”

Koth nodded, but he didn't look. “That's Silas. He's cool, he'll just never admit it to you.”

Silas, the guy with yellow eyes, just sighed and shook his head. The funny thing was, no one in the witch community ever talked about the shifters until last fall when one of the dragons had landed in the middle of Eden—witch home country. We knew they existed, we were taught about them in magic school, but no one talked about them. The rumor going around now was that the previous king before Koth had ended the alliance between shifters and witches, but when The Coven went to Issale back in October, they had reformed that alliance. Since then, the dragons had been present in nearly all of the major battles our Coven faced.

And *everyone* talked about Silas. Sure, people spoke about Koth constantly, loudly, and with blatant awe, particularly because he was the King and the biggest dragon of the group—and from what I'd heard, one hell of a menace in battle. But Silas was the one people whispered about. For the women it was because he was one of the single most gorgeous men I had ever seen, and for the men it was because he was equally as terrifying. Actually, it was both for everyone. The general consensus was *don't fuck with Silas unless you could fuck Silas*. He didn't joke, he didn't laugh, he didn't sit around and shoot the shit ... he was the attack dog for the King, and he would not hesitate.

Even now, those yellow eyes scanned every face in front of him like he was watching for a traitor. Pale-gray scales covered his forearms and smoke billowed from his snout. And Koth knew it too. That was why he could smile and be friendly with his people, because he knew Silas had his back.

“Don’t let that sour face ruin your party!” A young guy with light-green eyes that sang with mischief slid in front of me. He wagged his eyebrows and held his hand out to me. “Hi, I’m Tyce. Welcome to Issale.”

I smiled up at him and his messy brown hair falling into his face. He was attractive with a super friendly face. “Thank you. I’m Inez.”

“So, Inez, let me give you the cheat sheet of Issale, ‘kay?”

I chuckled. “Please do.”

He wrapped his muscular tan arm around my shoulders, but it was very much a friendly, big brother kind of gesture. This guy was for sure a teddy bear, despite the fact he was a dragon. “Okay, so we’ll start with our crew. This here is my twin, Dace. He’s almost as fun as me.”

Dace was nearly identical to his twin, except he had light-blue eyes instead of green. He smirked. “Heya.”

I waved. “Would you concur?”

Dace pursed his lips. “That’s fair. But I’m the one who gets us out of the trouble he gets us into.”

Tyce scoffed. “Yin and yang, dude.” He pointed to a guy who looked like a smaller, thinner, more timid version of Koth, right down to the shoulder-length, wavy auburn hair. “This is Finn, Koth’s cousin. The literal nicest cinnamon roll ever. Also, he’s a green dragon who likes to hide in the bushes, so don’t freak out if the ground you’re standing on is suddenly moving.”

I chuckled. “I’d actually love to see that.”

Finn smiled and it made his emerald-green eyes sparkle. “Something tells me you won’t have a hard time finding where



I take afternoon naps.”

I grinned. “Wait, I saw you last night. The green one. I’m assuming Silas is the pale-gray one by the scales on his arms now.”

They all laughed. Silas shrugged one shoulder.

“Koth is the black one, which colors are you twins?”

“Charcoal-gray.” Tyce pointed to the sky. “You won’t even see me at night. I blend.”

Dace rolled his blue eyes. “Well, I’m ivory. The fairest of them all.”

“Shit, I bet that’s epic to see you two in the snow.”

Koth frowned. “No, no. We do not encourage them.” But he turned so they couldn’t see him, then winked at me.

“As if we need the help.” Tyce rolled his eyes. Then he turned me to the right. “That guy is Yaluk, and he has a kink for picking fights.”

Yaluk cackled. He had eyes the same color as flames. His dark hair was braided down the center of his head like a mohawk. “I’m the brown one with the spikes on my tail—the only one with spikes.”

“Yeah, we all know you love your tiara, princess. Ignore him, Inez. But *this guy*, well, you should feel honored. He rarely comes out.” He pointed to another guy who was hiding under the hood of his black hoodie. Blond hair just barely stuck out the bottom. “This is Neka, our only water dragon. He’s blue and you’ll never see him in the water unless he wants you to.”

Neka nodded and raised his hand slightly. He tipped his head back enough for me to see blue eyes that were so light

they were almost white. He gave me a small smile, then looked back down, hiding his face. Everything about him was mysterious and made me want to know more.

“Then, lastly, we have Maddox.” Tyce spun me to the left to where a teenage boy with black hair and bright-blue eyes sat beside Silas. “He’s Koth’s cousin as well, but Maddox here is the current heir to the throne until Koth procreates.”

Maddox let out a deep breath and cringed. “Please procreate.”

Koth grinned. “I’ll see what I can do, Cousin, so long as you don’t.”

Maddox arched one eyebrow. His cheeks flushed. “She’s a nightmare.”

Koth laughed so hard he pressed his hand to his stomach, then he sat back down, reached over and ruffled his cousin’s hair, and turned to me. “There are three more dragons, but they’re at SOMA—”

“Steve!”

They all chuckled, except Silas.

“Yes, Steve. Also, Tor and Kiev. They’re all teenagers. But they’re cool dudes. You’ll meet them soon.” Tyce spun me all the way around to face the rest of the party. “Foster here knows everyone a lot more personally here than I do. Right, Mama?”

Foster hung his head and laughed.

I nudged Tyce. “I hear there’s a kink for mommy issues, if you’re looking.”

Yaluk snorted so hard fire left his mouth.

Tyce's jaw dropped. "Dace, did you hear that?"

"Hey, that's between you and Mom. Leave me out of this."

Foster threw his head back and laughed. "Yeah, I think she's going to fit right in here."

Tyce cackled. "I like you, Inez. You're fun. So, you want to continue the cheat sheet?"

"Tyce cheating at something?" I didn't recognize his voice, but my magic rushed to the surface. "I never would've put money on that."

Tyce dropped his arm and turned to face the man with a playful smirk. "Clayton, fashionably late? Unheard of."

*Clayton. The Alpha.* That explained why my magic reacted the way it did. For some reason, he made me nervous. It was probably the whole Alpha thing mixed with the fact he wasn't as openly friendly and welcoming as Foster or any of the dragons. But I needed to be fair, I'd barely met him. There was a chance he was just giving me some space.

I turned to face him with my breath caught in my throat. *It's just the pressure, Inez.* Clayton was shorter than all of the other males standing around us, but I wasn't surprised the dragons were the biggest since they were the warriors of the species. Now that I could see him in better light with my mind clearer though, he had a kind face. He had brown hair that was starting to gray on his temples. His green eyes were the same shade as moss. He stood with confidence but not in an obnoxious way.

They spoke to each other in another language, one I'd never heard of.

And then Clayton's green gaze landed on me. A wide grin spread across his face. He stepped toward me. "Inez, we didn't

get a chance to meet properly when you arrived.”

“I was a little freaked out. Let’s pretend that didn’t happen and start again?” I forced a nervous chuckle. I held my hand out. “I’m Inez Alvarez.”

“Clayton Logan. Nice to meet you.” He chuckled back and shook my hand. The second our skin touched, he gasped and jumped back. His face paled, and he stared at me like I was a ghost.

I froze. “What’s wrong? What did I do?”

“Did you—did you feel that?” He looked down at the hand he’d touched me with, but he pressed his other hand to his stomach. “*I can’t believe it.*”

“What? Can’t believe *what?*” But he wasn’t looking at me. I glanced to the others, but Foster and the dragons were all watching Clayton’s hand. “Someone help me out here?”

Koth narrowed his eyes on Clayton. Silas did too. I looked to Foster but he looked like Clayton was a bomb about to go off. The dragon guys had all snapped to attention, watching Clayton closely. Even Neka leaned forward.

A giant eagle flew over our heads and then landed beside Maddox. There was a flash of light, then I heard Elan chuckle. “Oh, just in time I see.”

I turned to Elan but those black lines stretching across his face sent my pulse into a tailspin. “What’s going on?”

Elan cocked his head to the side and watched Clayton continue to stare at his own hand, then he glanced to me and Foster. “Perhaps Clayton ought to show you himself?”

Clayton flinched like he’d been slapped. “I’m sorry, it’s just ... when we touched ...”

“*What?*” I hissed.

He licked his lips, then slowly reached down and tugged his shirt from where it was tucked into his dark jeans. Tyce huffed and dove for his shirt like he was too impatient to wait. He grumbled something as he lifted Clayton’s shirt up to his chest—

Everyone gasped.

Their gazes were all locked on Clayton’s revealed body.

I frowned and followed their gaze, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. He looked like a normal middle-aged white guy. Sure, he was in excellent shape, and I hadn’t expected the ab muscles, but otherwise there was no reason for everyone to be freaking out. He had a tattoo on each side, right over his rib cages. Both tattoos were wolves. One was brown like the color wolf he shifted into. The other wolf was as black as night with purple swirls coiling around it.

Maddox stood and walked over to Koth. He scowled down at Clayton’s body, then looked up to Koth. But Koth raised his hand and shook his head once without taking his eyes off Clayton.

Elan chuckled and clapped his hands. “Well, would you look at that? What a surprising turn of events tonight.”

“Will somebody *please* tell me what’s going on?” I growled through my teeth.

“It means ... it means ...” Foster cleared his throat. His gaze hadn’t moved off our Alpha. “It means you’re his ... his —”

“His *what?*”

“—*soulmate.*”

I gasped. My heart stopped. “Excuse me—*WHAT?*”

Foster’s eyebrows rose, but he just shook his head.

Silence.

“No, no, no. We don’t go silent *now*. You cannot stop that sentence there.” I spun to Elan. “Talk to me, dammit.”

Elan’s smile faltered. He turned to me. “You’re familiar with soulmates, correct? Witches have soulmates. I’ve met a few pairs myself. How does that work for witches?”

“Well ... yeah. When two witch soulmates first see each other, a glyph appears on our chests and then as we’re around each other it spreads like vines down to our hands.” But then their words started to click. “Hold on. You’re saying I’m his soulmate? *Me?* I’m Clayton’s soulmate?”

“*Yes,*” Clayton breathed. His pupils were dilated, and his cheeks flushed. He stared at me in awe. “You are my soulmate, Inez.”

*Eso no puede ser verdad. Esto no puede estar ocurriendo.* I shook my head and waved my arms in front of me. “That’s not possible. We met earlier and nothing happened. No glyph. Look.” I pulled the collar of my shirt down to where the glyph would have been, but my skin was bare. “¿Lo ves? Nada.”

Elan shook his head. “For witches soulmate marks appear at first sight, but for shifters it’s at first touch.”

My jaw dropped. I looked down at my hand. “And I just shook his hand.”

“First touch.” Clayton grinned. He pointed to his stomach. “See?”

Elan leaned closer to me. “We don’t have the glyphs. Instead, our skin is marked with the image of our shifter form

and the shifter form of our soulmate.”

“This one is me.” Clayton tapped the brown wolf tattooed on his skin. Then he pointed to the other one. “*This* one is you. See the magic around it? That symbolizes you being a witch.”

Maddox narrowed his eyes on me. “Yours should be identical.”

Everyone turned to me.

My throat was tight and hot. My whole body tingled and twitched. I didn’t want to look but I had to. They were all staring at me. Waiting. Expecting. *Watching*.

I pushed my jacket sleeves up, then with hands that trembled more than I wanted to admit, I reached down and lifted my shirt up—they all gasped. Clayton swayed on his feet. His green eyes were glassy. He looked at me like I was his dream come true. I had the answer in their faces, but I had to see for myself.

*Just look, Inez. There’s no avoiding it. Just look. In three ...two ...one.* I looked down and my breath left me in a rush, even though I knew what I would find. There, on my tanned skin that wasn’t near as chiseled with muscle like Clayton’s, were two wolves. One brown. One black with purple magic. I let out a strangled cry and stumbled back a step.

*I have a soulmate? Me? A soulmate?*

My mind was rocked. Shocked. I was so confused. This was wild. *Es demasiado. Es una locura.* Yesterday I was a regular twenty-eight-year-old witch with her own magic shop selling trinkets to trophy wives and tourists. It was wild enough to suddenly discover I was a shifter and then mind-blowing to hear I was the person of their prophecy. The Priestess of the Pack. But meeting my soulmate was ...

*inconceivable*. I opened my mouth, but no words came out. My mind was blank. It just kept repeating the word *soulmate* over and over like a blinking neon sign.

“*Inez*.” Clayton shook his head in wonder.

Koth cleared his throat. “All right, well, why don’t we give these two a moment alone. My guys, come with me. I wanted to show you something.”

Without another word, all of the dragons disappeared.

Elan squeezed my shoulder. “Quite a weekend for you. Deep breaths, dearie.”

“Breathing. Right.” I nodded and then looked to my right to Foster. For some reason, I needed him to say something here.

He scratched his jaw and cleared his throat. He wouldn’t look at me. “I’ll go spread the good news to the pack. They’ll be happy to hear their Alpha has found his soulmate.”

“Foster.”

He looked up and met my eyes. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you.”

I watched him smile at Clayton and then turn and walk away. Heat washed over me. When I turned, Clayton was right in front of me. His breath swept across my face. I licked my lips and looked at him. This close, I could see each of the silver strands in his hair. There were even a few pieces in his eyebrows. He had a five-o-clock shadow I hadn’t noticed before. His green eyes actually had flecks of brown in them. He was handsome, there was no doubting that, but he was much older than me.



He reached down and took my hand in one of his, then lifted it to his mouth. His gaze was locked on me. “It’s nice to meet you, *soulmate*. I am honored to have been chosen for the Priestess of the Pack. Together, we can do amazing things for Issale.”

My mouth was too dry to speak, so I just nodded.

He pressed his lips to my knuckles. “I cannot wait to get to know you.”

I held my breath and waited. Waited for my body to react to him the way it should have. He was my soulmate, surely that meant I would be attracted to him. Yet there were no butterflies. No change in my pulse at his nearness, no heat in my skin from his mouth on my hand. I felt nothing. It made no sense. *How could I not be attracted to my own soulmate?* Maybe it was a pack thing. Maybe fated mates didn’t always have that connection at first.

Maybe the shock of the last twenty-four hours had prohibited me from feeling it.

A loud cheer ripped through the clearing, then it echoed as more people joined in. I spun around and swayed into Clayton’s side. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. All of Issale was cheering and celebrating the good news.

But all I saw was Foster standing between two bonfires with the flames dancing in his eyes. My pulse quickened. My breath caught in my throat. *Why couldn’t it have been you?*

## CHAPTER SIX

## FOSTER



THE UNIVERSE HAD A CRUEL, twisted sense of humor.

For the first time in my twenty-nine years of life, I finally met someone who made me feel something. From the moment I laid eyes on Inez Alvarez, I'd been captivated. Bewitched. All of my previous relationships had ended because I hadn't felt that spark, that pull to be near them. Their smiles hadn't affected me. I'd never noticed the different flecks of colors in their eyes or imagined curling their hair around my finger.

And then I saw Inez.

When I actually met her and spoke with her, I was shocked by how quick and easy our connection was. I felt like I'd known her forever, not a matter of hours. Part of the reason she arrived in Issale so injured and unconscious was because my attraction and connection to her had been so strong I hadn't been able to think clearly.

All of that ... and she could never be mine.

She was someone else's soulmate.

But not just anyone, my Alpha. My own adoptive father. Clayton was the only family I had other than the rest of the pack and Issale, which meant there would be no escaping this *thing* I felt for her.

The universe had a cruel, twisted sense of humor indeed.

I'd never been the overdramatic type, but tonight I was simply gutted. I hadn't realized how much of a crush I'd had on Inez until she was marked on Clayton's skin. I groaned and scrubbed my face with my hands. The bonfire in front of me raged with heat and fire. It'd been more than an hour since the shattering revelation came out, but I hadn't come to terms with it any better yet. Clayton still had his arm around her shoulders as he paraded her to the whole pack and anyone else within earshot. Koth and the dragons had slipped away from the party unnoticed, as they always did, which meant the party itself had gotten wilder. There was an entire band of people playing instruments on the other side of the clearing. They'd gotten pretty damn good over the years too. The food was delicious, so I was told, though I hadn't been able to stomach any of it.

Instead, I'd just been sitting here surrounded by all of Issale while entirely alone.

*Get a fucking grip, dude. You just met her. Shake it off.*

"May I join you?"

I jumped and looked up to find Inez standing a few feet away at the far end of the wood log bench. My pulse quickened. But I forced a smile and patted the spot beside me. "Of course."

She smiled and walked over, then sat on the wooden log bench right beside me. She smelled like jasmine flowers. "Hi."

I chuckled. "Hi? You okay?"

"I'm a little overwhelmed and overstimulated right now." She cringed, wrinkling the skin between her dark eyebrows. "I needed to get away from all the people. *Demasiadas personas.*"

I glanced around us and found there had to be at least fifty people nearby. “I’m sitting in the most overpopulated spot?”

She shrugged and her cheeks flushed pink. “I find you comfortable to be around. I don’t know why.”

*Well, shit.* I screamed in my head but forced a smile to my face. “Likewise.”

Her smile widened and I liked the way her golden eyes twinkled in the firelight. “Good. Then I’m going to hide by you for a bit. I can’t take any more socializing tonight.”

I laughed and nodded. “I will growl at anyone who comes near.”

She pressed her hand to her chest. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

We both laughed.

“Are all of the bonfires here like *this*?”

I followed her stare and glanced around the party. “You mean an out-of-control frat-house style rager?”

“Well, they *are* doing literal keg stands.”

“Okay, *that* is a new addition to the party.” I rolled my shoulders. “Times have been extra stressful lately. They all need a way to unwind and destress. Before Koth took the throne, people used to go down the mountain into human towns and get into trouble, so he started hosting parties here where he supplies everything ... No one gets too wasted because we’re safe here and we’re all together. We have harmless fun for a few hours and then everyone goes to bed. Wake up fresh the next day.”

She took a deep breath, then exhaled. It looked like it felt good. “It’s been a long time since I lived within a witch

community. Our home country, Eden, is massive. I loved it when I went to school there, but I didn't realize until now just how much I missed the freedom."

"The freedom to let your guard down and just be your most authentic self? Where your magic is safe to come out and play and no one is going to freak out, and there are people who will watch your back if it slips away from you?"

She gave me a big smile and sighed. "Yes. I left Eden to be with my father and sisters, then he died and my stepmother needed my help. I don't regret it, but I did forget how nice it is."

"They just got their magic recently though, right? Am I remembering that correctly?"

"After my dad died. But it was slow and light at the beginning, now it's actually functioning magic. *SOMA* is helping." She nodded. Her golden gaze bounced around at everything around us, like she was drinking it all in. "Thank the Goddess. I needed *someone* in my bloodline like me."

"Are they ... like you?"

"Carmen, I'm not so sure about. She's more like her mother, always calm and in control of her emotions. Takes a lot to rattle her. But then I see glimpses of me and dad in her, when she does finally lose it." She grinned. "Or when she's being protective of Marta. Then she's more like me."

"She sounds like an interesting person to know. And Marta? Is she like you?"

"A little too much so, yes." She giggled. "A bit more of a troublemaker than I was at her age. She has the luck of growing up in New York and being comfortable with her

surroundings. She has two older sisters. It was just me and Dad.”

Her voice was hypnotizing. “Where are you from originally?”

“Spain.” Her eyes twinkled as she stared off into space. “My mom died when I was ten. Gabby, my stepmother, was her friend and stepped in to help him with me, then they fell in love. I’d be a disaster now if I hadn’t had Gabby back then. She took us being witches in stride. Didn’t blink. But their magic awakening? That’s terrifying her because she doesn’t have my dad.”

The pain in her voice was one I recognized far too strongly. I was too familiar with that kind of loss. But I didn’t want to rain on her parade unless she asked.

“Now with me shifting I have new stress for them. Will they or won’t they? Gabby is not going to handle that limbo well. I was thinking of seeking advice from The Coven to see if they could tell me if they have the gene.”

“That’s a great idea.”

She scoffed. “They have bigger fish to fry. Besides, I’d hardly feel it appropriate to call on them for this. If I ever manage to meet one of them—”

“You will.” When she made a face, I shrugged. “I have. They’ve been here a few times, especially the Hierophant. He’s psychic like Elan. Well, more than Elan, but he’s less ... unique than Elan. And with you being the Priestess of the Pack and also a witch? I have no doubts their High Priestess is going to come sniffing around.”

She bit her bottom lip and peeked up at me through those dark lashes. “Would it be rude to ask though?”

“I suspect, given your new role here, they will want to ensure the safety of your family there.”

“Thanks, Foster.” She reached over and squeezed my arm. “So glad I decided to hide by you.”

I chuckled. “Me too.”

She sighed and leaned her head on my shoulder like a pillow. All I wanted to do was wrap my arm around her and hold her tight, but I could not do that now. Not ever.

I cleared my throat. “So ... do you want to talk about Clayton and your mark?”

*“Esa estúpida marca. No estaba preparado para eso. No la pedí. Un alma gemela es lo último que necesito ahora mismo. Dios me libre de que me quede un poco de libre albedrío en la vida.”* I must’ve made a face because she groaned. “Sorry. It’s just overwhelming on top of everything else.”

“I cannot fathom.” *Wish I could.*

“It’s just ... first touch? It has to be skin to skin?”

I nodded.

“It’s just ... I don’t know him. He’s a stranger. Am I supposed to be comfortable with him already?”

I grimaced. “I think it’s fair to feel as you do, especially given your arrival here. All you can do is eliminate the stranger part of the situation. Get to know him.”

“Yeah. True. I will, of course.” She looked up at me and wagged her eyebrows. “So, wanna give me the rest of the cheat sheet?”

“Um ... where did Tyce leave off?”



“Well, the dragons are the warriors, the ones who keep everyone else safe. The wolves have their role to play, which you told me about earlier ...” She gestured to the opposite bench where a cat, squirrel, and bird all sat beside each other. “What about everyone else? All the other types of shifters?”

“As a whole, they have a part to play, especially with actual rituals, but it’s very different than what wolves do.” I cracked my knuckles. “And it’s mostly a role given to us because we’re like puppies who can’t sit still too long or we eat things we shouldn’t ... or make even more of us.”

She threw her head back and laughed.

I loved the sound of it and the way her whole body shook.

“You’re terrible. I love it.”

I laughed with her. “Well, it’s true. But you’ll see. Our world is hard to just explain. It’s an energy thing.”

“The vibe check, I got ya.” She turned her golden eyes back to me and cocked her head to the side. “So, what do I do now?”

I exhaled and ran my hand through my hair. “Tomorrow, Koth is going to start your lessons on shifting. Elan will work with you on your new role and your magic. Clayton will teach you what it means to be in our pack. I’m sure they’re going to take everything slowly, one at a time, so as to not freak you out any more than you already are.”

She lifted her hands and then dragged her fingertips across her cheeks. “If I see any more of Elan’s black lines on his face I might lose it?”

I smirked. “They are unnerving.”

“They’re creepy.”

“Yes.” I laughed and shook my head. “Very. But he’s a great guy.”

“Kind of an unusual, atypical guy, yeah?”

“Quite. But he’s honestly a great friend. Talk to him one day about his visions and his magic, and you’ll understand why he is the way he is.”

“I would love to ask him about those. I wanna pick his brain so bad, not for me—just in general.” She rubbed her hands together, then held them out in front of the flames to warm up. “I’m a pretty observant person. I just notice things really. But as a result, I get curious about a ton of things I see and then ask and sometimes people are offended.”

“You have yet to ask me an off-limits question.”

“*Te vas a arrepentir.*” Her gaze snapped to mine. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Oh, there it is. Let’s hear it then.”

She reached down and placed her hand over my gloved hand. “Why do you always wear gloves?”

The scent of maple syrup filled the air. I knew it was only a memory in my mind but it came rushing back as if it were happening now. I heard my mother’s screams. I saw my father trying to use a tree branch to fight them off. I remembered the blood, my blood. And the pain. The way it made my body feel like it was melting, like I was on fire. The shouts from the Duenill echoing through the trees as they’d followed the demons to our location—

“Foster?”

I flinched. “Yes?”

She placed her hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “You don’t have to answer that.”

I shook my thoughts away. “When I was a kid, my parents and I were attacked by demons and just as my father was about to kill the last one the Duenill ambushed. They’d followed the demons to find us. My parents died. I survived but with physical scars to match my emotional and mental ones. People tend to stare and ask questions, or just give me looks of pity. It’s easier to just wear gloves.”

Her face fell. She closed her eyes and hung her head. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Thank you. It was a long time ago.” I tried to give her a supportive smile.

She just shook her head. “That doesn’t mean it sucks any less. I know.”

I nodded because I didn’t have the heart to speak words out loud. I’d shelved my grief for my parents a long time ago, never really letting myself go back to that dark place in my mind. They’d want me to live and be happy, so I focused on that. It probably, most definitely, wasn’t the healthiest game to play with my sanity, but I’d cross that bridge when I got to it. Yet it was nice to know somebody else understood a fraction of what I felt.

We were quiet a moment. I knew her thoughts were sprinting a mile a second, but then she sat up straight and scowled. “Wait, what are the Duenill?”

I growled and white fur sprouted up and down my arms before I reined it back in. “Shifter hunters.”

Her eyes widened. “Excuse me, what?”

“You’re familiar with Lilith, darkness incarnate, evil at its purest form, mother of monsters?”

She cringed and nodded.

“Well, a while back, she stumbled upon some human men who’d discovered what shifters were and were jealous of our abilities. Lilith smelled them out like blood in the water and pounced.” I glanced around to make sure no one was listening. Talking about them seemed to make everyone uneasy. “They’re mortal but under her influence. Dark. Demented. Murderers. She made them into the darkest versions of themselves. She brainwashed them to take it to that next level where we must be killed.”

Her jaw dropped.

I put my hand over hers. “But don’t worry. You’re safe in Issale. They can’t step foot inside, and they don’t know where we are.”

*“YO, Foster! What’re you doin’ hiding over there?”*

I sighed and leaned closer to Inez. “Brace yourself, some people are coming over.”

“Cool people?”

I nodded. “My closest friends here.”

“Oh, well then they can’t be too bad.”

“Who can’t be too bad?” Ronnie asked as he leapt around us to sit on the log to our left. The orange flames reflecting in his eyes. “Who are we gossiping about?”

I heard a scoff, then Jeffrey walked up from behind us. “Obviously us, jackass. You did yell for him. You blew our entire surprise ambush.”

“Isn’t that redundant?” Mischa walked in after him, her long purple hair swaying with her hips. She met my gaze and winked one blue eye. “*Hey.*”

Inez frowned.

Jeffrey sat next to Ronnie on the log and frowned. “That *is* redundant. Dammit, Ronnie.”

“How is that *my* fault?” Ronnie rolled his eyes. “You’re the dumbass who said it.”

Mischa walked over to sit on the log to my right. Her blue eyes dancing with mischief. “And you wonder why your wives ditch you for each other constantly. Where are they now anyway?” Her accent was still pretty thick since she’d just moved here but we all thought it was beautiful.

“Um ...”

Jeffrey looked over his shoulder. “Uh ...”

Then they both shrugged.

“I had a sister wife in Russia.” Mischa looked to me and wagged her purple eyebrows. “We both hated our husbands so we spent all our time with each other.”

Both guys opened their mouths then shut them. The frowns made them look like pouting puppies.

“Mischa, what did you do them *now*?” Isabelle stepped over the log beside Mischa and sat down. Then pointed to the two married guys still pouting. She shook her head, her dark curls bouncing. “*Por el amor de Dios, míralos. Son unos cachorros tristes.*”

Inez gasped and sat up straight. “¡Hablas español!”

Isabella flinched. She scooted closer to Mischa to get a better look at Inez. “*Hablo español, sí. ¿Y lo hablas?*”

I gestured to her. “Isabella Morales meet our Priestess Inez Alvarez. She’s from Spain but has lived in Manhattan for half her life.”

Isabella squealed and jumped up. She threw her arms wide. “*Dios. Dame un abrazo. ¡No puedo creer que otro español esté aquí!*”

Inez laughed and jumped up to give her a hug. “*¿Somos los únicos aquí que hablamos español?*”

Isabella huffed. “*Más o menos. Hay una familia de conejos que son de Miami. Una pantera de Venezuela. Un oso de México. Y dos hermanas de Puerto Rico, pero no recuerdo de qué animal son.*”

“*¿Pero ningún otro lobo?*”

“*Lamentablemente, sólo estamos tú y yo.*” Isabella shook her head. She turned to Mischa and flicked her wrists. “Move over, gorgeous. I don’t want to yell over you in Spanish. That is rude.”

“That’s not fair,” Mischa whined in her thick accent but she slid over. “I don’t have anyone else here who speaks Russian.”

“And I didn’t have anyone else who spoke Spanish until now. The others never talk to me.” Isabella rolled her eyes as she took the newly vacated seat. “Foster, move over. Hello? Inez needs to sit next to me.”

I cursed and slid over. “Sorry, sorry, I forgot I was here for a second.”

Ronnie cackled. “Talk to a therapist about that, dude.”

Inez took the seat I'd just been in. She gave me a sheepish smile. "Sorry?"

"Don't be. I told you I'd introduce you to Isabella. Actually, she's in the room on the other side of you." I frowned. "Elan made a point to make sure your room was open for you, he clearly wanted you to have Isabella nearby."

Inez leaned in closer. "You didn't introduce me to the others yet."

I cursed. "Sorry. This one with the Russian accent is Mischa Petrov, newly imported. You've met Isabella now. This one on the left is Ronnie and the other is Jeffrey. I can't remember their last names—"

They both threw dirt at me.

I laughed. "These two boneheads are both happily married to wives who are always off somewhere else doing God knows what."

Ronnie shrugged. "They're sisters, we just let them go."

"It's easier that way. We can't get in trouble *with* them if we're not there."

Ronnie nodded.

"Uh, Mischa?" Jeffrey raised his hand. "We told you to teach us Russian."

"Not our fault you've been slackin' okay?" Ronnie nodded. He held his fist up for Jeffrey to fist bump him. "So let's go."

Mischa mumbled in Russian and shook her head, but she was grinning. "I think I will teach your wives first. Sister wives are more fun for me."

Inez cocked her head to the side. “Where is your husband?”

“In Russia ... and a little bit in Mongolia.” She pursed her lips. “And a small amount in Alaska.”

Silence.

Inez just blinked.

I sighed. “None of us are sure if that’s a joke or not. The statement hasn’t wavered one bit so we’re starting to get concerned it’s the truth.”

Mischa shrugged and brought a beer bottle up to her mouth. “I did not do it.”

Isabella scowled. “That doesn’t help.”

Inez frowned. “How long have you been a wolf?”

“Since a few days before my husband wound up in Mongolia.”

“And Alaska.” Isabella chuckled.

“I did not touch him. Just because I did not like him does not mean I hurt him. Father made me marry him. Fate let me away from him by making me a big bad wolf.” She cackled like a movie villain. “He did not like the wolf. Pissed himself. Best day ever.”

Isabella sighed. “You’re not helping yourself here.”

“I help myself to a happy life in Issale.” She shrugged again. “Husband got what he deserved. He was horrible to bad people so bad people were horrible to him.”

Inez snorted. She covered her mouth. “Sorry, sorry.”

Mischa grinned and used her beer bottle to point at Inez. “See, I like new girl. Foster, she can be in our group.”



“Oh, thanks for your approval.” I rolled my eyes. “I think this part of the pack has adopted you, Inez.”

“Is the pack cliquy?”

“No,” everyone said at the same time.

“But we do tend to separate into smaller groups, based on what we like to do and stuff.”

Isabella sat forward and tapped Inez’s arm. “*Quiero saber más de ti y de España. ¿Viviste allí?*”

“*Sí. Nací en España y viví allí hasta los diez años. Luego nos trasladamos a Nueva York.*” Inez grinned and leaned forward. “*¿De dónde eres?*”

The guys called for Mischa so she jumped up and moved over to their bench. Then they started asking about Russian curse words. I laughed and shook my head. My gaze went back to Inez who was obviously excited to have Isabella around.

“*Soy de California. Nací y crecí. Pero mi padre es de Ciudad de México. Los padres de mi madre emigraron de España hace como cincuenta años. Se conocieron en San Diego y se enamoraron.*” Isabella pointed to herself. “*Y aquí estoy. ¿Y tu familia?*”

Inez smiled sadly. “*Mis padres son españoles. Pero cuando mi madre murió mi padre se volvió a casar con Gabriela. Nos mudamos a América. Mis dos hermanas pequeñas nacieron en Nueva York.*”

I did not speak Spanish at all. Though there were a few words that sounded similar enough to English that I knew they were talking about their families. I took a deep breath and exhaled. Inez looked so happy to be speaking her native language, it was the way her eyes shined brighter and her lips

were curled up in a smile even while speaking. I envied people who spoke other languages. Sure, I spoke our ancient shifter language but that was different. Outside of Issale no one else spoke it. I envied this instant connection between two strangers.

When Ronnie and Jeffrey started bugging Mischa to teach them Russian I'd just laughed them off. Russian was an entirely different alphabet. And as pretty as it sounded, my head hurt just thinking about trying to learn it. But now that Inez was here, I knew I had to learn Spanish. I liked the way she smiled when she spoke it too much to not.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## INEZ



TODAY WAS the day I learned how to shift on my own.

No big deal.

I wasn't freaking out at all. I definitely slept well all night without waking up once. My palms weren't sweating. My cuticles weren't bleeding because I was chewing on my fingers ... that was just a coincidence. That breakfast I'd eaten had tons of flavor and settled just fine. My stomach had not decided to evacuate all of its residents in the last hour. I wasn't nervous. There was no reason to be nervous. *Estoy totalmente, absolutamente bien.*

Someone knocked on my door and I jumped so violently I threw my pillow across the room.

*"Hijo de puta,"* I cursed. "Yes?"

"Hello, Inez," a deep male voice rumbled through the closed door. I recognized it in an instant. "It's Clayton."

*My soulmate.*

My stomach twisted into knots so hard I wondered if I was going to have a date with the toilet all over again. It would be a damn shame. I'd already brushed my teeth twice. This man was handsome and obviously decent since he was appointed Alpha of the wolves, yet my body didn't react to him the way

it should—at least not in the way I always thought it would react if I met my soulmate.

Definitely nothing like the way it reacted to Foster.

My chest tightened like someone sat on it. *Sí, porque pensar así es útil.*

“Inez? Are you all right?”

I cursed. Again. “Yes, yes. Sorry, I was getting dressed. One second.”

“Oh, not a problem.” His voice was cheery and kind yet did nothing to me.

When Foster spoke my pulse fluttered and—*stop that, Inez. This man is your literal soulmate. You need to get Foster off your mind, or you’ll lose your sanity.*

I scrubbed my face with my hands, then took a few deep breaths. I glanced to the mirror to make sure I was fully dressed and looked presentable. I’d chosen cotton leggings and a thick sweater for today’s training. I pushed my hair back and marched to the door.

“Sorry about that,” I said with a fake smile plastered on my face and my chin held high as I pulled the door open. “Good morning, Clayton.”

He grinned at the sight of me, carving little dimples in his cheeks. “Good afternoon, Inez. You look lovely today.”

*Lovely.* Foster had called me lovely. There had been something charming and soothing in the way he’d said it. Clayton’s use of the word felt like an insult hidden within a compliment. *Do you hear yourself, Inez? You haven’t given this guy a chance at all. Dammit, brain, stop making sense.*

“Thank you.” I tucked my hair behind my ears and shrugged. “I have my first training with Koth today, so I wanted to be comfortable.”

His smile softened. “I thought perhaps you might be nervous, so I wanted to escort you there to see if I can ease some of that for you.”

*Look at him trying, Inez.* I decided right then and there that I needed to give Clayton a chance. The universe obviously knew something I didn’t. I’d heard a psychologist say once that getting butterflies around a person was a red flag warning from your body. I’d never believed it, but maybe it was true. Maybe that was a purely physical attraction to Foster that would never lead to a fulfilling, deep connection. Clayton was my soulmate. That meant he was the match for my *soul*. Fate clearly had plans for me, so I needed to put on my seatbelt and see where the ride was taking me.

“That would be nice, actually. I’m quite nervous, though I don’t know why.” I chuckled.

He stepped back. “Well, then, let’s start walking. That’ll help with nerves, movement always does.”

I closed my room door behind me and let him lead the way out the front door. “Is it that obvious that I’m kinda freaking out still?”

He fell into pace beside me, and for a brief moment I panicked that he was going to touch me or try to hold my hand, but he didn’t. Which was a relief. I was going to give him a fair chance, but I wasn’t ready to be touched yet. Granted, the level of relief I felt was a bit unsettling.

All Clayton did was smile down at me with warm, kind green eyes. “How could you not be freaking out?”

I snorted. “That’s what I’ve been telling myself all morning.”

“Ah, didn’t sleep well then?”

I shook my head.

“I saw Foster this morning—he’s out with the pack today. He told me he heard you pacing around your room.” I must’ve made a face because he shook his head. “That boy has *incredible* senses. More than anyone else in the pack.”

“Oh, is that strange?”

He just shrugged. “Some humans have better senses than their peers, do they not? Some witches have stronger magic than others too.”

“Touché.”

“Anyway, he then saw you at breakfast on his way out the door and asked me to check on you.”

My whole body warmed. “That’s sweet of him. He’s one of the good ones, isn’t he?”

“One of the best. Issale is very protective of Foster.” He waved to a few guys who looked about my age as they passed. “I raised him, did you know that?”

I smiled. “He told me you were his adoptive father after his parents were killed.”

“Oh, he told you what happened?”

I nodded.

“It was horrible.”

“Wait. His name is Foster, and he was a foster—”

“It was a nickname. When he first came here, he was too traumatized to speak. He was very young too, so we didn’t know his name. Everyone called him the foster ... and it stuck.”

My heart hurt for him. “What’s his real name?”

“That’s for him to tell you, I think.”

My face heated. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He chuckled. “It’s okay. It was a fair chain of thought. But I can tell you that he comes from the first line of wolves.”

I gasped. “What?”

“Long, long ago, when our species was first created, there was a founding line for each type of animal. His ancestor was the first wolf.”

“That’s why his senses are stronger.”

He grinned. “You’re quick.”

“Hopefully that translates well in training.” I laughed nervously.

“I have a good feeling for you.” We stepped out from under a canopy of trees and sunshine slammed into us. Clayton grinned. “And what a gorgeous day for you to train!”

I looked up and spotted a gorgeous blue sky high above us. It should have brought me comfort, yet I felt only dread. There was no hope of this knot in my stomach easing until this was over. Clayton said something but I’d missed the beginning and couldn’t figure out what he was talking about. When I opened my mouth to ask, I spotted Koth standing up ahead, and my breath left me in a rush.

Clayton chuckled. “You don’t have to fear him.”



“I don’t.”

Clayton looked to me and arched one eyebrow.

I stopped walking and put my hands on my hips. “I am not afraid of him. I’m just nervous about how I will perform during this.”

His eyes softened and that smirk turned into a gentle smile. He stepped closer to me and ducked his head to meet my eyes. “Inez, no one expects you to be perfect on your first day. Or even your first week.”

I sighed. “I know, but—”

“No buts.” He reached out and squeezed my elbow gently. “It takes kid shifters months to master this, so give yourself a break.”

“Thanks, Clayton. I’ll try to remember that.” I turned my stare to Koth, who was facing the opposite direction. “I guess I better get over there now. Thank you for walking with me.”

“I was wondering though ...” He cleared his throat nervously, bringing my gaze back to him. He blushed and tugged on the collar of his shirt. “I know that discovering I am your soulmate was unexpected and overwhelming, especially given everything else. I don’t want to stress you out with it, but I would love to get to know you more.”

My face heated like I had a fever. “Oh, um, yes.”

“Would you like to go on a date with me?”

The world seemed like it spun around me, which I didn’t understand. Of course my soulmate wanted to get to know me. Of course he wanted to date me. I needed to get my head on straight. I shook myself, then smiled up at him. “Yes, let’s do that.”

He grinned and rocked back on his heels. “Excellent. How about Tuesday evening? I want to let you settle in.”

“Tuesday works fine for me.”

He waved to Koth, then nodded to me. “Tuesday is a date then. I can’t wait. Until then, good luck with your training. I’ll talk to you soon.” He started to back away, probably sensing my discomfort.

I waved. “Thanks, again, Clayton.”

He winked and then spun and hurried off in the opposite direction.

After a few moments of me silently staring into the forest in front of me, Koth laughed behind me. “Careful, Inez, you’re starting to act like Elan already.”

I spun on my toes to face him. Then grimaced. “I can’t decide if that’s a compliment or an insult.”

Koth grinned. His purple eyes sparkled in the sunlight streaming in between the trees. “Never an insult to be compared to our Shaman ... but sometimes it can be concerning.”

I snorted and shook my head. *Ya me estoy volviendo loca.* “I was just having an existential crisis over there.”

He nodded. “Here I thought it was a nervous breakdown.”

“Me? Nervous? Not a chance. What could I have to be nervous about?” With a forced, totally fake smile, I trudged my way down the path toward him. I made it about three feet before my toe snagged on a root of a tree sticking *slightly* above the ground and gravity dragged my face down to the dirt. My teeth slammed against each other, barely missing my own tongue. Pain shot up my jaw. I cursed but it was more of a

growl. I picked my head up and found Koth watching with wide eyes. I sighed. “That. *That* is what I was nervous about.”

Koth threw his head back and laughed.

I pressed my forehead to the dirt and tried not to laugh ... and failed.

“Oh no. This is what I was worried about,” an unfamiliar female voice said from ahead of me.

I scrambled onto my knees and scanned the clearing for the newcomer and witness to my demise. About ten feet behind Koth stood a girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen. There was no denying the soft lines youth gave to a teenager's face. She was taller than average. I was guessing around my own height of five-foot-eight. Her platinum blonde hair fell all the way down to her hips in luscious, subtle waves. It was the kind of hair celebrities had. People came into my shop seeking products to give them that hair.

Her eyes were the color of amethysts. Actually, a similar color to Koth's.

“Are you two related?” I gasped and slammed my hand over my mouth. “Sorry, that was meant to stay inside my head.”

Koth hung his head and chuckled. “You are so very entertaining, Inez.”

The girl turned her wide purple eyes to him, and that was when I realized she was more terrified than I was. She gnawed on her bottom lip as she stared at our King. “Are we?”

Koth shook his head and tapped on his ribcage. “No, kiddo. We are not. Otherwise, that would've been a weird choice.”

The girl's face turned bright-red. She closed her eyes and nodded. "Duh."

Koth reached out and squeezed her shoulder. It was very much an older brother type of affection. "Deep breath. You're okay."

"I hope you're talking to both of us."

Koth looked to me and smirked. "You've already fallen on your face. How much worse can it get?"

I gasped but laughter bubbled up my throat. "You're terrible. But that's a good point."

The girl looked back and forth between us nervously. "Is she training me?"

I snorted and pushed to my feet, then began brushing the dirt and leaves off my knees.

"No, I am training both of you today." Koth pointed to me. "This is Inez Alvarez. She is a witch who just so happens to also be a shifter."

The girl gasped and looked at me like I had three heads.

I waved awkwardly. "That's me. Just your friendly neighborhood witch who can't walk in a forest without tripping yet somehow shifts into an animal."

"*You're a witch?*" she whispered, still staring at me.

"Yes?" I frowned. "Is that a bad thing?"

She blinked, then looked up at Koth. "I'm not the only one here?"

"You are not the only witch shifter in Issale." Koth grinned and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, giving her a light hug which the fear in her aura told me she needed. "Inez, I'd

like you to meet Amelia Kensington English, a witch who just so happens to also be a shifter.”

My jaw dropped. I snapped my fingers as memories from my conversation with Elan trickled back in. “You’re Heather English’s niece, right? Your cousin Deacon is the Devil Card in The Coven?”

At the mention of her cousin, her face softened. That fear slipped away from her eyes. “Yeah, Deacon is my cousin, but he’s more like my big brother.”

I skipped over and held my hand out to her. “It’s nice to meet you, Amelia. And even nicer to have a fellow witch here.”

She shook my hand and I saw the relief in the way her shoulders dropped. “You have no idea. I’d just gotten used to SOMA and then *BAM* here I am all alone with all these shifters.”

“I’m older so I went to Edenburg, but my sisters go to SOMA. It seems like the coolest place.”

“I wanted to go to Edenburg my whole life, but my aunt and uncle wouldn’t let me. SOMA was the best thing to happen to me.”

“And we’ll get you back there as soon as possible.” Koth pressed his hand to his chest. “I promise.”

She smiled and leaned into his side. “I know. I understand.”

“And I understand how you feel, Amelia.” I smiled. “Oh, which suit are you? I’m a Wand.”

Amelia’s eyes widened. “I’m a Wand too!”

I grinned. There were only four Suits a witch could be: Wand, Cup, Pentacle, or Sword. The Swords were the fighters, the demon slayers. Cups were the healers. Pentacles ran the world. But Wands were the creative ones, the *magical* ones—the people who created and used spells for everything. Not that I was biased.

Koth shook his head. “I can smell the scheming already. Maybe the two of you can figure out how to get us electricity.”

Amelia and I looked to each other and nodded. I held my hand up for a high five, which she immediately gave me with a little smile on her face. Elan had told me Amelia’s story was traumatic, and I wasn’t going to ask, but I found myself wanting to protect her. Perhaps it was that big sister side of my brain that was missing my own little sisters—especially since Amelia was about their age.

“I smell trouble already.” Koth laughed and rubbed his hands together. He backed away so that he was facing both of us. “All right, so normally I don’t get involved with teaching kids how to shift. One, because I tend to make everyone nervous. Two, because honestly, it’s usually messy as hell.”

We both chuckled.

“But you two are different. I can’t expect anyone else to be prepared for your magic, as most shifters living in Issale have only met the witches who have visited here—and that’s only a few of them. I don’t expect you to blow up with magic or anything, but if you do, I’m the only one who is capable of controlling it. Elan is close by, sitting in a tree being his usual creepy self. Silas is near, sitting like a pillar of stone and glaring at nothing.”

Amelia took a deep breath, then exhaled. “I thought you were training me because ... ya know ... *Maddox*.” She

whispered the last part, but I didn't know why the King's cousin had anything to do with this.

Koth's face fell. "You've been through something severely traumatic, Amelia. Your comfort and peace with this new aspect of your life is important to me, and I wouldn't trust anyone else with you. And Deacon would kill me if anything happened to you here."

At that, Amelia grinned. "I haven't used him against Maddox yet. Great idea."

Koth rolled his eyes and turned to me. "Don't ask."

I held my hands up. "I've got enough to worry about on my own."

"Normally, I would let Clayton or Foster handle this part for any new wolf ... but as Priestess of the Pack, you are too important."

Amelia's eyes widened. "Landy told me about that! That's so cool. You must feel so honored."

My face warmed. "Thanks. I am, I think?"

"I like the question in there." Koth shook his head and backed away more, which brought a whole new round of knots in my stomach. "I'll let you two get to know each other better *after* we train a bit."

Amelia turned white as snow.

My stomach spasmed.

Koth shook his head again. "We're going to take this super easy and slow today. As a matter of fact, learning to control your shift is going to be easier for you both since you're already trained witches—yes, I mean you too, Amelia. I know

what you did to King Fuckface. You've got raw talent and power."

Amelia balled her hands into fists so hard her knuckles cracked. "Good. Remind me of him right when I need to control my emotions."

I cocked my head to the side. "King Fuckface?"

"The Seelie King," Amelia growled through clenched teeth.

My eyebrows rose. "Isn't he dead? Didn't The Coven announce he was dead? Like, for good dead?"

Koth's grin was terrifying. "Yes. He's dead. Killed by his own granddaughter."

Amelia shrugged. "And Tenn's sword."

Koth chuckled. "That too."

I bounced on my toes because my legs had started to tremble. "Okay, so, um, how does this go?"

"Today, we're going to work on shifting back and forth and getting comfortable in your other forms." He held both hands up. They were not shaking like mine. "Okay, now you both know I have the ability to force a shift, so we're going to do that first because I want you to focus and pay attention to what it *feels* like as your form shifts. The process can feel strange, so you need to experience it."

I exhaled in a rush.

Amelia closed her eyes. Her right leg twitched.

Koth glanced back and forth between us, his purple eyes calm and steady. "Who wants to go first?"



Amelia's eyes flew open—all the way open so the white was visible all around.

*Ah, shit. I have to go first. Say it, Inez. Volunteer so the literal child next to you can not panic.* But my mouth wasn't moving. My own nerves were getting the best of me. I knew I needed to lead by example here. Amelia may have been fifteen but she was a young fifteen. Some people had old souls, but Amelia's reminded me more of Marta's than Carmen's. She needed someone else to go first and show her what to do. All I could do was stare at Koth and nod.

He looked to Amelia, then back to me and nodded. "Inez, why don't we start with you."

"Okay. Yep. I'm ready." I rolled my shoulders and shook my arms out.

"Close your eyes. We're focusing on what it *feels* like, not what it looks like." Koth moved to stand in front of me. "I'll force it. All you have to do is *feel*. Got it?"

"In theory, yes." I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on the cold air attacking my body. "Go for it. I'm ready."

The first thing I felt was a tingle of vibration in my feet. It reminded me of the way magic felt running through my wand. The sensation traveled up my legs inch by inch, slow but swift. Warmth wrapped around me like a cocoon. Air whipped across my body, and I felt it brush along my skin even through my clothes—*no, my fur. That's my fur.* I felt the air sliding between the strands of my wolf fur. My body felt weightless yet anchored to the soft powder of the dirt beneath my paws. My *four* paws. I felt each of them on the ground, but unlike being on all fours in human form, this was comfortable and easy.

*“I’m speaking only to you now, Inez—directly to your mind.”* Koth’s telepathic voice was even calmer than his spoken voice. I wondered which form he was in, but I suspected human. Not that it seemed to matter for him. *“Keep your eyes closed. I had you go first because Amelia is recovering from severe trauma, and I thought she could use a good example.”*

*“I’m happy to help her.”* I took a deep breath. *Wait, did I do that right? Or did she hear me too?*

*“You did that right, though probably only because she’s still in human form.”*

I groaned and heard a growl rumble through my ears. *“Not fair to tease me in this mental state.”*

*“On the contrary. None of your limbs are trembling now.”* Koth chuckled in my head. *“Now, I want you to feel your surroundings. What do you smell? Hear? Feel?”*

*“Want me to taste the dirt too?”*

*“You already did that today.”*

I gasped but it came out as a strange, strangled cry. *You’re twisted. Get it out of your system with me so you don’t terrorize poor Amelia.*

*“Why do you think you went first?”* Koth laughed but then he stopped. *“Now, focus on your senses.”*

*Right, right, right. My senses.* I wasn’t going to taste anything, and I wasn’t allowed to open my eyes, but the other three I could do. *Feel. What do I feel?* I lifted each of my paws one at a time, registering what it was like having four legs instead of two. As I lifted each one, the cold air swept over those pads on the bottom like silk sheets. I felt dirt fall off of my paws too. Like before, I registered each gust of wind

sweeping through my fur yet never touching my skin. So I wasn't cold. Not even a little bit. In fact, the cold air was refreshing. Especially with all that heat radiating off of Koth. In wolf form, there was no avoiding that heat. It was like standing in front of a raging bonfire. And he wasn't even in dragon form. I wondered what that would feel like to have a dragon standing there.

*"Not today,"* he answered my unspoken thought. *"Being near my dragon form is ... overwhelming, so I'm told."*

I shuddered. *Good call.*

He chuckled. This man was so damn patient it was incredible. He definitely had better and more important places to be than watching me wiggle my wolf toes around. *Focus, Inez.* I shook myself and giggled at the way all my fur flopped around.

*Okay, that was feeling. Now what about hearing?* I sat down on my back end and focused on the sounds around me, except it was surprisingly quiet. Almost like when you were under the water but could still hear things happening in a muffled sort of way outside of the water. *Wait a second. Koth, what did you do to my ears? I should be able to hear more than this, right?*

*"Very good, Inez. I'm trying not to overload you. Your hearing is going to be impeccably strong. Try to focus on what's closest to you or you'll make yourself dizzy."*

I nodded and wiggled my ears. *I'm ready. Release the kraken.*

He chuckled, then like the flip of a switch, sound slammed into my eardrums all at once. It was like turning on your radio not realizing it was on max volume. I jumped up on all fours

and shook my head. *You're fine. You told him to do that.* I just hadn't expected the world to be so damn loud. We were in a forest on a mountain, a private mountain with no humans, yet the noise level was deafening.

*"You'll get used to the sounds. I promise."* His voice was calm and steady. *"What do you hear?"*

*A damn hurricane is what I hear. Is the wind always that loud?* As the wind vanished, I was able to hear other things, like the buzzing of insects flying around nearby and birds chirping from Goddess only knew how far away. If I concentrated, I could hear squirrels climbing up and down the tree branches and rabbits rustling the bushes. They were all things I could hear normally in a forest but *louder*. So much louder.

*"Good. Now, what can you smell?"* Koth asked.

I stuck my nose in the air and sniffed really hard. Sharp pain shot up my head.

*"Not that hard. You'll give yourself a migraine."*

*Yep, yep, yep. I'm fine. I'm just smelling. Sólo estoy oliendo cosas.*

The air was clean and crisp. It made me want to find a cliffside so I could have uninterrupted breaths of it. Instead, I smelled the intense scent of pine trees and an unmistakable oak scent. I smelled animals. I would have to learn what each type smelled like so I could tell them apart. The only one I knew for certain was that bonfire scent from Koth ... And Cheetos, that was definitely the smell of those crunchy Cheetos Marta loved. The smell came from my left side. I suspected if I opened my eyes, I'd find traces of the orange dust on Amelia somewhere.

I turned my head to the right and inhaled again. And again. At first it was more of the same trees and dirt but then a new wave carried over to me that smelled familiar. *What is that?* I sniffed hard. It was a nice smell. It reminded me of summer afternoons in Central Park with all the fresh green grass. *Wait, cut grass. I know that smell. That's ... is that ...Foster?*

“*Inez?*” he responded back in my head.

It *was* Foster. That smell was *him*. I recognized it. And it was coming from a very specific, single location to my right. He wasn't super close, maybe fifty feet or so. I wasn't familiar with the layout of this forest yet, but my senses were laying out a path right toward him until I knew exactly which way to go to find him.

*Foster! I smell you!* I giggled. These heightened senses were overwhelming and would take getting used to, but they were also pretty freaking cool. *¡Puedo olerte!*

“*I thought you were training with Koth?*” he said back.

*Oh shit. Fuck. Right. Telepathy. How do I turn off the thoughts thing?*

I heard Koth laughing in my mind and then he spoke to both of us, “*She is. Apparently, telepathy will be lesson number two. I'm going to force that back off now. Say bye to Mama Foster.*”

“*Adiós, Foster?*”

He chuckled. “*Have fun.*”

And then the voices stopped. I hadn't even realized I was hearing other voices until they were gone. My ears were ringing. I opened my eyes and blinked. Vision was much, much harder to handle. It was exactly like that scene in *Twilight: Breaking Dawn Part Two* when Bella woke up as a

vampire and saw all the colors inside the bubbles of water. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Yeah, seeing is harder.” Koth laughed. “I turned the telepathy back on so you could feel the full force of it when you shift, but telepathy can be overpowering. So, until you learn how to control it, I’ve turned it off while in wolf form. Except for me, I’ll still be able to hear you.”

I groaned. *Can I learn that effective immediately?*

Koth grinned. “As much as I love having your random thoughts thrown at me—”

I gasped.

“— yes. *That*. I’ll have the pack show you.”

Amelia sighed. “You’re such a pretty wolf. I love how vibrant your black fur is.”

I opened my mouth to thank her and realized I was still a wolf.

“Your magic is coiling around your paws.” Amelia pointed to my feet. She frowned and looked to Koth. “Does mine do that?”

I looked down to my paws and my eyes widened. *¡Santo cielo!* Sure enough, that same pinkish-purple color that came off my wand when I used it was coiling around each of my four paws. I lifted one paw to watch it swirl and move, then I sat it back down and more magic burst from the ground.

*Whoa. Wicked. Qué guay.*

“No. That’s because she is the Priestess of the Pack. And once she’s more in control of herself, that won’t happen unless she wants it to.”

I stared at my magic. It probably wasn't safe to have that swirling around. It would definitely signal who I was and what I could do. In times of war, that wouldn't be ideal. But it sure was pretty. *La magia es tan bonita.*

“All right, Inez. I'm going to shift you back now. Close your eyes.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to watch that process right now. My eyes were already straining to see every shade of green in the leaves above me. The second my eyes closed, that warm cocoon surrounded me once again. It tickled as it lowered slowly to the ground until it was gone. Ice-cold air slammed into me, making me hiss. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself.

Koth grimaced. “Sorry, our animal forms handle the cold much better.” He blew air from his mouth at a small pile of logs in front of him and instantly small orange flames danced on the pile.

*Dragons.* I chuckled and slid a little closer to the fire. “*Gracias.*”

“All right. You're up, Amelia.”

Amelia cursed under her breath. I focused on the fire so she wouldn't feel self-conscious. The heat was comforting and familiar. I felt a rush of energy sweep over me, but I didn't look. Amelia was young. I'd let her have a moment. It was unnerving enough to have your senses turned up that high. *I can't believe I sniffed out Foster.* I smiled and looked to my right. He wasn't anywhere in sight, but I knew if I took that path on the far left and followed it directly in front of where I stood it would lead to him. Or at least, the spot he'd just been in.

*I wonder what he's doing today? Didn't Clayton say he was out with the pack? I hadn't smelled the rest of the pack. Maybe he's just getting back?* I suddenly wanted to know exactly what the pack did and what Foster's role as Beta was within it. The dragons and their jobs were obvious, but the pack dynamic intrigued me. Always had, actually. I laughed to myself. I always loved werewolf books. There had to be three or four dozen paranormal romance books about werewolves on my Kindle. And I'd been annoyed with Stephenie Meyer for not including more about the wolves in *Twilight*. Jacob was a whiny little brat I couldn't stand, but the others were cool. If my life were a book, that would've been called foreshadowing. *Who would've thought?*

I smiled and looked to my left—and gasped.

Amelia the human teenager was gone. In her place stood a huge white lion with a thick white mane and massive white wings sticking up out of her back. She had to be over ten feet tall. Elan had said Amelia's place would be on the battlefield. Now I understood why.

“Holy shit,” I mumbled.

Amelia's wide purple gaze snapped to me. She whined but it came out as a ferocious growl that sent goosebumps over my body. She lifted one paw, and it had to be two inches thick. When she sat it back on the ground, I felt the vibrations through the dirt.

“Holy *shit*.” I giggled. “DUDE. Look at you! You're incredible!”

Amelia flinched and looked back and forth between me and Koth.

Koth grinned. “Isn't she amazing?”



“So amazing.” I held two thumbs up. “You are fierce. I pity the fool who tries to fuck with you.”

Her purple eyes sparkled.

“Seriously, Amelia. You’re basically as cool as the dragons.” I grinned. “Lucky. I’m so jealous.”

Koth winked to me, then he turned back to Amelia and held his hand up. “All right. Close your eyes. Let’s shift you back.”

She slammed her eyes closed without hesitation. White smoke swirled around her. It was like a tornado swallowed her whole. The smoke sparkled and flashed like magic for a few seconds and then vanished like it was never there, leaving Amelia standing there in her human form again.

“Thanks,” she said softly and wrapped her arms around her stomach. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“It’s too bad we don’t get to pick our animal form.”

Koth laughed. “I agree.”

Amelia blushed.

“So now what?” I gestured between us. “What’s next?”

Koth turned to me and grinned. “Now, you’re going to practice shifting on your own.”

*¿Por qué lo pregunto?*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

INEZ



“WELL, THIS IS ME.”

I peeled my gaze off the prettiest sunset I’d ever seen and turned toward Amelia. She was facing the opposite direction and looking up at something with a small smile. Then her words clicked. *This is me.* I’d offered to walk her home because Koth had been called away to handle something with demons that I hadn’t wanted to hear about. Ignorance was bliss, after all. We’d trained all day until we’d both successfully shifted on our own about a dozen times or more.

When I turned to follow her gaze, my jaw dropped. It was a house, but it was *nothing* like Pack House. The wolves lived in a three-story building that looked more like a hotel or apartment complex. It was perfectly nice and had everything we needed ... but *this* house was a *home*. Just a few feet off the cobblestone pathway stood a two-story building that looked like it was built into the ground. The mountain grew around it, with trees and hills that merged into the sides of the house. The entire roof was covered in thick, lush moss. In some spots you couldn’t even see the stone walls—it was just moss and circular windows. There had to be fifteen windows and most of them were round and glowed orange, though I wasn’t sure if that was from candlelight inside or the reflection of the sunset.

“You live here? It’s like a fairytale.”

Amelia chuckled. “Our entire lives are fairy tales.”

“Touché.”

“But yes, I do.” She pointed to the front door that was made of wood and rounded at the top. “This is where my best friend, Landy, lives with her family. They’ve taken me in.”

“That’s sweet of them. I’m glad you have support here.”

She nodded and her cheeks flushed. But her feet didn’t move. She just stared at the house like it was going to bite her. “Me too.”

“Amelia? Are you all right?”

“Do you wanna come in and hang out for a while?” she asked in a rush.

I blinked. “I’d love to, but are you okay?”

She grimaced. “Landy and her parents left Issale for the day on a favor for Koth. They’ll be back tonight. I just ...”

“Don’t want to be alone?” I nodded to the house. “Have you been alone here before?”

She bit her lip and shook her head.

I grinned. “Then why start now? Lead the way. I can’t wait to see the inside.”

Her purple eyes brightened. She hadn’t thought I’d say yes. As she led the way up the cobblestone pathway to the wooden front door, I felt like Frodo Baggins was going to be on the other side. It made me smile. I wondered if Landy’s parents knew just how fragile Amelia’s mental and emotional state was. There was no doubt in my mind that Amelia insisted she was perfectly fine to be left alone. She was brave and had

one hell of a spine. You didn't just shift into a giant lion with wings if you were a timid person.

I'd only just met her, but I was fiercely protective of her already.

"It's so weird to not have keys to the house," she said with a laugh as she reached out and gripped the wrought iron door handle. The door opened immediately. "Like even at SOMA the doors only unlock for our magic."

"Oh, yeah, that's how Pack House is."

"It's so strange to me."

I nodded. "That's the New Yorker in you. We can't just *not* lock our apartments in the city."

"Right? My aunt and uncle are stupid rich with staff and everything but they're serious about security."

"My room in Pack House only opens for me, like it sensed me and unlocked but wouldn't open for Foster."

Amelia pushed the door open and glanced over her slender shoulder to me. "Not this house. There's no lock, magic or key."

I frowned. "Why not?"

"Because they're Koth's cousins. Royal blood. Apparently no one would dare enter without approval or else they'd suffer the wrath of the dragons."

My jaw dropped. "That feels a little ass backwards."

Amelia snorted. "Tell me about it. Come on in."

We stepped inside and I squealed. Literally. The outside had been fairytale to the max, but inside was a damn dream. I

suddenly realized why all the Disney characters ran around singing. They lived like *this*. I sighed and smiled.

“That was my exact reaction too.” Amelia giggled. “Much, much different than my Fifth Avenue penthouse overlooking Central Park.”

I glanced over at her. “But in a good way.”

“In the best way.”

The walls on the outside were made with stone, but inside it was wood and it smelled gloriously like pine. I took a deep breath to inhale the scent and let it seep into my bones. *Man, I forgot how much I love the woods. I gotta get out of the city more often—oh, wait. Guess I am now.* I smiled and looked down at the floor which was made entirely of smoothed-out river rocks that varied in shade of gray in no particular pattern. The ceiling was about twelve feet high, give or take, and made of wood. There were carvings with intricate symbols I’d never seen before.

“That’s their ancient language.” Amelia pointed above us. “I have no idea what it says. Apparently they’re going to teach me, but I said one thing at a time.”

I nodded. “I hear that.”

Amelia turned and shut the door behind us. “They say we can leave it open and be safe, but what can I say? I’m a city girl.”

“I’m glad my door locks, so yes ... city girl problems.”  
*Todas las puertas deben cerrarse con llave.*

The second the door closed we were drenched in darkness. All of that orange and red light had been from the setting sun behind us and *not* inside. Amelia cursed but it sounded more like a whimper. Thanks to my new heightened wolf senses, I

could still see her despite it being dark as she fumbled for the door handle. She yanked the door back open to let light back in.

She sighed and rested her forehead on the door. “Dammit. I keep doing that.”

“No electricity is a bitch.” I pointed to the wall directly in front of her where a wrought iron sconce held an unlit torch. “There’s got to be matches or a lighter nearby.”

“It’s dragon flame.” Amelia reached out and touched the base of the torch. Bright orange flames flickered to life. She closed the front door again, then spun and touched the unlit torch on the opposite wall and flames responded instantly. “Watch.”

I turned just as candles came to life in every corner of the house, all without touching or lighting them or even saying a spell. “How?”

Amelia shrugged. “Any home a dragon lives in here has dragon flame torches and candles. Something with their magic just makes it happen. I honestly don’t understand, and my brain hurts too much to ask for clarification so I just accept the answer is *magic*.”

“Funny, that was my advice to Marta and Carmen. Some things you won’t be able to understand at the start so just know it’s because of magic.”

We were in the foyer, which wasn’t large, but the wrought iron chandelier hanging over our heads was. There were thirty-six candles on it. I counted. All of them had little flickering flames. I took a step forward so I could see. The first thing I noticed was a spiral staircase up ahead and to the right a little, and it was made entirely of stone. Attached to the back of it

was a massive hearth. Not a fireplace, a *hearth*. It had to be fifteen feet long and as tall as the ceiling. The mantle was lined with candles and a flowery vine. To my right was a sitting room with a love seat and two cozy chairs. Each was wood framed with comfy cushions made of a soft material that I knew was either synthetic or naturally sourced. On the far wall was another hearth, this one a quarter of the side of the other one. To the right was floor-to-ceiling windows, which I realized were what I saw from outside. Between the furniture was a long coffee table made of wood.

To the left of the foyer was an opening to the kitchen. Unable to curb my curiosity, I stepped through the opening and then stopped when I reached the island made of wood. On the other side of the island was a huge hearth that was definitely used for cooking. Wrought iron beams stretched across it with cauldrons and skillets and other cookware hanging. To the left, on the front wall of the house, was a huge farm-style sink made of the same wrought iron the wall sconces were. I was definitely sensing a theme. The entire ceiling of the kitchen had wooden crossbeams where rows and rows of dried plants, flowers, and herbs hung. It reminded me of my shop. I wasn't surprised to find shelves full of jars of herbs and nuts and things to cook with. There were wicker baskets carrying fruits and vegetables, which I'd learned Issale grew themselves.

“Apparently, before Koth ascended the throne, everyone was on their own with food and clothes and stuff.” Amelia strolled inside the kitchen and leaned against the island opposite me. “Now there’s an official Issale garden where some civilians tend to fruits and veggies and stuff. He set up a team of civilians whose job is to find materials they can make clothes and shoes out of. They don’t kill anything. They only



use what they find. And they have to do a special ritual to honor the soul that fell—and that goes for using plants too. For them they have to honor the natural lifecycle by giving the animal or plant a second life.”

“That’s incredible, so he’s giving his people jobs and purpose.” I smiled. “And he gave them modern plumbing. I swear, what did they do before him?”

“Suffer in silence, from what I’ve heard.” Amelia pointed to the island between us. “Look at this.”

I frowned and looked down, then did a double take. There was a stove. With two burners. “How? Pack House has two kitchens with stoves but that’s because those rooms lie just beyond Issale’s border. We’re deep in Issale here.”

“Koth. Again, I don’t understand the how other than *magic*, but he somehow managed to get a gas line up one side of the mountain. Naturally, it’s the side all the dragons and the members of his family live on. But I think it’s because it somehow ties to Koth’s power, not because he’s selfish. Because I also know that as soon as it was up and running, he moved whole families *into* houses on the gas line, and they opened like the first ever Issale restaurant. It’s more of a cafe. And it’s not actually open yet. He says they’re working on it.” Amelia sighed and pushed her hair back. “Which is where Landy and her parents went today. Something to do with restaurant stuff.”

I grinned. “He’s opening a restaurant inside Issale. That’s going to be life-changing for some people.”

She groaned and hung her head. “Like me. People who are hungry and need food, but there’s nothing to eat. I miss my air fryer.”

Back at Pack House there was food, but I didn't want to leave her alone, and there was no way she was comfortable enough to go hang with all the wolves. Plus, I didn't know those young wolf guys enough to bring a pretty little thing like Amelia into their den. I trusted they wouldn't hurt her, if only because they were terrified of Koth and the other dragons, but if she'd been traumatized recently, then having horny males drooling over her wasn't going to help. And Amelia was gorgeous. I wasn't in the mood to threaten the lives of any male that objectified her tonight.

I cleared my throat. "So, what do you usually eat?"

"Landy's parents cook. Her dad makes breakfast because he's good with eggs, but her mom makes lunch and dinner. There's no such thing as leftovers here. Nothing to heat up in a microwave or air fryer. Everything is made from scratch."

"That's inconvenient."

She snorted, but then her stomach growled and she cringed. "I'm sorry. This was a terrible hangout idea. You're probably just as hungry as I am, and I can't feed you or myself."

I glanced around the kitchen to the baskets of fruits and vegetables, then to the jars of grains, seeds, nuts, and to my surprise, *noodles*. This kitchen was fully stocked and ready to feed its residents. I shrugged and gestured around the room to all the ingredients ready for us to use. "Why don't we just cook something? My little wolfy apartment doesn't have its own kitchen, but you've got one here with a full stash of supplies."

Amelia gnawed on her bottom lip and glanced around nervously. She wrung her hands in the hem of her sweater and shifted her weight around. She was *flustered*.

I frowned. “Would they be mad if we cooked?”

Amelia shook her head immediately. “They won’t mind, but, um ... I don’t know how to use the kitchen.”

*That’s a strange way to word that.* “Didn’t cook much at home? You said air fryer and microwave?”

“Yeah, for like Bagel Bites and Easy Mac when everyone is busy.” Tears pooled on her lashes and her cheeks turned bright-pink. “Or, like, if there’s leftovers in the fridge, Deacon taught me how to heat the easy stuff up. He’s the one who taught me the microwave and bought me the air fryer when Stedman laughed.”

There was something off about her reaction. The emotions were intense for something as little as cooking, which meant it wasn’t about the cooking at all. *Okay, big sister mode, Inez. Something is wrong.*

I walked around the island to stand beside her. “And did you just learn how to use those?”

“My aunt and uncle don’t even cook. They have Stedman for that. He’s our butler. He handles everything because they’re just busy.” She looked around the kitchen. “I’ve never made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but that can’t be hard, right? It’s not cooked, right? Or is it? Deacon said he’d teach me how to cook grilled cheese sandwiches when I got older.”

*When I got older?* She was fifteen. Surely she was old enough to cook simple things. If she could wield a wand and use magic, she could cook. Carmen was well on her way to being a phenomenal chef. Marta was already learning. I licked my lips, then asked in a soft voice, “How old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

Amelia's face turned a ghastly green and fell. "Technically, I'm twelve."

I flinched. "Excuse me? *No lo he oído bien.*"

Amelia fidgeted with her fingers and her sweater sleeves. "I've only been alive for twelve years. So has Landy."

*¿Cómo es posible?* My jaw dropped. "So you were born in what year?"

"I was born April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006. I'm supposed to be turning thirteen in two months."

I shook my head. "How? No, wait, don't answer that. You don't have to talk about it—"

"Yes, I do." She sniffled and held her chin up. "This is my new reality. I need to adapt. I'm fifteen now."

"How?"

A single tear slid down her cheek. "Um, like a week or two ago—I've lost track of time—Landy and I were kidnapped and taken to the Seelie Realm. Time works differently there, but it was only a few days here. The Seelie King used his magic and transformed me from a twelve-year-old to *this body.*"

"King Fuckface. Now I get it." But then I eyed her new, very mature and adult body and my stomach turned. I didn't want to ask, but I had to just in case. "Amelia, did he—"

"No, but it was the plan before I escaped. That's what triggered my magic to let me shift the first time."

"You're only twelve inside? Oh, sweetheart." I pulled her into my chest and wrapped my arms around her and just hugged her tight. "I'm so sorry."

“It’s just not fair,” she cried into my hair, her fingers gripping my back like she was afraid I’d let go. “Everyone thinks I’m fifteen and can do stuff on my own—”

“But you’re just a kid.” I pulled back and ran my hands through her hair to settle it in place. “Of course you don’t know how to cook. My own twelve-year-old sister, Marta, *just* learned how to boil water for pasta. She gets nervous in the kitchen, except everyone knows she’s just a little kid so they help her. You look like an adult, so people forget or just don’t know.”

She wiped her tears with her sleeve and sniffled. “Deacon would teach me anything I wanted then he was marked for The Coven. And now I can’t leave until I can control my shift, and it just sucks.”

“How’s Landy handling the change? Is she fifteen now too?”

“Fourteen. But this is her home and her family so at least she’s comfortable here. I’m the stranger no one knows.”

I wiped some of her tears with my thumbs, “Well, lucky for you, I’m also the stranger no one knows. And I have a sixteen-year-old sister and a twelve-year-old sister, so I know how to help you connect your mind to your new body. We’re gonna stick together here, Amelia. Two witches from the Wands Suit just hanging with dragons and shit.”

She giggled and then burst into tears and collapsed against my chest.

I let her cry for a moment because sometimes you just needed to cry it out. Sometimes life just sucked so fucking bad you had to just let yourself feel the raw emotions *and then* you

dealt with them. I rubbed circles on her back for a few moments until she started breathing normally again.

“All right. So, the first thing we’re going to do is teach you how to cook, because everyone should know how to cook at least *one* thing. Peanut butter and jelly and grilled cheese are both yummy sandwiches but not always filling enough.” I pulled back and tipped her chin up to look at me. “Let’s make pasta. Nice and easy?”

She nodded.

“Did they perhaps show you how to turn on their super special secret gas stove?”

She shook her head, then gasped. “Wait. I saw her mom flip this switch under the counter.”

I heard the metal of the switch, then the hiss of gas a split-second before a little blue flame popped out from the stove burner on the right. I grinned and turned the stove back off until we were ready. “Excellent. Okay, so step one is to take that pot hanging by the sink and fill it halfway with water.”

Now that I gave her a task, she leapt into action. She hurried to the sink and was back with that pot of water in mere moments. She sat the pot on the burner, then looked to me with expectant eyes.

“Step two is turn on the stove.” I flicked the switch to put it back on. “We don’t want to waste any water or gas. Now, have you ever seen boiling water?”

“That’s when it’s all bubbly, right?”

“Exactly. Now, that’ll take a few minutes for the water to heat up to a boil. In the meantime ...” I pointed to the jars on the shelves, “there are a few different types of noodles to choose from. Pick one.”

She grabbed the one with the shells in it. “But we can’t put cheese, because we don’t have a fridge?”

“Mac and cheese is a staple, I know, but there are other pasta options. For example, you could put butter and salt. That’s tasty.” I reached for the jar filled with a red sauce where the label read *marinara*. “This is spaghetti sauce.”

“Oh, *that’s* the name of it. Landy said it’s homemade by the old lady a few houses down.” She took the jar and sniffed. “She is going to be selling her stuff at the new grocery store in town.”

I grinned. “Yeah, I have a good feeling this will taste damn good. And for beginning chefs, no need to get fancy. Noodles and sauce is all you need.”

“Hey look! It’s ready!” She pointed to the pot, which was already boiling. “Do we pour it in with the noodles now?”

“No.” I chuckled. “That boiled fast. Magic?”

She nodded.

“Okay, once the water is boiling, we get to step three, which is to put the noodles in—and only the noodles.” I picked up the jar and opened it. Then dumped noodles in. “So, Deacon cooks then?”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Goddess, no. I mean, he knows how, but as Stedman says, there are chefs and there are people who cook.”

I threw my head back and laughed.

“But Deacon doesn’t want to cook. He says him cooking is an insult to chefs around the world, and why should he rob them of their passion to make food for people?”

“I’m starting to see why he’s The Devil Card.”

“You have no idea.” Amelia’s whole face lit up when she spoke about her cousin Deacon. I wondered if he knew that. “The only thing he’ll cook is a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“Late night grilled cheese is a party boy’s dream.” I grabbed a wooden spoon from the rack by the hearth, then stirred the noodles. “I promise you’ll get the hang of it. For now, we’ll just stand here and watch until the noodles look how you want them. And you can take one out to test.”

“That sounds easy enough.”

I leaned my hip against the island. “So, Deacon refuses to cook, but he lives with The Coven now, so who cooks for him?”

“There are ...” she counted with her fingers, “nine adults living in that house. Like real adults. Full-grown, middle-aged adults.”

“Ah, so they do the cooking.”

She grinned. “Deacon’s soulmate is a good old-fashioned southern woman who is a mean chef. Goddess, I can taste her fried chicken if I think hard enough.”

We both laughed.

I hopped up and sat on the island. “I hope this is normal in this house.”

She hopped up on the other side of the stove. “Hey, I saw Koth sitting on this very island like this the other day. If it can hold him, it can hold us.”

I snorted. “So, do you like Deacon’s soulmate?”

“Emersyn? Oh yeah. She’s the best.” She grinned. “Where are you from?”



“Spain. But I moved to New York when I was twelve.”

“Do you miss Spain?”

I sighed. “*Es una pregunta difícil.* That’s hard to say. Both of my parents passed, so missing Spain might simply be my missing them.”

“I’m sorry about your parents.” Her face fell. “Both of mine died too. I love my aunt and uncle, and of course Deacon, but I do miss them.”

“One more thing we have in common.”

“I wish that one wasn’t.”

“Me too, girl. Me too.” *Diosa. Ahora eres mi hermana pequeña y aún no lo sabes.*

She stirred the noodles, then scooped one up to inspect. With a nod, she dumped it back in and stirred more. “Do you like your stepmother?”

“Gabriela is an angel of a woman. Human, but she knew I was a witch before Mom even died. She’s been so good to me and she gave me two sisters.”

She scooped a noodle, then squished it between her fingers. “Okay, that’s a done noodle. Now what?”

I flicked the switch for the stove. She followed me like my shadow over to the sink to watch me dip the pot sideways to dump the water out. I shook the pot, then tipped it back over for the last bits of water. I carried the pot back to the stove and sat it on the left burner we hadn’t used. I dumped the jar of marinara sauce in it and stirred.

“That’s it? That’s all I have to do?”

I pursed my lips. “We just need bowls and spoons.”

She grinned and hurried to the cabinet for them. We were both so starving after training all day that neither one of us spoke as we shoveled pasta into our mouths. Normally I cooked with spices and all kinds of extra-flavored ingredients, but I hadn't wanted to intimidate her. Her body may have been fifteen, but her mind was twelve and frazzled as hell. She ate her pasta in silence, doing a little happy dance, so our easy meal clearly sufficed for her.

As she leaned over to serve herself a second bowl and paused. "I never knew spaghetti could be a different noodle."

"I never realized we didn't go to the table."

We both laughed.

The front door flew open, letting a huge gust of ice-cold air into the house. We both hissed and shivered. I jumped off the counter and yanked my wand from where I'd stashed it in my leggings and held it up. Amelia leapt off and hid behind me. The door slammed shut and the whole house shook.

"*AMELIA?*"

She sighed behind me. "I'm in here," she said softly.

A teenage boy I recognized immediately slid into the doorway of the kitchen. He was tall and had short black hair and bright-blue eyes. He threw his hands up in the air. "Whoa. It's just me."

I lowered my wand. "Maddox. What are you doing here?"

He arched one dark eyebrow. "This is my house. What are *you* doing here?"

"Amelia invited me over after training today." I gestured to the pot on the stove. "We made dinner. Would you like some? It's pasta."

“No, thank you. I ate at Finn’s.” He glanced into the living room to my left. “Why are none of the hearths on? The house is an icebox.”

“Do dragons get cold?”

“No, but my parents and my sister do. As does Amelia. Why didn’t you turn the hearths on? Did you close the windows when you got here?”

Amelia’s face fell. “There are windows open?”

Maddox threw his hands up in frustration. “Yeah, Amelia. There’s no air-conditioning, so we open at least one window per room in the house for cross ventilation during the day. Dad told you, remember? At sunset you either turn on the hearths or close the windows. One or the other. You did neither?”

Amelia sat her bowl down on the counter. “I forgot about the windows.”

He put his hands on his hips. “And the hearths?”

She mashed her lips into a line and glared at him.

“Well? Amelia?”

I glanced back and forth between them and frowned. Maddox was glaring at her, his temper rising by the second. Meanwhile, Amelia’s energy was sliding down the slippery slope to that panic I’d seen when she didn’t want to admit she didn’t know how to cook—*OH*.

“Maddox?”

“What?”

“Back off.”

He flinched and turned his icy glare at me. “Excuse me?”

“Did I stutter?” I pointed to Amelia without looking at her.  
“How old is she?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it.

“I said, how old is she? Ignore the body and tell me her mental age.”

“She’s twelve.” He cursed and ran his hand through his hair. His anger dropped a few notches. “Do you know how to turn on the hearths?”

She shook her head.

He hung his head. “Shit.”

I sat my wand on the counter. “Your family may be gracious enough to accept her into your home to live, but she was left with nothing to eat in the house because she doesn’t know how to cook.”

“Dammit, Amelia.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and cursed again. “I know I can be an ass to you, but I would never starve you. I would’ve made you something before I went to Finn’s or at least brought you home something from Finn’s. My parents taught me and Landy when we were young. I’ll make sure she knows you need help in that area.”

“Thanks,” Amelia said, just barely more than a whisper.

“Did you turn the gas switch off?”

I nodded. “And we’ll clean this up in a minute.”

“All right. Well, I’ll go light the hearths for tonight and get the house warmed up, but I’d stay in the kitchen until I do. The stove must’ve kept the chill away. And Dad will show you the hearths tomorrow.” He started to back away, then stopped. “Inez, thank you for feeding her. And, Amelia, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, Maddox.”

He nodded and then hurried up the stairs, his steps thundering above us in seconds.

“How old is he?”

“Sixteen.”

I tucked my wand back into my leggings, then grabbed my bowl and served myself seconds. “So, I have questions.”

“Maddox ...” She grimaced. “That’s ... that’s a whole different story.”

I swallowed a bite and watched her scoop more into her bowl. “Is he always mean to you? Or was the snappiness new?”

She chuckled, but it wasn’t a lighthearted sound. “We’re always mean to each other equally. We’re both working on not doing that.”

“That’s interesting.” I pointed above us, then leaned forward and whispered, “Do you feel safe with him?”

She blushed. “Maddox would never hurt me.”

“You’re sure? I know he’s Koth’s cousin and heir to the throne, but that doesn’t mean anything. There’s a temper in that one.”

“He’s my soulmate.”

I gasped. “OHHHH. I see. This makes so much more sense now.”

She groaned. “That’s what Koth said.”

It didn’t make sense to her. It probably didn’t to Maddox either. They were both kids. Amelia was super young, but that fact cleared everything up for me perfectly. Firstly, the

universe clearly knew she was going to be aged up, so it gave her an older soulmate. Secondly, she was insecure and terrified, so fate gave her someone who was a pillar of strength. Maddox was young and Koth had told me a few times that young dragons had to learn to control their tempers, but I was confident he would be a lot like Koth when he got older. Plus, he was the heir, and it took a strong person to be worthy. But mostly, the tension and animosity between them was a romance novel waiting to happen.

He'd snapped at her for not heating the house ... because he knew *she* would be freezing. He just didn't know how to handle his emotions, and she probably didn't know what she was feeling.

I cleared my throat, then forced a fake smile. "I have a soulmate too. Clayton, the wolf Alpha."

She gasped. "No way. Really? Do you have the marks too?"

I hadn't shown anyone else my marks since the bonfire, and I'd tried not to look at them myself as they stressed me out, but Amelia and I were bonding so I pulled my sweater up. "They look so different from arcana soulmate marks."

"I know, right?" She leaned forward to look and frowned. "Yours looks different."

"Well, yeah, because it takes the image of your soulmate's form. Clayton is a brown wolf so I have a brown wolf, but Maddox is a dragon."

"Right, but yours is different. Look." She pulled her sweater up. As expected, there was a navy-blue dragon on one side of her rib cage, but on the other side it was a symbol of

The Goddess. “See? Mine is The Goddess because I’m a witch. But yours is a wolf with magic. Why?”

“That’s interesting.” I lowered my sweater and frowned. “Maybe because I’m Priestess of the Pack? So, maybe I have my own symbol?”

“Oh. I bet you’re right.”

“Koth and Elan all saw my mark at the bonfire, and they didn’t say anything.”

“You must be right then. What do I know?” She chuckled and picked her bowl back up. “I’m still struggling with having a soulmate who hates me.”

“I don’t think he hates you, Amelia.”

“I know. I didn’t mean that so literally.” She pushed her pasta around her bowl. “We’ve been basically attacking each other since the moment we met. At first, it’s a long story, but I kinda get why he was so mad at me, but then he touched my arm and *BOOM*—soulmates. You’d think he would’ve been nicer after that. Instead, it’s like it made it worse.”

*Poor sweet summer child. She’s so young.* “I imagine it’s difficult to be a sixteen-year-old boy marked with a twelve-year-old soulmate. That might have freaked him out a bit. When you’re an adult like me, that age gap won’t matter much as it’s just a couple of years. But right now? Might be weird for him. And then to have his young soulmate suffer severe trauma and not be able to do anything about it or console her in any way?”

Her eyes widened.

I shrugged. “Tough situation.”

She dropped her bowl to the island. “I never thought about it from his perspective like that. I should have. How self-centered of me.”

“You were twelve. How were you supposed to know how to handle having a sixteen-year-old boy as your soulmate? This is tough on both of you. Give yourself a break, but maybe give each other a break.”

“Because he’s my soulmate, and I’m, like, supposed to marry him one day.”

I scoffed. “I never said that, nor will I say that. That mark only says he’s your soulmate. It is not a legally binding contract for an arranged marriage. If you don’t wanna be with him, then don’t be. End of story. But there’s got to be a reason the universe put you two together, even if that reason is unfathomable right now.”

“Like you and Clayton?”

I grimaced, mostly for show for her. “Between you and me? I’m confused by it. He’s a lot older and there’s no ... spark. I feel nothing. Not even anger or hatred. Just apathy. But I’m going to give it a try and see what the universe had in mind for us.”

“This has been so overwhelming.”

I reached out and held her hand. “I’m here for you, Amelia. For anything.”

She looked at me all teary-eyed. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you about that, about me and Maddox. We agreed to keep it a secret.”

I pressed my palm to my chest. “I’m a big sister. I’m really good at secrets, and yours is safe with me.”



“I wish I had a big sister like you.”

“Well, now you do.” I pulled her in for another hug. “And I’m not going anywhere, so you can talk to me.”

Something loud pounded on the front door. We both gasped but didn’t step apart. Maddox flew down the stairs and yanked the door open before we could even move.

“Oh, it’s you. Sorry.” Maddox stepped back into the foyer and gestured for someone to enter the house. He was smiling, so my nerves calmed. “Come in.”

The scent of freshly cut grass swept through the kitchen and my pulse skipped beats. I dropped my arms and turned toward the doorway just as Foster walked into the kitchen. His dirty-blond hair had dirt in it and was sticking out in wild directions. He was dressed in his usual attire of jeans and a leather jacket.

His amber eyes sparkled. “Good evening, ladies.”

My whole body warmed. *Dammit. What is wrong with me?*

He smiled and I swooned a little. it’d been too many hours since I’d seen him. “Sorry to intrude, but I just left Koth’s and was told Inez was up here at your house. I thought she might like an escort back to Pack House. It’s dark and all that.”

Butterflies danced in my stomach. I grinned. “Thank you, Foster. I appreciate that. Last thing I need is to get spooked by my own shadow.”

We all laughed.

I pointed to the stove. “I just need to clean up our dishes real quick. Can you give me a few minutes?”

“Not a problem.” He turned to Amelia and held his hand out. “Hi, I’m Foster. I don’t think we’ve met.”

She shook his hand. “Amelia. You’re the Beta, right?”

*Wait a second. He’s not wearing gloves. She just shook his ungloved hand. That’s not fair. Shut up, Inez. But where are his gloves?* I knew I shouldn’t have looked, but I couldn’t stop myself. He’d told me his hands were severely scarred—and he wasn’t lying. The backs of his hands had huge gouges carved out. It was gnarly. I understood why he covered them.

“Hey, Foster?” Maddox held his hand up. “Was Koth good? There was a demon attack, right?”

“Yeah, there was, but it was small and not a big deal. I only called Koth out there because I’ve never seen demons in that area before.” Foster pointed to the left as if we knew where he was talking about. “I wanted them to try and see where they came from. It was weird.”

Maddox nodded like he knew what was happening. “Finn said that’s happened like four times this week. It’s making him nervous.”

Foster scowled. “What does Elan think?”

Maddox rolled his eyes. “No one will ever know.”

“Well, I’ll make sure I let the pack know to be extra careful.” Foster reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his gray leather gloves, then slid them onto his hands. “If the demons are planning something—”

“What kind of demons?”

Both guys turned to Amelia.

Maddox scrunched his face like he was trying to figure out how to answer that. “The normal ones, not that shadow kind we saw with Henley.”

I scowled. I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded terrifying. Foster's eyes met mine, and I saw my own expression in his face, which made me smirk.

But then Foster shook himself. "Yeah, these were just normal demons. The kind we always see."

Amelia nodded. "Demons like that don't plan things."

Maddox and Foster scowled.

She shrugged. "I've spent a lot of time with The Coven recently, and I've been there when they attacked New York a couple of times. Normal demons don't plan. they don't *think*. So, if you're noticing a pattern, or a break from the norm, then you need to be looking for what's pulling the strings."

I grinned. This girl was smart and observant. She was no damsel in distress.

Foster snapped his fingers in my direction. "No, no, no. That's not the right time to do the grinning. That's creepypasta."

"Oh, we've got pasta. Want some?"

Maddox closed his eyes and sighed.

Foster grinned. "I was hoping you'd offer. It smells divine. I'd love some."

Amelia grabbed a clean bowl and served him a good portion. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

Maddox shook his head. "Listen, Amelia is probably right. But Koth isn't going to tell everyone that and freak people out."

“So, keep our eyes open.” Foster pointed to the pasta in his bowl. “That’s good sauce. Did little old Marie make this sauce?”

“Yes,” Maddox and Amelia said at the same time, which made them both blush.

Foster purred in approval.

I giggled and pulled my wand back out. “Okay, cleanup time.”

“Wait, you’re using magic to clean?” Amelia’s eyes widened. “Show me.”

“There are spells you can recite, but I’ve forgotten them. Now I just direct my magic. So, let’s start with my bowl. I point my wand at it, summon my magic, then push my magic into the bowl. As soon as I feel it touch the bowl, I flick my wand toward the sink. In my head I say, *wash the bowl*, and then my magic just does it.” We all watched as my bowl and spoon flew to the sink and then washed themselves in the water with soap. “Then I do the same to put it on the drying rack.”

Silence.

“Holy shit,” Maddox breathed.

“Oh my Goddess. I wanna try.” Amelia yanked her own wand out from where she’d tucked it in her boot, then repeated what I’d done with her own bowl. The first try the bowl wobbled on the counter, but the second try was flawless. Her grin was like a kid on Christmas. “That was epic.”

Foster shoveled the rest of his pasta into his mouth, then sat the bowl on the counter in front of her. “Do it again.”

She did, even faster than before. With a giggle, she turned her wand to the pot we'd cooked with. Then the now empty jar of marinara sauce. Once those were clean, she used her wand to put the lid back on the jar of the shell noodles and flew it back to its spot on the shelf.

“Oh, you're a powerful little one. We're going to have fun.” I cackled. “Ya know, Maddox, I bet If you showed her the hearth process now, she could use her wand to do it.”

Maddox pointed over his shoulder. “That window over there. Close it.”

Amelia grinned and aimed her wand at the window. It clicked shut with ease.

“Damn.” Maddox laughed. “That's not fair.”

“Neither is flying.” Amelia pointed her wand to her mouth. “Or melting your enemies with your fire saliva. Or eating them.”

Maddox grimaced. “Don't eat them. It's not worth it.”

Foster arched one eyebrow. “She's gonna eat one. I can tell. Just to try it.”

Maddox threw his hands up. “Just don't puke it up inside the house.”

Amelia giggled and bounced on her toes. “This has been a good day.”

“Yeah, and you're tired.” I lowered her wand. “We need to ask Elan if we can still get Witch's Shock before you go too crazy.”

Witch's Shock happened when a witch used too much of their magic. It was like bleeding to death but with our magic.

Most people died when they got it, because their bodies just weren't strong enough to withstand the healing process.

“Don't you dare die on my watch.” Maddox held his hand out. “Wand. Gimme. You can have it back in an hour.”

Amelia pouted but she put her wand in his hand. “If you break it, I will turn all of your clothes into pink sequin dresses.”

“Inez, Foster, have a nice night.” Maddox pointed to Amelia but didn't speak. He just walked out of the room and back up the stairs.

Foster grinned. “How many more wands do you have, Amelia?”

Her answering smile was wicked. “Two.”

“All right, well, I'm going to go take a shower and then climb into my bed and sleep for days.” I laughed. “I recommend you do the same, Amelia.”

She turned and tackled me in a hug. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” I hugged her for a moment longer, then stepped back. “Now go get some rest. We train again tomorrow.”

“I'm already ready for bed tomorrow.” She winked. “Night, Foster.”

He nodded his head, then walked to the front door.

“Oh, Amelia, try to have a proper breakfast tomorrow and not Cheetos again.”

She gasped.

I laughed and waved as I skipped to the door. “Good night!”

The door was open, so I slipped right out—then stopped short as the bitter ice-cold air slammed into me. I hissed and cursed. “No, no, no, no. Abort mission.”

“Come on, Priestess.” Foster laughed and held his elbow out to me. “I’m no dragon, but I’m surprisingly warm. Let’s get you home before you freeze.”

## CHAPTER NINE



INEZ



“BUT SERIOUSLY, why is it so cold?” I shivered and wrapped myself around Foster’s arm. My teeth were already chattering, and we’d only been walking for a few moments. I could still see Amelia’s house behind us. “This should be illegal. It’s not this cold in Manhattan.”

Foster laughed. “Well, you aren’t dressed for single-digit temperatures.”

“Because this place makes no damn sense! It was sixty-two degrees when I left for training. What’s it now, like five? *Si controlas las estaciones, ¿por qué no puedes controlar la temperatura? Hace demasiado frío. ¿Qué sentido tiene esto? Alguien tiene que hacer algo contra este crimen.*”

“Actually, the thermometer at Koth’s said negative—”

“Shut up. Don’t you finish that sentence. Ignorance is bliss. I can’t get frostbite if I don’t know.”

“That’s how that works now?” He laughed again but stopped walking. When he pulled his arm out of my grip, I whined and he rolled his eyes. But then he slid his leather jacket off and wrapped it around my shoulders. “Go ahead, get your arms in there.”

The instant heat was so soothing I almost cried, which made my eyes burn like fire in the cold. I shoved my arms into the sleeves and found they were a few inches too long, which meant my hands were safe from the tundra. “Thank you. Won’t you be cold?” *Por favor, di que no. Quiero robar esta chaqueta para siempre. Huele tan bien. Huele a ti.*

“Nah, this is a thick sweater, and I’ve been running, so my body temperature is still up.” He held his elbow back out so I could resume clinging to him, which I did. “When we shift, our bodies are protected from the weather by fur or scales, right? Well, our magic knows we may need to switch back and forth, so there’s a window of time after we shift back to human form where our bodies are still handling the temperature as if we still have fur or scales. And that window will depend on each shifter. So, the dragons, for example, are never cold. Ever. That window is basically limitless. Especially Koth. I’ve seen him sleeping naked in the snow when it’s negative twenty.”

“Why was he naked?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it. “Ya know ... I didn’t ask.”

“Really? That would’ve been my first question.”

“In my defense, his lower body was buried in the snow, so I didn’t know he was naked when I walked up. I mean, Koth is shirtless most of the time. It wasn’t until he said, *I don’t want to put clothes on, so I’m not going*, that I realized the situation.”

I snort-laughed so loud a little bunny scurried into a bush. “I like him so much.”

“Me too.” He chuckled. “The dragons do strange things. I guess I’m just desensitized.”

*I need to be desensitized to you. Effective immediately. Ojalá no me gustaras. Ojalá no me afectaras tanto.* I sighed. My crush on Foster hadn’t dimmed at all by not seeing him all day, which I supposed was stupid since it’d only been a day. I just needed it to go away. Clayton was my soulmate. Sure, I’d told Amelia that being soulmates didn’t require me to be in a relationship with Clayton, but it would make life so much easier if I was. He was my Alpha. I was *Priestess of the Pack*.

My life was predominantly now here in Issale. With every detail I learned about this place, I found myself wanting to help make their lives easier. It was becoming obvious why they needed a witch like me in their ranks, but staying here meant having to be near Clayton. It wasn’t like I could decide to not be with him and date someone else here. Everyone knew I was Clayton’s mate. So it was either I was single forever or I dated Clayton.

My body and heart just needed to get with the picture.

*Fake it until you make it, Inez.*

“Where’d you go?” He tapped one gloved finger on the tip of my nose. “What are you thinking about down there?”

My face warmed. *Nothing I can ever voice out loud.* I forced a smile. “Lots of things all at once. It’s like there’s several tabs open at the same time and they’re all videos.”

“We’ve got a bit of a walk ahead of us, so why don’t you tell me what those videos are.”

I bumped him with my shoulder. “Is my silence boring you?”

“More like I have a hundred tabs open at once too, but the whole computer froze and force-quit is mocking me, so please distract me from my own insanity.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Dammit, Foster. Stop being so relatable, or I’ll have to make you my new best friend.”

“Will your current best friend be angry?”

“She’s imaginary, so I don’t see why she can’t come along.”

“Okay, but later I’m gonna need a full description of what she looks and sounds like so I know I’ve got the right imaginary friend.”

I pursed my lips. “I like this notion that all the world’s imaginary friends hang out in an alternate dimension waiting for our attention.”

He stopped short and looked down at me. His amber eyes were the brightest thing in the darkness of the forest. “That is the most disturbing thing a person has ever said to me while walking in the near pitch-black of a forest.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it.

“Creepypasta, Inez.”

“But you kinda liked it, right?”

“Very much so, but I’m also kinda afraid to sleep now.” He shuddered for show. “Will I slip into their dimension and make all these friends?”

“I heard the Chariot Card of The Coven can astral project. Ya know, multiply herself a bunch of times. So maybe our imaginary friends are really just her in all these different forms —”

“*Inez*,” Foster giggled so hard he bent over at the waist, “that makes it SO much worse!”

“What? How?”

“Because instead of it being a figment of your own imagination, it’s a real living, breathing person talking back to you.”

“Well, when you put it like that.” I cocked my head to the side. “Have you ever seen the Chariot?”

“Devon Bishop? Yeah, she came to Issale back in October.”

“So if I told you my imaginary friend had shoulder-length, wavy brown hair and bright, pale-green eyes—”

He gasped, his face paling. “*Stop it. You’ve met her.*”

I blinked up at him with wide eyes.

“*Inez.*”

I grimaced.

“I will leave you in this forest all alone—”

“All right, all right, I’ve met Devon Bishop.” I giggled as he groaned and shoved me away from him playfully, then hurried forward. “But only once and for a few seconds. I didn’t know it was her until after she left.”

“You’re twisted.”

I skipped through the dark to catch his elbow again. “Thank you.”

“Okay, so back to the open tabs?”

I took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Okay, all the things on my mind? I’ll give you the list, and you can dissect as you

please.”

“Hit me.”

“One, why the hell is it so damn dark out here? It’s not that late. Don’t people need to see where they’re going? And two, where the hell IS everybody? No one else is out? Is there a curfew I don’t know about? Three, are we one-hundred-percent certain no demons can get into Issale? Because some crazy shit has been going down. Four, what did you call the shifter hunters again? And what do they look like? How do I spot them? Five, I’m worried about Amelia. She’s too brave and proud to admit she needs more help than Landy’s parents are giving her. Six, where the hell are we going right now? Like, how do you know we’re going in the right direction and not just off a cliff ten feet ahead?” I licked my lips and waved my hand in front of my face. “I can barely see my own hand. Seven, this whole telepathy thing is making me super uncomfortable. My imaginary best friend did not sign up for a thought orgy. Eight, why can’t we get electricity here? I don’t understand. Nine, Clayton. That’s overwhelming for me. He wants to go on a date Tuesday night, and I’m trying not to freak out. He’s my soulmate. This should be totally normal, right? And ten, y’all need golf carts.”

Silence.

Foster whistled under his breath and then laughed. “Wow. There’s a lot to unpack there.”

“I know.” I sighed and pulled the collar of his leather jacket up to cover my neck. “There’s more where that came from too.”

“Okay. Let me see how I do on that list.” He cleared his throat. “One, there’s no electricity and we don’t keep torches lit along the trails at night because we’re all born with

heightened animal senses and therefore are comfortable with the dark. To us, this isn't that dark because we've always lived like this. To you, this is a stark difference to city life. Also, people's homes are tucked into the forest all along this pathway we're on, and some people get bothered by the constant flicker of flames. Two, there's no curfew. But in the winter, we tend to hunker down earlier in the evening because it's so damn cold. Our magic keeps the snow and full force of winter at bay, but at night the magic lets the temperature match that outside of Issale as a form of protection for us. People tend to stick close to their homes after dinner." He leaned closer so his breath brushed over my face. "And if I'm being honest, people are pretty nervous about the rising dangers outside of Issale, so they don't venture out as much as usual, which leads to question three. I would say nothing is one-hundred-percent anymore, but that's between you and me. No demon has ever crossed our border, but Lilith is coming back, and I suspect all bets will be off."

I shuddered.

He nodded. "Right, so then ... four, the shifter hunters are called the Duenill. They look totally and entirely human. You probably won't notice they're after you until the chase starts, or unless they make it stupid obvious. You're a witch, so you may be able to pick up on their energies and the darkness about them. For me they just smell bad ... like a musty old garage with dead rodents."

I gagged.

"Five, talk to Koth about Amelia, and he'll handle it on her behalf. But I think she's going to be rather attached to you from now on." He smiled down at me and winked. "I also don't fully understand why we can't get electricity here, but

trust that Koth would give it if he could. He did give us plumbing and gas. Golf carts are actually not a bad idea. Granted, they'd have to be solar charged. Some of the smaller animals or birds may really appreciate that. Running in animal form isn't as easy for everyone." He frowned. "That's a damn good idea. Lot of folks have cars parked just outside our borders near Pack House for when they want to go into the human world, but they still have to get down the mountain. I'll tell Koth your idea."

"That actually reminds me of thought number eleven, which is all the things I want to try and do to help everyone here with my magic. But let's not tackle that one tonight. I still have to learn more." I frowned. "Hey, wait, you skipped a few."

He grinned. "Telepathy is easier to teach while in animal form but I think you're too tired to shift right now."

"Yeah, I am. Plus, Koth said he turned off my telepathy for the day."

"Oh, because of that little tangent conversation with me today?"

"That wasn't my fault!" I threw one arm up. "He told me to focus on my senses, so I was sniffing like the good wolf that I am. Then I smelled you—"

"You smelled me?" He scowled and sniffed his pits. "I showered this morning."

"No, I smelled your scent."

"I have a scent? No one has told me I have a scent."

"None of the girls?" *NO, INEZ. SHUT UP.* I slammed my mouth closed.



He shrugged the shoulder I wasn't leaning on. "I don't really do a good job of talking to a lot of them."

"Ah, one of your frozen tabs?"

"So frozen."

I snorted. "Well, you smell like fresh cut grass."

"Is that a good smell?" He frowned. "Because I think it is."

"It is. For sure. But like, I wasn't expecting it today while I was training ... and it's winter, so I smelled it and thought of you—then it *was* you." I chuckled. "I couldn't believe you answered back."

"See, that's why the idea of an imaginary friend being a real person is terrifying!"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. "Shit. You're right."

"Is that why Koth turned it off?"

"Probably. As you can tell, there's a lot going on in this head that nobody else needs to hear."

He laughed. "Telepathy is a strange thing to get used to in the beginning."

"Right, okay, so how do I not broadcast all my thoughts to everyone? I will not shift if I don't learn this immediately."

He frowned and pursed his lips. "Right now, you're overwhelmed. But speaking telepathically actually feels different than just thinking."

"How so?"

"Have you ever rested your head on someone else's chest while they were speaking? It kind of vibrates, like a low hum kind of sound."

My eyes widened. “Yes. I know exactly what you mean.”

“So, when we speak with our minds, it should kind of feel like that but more subtle and gentle.” He tapped on his temple. “Next time in wolf form, pay attention to how it feels when you think, and you’ll notice a difference.”

“Noted. Okay. But how do I control it?”

“Similar to how you control shifting. It just happens faster.” He snapped his fingers, which was a muted sound with his gloves. “Remember when you taught Amelia how to use her wand to clean up? You said there used to be spells but now you just point your wand at the bowl and think, *fly to the sink?*”

My jaw dropped. “OH. So, I direct it like I do with my magic.”

“Well, it *is* magic. And since you’re used to using and directing your magic, I think you’ll find approaching telepathy in the same manner to be much more helpful.”

I nodded. “I’ll try that tomorrow with Amelia. Thanks, Foster.”

“You’re welcome.”

I squeezed his arm and looked up at the dark profile of his face, where only the edge of his nose and cheekbones caught the moonlight. “You’ve been a real lifesaver here for me so far.”

“I hope that remains a figurative statement.” His eyes met mine and held, our faces mere inches away. “I’d like you to stay alive.”

I smiled and looked down at the ground in hopes he wouldn’t see just how much he affected me. It was dark out,

but he had better senses than most and probably saw my blush or heard the way my pulse fluttered when he looked at me like that. My whole body warmed, and it had nothing to do with his jacket.

*Shit. I am screwed. Diosa, por favor, salva mi corazón. Esto me va a doler.*

“A thought orgy.” He laughed and his whole body shook. “That just now registered.”

I bit my lip and tried not to grin quite so wide. “Well.”

“Only you, Inez. You’re unique. I like that.”

*I like you.* I groaned in my head. “So, where are we going?”

“Pack House.”

“But how can you tell?”

“Ah.” His eyebrows rose. He scratched his jaw. “That’s a complicated answer. Mostly, I just know my way around Issale. You’ll learn. But there are set pathways like the one we’re on that lead to all the different areas, think of them like roads in Manhattan.”

“There’s a system for that.”

“Exactly.” He pulled me to a stop. “Look above us, what do you see?”

I craned my neck back and found the trees had parted enough to give a straight shot of the navy-blue sky with twinkling stars. “The sky.”

“Now, look down, what do you see?”

“Cobblestone?”

“In Manhattan you have the major roads that are wider and have a few lanes for cars, right? Those are the popular streets more people drive on, so they’re wider.”

“So you’re saying the cobblestones and the sky tell me I’m on a main street?”

He grinned. “Yes. Precisely, yes. As you can see, it’s dark here at night. But in the autumn, when everything is red and brown and it all blends together, or when it rains or is foggy, or any other time we don’t have access to all of our senses, we needed a way to mark trails. The trails are made out of different things to tell us where we’re at. Cobblestones are the biggest streets in Issale. They lead to everything. And in order to give those trails light, the trees are trimmed to let in the moonlight and sunshine.”

My jaw dropped. “So this main trail leads where?”

“Up at the top of the mountain, where the dragons live and where all of our new shops and stuff are, that’s all cobblestone, but the only other cobblestone trails lead down the mountain. This way you know if you’re going *down*, then you’re headed down the mountain. He pulled me to the side of the trail then tugged me down into a crouch. “Look at this trail that runs perpendicular. It’s pebbles.”

“What does that mean?”

“Issale is a mountain, so while there are a handful of trails leading down there are also a handful wrapping around it. Think of them like rings.” He scooped up a handful of pebbles. “There are six trails that go around the mountain and they all go the whole way around, but not all six are made of the same material. The two top rings are made of pebble, as you can see with this one. This is actually the second pebble trail, so you won’t see another until you head back up. So if you end up on

a pebble-covered trail, just keep going until you hit cobblestone.”

I nodded and scooped a handful of pebbles into my palm. They were small and round and not as smooth as I would have expected. They were something that would somehow slip into my shoe and drive me nuts.

He tugged me back upright and we walked back down the cobblestone trail. “The very last ring is a paved road. It’s actually the seventh ring, and it’s paved because we want you to know you’re about to leave Issale.”

I chuckled. “What a warning.”

“The bottom two rings at the base are gravel. That way if humans stumble onto our land, they won’t realize it.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Oh yeah. Issale is like Eden in that it’s a magical piece of land that doesn’t exist for humans. There are parts of that humans can walk through, but they can’t get into the rest. Those gravel trails are as high as humans can get, and it’s part of the pack’s job to protect us from the humans while also protecting humans that are on our land. You’ll see. We’ll take you on a pack patrol soon so you can see.” He pointed to his left. “See those twinkling lights?”

I peered behind his back and spotted little golden balls of light bouncing and fluttering around. “They look like fireflies.”

“They are.” He turned to walk backwards down the trail but didn’t let go of me. “River stones are the middle two rings and because of that, most people feel the safest in the middle of Issale and they choose to live there. The dragons, Elan, the royal lines, and everyone who flies like the top rings. Oh, and

the dozen snow leopards. They have a little section where Koth lets it snow for them at the top.” His whole face softened whenever he mentioned little thoughtful things Koth did for his people. “I recommend going up there. They like to play hunt with us. It’s a game. It’s fun.”

I wondered if Koth knew just how much they loved him. I also wondered who the king was before him and if it was too late to punch him in the throat. All of the kings before him, actually. I’d only just gotten here, and I couldn’t count the number of things Koth had given them for the first time. It also made me fiercely protective of that man, which was ridiculous since he was a dragon and I was a measly little wolf.

“... so the fireflies hover here.”

“Um, sorry, can you repeat that? I got lost on one of my tabs for a second.”

He hung his head and laughed. “*I said* a lot of families will build their house at the base of big trees and then as the family expands with kids and grandkids, they build *up*, like into the trees.”

I squinted to try and make out the structures, but it was all black and fireflies. “And the fireflies just like to hang out with them?”

“Yeah, they know they’re safe.” His smile turned wistful. “You’ll find we have comfortable and friendly relationships with all the wild animals in the area. They understand what we are. They know we’re here to protect them too. And we do. We’ve nursed to health many a wolf and bear and everything else in between. So, anywhere you see a large cluster of fireflies, there’s probably a house there.”

“There are none by Pack House.”

“Can you blame them? We’re a rambunctious group.” He smirked. “But mostly we’re too close to humans for their comfort.”

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but my body had other plans and I yawned.

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I boring you to sleep?”

“Shut up,” I teased and bumped him with my shoulder. “It’s not my fault. It’s dark, cold, and you’ve got that deep voice. It’s like a lullaby.”

He chuckled. “Shall we walk the rest of the way in silence, or shall I go ahead and carry you?”

“If I pass out on this walk, you have my full permission to be as dramatic about it as possible.” I tried to laugh, but I yawned again.

“Stop that—” he yawned. “Look what you did.”

“That’s just how I test to see if people are psychopaths. You passed?”

“I like the questioning tone.”

“But really, silence is my enemy right now. We can’t let the tabs win.” I gestured ahead of us. “Please, tell me everything about Issale. Anything. Whatever comes to mind. I want to learn.”

For the rest of the walk, which felt like an hour but was probably about fifteen minutes since we weren’t moving quickly, he told me about the residents of Issale. It was nice to hear about all the different types of shifters. I had questions, as always, but fatigue kept those locked in my mind for now. Instead, I just listened. Foster had one of those voices that seemed to soothe the cracks like running water in a drought. If

he noticed that my eyes drooped closed a few times as we walked, he didn't say anything.

“Okay, we're home.”

I gasped and my whole body jumped. We were out front of our super modern-looking building that didn't quite fit in with the rest of Issale. “We need to renovate.”

“What's that?”

“It looks so ... human, ya know?” I held both hands up together to make a frame between my fingers and closed one eye. “We need to make it prettier. More fairytale.”

“I think that's a wonderful idea.” He touched my elbow and urged me forward, but when I didn't move, he stopped and frowned. “Inez?”

“I have a date with Clayton on Tuesday,” I blurted before I could stop myself. *Please tell me not to go. Tell me I should be with you.*

*No, no, no. Inez, you can't do this with him. Clayton is your soulmate.*

*You HAVE to give him a chance at least.*

Foster nodded and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “He's not expecting anything from you, Inez. He told me so.”

Over Foster's shoulder, I spotted the man in question through the window of his room. He wasn't looking at us but was focusing on something in front of him. “What's he doing in there? Is that a chemistry set?”

Foster glanced over at Clayton, then turned back to me and shrugged. “He says he's helping Elan with something, some



potion for the Equinox ritual. It's not my area of expertise, so I didn't ask questions. There are herbs and shit involved."

"Oh." I nodded. Then I shook myself. "You don't have to vouch for him, Foster. He's your adoptive father who raised you, and look how great you turned out. And he's Alpha. I get it. I'm honored to be marked for him. I just wasn't expecting it."

"I imagine it's a lot to take in. Soulmates, in general ... I can only imagine." A muscle in his jaw popped.

*Great. Make it weird. He may be my friend, but he's my soulmate's son. You don't talk to your boyfriend's kid about your relationship.* I needed to remember that. I cleared my throat and went to scrub my face, but Foster's long sleeve slammed my forehead. We both laughed.

"Right, I ought to give this back." I started to take it off.

He stopped me. "No, hang on to it. We don't sell jackets like this right now, and the next few nights are supposed to be just as cold. This can hold you over until we can get you one."

"Won't you need it?"

"I've got a few."

My cheeks warmed and butterflies danced in my stomach. "Thank you."

He nodded to the front door. "It's still early, so I have to do roll call and make sure everyone's in ... It's pack stuff. You should head to bed."

I nodded. "Another training day tomorrow."

He opened the door for me and held it. "Good night, Inez."

“Good night, Foster.” I paused on the threshold, wanting desperately to kiss his cheek, but I knew better. “I’d be lost without you, my friend.”

“I hope that remains a figurative statement.” His eyes met mine and held, our faces mere inches away. “I’d hate to lose you.”

## CHAPTER TEN

## INEZ



TONIGHT WAS THE NIGHT. Date night with Clayton. My first date with Clayton—my supposed soulmate whom I felt nothing for. I was crossing my fingers that would change tonight.

It'd been a long time since I'd been on a date. I couldn't even remember when the last time was. Back home in Manhattan, I would get all dolled up for a date. I'd curl my hair for a little extra flair. I'd actually take the time to put on makeup, and I'd always wear something that gave me a confidence boost. But that was Manhattan, where the cold weather was manageable, not this place, which turned hellish tundra once the sun went down.

Perhaps I would've felt more comfortable if I'd had any of my own clothes. Foster had done his best in stocking my new closet, and I was very grateful for him, but I wanted *my* clothes. As soon as Koth gave me the green light, I was going back to my apartment to pack a bag or two. Then I'd feel more at home. Until then, my new awesome wolfette friend Isabella had loaned me some clothes that were a little more ... feminine than what Foster had gotten me.

I stood in front of the mirror in my apartment and sighed. The red, silk, full-body romper was soft and shiny, and I liked

the way it moved when I moved. It was super stylish with big golden buttons. I liked the exaggerated lapels. I couldn't have said if this was a current fashion trend, but it was pretty, and I felt like a woman in it.

There was a knock on my door.

My heart skipped. *It's time.* I took a deep breath, then marched to my door and pulled it open. Clayton stood on the other side with a dashing smile on his face. I smiled back. He *was* handsome. I somehow kept forgetting that. Tonight, he looked particularly handsome in his soft, gray sweater and dark jeans. His sneakers were a perfectly unscuffed white. Those must have been his dress shoes. I was actually impressed they were so clean.

He nodded. "Good evening, my darling."

*¿Querida? Qué asco.* My stomach turned. I had to bite my cheek to stop myself from cringing. We barely knew each other. He shouldn't have been calling me pet names yet. *Calm down, Inez. He's just being cute and charming. This IS a date. Dale una oportunidad.*

"Hi, Clayton." I forced a smile. "What did you have in mind for tonight?"

He wagged his eyebrows and his green eyes flashed. "It's a little surprise."

"Am I dressed appropriately?" I gestured to myself. "I borrowed something."

His green eyes slid up and down my body. "You are perfect."

"Thank you."

He stepped back and held his arm out to the side. “Shall we?”

I let my door close behind me as we walked to the front door of Pack House, but I made it five feet before a gust of wind swept over me. I hissed and cursed. It was so cold it felt like razor blades. When I’d gone inside to get dressed, it’d been mid-sixties. This mood swing in temperature was brutal. I shivered.

“So, are we leaving Issale?”

He frowned and cocked his head to the side. “Why would we leave Issale?”

“Well ... it’s our first date and it’s dinner time, so I assumed we were going to eat?” I frowned. “The only restaurant in Issale is not yet open, so I’ve heard, so I assumed we were going into one of the nearby towns? Because Pack House common rooms aren’t first date material?”

“Oh, I see. I apologize. I forget how new you are to our land. We’re staying in Issale, but I assure you we will have privacy.”

I stopped short. “Okay, listen, I have anxiety issues. I hate surprises. Can you please tell me where we’re going and what the plan is?”

He smiled, not unkindly. “That’s fair. We’re going to have a picnic to watch the last of the sunset then a little star gazing. Not far from here. I have everything set up and ready for us.”

I shivered and wrapped my arms around my waist. “So I need a jacket.”

“I have a couple blankets—”

“Just give me one second to grab a jacket. I’ll be right back.”

Without waiting for approval, I spun and sprinted back to my room. As always, the door opened at my touch. I glanced over my shoulder to see if Clayton had followed but spotted him right where I left him out front. It wasn’t until I was standing inside my walk-in closet full of clothing Foster had grabbed from their little general store that I remembered I didn’t have a good coat. The one I’d been wearing the night my life changed was torn apart by demons. The only thing I had was a thick flannel button-down shirt and a sweatshirt. I grabbed both, just in case. On my way back out, I grabbed my purse and then shoved in three of the snack bags of chips I’d gotten from the common room at lunch. Goddess bless the elder members of the pack who drove into human towns to stock up on snacks. Clayton said he had a meal, but I had no idea what that would be. Best to have a backup.

As I stopped to open my door, I caught a whiff of fresh cut grass and froze. *Foster*. But he wasn’t inside my apartment. I frowned and followed the scent until I spotted his gray leather jacket hanging on the back of my chair. I picked it up and held it to my nose, then sniffed. Warmth filled my body instantly. My anxiety-driven, rapid pulse slowed a few notches. I grinned. Once again, Foster was saving me. I slid the flannel shirt on over my romper, then draped Foster’s jacket and my sweatshirt over my purse.

When I walked back out the front door of Pack House, Clayton looked up and smiled, then his gaze dropped to my bag overflowing with clothing. He frowned but didn’t say anything. He just forced a smile back to his face and held his elbow out. “Shall we?”

I slid my arm around his and waited for my body to react to touching my soulmate, but it didn't. I wasn't repulsed or anything, but I just didn't feel anything. *Vamos, Inés. Siente algo. Cualquier cosa. Por favor.*

“Do you trust me?”

I barely knew him. Normally, that would mean a fast, easy no. But since we were in Issale and he was Alpha of the pack, I had no reason not to. “Yes. But why?”

He wagged his eyebrows playfully. “Close your eyes. Don't want the walk to ruin the destination.”

I arched one eyebrow. “What's wrong with the walk?”

“Nothing.” He gestured ahead of us. “One of my favorite spots in Issale is easiest to get to by walking the gravel ring.”

The gravel ring. Right. Foster had told me about the six rings that wrapped around Issale to help signify how high on the mountain you were. “Gravel isn't pretty and romantic, is it?”

“Nope.” He chuckled. “But I promise the destination is.”

I smiled and closed my eyes while tightening my grip on his arm. “Okay, but if you take me off the side of a cliff, I'm taking you down with me.”

He laughed and his whole body shook. “We are not far off the ground. That wouldn't be a good fall. Wouldn't be worth it.”

“Well, that applies to random ditches, holes, caves, mudslides, waterways, etc.” I grinned as we walked. “I will take you down with me.”

He laughed.



“You laugh, but one time I fell off a pier on a lake and took two friends down with me.”

He snort-laughed.

I grinned. “You should’ve heard their squeals.”

“I will have to remember this when you go out on patrols with the pack and make sure you’re not holding on to anyone.”

I nodded. “Better make sure no one is within arm’s length. I’m a grabber. More the merrier, right?”

“Well, the pack does like to stick together.” He slowed us down and turned right. “Okay, we’re walking off the gravel road now and onto a trail.”

“What’s it made of?”

“The trail?”

“Yeah, Foster taught me how the trails are made of different things to mean different things, like a map.”

“Foster. He’s good for stuff like that. It’s why I have a Beta in the first place, someone to handle the small details while I work on big picture stuff. Oh, right, um, the trail is a beaten path of dirt.” He snickered. “That means it’s not an official trail, but it’s been trampled enough times to leave a mark.”

*I feel that.* “Just so you know, I have terrible reflexes. I go full armadillo when I fall—tuck and roll. I never protect my face.”

“What a visual.” He laughed so loud it echoed, so I knew we were in the forest again. “Okay, just five more steps.”

*Uno.*

*Dos.*

*Tres.*

*Cuatro.*

*Cinco.*

“Open your eyes.”

I opened my eyes and gasped. I’d expected a clearing or a meadow, but it was actually a cliffside covered in grass. The forest stretched out around us in a semicircle. In front of us was an open view to the mountains next to Issale and the valley between. There was a wide-open view of the night sky, which looked like a painting. The sun had set beyond the horizon, but the hints of orange, pink, and purple clung to the stars like kids being dragged out of a toy store. The bright colors faded seamlessly into a dark-violet and blue shade that made the stars look like snowflakes frozen in place.

“It’s beautiful, Clayton.” I smiled. “I wouldn’t have expected such a view from this low on the mountain.”

“Issale’s elevation is higher than all the other mountains surrounding us, for safety reasons.” He pointed directly in front of me. “This is our destination.”

I followed his point until I spotted a thick red blanket stretched across the ground with a brown wicker basket sitting in the middle. “A picnic. What a perfect spot for it.”

“See? I told you the destination was worth it.”

“You were right.” I chuckled. “I didn’t even hate the surprise.”

“I haven’t been on a date in a long time, so I’m feeling rather proud of myself at the moment.”

“You should be. This is really nice.” I sat down on the blanket and tucked my legs under myself. “It is gorgeous out here.”

Clayton was a nice guy. He was trying. The effort alone meant a lot. It was more than the last few guys I'd gone on first dates with. Perhaps that was a benefit of dating an older guy—he was fully mature and self-aware. He was confident and knew what he was doing, or at least had learned what women liked.

“Here’s a blanket for you.” Clayton draped a soft fluffy blanket across my lap, then he sat down across from me and reached for the two empty wine glasses. “For you, my lady.”

*My darling. My lady. Pump the brakes here, dude.*

I took the glass with a smile. “What are we drinking this evening?”

“A bottle of my favorite merlot.” He pulled out a bottle with dark-red wine inside. Then to my surprise, he extended a claw from his right pinky and used that to uncork the wine. I hadn’t known we could partially shift. He smiled and hummed a tune I didn’t recognize as he poured wine into my glass. “It’s called *Duckhorn Napa Valley*.”

“I’ve never had that before.” I lifted the glass to my nose and sniffed. It was a pungent kind of scent. Wine was not my favorite drink of choice. “I’m not much of a wine drinker.”

“Oh, no? What do you usually drink?”

“Aside from soda? Either bottled beer or a fruity frozen daiquiri.” I sniffed the wine again. “I’ve never had merlot, actually. All the wines I’ve had were either pinot grigio or chardonnay.”

“Ah.” He chuckled as he poured his own glass. “Those are served chilled, which is more difficult when you have no electricity, though some of the women of the pack keep coolers of snow on the courtyard to keep their whites cold,

along with other food products. But I thought you might not be acclimated to the temperature here just yet and that a red would be better.”

“That was very thoughtful of you. As was the blanket.”

“I’m sorry I did not think to have you bring a jacket—”

“Don’t.” I waved him off. “We were close enough for me to grab one. No harm, no foul.”

He raised his glass toward me. “A toast?”

“A toast.” I held my glass up.

“To the powers at be who blessed us with a soulmate.” He leaned forward and smirked. “And to us, soulmates on a new journey together.”

*See? He’s sweet. Give him a chance, Inez. Sure, he’s not your usual type. Sure, he’s older than you expected. But he’s a catch. He’s Alpha of the pack for crying out loud.*

I grinned and tapped my glass against his. “Cheers.”

Wine was not something I preferred at all, but I didn’t want to offend him. And I’d never tried merlot, so there was no reason not to. I tipped my glass and took a good swig. Flavor danced along my taste buds. It wasn’t as bad as I’d expected. I licked my lips. It tasted interesting. Not awful but probably an acquired taste. This merlot was fruity tasting but not as sweet as I’d expected. I’d always heard merlots were more mellow and sweeter than pinot noirs. I liked sweet things.

“Do you hate it?”

“No, not at all. Me and Mr. Duckhorn are just getting to know each other for a second.” I winked. “I’m sure it will pair nice with whatever you’ve brought.”

“Worry not, I also brought a few bottles of water and two cans of coke. Those are stored in a small, ugly cooler I’m hiding inside the cute basket.” He grinned as he reached into the basket. I expected him to pull out the other drinks, but instead he brought out a hunk of a tree trunk with a crater carved into the top. He sat a large candle in the crater and lit all four wicks. “In case you need a bit of warmth.”

He may have forgotten the jacket part, but so far he’d thought of a lot of stuff.

“So, I’m curious, what are we eating? I’ll admit, New Yorkers don’t really do picnics like normal people. We grab food on our way into Central Park, then sit and eat it.” I chuckled. “And in New York, there’s food options everywhere. I’m a hot dog or pretzel vendor kind of gal.”

He grinned and slid the picnic basket closer to him. “Well, I figured you might be missing some of the amenities a city with proper electricity might have, so I took a little trip into town this afternoon. I wanted this to be just right.”

“That was really thoughtful of you, Clayton.”

“I am your soulmate. Your well-being matters to me.” He pulled out a rectangular tray with a clear lid on it. When he sat it down, he took the lid off. “To start, we’ve got a selection of fruit with a chocolate dip.”

I gasped. “Chocolate.”

He laughed as he pulled another tray out of the basket. “And to balance those ... vegetables with a choice of ranch dip and blue cheese. All of the fruits and veggies are grown right here in Issale. You’ll find they are rich in flavor. The dips I grabbed from town. I also grabbed these from the store.”

My mouth watered at the sight of cheese cubes and crackers.

“This is quite a feast, Clayton.” It took a lot of time and effort to get all of these things. That had to count for something. “You really thought of everything.”

“And we’re not at the best parts yet! There’s a little restaurant I love where I got a few hot items for you. Sliced-up grilled chicken, I went plain on the seasoning because I wasn’t sure what you liked,” he pulled out a large bowl and peeled a lid off, “and pasta salad.”

As the scents from the chicken and the pasta salad hit my nose, my stomach growled like a lion. “Okay, you’ve poked the bear.”

“Well, when we finish dinner, I also have a dessert you won’t find within Issale.” He lifted a white tub from inside the basket. “Neapolitan ice cream. A little sampler of flavors.”

I gasped. “*Ice cream?* Damn, you know how to impress a girl. Who told you the way to our hearts was through our stomachs?”

“There isn’t an animal in Issale that doesn’t love food.” He gestured to the feast spread on the blanket between us. “Dig in.”

I reached for a strawberry and immediately slathered it in chocolate. The flavor bomb in my mouth was a relief. I moaned and did a little happy food dance as I went one by one to sample each piece of fruit, veggie, and dip, then I stacked cheese cubes onto crackers and devoured them. Clayton did not judge me for pigging out. He merely sat two plates on the blanket with forks on them.

“May I serve you some Italian pasta salad?”

I nodded because my mouth was full of gouda.

He dumped some of the pasta salad on my plate, then handed it to me. “I am glad you’re hungry. I probably should have informed you we were eating.”

“I assumed food was involved because I always assume food is involved.”

For a few moments, we ate in silence, just enjoying the flavors and the twinkle of the stars in the sky. I was surprised the silence was comfortable. Of course, I had anxiety so I was rarely ever truly comfortable around people, but all things considered, his company wasn’t bad.

But this was a first date with my soulmate, so I washed down my bite with a sip of wine and then cleared my throat. “So, how do you like being the Alpha?”

“I love it. Sure, it’s a big responsibility and that keeps getting bigger the longer Koth is King. But I enjoy it immensely and am honored I was chosen.” He picked up a strawberry and dipped it in chocolate, then lifted it to my mouth. The chocolate brushed against my lip. “Tell me about your store. What’s your favorite part?”

I took the bite he offered and chewed, trying not to be grossed out by the fact that he just fed me. Some women liked that. I didn’t know of any, personally, but I’d heard it. I just needed to keep feeding myself without pause so he didn’t have a window of opportunity to repeat himself. I licked my lips. “I’m very proud of my store. I like helping clients. That’s my favorite part. Both witch *and* human. I like listening to their needs and concerns and finding something that will help them.”

“And you doubted that you were our Priestess.” He grinned. “I cannot wait to see what you do for us.”

“Yeah, that makes me nervous, but I’m excited to get started. Just need to learn my shifter side first. I want to really feel a part of the pack before I mess with anything.” I took an apple slice and dipped it into the chocolate. “Do you have favorites in the pack?”

“Like people?” He frowned. When I nodded, he shook his head. “I mean ... Foster, of course, but I raised him ... so that’s different.”

“You just like everyone?”

He smirked. “Overall, everyone is likeable in our pack. Some of the youngsters are a bit rowdy for me lately, so I can get grouchy with them. Some of the elder wolves are a little less helpful to the pack. I can get a bit impatient with them, but I try my best.”

“That’s all you can do, really.” A gust of wind ripped through my hair and sent goosebumps over my skin. I shivered and dove for Foster’s leather jacket. I’d stalled putting it on as long as possible, because eventually it wouldn’t be warm enough. “You can’t get along with everyone all the time.”

Clayton’s gaze dropped to Foster’s jacket. He scowled. But a split-second later, he shook himself and plastered a smile back on his face. *Interesting. What was that? Are the territorial alpha stories true? Is my soulmate jealous I’m wearing another man’s jacket?*

I wasn’t going to ask. He needed to deal with it. “What’s your favorite part of being Alpha?”

“The power.”

I choked on a mozzarella cheese cube. “¿Qué has dicho?”



He giggled. “Kidding. Sorry, couldn’t help myself.”

“*Diosa mía*. That’s funny. *Muy buen chiste*.”

“No one has ever asked me my favorite part of being Alpha. But I suppose it’s the same as your favorite part of your shop. I like helping my pack, making sure they have what they need.” He reached into the basket and pulled out one of the cokes and handed it to me. “You don’t have to drink the wine.”

My cheeks warmed. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He cocked his head to the side and watched me. “How’s the adjustment from the world of witches to the world of shifters?”

“*La noche y el día*. I haven’t lived *in* Eden in a while. I’ve just been in New York around humans, so it’s nice to just be free to be my true self. To use magic. To speak freely. It’s been a bit of a relief, which surprised me. I wasn’t expecting everyone to feel like family. Eden is a huge place. People live pretty independently there. But I suppose it’s not fair to compare.”

“Why not? Are they so different?”

“To preface, I haven’t been in Eden since I was twenty. So, as you know, a lot can change in eight years.” I looked off into the stars and smiled. “It’s not unlike Issale in that it’s huge and self-contained, but it has electricity and everything else any human city has to offer. When I first moved there to attend the magic school Edenburg, I used to think I was still in Eden and would start using magic or talking about it. My friends would have to smack me. It just blends so seamlessly. If a human managed to pass through Eden, they might not ever realize it was a magical land full of witches.”

“I would love to see it one day.”

“I’ll take you! My sisters have been begging to go. Naturally, I told them we needed to wait until Eden was safe to visit.” *Si alguna vez es lo suficientemente seguro.*

“So, you don’t see Coven members walking around like we see Koth and the dragons?”

I scoffed. “*Diosa* no.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters, most of The Coven has been predominantly stationed in Tampa, Florida for the last twelve years since that small gap opened, so they weren’t even *in* Eden. They’re there now, but Coven Headquarters sits behind Edenburg, and they don’t allow non-students to just wander across campus.” I popped a grape in my mouth. “And from what I hear, The Coven has been in a nonstop battle since August.”

“We don’t hear much about them, or at least we didn’t used to.” He whistled and shook his head. “I wonder what The Coven is like.”

“You haven’t met them? Foster says he met a few when they were here in October.”

“He did. I was on patrol with the pack that day.” He looked really upset about that.

“Elan assures me they’ll want to come here and meet me, so maybe you’ll get your chance soon.”

“I’d like that. And I do hope they meet you. I bet you’ll need to work with them from time to time—”

He gasped and pointed to the sky. “Shooting star! Did you see it?”

“No? Where?”

He slid over to sit next to me, then pointed up. All I saw was the regular dusting of stars against the darkness. We waited in silence for a few moments, waiting for another one, but it never came.

He cursed. "I swear I saw one."

"I believe you." I chuckled and bumped him with my shoulder. "So, I don't know a thing about constellations. Normally, I would pull out my iPhone. I have this fancy stargazing app that I point to the sky and it tells me what everything is."

"Dammit. I want electricity."

I giggled. "Do you know the stars?"

"I do. We grow up learning astronomy here because we use it as a guide." He looked down at me. "Would you like me to tell you about them?"

I grinned and nodded. He cleared his throat and launched into detail on all the stars and their names. The only ones I knew were the Big Dipper and Orion's belt. Clayton had a warm, deep voice that made listening to him easy. After a few minutes, I glanced over and watched him instead. The glow from the moon lit his profile perfectly. He was actually quite handsome. I found the longer I looked at Clayton, the more attractive I found him. It gave me hope for our relationship. Maybe I just needed to look a little longer.

He looked down and his green gaze found mine watching him. He smiled and tucked my hair behind my ear. There was no tension between us. No electricity. No fire. But he was comfortable and easy. I was relaxed around him. Every minute we spent alone together, I felt our bond grow stronger.

*Maybe we need to step this up a notch. Maybe we need to introduce a little physical touch to the game. If he would just kiss me, then maybe those other parts of my body would kick into gear.*

*Wait a second. Why can't I just kiss him? Sí que puedo. Soy una mujer fuerte e independiente. Puedo besarle si quiero.*

I went for it. Feminism and all that. I leaned into him, our arms touching. The heat of his skin soothed the chill in the air. I licked my lips to gauge his interest. When his gaze dropped immediately to my mouth and his eyes dilated, I knew we were on the same page. *Just go for it, Inez.* I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. He sighed and fell into me. His large, warm hand cupped my face. He tipped my head to deepen our kiss. The brush of his lips on mine was soft and tasted like chocolate. Each time our tongues brushed, I felt my pulse beat harder. It wasn't fireworks, I wasn't gasping for breath ... but I liked the way it felt. Kissing Clayton was like cuddling under a fuzzy blanket next to a fireplace and watching your favorite movie.

That wasn't a bad thing.

It was just confusing.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## FOSTER



ERRAND BOY WASN'T my usual title. Clayton actually preferred to give the younger pack kids errands to run to give them a sense of independence and some practice at taking orders. It was good for them. But tonight my adoptive father forgot he had a package in his P.O. Box that apparently could not wait. The sun had already set, and he didn't like to send the teens driving down the mountain in the dark.

It was unlike him to forget, so I offered to go. The last thing I wanted was to watch him and Inez on their date. Distraction, good. Something to do, better.

I pulled my truck into the gravel lot and nabbed one of the five parking spots. We didn't have US Post Offices in Issale because the United States government didn't know we existed, so a lot of our civilians had P.O. Boxes at the local post office in the nearest human Vermont town. The clock on my dashboard read five minutes till six, which meant I barely made it before they locked up for the night. I threw my door open and jumped out, my boots sinking in the gravel. There was no point in locking the door, this was rural mountain country out here. The biggest concern for these locals was hungry bears. Which, of course, was not a concern for me.

Mid-February in northern Vermont meant I made it two feet before snow pelted me in the face. Inez probably would've hissed and cursed violently at the sheer audacity of Mother Nature. I laughed at the visual in my mind as I walked into the post office. But then I remembered that the whole reason I was on this errand was because Inez was on a date with Clayton. My stomach tightened into knots.

“Hi, Foster!” I heard Carol’s sugary sweet voice before I spotted her hunched over the computer with her big glasses pushed high on her nose ... which was about two inches from the screen. She leaned to the side and waved, giving me a wide, toothy grin. Her hair was as white as the snow outside. “Cutting it close tonight. Everything okay?”

“Hey, Carol.” I smirked. “Clayton forgot to tell me earlier. I wasn’t sure I was gonna make it.”

“Honey, we would’ve waited for you. Call us next time. Harold, Foster’s here!”

“*What?*” An old man about six inches shorter than me hobbled out from the back room. “Carol, what—oh, Foster! Evening, son. Been a while since we seen you. How you been?”

I grinned. Carol and Harold were in their seventies and had been married for nearly as long. From what I’d heard, they’d worked this post office for decades, just enjoying talking to everyone. These were the kind of humans that made fighting demons worth it, that made saving this world from Lilith worth it.

“I’ve been well, just caught up with work.” I slowed down to shake Harold’s hand. “Any of my young friends been giving you trouble?”

“Those kids?” Harold waved his hand and then grabbed a box off the counter. “They’re all good kids.”

Carol slid her glasses down her wrinkled nose and eyed my empty hands. “Just another box pickup?”

“Yep, nice and easy tonight.” I went across to the wall of P.O. Boxes and unlocked Clayton’s with the key he’d given me ages ago. “Did you two have a nice Valentine’s Day last week?”

“The best!” Carol yelled from the computer. “All eight of our grandkids came over for a slumber party so their parents could go to that concert in Montreal. Harold, what concert did the kids go to again?”

“Concert? What concert?” Harold shouted from the back. “When did they go to a concert?”

I opened the box and a wave of wet air hit me in the face. It smelled like wet cardboard. Inside I found one of those flat rate white boxes inside. When my fingers touched it, the box was soggy and weak. I pulled it out and the whole bottom gave out. A plastic bag plummeted to the tile and landed with a thud. *That sounded breakable.*

“Last week, Harold.”

“The kids went to a concert last week? With who? Where was it?”

“In Montreal, Harold.”

I bent over and grabbed the bag. It wasn’t heavy, but there was definitely something of substance inside. I closed the P.O. Box, then carried the soggy remains of the shipping box and the bag over to the counter where Carol sat.



“How In the hell did the kids get to Montreal by themselves? School field trip?”

Carol rolled her eyes. They were such a pale brown they were almost golden like Inez’s. “Harold. *Our* children are in their forties.”

“OH. Our kids. Right.” Harold laughed at himself. “Wait, they didn’t go to no concert.”

“Where’d they go then?”

“Hell, I don’t know,” Harold grumbled.

I waited a moment to see if either was going to speak again, then I cleared my throat. “Sorry, Carol, but it looks like Clayton’s package had a rough day.”

“I’d say. Did anything inside break?” She tapped on the white bag. “Check for me so I can file a report.”

If it was anyone else’s package, I wouldn’t have looked, but my adoptive father didn’t keep secrets from me. And he’d want me to be efficient, so I gently opened the bag and pulled out the contents, which turned out to be Bubble-Wrapped and taped. It looked safe but when I picked it up it felt like jagged, broken pieces of clay. With a curse, I ripped the tape off and unrolled the Bubble Wrap.

“Football!”

Carol gasped and jumped. She clutched her chest. “Dammit, Harold, don’t scare me like that!”

Harold poked his head into the hallway. “It was a football game they went to, not a concert.”

“*Football?* Did you hit your head? Football ended already and they don’t have football in Canada.”

“Yes, they do. I took the kids a few years back.”

“Not the NFL, Harold.”

While the old married lovebirds argued over whether or not Canada had tackle football as an organized professional sport, I was unraveling layers and layers of bubble wrap. My thoughts had been so distracted by them that it took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. But even when it clicked, it confused me. It was a pile of crystals.

Jet-black crystals.

I frowned and stared at them. Magic and crystals were not my specialty as a wolf, so although I knew some names of black crystals, I couldn't tell if these were those. Jet, hematite, onyx, black tourmaline—it was all gibberish to me.

*Why is someone sending Clayton a box full of carefully wrapped and protected crystals?*

“Wait a second, I know!” Harold smacked the wall excitedly. “It was *hockey*.”

Carol giggled. “That should have been obvious, eh?”

I started to wrap the crystals back up when I noticed a small piece of paper lying under them. When I picked it up, I found unfamiliar handwriting instructing Clayton to treat these stones in Elan's potion. Whatever that meant. *That's weird, no? Why not just send them to Elan? Since when does Elan get crystals from someone else?* The box was so damaged it would've been impossible to find a return address or name.

“Anything broken?”

“Nope, just a bunch of pre-broken rocks.” I winked to Carol. “But can I get a new box? I'd like to not drop them before I get home. Or worse, lose one inside my truck.”

“Of course, dear. One second, I’ll grab you one.”

I tucked the paper back under the stones, but when my finger grazed the surface a bolt of electricity shot up my arm like I’d been shocked. *That’s strange.* While Carol had her back turned, I bent over and sniffed the stones, only to be instantly met with an intense lemony scent. Magic. There was magic on the crystals. This kept getting stranger. To make sure I wasn’t going crazy, I pulled one of my leather gloves off and touched the crystals with my bare skin. Each one I touched, I felt a tingle of heat and vibration. *What IS that?*

Inez would know. I saw all those crystals in that back room of her shop where she did all of her real magic. She would know what this feeling was. I’d give the package to Clayton and see if he volunteered the information first, which he probably would. I wrapped them back in all the layers of Bubble Wrap and then secured it with tape. These crystals were obviously going to serve a purpose, so I didn’t want to compromise them any more than I potentially already had.

“Here you are.” Carol slid an empty box across the counter. “Need anything else?”

I slid the wrapped bundle of crystals into the box, then taped it shut. “Nope. I’m all set now. Thanks, Carol. Have a great night, and I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye, Foster.”

“Night, Harold!” I yelled out. “Take it easy!”

“Later, kiddo!” Harold shouted.

I nodded and winked to Carol, then hurried back to my truck outside. Normally, any time I went into town, I swung by one of the restaurants or fast-food joints for some grub, but tonight I wanted to get back. The pack was grilling in the

courtyard tonight, and I knew for a fact Kelly had whipped up one of her special seasonings, and I didn't want to miss it. We may not have had electricity in Issale, or all of modern technology's conveniences, but that only forced us to get creative on our own.

Luckily, the closest town to Issale was only about a fifteen-minute drive from Pack House. Granted, that town was *tiny* and didn't have a downtown area. Mostly it was farms, so everyone was spread out. But if you drove about twenty minutes the other way, you got to a bigger town with grocery stores, a few mom-and-pop style diners, and a McDonalds. If you drove ten minutes farther from that, you got to Burlington, where there was a real city with a mall and a university.

The smell of Kelly's barbecue sauce hit me the second I put the truck in park. I hadn't even opened a window. My stomach growled. With a smile, I grabbed Clayton's package and hurried on my way with thoughts of stuffing myself into a food coma.

I was about halfway to Pack House when I smelled Inez. My feet stopped before I consciously told them to. *What is she doing out here?* I let my nose guide the way toward her until I spotted her. I froze. She sat on a blanket in a clearing with her legs tucked under her and another blanket draped across her lap. Her long black hair swayed in the breeze as she looked up at something and smiled. Whatever she was looking at, it made her cheeks flush a soft pink.

She was wearing my leather jacket.

My pulse skipped beats. It shouldn't have made me so happy to see her wearing my jacket ... but it did. I smirked and started toward her. I just wanted to say hello and see how her day had been. I hadn't gotten more than two seconds of

conversation with her since Sunday night. Training with Koth had knocked her out early.

I stepped around a pine tree—and froze.

Clayton sat beside her.

*Clayton* was what she was looking at with that smile on her face. Nausea bubbled up my throat. She was still staring up at him with bright-golden eyes that twinkled brighter than the stars above us. Clayton rested his hand on the blanket between them and leaned his weight on it, causing his body to be mere inches from her. Every nerve ending in my body was screaming. Clayton looked down at her and smiled.

They stared at each other.

I balled my hands into fists. Heat rushed through my veins. My breath hitched.

And then Inez leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. My stomach rolled violently, and I gagged. I turned to the side and bent over and gagged. Bile rushed up my throat. I was going to vomit. My nose burned. My mouth watered. I had to get out of there before I embarrassed myself.

Without looking back at them, I turned and sprinted toward Pack House. I didn't want to see that again. I didn't want to see her lips on his. They were soulmates. I knew that. I was happy for them. Yet I hadn't prepared myself for seeing them kiss.

*Inez* initiated it too. Inez. Not Clayton. I didn't know why that mattered. I didn't know why that made it so much worse.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## INEZ



“OKAY, I’m turning your telepathy back on. I want to see how you’re progressing with that.”

I pointed my finger at my King. “You want to see me embarrass myself. Admit it.”

Koth grinned and tied his long wavy hair into a messy bun that took him only a split-second and looked better than any attempt I’d ever made. “You just make it so much fun.”

“Well, you’re out of luck.” I held my chin high. “Foster taught me a good trick.”

Amelia nodded. “And then she taught me. We’ve been practicing every night.”

Koth rubbed his hands together. “Let’s give it a go then. Both of you shift, and let’s have a chat.”

Faster than I could blink, Koth shifted into his dragon form. One second he was a six-foot-eight dude with tan skin, purple eyes, and long brown hair ... the next he was a towering twenty-two foot black dragon whose scales held glimmers of rainbow like an oil slick. Only the purple eyes stayed the same. He puffed and smoke left his nose.

*Oh shit, right. Presta atención, Inés. Te está esperando.* I took a deep breath to steady my pulse. We’d been training with

Koth for about a week now. We were getting really good at shifting back and forth on command. I closed my eyes and exhaled—then pushed with my magic. Koth told us to think of our shifting as if we were sending a spell through our wands. I felt that tickle in my stomach that morphed into warm vibrations down all of my limbs ... and then I was weightless.

It always happened. There was always a moment when I was neither human nor animal, when my soul just hovered in the air. And then I felt the cold dirt against the bottoms of my feet as they turned into thick paws. The ice-cold wind rustled through my black fur, yet it didn't feel as cold anymore. I took a deep breath just to soak in each and every scent my human nose couldn't pick up.

The ground rumbled beside me. I glanced over just as Amelia took the form of her white, winged lion. She rolled her neck and roared. *Ahí la tienes. Increíble.*

Koth shook his dragon head. *"I said telepathy, not screaming."*

Foster's trick had helped me so much. Being a witch was making this adjustment much easier than it could have been. I focused on Koth and pushed my thoughts out. *"What if we do both? 'Cause sometimes I need a good scream."*

*"Oh yeah, like a rage room."* Amelia bounced on her white paws.

Koth scowled. *"A rage room?"*

*"It's like an escape room except you break stuff instead of trying to get out."* Amelia shrugged. *"Which means it's more fun."*

*"You're so destructive. I like it."* Koth looked to me. *"I am impressed, especially with how fast you learned telepathy."*



*That's usually the hardest to tackle, and yet you nailed it immediately, and then taught Amelia."*

*"We've got to stick together here." I nodded my snout toward her. "Even if she's a terrifying lion that could eat people."*

*"Do people really taste like chicken? And why aren't the Duenill safe to eat?"*

Koth chuckled, which sounded funny in his dragon form. *"We'll circle back to that one, Amelia. Until then, Inez, you have exceeded my expectations in the best way. I formally and officially approve the end of your training with me."*

I gasped. My tail swished back and forth. *"What does that mean?"*

*"It means you can finish your training with Clayton and the pack. You'll still have to be tested by me before returning to Manhattan."*

*"Where you'll arrange to startle the ever-loving shit out of me without warning to see if I wolf-out?"*

A grinning dragon was an unnerving sight. Little puffs of smoke billowed from his snout. *"Don't rob me of my fun."*

*"I wouldn't dream of it." I winked, though it felt funny in my wolf form.*

Amelia growled deep in her throat. *"That sounds dangerous for other people."*

Koth shook his head. *"I won't let you hurt anyone. I promise. But you're not ready yet."*

*"I still have to train with you?"*

*"For a little bit longer."*

Amelia sighed and flapped her wings. *“That’s ... good?”*

Koth snickered. *“I’d just like to work with you a little bit more and a little differently.”*

Amelia’s purple eyes widened. *“Ominous.”*

Koth looked to the sky, then back to her. *“Fly with me?”*

Amelia gasped. *“Oh my Goddess.”* Her tail flicked back and forth. Her wings flapped and fluttered. She bounced her weight from paw to paw. *“YES.”*

Koth turned back to me. *“You can leave now, Inez. Tell Clayton the rest of your training is on him.”*

I bowed. *“Thank you.”*

*“But I’m here if you need anything, okay?”*

*“I won’t hesitate to ask. Good night!”* I nodded as I began to back away. *“Good luck with the flying! I can’t wait to hear all about it, Amelia!”*

*“I’ll tell you tomorrow!”* She hovered off the ground, then lowered again.

Koth shook his head. *“Good night, Inez.”*

Part of me wanted to stick around and watch Amelia fly, but the bigger part of me just got the afternoon off of work and I didn’t want to waste it. I had no idea what I would do instead, but I’d figure that out. Also, I suspected Amelia wouldn’t want an audience for her first flight. She’d be too self-conscious. So, without a moment of hesitation, I turned and sprinted over to the cobblestone path that led down the mountain to Pack House.

It was early, just after lunch time. There was so much time left in the day before Issale tucked in for the night. *What do I*

*want to do?* There were a lot of options, but I knew I wanted to go into town. I hadn't left Issale since they brought me here that night, and though I knew I wasn't trapped or banned from leaving, I'd wanted to get Koth's clearance for my own sanity. He hadn't given me the green light to go back to New York, but I wasn't trying to be near that many people. Vermont surrounded Issale and it was full of small towns. I just wanted to feel a bit like myself for a minute.

"Inez?" Foster's voice carried through the wind.

I slid to a stop, my paws gouging valleys into the dirt. But there was no one in front of me. I frowned and pushed my thoughts out. "*Foster?*"

"Inez!" Foster shouted, his voice closer now. "Turn around."

I spun and spotted Foster and Clayton hurrying toward me from up the cobblestone path. *Did I pass them? Where were they?* I glanced over my shoulder and found I was back at Pack House already. *Huh.* I was so caught up in this plan of mine that I hadn't realized I'd made it back home.

"INEZ."

I jumped and turned toward the sound of his voice. Then gasped. Foster was now right in front of me in his big white wolf form. "*Hi.*"

"*Hi?*" His amber gaze swept me up and down. He frowned, and had it been anyone else, the expression would've terrified me. "*We've been yelling your name—*"

"*We?*"

"*Yes, Clayton.*" Over his head I spotted Clayton hurrying down the cobblestone path toward us. Foster growled. "*Inez, what's wrong?*"

*“Nothing. Why? What happened?”*

*“You come flying down the mountain and aren’t responding to anyone yelling for you.”* Foster cocked his head to the side. *“Are you okay?”*

*“OH. I see. No, I’m fine. I was just lost in my tabs.”*

Foster shook his head. There was a swirl of white smoke around him and then he was back in his human form. Laughing. He ran his gloved hand through his hair. “She was thinking.”

Clayton sighed. He was getting closer. “Don’t scare us like that, darling.”

*Odio cuando me llamas cariño.* I took a deep breath to steady myself, then pushed my magic out, letting it spread through my limbs to send me back to my human form. It took a few seconds longer than it did Foster but I was proud of how good I’d gotten at shifting. Once my magic faded, I stood there back in my sweater, leggings, and sneakers combo.

“Sorry, I got swept away in my mind for a moment.” I chuckled and smoothed my hair down. “Didn’t even realize I’d gotten all the way back already.”

Foster gave me a sideways grin. “You’re fast on all fours.”

I grinned. “Who would’ve thought?”

“Inez.” Clayton stopped in front of me and smiled.

I started to greet him when he reached out, cupped my face in his hands, then pressed his lips to mine. His lips were soft and warm and tasted like cherries. The kiss was nice and all, but I wasn’t one to lock lips in front of other people unless it was a peck. This was *not* a peck. I pulled away with a flutter in my stomach. It took everything in me not to cringe. My gaze

shot right over Clayton's shoulder to Foster, who was grimacing at the ground.

"I'm just relieved nothing is wrong." Clayton tapped my chin, then lowered his arms. "Why are you not training with Koth?"

I grinned. "He said I was done, that now it's on you guys to finish my training before he tests me."

Foster smiled. "I knew you'd nail it."

"Your faith in me is sweet."

"That's our Foster." Clayton chuckled and tapped him on the shoulder. Then his green eyes went back to me. "So where were you going?"

"I have no idea! That's what I was thinking about. It's early in the day ... I want to go out." I bit my bottom lip and looked to my soulmate. It wasn't in my nature to ask for my boyfriend's permission, but he was my Alpha. "Actually, I was hoping I could leave Issale and maybe go to a human town where I can buy some new clothes. I just want to feel a bit more like myself. More comfortable."

"Oh." Clayton blinked and scratched his jaw, then glanced at his watch. "Well, I don't want you going alone, not until you learn to spot the Duenill and learn the area. But I am a little busy. Foster, would you mind—"

"Ditching whatever chore you had lined up for me this afternoon to go into town?" Foster grinned. "I'd be happy to."

Clayton rolled his eyes. "You just want pizza."

"And I'm going to get some, right, Inez?"

My eyes widened. I pressed my hands to my stomach and bounced up and down. "*¿Pizza? Quiero pizza. Si. Dámela.*

Yes. Yes. Yes. Pizza. *Vamos*. Can we go right now?”

Foster wagged his eyebrows. “Go grab your bag, and meet me at my truck?”

“Okay!” To my horror I let out a little squeal as I leapt forward and kissed Clayton on the cheek. “Thank you! We’ll be back early!”

Thirty-five minutes later, Foster parallel parked his truck on a snow-covered street in downtown Burlington. I grabbed my purse and hopped out with a grin plastered on my face. My feet hit the sidewalk and snow flew up around my ankles. I giggled as I slammed the truck door shut and then skipped forward. Foster stepped onto the sidewalk, shaking his head and laughing.

“Don’t judge me.” I pulled my jacket around me tighter and shuffled my feet through the snow. There had to be three inches of it. “We don’t get snow like this in the city.”

“I was just waiting to see if you’d stick your tongue out—”

I gasped. “I haven’t done that since I was a kid. Let’s try it now.” I craned my neck back and stuck my tongue out.

“Come on, goofball.” He gently gripped my elbow and pulled me into a walk.

“Wait, wait, wait! I wanna catch one.”

“I’ve found it helps to move while you hunt snowflakes.”

Snow landed all over my face, yet it somehow missed my tongue completely. But then Foster tugged me around a corner to the right and a massive gust of wind slammed into me at the same time as a few snowflakes finally hit the target. I giggled and wiped my mouth, then looked to actually see where he was taking me.

My steps faltered. I'd never been to Burlington, Vermont before and I had no idea what it looked like in the other seasons, but covered in snow it was a winter wonderland straight out of a Hallmark movie. Foster led me into the middle of what should have been a street, but it was littered with pedestrians. It was a snowy Friday afternoon in their big city, and apparently everyone was out on the town. Each side of the street was lined with shops and restaurants. Most of the buildings seemed to be made of red brick. Trees stood in rows between the shops and the pedestrian roadway. There were no leaves on the trees, but every single branch held at least an inch of snow on it. I couldn't tell where the lights were at exactly, I just knew little golden lights twinkled from within the snowy trees. At the end of the road, directly straight ahead, stood what had to be a church with the steeple towering over everything.

I sighed and smiled. "This is so pretty."

"Beautiful."

I turned to face him and ask our plan, but my words dried on my tongue faster than those snowflakes. The angle of the sun's rays poking through the clouds made his face look more angular and his skin warmer. Those amber eyes looked like embers under a bonfire. He was really beautiful ... and staring right at me.

*Mierda. Aparta la mirada de él.* I cleared my throat and pushed my hair back. "So where are we going first? Pizza?"

"Let's shop first. The stores can close early up here this time of year."

I nodded and pushed my shoulders back. "Work first, play second. Got it. Lead the way and I promise to make this as painless as possible."

Normally when I went shopping, I went with my sisters and stepmother and it was an *event*. We'd get dressed cute and do our makeup so our confidence level was high and secure before the horrendous lighting in the dressing rooms broke our souls. It usually took hours because everything we bought had to be voted on by the entire group. *That* and we stopped to get a lot of snacks and chitchat. We loved shopping.

Foster was a different shopping companion. Though he handled it like a champ. I didn't dillydally or take too much time deciding. I simply worked my way through the shops, trying things on as I went. Foster had good taste, but Foster also made fashion decisions much faster than my family. Not half-assed ones though. It only took me an hour to do all the damage my retail therapy called for. Granted, with *Free People*, *Lululemon*, and *Urban Outfitters*, the task was simple. By the time we shoved all my shopping bags into the backseat, I was a happy little clam in my brand-new black sequin Ugg boots. My feet were so warm now. I was considering never taking them off unless it was to put on the non-sequin pair in the classic chestnut color.

"I'm surprised you only bought natural garments."

I frowned and spun around. "Are you?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, figured you might've wanted something different."

"Yeah, and then I'd forget and shift and flash everyone. *El horror. Una pesadilla literal.*"

He snorted and hung his head. "That's ... yeah, that tracks."

"Right? No, I have to play it safe." I pulled my new sherpa jacket out of the shopping bag and slid it on over my sweater.



The sun went down stupid early in northern Vermont. “Okay, so what now?”

“Come here. I want to show you something.”

I followed him across the street, around a different corner, and a few blocks over before finally stopping. “Okay, Hansel, I hope you left a breadcrumb trail.”

“Don’t worry, Gretel, I know our way back.” He took my hand and tugged me over to him, then pointed out. “Look. What do you see?”

I looked, then did a double take. It was Lake Champlain with the horizon of mountains around it. Everything was covered in snow, including sections of the lake which had frozen over. I sighed and leaned into his shoulder. The soft leather of his jacket was smooth against my skin. “Where’s Issale?”

He pointed to the right a bit. “There.”

“Which one?”

“You can’t see it.” He grinned. “Magic hides the mountain. Even if we know it’s there, we cannot see it from here.”

“That’s wild.”

“Isn’t it? That’s what I wanted to show you.”

I looked up at him and smiled. “Thank you. For bringing me here, for fleeing town with me ... for everything you’ve done for me.”

His gaze locked on mine, our bodies touching but with far too much material between us. I wanted to feel the heat of his skin on mine. We stood so close, too close. All I’d have to do is push up on my tiptoes and —*INEZ! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*

I cursed and spun away from him, breaking whatever hold those amber eyes had on me. My whole body was warm and tingly, and it had nothing to do with all the new layers of clothing I had on. Foster cursed behind me and sighed. But I wasn't going to read into that. I didn't need to know if these forbidden feelings were requited or not. Nothing could ever happen between us. Ever. We had to remain strictly platonic.

My mind knew this. I just had to get my body with the program. *Y me está matando.*

Foster cleared his throat. "Come on. Let's go eat pizza."

In the back of my mind, I registered that he led me a few storefronts down, but I wasn't paying attention. My thoughts had gone off on a tirade, telling myself off for being flirtatious with Foster when I had a soulmate. Technically, Clayton and I were not in a relationship, we hadn't defined it yet, but it still was wrong. *I need to curb this crush as soon as possible.*

Warm air rushed over me. I frowned and jumped—then froze. We were in an arcade. It was dark inside, with low ceilings and dark walls. There was a bar to the left with a woman about my age running it. All around us, from corner to corner and everywhere in between were various arcade games. Skee-Ball, basketball, old school Ninja Turtles, a few shooting games with zombies or dinosaurs, and much more.

"What do you think?"

My jaw dropped. A giddy laugh bubbled up my throat. There was a small crowd inside, which meant most of the games were open and ready to be played. I looked up at him and nodded. "We need coins."

"Follow me." We went to the bar and leaned against the counter. "Hi, can we get a bucket?"

The bartender batted her eyelashes at him as she slid a white bucket the size of a kiddie cup to him. “Anything you need, I’ll be here.”

“Thank you.” Foster grabbed the bucket and turned to me. “The pizza place is right through the back door. I say we clear this bucket and then eat.”

“Then get another bucket each and destroy the zombie game.”

He laughed. “I don’t know why I doubted that you’d want to come here.”

“I don’t know why either, but I forgive you.” I grabbed the bucket and shook it, enjoying the clinking sound the golden coins made against each other. “Play your cards right, and you may have just started our new Friday night ritual.”

“What do you want to do first?”

I bit my lip and turned to face the arcade—and my gaze landed on a photo booth. “That. Right there. *Vamos.*”

I gripped his jacket and dragged him to the narrow photo booth, then yanked the curtain back. He was a smart boy who didn’t fight me or ask questions. He merely slipped inside and sat on the bench. It took me a second to figure out how many golden coins it needed, but once I fired it up, I climbed inside the booth and squeezed onto the bench between him and the wall.

He frowned. “Do you know how to do this?”

“I think we have to hit the button there—”

He slammed his palm on the button and bright white light flashed, filling the whole booth. We both shouted in alarm and cursed. When the light faded, we looked at the screen just as a

picture popped up ... of him and I beside each other shrieking from the flash. I snorted and covered my mouth with my hand. Foster threw his head back and laughed.

LIGHT FLASHED.

“OH NO!”

“SHIT!”

Sure enough, a picture of us laughing filled the screen.

“It’s automatic! Hit pause!” I dove for the pause button just as the light flashed again. “That wasn’t attractive.”

The booth shook. When I glanced back, I found Foster laughing so hard his eyes were tearing and his face was red. He pointed to the screen. I looked and gasped. It was *horrible*. My face in the picture was scrunched in horror and panic with my hand reached forward. I cackled.

The camera flashed a fourth time.

I cursed. “Why won’t it stop?”

“How many coins did you put in?” Foster held up the bucket like he was going to count how many were left.

Camera flashed a fifth time.

“NO!” we both yelled.

“This is anarchy,” Foster said between laughs.

I leaned over his body to try and read the sign. “It said four pictures but that was five—”

*“It’s counting down—POSE!”*

I smiled and jumped up—and landed right in his lap just as the sixth flash went off. The picture that filled the screen was actually almost normal. “We need at least one good one!”

“These are all amazing.” He pointed to the screen. “*Three ... two ... one—*”

“FISH FACE!” I yelled in a panic.

We both puckered our lips to make that silly fish face a split-second before the flash.

“*What the fuck was that?*” He wheezed he was laughing so hard. He looked up at me as I still sat in his lap. “*Fish face?*”

“I don’t know. I panicked!” I giggled and looked down at him. “You listened!”

Light flashed.

We flinched and turned to the screen. The picture captured us staring into each other’s eyes with me on his lap as we both laughed. It was adorable. And torturous. We looked damn good together. I moved to get up when the screen said *BONUS PIC*. He gripped my hips and pulled my back flush against his. Heat rushed to my face and my pulse skipped. I smiled and watched the numbers count down to one to try and get at least one cute pic, but then it hit ONE and he rested his chin on my shoulder.

The light in the booth went off, drenching us in shadow. I jumped up and out of the booth just as two narrow strips of paper dropped out of the slot. Each strip held four small pictures on it. I picked them up and giggled as I held them up to show him. The first eight pictures told a clear story if you looked at them in order. I loved it. Then a third paper dropped out and my heart sank. The bonus picture. My stomach tightened.

He reached down and snagged it. His eyes lit up and he smiled so hard his cheeks dimpled. “This one is nice.”

I didn't want to see it. I knew it would be too much. Too couple-y. Too romantic. I cleared my throat and held up the two narrow strips. "We'll have to get copies made on our way home."

He tucked the bonus picture into the front pocket of his flannel shirt he wore under his leather jacket. "For sure. But for now, show me what you've got on Skee-ball."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOSTER



IT BLEW my mind how much your life could change in just a few days.

A week ago my life fit a perfect pattern. The pack *was* my life. The only variations came from switching up my patrol schedule. When I wasn't on patrol, I was either helping Clayton, working with the younger pack kids, or just hanging at Pack House. The only surprising moments would be if the dragons or Shaman requested my assistance. Despite the fact I was a guy who shifted into a wolf, my day-to-day life was mundane. Ordinary. Predictable.

And then Inez came to town.

I wasn't sure I'd ever be the same. For better and for worse. Better, because while I had close friends in the pack, I hadn't clicked with them the way I had with Inez. I'd never been as comfortable with anyone else. No one else made me laugh like she did. Worse, because my feelings for her were not platonic by any stretch of the imagination, and since her soulmate wasn't me, those feelings were going to destroy me.

And it'd only been a week.

I was doomed. Little had I known last Friday night that our new Priestess of the Pack would be my demise, yet from the



moment I laid eyes on her, I was captivated. Ensnared. Helplessly screwed.

Last night had been too much fun. I couldn't actually remember the last time I had that much fun, that I was so relaxed and at ease. I hadn't wanted to leave the arcade. We'd stayed there just goofing off and taking pizza breaks until they kicked us out. Even when we got back and we just sat in the courtyard talking, she was just great to be around. As soon as I opened my eyes this morning, all I wanted was to knock on her door and ask her to hang out, which was exactly why I'd been avoiding her all day. I'd busied myself to not make it obvious.

She wasn't mine and she never could be.

But if I could get over her soon enough, then maybe I could salvage our friendship, which was why I decided to hang in the common room tonight without even checking to see where Inez was. Though, I *had* asked around ... subtly. A little birdy told me she was down at Amelia's house giving her another cooking lesson.

*"Foster!"* Jeffrey smacked my shoulder. *"I SAID, your turn. Pay attention, dude."*

I cursed and snagged a card off the table. It was a Queen of Hearts. Fitting.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

I flinched, then turned to Jeffrey. "What?"

He threw his tattooed arms up in the air. "No, you don't get a turn now. Ronnie, just go."

Ronnie held his left palm out to Isabella. He nodded. Isabella cursed and slammed her card in his hand. I sat my cards facedown, then scrubbed my face with my hands. *Focus,*

*Foster. No one else needs to know how pathetic I am for her.* I needed to stay in the present, in the moment, with the people actually around me. Right now, that meant my two best guy friends, Jeffrey and Ronnie. They were both happily married to women who were actually sisters. Their wives were cool too but were off on one of their shenanigans, which meant the guys were hanging in here with me. Isabella was young, maybe twenty, so I hadn't been super close to her until recently, but so far she was chill as fuck.

We were in the common room playing cards, and because this was the room for the rowdy twenty-somethings and it was Saturday night, it was basically just us. There were a few other guys playing pool on the opposite side of the room, and I spotted about a dozen others in the courtyard playing beer pong.

Mischa sat *right* beside me. There wasn't a fraction of an inch of space between us. Her leg was pressed tight to mine. She giggled at whatever Isabella had just said and grabbed a card off the table. Her hand landed back on my thigh, where it'd been for about an hour now. The warmth of her skin seeped through my jeans. I kept waiting for the butterflies or the electricity, but they didn't come.

I was gonna keep trying though. Mischa was a beautiful girl with an infectious laugh. She had these big blue eyes, long purple hair, and the widest smile. She was young like Isabella and had only just discovered she was a shifter a few years back and wanted to come to home country for a while since Russia was so far away. She'd only been here a few months. I liked her, but I didn't want to lead her on. And the way she kept drawing circles on my thigh with her fingers told me perhaps I was failing at that already. I wanted to like her. I

wanted to want her. I wanted her to be the object of my desire, but I was still stuck on Inez.

“INEZ!”

I flinched and looked up—my breath left me in a rush. Inez. There she was, standing in the doorway with her long black hair and eyes that shined like liquid gold, looking like a model in a magazine. She wore a dress she bought last night that sent my pulse into overdrive. It was long-sleeved, black, and skintight, clinging to every curve of her body. It hugged her hips tight and tapered in until it cut off just below the knees. The metallic silver Ugg boots made me smile. She was back in her comfort zone, feeling like herself in clothes that fit her own style.

“YO!” Ronnie fist-pumped the air.

Jeffrey nodded, but beneath that mustache, he was smiling. “Sup, Alvarez!”

Isabella jumped up and her dark curls bounced on her shoulders. “*¡Inés! ¡Hola! ¡Ven con nosotros! ¡Ven aquí!*”

Inez smiled like we were all old friends, like she’d never *not* been here. The comfort and ease in that smile made my pulse flutter. Those golden eyes looked to me and her smile widened. “*¡Eh! ¿Qué pasa?*”

“We’re playing cards,” Ronnie said and pulled out the empty seat beside him. He patted it. “Join us.”

“Yeah, we could use some fresh blood.” Jeffrey chuckled. “I bet you’re cutthroat.”

I snickered. She sure was. I’d never been so competitive in an arcade. I opened my mouth to make a joke about it when I realized the others were all joking around with her. It’d only been a week, but the pack had already taken her in. She was

one of the gang already, like she'd always been here. The happiness that filled me choked me up with raw emotion.

"Sure, I'll join ya." Inez grinned and gave the guys two thumbs-up and then her gaze landed back on me. I sensed the question in them. "What are we playing?"

I held my handful of playing cards up. "Paper anarchy."

She snorted. "Aight. Deal me in."

"Paper anarchy." Isabella chuckled and shook her head as she dealt Inez cards. "*Me gusta.*"

Inez cocked her head to the side. "I've never heard of that game."

"It's more like a state of mind while playing a game." I leaned back and rubbed my hands on my thighs, but the movement gave Mischa the wrong idea.

She reached out and took my hand in hers, skin to leather glove. She squeezed my hand, then gasped. "Foster your gloves are wet. Take them off to dry. That's not good for you."

Inez's gaze dropped to the table in front of me, like she was trying to see my hands through it. She frowned. *Do you know she's holding my hand right now? Do you care? Does it bother you? Do I even want it to bother you?*

"Foster." Mishca hissed in her heavy Russian accent and lifted our joined hands up so everyone could see. And everyone did. All of their gazes turned to our hands, then back to their own cards. Mischa reached up with her free hand and wiggled my fingers. "You shouldn't leave these on when wet."

*They're wet?* I hadn't even noticed, which didn't bode well for my sanity.

“No one cares about your scars here, dude,” Isabella said softly with a small smile as she shuffled cards.

Wearing my gloves was just so natural and normal for me at this point. I’d gotten too used to it. My scars were gnarly, but they were also a constant reminder of what I’d lost and how. It was bad enough to see them and have the memories assault my mind, having people ask about them was worse. So much worse. The question was always innocent enough. People had a natural sense of curiosity. And since I looked normal everywhere else, and behaved normally, no one was prepared for the heavy, traumatic explanation. Then when they heard the story of where I got them, I got to watch their emotions go from curious to horrified to heartbroken and finally to pity. I wasn’t sure which of those was worse.

However, most people in Issale knew about my past. The new people who moved to Issale tended to know without asking because they lived outside the protection of home country, where the shifter hunters stalked us mercilessly. Most of them had their own traumatic stories to tell. Like Mischa. Mischa had scars on her back from an attack last year. She took one look at my hands and just said *Duenill*. Easy as that. We never discussed it more. Inside the safety of Issale, my gloves were for my *own* comfort.

But she was right. I didn’t need to have them on while wet. And I knew no one at this table cared about my scars. So I nodded and tugged them off, fighting with the wet leather and only proving their point. Once they were off, I stretched my fingers out but did not look at them.

Inez held her hand out. “I can dry them.”

Mischa handed them to her without hesitation. When Inez touched them, she scowled and shook her head. I knew she

was silently chastising me for how wet they were. It was well deserved too. Now that I had them off, I didn't know how I missed the wetness. Inez smirked and pulled her wand out. The other's gazes all snapped to the wand and locked in place. They were riveted. I didn't blame them. Her lips moved silently as she recited whatever spell she needed and then air blew from the tip of her wand like white smoke. She smiled and shoved the wand inside my glove, then winked to me. My chest tightened. I was so damn proud of her. And wildly impressed.

I glanced around to my friends and found their jaws hanging open. They were all impressed. For good reason. Inez had waltzed into Issale like it was no big deal, even while her eyes screamed with panic and uncertainty. It was amazing to watch her growth as a shifter, but even more incredible to watch her shine as a witch. Performing magic was second nature for her. She was confident and sure of herself. I couldn't wait until that confidence in shifting caught up. What a sight to behold she would be then.

Mischa took my hand in both of hers. "Your skin is so dry from being wet. You need more than two pairs. I've got something to help with this though."

I opened my mouth to assure her I was fine when she pulled a little bottle of lotion out of her bag on the floor. She squeezed lotion into her palm, then began rubbing it into my skin. I could have stopped or fought her, but the lotion was cool against my dry skin. It felt good, like taking that first drink of water on a hot summer day when you've been out in the sun for hours. I felt my skin sigh with relief, so I let her rub the lotion in more. Her skin actually felt nice against mine. It was soft and warm.

Inez cleared her throat. “So, what are we playing?”

I glanced up and found Inez looking at Isabella, like she was trying not to look at me. They spoke to each other in Spanish but I had no idea what they said. *Does her touching me bother you? Why haven't I made Mischa stop? Because, Foster, this isn't good for us. Inez has a soulmate that isn't me. Let yourself try with Mischa, dammit.*

Isabella turned a pointed glare at Ronnie. She arched one eyebrow. “We used to have *Cards Against Humanity* until someone vomited his entire stomach contents on them.”

Ronnie slammed his fist on the table. “That was food poisoning and you know it!”

Isabella scoffed. “Well, why the hell did you eat there?”

“Because it was fried chicken!” Jeffrey threw his hands up.

We all laughed.

Inez shook her head. “So, what *are* you playing?”

The rest of us laughed even more.

I opened my mouth, but Inez glared at me playfully. “Aside from paper anarchy.”

“Fine.” I shrugged. “Go Fish. With about fifteen decks of cards.”

Jeffrey held his finger up. “No. Only six.”

Everyone tossed popcorn at him.

“Ah, the paper anarchy makes more sense now. So, I'm not trying to diss your game, but ...” Inez glanced around sheepishly, “have you ever played spoons?”

Ronnie sat up straight. “No. What's that?”

“Let’s play it.” Jeffrey nodded.

Isabella rolled her eyes. “You don’t even know what it is.”

Jeffrey scoffed. “It’s not Go fucking Fish, dude.”

Mischa giggled. “I’m down for anything.” She drew little circles on my hand.

*Subtle but delivered.*

“Yeah, it doesn’t matter.” Ronnie tossed his hand of cards into the pile. “We can only play this so long before I lose my mind. We need a new game.”

Isabella grinned. “Okay, Inez, what’s this game *spoons*?”

Inez licked her lips. “Okay, so since there’s six of us playing, we’ll need five spoons to start the game. We set all five spoons in a row on the table in the middle, then all of the cards go into one deck. The dealer hands out four cards to each person. The dealer will change each round like in *Cards Against Humanity*. The dealer of each round will pick up the top card from the deck and decide if they want to keep the card or discard it. The goal for everyone is to get four of a kind.”

Isabella frowned. “We only get four, but we have to collect four matching?”

“Right, so each time you have to make a choice on which number you’re collecting, and you may end up switching mid-round.” She grabbed a few cards off the table and demonstrated. “So, I’m the dealer, I pick up a new card and decide to *keep* or *discard*. If I keep, then I must discard another. Whichever card you choose to discard, you hand to the player on your left. Then the process repeats itself. I keep picking up new cards from the deck and passing them along to the left. The person at the end, so that would be Ronnie for the first round, puts his discarded in a pile on the table.”



Ronnie rubbed his hands together. “I like this, so what do we do when we get all four matching?”

“You grab a spoon.” Inez grinned. “And you do so as subtly as possible. If no one notices, then you keep playing the game. Because, you see, while you’re choosing cards, you have to keep an eye on the spoons. Once one spoon is grabbed, it’s a free for all. Snatch and grab.”

Isabella nodded. “And what happens if we don’t get a spoon? We’re one short.”

“There’s two ways to play. One way is if you don’t get a spoon, you get a letter—one for each in the word *spoons*—and then the last player to spell out spoons wins.” She sat the cards down and shrugged. “Or we can play the shorter and more cutthroat version -”

“That one.” Jeffrey pursed his lips and nodded. “I want that version.”

Inez chuckled. “If you don’t get a spoon, then you’re out. No mercy. No second chances. Last person with a spoon wins.”

Ronnie narrowed his eyes. “How slowly do we have to pass the cards around?”

“Fast.” Inez nodded in approval. “It’s gotta move *fast*.”

Ronnie and Jeffrey looked to each other, nodded, then began shuffling all six decks. Once they had them all shuffled into three piles of cards, they pushed the piles to Inez. Isabella ran back over with five silver spoons and laid them out on the table. Mischa was still playing with my fingers, but she was laughing along with us.

Inez made quick work of dealing each of us four cards, then she wagged her eyebrows. “Ready to play?”

I leaned forward with my cards in hand. “Pass ‘em.”

Once everyone nodded they were ready, Inez picked up a card from the deck and the game started. She barely looked at the card she picked up before she passed it to Isabella. Then Inez picked up another card from the deck. Isabella took a second longer than Inez to decide before passing to Jeffrey, who didn’t look at it at all. I glanced down at the four I was dealt and saw I had two eights, a three, and a king. *Guess I’m going for eights.* Mischa passed me that first card. It was a six, so I handed it to Ronnie. Mischa shoved another card in my face. It was a queen, so I also passed it.

I glanced to Inez. She met my stare with a smirk *and grabbed a spoon.* No one else noticed. She winked at me and kept passing the cards as if she were still looking. I took the next card from Mischa and handed it right to Ronnie, then grabbed a spoon. Mischa jumped and snatched a spoon. Isabella gasped, then dove for the fourth spoon, leaving only one left. The four of us exchanged glances, then looked to Ronnie and Jeffrey who were still passing cards with their brows furrowed. It wasn’t until Mischa giggled that Jeffrey peeked up—and cursed. He dove for the spoon, but his curse drew Ronnie’s attention, so they ended up punching each other in the knuckles in an attempt to grab the spoon.

*“Dammit, Ronnie!”*

He groaned and shook his hand. “I’m not the one with a ring on. Can’t feel my pinky now.”

“Okay, okay, let’s call that a practice round?” Inez sat her spoon and cards back on the table. “Now you know how it goes.”

We all tossed our cards and spoons back into play. Thirty seconds later, we were in the first round for real. I didn’t get

any duplicates, but the first three cards passed to me were all sevens, so clearly I should have kept them. We were passing the cards around super fast. As the eighth card was handed to me, I saw Inez grab a spoon in my peripheral vision. I had to give her credit, she was sly. She didn't miss a beat with the cards in grabbing it. I passed the card to Ronnie and then took a spoon. Isabella squealed and dove for one.

“NO!” Ronnie lunged for a spoon.

Jeffrey grabbed the same spoon. They played tug of war over the same spoon, so Mischa reached under them to take the one just lying there. But Jeffrey slammed his hand on it at the last second. Mischa squealed and yanked her arm back while he cackled like a comic book villain.

“That was a trap?” Mischa huffed and tossed her cards in Ronnie's face. She leaned back in her seat and sighed. “Fine. But you're both gonna lose to Inez anyway.”

Inez chuckled and tossed one spoon to the ground. “Four spoons this round. Isabella, you deal.”

Isabella took the deck, and we were off on round two. This time I got lucky and had two aces, so I knew what to watch for. I didn't know what Ronnie or Jeffrey's angle was, but I was starting to suspect brute force. For a moment, I got caught up in watching the cards being passed to me, but when I got my fourth ace and reached for a spoon, I discovered one was already missing. Instantly, I looked up to Inez and found her smiling at her cards as she pretended to play. Those golden eyes glanced to me, then she winked and my pulse fluttered. I chuckled and shook my head. *Damn, she's good.*

“OH SHIT,” Jeffrey mumbled. He lunged out of his chair to grab one of the two spoons left on the far side of the table.

Ronnie threw his cards and snagged the last spoon right in front of him. He frowned. “Dammit. I am not doing a good job at this.”

“We’ll get the hang of it, dude.” Jeffrey pointed at him. “It’s only round two.”

Isabella sighed and then hung her head. “I got way too focused on dealing the cards and forgot to watch.”

Mischa shoved Jeffrey’s shoulder. “Your turn to deal. Don’t choke.”

Inez dropped another spoon to the floor, then laid three out on the table, spread out evenly. It was down to four of us. I wondered how Inez had won the rounds so quickly. It had to be luck. Jeffrey got the round going, handing the card directly to me. I’d been too busy trying to figure out Inez’s game to even look at the card before tossing it to Ronnie. And when he discarded one to Inez, I watched to see what she’d do, even as I kept passing cards blindly.

Ronnie snatched a spoon. Inez and I reached for the final two, our eyes locking as we moved in perfect unison. Her cheeks flushed a deep pink. I smiled and tried to ignore the rush of butterflies in my stomach.

“What? Already?” Jeffrey tossed his cards on the table. “I call bullshit.”

“Because you lost?” Ronnie brushed imaginary dirt off his shoulder.

“Because you only saw like three cards and suddenly have all four matching? Show ‘em.” Jeffrey waved his hand toward Ronnie. “C’mon, show ‘em if it’s legit.”

We all turned to Ronnie.

He glanced at us. “No one said there was punishment for crying wolf.”

Inez and I threw our spoons at him. The others threw food.

“That’s not allowed, Ronnie.” Inez laughed and put two spoons on the table. “So, that means you’re out. Jeffrey is in. You can sit there and think about what you did.”

He pouted and crossed his arms over his chest.

It was my turn to deal, so I took the deck and dealt four cards to Inez, Jeffrey, and myself. Then I got the game going. Immediately I realized what Isabella meant. Dealing took an extra step of concentration because you had to pull from the deck itself and not the card being handed to you. It disrupted the flow. So after passing two cards, I decided I wasn’t going to try to deal the cards *and* try to collect four matching. I was focusing on passing cards and the two spoons on the table. Speed was a strength of mine. I just had to beat out one of them.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ronnie still pouting. Isabella had her head propped in her hands as she watched the play-by-play. Inez bit her bottom lip, and that sent my thoughts spiraling in torturous directions. Every time I held the card across the table to her, our fingers almost touched. I was desperate to feel her skin against mine for the first time ... and hesitant to let myself feel that.

Mischa reached up and ran her fingers through my hair.

Inez’s gaze snapped up. Her eyes widened ever so slightly, and her lips parted.

Jeffrey snatched a spoon. I grabbed the other one—the last one.

Inez blinked and shook her head. “Shit.”

My heart did weird things in my chest. Had Inez been so distracted and disrupted by Mischa touching me that she lost the game? That couldn't have been what happened. Inez didn't care. She couldn't care. Just like I couldn't. Yet the way she wouldn't meet my eyes suggested otherwise. My chest tightened.

“What are you playing?”

“Are those spoons?”

“Those cards better not be sticky.”

I peeled my eyes off of Inez to find six of the twenty-something wolves had ditched their beer pong game and came inside. Ronnie and Jeffrey were collecting all the cards and shuffling as Isabella quickly detailed the game Inez had taught us. Mischa rested her elbow on my shoulder and continued to run her fingers through my hair. It was only in that moment that I realized I was leaning into her.

“Oh, I'm in.”

“Move over. I want in.”

“How many people can play?”

“What is going on here?” We all froze at the sound of Clayton's voice. Our Alpha leaned against the doorframe and smiled. “Looks like a rowdy night.”

“Hey, Clayton!”

“Wanna join?”

“We'll clean this up, I swear.”

Clayton chuckled and shook his head. “I'm not worried. And no, thanks, I was just looking for Inez, actually.”

Inez tucked her hair behind her ears and stood. “Hi. I’m here.”

“Come with me?” He nodded his head toward the hall.

She glanced to me but then her gaze latched onto the places where Mischa was touching me. She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah, of course. I’m coming.”

“What? You’re leaving us with spoons?”

Inez grinned. “Oh, Ronnie, I don’t think you need me to beat you again. You guys have fun. Next time you’ll be warmed up and ready for me.”

“*Ohhhh.*”

She winked to them, then turned and bounced right to Clayton. He smiled down at her and stood upright, then pressed his hand to the small of her back and led her out of the common room and out of sight. My heart sank. I was confused and conflicted. I shouldn’t have felt so gutted over someone who was never mine and I barely knew. *I can’t feel like this. He’s her soulmate. They’re going to spend time together. I need a way out of this crush.*

Heat brushed over my side, then Mischa pressed her lips to my ear and whispered, “I wanna show you something.”

I looked down at her and arched one eyebrow. “You want to leave?”

She nodded. “There’s enough of them now to not miss us. Come on.”

I shrugged and went with her. With the new arrivals, there were nine of them to play without us, so it wasn’t much of a loss. I let Mischa lead me out of the common room and out the doors to the courtyard. The cold air was a breath of fresh air I

desperately needed to clear my thoughts. We walked to the middle of the courtyard before Mischa pulled me to a stop.

“Well ...” I looked down into Mischa’s big blue eyes and smiled. “What did you want to show me?”

“This.” She stepped up close to me so our bodies were nearly flush against each other, then she pointed up to the sky. “Isn’t the moon beautiful tonight?”

I glanced up and let out a sigh. “Crescents are my favorite.”

“*You’re* my favorite.” Mischa gripped my shirt, tugged me down, then pressed her lips to mine.

I froze from shock. Mischa was kissing me. *Wait, Mischa? Do I want to kiss her?* I pulled back and looked down at her. She beamed up at me with bright eyes and glossy lips. Her cheeks were flushed. She’d tasted like fruit punch, which wasn’t a bad way to taste. She licked her lips and leaned into me, waiting. *Do I want to kiss her?* It felt nice just to be kissed. It’d been a little while for me. Mischa was pretty and fun and easy to be around. I didn’t want to lead her on a path my heart couldn’t follow ... but I also knew the road to Inez was *closed*. Permanently. So I had nothing to lose in trying to give my heart to someone else.

With that, I cupped her jaw with one hand and dragged her lips back to mine. She let out a little giggle of victory before she stepped back, fisted my shirt, then dragged me through the glass doors to her apartment. She jumped up, wrapped her arms around my neck, then reclaimed my lips with hers. We stumbled into her apartment but then she spun us around. Distantly I heard the door slam shut and the curtains closed but she’d wrapped herself tightly around me. And the second my



feet crossed the threshold into her room that smelled like roses part of my brain tried to abort mission.

But that was the part of my brain that had feelings for another woman, a woman I could literally never have because she was someone else's soulmate. There was no changing that. No breakup to hope and wait for. She was his other half, his eternal love. I needed to find my way out of that crush. People always said the best way to get over a person was to get under someone else, and I was starting to realize maybe there was some merit to that. *Fake it 'til you make it.*

She dragged my body back down to hers, sending us stumbling farther into her room. That fruit punch flavor on her tongue was intoxicating. She ran her tongue over mine and my body began to warm. My pulse fluttered though I didn't know if it was from excitement, nerves, or doubt. *There's nothing wrong with having some fun. You're not doing anything wrong, even if it feels like you are.*

Mischa and I were both adults. We could do as we pleased. We could enjoy each other's company however we wanted to so long as it was consensual. I wasn't the kind of guy to hook up with girls outside of a relationship but there was nothing wrong with it.

I pulled back. "Mischa, I'm not really in the headspace to start a relationship—"

"Good thing we're not even dating." She chuckled deep in her throat. She pulled me by my shirt farther into her apartment. When we stopped, she pushed up on her toes and slid her tongue back into my mouth. Then she whispered against my mouth, *"I'm not looking for a boyfriend tonight, Foster. That's not what this is about."*

I reached up and fisted all that purple hair into my hands, tipping her head back. “Then what is this about?”

She nibbled on my jaw, then pressed both hands to my chest – and pushed. It caught me off guard, which is the only reason I flew back with such speed. I crashed onto her bed and bounced a little but she pounced, straddling my hips. With confident, calm hands she slipped beneath my shirt and forced the cotton up and over my head then tossed it aside. She dragged her nails down my chest, sending little tingles across my skin. My muscles tightened. It tickled. I kind of liked it.

“This is about you, Foster,” she purred as she caressed my body with her nails.

My breath hitched. “Me?”

She smirked and reached for the button on my jeans. “You’re so busy taking care of everyone else, but who is taking care of you?”

I opened my mouth then shut it.

“That’s what I thought.” She giggled and unbuttoned my jeans then yanked my zipper.

I braced myself for her to reach in for me but instead she leaned forward and placed her hands on the bed next to my face. That long purple hair of hers brushed over my bare chest and sent goosebumps over my body. Mischa was gorgeous. And despite the fact that my heart was trapped in the forbidden forest, my body was reacting to the heat Mischa was sending.

“Let’s see what we can do about this.” She claimed my mouth with hers, her tongue practically consuming me like she was feeding off of it. When she finally pulled back I was out of breath. With one hand she reached up and pressed a finger to the skin between my eyebrows. “This has been scrunched

up for a long time. This here isn't about me. It's about *you*. So close your eyes, turn your thoughts off, and let me take care of you."

Before I could protest or think too much about what she'd just said, she licked a trail down my throat, stopping to nibble on my collarbone. I closed my eyes and forced all of my other thoughts away, forcing myself to just focus on the feel of her mouth on my skin. Her nails dragged down my chest and over my abs. My body warmed. It'd been a while since I'd been touched and dammit if it didn't feel good.

She kissed and nibbled a trail down my chest and over my abs, pausing to kiss the skin just above my bellybutton. I felt myself twitch beneath the open zipper of my jeans. She blew against my skin, the warmth of her breath making my body crave her touch. When she finally took me in her hand my body forgot everything else. I exhaled as that first real wave of pleasure washed over me. Both of her hands gripped me, sliding up and down excruciatingly slow. A little groan slipped out of my lips and I heard her chuckle.

"That's a good boy," she purred just over my body, her warm breath caressing the length of me still in her hands.

Heat pooled in my stomach. It'd been too long since I'd let someone touch me. She'd only barely started and I was near finishing. My whole body tensed like a bomb about to go off. And then she licked me from base to tip. I hissed through clenched teeth and rolled my hips. She ran her tongue along the rim, just outside of where I wanted her mouth and I moaned. I arched my back, forcing her tongue to sweep over that sweet spot and I moaned even louder.

"That's a very good boy." She chuckled. When I groaned she ran her teeth over the tip. "Who knew you had a praise

kink?”

I groaned. I didn't know about a praise kink but I knew I was about to lose myself.

She took me into her mouth and heat exploded in my stomach. I threw my head back and gasped, fisting the sheets of her bed in my hands as she swallowed all of me. Her mouth was warm and soft and sending my body racing to the finish line faster than it had any business doing. Then I understood what she meant. This wasn't about emotions or lust. This wasn't dating. This was just physical. This was just a moment of fun, a way to release the tension and relax. And then she sank her nails into my stomach and my release slammed into me hard and fast. I threw my head back, clenching my teeth as raw, hot pleasure consumed me.

But then that high began to fade and I saw a face in my mind. A face with big gold eyes and long black hair. I scrubbed my eyes with my hands and cursed violently. Mischa chuckled, oblivious to the guilt and shame eating away at me. It wasn't fair of my heart to do this to me. I already knew I wanted Inez but it didn't need to torture me the very moment I sought pleasure from someone else. Especially since she could've been with Clayton in this very minute – my stomach rolled. I shook my head to shake those thoughts and visuals away.

Mischa leaned over me, her hair sweeping across my arms so I dropped them. She looked down at me with big blue eyes. “That felt good, didn't it?”

I sighed and nodded.

“Good boy.” She grinned but then tapped between my eyebrows again. “I can see you're back to whatever is stressing you, so I'll leave that way you can process this alone.

Just remember which room is mine when you need to relax again.”

I opened my mouth to speak but she was gone, slipping out the glass door without another word...leaving me alone...in *her* bed. There was something very powerful in that move. If I hadn't been so infatuated with Inez already, Mischa's move would've worked hook, line, and sinker. I liked strong, powerful women who knew what they wanted and went for it. If only this had happened before Inez rolled into town.

*Fuck my life.* I glanced down and found she'd been nice enough to put me back together. So if anyone were to walk by her apartment and see me lying in her bed they wouldn't know exactly what we'd just done.

Inez's face flashed in my mind again and my stomach tightened into knots. I sighed. “I am so screwed.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## INEZ



“YOU KNOW,” I said with a smile as I stretched my legs out in front of me, “when you called me out, I thought it was for something specific.”

Clayton grinned without any shame or guilt. He leaned back in the chair and nodded. “It’s a method that works.”

He’d led me straight to the courtyard, specifically to the two chairs right outside my apartment. We’d only been sitting there a moment, but he hadn’t said anything yet, aside from complimenting my dress. His words had been nice, but the lust in his eyes was obvious. I’d just seen the same expression in Foster when he saw me. Ronnie and Jeffrey were married, so they didn’t even notice, but the other four guys who’d joined at the end definitely had. I knew this dress was tight and accentuated all of my curves in the right ways.

“But, if I’m being honest?” Clayton shrugged, then sat forward and put his elbows on his knees. With one hand, he reached out and squeezed my knee. “I just want to spend time alone with you. I want us to get to know each other better.”

I smiled and placed my hand over his, enjoying the heat radiating through his skin but waiting and wishing to feel *more*. “I feel like all I do is talk about myself lately. Why don’t you start?”

“All right. What would you like to know?”

I pursed my lips. “How about ... was there ever a dream of yours that didn’t involve you being Alpha of the pack? Like something else you might’ve wanted to do in life?”

He leaned back in his seat but left his hand on my knee and didn’t pull from my touch. “It’s been a while since I thought about that, but ... yeah? I think so. At least when I was younger.”

“Tell me about it?”

He nodded and launched into a story I had every intention of listening to, but at that exact moment, Foster and Mischa came walking out into the courtyard ... holding hands. My breath caught in my throat. They walked about halfway down without realizing we were there, or maybe they didn’t care. Mischa said something but I couldn’t hear her words over the heavy pounding of my pulse in my ears.

They looked up at the moon, but I kept my gaze locked on them. Foster looked down and smiled warmly at her—she pulled him by the shirt and pressed her lips to his. I gasped so hard it came out as a hiccup. The world spun around me. Foster stepped back, so I exhaled in a rush, but he just kept staring at her, like he was thinking about all the things he wanted to do to her. My stomach turned. Clayton was telling me about his old dreams and ambitions, yet all I could focus on was Foster and Mischa.

Especially as he cupped her jaw and dragged her mouth back up to his. My stomach tightened into knots as I watched them suck each other’s faces. Mischa pulled out of their kiss only to grab him by the shirt and tug him the few feet to the right to where the glass doors of an apartment stood wide-open and ready. Foster went with her without hesitation. There was



hunger in his eyes and the way his cheeks had flushed. As they crossed the threshold into what had to be Mischa's apartment, she jumped up, wrapped her arms around his neck, then reclaimed his lips with hers. They stumbled into the apartment. A second later the door slammed shut, curtains closed, and they were out of sight.

My stomach rolled so violently bile shot up my throat and tried to come out. I swallowed it down and pressed my hands to my stomach. My pulse skipped beats, then kicked into overdrive. I shivered and wrapped my arms around my waist. *Foster is with Mischa. This shouldn't bother me. This isn't allowed to bother me.*

Clayton pressed the backs of his fingers to my neck. "You're cold. Why don't we go inside?"

I nodded and let him pull me to my feet. He tangled his fingers with mine as he led me through an open doorway. But it wasn't until I heard the click of the door and the cold air vanished that I realized we'd come inside Pack House. We'd gone into *my* room. I bit my lip and fidgeted with the ends of my hair.

Clayton walked over and sat on my bed. He gestured around my room. "We need to get you more settled in here. Maybe some decorations. You need to break it in a bit, don't you think?"

"Yeah, maybe I do."

And that's when I knew what I needed to do. A little breaking in never hurt anyone. We were soulmates and we were adults. There was no reason we couldn't explore each other a little more.

"Where would you like to start?"

I kicked my Ugg boots off, then walked over to the bed. With both hands, I hiked up my dress to my hips so I could climb into his lap. His eyes widened and his lips parted. His cheeks flushed a pale pink. He licked his lips and stared at my body like he was a trained puppy waiting for his queue to have his treat. I placed my hands on his shoulders, then slowly slid them up over his neck to hold his jaw and force his attention on me.

“Here.” I kissed him, just a quick brush of our lips before I pulled back to whisper against his mouth. “Let’s start here.”

He gripped my hips and pulled me down onto his lap. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my lips to his. His hands slid down my thighs to slip beneath the fabric of my dress. Heat radiated out of his palms. He ran his hands over my bare hips. His kiss was soft and nice. I wasn’t overwhelmed with passion, but I never had been, I’d never been one of those girls lost to the heat and tension. Yet being touched felt good, felt better than good. It’d been far too long since I shared myself with someone. If he hadn’t been my soulmate, I might not have been so willing, but he was ... so I was going to let us have it. There was no reason not to.

And maybe, just maybe, a little spicy tango with him might help get my head and heart on the right page.

He slid his hands over my hips to my bare ass, then dug his fingers into my flesh and pulled me flush against the hardened length of his body barely concealed by his khakis. He rolled his hips into me. I gasped against his mouth as the length of him rubbed against that sweet spot. My whole body warmed. All of my muscles loosened around him, allowing me to sink closer into his lap. He gripped my thighs and yanked my legs to wrap around his hips, changing the angle our bodies were

pressed together in the most delicious way. I gasped against his mouth and arched my back.

My body had taken over, shutting off the blood flow to my brain and heart and just letting pleasure take control. He sucked on my throat, dragging his teeth across my skin while he thrust his hips against mine. I knew all I had to do was reach down and spring him from his pants but I was too lost in this moment. I hadn't realized how deprived my body had been of pleasure until it got some. We had all the time in the world to walk all the bases. I was going after that home run right then and there and he didn't try to stop me. I leaned back and braced one hand on his shoulder and the other on the bed then rolled my hips as hard and fast as I could. I rode him like a bull, meeting each of his thrusts with one of my own.

The only thing blocking him from filling me was the thin material of his pants but I felt every inch of him. And I was close, so close. My thighs trembled. My breath hitched. He slipped one hand down pressed his thumb right where I needed it. I gasped but as he moved his thumb in circles over me. I moaned and rocked my hips harder to keep him on pace with me. He moved his thumb faster, and faster, and faster, sending me closer to the edge until my eyes rolled back and climax hit me. I gasped. Every muscle in my body tightened but he kept touching, pushing me over the edge a second time. As I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on as pleasure rocked me I felt his hips buck beneath me.

For a moment we just breathed against each other.

I sighed and rested my forehead against his. "Sorry, I guess I got impatient."

"That's okay." He chuckled and kissed my jaw. "I suddenly feel like a teenager fooling around with my parents

in the next room.”

I snorted then we both burst into laughter.

“Inez, are you in here?”

I gasped and sat up straight unwrapping my arms from Clayton’s neck. “Y-yes? Elan?”

“Yes, sorry—*oh*. Hello, Clayton.” Elan ducked his head and smiled. “My apologies, Inez. Your door was ajar.”

I frowned and spun around so I was no longer straddling him. “It was? *Mierda*.”

“Everything all right, Shaman?” Clayton asked in a rough voice. “You look distressed.”

“Well ...” Elan gestured to us without looking. “I hate to ... interrupt ... but I need Inez’s assistance.”

“Oh. With what?” I stood up, carefully sliding my dress back down.

Those black lines darted across his face for a fraction of a second before vanishing. He turned those eyes to me, and they flipped through every color in the rainbow in rapid succession. “I need to make a potion and I would very much like your assistance.”

Clayton sighed. “Priestess of the Pack, after all.”

I smiled and nodded, then bent down to press my lips to Clayton’s. When I turned, I found Elan watching us closely. “Okay, but please tell me you have a fully stocked and loaded apothecary I can play in?”

Elan grinned. “I think you’re going to love my apothecary, Priestess.”

“Awesome. Let me just change out of this dress so I don’t mess it up then we can go.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

INEZ



“So, do your psychic powers tell you if this potion is going to work?”

Elan sighed so hard it turned into a groan. He gripped the edge of his counter and hung his head. “Wouldn’t that be fucking nice?”

I snorted and then covered my mouth to try and hide my laugh, but it just grew bigger and louder. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

He laughed with me, his whole body shaking. His curly hair was knotted and tangled, disheveled in a way that only two days over a brewing cauldron could create. He’d interrupted my attempt to hook up with my soulmate on Friday night to help him create a potion. Part of me was relieved he’d swooped in and called me out because I realized about ten minutes after walking out that I’d only been provoked to get spicy because I’d seen Foster go into Mischa’s room. It was like I’d wanted to retaliate against Foster for hooking up with someone else. That wasn’t fair to him, to me, or to Clayton. Hell, it wasn’t even fair to Mischa. Truth was, I was jealous. And bitter.

Because the man I wanted wasn’t my soulmate.

It was all kinds of wrong to sleep with Clayton when Foster was the one in my thoughts. Elan had rescued me from a heat of the moment rejection of ethics. I needed to sort out my feelings for Foster—which meant I needed to get rid of them entirely or dull them enough that they didn't affect me. Foster and I were friends. We were good friends. I had more fun with him than with any of my so-called friends who never made time for me. I couldn't remember the last time I laughed like I did with Foster. This lust and infatuation was going to rob me of having a truly amazing friendship. I had to conquer this. Perhaps sleeping with Clayton would help get my body on the right track, but that felt wrong and icky. No, I had to put out this internal fire for the other guy first. Or at least try to.

As the fumes from the potion wafted over my face, I was starting to think I'd have to use magic to rid myself of this crush. If I could bottle lust, then it stood to reason I could bottle apathy.

In the meantime, I'd avoided Foster all together. If he wanted to date Mischa, then that was his prerogative, his right. I didn't begrudge him that *want* to be with someone. Of course, I had no idea if he even felt something for me in return. It could've all been in my head, which it likely was. He hadn't actually given any indication he felt the way I did. He hadn't sought me out since we played spoons either. Maybe he wanted the space from me too. Maybe he only saw me as a friend and didn't realize I was putting space between us because he assumed I was busy making potions with Elan. Or maybe he hadn't gotten out of Mischa's bed yet. My stomach rolled. *Dammit, Inez, you're stronger than this. Contrólate.*

“You okay over there?”



I jumped and looked over to find Elan watching me with those creepy eyes that changed colors every few seconds. “Yeah. Yes, totally. Sorry, just kind of spaced-out for a second.”

“I get that.” He nodded and stirred the cauldron. “I think this is about done.”

“It does feel complete, though whether or not it will do what we intended it to is a different story.”

Elan shrugged. “My magic and abilities with potions are limited, derived from the needs of our species. This, I believe, is what you’re here for. Not this potion in itself, but to provide us with magic beyond our means.”

“No pressure.”

He grinned and then pushed away from the counter to lean against the table behind us. “You won’t believe me, but there is no pressure on you. If this first attempt at the potion does not work ... well, it’s merely the first attempt. We work to make it right.”

I rubbed my palms together and shifted my weight around. *Sin presiones*. “Okay, so remind me how you hope this potion will work? I know why we made it and what for, but let’s go over it again.”

My brain was mush. Forty-eight hours we’d been at this. Without stopping. We alternated sleeping, going out for fresh air, and getting each other food. I hadn’t been to Pack House, but I did see Isabella Saturday morning and sent a message to Clayton with her. Clayton had then swung by a few times to check on us, even brought us snacks, but otherwise it’d just been me and Elan. At this point, I thought we were both a little high from all the fumes and magic.

“Right. To reiterate the plan we came up with when our thoughts were more clear Friday night,” Elan licked his lips, his legs bouncing with restlessness, “one of our biggest issues is the shifter hunters—”

“The Duenill.”

“Exactly. Now, most of our people shift into animals that have the ability to kill our enemies, including demons. However, there are far too many who shift into house cats, rabbits, and little birds. And all the species in between.” Elan pointed to the cauldron. “As we said, we need a way to identify them before they see us.”

“Like how we can smell demons from a distance.”

We both took a deep breath, then exhaled. This potion needed to work. We needed to be able to protect our people outside of Issale, and that meant giving them a warning signal. We wanted this potion to give them that, like a tornado siren alerting them that danger is imminent and to seek shelter immediately. I just wasn't sure how it was going to *work*. We put all the necessary ingredients in the potion. Elan supplied what was needed for shifters, since I was still learning this other half of my genetics, and I put in elements for protection and clarity. Elan had a surprisingly large inventory of crystals, so I threw in everything I saw that might give us what we needed. I also threw in a ton of herbs. It reminded me exactly of my first potion I'd made ... as a six-year-old in Spain in my backyard with a bucket and stuff I collected from the yard.

“You think we did something wrong.”

I scowled and turned to face him. “No, why do you think that?”

“Because we’ve both worked on this potion for two days, equally. We both put the ingredients in and discussed the goal of what this potion would do.” He cocked his head to the side and watched me, those black lines darting across his face. “A witch’s intuition is strong and not to be ignored. So, what are you thinking?”

I pursed my lips and tried to find the right words to express myself. *¿Cómo lo digo?*

“In my experience, thinking out loud is beneficial to everyone involved.” He tapped on my forehead. “What’s bouncing around in here may not make sense to you but may trigger something for me.”

“*Cierto. Muy cierto.*” I cleared my throat, then let out a rough breath. “I’m just wondering ... why now?”

Elan frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “What do you mean?”

“Well, why make this potion *now*? Perhaps Issale wasn’t run as smoothly prior to Koth’s ascension, at least that’s what I’ve gathered, but you’ve had some time to work with him prior to my arrival. You’ve also been good friends with The Coven since October, and they have immeasurably more magic than me. So why now? What happened that triggered this potion?”

“Ah.” Elan closed his eyes, but those black lines shot over his cheeks and then vanished. “Because we did not know what we know now. We have tried to make a potion for this purpose, but it has failed.”

“But why did it fail? What do you know now?”

“You were at the Yule Ball in Manhattan on the winter solstice, correct?”

“I was. I don’t remember seeing you?”

“We had an emergency occur during the dance that involved Amelia and Landy getting taken by the Duenill. Normally, this is shifter jurisdiction but The Coven was literally beside us when we found out and they’re quite protective of their own—and their own’s family members. So this was personal, and between us, probably the only reason Amelia and Landy came home entirely unharmed.” He glanced toward the door to his apothecary like he wanted to make sure it was closed and we were alone. “The Coven discovered something we had never known. Until that night, we thought the Duenill were a group of humans, like the Free Masons but more of a cult, who’d discovered what we were ages ago and had made it their mission to eradicate us from the Earth because we were evil.”

My eyes widened. “Are you telling me they’re not human?”

“They were to start, at least. But The Coven discovered Lilith started them.”

I exhaled in a rush. “Whoomp, there it is.”

“Lilith has been hard at work the last few centuries, preparing for her return, and she’s not taking any chances this time. She plans to succeed where she has failed previously. The last time Lilith was here was during the One Hundred Years’ War in the 15th century—before that war with her, the Duenill did not exist. We simply failed to make the connection —”

“Because you don’t have the magical abilities to sense black magic like hers.”

He shrugged and nodded.

“So, Lilith gave her black magic to a group of violent, angry humans, probably under the guise of her being an angel or some shit.” When he nodded, I cursed. “That’s how you haven’t beat them yet, and that’s why you want to make this potion now.”

“To aid The Coven, as we are all in this together, we have been at war since Halloween. But we don’t have the means, as you said, to combat Lilith with magic. The prophecy that led us to you can’t be a coincidence. Amelia’s arrival here is not a coincidence. Call it what you will, but I assure you Heaven is trying to give us the power we need to defeat her.”

*“Fuck.”*

Elan chuckled.

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my wand. I closed my eyes and sent a little prayer to the Goddess. *Diosa, if you can hear me, I need your guidance. I think I know what I must do with my wand, but I do not want to offend you if I am wrong. Give me a sign, please.*

A bolt of hot electricity shot through my wand. I gasped and opened my eyes. My arm was glowing. Little pinkish-purple flames the same color as my magic danced across my skin on my left forearm. It didn’t hurt. It actually felt like a warm hug. Elan choked on a gasp, then gripped my wrist and held my arm out. We both watched in silence with wide eyes until the flames vanished.

My jaw dropped. My hand began to tremble. Goosebumps covered my skin. I couldn’t believe it. This was unheard of. When I asked the Goddess for a sign, I did not expect it to be this obvious, this instant. Tears stung my eyes. She heard me. She listened. And She *answered*.

For on the inside of my left forearm were four lines of elegant black scroll.

*By the wand my name is sewn,*

*With this potion make her known.*

*Just one drink shall suffice,*

*For in thine eyes evil becomes Ice.*

Elan squealed and then burst into a fit of childlike giggles. He dropped my wrist and bounced up and down. “*I KNEW IT.*”

I shook my head. The Goddess sent me a spell to use for this potion. *The Goddess*. She only ever spoke to The Coven. I never expected this much of a response from her. I wiped a stray tear from my eyes. This was by far the biggest honor of my life. I was the Priestess of the Pack and the Goddess herself had come to my aid.

Pink light flashed from my wand. I frowned and held it up higher. Five rings wrapped around my wand. I knew in an instant what she wanted me to do, so I did not hesitate. I gripped my wand, then snapped it into pieces, breaking it at each of the rings She designated. Then I placed them in the potion. Elan already had the spoon in his hand and began to stir. The moment the pieces of my wand hit the potion, the liquid glowed the pinkish-purple color. I grinned.

I closed my eyes. “Thank you, Goddess.”

Elan wrapped his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. “If you had any doubts about your selection, I sure hope they’re gone now.”

I snorted and nodded. “I am so happy someone else witnessed that so I can know I’m not crazy.”

“Guidance from the Heavens can make us feel crazy, but those of us they speak to were chosen for a reason.” He winked and grabbed a cup, then filled it with potion that was still shimmering in color. “Take the first drink.”

My eyes widened. “*ME?*”

He nodded. “She chose you. She means it to be you.”

I started to argue when those black lines suddenly covered his entire face. I pointed to them. “*That*. What did you just see?”

He smirked. “You drinking the potion.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Liar. Give it to me.”

With a chuckle, he handed me the cup. I didn’t give myself another moment to second-guess this decision. I simply put the cup to my lips and drank. To my surprise it tasted like fruit punch. With a few gulps, I drank the whole glass.

“Well, do you feel different?”

“No—” I frowned. A wave of warmth rolled through my body like a tsunami, but in its wake I felt energized. “It feels like those silly Red Bull commercials where *Red Bull gives you wings*.”

“Okay. All right. So you want to—”

“Run.” I bounced on my feet. “I need to run.”

His eyes danced as they shifted colors. He shooed me with his hands. “Go forth and run then.”

“Really? Just leave?”

“We cannot give this potion to anyone else until we know if it works and causes any side effects. So, you’re the test. If it’s good, we’ll try it on Foster next before we give it to

everyone.” He shooed me again. “I’m serious. We’re done for now. Go run. Report back to me.”

“Okay! Thanks, Elan.” I giggled and then rushed out of the room. “See you later!”

“Be careful! Don’t go looking for them by yourself!” he yelled after me.

“I won’t! I promise. I’ll bring a chaperone!”

His laughter echoed down the hall as I sprinted out of his house. The cold night air normally made me hiss and cringe, but the potion was warming my body. Adrenaline rushed through me. I closed my eyes and threw myself into a shift. When my four paws hit the dirt, I giggled and burst into a full-out sprint.

Elan made me promise not to go out looking for the Duenill on my own, which I’d agreed to because I wasn’t an idiot. I knew I wasn’t a warrior. But I hadn’t actually been thinking of going looking to test the potion out. I just felt energized and wanted to *run*. Yet now that he gave me the idea, I couldn’t think of anything else, so I *did* need a chaperone. My first thought was Foster, but that was part of my problem all together.

*Clayton is my soulmate and the Alpha. He’ll want to test this with me.*

Thanks to the energy the potion gave me, I made it back to Pack House in record time. The night was young, so most of the pack was out and about or hanging in the courtyard, yet no one paid me any attention—at least no more than a head nod if I passed them. It wasn’t until I was almost all the way across the courtyard to my room that I realized I needed a drink of



water and probably a change of clothes. I'd been in mine for two days.

I shifted into my human form, then hurried into my apartment. I grabbed some clean clothes and darted to the bathroom to freshen up. It took me less than two minutes to change into clean leggings and a tank top, splash water on my face, and reapply some deodorant, then I headed out to get a clean sweater and my other pair of Ugg boots.

“Hello, darling.”

I gasped and jumped back, slamming into the bathroom doorframe. “*Hijo de puta. No hagas eso.* Clayton. You scared me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He grimaced. Then he sat on the big cushy chair in my room and smiled. “I saw you sprint by and thought something was wrong, but then I heard you in the bathroom and well ... I understand that kind of emergency.”

I chuckled and pushed my hair back. “Actually, it wasn’t that either. I was just changing my clothes since I’d been in the others since Friday night. Needing some freshening up real quick.”

“Why not take a nice bath and relax?” He held his hand out for me. “How are you? I haven’t talked to you in two days.”

“I’m not a bath girl, and I wasn’t staying in—wait, how’d you get inside?”

He arched one eyebrow. “You left your door open?”

I glanced to the glass doors at the back of my apartment and found one propped open. I sighed and placed my hand in his. His skin was soft and warm. “That tracks. I’m a little mushy in the brain today.”

“Why is that?” He tugged my hand, pulling me down so I was draped in his lap. He smiled up at me, then pressed his lips to mine. “Hello.”

“Hi.” I sat up straight but didn’t get up, despite the fact I was bursting with energy. But I wanted him to go on an adventure with me to test the potion, so I’d stay in his lap. “Sorry I’ve neglected you all weekend. I was working with Elan.”

“On that potion, I know.” He kissed a path along my jawline to my ear. “How did that go?”

“Good, actually—”

“Did he tell you why he needed it?” His lips moved down to that soft spot behind my ear, which usually gave me butterflies but from him did nothing, even after our little pleasure joy ride Friday. “Maybe he revealed some of his visions?”

I frowned. “His visions? The psychic ones?”

“Mmhhmmm.” He nibbled gently down my throat while his hand slid indecently up my thigh. “A vision for why you needed to make the potion.”

“Oh, no. He hasn’t shared any visions with me.”

“Pity.”

“Ignorance is bliss, eh?”

He sat forward to kiss along my collarbone. “What did you put in the potion?”

“The usual stuff. It’s more about magic and intent.”

The arm draped around my back slid up and around so his fingertips brushed the sides of my chest. The other hand slid

all the way up. He trailed his lips along my neck. I closed my eyes and tried to let myself enjoy his touch, this little moment of passion, except I couldn't. I couldn't sit still. That potion's energy would wear off soon, it was merely a side effect of the Goddess's intervention, and I didn't want to waste it. I wanted to feel Her power in my veins as I ran as fast as I could, feeling the wind rush through my fur.

I jumped up and off of Clayton's lap. "I'm sorry. I just, I'm a little restless right now."

He sat forward with a scowl and puffy lips. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Totally." I spun and grabbed my sweater hanging on my bed frame and threw it on. My other Ugg boots were under my bed, so I quickly popped them on. "I've been cooped up in his apothecary for two days over a cauldron, so my body needs a little movement. I think I need to go for a walk."

He stood. "I'll go with you."

My plan had been to ask him to go with me, but now that he stood in front of me, I realized I was a little too frazzled, my emotions a little too raw and on edge. I needed some time to figure out how to fix this mess I'd made with my heart. I kissed him on the cheek, then stepped back. "I'm sure you have things you need to do for the pack and the ritual in a few days. I just need to run."

"*Run?* You said walk." He grimaced. "You want to go run?"

I skipped to my still open doorway, then hopped outside with him hot on my heels. "Yeah, just stretch my legs and run. As fast as I can, feel the wind in my fur, ya know? Don't you ever want to do that?"

“Not in at least ten years,” Foster said from behind me.

I closed my apartment door, then spun to face him—and my breath caught in my throat. He looked handsome as ever in the torchlight off Pack House. His amber eyes glistened in the night. I smiled but felt it wobble a little when his gaze moved to me.

Clayton sighed. “I’m not as young as you. The energy for running *for fun* has evaded me.”

Foster scowled and rocked back on his heels with his hands stuffed into his jeans’ pockets. “Why are we running for fun?”

Clayton looked pointedly at me. His green eyes were bright with amusement. “Inez may have breathed in too many fumes this weekend.”

“Right, you’ve been working with Elan on a potion. How’d that go?”

I grinned. “Great. We think? But we haven’t left that room in two days. *Quiero mudarme. Quiero correr. Rápido. Muy rápido.*”

“Ah, hence the need to run,” he gave me a sideways grin, “as fast as you can.”

“Exactly. I assured Clayton he doesn’t need to go with me.”

“Someone should though.” Foster held one hand up like he knew I was about to protest. “You’re not used to the mountain yet, and if you take one wrong turn, you’ll end up in Canada or Connecticut before your legs get tired.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. He probably had an excellent point.

“I’ll go with you, if you’d like?” He shrugged one shoulder like it was no big deal. “I was going to take a sniff around anyways. We’ve been wanting to give her a preview of a patrol run anyway.”

Clayton’s eyebrows rose. “That’s true. Yes, right. Excellent idea. Thank you, Foster.”

Foster nodded once, then leapt backwards—and landed in his wolf form. All that fluffy white fur glistened like fresh fallen snow in the moonlight. I glanced over my shoulder to Clayton and smiled. When he nodded, I closed my eyes and focused my magic on that side of me that wanted to *run*. I took a deep breath, then pushed it out until I stood in front of Foster on all fours.

I looked up and met his amber gaze. “*Ready to run?*” I asked just to his mind.

“*As fast as you can. Don’t worry, I can keep up,*” he said back, then nodded to his left. “*Wanna go that way?*”

“*How about I follow you out until you tell me to go?*”

He chuckled in my head. “*Like the good puppy that you are.*”

“*Shut up and lead the way, butthead.*” I bumped my shoulder into him as I trotted off in the direction he’d nodded in. “*Or eat my dust.*”

He snorted. I followed him around Pack House and onto a trail that’d clearly been worn into the land. We ran but not fast, just at a casual pace. My thoughts drifted to a million different places, and I wasn’t sure if I’d accidentally broadcasted them to Foster or not, but he hadn’t replied to any of my thoughts yet, so I was going with no.

After a few minutes of silence, Foster said into my mind, “*So, do you wanna talk about it?*”

That was a loaded question. There were so many *its* he could have been referring to, some more likely than others. But all I saw in my mind was him and Mischa all over each other and bile shot up my throat. I shook my head. “*No. I just want to run.*”

“*Okay. Then run. I’ll be right behind you.*”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## INEZ



“INEZ, for the hundredth time, it’s a *good* thing you didn’t encounter a single Duenill on your run last night.” Elan glanced over his shoulder at me. “It means they have not yet found our mountain.”

“*Sí,sí, lo sé, lo sé.* I just really wanted to see if our potion worked.”

He chuckled as he pulled a glass pitcher off a shelf. “Oh, I’m anxiously impatient for that feedback as well. But I’d prefer if you spotted one of those pricks farther away from home.”

I sighed and kept stirring the potion in the cauldron. “I don’t ever *want* to see one, though I’m sure it’s inevitable.”

“Indeed, as unfortunate as that may be.” He sat the glass pitcher on the wooden counter beside me, then reached up to tie back his disheveled curls. “We may have to send you out with some of the pack to test it.”

I wagged my eyebrows at him. “Road trip?”

He leaned forward and grinned, so I knew this was going to be good. “How many wolves you think we could get on Silas’s back?”



I threw my head back and laughed so hard my lungs screamed for oxygen. Tears spilled over my eyelashes. The visual of that idea was too priceless. It was now my life's goal to make that a real moment, even if Silas never spoke to us again. By the time I got control of myself, Elan had already poured the potion from the cauldron into the glass pitcher.

“*¡Basta!*” I wiped at my eyes. “*Diosa*, Elan. It's a good thing I'm not wearing makeup. Damn, what a visual.”

He pressed his hand to his chest and sighed wistfully. “Now you know my deepest, darkest wish.”

“And now we share that wish. I'll make it happen, just you wait. *Te lo prometo.*”

“Don't tease me, Alvarez.” He winked, then leaned over the pitcher and inhaled. “What do you smell in this?”

I leaned over and sniffed. I sighed as the scent washed through me. *Me gusta*. It was soothing in a way I couldn't describe except to say it was like it filled all the cracks and crevices in my soul. “I smell a hint of citrus, jasmine, and maybe gardenia? And is that moss? No, oak tree?”

“*Yes!*” He grabbed a few mint leaves from a jar and tossed them in. “Among many other things. I'm not surprised you picked up on some of them, miss potion queen.”

“Can I try it?”

“You don't even know what it is.”

“But it smells good.” I took another sniff. “And I assumed that was why you called me here.”

He snickered. “I called you here for two reasons. The first being so you could watch me make this potion—”

“Oh, is this one of your regular potions?”

“Yep—wait, I didn’t explain when you got here?”

“Nope.” When he hung his head, I giggled. “I distracted you. Tell me now. What is this potion?”

“Well, one of the main things we do as shifters here in Issale is perform the necessary rituals to trigger the seasons to change. The big spring equinox is coming up in March, and the ritual we’ll do that day is massive. I think you’re going to love that, by the way. Super witchy. I’m actually thrilled to have a witch here for this.”

“Oh, we should include Amelia.”

He cocked his head to the side. “For what?”

“She’s a witch like me, but she’s young and going through a lot—as we both know. I just thought maybe she’d feel more comfortable here in Issale if she got to help you and me with the magic stuff. Help her loosen up and settle in.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. I didn’t want to overwhelm her, but you know her better than I do. I’ll for sure include her from now on.”

I grinned. “Cool. So, continue, this is for the equinox ritual?”

“No. It’s a whole process that takes weeks for us, starting on the evening of February 28th. We do a specific ritual to mark the start of the Ostara season, actually. The pack leads this moon ritual. The timing of your arrival was perfect.” He pointed to the potion in the glass pitcher. “That’s when we drink a potion. Every civilian drinks the same potion, one I’ve already made and has been brewing on the cauldron over there for a week. It is to help all of us connect to the elements of Ostara—*spring*—especially in Issale.”

“You said civilians, so is this potion for the dragons?”

He smirked at me. “As a matter of fact, yes.”

I cocked my head to the side and stared at the potion. “Why do they get something different?”

“The dragons are not part of the rituals.”

My jaw dropped. “What? Why not?”

“Ah, well, that’s part of our history. When our species was created, there were no dragons. It was the rest of us, all the other natural animals that you’d find in the wild all over the world. But we were struggling to survive. We were hunted by all kinds of things. Our role here in this realm is to protect Earth. We’re peaceful creatures, nurturing and gentle. No one even wanted to take leadership because those who did wound up killed over it. It was chaos. Granted, this was only the first few decades or so. Not long. So, the Heavens gave us The Guard, a team of dragon shifters whose job is to protect the ones who protect the Earth.” He stopped and made a face. “This is the oversimplified version of the story, of course.”

“By having the rulers and security not part of the rituals, it allows for them to focus on their job and not abuse their power.” I nodded. “Makes sense. But why do they get a different potion?”

“The rest of us need that deeper connection, but the dragons need the opposite, because sometimes their presence can be distracting to the earth’s energy. It’s hard to explain now, but once you watch it, the explanation will be easier.”

“I’m rather excited for my first ritual as a shifter.” I did a little dance, which made him laugh. “So, what’s the other reason I’m here?”

“I want to teach you a trick.”

I propped my chin on my hands. “*Dímelo. Dímelo.* You’ve got my attention.”

He turned to face me. “I’m going to teach you how to become invisible.”

I gasped and stood up straight. “That better not be a joke.”

“It’s not, but it’s a secret.” He held his pinky out to me. “Pinky-promise you won’t tell anyone else about this.”

I narrowed my eyes on his extended pinky. “If this is a thing we’re capable of, then why can’t everyone do it?”

“Because it requires a combination of arcana magic and shifter magic. As the Shaman, I was gifted just enough arcana magic to do my job, which happens to be enough to become invisible.” He leaned forward and whispered, “*And because I don’t need everyone else knowing I could be in the room.*”

“Devious. *Hombre astuto, me gusta.*” I hooked my pinky around his. “I pinky-promise I will not tell anyone about the invisibility trick, but I won’t lie to The Coven or my soulmate if asked.”

He grinned and wagged his eyebrows. Those eyes flashed amber like Foster’s, then turned to blue. “You’re devious too. This is why we’re already such good friends.”

When he started to pull his pinky away, I tugged on it. “But I think Amelia should be taught. Us witches got to stick together, and my gut tells me it’s a skill she may need.”

He pursed his lips and watched me for a moment, then nodded. “I shall trust your intuition, but I need to gauge her magic abilities first. Let’s have you master the skill first, then teach her. Deal?”

“Deal.”

We both nodded and then dropped our hands. He winked, then spun away from me and walked over to a locked wooden cupboard in the corner.

“So, is it a spell we recite? Do I need my wand?”

He pulled a gold chain from beneath his shirt, and a gold key dangled from it. He slid it inside the gold lock on the cupboard. “The wand we used for the Duenill potion, was that a special wand?”

“It was my talisman wand.”

“That sounds rather special.” He opened the cupboard, then tucked the key back under his shirt. “And yet you destroyed it for our potion that might not work.”

I shook my head and ran my fingertips over the spot on my skin where the Goddess had written that spell. “The Goddess does not interfere, and She certainly does not answer civilians the way she did for me. My gut tells me that potion will work. Plus, *She* told me to break the wand into the potion, so She knows I sacrificed my talisman—”

“What is a talisman wand exactly?”

“Every witch that attends our magic school Edenburg—or now SOMA as well—gets sorted into a Suit—”

“Like at Hogwarts?”

I grinned. “Exactly. Except we’re sorted based on where our magic is the strongest. So, there are the four Suits, which are Cups, Wands, Pentacles, and Swords. We all have all the magic, but we have strengths. Usually, whichever Suit we’re sorted into tells us which career paths and lifestyles to take on as we grow up. So, someone sorted into Swords is a warrior, a fighter, a soldier. They always become Knights, which is The

Coven's army. They're stationed all over the world to protect civilians and humans from demons and such."

"Yes. I've seen them." He reached into the cupboard. It held just two nondescript vials inside, but then he slid the wooden panel to the right and revealed about a dozen fancy and ornate vials with glowing potions inside. "And the Cups, they're healers?"

"Yup. Cups are phenomenal with potions, but they have an innate connection with magic that allows them to know how to heal. They always become healers, who like the Swords, are stationed everywhere the Knights are and more." I leaned to the side to try and catch a glimpse of all his potion vials he clearly kept hidden, but then he grabbed a pale-blue one and closed the secret panel. I shook myself and tried to pretend I wasn't snooping. "Pentacles get a bad rep, or should I say a boring rep. People think they have less magic than the rest of us, but the truth is we would all be lost without the Pentacles. They're the ones who make it possible for us to live among humans. They're the ones who get appointed Majors and Minors of huge cities, overseeing all non-human creatures and their non-human abilities within their area. So, like, if a witch and her two sisters get attacked by demons in Central Park, the Major of New York makes sure no humans remember what they saw and cleans it all up. They're so important."

"This is so fascinating to me. I literally want to know everything. Drink this." He handed me the silver, metallic vial with a glowing pale-blue potion inside. "It tastes like skittles. So, then, what are Wands?"

I uncapped the vial and tossed the potion back like a shot. At this point, I trusted Elan. And my intuition supported that trust. Sugary sweet flavor exploded on my tongue. I licked my

lips to savor every last ounce. It tasted like cherry and citrus at the same time. “Oh, that does taste like skittles. Yum. Wands are the magicians. We craft the spells that everyone uses. We also use potions, though some of us are better at it than others.”

“Like you.”

I shrugged. “I made it my mission to know how to use magic in all forms, because while I can use my wand to make my dishes clean themselves, I can’t use my wand to help me sleep better.”

“And that’s why you’re our Priestess.” He tapped on my forehead and winked. He was a winky kind of guy but not in a creepy way, more like he was playful so that people wouldn’t be unsettled by his overall aura. “So, the talismans?”

“Right. Once we’re sorted into our Suits, we make a talisman. For Swords they get to pick their weapon. Cups get a chalice, Pentacles get amulets, and Wands get wands. Each one is blessed by the Goddess and charged with stronger energy. We can only have one talisman at a time, but they can break or get lost and stuff.” I pulled my pant leg up to show the wand tucked into my Ugg boot. “I have many wands for regular use. When Koth approves me for leaving Issale, I will go to SOMA in Manhattan and get a new talisman wand. No big deal.”

He sighed with relief. “Good. I’ve been worried and feeling guilty about that.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should have explained bet—*whoa*.” I swayed on my feet as cold air washed over my whole body. Every muscle tingled and twitched. My pulse slowed down. “What’s happening?”

“It’s a one-time potion. You drink it to open up your magic to this trick.” He gestured to my body. “What you’re feeling is your magic awakening in each of your muscles. Think of it this way: you must possess the ability to shift in order for this trick to work because it requires your body to partially shift, which means your magic just needs to flip a switch all over to allow this full step.”

I nodded and shook out my arms and legs. “And you were hoping to distract me by asking questions so I wouldn’t notice this?”

He chuckled and leaned his hip against the wooden counter. “Not quite. You’re headstrong, so I needed your mind to be focused on speaking so it wouldn’t resist the potion. I merely took advantage of that need to ask a question I wanted to know the answer of. Two birds, one stone.”

“That makes sense.” I looked down at my body, expecting to see *something*, but everything appeared the same. The tingling vanished inch-by-inch, starting from my shoulders until it left my toes. When it was gone, I shook my arms and legs, then looked up to Elan. *Ha sido intenso y extraño.* “Now what?”

“You recite a spell to become invisible.” He held up one finger to stop me from asking questions. “Then when you want to be visible again, you recite a different spell.”

“Okay. Easy enough. *Vamos.*”

“Once you get used to how it feels, I suspect you’ll be able to do it without the spell. But no pressure or concern if you always need it.” He stood facing me. “Repeat after me: *To the Air Stone I call on thee, conceal mine body from what they see.*”



I took a deep breath, then repeated his words, *“To the Air Stone I call on thee, conceal mine body from what they see.”*

Warmth coiled around me like an electric heated blanket. It was cozy and gentle. I had the sudden urge to lie down and take a nap. I looked down at my body, expecting to find myself invisible, however everything looked the same. But then Elan pulled the closet pocket door out to reveal a full, body-length mirror. I stared at it for a few seconds before I realized I wasn't in the reflection. *I* was missing. I gasped. My body was gone. The mirror only showed the counter behind me, as if I wasn't there at all.

*“Elan, ¿qué hiciste?”*

“Isn't magic just the best?” He moved to stand beside me, his reflection the only one in the mirror. “Now, to undo the spell and be visible again, you would say, *“By the Air Stone comes the right, return me to their open sight.”*”

I nodded and kept my gaze locked on the mirror. *“By the Air Stone comes the right, return me to their open sight.”*

The air sparkled beside Elan and then I was there, like I'd been there the whole time.

My jaw dropped. “Wicked.”

“I know.”

“That's badass.”

“I know.”

“That could really come in handy.”

He smirked. “I know.”

“So only you and I can do this?”

“Well ...” He shrugged and scratched his jaw. “This trick is passed down from shaman to shaman to both use and teach to our witch half-breeds. From what I’ve heard, it is possible for those of us who can do it to take someone with us.”

I scowled and looked up at his profile. “Meaning if, let’s say, Isabella were standing here, I could make her invisible with me?”

“In theory. But I’ve yet to be successful with it.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m now determined to figure that out.”

“Excellent. But for now, try it on yourself again.”

I turned back to the mirror and took a deep breath. *Okay, Inez. Spells and potions are your wheelhouse. This is no different.* It was strange to wrap my head around becoming invisible, but I’d already done it, so there was no reason to be nervous now. I cleared my throat and repeated the spell, “*To the Air Stone I call on thee, conceal mine body from what they see.*”

Once again, that warm blanket of energy wrapped around me. All at once my body simply vanished without a trace. Unable to stop myself, I stepped forward and waved my arms in front of the mirror.

“So, the transition from visible to not, and back, is the easy part. Sometimes it can be difficult to hold it.”

I scowled at him in the mirror, then realized he couldn’t see me. “Why is that?”

“Because reciting the words isn’t required, it’s merely a tool to help ease the process, so if you accidentally let the magic slip, you will become visible again.” He patted the counter with his hand. “What I’d like you to do now is sit here and hold it.”

“Sit here and keep myself invisible, you mean?”

“Correct.” He pointed to the ground in front of him. “Cop a squat here and just stay.”

“Bad dog style.”

“Exactly.” He pointed to the ground again. “Cop a squat.”

I sat on the ground and crossed my legs, then leaned my back against the cabinet. The mirror was directly in front of me. “*Sí, señor.* A squat has been copped.”

“I want you to just try and hold the invisibility as long as you can.” He walked to the door, then paused in the doorway. “I have to go find Koth, so I’m going to leave you to it.”

“Is this your subtle way of saying I need to meditate?”

He glanced over his shoulder and winked one neon-pink eye. “If I wanted to be subtle, you wouldn’t have realized what I’d done until you finished doing it. Have fun!”

I snorted. As his footsteps echoed down the hall, I focused my gaze on the mirror. For a few seconds, I basically glared at myself, waiting for the spell to drop. It blew my mind that I could see my hand in front of me yet not in the mirror. *I* could see me, but no one else could. This trick was going to come in handy, I knew it. The only thing I didn’t know was why he thought I needed to practice *holding* it. I didn’t feel any different. Magic wasn’t new to me. I knew what it felt like when the power was fading. All witches were taught how to manage the amount of magic we used to avoid Witch’s Shock—which was typically fatal. We took it very seriously, so I didn’t know if I was just well-trained or if I was missing the assignment.

Footsteps echoed in the hall. Elan must’ve been coming back already. Instead of trying to hold my spell, I tried to drop

it without reciting the reversal spell. Elan had said it would probably be possible, yet I felt nothing. That warm cocoon still held me tight. I was about to call out to Elan to ask him about it when I realized those footsteps were far too heavy to be Elan's. And they were rushed, like the person was scurrying down the hall.

There was a beat of silence, like perhaps the person stopped in the hall.

And then Clayton stepped into the doorway. He glanced left to right to make sure the room was empty, then hurried across the room. He definitely hadn't seen me. His green eyes had moved over the exact spot I sat in three times without any reaction. The mirror told me I was still invisible, so I slowed my breathing and pulled my knees to my chest. Clayton was my soulmate and it felt weird to spy on him ... but there was just something off about the way he tiptoed over toward me.

*What are you doing here? Sospechoso.*

In the time I'd known Clayton, he never skulked or crept. He was always confident and self-assured, so this behavior was a giant waving red flag. And he was dressed in all black. I'd never even seen Clayton wear black. *C'mon, Inez, you're being a little paranoid.* I'd only actually known Clayton for about a week, so it wasn't like I knew the extent of his wardrobe. The first week Marta and Carmen went to SOMA I was so anxious I wore the same sweatpants for six days straight. It wasn't like he was in a hoodie like some scene from a movie. He had on dress slacks and what looked like a merino wool sweater.

But when he stopped at the glass pitcher filled with Elan's potion for the big ritual in two days, my pulse quickened. It was the way he bent over and smelled the potion before

glancing over his shoulder like he wanted to make sure he was still alone. My stomach turned. This was not right. Something was very wrong. Time seemed to slow down as I watched him pull a black backpack off his shoulder.

And then he pulled a glass pitcher out of his bag that was *identical* to Elan's.

My eyes widened. *No, no. ¿Qué haces?*

Clayton's pitcher was also full of a liquid the same color as Elan's. He slid Elan's over and put his own in its spot, then carefully put a lid on Elan's pitcher and slid it into his backpack. He switched the pitchers. He switched the *potions*. He then took a step back and reviewed his work to make sure everything looked right.

*Clayton, what are you doing? I don't like this. Elan, where are you?*

Just as quickly as he came in, he swept back out. With Elan's potion. I waited until his footsteps were too far for me to hear, then I jumped to my feet and dove for the swapped potion. The lid was off because Elan didn't have a lid on his, so I leaned over and sniffed.

Nothing.

It smelled like *nothing*.

*"What the fuck did you do, Clayton?"* I whispered to myself.

My fingers were shaking as I pulled my wand out. I pointed the tip to the potion and whispered, *"By petal, herb, and crystal mold, reveal to me the spell you hold."*

The potion swirled like a whirlpool for a split-second, then went flat. Not a ripple in sight. This spell was designed for

potions, so after the whirlpool ended there should've been runes glittering on the surface that told me what the intent of the potion was. There was nothing.

*"Oh my Goddess. This is nothing."* I leaned closer and smelled again. *"This is water, or basically water."*

I stood up straight and sprinted to the door. No sign of Clayton or Elan. Or anyone else—which was expected since this was Elan's house. His apothecary was inside his house, that meant no one else was supposed to be in here unless invited by Elan. I glanced inside the room, and a cold chill slid down my spine.

Without another thought, I raced down the hall and out Elan's side door to outside. Elan had said he was going to find Koth, so when I got out the door I headed in the direction of our King's house. With every step I took, I replayed Clayton's actions over and over. It was strange. Weird. Suspicious as all hell. Elan always made the potions for their rituals. That was the Shaman's job. The Alpha of the wolf pack didn't make potions, so there was no reason I knew of for him to even be in there, let alone swapping them. And if it wasn't sketchy, then why was Clayton acting sneaky.

My stomach tightened into knots. I wrung my hands together.

"Inez?"

I froze, but there was only silence. *Did someone just say my name?*

"I said your name," Koth grumbled from behind me, his voice rougher than usual.

I spun around—and leapt backwards. Koth stood there towering over me with his thick eyebrows hung low over

narrowed purple eyes. His hands were in fists at his side. The muscles in his arms were tight, like he was holding himself back from something.

“Inez, why can’t I see you?”

“Wha—OH, shit, I forgot. *Lo siento, perdóname, mi Señor.*” I cleared my throat and took a breath to calm my pulse. “*By the Air Stone comes the right, return me to their open sight.*”

Koth’s eyebrows rose, but his body relaxed. I knew the moment I was visible because his gaze landed on mine. “Elan?”

“Yes, sorry. I guess I forgot to reverse the spell when I ran out—”

“What’s wrong?”

I froze mid-word with my mouth half-open.

“I’m a little stressed out today,” he said. “If it’s all right with you, let’s skip the *how did you know that* step and just tell me why you’re making that face and why your magic is swirling around your feet?”

*Magic at my feet?* I looked down and sure enough, thin bands of pinkish-purple magic coiled around my feet. “Where’s Elan? He said he was going to find you.”

“I haven’t seen him since dawn. Talk to me, Inez.”

“Something weird just happened in his apothecary. I was in there alone and—”

“*SILAS!*” Koth yelled to the sky.

A split-second later, Silas’s light-gray dragon form flew over our heads. He was the exact shade of cloudy sky today,

but the bright orange flames he spit from his mouth were not. Koth cursed. That wasn't good. My intuition was on hyper speed.

“Inez.”

I jumped and looked to my left just as Koth placed his hand on my shoulder. “Yes?”

“Demons are attacking Halifax. I have to go.” He ducked his head to meet my gaze, then he pointed to his right. “Foster is about twenty feet that way. Go tell him whatever just happened. He'll know what to do until I return, okay?”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you. Be careful.”

He glanced at me, then did a double take. He smirked. “Thanks.”

Faster than my eyes could track, his massive black dragon form shot into the setting sunlight. *Demons*. I shuddered. Perhaps that was what Elan needed to tell Koth. Either way, Elan was probably busy with that, so I turned toward the pathway Koth had pointed to and sprinted until I spotted Foster crouched on the trail with four little boys crowded around him.

He glanced up as I approached and smiled. “Hey, you.”

“Hi.” I waved awkwardly, then cleared my throat. I stopped a little ways back and shuffled my feet in the dirt. My sweater sleeves were long, so I pulled them over my hands and tugged on them. *Mantén la calma*. “When you're done, I need you for a second.”

Foster frowned at me but nodded. It took him about forty-eight seconds to send the kids on their way and turn his sole attention to me. He brushed his hands off on his jeans. His bare hands. I wanted to look at them and talk to him about his



scars and maybe me helping him cover them with magic, but I had to focus on what I'd just witnessed.

“Okay, I don't like that face.” Foster stopped in front of me and cocked his head to the side. “Tell me. Whatever it is, tell me.”

So I did. I told him about the potion Elan made, which he already knew of, and then learning to become invisible – which I realized I'd sworn to keep a secret. But this was Foster, somehow it didn't feel like he counted. And then ... and then I told him about Clayton. I gave him every detail about Clayton's behavior, even down to his clothing.

Foster's eyebrows scrunched so hard he gave himself wrinkles. But he said nothing.

I groaned and began nervously braiding my long black hair. “*Por favor, di algo. Estoy flipando.*”

He scratched his jaw and shook his head. “That *is* odd behavior. He's been acting weird. But let's not freak out until we speak with Elan or see if Clayton says something. For all we know, Elan sent him in there.”

I knew Elan hadn't, but Foster wasn't quick to mistrust his Alpha and adoptive father. And that was understandable. His experiences thus far told him to trust Clayton. “Something happened in there—”

“I'm not disregarding this, Inez. I promise.” He reached into his leather jacket pockets and pulled his leather gloves out, then slid them onto his hands. “I'm just asking you to trust me here. Let's watch. If Koth and Elan return, we'll go to them. Until then, let's see what happens. We can't confront Clayton about this ourselves, we need either Koth or Elan, so

we hold tight until we get them back or we're shown a reason to act."

"Okay. That's fair. We watch and wait. Don't act impulsively." I tried to ignore the knot in my stomach. "But we won't let anyone drink that potion without telling."

Foster nodded. "Agreed."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## INEZ



I HADN'T SEEN ELAN, Koth, or Clayton since I told Foster about the swapped potions.

It'd been twenty-four hours.

I was anxious as hell. My stomach kept turning and flipping like I was a little rowboat in the ocean during a category five hurricane. I'd bitten all my nails off until they were bloody, sore stumps. My cuticles were raw because I'd moved to picking at those when my nails were gone. I hadn't slept. I hadn't eaten aside from that one cracker this morning that threatened to come right back up. I'd held my body so tight and tense that I gave myself a bunch of muscle spasm knots the size of my fist in my shoulders. I was a mess.

Something was wrong. I knew it deep down in my gut.

And I was starting to think Elan knew it too. After all, he'd left me in there by myself after he'd taught me how to be invisible. Telling me to sit by myself and focus on holding the spell had felt weird from the start. It hadn't needed to be *held*. The spell held itself until I reversed it ... Elan wanted me to play his spy. Clayton had snuck in seconds after Elan left, which meant he had to have been watching and waiting for Elan to leave, so Elan couldn't play the spy on his own. I didn't understand why he chose me to spy on my own

soulmate. But then again, maybe he thought I was the person who *needed* to catch him in the act.

In the act of *what* I didn't know.

But there was no way in hell Elan meant for that potion to be tampered with. I'd been in there with him in his apothecary all weekend working on potions. I'd even helped with *that* potion. We'd only just finished brewing it. Clayton was up to something. If cell phones worked in Issale, I would've already called Elan to get him back here. I'd asked around for his number, but everyone said only Clayton knew the Shaman's phone number. Obviously I couldn't ask him for it. I had managed to get Silas's phone number—apparently he was the dragon everyone called if there was trouble—but Silas had flown in to grab Koth to go handle a demon attack last night. They weren't back yet, and that didn't bode well. They were probably with The Coven. I could've called ... but I had no proof.

All I knew was he'd swapped the potions.

Just by itself, that meant nothing.

Even if Elan confronted him and said he didn't tell him to swap them, Clayton could have lied through his teeth with some bogus story. He was a smooth talker. My stomach rolled. I groaned and pressed my hand to my stomach. I hated thinking ill of my own soulmate. I didn't like all the doubts it stirred in my mind. Nor the questions. My intrusive thoughts were getting the best of me, so I needed to get out. I needed a distraction. Foster had promised me he was watching everything, making sure no one drank any potions. He knew everyone better than I did. But I couldn't sit by myself in silence a moment longer or I'd lose my mind.

Just before sunset, Isabella had knocked on my door to tell me Foster was throwing an impromptu bonfire. Apparently, everyone else was on edge because the dragons hadn't yet returned from the demon attack. Apparently, the night before the first spring ritual—or *Ostara* as they called it—Elan always had some form of gathering for all of Issale to get ready. But he wasn't here either. According to Isabella, Clayton had gone on a solo task this morning and hadn't returned, which I was now super suspicious of.

Foster throwing the bonfire was brilliant—both for us to keep an eye on everyone and for morale. So far, Foster was by far the better leader of the pack. I wondered why he wasn't Alpha.

I paused between two trees tucked in the tree line at the edge of the clearing. The bonfire had only started about twenty minutes ago, but you wouldn't have known that by looking at it. So far, I'd been to a couple of bonfires here in Issale, and both times there were at minimum two separate fires going at once. This bonfire had only one and it was half the size they usually were. Since it was only the pack here in this little clearing, it made sense to go smaller. Granted, it'd only just started, so maybe it would grow bigger the longer it burned.

*Great, Inez, you're such a mess you're debating the size of the bonfire.*

The pack was relaxed and already having a good time listening to music—*Wait. That's the Eagles playing. That's not live music the pack is playing themselves, that's from a speaker.* But that didn't make sense. Electricity didn't work within the borders of Issale. The curiosity carried me into the clearing, overpowering all of my anxieties. I walked through the party, exchanging smiles, waves, and *hellos* with my

packmates as I headed toward the bonfire in the middle. Most of the pack was on the near half, especially all of the young kids and elders. *That's weird, isn't it? I've never seen them so segregated. I must be missing something.* But as I walked around the bonfire to glance around the other side, I realized I wasn't wrong. This side was all people in their twenties, thirties, and forties. No children. No senior citizens.

But there *was* music.

The song switched from *Tequila Sunrise* to Black Sabbath's *Iron Man* and my confusion grew. I couldn't find where the music was coming from, but it was definitely on this side of the party. Directly in front of me was a group of about two dozen girls about my age sitting in a close circle all wrapped up in blankets and holding cups with steam billowing off of them. To my right were a bunch of rowdy frat boys, or the wolf pack equivalent, complete with a keg and some kind of beer pong meets cornhole game happening.

I took a step forward and ice-cold air washed over me. I gasped. The bitter chill was so sudden and harsh that it literally stopped me in my tracks. I frowned and glanced around. Everyone on this side of the bonfire was either under blankets or wearing coats, whereas everyone I'd passed was in light sweaters. I frowned and took a step back—warmth coiled around me. And not just heat radiating off the flames.

“You look so confused.”

I jumped and spun until I spotted Eddie, a wolf a few years older than me with wild curly brown hair down to his shoulders. Then his words clicked. I scowled. “I *am* confused. *Diosa, ¿Qué ha sido eso?*”

Eddie snickered and rubbed his face with one hand, then gestured to the ground in a slashing motion. “You crossed the

border, dudette.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait, you’re not in Issale right now?”

“Technically, no.” He grinned and rocked back on his heels. “Cool, right?”

I nodded.

“I watched you enter the clearing on a mission to seek out the music. When no one else paused to explain it, I figured I better.” He stepped forward so we were side-by-side, then he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and spun me to face the bonfire. “Whenever tension is high in Issale, Foster throws these parties here on the border. The fire is on the Issale side so we know it’s safe and contained by our magic and so no humans smell it and come sniffing. The kids and grandparents hang on the Issale side so they’re safe just in case trouble rolls in.”

“I had noticed the segregation.” *Sí, ya veo.*

“It’s a precaution we all take seriously.” He pointed to the bonfire. “Directly on the other side of the flames is Lover’s Cove, and it’s exactly what you think it is.”

“Where all the couples go to hook up in the shadows.”

“Yeah, so if you don’t like *PDA*, stay away from there. This side is mostly the twenty-somethings. On the other side of the keg stand crew, there’s a bunch of us playing giant Jenga, which is where I’m heading.” He dropped his arm and crossed over the invisible border again. The only way I knew was because snowflakes landed on his shoulders. He pointed to his left, to the far corner of the clearing I couldn’t see from where I stood. “But I’m sure you’re looking for Foster. He hangs on the rocks, farthest from the border.”



I smiled, even though I wasn't sure if I liked that he knew I wanted to find Foster. Did he think I had feelings for him? Had I been that obvious? Or was it an innocent awareness that Foster and I were friends? I nodded. "Thanks, Eddie. I'm gonna check things out."

"Come join us for a game later. It's fun!" He winked and then turned and walked off.

I should have followed him. I should have let myself go play a game and relax for a bit, ease my stress for even a few minutes, but my feet started in the direction he said Foster was in. I was a moth to a flame. I knew I shouldn't go near him, and yet there I went. Later, if I ever told anyone about this night, I decided I would pretend I happened upon him by accident while playing giant Jenga. In reality though, my gaze eyed the horizon until I spotted a cliff wall up ahead. Eddie said *on the rocks*, which I assumed meant the cliff, so I lowered my gaze to the group of people sitting on the ground.

Even with the shadows from the trees and the flickering of orange light, I spotted Foster right away. My pulse quickened like the traitor that it was. Foster was leaning against the cliff wall with his long legs stretched out in front of him and a beer in his hand. Despite the arctic chill in the air, Foster only wore a button-down denim shirt that perfectly matched the shade of his jeans, which were tucked into brown combat boots. I'd never seen an all-denim outfit look so good. My stomach tightened into knots. *¿Por qué eres tan bonito?*

I recognized the pack members sitting around him, or at least most of them. Ronnie and Jeffrey sat across from him with their wives – who were whispering to each other and giggling like they were up to no good. Charlie, Johnny, and Calvin sat on his left side while Anne, Bella, and Timmy sat

on his right. They were all the picture of ease, not a worry in the world. The song blasting through the speakers changed to the Rolling Stones' *Beast of Burden*, and for a moment I realized this was probably what parties were like in the seventies—without all the frills of modern technology.

Foster's group was only about fifteen feet away and yet he hadn't noticed me. He hadn't looked in my direction at all. His gaze was locked on something to his right, giving me a view of only his profile. As beautiful as it was, I wanted him to see me. I wanted his attention, and I hated it. I hated how much I craved him.

Bella and Timmy leaned away from each other to let someone else walk between them. I glanced up to see who it was, then did a double take. My steps faltered. It was Mischa. The knockout from Russia was wearing a minidress and knee-high boots despite the low double-digit temperature. *How cold is Russia if this is minidress weather?* I liked Mischa. I did. I just wasn't ready to see Foster with someone else, which I knew was entirely unfair. I told myself she was a nice, cool girl who had the chance to make a good guy happy. I needed to smile and be supportive of them.

And then she sat in Foster's lap, and my stomach turned. My body froze in place. I waited for Foster to tell her to move, but he leaned *into her*. Every muscle in my body tightened. Foster grinned up at her and all but batted his eyelashes at her. I clenched my jaw so tight my jaw popped. Mischa reached up and ran her fingers through Foster's hair, and I gagged. Had I eaten anything today, I would have thrown it all up right there where I stood.

“¿Estás bien?” Isabella said from suddenly beside me. “Looks like you're gonna be sick. *Puedes vomitar en los*

*arbustos, a nadie le importará.”*

*You’ve got that right.* I shook my head and pressed my hand to my stomach. I forced myself to look over at my friend and grimace, then said the first thing that came to me other than the truth. She couldn’t know the truth—that seeing Foster with another girl made me sick. “I ate three big bags of Doritos today.”

Isabella threw her head back and laughed, her dark curls bouncing.

*Quick, think of something else to say to divert her attention from your reaction just now. What can you ask about?* My gaze flickered back to Foster who was still beaming up at Mischa, still in his lap. *So are they, like, a thing now—OH, ask Isabella that. But be subtle, Inez.*

I cleared my throat. “So, I just realized I haven’t gotten the tea.”

Isabella wiped under her eyes. “We don’t do tea here.”

I scowled. “Why not?”

“*¿Por qué deberíamos hacerlo?*” She shrugged. “Because tea is only good when it’s hot or ice cold. We can’t serve either. I mean, we’ve tried putting snow in it, but that melts and waters it down nasty.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it.

“*¿Qué pasa?*” Isabella frowned at me for a long moment before the lightbulb flickered on. “OH. Oops. *Dios mío.* You meant the hot goss. *Perdóname. Por favor, no le digas a nadie que he dicho eso. ¿Lo mantenemos en secreto?*”

“Indeed. *Un secreto, no hay problema.*” I forced a laugh I didn’t feel and gestured around the pack. “This is the first

pack-only party I've been to, and I realized I don't know the tea. Who's related by blood within the pack? Who's dating? Who's hooking up? Who's secretly shagging. I need the hot goss."

Isabella tipped her beer bottle toward me. "Drama is more fun when it's not yours."

I shrugged. "I mean, I've got a soulmate, so I'm not going to be in the dating scene here. I feel like a married woman wanting all the drama updates from my single college friends."

"That's super specific." She giggled. But then she licked her lips and turned to face the crowd. "Okay. Teatime."

I meant to listen. I really did. But Foster reached up and twirled Mischa's purple hair around his finger. *Goddess, please don't kiss. I am not strong enough for that tonight.* I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then pretended to need to rub my eyes so it didn't look strange. *Focus on Isabella, then you can find out about Foster and Mischa.*

By the time I tuned back into Isabella, she was talking about two sets of identical twins who were dating. She giggled. "Apparently, they got so drunk on New Years' Eve that they accidentally swapped partners. There was *drama* on New Years' Day."

I shook my head. "Let me see if I followed that. Amanda and Ashley, the redheaded twins with the adorable freckles, are dating the long-haired duo Teddy and Tommy. Who is with who?"

"Amanda and Teddy. Ashley and Tommy."

"But on New Years' Eve, Amanda hooked up with Tommy  
—"

“And Teddy nailed Ashley. Yup.” She giggled. “Worst part is, it took them half a day to realize they were with the wrong guy. Best part is, that revelation happened at the picnic with everyone.”

“And they are still together?”

She shrugged. “No one got knocked up, and they were all equally guilty. Granted, none of them *meant* to cheat. It was tense for a couple weeks, but they’re good now.”

“Dog breeders put different color collars on the puppies when they’re born to tell them apart.”

Isabella spit her beer out with a laugh. “They’re wearing bracelets.”

I laughed. It felt nice. It was a welcome distraction. “Okay, more tea like that.”

She swallowed a fresh sip of beer, then licked her lips. “Okay, so Hannah started reading reverse harem romance novels last fall, and at the Yule Ball she told half of Issale that she wanted to live that out in real life, so now she has four boyfriends and we barely see them.”

*Apuesto.* I giggled. “Good for them.”

“You see that group of girls over there?” She pointed to the girls with blankets I’d seen a few minutes ago. When I nodded, she grinned and pointed to the frat guys doing keg stands. “They all decided they didn’t want to settle down any time soon—with the potential Lilith-caused apocalypse on the horizon—and have decided to all be one big couple. Two dozen of them, ten girls and fourteen guys. They all share each other. It’s like a swingers’ party that never ended.”

I blinked. “Good for them, too.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. Why not? If they all agreed to the terms and it’s not harming anyone, then why the hell not? Polyamory for the win.”

“I knew I liked you.”

“Does that mean you’re going to join them?”

She scoffed. “No. But the reverse harem idea is drawing more and more appeal for me every day.”

I laughed. “Have you picked out your four yet?”

“I’m working on a list.” She winked to me. “But I think that’s all the tea.”

This was it, my chance to ask. I glanced over to Foster and found Mischa petting his face. She ran her fingertips over his cheekbones, then ran her thumb over his bottom lip. I cleared my throat. “And them?”

Isabella frowned. “You and Foster are wicked close. He hasn’t told you?”

“He plays coy.”

“Of course he does.” She rolled her eyes. “So, Foster doesn’t really date anyone. I heard he had a girlfriend as a teenager, but I wasn’t around for that. Every single female in the pack has tried to bed him, some went as far as waiting naked in his bed for him. I don’t even know how they got into his room.”

My pulse skipped beats at the mere idea of women lying naked in his bed.

“But the pack is super close. We’re like one big family. Clayton is like the dad of the pack, he’s here to help. But

Foster is the mom. We all go to him. For everything. So, for him, I think he just can't see any of us gals like that."

My chest tightened. "Sounds lonely," I heard myself whisper.

"Probably why he ends up on the flirting end with any new female to the pack. Fresh blood and all that."

*OH. Oh, that makes sense.* "Like Mischa."

We both looked back over to them just as Mischa took Foster's chin between her fingers and kissed him. My heart stopped. She kissed him in front of everyone. Nausea bubbled up my throat. My fingers trembled. The world spun. *Don't vomit, don't vomit, don't vomit. This is fine. Normal. He's allowed. You're not his girlfriend.*

Isabella was thankfully oblivious to the havoc Mischa caused inside of me and continued talking. "She's a nice, chill girl. She'd be good for him, so I kinda hope so."

*I should hope so too. Goddess, what is wrong with me? Why do I hope they're not together? Why does this bother me so much?* Isabella grabbed my arm and dragged me over to the group, closer to Foster and Mischa still exchanging saliva. I looked down at my feet and focused on taking calm, easy breaths. But when I looked up, my gaze latched onto Foster's hand resting on Mischa's thigh. Mischa's bare thigh. Sure, he had on his gloves, but still. I gagged.

Johnny threw both hands up and yelled, "CLAYTON!"

I gasped and froze in place.

Foster's head snapped in my direction and our eyes met.

"Clayton!" Charlie yelled, then howled while in human form.

Calvin jumped to his feet and threw his arms out wide. “Clayton!”

“You three are so strange,” Clayton said with a laugh from suddenly right behind me. Before I even had a chance to turn to face him, his large, warm hand pressed to the small of my back. He pressed his lips to my temple. “Hello, darling.”

In my mind, Foster’s face looked a little green. But I knew I was imagining that.

I forced a smile and looked up at my soulmate, finding his green eyes watching me. “There you are.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Oh, were you looking for me?”

“Well, I haven’t seen you all day.” I pushed my fake-smile wider. “Where did you go?”

He pulled his hand off my back, then used his fingers to tip my chin up. I shouldn’t have been surprised when he pressed his lips to mine. “I am sorry for not letting you know. I had an errand to run for the ritual. I guess I’m not used to having a soulmate I need to communicate that with. I promise I’ll do better.”

In my peripheral vision, I saw everyone watching us. *Everyone*. I shrugged and brushed some dirt off of his shoulder. “It’s all right. We’re learning this together.”

He winked to me, then turned to face our pack, most of whom had crowded around the cliff or right along the border so they could hear but be safe. “Sorry I’m late everyone. I did not expect that to take so long. But thanks to Foster for setting up this party in my leave. You make a good leader, Son.”

Foster unclenched his jaw and tried to smile, but it came out sideways. He nodded. “Happy to help, as always.”



“Well, on that note, I was hoping to speak with you and Inez privately.” He smiled and gestured to the bonfire. “Everyone else, please ... as you were.”

At once, everyone else turned back to whatever they were doing prior to Clayton’s arrival. It was as if he’d never shown up at all. Foster stood. I tried to look away before Mischa kissed his cheek, but my body wasn’t functioning the way it was supposed to.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Clayton cupped my face. “You don’t look well.”

I shook my head. “I think I’ve just overexerted myself.”

“That makes sense, but you’ll get used to this.” He kissed my forehead, then pulled away. “Foster, I owe you one for tonight.”

“It was nothing,” Foster said in a gravelly rough voice I wasn’t quite used to hearing from him. “What’s going on?”

I didn’t look up at him. I couldn’t afford to. I was too fragile.

Clayton cleared his throat and glanced around to make sure we were alone. “So, Elan is with Koth and the dragons handling a demon issue that moved from Halifax to Bangor, Maine, but he called me and asked if I could send someone to meet up with a witch named Vincent from Eden. Apparently he needs to add some new, special ingredients to our potion we use for the ritual tomorrow night.”

Foster scowled. “Why are there new ingredients? It’s been the same potion forever now.”

“Lilith.” Clayton shuddered. “Elan says the potions all have to be stronger and more specific to help block Lilith from sensing us.”

“Oh.” Foster pursed his lips and nodded.

“Vincent—that’s the witch—is also to give us a new special spell to recite during the ritual for protection and strength.” Then Clayton turned his smile to me. “I was hoping you would go meet with him, Inez.”

I flinched. “Me?”

Clayton gave me a sideways smirk. “Well, you are the Priestess of the Pack, and you’re a witch. Hell, you might even know Vincent.”

I bit my bottom lip. I definitely didn’t know any Vincents. But I *did* know he stole the potion for the ritual, and this conversation was only making me more nervous. If I took the potion with me, then no one else could drink it until I had it checked by Elan. So, with that, I cleared my throat and nodded. “Okay, I’ll go. But I don’t want to go alone.”

Clayton’s eyebrows rose. He pressed his hand to his chest. “Would you like me to go with you? I could probably step away from preparations for a little while—”

“I’ll go with her,” Foster said in a rush. “You have other preparations to begin.”

Clayton sighed with relief. He reached out and squeezed Foster’s shoulder. “Thank you for volunteering, Foster.”

I blinked and peeled my eyes off of Foster. Again. “Where are we meeting this witch?”

Clayton shrugged. “I was told to pick the location and let Vincent know. He’ll meet you.”

“Now? We go now?”

“Dreyar Park.” Foster pulled a cellphone out of his back pocket and tapped on it a few times, then he held it out so we

could see the map he was looking at. “It’s that little park right down the road from my cabin in the mountains.”

“Ah, yes. That’s an excellent idea, Son. It’s a safe location and you have somewhere to go if an emergency arises. I’ll text him the location of the park now. He says he can travel by portal via The Coven, so why don’t the two of you head out now?”

I glanced to Foster and found his eyes sliding to me. We both nodded.

“Perfect. I, um, well ...” Clayton chuckled nervously. “I was actually going to ask Foster to let you borrow his truck, so I already put the potion on the passenger seat.”

My jaw dropped, but Foster just chuckled and shook his head.

Clayton grinned. “She doesn’t have a car. I figured you wouldn’t mind. But you going *with* her is an even better idea.”

I licked my lips and wrung my hands together. All of my nerves were back tenfold. “Special ingredient for the potion and a spell. That all?”

“That’s all. Why don’t you two head out now? Give me a call if anything goes down. Be safe.” Clayton kissed me once more and then squeezed Foster’s shoulder ... then he turned and walked away.

I turned to Foster with my eyebrows raised.

Foster barely glanced at me. He smiled wide for a few people who walked by, then he pressed his hand to the small of my back, sending electricity sizzling up my spine. I hated that his touch, even through his gloves and clothes, affected me so much yet Clayton’s felt like nothing. “Let’s just get to my truck first, okay?”

That made me smile. He knew I was suspicious of this whole thing. But he also must have been thinking what I was because he didn't want to let anyone else suspect anything. Together, we walked in silence to the parking lot, which was actually adjacent to this clearing. It was a short walk, but my mind was already spinning. This was shady. It had to be. Koth and Elan were not reachable. He knew we wouldn't be able to verify his story if we tried.

And he knew carrying around Elan's pitcher of the Ostara launch potion would be hella suspicious, so he put it in Foster's truck. A convenient little trick I wasn't buying for a second.

By the time we made it to the truck, I was half a second from wanting to call The Coven in to assess the situation. The only reason I didn't, and wasn't going to without obvious cause, was this little lone soldier in my mind telling me we needed proof. We needed something concrete to bring to the people above his pay grade.

The car beeped and the taillights flashed. Foster reached out and yanked the passenger side door open. Sure enough, there it was—the glass pitcher filled with Elan's potion.

“I don't like this,” I whispered.

“Me either.” Foster picked up the pitcher off the seat so I could sit down. “But no one can drink it if we have it.”

“That was my exact thought before.” I smiled and held my arms out for the pitcher. The second he handed it to me, I popped the lid off and took a sniff. “This is Elan's potion. The original. The one I saw Clayton take.”

Foster cursed, shut my door, then ran around to climb in the driver's seat. The second his door closed, he said, “*SHIT.*”

“What do we do now?”

He threw the car in drive and drove off. “Wing it? We go to the park and meet this Vincent guy.”

I nodded. “Right. Meet the witch. Let him add to the potion and give us the spell we need. But also try to interrogate him.”

“Exactly.” Foster gripped the steering wheel with both hands. “It’s probably going to take some creativity to get him talking. So, we’ve got a little bit of a drive, now might be a good time for you to try and come up with some brilliant, sneaky plan.”

“Are brilliant, sneaky plans not your specialty?”

At that, Foster smirked. “They call me *Mama Foster*. My specialty is keeping everyone alive. I’ll be watching our backs.” He glanced over at me, then down to the potion. “But I want that invisibility trick of yours ready to go.”

“You want me to be invisible when we get there?”

“No, I want this Vincent guy to know we have a witch in our ranks. However, if trouble starts, I want you out of sight.”

My stomach tightened into knots. “*Fantástico*. So, you have as bad a feeling about this as I do. Is it stupid to walk into a trap? *Porque me parece muy estúpido*.”

“*Muy estúpido*? Most likely. But I don’t think Clayton is trying to hurt us here tonight.” He exhaled a deep breath as he turned a corner. “He wants that potion back, and the spell, which means he wants us back.”

“You do realize if something goes down with that spell and it doesn’t end well for Clayton’s plan, he’s going to throw us under the bus and say we did it. You know that, right?”

Foster's grip on the steering wheel tightened. "He raised me, Inez. He's been *good* to me. Real good. I believe you and I'm not doubting *you*, that's why I'm here with you now ... I'm just having a hard time wrapping my head around this behavior coming from the man I know."

"I cannot fathom how this feels for you. I'm sorry."

"Thanks." He shook his head. "But that's why I need *you* to think deviously. I'm clouded."

"Right. You focus on keeping us alive, I'll make a plan. Turn on Taylor Swift's Reputation album. I think better with Taylor in the background."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

INEZ



“INEZ.” Warmth pressed into my skin. “INEZ.”

I gasped and kicked my legs out. “What? Who is it? What happened?”

Foster chuckled. “It’s just me ... we’re here.”

My heart pounded against my chest. I hated when I was startled awake. It sent my body into fight mode. I leaned back against the seat and pressed my hand to my chest while focusing on deep breaths to try and get my pulse back to a normal speed.

“You all right?” Foster’s voice was warm and soft, like a lullaby. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“I’m sorry I fell asleep on you. That was rude.”

He chuckled and rubbed his thumb over his bottom lip. “If the pacing footsteps I heard from your room all night were any indication, I’d say you needed it.”

I sighed. “Dammit.”

He reached into his console and pulled out a round piece of amethyst. “Here, this will help.”

I smiled down at the crystal in my hand. “Foster Logan, did you just hand me a crystal to calm me down?”



He grinned crookedly. “Elan gave it to me as a kid, but a witch I know speaks highly of crystals. She even sells them in her shop.”

“Smart lady.” I wrapped my fingers around the crystal and squeezed. Amethyst was a great store for calmness and mental clarity. I always found it helped the best when I needed my thinking cap on. “Wait, we’re parked.”

“Yep. We’re here.”

*Here* as in Dreyar Park, the place we were to meet a witch we didn’t know to tweak Elan’s special potion. A witch we were crazy suspicious of and a plan we were even more suspicious of. No big deal.

“Right.” I nodded. “Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool.”

“Did your dreams or Taylor Swift give you any brilliant ideas?”

I hadn’t had a single dream, I’d just gone down hard, but I wasn’t surprised. That was actually how my brain did its best thinking. “Well, if we’re correct and this potion remix and new spell are shady, then we know this Vincent guy is in on it, which means we cannot trust him for a second.”

“Correct. And depending on what he’s getting out of this arrangement, we have to prepare ourselves for the chance he’ll turn on us somehow.”

“And his name is definitely not Vincent.”

Foster frowned and cocked his head to the side. “Why do you say that?”

“Because if I was going behind the backs of both The Coven *and* the King of Shifters, then I definitely would not be telling the shady wolf my real name.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it.

“This witch probably used spells to conceal his identity by changing his physical appearance. Spells like that are difficult and a high level of magic, but it’s possible.”

“So, the face we’re about to see may not be his face at all?” He cursed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We need to know who this guy is so that later we can report him. Do you have any spells for that?”

I pursed my lips and went through the rolodex in my mind of all the spells I knew. Nothing was fitting. *Mierda. Mierda. Mierda.* “Wait, we don’t want him to know we’re onto him. We need to let this play out a little bit more so we have something to report. We’re using ourselves as bait here.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’ll put a magical tattoo on him. It won’t allow us to track *him*, but I will be able to track *my* magic.”

“Won’t he see a tattoo? Or feel it?”

I shook my head. “I put them on to look like freckles or a mole, something that blends into their skin. And it doesn’t feel like anything. He won’t know after it’s done. I’ve done this to my stepmother, Gabriela, and both my sisters.”

He rubbed his gloved hands together. “So how do we get the tattoo on him without him noticing?”

“Hold this a second.” I handed the pitcher to him. When he took the pitcher, I reached down into my boot and pulled out my wand. It was a compact, slender wand made for witches who wanted to be able to carry and conceal when around humans. It fit perfectly in my boot. Foster watched with a confused puppy expression as I pulled the sleeve of my sweater down over my hand, covering the wand pressed to my

palm. Then I held my hands out to Foster. “Okay, give it back.”

With a scowl, he did. “What’s the plan?”

“Well, Vincent will be preoccupied with the potion, and therefore won’t see my wand tucked under my sleeve, so when he goes to take the pitcher, I will quickly place a new freckle on his skin.”

He chuckled. “That’s brilliant. Though I am a little nervous about you having your hands full. What if there’s trouble?”

“I’m not a fighter, Foster. If we are in danger, we need you to be able to move and fight. Plus, my wand is already in my hand, I can get creative with that—”

“While invisible.” He ducked down to meet my eyes. “Promise me if it comes to a fight, you will become invisible so no one can see you.”

“I promise.”

We stared at each other for a moment.

His gaze dropped to my mouth, then he sighed and closed his eyes. “What are we doing? This is reckless.”

I chuckled. “Protecting innocent people by letting ourselves be bait.”

“I have a bad feeling about this. You’ve never encountered the Duenill before—”

I gasped. “Oh, I didn’t tell you about that, did I?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You cannot pose a vague question like that with my anxiety this high. Please continue.”

“Elan and I made a potion to allow us to detect Duenill on sight.”

His eyes widened. I quickly filled him in on that potion and how the Goddess gave me a spell and had me use my talisman wand for the potion. When I was done, he cursed and shook his head, but there was a smirk on his face.

I opened the passenger door. “C’mon, let’s get this over with before we sit here and freak ourselves out.”

He gripped my sweater sleeve, pinning me to the seat. “Follow my lead out here, okay? You’re brilliant, but my senses are stronger.”

“Oh, you *so* wear the pants on this one.” I winked and carefully slid out of his truck without spilling the potion. There was a lid, but still, I needed to be careful. When I walked to the front of the car, I found Foster waiting for me. I cleared my throat. “How will we know who he is? There could be other witches here. Can’t assume anything.”

Foster pulled his phone out. “Clayton texted me and said we’re to wait on the bench beside the grill at the picnic area. Vincent will approach us and say, *for all evils there are two remedies*. To which we’re supposed to respond with, *time and silence*. Though I have no idea what that’s from.”

“I do. But I’m drawing a blank at the moment. Time and silence, that’s our line. Got it.” I nodded and looked out at the park in front of us. “Lead the way?”

“Stay close,” he said softly with a single nod.

I followed as close as I possibly could, acting like his shadow. It was dark and bitter cold. The towering pine trees cast shadows all around us as they blocked the moonlight. There were two streetlamps shining golden light into the park, but it was faint. I glanced around and realized I had no idea where we were. Foster had said it was called *Dreyar Park* and

that it was near his cabin, but that was all I knew. I'd fallen asleep on the drive. I didn't know if we were one hour away or six. It was as dark as it was when we left. But I had Foster, so I wasn't going to freak out.

We followed a cobblestone pathway through an open field that was probably a happy, cheery little spot for locals to play with their dogs and kids during the daylight, but in the night it felt sinister and wrong to even be there. I glanced around the perimeter and found there weren't any houses or towns in sight, just a road and mountain all around us. This park was secluded ... too secluded for my liking. Then again, an exchange of magical potions was not something you wanted to do in the eyes of humans.

The glass pitcher was ice-cold from the chill in the air. It burned the bare skin of my hands. The wand dug into my palm. But it was fine, this wasn't going to take too long. I looked up just as Foster led us to the picnic area beneath a canopy of oak trees. There was one single charcoal grill and a handful of tables. Yet there was only one bench next to the grill, so that had to be the one we were supposed to sit at.

As we headed there, I focused on the world around us. There wasn't a person in sight, so I didn't know where this witch was hiding. The only reason I'd ever wanted to be in The Coven was for their magic sensory. They could tell if there was another witch nearby or any other kind of danger. Their senses were insanely powerful. It would be amazing to have. I didn't want all that power and responsibility, but the sensory stuff would've been great. As a civilian witch, my senses went as far as about twenty feet around me. As a wolf, I would've had much better senses, but we couldn't meet a witch and talk while in wolf form.

*“Do you sense anyone?”* I whispered to Foster.

His nostrils flared as he sniffed. “Yes, but they’re not very close. My guess is he’s waiting and watching from somewhere.”

I sighed. “How can you smell him but I can’t?”

“You’ll get used to your wolf nose soon.” He pointed to the left. “There’s the bench. Let’s sit and wait.”

The bench was wooden and had definitely seen some attention, but at least it wasn’t cold metal. My leggings might not have survived that chill. I shivered and moved closer to Foster so our legs were pressed against each other’s and the heat from his body could warm a small part of me. Meanwhile, my gaze jumped from shadow to shadow, waiting for a figure to emerge from the darkness. I didn’t know how long we sat there, it sure felt like an hour in the cold, but finally Foster tapped my leg.

I sat up straight and put my game face on—the face I wore when walking in Manhattan or taking the subway. The face that made strange men reconsider talking to me. I glanced up at Foster and found a menacing scowl on his face, and it almost made me smile.

*“There he is,”* Foster whispered and nodded his head to the left.

I looked over and spotted a man marching over to us with a dark hood over his head and his hands shoved into the pockets of his black jacket. My pulse quickened with every step he took toward us. I scanned the trees around him but saw no one else there. About twenty feet away from us, I felt the tingle of his magic in the air. His aura radiated in nervous

pulses, but this whole thing was strange, so I didn't blame him for that.

When he finally got to us, he stopped and pulled his hood back, revealing the face of a man who couldn't have been more than our age. The man had dark eyes and a shaved head. He arched one eyebrow and looked both of us over, twice, before he cleared his throat. "For all evils there are two remedies."

"Time and silence," Foster responded immediately.

The man sighed and smiled. "I'm Vincent. Thanks for being punctual."

"I'm Foster, this is Inez." He gestured to me. "Nice to meet you."

*Good, play nice. You catch more bees that way.* I forced a smile to my face.

Vincent smiled back. "Nice to meet you too. It's not every day a witch meets two shifters."

*You can't tell I'm a witch?* But I just laughed and nodded. "We stick to Issale."

"So I've heard." He looked down at the glass pitcher in my hands. "This the potion?"

"That's it. Clayton says you and our Shaman have new additions to make?"

*Shaman, not Elan. He's testing him.*

"Elan was specific in his request." Vincent reached into his right jacket pocket and pulled out a rolled up brown paper bag. "It's not much of an addition, but I've been brewing them in a potion for days to give it the power it needs."

*For days? Does that make sense? I don't think so. Elan just made the potion ... why would he have had this brewing for days?* My spidey senses were tingling, but I had to push them aside for a moment because Vincent was reaching toward me. I needed to get the tattoo on him.

“Here, I’ll take that.” Vincent reached out and grabbed the bottom side of the pitcher.

*On this witch, place a mark. Freckle their skin with my magic spark.* My wand buzzed with electricity that tickled my skin. Through the glass pitcher, I saw a small spark of pinkish-purple light as my magic did its job. It was the briefest of moments, one a person would miss unless they were watching for it.

“Why don’t I hold it? Then you can just add what you need to?”

“Good point.” He dropped his hand and reached to remove the lid from the pitcher. When he opened the bag and started to dump its contents into the potion, I leaned forward to get a closer look at what he was putting in. “You okay?”

“Oh, sorry.” I stood up straight. “Magic fascinates me.”

He grinned like I’d complimented him. “It’s just rose petals I’ve treated with spells and potions. They’ll dissolve in minutes, so you’ll be ready to go when you get back.”

They were rose petals. Red rose petals. I held my smile despite the screaming in my head. Red rose petals were often used in spells of sinister nature. The petals looked normal as they fell from the bag, but the moment they touched the potion, they sparkled with red light. My stomach twisted. Red magic was demonic. I didn’t like this at all. *No me gusta. Esto no me gusta nada.*



Foster's expression didn't change. He probably didn't get it.

"The red magic is pretty."

"The prettiest spells are always red." Vincent winked at me.

My stomach rolled. This shady son of a bitch. The potion warmed in my hands. Red, glittery swirls coiled like a whirlpool inside. None of this made me feel any better. He needed to hurry up and finish so I could investigate what he did and what *it* did. Once all the petals were dumped out, he balled up the brown paper bag and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Lights flashed behind me. All three of us jumped and looked just as a white SUV pulled into the parking lot with music blasting through the closed windows. None of us moved. We watched and waited to see who was inside. Two seconds later, all four doors flew open and about eight guys stumbled out. The air reeked of alcohol and marijuana. Each of the guys wore jeans or khaki pants with sweaters and hoodies that had their college's acronym on the front. Three of them had their hands full with cases of beer. The others carried bags of chips.

"That it?" Foster said in a flat, stern voice, his amber eyes flicking back and forth between Vincent and the newcomers.

"Yep." Vincent placed the lid back on the pitcher. "This will be good and ready for you to use in about ten minutes."

"Great. Thanks." Foster nodded.

"And the spell?"

Vincent gave me a sideways grin. He reached into his other pocket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment paper. "I

like you. You're on top of your shit. This is also ready for you."

"Hey, you guys using the grill?"

As I took the parchment from Vincent, I glanced back at the college dudes and found two of them headed our way with a bag of charcoal and a long stem lighter. *Who grills at an empty park at night in the freezing cold?*

"We'll be out of your way in just a minute," Vincent yelled out to the guy.

Foster scowled fiercely and let out a little growl, which made the dude stumble back a step, then Foster returned his glare to Vincent. "And the spell is self-explanatory? Or do we need instructions?"

"Clayton has been instructed on how to handle the rest."

Something in the air tingled. It felt like ice was dropped down the back of my shirt. Foster and Vincent were speaking, but my magic was *screaming* at me. My wand pulsed with energy. I casually looked over my shoulder. The guy with the charcoal had turned away from us to talk to his group, but the rest of them were all headed our way. Not slowly either, like they were marching with a purpose. I didn't like their speed. It wasn't casual.

And then light flashed from the charcoal guy's hands. I narrowed my eyes on it ... it was pale-blue, almost white, and it wasn't fading out. In fact, the light spread up his arms and over his back. In front of him, his friends stepped into the light from the streetlamp. Their entire bodies were covered in the pale-blueish light. It almost looked like ice, like they were freezing.

*For in thine eyes evil becomes ice.* My eyes widened. Ice. That looked like ice. The Goddess's spell said they'd become ice. I gasped. *That's the Duenill. This is an ambush.* "Foster."

"Yes?"

*To the Air Stone I call on thee, conceal mine body from what they see.*

Vincent cursed and leapt back. Foster growled so loud his breath billowed like a cloud. His eyes shined brighter. I spun to sprint for Foster's truck just as all eight of the college-looking dudes pulled firearms out of their beer cases and chip bags. They charged forward, running straight for me. *Mierda, mierda, mierda.*

"*FIND THE GIRL!*" one of them screamed. He raised his gun and fired.

*Piensa, Inés, piensa. ¡Tienes que atacarlos!* I tucked the pitcher into my side like a football and planted my feet right in front of one of the guys. When he got to me, I pretended I was a New York Ranger hockey player and dropped my shoulder right into his rib cage. He grunted and dropped to the ground. The element of surprise was on my side but it wasn't going to last. I had to act quick before they caught me so I dipped and spun on my toes, then leapt to the side to throw my hip into a second guy. They were all screaming now. The Duenill spoke a language I'd never heard. Gunshots fired left and right like fireworks.

*FOSTER.* I ducked and looked over my shoulder just as a gorgeous giant white wolf pounced on that first guy with the charcoal. I knew what was about to happen, but I couldn't turn away. Foster's wolf teeth sank into the guy's face. Blood gushed like a firehose. I heard three more gunshots. Foster ducked and the bullets slammed into the tree trunk behind him.

My stomach rolled. I had to get to the truck. I could run these bastards over with a smile on my face. Four more gunshots and my heart stopped. I had to look back to check for Foster. He was on all four paws and moving swiftly, but how long could he hold up? We couldn't fight bullets with our teeth.

But then I remembered Amelia telling me about her tricks and how she got away from the Seelie King. She'd turned his clothes into a straitjacket and gave him rollerblades. It was simple magic, simple schemes, but it saved her life. Ideas rushed through my mind. I pointed my wand at the guy closest to me and fired my magic. That pinkish-purple sparkle left my wand and coiled around the Duenill guy's gun as a thick scarf, jamming up his trigger. I didn't wait. I turned to the next guy with a gun and did the same.

I was so caught up on disarming their guns that I didn't see one of them running straight for me until his knees slammed into my shoulders. He cursed and flew headfirst over me as I was thrown onto my back on the dirt.

“THERE! SHE'S THERE!”

*Shit, shit, shit. MOVE, INEZ.* I rolled to my knees and found the Duenill running for me. I froze. I had the pitcher in my hand. Sure, I thought it was tainted, but I couldn't prove anything if the potion was destroyed. I panicked and fired random magic across the park. Pinkish-purple flashed over to the right.

“THERE!” The one pointed to my magic and half of them raced that way.

I leapt in the opposite direction, sprinting for Foster's truck. *Foster. Where's Foster?* I slid to a stop and spun back around and found Foster pinned under two Duenill with serrated daggers the size of my forearm. My heart stopped.

*Foster. No, no, no.* I flung my wand out and blindfolds wrapped around their eyes. Foster twisted and sank his teeth into one of their thighs. Thick red blood coated his white fur as the man screamed.

“NO!” Vincent groaned. “I’m not one of them, you idiot! The truck! She’s going for the truck!”

*YOU BASTARD!* This piece of shit Vincent was going to get his, but I couldn’t fight him myself. The Duenill were gunning for me now. *Shit, shit, shit, shit.* I dug my heels in and pushed my legs harder. Footsteps thundered behind me, echoing my own pulse.

Dirt slammed into my back.

“THERE! SHE’S THERE!”

I felt fingers brush through my hair and then Foster roared. There was a flash of white in my peripheral vision and those fingers in my hair slipped away. I felt a yank on my hair but then it was gone. I sprinted the last few feet to the truck and yanked the driver’s door open.

“SHE’S AT THE DOOR!”

“THE DOOR!”

They were too fast. Even without being able to see me, two pairs of hands landed on my back. My plan was gone. I wasn’t going to overpower these men in order to get in the truck - and with enough time to use magic to start the engine without his keys. In a panic, I tossed the glass pitcher onto the driver’s seat—my body was lifted off the ground by four large hands. I screamed and thrashed against their hold, except their grips were iron tight.

I squeezed my wand in my hand, my only hope at survival. *Think, Inez. THINK.*

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

FOSTER



PINKISH-PURPLE MAGIC FLASHED over my head. It coiled around the two Duenill's faces, then turned into black blindfolds. I didn't waste her assistance. I twisted around and sank my teeth into the thigh of one of my enemies, puncturing his artery. Thick red blood sprayed onto me as he screamed. With both of my back legs, I kicked the other guy holding me down right in the gut. He flew backwards and toppled to the ground. I growled and pounced on him, going right at his throat for the kill.

Some of the younger members of the pack didn't have the heart to go straight for the kill. They wanted it to be self-defense. They felt these men in their cult could change their ways. But I knew better. They weren't Duenill by accident. They were sick, demented humans with the thirst for murder.

And they'd killed my parents.

Each time I sank my teeth into one of them, I saw my parents' faces.

Ever since we learned Lilith had given these men their power, I'd lost any remaining sliver of remorse. No way in hell was I going to risk my life or someone I cared about for a demon in human form.

“NO!” Vincent groaned. A few of the Duenill had tackled him to the ground. “I’m not one of them, you idiot! The truck! She’s going for the truck!”

Two of the men who’d taken Vincent down lunged toward my truck, but I didn’t let them get more than a few feet before I slammed into them like a bowling ball to pins, except I went in teeth-first. Blood sprayed in an arc as the first one’s screams gurgled out. He hadn’t even dropped all the way to the ground before I ripped the voice box out of the second.

The Duenill were dangerous, lethal beasts, but surprise was their best weapon, followed by guns and outnumbering us. But Inez had given me all the warning I’d needed to shift, ruining the element of surprise. And then she’d robbed them of their firearms while invisible, sending them into a panic.

All I had to do was pick them off one by one, and I was damn good at that.

I glanced over to Vincent, hoping he’d fallen to my enemies, only to catch him stabbing the guy in the face. His focus was on the Duenill, so I could’ve gone to take him out, but all four of the Duenill left alive were racing toward my truck.

*INEZ.*

My heart skipped beats. I didn’t see her anywhere, not even any of her magic. *Where are you, Inez?* I leapt forward, landing right behind the four men running her down. The one in the front bent down and scooped up a handful of dirt and then chucked it in the air. It slammed into an invisible barrier. *INEZ.* The dirt landed on Inez’s back, coating her invisible body with something tangible for them to hunt for.

“THERE! SHE’S THERE!”



*FUCK. FASTER, FOSTER! GET TO HER!* I was almost there. I just needed to give her a few more seconds to get away. My truck was *right* there. I pushed off the ground with my back paws and dove into the Duenill in front of me. He bellowed and flew forward, taking his cult mate down with him. Momentum had me sailing over the one I'd tackled, but I landed right on the back of the one in front. I dug my claws into his back, then severed his spine with my teeth.

“SHE’S AT THE DOOR!”

“THE DOOR!”

I gasped and looked up, spitting flesh and blood from my mouth. *INEZ!* I lunged for her but the Duenill I'd abandoned grabbed my feet and yanked me back. My stomach slammed into the dirt. I looked up again to find my truck door standing wide open. Two of the Duenill grabbed a hold of the air. Inez screamed and my heart stopped. *No!* I roared.

The Duenill holding my legs dragged me backwards.

I growled and shifted back into human form. The guy holding me cursed. I flipped onto my back, sat up quickly, and snapped his neck with my bare hands. I was back in my wolf form before his lifeless body hit the dirt. My wolf form was stronger and faster, but sometimes I had to remix with these homicidal bastards.

Pinkish-purple magic flashed by my truck.

I leapt to my feet and charged just as Inez's sweater hit the ground. One of the two holding her dove for me. In a normal fight, I didn't take risks. I wasn't usually alone and it wasn't worth the risk. It could get me stabbed that up close. But Inez wasn't a fighter, even one on one these monsters were too much for her. They were trained assassins. Inez was a healer

and spellmaker. She was still invisible to my eye, but my ears heard every rough exhale and scream. She needed me. I had to get to her. So I lunged straight for this guy's throat, sinking my teeth into his flesh in one smooth movement. The bitter metallic taste of blood filled my mouth. I spit it out and kept running,

More magic flashed.

Inez screamed in pain.

I growled. There was only one of them left. He looked up at me and raised a blood-soaked serrated knife in the air. *Blood-soaked. INEZ.* Bile shot up my throat. I charged for him while the world seemed to slow down around me. The prick faced me with a dagger in each hand, swinging them back and forth. At the last second, I shifted back into human form and dropped to slide on my knees. He gasped and then roared with rage. But I was faster. As I slid under his arm, I leapt up, grabbed him by the wrist, and spun him around. I shifted to my wolf form and sank my teeth into his throat.

His scream was cut off by the gurgle of his throat being gone.

I smiled. Good. *Wait, INEZ!* I glanced around, left and right, but it was empty. I forced myself back to my human form, then spun in circles until I spotted her lying on her side on the ground. Unmoving.

*"No, no, no! INEZ!"* I shouted and dropped to my knees beside her. *"Inez, talk to me. Please."*

They'd managed to somehow rip her sweater off of her body. I carefully peeled her hair off of face, then pressed my fingers to her throat. Her heartbeat thudded beneath my fingers. I almost cried with relief. But there was too much

blood on her body. With fingers that trembled more than I wanted to admit, I peeled the scraps of her shirt away from her wounds to find they'd slashed her a few times really good, but nothing was a stabbing. Nothing would be fatal. Her skin was raw and red in so many places. There was so much blood.

She gasped, her golden eyes flying wide-open. She threw her arms up and tried to sit up, but I cupped her face in both of my hands, forcing her gaze to land on mine.

"It's me. You're safe," I said in a rush, my voice tight and raw. "They're all dead."

Her heart pounded through her whole body, beating against my palms. She took a ragged breath, then hissed. "H-h-how ... b-bad?"

"Nothing fatal." I gently lowered her head to the ground, then reinspected the gnarly wounds on her stomach without touching them. "They slashed you good, but you'll be okay."

She swallowed roughly. I knew by the rapid rise and fall of her chest that she was in a lot of pain. "You ... okay?"

I smiled down at her. "Thanks to you and your tricks, yes. I am fine."

"G-good." She squeezed her eyes shut and winced. "B-broke my wand-d."

"Your wand? Where is it?" I glanced around the ground near her a few times before I spotted it lying in three separate pieces. With a curse, I scooped them up and shoved them in my jacket. "I'll drive you to Manhattan myself to get you a new one, okay? Now, where's the potion?"

"Truck ... seat ... hope." She gritted her teeth and hissed. "Ow."

“You’re amazing, Inez.”

Despite everything, her cheeks flushed pink.

“Listen, I need to pick you up. It’s going to hurt—”

“Do it.” She nodded and clenched her jaw, then she reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck. “Three—”

“Two ... one—” I slid one arm under her knees and scooped her off the ground. She screamed out and my heart sank. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

In an ideal world, I would’ve let her pulse settle a few minutes before moving her. But with the Duenill, we never knew when a second crew was on their way. And I didn’t trust Vincent. He’d taken off during the fight but something told me he was behind that ambush, so I had to get her to safety. *Now*. My cabin was close. I could heal her there. I carried her to my truck, then carefully sat her on the passenger seat. She cursed and growled but nodded me on. Then I sprinted to my side and hopped in. The glass pitcher with Elan’s now tainted potion was on my seat, with the lid still on, just as Inez had said, and that was a damn miracle.

I looked to the sky and closed my eyes. *Thank you, Goddess. We needed this proof.*

“Wait,” Inez whispered.

I froze. “What’s wrong?”

“The spell. Parchment.” She pointed to her hip. “Tucked it ... inside pocket ... can you grab it? Shit, this hurts. I can’t see it.”

“It’s in the inside pocket of your leggings?” I eyed the black material that was now soaked in her blood. “In the waistband?”

She nodded. “Left side.”

We needed to get out of there, but we needed to make sure we had the spell first. If it had fallen out, then I had to go looking, so with hands that trembled, I reached out and carefully lifted the waistband of her leggings on the left side and slid one finger under—and hit something firm. It took me a second to gently wiggle it free without hitting her open wound, but when I finally got it out, I found it was a folded up piece of parchment, like one of those old-school-looking ones people used to write everything on.

“Open it?” Her voice was hoarse. I unfolded it for her and glanced down, then snarled. “That’s it. Okay. Flee.”

I folded it back up and shoved it into my jeans’ pocket because there was no way I was getting it back in hers without hurting her. With a nod and one hand on the pitcher, I threw my truck into reverse and backed out of the parking lot. We were on the road, speeding through the dark, fog-covered mountain in seconds.

Inez whimpered. Her grip on the door and the seat beside her were so tight her knuckles were white.

“I’m sorry. I know that hurts. My cabin is two miles away. We’ll be there in just a second.” I tried to keep my voice chipper for her, but my stomach was turning. “I can heal you up quick there. I have all our healing potions—”

“Good ... call.”

“What?”

“Good call ...” she smirked. “Meeting near your cabin.”

My heart sank. “I wish we didn’t need it right now. Hang tight. We’ll be there soon.”

It was probably only about five minutes later that I turned onto the dirt road that led to my cabin, but it felt like an hour had passed. My senses were sharper than a human's, so I turned off the headlights and running lights so we were riding in the pitch-black. After that ambush, it was just safer to conceal our location, especially when Inez was so injured. With every second that passed, Inez grew quieter. That had my nerves fried.

When I finally parked in front of my cabin, I turned to face her. "I'm running inside to make sure we're safe. Stay here. It's running so you can drive away in an emergency, okay?"

She exhaled and nodded, though I could just barely see the outline of her face. "Eat anyone you see."

I chuckled and hopped out, making sure to lock it behind me before shifting. My wolf senses would pick up everything faster and sharper. I cleared the steps with one jump. The door swung open as it recognized my presence, just like our rooms at Pack House. Inside, the cabin was dark but quiet—exactly how I wanted it. To be sure, I hurried through the cabin to make sure no one was inside waiting to ambush us. I flipped on the lights as I went, filling every nook and cranny with golden glow. Fortunately, my cabin was a cozy one-bedroom with an open floor plan, so I cleared the whole place in less than a minute.

It was safe, so I rushed back out to the truck, shifting as I approached the passenger door. But when I peeked inside, my heart stopped. Inez sat still as a statue with her eyes closed. With my heart in my throat, I yanked the door open. "*Inez?*"

She gasped. Her eyes flew open. She threw her arms out like she wanted to fight.

“It’s me! It’s me.” I cupped the back of her head and ducked down to meet her eyes. “I’m sorry, but could you not look dead right now? My nerves are frayed enough.”

“Sorry.” She tried to smile, but it wobbled. She lifted her hand and I saw the handle of the glass pitcher gripped in it. “I’m ready.”

I chuckled and reached in to scoop her up. She hissed but I knew it was involuntary. Those kinds of wounds hurt surprisingly bad. She held on tight to that pitcher like our lives depended on it ... which there was a chance they did.

When we crossed the threshold, I stopped to kick it shut with my foot.

“This looks more romantic in movies.”

I snorted. “Not so much carnage in the movies, eh?”

“I don’t know, the ripping out throats with your teeth kinda worked for me.”

*She didn’t mean that. She’s a little off from the pain.* Even still, my body lit up like a Fourth of July fireworks show as if she’d confessed her undying love for me. I cleared my throat. “Okay, we need to clean these wounds, so I’m going to put you in the bathtub. Is that all right?”

“Please tell me you have clean, dry clothes here that I can change into?”

“A whole closet full.” I smiled and walked into the bathroom, then paused at the sink. “Why don’t you sit the potion down right there?”

She slowly lowered the pitcher to the counter, then uncurled her fingers from the handle. But then she looked up

and saw herself in the mirror. She choked on a gasp. “Oh, *diosa mía. ¡Mírame! Eso es mucha sangre.*”

I had no idea what she’d just said but I understood the feeling. Now that I was seeing her in the light of the bathroom, my stomach sank. She was covered in blood. Dirt was caked in her hair and dusted all of her skin. The golden light that usually shined from her eyes was dull.

“Bath time?”

She whimpered and nodded.

I walked over and sat her down on the edge of the tub. My cabin wasn’t fancy by any means, but I had a tendency to need to soak in ice sometimes, so I’d made sure to install a big tub. Once I sat her down, I reached over and turned the faucets on.

“All right, just don’t move. Sit tight. I have to grab the healing potions while the tub is filling and getting warm, okay?”

She nodded but her whole face was pale and tight. Her words were coming out clearer when she spoke now, but her voice was rough, like it took a lot out of her. I backed out of the bathroom, watching to make sure she didn’t tip over, then I spun and sprinted to the kitchen. This wasn’t the first time an injured shifter was in this cabin, and it wasn’t always me, so I always kept fresh healing potions in my cabin and an emergency dose in my truck.

Because maybe my parents would have survived if we’d gotten help faster.

Deep down I knew that wasn’t the truth, the damage was too severe, but still.

I shook those awful memories away and dove for the tray of potions in my cabinet. My collection wasn’t too shabby.



Most of what I had were small vials, but the healing potions were all big jugs—and I had six different kinds of healing potions. There were only two I needed for Inez. Both of them were shades of aquamarine. I grabbed them and hurried back to the bathroom.

I'd closed the door to keep her warm, so I paused to knock. "Inez?"

"Come in."

I pushed the door open, then shut it behind me. My cabin got chilly at night without a fire burning and I didn't have time to get one started, so we were going to trap the heat off the water in this room. "You all right?"

"I'm the same as you left me, if that counts?"

I smirked and held the potion jugs up as I crossed to the bathtub. The potion that was a pale-aquamarine was meant to be put in the water. It was step one for healing: *soak in it*. So I uncapped the jug and dumped it in. The lavender scent billowed through the steam.

Inez cursed violently in Spanish.

"*What?*" I jumped and dove for her only to find her trying to take her shoes off. I helped her back upright, then moved down to her shoes. "Let me, please."

Fortunately, combat boots could sustain some blood and dirt, so we didn't need to toss them. I quickly untied the laces and slid the first off her foot, followed by her thick sock—a narrow wooden stick clanked onto the hardwood floor.

"*Mierda*, that's my wand."

I frowned. "I thought your wand was in pieces in my pocket?"

“That one is.”

I scooped it up and held it out for her. “How many do you have?”

“This is my last one.” She sighed and squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m gonna need a trip to SOMA sooner rather than later.”

I nodded. “I’ll take you after the ritual. Maybe one of the dragons can give us a ride.”

“That would be cool, riding a dragon.”

“It can be terrifying when they fly high and fast, but if you trust them, then it feels awesome.” I reached down to her other boot and quickly slipped it off her foot. Her thick black socks looked comfortable, so I made a mental note to wash them in the sink for her.

It was only as I stared down at her pretty, white, polished toenails that I realized she needed to take her clothes off to get in ... but then I needed to put the healing potions on. I froze.

“Foster?”

I licked my lips but didn’t look up. “Yes?”

“I’m wearing undergarments.”

I looked up and found her trying not to laugh. “What?”

“I can see you panicking down there.” She chuckled. “Tell me, how were you planning to heal me?”

“Um ...” I cleared my throat, “these potions. Elan’s potions? I keep a stash here for emergencies. They work really fast on us. The one in the water is like step one, a base coat for healing so to speak, then I apply the other to the wounds themselves.”

She nodded. “Okay. Help me out of these leggings and into the tub.”

My jaw dropped. I felt my eyes go wide. I wondered if she heard the skip in my pulse or if she saw the blush I knew I was sporting just from the heat in my cheeks. “A-a-are you sure?”

“My bikini shows more skin than the underwear I’m wearing. It’s about consent, and I’m giving it to you ... because there’s no way I can bend over and take these off myself. And they *have* to come off.” She gestured to her legs. “Please, Foster? Help me?”

“Let me check the water first,” I said softly.

I slid my glove off to check the water temperature. It was nice and warm, so I slid my glove back on. If I had to help undress her, then I was going keep my gloves on for her comfort. I peeked up at her and arched my eyebrow in silent question, because there was no way I trusted my voice to ask permission to undress her. I was a good guy. A nice guy. A *respectful* guy. But I was completely in love with this woman who was never a possibility for me, and that wreaked havoc on my sanity.

*Wait.*

*I’m in love with her.*

*I am in love with Inez.*

*Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no.*

“Foster?” she whispered.

*Dear Goddess, why did I have to make that revelation NOW?* I cursed in my mind, then cleared my throat. I could do this. More importantly, I had to do this. She was Clayton’s soulmate, not mine. And she was my *friend*. I wanted to keep

her as a friend. That meant I needed a crash course in self-preservation. Or maybe it was masochism.

“Okay, um, put your hands on my shoulders to brace yourself while I slide these off your hips.” I moved in close. Close enough that I felt the heat coming off her body. I smelled her jasmine scent mixing with the blood. My stomach was in knots with butterflies bouncing off of them like pinballs. She put her hands on my shoulders and squeezed. Even through my leather jacket, I felt her fingers digging in. Her breath swept over my forehead and my pulse quickened. With shaky hands, I reached out and hooked my thumbs beneath the waistband of her leggings. Then I slid them *down*. “All right. Your left hip first.”

She took a deep breath and pushed against my shoulders hard enough to give her some leverage to lift her hip off the tile. I pulled them down as fast as I could until the waistband reached her upper thighs. Then we repeated this with her right hip. Her whole body trembled.

I looked up into her eyes. “You okay?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her golden eyes locked on me. “Go ahead.”

I licked my lips and let my other fingers slip beneath her waistband. I meant to break eye contact as I pulled her leggings down her thighs, but my gaze was locked on hers. It was probably my imagination that her breath hitched or that her cheeks flushed. Her eyes definitely didn’t dilate as I slid my palms down the outsides of her thighs, dragging the soft cotton of her black leggings all the way down her legs. I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off her.

She licked her lips, but her eyes were locked on mine. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Time to get in.” I helped her turn and put her legs in the tub. She moaned at the warm water. With a hot lump in my throat, I helped her ease into the water until it was up to her chest. When she sighed and leaned back against the tub, I smiled. “How’s that?”

“Better, so much better.” She sighed. “How long do I soak in this potion?”

“Until the wounds are closed—oh, shoot.” I cursed and glanced around me. “I forgot the sponge. Be right back.”

I jumped up and ran back to the kitchen. The sponge sat in a small bowl right there on the tray with the other potions. I snagged it and raced back to the bathroom. When I walked in, I found Inez had taken off her shirt and my whole body jerked to a stop. She wore only her black underwear now. It wasn’t lingerie, that bra was definitely more for comfort and function than trying to seduce someone ... yet my body seemed to miss that memo.

“It’s already working.” She looked over at me and smiled. It seemed less pained than a minute ago. Then I noticed her hair was wet like she’d dunked herself all the way under. Her black eyebrow arched. “Are you giving me a sponge bath?”

“In a minute, yes.” I shut the door and walked to the tub, then sank to my knees. “Do you mind?”

She shook her head.

I poured some of the dark-aquamarine potion into the bowl, then put the sponge in. “Can you sit up a little? I need your torso out of the water for a moment.”

She nodded and pushed herself up with a wince. “I dunked. I needed my hair wet sooo bad.”

“Well, you probably bumped your head in that process somewhere, so it’s good to let the potion get all over you.” I smiled and looked down at her stomach to where they sliced her skin open. Those serrated knives were a bitch. Luckily they’d only gotten her stomach a few times and nowhere else. “The potion has cleansing properties in it as well, but I would still suggest a regular shower with soap once you’re healed.”

Her golden gaze was locked on the sponge beside her face. “Is that going to hurt? I just need to brace myself. One time I sliced myself open on accident—long story—and let me tell you when they put the bactine wash on it ... I think my soul left my body.”

“I’ve had that. This won’t hurt, *that* I promise.” I squeezed and twisted the sponge, wringing out the excess ... and soaking my gloves. I cursed. Discreet had to go for now. “Do you mind if I take my gloves off?”

She smiled softly and shook her head.

I pulled both gloves off and tossed them to the sink for later. She watched me. *Ignore that, Foster. Just ignore it and clean. That’s your job.* But as I reached out with the sponge to wipe her wound, my gaze landed on the black lines of the black wolf mark on her rib cage with the pink magic swirling around it. My hand froze. On the other side of her rib cage was the image of Clayton’s brown wolf.

I wanted to throw up.

Her soulmate mark.

I clenched my teeth and breathed through my nose. *This isn’t news to you, Foster. Focus. She needs your help to heal.* I’d seen her soulmate mark before, yet somehow the second

time was more of a blow than the first. I took a deep breath, then pressed the potion-soaked sponge to one of her wounds.

She flinched but shook her head like she knew I was about to pull back. “No, it was just a reflex to the texture. Go ahead.”

These potions had natural numbing agents. By now, the water she soaked in was taking away all the pain. This allowed me to wipe at the wounds with the sponge without hurting her. I meant to say all that out loud, but my jaw seemed to be locked shut. There was too much I wasn’t allowed to say. Too much I felt.

Yet I couldn’t stop myself from meeting her stare.

Our eyes met and locked.

My chest tightened. Heat swarmed my throat like I swallowed lava. Her golden eyes were rays of summer sunshine I couldn’t get enough of. She licked her lips and her gaze shot down to my mouth. My stomach tightened.

I peeled my gaze away from her face and looked down at her wounds—and gasped.

She flinched. “What? What’s wrong?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. I shook my head. *What? This doesn’t make sense.*

“Foster? What is it?” She sat up straight and looked down. “What?”

“It’s coming off,” I heard myself say. I ran the sponge over the marks, and they came off completely. “Both are gone.”

She frowned and pressed down on her chest like she was trying to see over them. “What’s coming off? What’s gone? The wounds? Isn’t that the point? It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“The wounds? Oh, the wounds ... well, actually...” I leaned forward and rubbed the sponge over her rib cage, “yes, the wounds have closed already, but that’s not—”

“Not what? Why are you staring at me like that?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. *What the fuck?* Her skin had already glued itself back together, the wounds closing entirely, but that wasn’t the part that had me shook. The incision lines were raw-looking and sensitive, she needed more time in the potions, but as I wiped her skin again and again and again, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

Or ... what I *wasn’t* seeing.

“Foster, dammit. *Por el amor de Dios. Habla conmigo.* Speak. Please.”

“Your soulmate mark ...”

She scowled. “Yeah, the black wolf and the brown wolf. You’ve seen them before?”

I nodded and blinked. I pushed harder with the sponge, scrubbing her skin on the spot where the two wolves went. But her skin was bare. *What the FUCK?* I shook my head in shock. “Inez ... Inez ... your soulmate mark is *gone*.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY

## INEZ



“INEZ ... Inez ... your soulmate mark is *gone*.”

“WHAT?” I sat up straight and looked down at my abdomen, and my breath left me in a rush. My skin was *bare*. The only markings were the red lines where my wounds were healing back together. That was it. Nothing else. “¿*Qué quieres decir? ¿Cómo se ha ido? ¿Dónde se ha ido?* Where is it?”

Foster shook his head, his amber eyes wide and locked on my body.

“Where’d it go, Foster?” I leaned to the side to look at my rib cage from a different angle. “I don’t understand. Can fated mates be *unfated*?”

“No,” he whispered. But then he cleared his throat and scrubbed his face with his hands. “It’s written in our fate before we’re born. We just have to follow the right path to find our other halves. It’s permanent.”

“Are you sure? Maybe it’s because I’m also a witch—”

“It’s your *soul*, Inez, not which species you were born into. My parents were soulmates. They explained it to me many times.” He shook his head again, then looked at the sponge as if my mark was somehow stuck to the bottom of it like a

temporary tattoo. “Soulmates are literally two halves of the same soul separated and sent into life to find each other. There’s no undoing it. Your soulmate *is* you. It’d be like suddenly losing an arm for no reason. It just isn’t possible. These marks we get, they’re just how we know we found our other half. And I mean that literally, not figuratively.”

My chest tightened. His words were beautiful and hopelessly romantic, but all I felt was confusion.

“I don’t understand ... that soulmate mark revealed itself that Saturday night, your first real day in Issale at the damned welcome bonfire.” He stopped, his eyes widened. “You didn’t feel it, did you? The mark appearing?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. He just gasped and showed the mark on his skin. I just assumed I was too out of it, the shock of shifting and all that. Wait, does it burn for you guys like it does for witches?”

“I don’t know how it works for witches, but for shifters it’s like a little zap. Nothing extreme, at least so I’ve heard.” He hung his head, pressing his forehead to the tile beside the tub. “You didn’t feel it because it wasn’t real. He faked it. That has to be it, especially given what has happened tonight. He knew it would only be believable if it happened right away—that first night when you’d assume shock blocked you from feeling the marks.”

*You didn’t feel it because it wasn’t real. He faked it.* His words echoed in my head. My mind was reeling. This was an unfathomably heinous act. I leaned back to inspect my skin again, thinking I must’ve been dreaming this whole thing and it was actually still there. But it wasn’t. The red lines of my wounds were now a pale-pink. I grabbed my wand sitting

beside the tub and pointed it at my body. “*Seek within what lies clean, reveal magic that can’t be seen.*”

Pinkish-purple magic shot out of my wand and slammed into my stomach.

“What are you doing?”

“Confirming that he used magic.” I sat my wand back down and just watched as my magic swirled around until it took the silhouetted form of two wolves on my rib cage. My breath left me in a rush. I slammed my fist on the tub and cursed. My magic faded away. “He used magic. I can’t tell what kind or how, I don’t have the power to detect *that*, but he did something to fake the marks.”

He exhaled. “The healing potion cleansed you.”

I nodded. “When? When did he have the opportunity to use magic on me without me know—”

“The first night.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut like the memory caused him physical pain. “After you’d been forced to shift that first time from the potion, you passed out. Koth carried you to Elan’s infirmary. But Clayton ... that son of a bitch. He said as your Alpha he just wanted to make sure you were settled in okay with Elan. The pack was worried about you. He was only gone like ten minutes before coming back and assuring us you were just sleeping. He must have done it then.”

The world crashed in around me. I felt like I was suffocating. My muscles tensed. My chest was too tight. I’d known something wasn’t right with my feelings for my supposed soulmate, but I’d been too naive to think someone would fake it. I felt tainted and vandalized. I couldn’t believe he’d done this to me.

“But why though?” Foster’s voice shot up a little higher. This revelation about the man who raised him was hitting him hard. “Why would he do this? Why would he fake being your soulmate? I don’t understand.”

And then it hit me. My breath was knocked out of my lungs. I crashed back against the tub. “Oh my Goddess.”

“What?”

“I’m his fall guy.”

Foster scowled and the skin between his brows wrinkled. “What?”

“He’s setting me up.” The truth shook me. It all made sense now. I put my hands on my head like I couldn’t contain the furious thoughts inside of it. “He’s planning something for the ritual tomorrow night. He and that Vincent guy tainted the potion that everyone is supposed to drink. I don’t know what it’s going to do, but it’s going to be bad. And he’s framing me for it. He’s been waiting to find a fall guy and then I rolled into town with the prophecy on my back. It’ll make perfect sense. Whatever is coming, killing me is part of that plan.”

“*What?*” Foster shrieked. He shook his head and I saw sweat drip down his temple. He ripped his leather jacket off and tossed it across the bathroom, then buried his face in his hands. “I can’t believe this. He’s been my father for twenty years! He took care of me. He set me up as his Beta—*oh Goddess.*”

I bit my bottom lip and nodded. Foster dropped his hands and stared into space, but I saw his thoughts replaying his entire life at Issale. His eyes watered. His skin flushed. Every muscle in his arms and shoulders tensed. His breath burst from

his nostrils in puffs. If he'd been a dragon, he would've been breathing fire at this point.

He snarled. "He's played the long game, hasn't he? Found a poor, broken, beaten foster kid and pretended to care. Took me in. Changed my name and presented the idea to me like he was giving me a new start on life. He gaslit me. Tricked me into forfeiting my identity, who I was and who my family was ... to make me his pawn. He's been making so many comments lately about how good of a leader I'd be because he's placing the poison in their minds, making them think they were *my* thoughts and feelings. This whole time I have meant nothing more to him than the tool to get him what he wants. That's why he's insisted I stick close to you ... Why it's always me to show you the ropes and drive you into town. Don't misunderstand, I was happy to be with you, but for fuck's sake, it was all a ploy for him."

"We're being framed as we speak, which means we cannot return with this potion until we figure out exactly what he's up to. Then we snitch. Hard."

He closed his eyes and hung his head. "What kind of monster does this to a person? To pretend to care about me? To raise me for slaughter?"

"We're going to fix this. Together." I leaned against the side of the tub. "We won't let him win. We'll do whatever it takes."

He looked up at me and the brokenness in his watery eyes hurt my heart. He gripped the side of the tub like he needed to anchor himself to something. "It's like I've lost my family all over again. I'm *alone* again."

"You are *not* alone, Foster."

He squeezed his eyes shut and let his head hang. His knuckles were white from how hard he gripped the tub. This was ripping him apart. If I felt betrayed, then I couldn't fathom how this felt for him ... from the man who raised him. I wanted to console him, I wanted to comfort him, so I reached out and took his hand—light flashed between our hands.

We both gasped and sat up straight.

Hot electricity shot into my hand, then up my arm. Every single spot we touched, my skin tingled and burned. Black dots danced in my vision. It burned like a raging wildfire. Like gasoline on a flame. Each breath I sucked in scorched through my body like swallowing acid. A strangled kind of noise left my mouth. My pulse skyrocketed. Goosebumps spread over every inch of my body. I gasped for air. My gaze locked on the light shining between our touching hands. And then the light *moved*. It leapt from our hands to our chests. I gasped as my back arched. Those electric pulses vibrated down my spine and onto my rib cage. That light danced down the center of my chest like twinkling Christmas lights, then moved to cover each side of my rib cage.

Right over the spot where my *fake* soulmate marks had been.

My mind went completely blank. My mouth was dry. All I could do was watch as the light started to take form. I gripped Foster's hand as hard as I could. As the light began to fade, I saw it left a mark on my skin.

But then the light vanished, and my jaw dropped, my breath leaving me in a rush.

Because there on the left side of my abdomen, right over my rib cage, was a massive wolf with fur like fresh fallen snow and bright amber eyes. I knew that wolf in an instant. It

was *Foster*. It stretched from just under my bra almost all the way down to my hip. My heart thundered through my head and pounded in my veins. I twisted in the tub to get a better look, but from every single angle, it was Foster's wolf form.

The light had been on both sides, so I twisted the other way to look at my right side. A strange whimper left my lips. This image was as large as the white wolf on the other side, but it was of a woman with long pale hair. There was a sun shining behind her head and a crescent moon at her feet. Vines made of black lotus flowers wrapped around her naked body. She held her hands in front of her chest and crystals hung from the tips of her fingers. Stars and the phases of the moon circled around her hips and legs. In the center of her stomach was a pentacle, with a crescent moon and each side to make up the Triple Goddess symbol.

I knew that symbol. We learned it in class at Edenburg. It was the Mark of the Goddess. A rare, *rare* painting of her from the deepest vaults of our species. Not one we shared with outsiders, not one we were allowed to publicly display. It was a sacred image of our Goddess.

And then a memory flashed in my mind. I'd seen this recently.

On Amelia.

When she told me Maddox was her soulmate.

I gasped and looked to Foster for answers, but he just stared at the marks on my skin with eyes so wide I saw the whites around them. I moved to get in his view, then hissed. It still hurt, like it was still burning my skin. Foster cursed and dove forward, pressing the hand I wasn't holding right over the image of the Goddess. I froze as the soft skin of his palm



touched my bare waist. But then the pain subsided like it was slowly being drained from my body.

Then he lifted his hand off of my skin. For a moment, he just stared at it while I stared at his profile. My mind was working fast, putting the pieces together, but I was afraid of what those thoughts were telling me. Afraid to hope. I hadn't taken my hand off his and he hadn't tried to shake me off yet.

It took me a few tries to get my mouth to work, yet even then I barely croaked out, "*Foster?*"

He blinked and shook his head like I'd woken him from a trance. His amber eyes met mine and stayed there as he used his free hand to pull his long-sleeved shirt up to his chest. I propped up on my knees to look over and let out a strangled whimper. My eyes watered. A hot lump formed in my throat. There, on his skin, were the same marks as mine. The Goddess was on his left and his own white wolf was on his right, so they were flipped but they were identical in every other way. He didn't look down at his own body. Instead, he watched *me*. When I looked up at him with tears in my eyes and nodded, he swayed.

Finally, he looked down at himself. I knew the moment he saw them because he exhaled in a rush. When his gaze met mine again, there was a blazing fire in those amber eyes. "You're *my* soulmate."

I nodded.

We just stared at each other in silence. I was afraid to move, afraid to blink, like maybe I'd wake up from this dream where Foster was my soulmate and not Clayton. I couldn't believe it. I wanted to, yet that felt like walking on thin ice over a river rapid—one crack and I'd fall in and get sucked away by the current, never to be seen again.

And then he gripped my hand and pulled me toward him. His other hand grabbed me by the hair on the back of my neck and dragged my mouth to his. Our lips crashed together, and for the first time, the whole world made sense. My whole body lit up with heat and electricity racing through my veins. It was fireworks. It was passion so bright I couldn't breathe through it and didn't even care. He tasted like blood, dirt, and sweat and I'd never tasted anything better.

*This. THIS.* This was what I'd been waiting for. To feel like I was being burned at the stake and liking it, clinging to the pole tighter. But his shirt was in my way, I needed to feel the heat of his skin against mine. I reached down and yanked it up, breaking our kiss just long enough to push his shirt up and over his head. He growled and dove for me. Our lips crashed together. We were tongues and hot breath and I couldn't get him close enough. I whined and wrapped my arms around his neck, fisting his hair in my hands.

He pushed into me just as I tugged him down so we fell backwards, toppling over the edge of the tub and crashing into the tub as a tangle of limbs. Water splashed all around us. The scent of fresh cut grass overpowered my senses. My pulse was flying. We rolled in the water like a torpedo. His kiss was everything I'd ever dreamed. Everything I'd ever heard passion should feel like.

His hands gripped my waist then slid up over my breasts. I had no idea where my bra was or how it'd come off but as he broke our kiss to suck my nipple into his mouth nothing else mattered.

I threw my head back, arching into his mouth. "*Foster.*"

He growled and flipped onto his back, pulling me on top of him. Water splashed over the edge of the tub and flooded his

bathroom but he didn't pause for a second. He slid my underwear over my hips, digging his fingertips into my skin. His tongue slipped inside my mouth. I moaned as my whole body trembled. This wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed all of him and I needed it now.

I sank my teeth into his bottom lip and pulled. He groaned against my mouth. I pushed both hands into the water, sliding down his abs, under the waistband of his jeans, and then gripped the hard length of him in both of my palms. He squeezed his eyes shut and threw his head back, moaning just loud enough for me to hear. I liked this unhinged side of him, the side that was about to snap and go in for the kill.

And I desperately wanted to be the kill.

I slid both hands down the length of him. He shuddered then let out a vicious growl a split second before he pounced on me. He scooped me up by the ass, sat me on the ledge of the tub, then thrust inside of me in one swift, hard slide. I screamed his name and gripped his shoulders. He moaned with his lips on my throat. Our lips crashed together again. He drew his hips back, sliding out of me and my body shuddered. His name left my lips as a strangled moan. He threw one of my legs over his arm and braced his hand on the ledge then swung his hips back into me, pushing farther and farther in until I thought my back would break.

I dug my nails into his skin and cried out. "*Harder.*"

He cursed and scooped my other leg over his arm. With both hands braced on the tiled tub ledge he drove into me harder and faster. Water splashed all over us and the bathroom. His body fit so deliciously into mine that I couldn't get a breath in. My vision started to tunnel, turning black at the

edges. I gripped his neck and pulled my mouth to his then sucked in a gasp of air that was mostly his hot breath.

I pressed my lips to his just as the world exploded around me. I threw my head back and screamed his name so loud they probably heard me in Issale. White light flashed in my eyes. He thrust his hips into me two more times before his body tensed and his own pleasure consumed him. The moan that left his lips had me ready for more already. I reached for his face when he slid out of me and flipped me around to face away from him. He leaned over and slammed his palm onto a button on the wall and the jets roared to life beneath the water.

The vibration of the bubbles the jets made had me burning for him. I reached behind me to turn around. “Foster—”

He gripped my hips and slid me over a few inches then pressed his body into my back – pushing that sweet spot right up against the jet. I gasped as my hips bucked. I gripped the edge of the tub for support. Words left my lips in Spanish but even I wasn’t sure what I was saying. He used his legs to push my legs apart. That was all the warning I had before he thrust into me from behind, sliding deeper than before. My voice was hoarse from the sounds he forced out of me.

“*Fuck, you’re perfect,*” he growled in my ear. His hands covered mine on the ledge as he sent us closer to orbit. The combination of him and the water jets had me shaking. His lips grazed that soft spot behind my ear then he growled, “*you’re mine.*”

The world exploded with light and then everything went dark.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FOSTER



MY STOMACH GROWLED before I even opened my eyes.

Inez giggled so hard the bed shook beneath us.

I opened my eyes and looked over at her and grinned. “I can’t think of a better reason to wake up hungry.”

Her cheeks flushed. She rolled onto her side to face me. Her skin was flushed an adorable pink, with wrinkles from where the sheets had bunched while she slept. Those golden eyes were soft and glowy like the streams of sunlight streaking in through the curtains. Her black hair was *everywhere*. She smiled and her blush darkened. “The only excusable reason to skip a meal.”

I rolled onto my side so we were face to face on the pillows, then I ran my fingers over her cheekbone to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Worth it for the view.”

“My favorite morning ever.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine. But then she pulled back far too soon. “Even if it should have happened a week ago had it not been for a lying, scheming piece of shit.”

My chest tightened. I groaned. “I’m just focusing on the fact that it happened and we’re here now. Together. Otherwise, I’ll beat myself up for not taking off my damn gloves sooner.”

She snorted and then covered her mouth with her hand. “If we had played *spoons* a little longer, I think contact would’ve been inevitable.”

I sighed and rolled onto my back. “I can’t believe it. This whole time you were mine and I had to watch Clayton with you. Makes me sick.”

She propped up on her elbows and leaned over me. “Everything happens for a reason. If we had figured out we were soulmates earlier, then we wouldn’t be here right now unfolding Clayton’s evil plans. And yes, evil. Because only an evil person forces someone to think they’re soulmates when they’re not. Thanks to his plans, we’re going to take him down and it’ll be all his own fucking fault.”

*Goddess, I love you.* I didn’t say it. I wanted to but I didn’t. It was too soon for that. I didn’t want to freak her out. Instead, I took her chin between my fingers and dragged her lips back down to mine.

She pulled back and grinned. “But for the record, no more kissing Mischa. Or anything else ... with anyone else.”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. “I’m sorry. It was desperation.”

“What do you mean? Hey, look at me.” She tugged my hands off of my face. “I was just joking. I’m not upset about it.”

“But *I* am.” I ran my fingers through her dark hair. “It was killing me to see you with Clayton. I mean, now I know why, but I was dying. I walked by your first date and saw you two kiss and literally vomited. I just had to try to distract my heart before it shattered beyond repair. Mischa is new in town like

you, and she was interested, so I didn't fight it. I tried. It probably wasn't fair to her."

"It's Clayton's fault." She tipped my chin up, forcing my eyes to meet hers. "You think I like knowing I kissed him? It makes me sick. I'm glad I never slept with him. But we didn't know any better. We just made the best of our situation."

"I didn't sleep with her," I said in a rush. "Just so you know."

She grimaced and shook her head. "Poor Mischa."

I snorted. "I have no idea how to safely respond to that."

"Oh, I think you do." She crawled up my body, her bare breasts pressing into my chest. She braced her hands on the pillow on either side of my head and leaned down to hover with her mouth just over mine. "Unless you need the tub to show me?"

I growled. My body instantly ready. She pressed her lips to mine, claiming me with her kiss ... her tongue. Then she rolled her hips and it was all the permission I needed. I gripped her thighs, lifting her hips off my body so I could move myself into position then I pulled her hips down as hard as I could. She slid over and around me until I filled her as deep as I could. She screamed out but the sound cut off. Those gold eyes of hers rolled into the back of her head. Her arms trembled and buckled so she crashed into my chest.

She closed her eyes and moaned. "*Good ... boy ...*"

Apparently I did have a praise kink because I just fucking lost it. I gripped her hips and topped her from the bottom. She fisted the sheets beside my head. Her moans rising and falling with each thrust of my hips. Those words tumbling out of her mouth in Spanish were sending me over the edge. I moved as



fast and hard as my body would let me. Each time I fully entered her she let out a little gasp and it had me flying.

I reached up and cupped her face in my hands without slowing my rhythm. Her black hair was wet and tangled around my fingers. Her gold eyes met mine and I saw the need in them, the desperation. I dragged her face down to mine then whispered against her mouth, “*You’re MINE.*”

She screamed and threw her head back, arching into me. Her eyes widened as I kept rolling my hips, sending her down the rabbit hole two ... three ... more times before my own release caught up with hers.

Her arms gave out and her face crashed into my chest. I laughed, sliding my fingers through her tangled, mostly wet from sweat hair. For a moment we didn’t move. We just laid there with our hearts pounding against our chests and our breaths hot on each others’ skin. I had just enough energy left to slide myself out then I just collapsed on the bed.

She lifted her head and bit her bottom lip. “Like I said ... poor Mischa.”

I snorted. She giggled, then we both burst into laughter. This whole situation was fucked up. I knew she’d done *something* with Clayton because he’d had the audacity to hint at it the other day. And I knew I’d shared the *experience* with Mischa. Neither of us would be happy about it yet there we were laughing it off. Humor *was* my favorite coping mechanism.

Finally, she sighed and laid her head on my chest while tracing over the soulmate mark on my stomach. “For witches, these grow as you are near your soulmate.”

“Ours grow too.” I ran my finger over my skin. “As the bond grows stronger, prayer runes appear on our skin around the animals. Though, I’ve never seen them on a bi-species couple, so that’ll be interesting to watch.”

“I wonder if we’ll get the witch version too.”

“I saw that on The Coven members who were here in October. They’re pretty gnarly. I would not be upset.” I laughed and ran my fingers through her long hair. I tried to stay relaxed. I tried to stay in this moment with my soulmate, my first morning with her after finally learning we were destined for each other. But those thoughts led me to the reason we were kept apart. “What else is he lying about?”

She sighed, her warm breath sweeping over my bare chest. “Probably everything.”

“What’s he up to though?” I stared up at my ceiling. My stomach was in knots and not just from hunger. “We have the tainted potion and a spell, but what are they for? What’s his plan? We can’t intercept the plan if we don’t know it.”

“You’re right. Let’s find out.” She sat up straight, her hair draping over her bare chest. She shivered and looked down. “Some clothes would be good. Did any of mine survive?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. My face heated. “Let me see. Hang tight.” I started to get up, then paused to press my lips to hers.

She whined when I pulled away, but I had to stop us or we’d never make it out of bed. It was sunrise already, which meant we had less than twelve hours to figure out the plan so we could determine how to foil it. It was time for us to put our brains together and figure this out. Inez chuckled from the bed,

so I glanced over my shoulder at her and found her wagging her eyebrows and biting her bottom lip.

“Right. Clothes.” I laughed and walked to my closet to grab a clean pair of jeans for myself. Once those were on, I gave Inez a wink. “Be right back.”

I hurried to the bathroom, where we’d ditched all of our clothing. Her sweater was trashed and actually got left at the park. Both her shirt and leggings were blood soaked and grimy. I scooped all the rest of the clothing garments up and took them back to my bedroom. She grimaced at the notion of putting her dirty undergarments on but did it anyways. I went back to my closet and grabbed two long-sleeved shirts—one for me and one for her.

My shirt, however, she was more than happy to put on. She giggled at how long it was on her. “I may never wear anything else. Now, where are my leggings?”

“Bathroom. They’re bloody.” I held my finger up, then reached back into my closet. “When I first got this cabin, one of the elder women of the pack gave me some advice. One of which was to always have clean clothing for all types of people in the case of emergency. Part of pack mentality, I suppose. But it stuck with me, so I listened.”

When I sat a stack of brand-new clothing on the bed beside her, she gasped. “There’s tags on these.”

“Well, yeah. The stuff that’s been used went home with the person who needed them. I replenish—what? Why are you looking at me like that?”

She pushed up on her tiptoes and kissed me. It was soft and quick, but it made my pulse flutter all the same. She smiled as she pulled away. “I know they tease you and call you

*Mama Foster*, but you are the most thoughtful, caring man I have ever met. This is so sweet. Thank you.”

“I just hope something fits.”

“Oh, these will.” She giggled and snagged a pair of fuzzy pink socks. “Wait, did my boots survive?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. They’re in the bathroom still.” I watched as she made quick work of pulling on a pair of black leggings, followed by the fuzzy pink socks. She looked cozy and comfortable, but it was the smile on her face that made me grin. “I have sweaters and jackets in the closet too. Before we leave, we’ll get you one of those.”

She plucked a black long-sleeved shirt off the bed and skipped over to me. “Please put this on. I need to focus.”

I frowned, then realized I was still shirtless. Butterflies danced in my stomach at the mere suggestion that she was so affected by me.

She tugged on my pockets. “Is the parchment in here?”

“My jeans from last night.”

“Is the potion still in there?” When I nodded, she kissed my cheek and then bounced away. “Let’s get to work then.”

I followed her into the bathroom where we’d left the glass pitcher, but my gaze landed on the tub and my body warmed. *Focus, Foster.*

“*Diosa mía*, look at all the blood. *Esto es la escena de un crimen*. That makes me want to be fully dressed and ready for another attack.” She shuddered and dove for her boots, sitting on the floor to slide them on. “Where’s the spell?”

“In my jeans pocket. I’ll grab it in one second. You’re making me need to put my boots on.” I grabbed my boots,

then sat on the edge of the tub to put them back on. Once they were strapped on good, I jumped up and snatched my jeans. The parchment paper with the spell was tucked safely into my pocket still. I pulled it out and held it between two fingers. “See? Got it right here.”

She was bent over at the sink, inspecting the potion from the outside. “Open that up and see what it says.”

I opened up the folded paper all the way until I found writing in black ink. Except it wasn’t words. It was numbers. It didn’t make sense at all. “I think we’ve been scammed. This is gibberish—”

“Oh, good Goddess almighty.” Inez shuddered and gagged. She slammed the lid back on the pitcher. “That’s awful.”

“Let me?” I frowned and crossed the room to her. She uncovered the pitcher so I could take a sniff, but the moment the metallic scent hit my nose, sharp pain shot into my head. I cringed and shook my head. “What *is* that?”

She sighed and re-covered it. “I don’t exactly know. But it’s wrong—so very, very wrong.”

“You were asking about the red flashing—”

“Demonic. That’s what the red magic usually means.” She glared at the potion. “I can’t say for certain that’s the case here, but I don’t like the similarity.”

“Can you do that little spell trick you did last night?”

She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not strong enough for that.”

Somehow I doubted that was possible, yet I wasn’t going to call her on it.

“Wait, did you say the spell was gibberish?” She turned toward me and held her hand out. “May I see it?”

“It’s just random numbers.”

Her eyes widened. “This is an Ottendorf cipher. I’ve never seen one in real life, but I’ve read about them, mostly because my sisters are obsessed with the National Treasure movies and made me research them. Point is, these numbers are not random.”

“They’re not? Then what are they?”

She looked up at me with her determination pouring out of her. “It’s a code for how to get the right letters. Okay, see how it’s number—dash—number—dash—number again. This first number tells us which page in the book to look at. The second number tells us which line it’s on. Last number tells which letter it is. You use these on a book as the key. That’s how you decode it, but it’s a specific book, not just any book. You have to have the right key. That’s what we have to figure out now—which book.”

“Fuck, it could be any book.” I ran my hand over my hair. “I should have searched him.”

She waved me off and began pacing the bathroom. “No, he wouldn’t have been dumb enough to carry it with him. But it has to be a book that he knows Clayton has, so think about books you’ve seen in his room.”

“Clayton has a ton of books in his room, but he’s been really odd about letting people in there lately. Dammit. That was a flaming red flag and I missed it.”

“Hold on, hold on, hold on.” She stopped pacing right in front of me. “The line we used as code to meet Vincent?”

“What about it?”

“I recognized it. *For all evils there are two remedies—time and silence.* It’s from a *book*. A famous book. But which one? The answer is right in front of our noses! That’s probably how they told each other which book to use.” She gnawed on her thumbnail. Then she gasped and snapped her fingers. “Is your phone working? Can you look it up?”

“Oh. Good idea. My phone was in my leather jacket, which I ripped off and tossed ... there, on the floor.” I dove for it, then went digging in the pocket for my phone, silently praying it somehow still had a charge. When I pulled it out and tapped on the screen, I found the battery read *one percent*. I gasped and sprinted out of the room.

“Foster?”

“It’s on one percent. If I can get it plugged in before it dies, then we won’t have to wait for it to power up enough,” I yelled as I hurried to the bedroom. Inez walked in the room just as I got the cord plugged into my phone. The battery symbol lit up with that lightning symbol. I sighed and laughed. “Damn, we just barely made that. The Heavens are on our side right now for sure. Okay, what was the quote?”

When she opened her mouth to speak, I hit the voice-to-text button. “*For all evils there are two remedies—time and silence.*”

I hit search, then waited for the screen to load. “Okay, first thing here says *quotes by Alexandre Dumas—*”

“Count of Monte Cristo!” She bounced up and down, which made the potion splash around in the pitcher. “I *knew* I knew that line.”

“Is that the one they made a movie out of with the guy who played Jesus?”

She snorted. “Jim Caviezel? Yes. Fantastic movie. But the line is from the book.”

My jaw dropped. “I have that book.”

She narrowed her eyes on me. “You do?”

“I didn’t read the book yet.” I stood and led her to the living room, where I had one bookshelf with all the books I told myself I’d read eventually. I hurried for the book that I’d placed on the far left side of the bookshelf, where I put my entire *to be read* collection. It sat there pretty and waiting for me. “Elan gave me this book a few months ago because he’d told me to watch the movie one weekend I came to stay here. So I did, and after I told him how much I loved it, he said to read the book. He knew. He fucking knew. The whole thing was a setup from Elan so that I would already have the key we need for the code. Because Clayton has it. I told Elan that Clayton had it in that conversation.”

“Which is why Elan purposely taught me the invisibility spell, then left me alone in his apothecary with this potion. I already suspected it was intentional but now we know. Elan knows Clayton is up to something, and he wanted us to figure it out.” She sat the pitcher on the counter, then tied her hair up in a messy bun on top of her head. “I’m gonna have words with that man. He should’ve just told me. Instead, he kept intentionally keeping me away from Clayton because he must have also known about the soulmate lie.”

I stared at the book in my hand for a moment as the weight of all this settled in my gut. “He might not have known the full extent of all of it. Sometimes he gets pieces of visions, like he’ll know someone has to go do something specific but doesn’t know why. Or maybe he knew exactly what was



happening but worried his adopted son and unknowing soulmate wouldn't take the news well."

She took the book from my hand and inspected it. "Either way, it doesn't matter because we're here now and we know. We have to do our part and solve this. Elan is probably prepared for us to tell him."

"Right, so let's decode the cipher? I'll read the codes out loud, and you scan through and find them?"

She nodded and handed me the parchment, then walked to the kitchen counter with the book. "I need something to write with."

"Top drawer on your right. There's pen and paper inside." I waited until she got ready and nodded to me, then I read the first code out. "Sixty-eight, nine, eleven."

It took us a total of ten minutes to decode the entire cipher. The problem was, it was written in the witch's ancient language, and I didn't speak that one. At all. So, I merely followed along as told, watching her writing the letters down as we found them.

Inez cursed violently. "It's a summoning spell ... but I don't know what."

"You mean this spell, if read as they wrote it, would summon something *other* into our realm? Like what?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "It's sinister in nature, but that's all I've got. This spell will summon something *other* unless we figure out how to rig it our way."

I cursed. "Okay, so where does that leave us? We have a cipher, the book it was tied to, and this busted potion. What do we do? This is so outside of my expertise."

She stared at me for a moment, then she turned and marched out the front door. Without pausing or missing a beat, she held her wand in the air and a little sparkle of her magic shot straight up into the sky—then vanished altogether. “We need The Coven.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## INEZ



TEN SECONDS after Foster shut and locked the front door, someone knocked.

We both jumped and spun toward it like it was a snake about to bite. We exchanged nervous glances, then stared back at the door. We'd *just* been out there. Granted, we'd only gone out there for thirty seconds, max, but there hadn't been a soul in sight. I'd done a quick scan the moment I opened the doors.

The person knocked again.

My pulse quickened.

Foster scowled. "Could it be The Coven?" He whispered.

"That fast?" I whispered back. Then again, it could have been.

"Listen, I know you're in there," an unfamiliar female voice yelled through the door. "I can feel you. And since you called for us in a method only a witch knows of and is supposed to only use in times of extreme danger ... if you don't open the door in three seconds, I'm going to assume you're bleeding to death on the floor and let myself in."

Foster turned wide eyes to me.

I pulled my wand out and held it up as if I had any moves to make in defense. “Go ahead, open it.”

Foster looked confused but shrugged and reached for the door. When he pulled it open, I saw two people turned into silhouettes by the sunlight streaming in. Foster took a step back and held his hand up to try and block the sun. I raised my wand higher.

Then the shorter person, with narrow shoulders and a small waist, held their left hand up. Rainbow mist burst from the top of her finger and then the sunlight faded. Then I spotted it. On the inside of her left forearm was the Roman numeral II.

*The High Priestess of The Coven.*

That was how Coven members were Marked, on their arms with the Roman numeral for the tarot card they were chosen to represent.

I knew exactly who this was.

My breath left me in a rush as relief overpowered me. Yet my pulse seemed to be confused, because it beat even faster. I pressed my hand to my chest and bowed my head. “My apologies, High Priestess. We’re a little freaked out and on edge. Please come in.”

Foster stepped back to let her walk in and then he smacked himself in the forehead. “I remember you. Sorry, I could not see your face with the light.”

The High Priestess grinned like she never had a single care in the world. No, that wasn’t quite right. More like she wasn’t afraid of anything because she was more powerful than everyone else. And it was true. “No worries, dude. I’m Tegan Bishop, High Priestess as you’ve realized. This is my little brother Bentley Bishop, the Hierophant.”

Bentley raised his left hand and waved. The *V* Mark on his arm was practically glowing—no, wait, there were actual orange flames around it. I must've made a face, because he looked to his arm, then laughed once. "Hey, that's new."

Tegan grabbed his arm and yanked it forward. "Fascinating."

All I could do was stare. I'd never been shell-shocked over seeing celebrities walking around Manhattan, but two Bishops in front of me did me in. The Bishop family had *always* been the most powerful bloodline, ever since the dawn of our species' existence. The two in front of me happened to be two of the strongest Bishops currently living—and all of them were in The Coven. This was a double whammy. Coven members *and* Bishops. Ten-year-old me would've been shitting herself in this moment. I'd called for The Coven so it shouldn't have been a shock they answered, I just hadn't prepared myself for one of the actual Coven Leaders to respond.

Thankfully, my bowels behaved themselves.

My mouth, however, had a system malfunction and just hung open.

Tegan and Bentley were looking at each other, taking turns nodding. Tegan had put her hand over those orange flames. Foster turned to me with the most perplexed expression I'd ever seen from him, like he was seeing aliens from outer space. Sometimes I forgot how strange and entirely *unhuman* witches could be.

I shrugged and tried to get words out of my mouth, but only a squeak came out. It was delayed shock.

“Um, hi, hello. Uh ...” Foster cleared his throat. Both their gazes snapped right to him, but they turned too quickly and it made Foster flinch. He held his hands up, and I knew it was an automatic defensive reaction. His shifter magic was sensing the intensity of theirs and was freaking the fuck out. “Thank you for coming. I mean no disrespect, but how did you get here so fast?”

“We were already here.”

Bentley nodded. “Cute little park though.”

“The dead bodies and blood streaks really added a special ... something.” Tegan’s gaze lifted to the ceiling like she was seeing it in her mind. She waved her arm. “It was like installation art.”

“Tell me, which one of you bit their throats out and what did their blood taste like?” Bentley narrowed his eyes and gripped the golden locket hanging on his chest. Light flashed between his fingers. “For research purposes, of course.”

Tegan sighed. “I’m really here for that level of brutality. It has inspired me.”

Foster’s eyes widened. “The ... the bodies ... are still there?”

“Not anymore. We handled it.” Tegan narrowed her eyes on Foster. “I’m surprised by the sloppiness though, not gonna lie. Clean-up is mandatory to keep the humans at bay.”

“I thought ... I was ... we were ... Inez was ...”

Tegan’s eyebrows raised. She stared at Foster. He just shook his head with wide eyes. Tegan cackled. “Nah, I’m fucking with you. The wildlife ate your friends. There was a little blood left, but since it’s dawn, we managed to beat anyone else there and cleaned it up.”

Foster sighed and placed his hands on his knees. “The animals always—”

“I know, but you should’ve seen your face.” Tegan giggled. She wiggled her fingers and rainbow mist billowed between them. “I used magic to see what happened.”

“Plus, we’d rather you get to safety than potentially risk yourselves by disposing of their bodies.” Bentley nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. “The Duenill always have backup ready and waiting, and from what we saw, they did come and take the car of the ones you slayed. They cleaned out their wallets too, then left the bodies.”

“They left before we got there, sadly. I really wanna catch one.”

“Tegan, they’re not Pokemon—” Bentley closed his mouth and frowned. “I take that back. We do want to catch them all.”

“I just wanna dissect one. See what they’re made of.”

“Evil,” Foster said with disbelief all over his face.

Tegan cocked her head to the side and eyed him. “Yes, but what kind? Who from? And how’d it get there? These are things I need to know.”

“I said we could’ve gone looking for a body—”

“Benny, I told you. Then the body would be tainted, and I couldn’t know for sure. I need a fresh one.”

“You mean alive?”

“Well, it wouldn’t stay that way. I’m not a monster.”

Bentley arched one eyebrow. “Yes, you are.”

“I know.” Tegan grinned. “But only to the bad guys.”

“Sometimes you really sound deranged.”



“Ignorance is bliss. Knowledge makes you crazy.” She reached up and ruffled his dark-brown hair, causing it to fall out of whatever hold he’d had it in. The long strands now fell over his shoulders. She giggled. “So glad you’re crazy now too.”

“I’m so glad you have Tennessee to anchor you.”

“You’ll get your soulmate soon and you know it.”

Bentley shuddered.

Foster blinked and shook his head. “Is this what it’s like to have siblings?”

“No.” I laughed. “And yes.”

The Bishop siblings smiled at us with identical mischievous glints in their eyes.

“So, you were in the park? Why?” Foster gestured to me. “We called you from here.”

Tegan nodded. “We know.”

“We were waiting for your call from the park.”

“We knew you were calling for us today.” Tegan wagged her eyebrows. “We don’t sit still very well anymore.”

Foster shook his head. “You saw we were going to summon you today?”

“Oh, I like that you used *summon*. Really plays to my reputation well.”

Bentley shrugged. “I’m psychic.”

Foster rocked back on his heels. “So, you know what’s going on.”

Bentley shook his head. “I just saw we were supposed to be here but not why.”

Tegan grinned like the Cheshire cat. “I know why.”

Bentley sighed. “Yes, but let them explain it.”

“I am.” She looked to me expectantly. “Inez?”

I gasped. “You know my name?”

“Of course. Koth told me about the Priestess of the Pack prophecy a while back, so he informed me of your arrival.” She glanced around Foster’s little cabin. “Though he did not tell me *your* name.”

“That’s Foster Logan,” Bentley answered for him, “Beta of the wolf pack under Clayton.”

Foster’s jaw dropped.

Tegan looked to her brother. “Elan?”

“Elan.”

I chuckled. These two were a riot. I could’ve stood there watching them exist forever, but there were dangerous things happening, so we needed to get moving on them. With that in mind, I spun and hurried to the kitchen counter to grab the glass pitcher with the potion, the parchment with the spell, and the book key.

Then I went straight to Tegan and held out the potion to her. “It’s sus.”

Tegan opened the lid and sniffed it.

White light flashed all around us. Before I could blink or react, the light faded and we were suddenly in a massive living room of a house I’d never seen. Foster gripped my elbow and pulled me closer to him.

Bentley sighed. “*Tegan.*”

Tegan rolled her eyes. “I can tell by this potion that this needs to be a private conversation.”

Foster pointed to his left where a handful of witches sat quietly on couches in front of a massive fireplace. “Who are they?”

I leaned around him, and my eyes widened.

There were four of them sitting there. The first boy in the big comfy chair had short, sandy-blond hair and bright-blue eyes with a whole ton of restless energy rolling out of him. Even his legs were bouncing. In the chair to his left by the fireplace sat a girl with one of those epic split-dye hairstyles where half of her head was blonde and the other half was black. The side with the blonde had a royal-blue eye, whereas her other eye was emerald-green. She really committed hard to the split theme. On the couch was a couple all cuddled up to each other. The girl had long Rapunzel-like platinum wavy hair and bright, golden eyes that were somehow even brighter than my golden eyes. But it was the boy she leaned on that I recognized.

I gasped. “You’re Deacon English!”

Deacon English was New York City’s resident bad boy. Far too young for me, but his mother was the Major of New York. Now he was *The Devil in The Coven*, and honestly, it was such a perfect casting. His blond hair was cropped short on the sides but was long and slicked back on top. He gave me blond-Elvis vibes. He gave me a sideways grin and his violet eyes sparkled. “Inez Alvarez, nice to see you again.”

I smiled. “Oh, you remember me?”

“I made it my business to know every witch in Manhattan prior to being Marked.” He curled the blonde girl’s hair around his finger, and judging by the black vines covering his hand and fingers, I knew she had to be his soulmate. “But also, I just spoke with my mother and the Headmaster at SOMA to check on your sisters. They’re going to be living in the dorms until you’re more settled into Issale—for their safety.”

My breath left me in a rush. “You checked on them?”

He frowned. “Of course. We take care of our own.”

Tears pooled in my eyes. I nodded. “They’re okay though? That demon attack—”

“They’re perfectly fine. Literally no harm done to them. They’re mostly just worried about you, but we assured them you’re safe and will be coming home as soon as you can.”

Foster squeezed my hand. “Do they know she’s a shifter too?”

His soulmate raised her left hand in the air and pointed at us. My eyes latched onto the *III* Mark of The Empress. “Hi, I’m Emersyn Bishop. And no, your sisters were not told of your new abilities. That’s not our business to tell. Koth has his own protocol we follow. Your sisters were told you were assisting us for a short while.”

Deacon nodded. “But the Headmaster and the shifter professors there were made aware by Silas to watch them in case the gene presents itself.”

“Thank you. I’ve been worried about them.” I smiled and squeezed Foster’s hand. “If I may return the favor, I’ve gotten close to Amelia ...”

Deacon’s eyes sharpened, and he seemed to be holding his breath.

“I mean, I can tell she’s one tough cookie ... but emotionally and mentally? It’s not my place to order you around, but you should probably go visit her. She needs to see you.”

Deacon exhaled in a rush like I’d kicked him in the gut. “She’s okay though? Landy’s family is good to her? And Koth —”

“Koth has been training us on shifting. Actually, he was just starting to teach her how to fly.” I chuckled at the memory of her excitement. “But she’s struggling to connect her current to her past, if you know what I mean?”

“She told you that?” He said between clenched teeth.

“I have sisters both ages. We bonded. I’m only relaying this because I think things are about to get a little worse in Issale, and since she can’t call you, perhaps you can pop in and just see her for a little while?” There was a loud banging noise from what looked like a kitchen in the back of the house. “For example, I just taught her how to cook because she doesn’t know how, and they don’t have microwaves or delivery.”

Deacon nodded, then looked to the creepy twins in front of me. “Tegan?”

“Yes, but not right this second. Trust me?”

He nodded immediately and leaned back against the couch. Emersyn squeezed his hand. “Thank you, Inez.”

I smiled.

The other blond guy looked back and forth between us and the couple. Then he grinned. “I’m Easton. This is Cruella De Vil—”

“*Easton!*” The girl with the split theme smacked him in the shoulder with the book she held. But then she smiled at us and waved. “I’m Bettina.”

Easton Corey, the Lovers Card. Bettina Blair, Judgement Card. Four Cards just chilling on the couch. No big deal. I glanced to Foster, and his expression almost made me laugh. He wasn’t a witch, so this star-studded living room meant nothing to him. Instead, he looked both concerned and confused at the same time.

Something metal slammed to the floor in the kitchen, and a girl screeched.

A second later, a guy who had to be six and a half feet tall with long, black wavy hair and mismatched eyes came flying out of the kitchen like he was being chased by a predator. He was shirtless, so I saw the soulmate glyph and the bright-pink crystal on his chest, and it made me wonder if mine and Foster’s would ever look like that. And then I spotted the *IV* Mark on his left arm, and my breath left me in a rush. That was Tennessee Wildes. The Emperor. Coven Leader and soulmate to Tegan Bishop. He had the most raw power than anyone else alive. The Aether Witch had more magic, she had *all* magic, but The Emperor was just power incarnate. Yet there he was fleeing the kitchen barefoot with a bag of chips.

A feather duster used for cleaning flew through the air and slammed into his back.

Tennessee cursed. “*SAVANNAH!*”

I was about to ask what was going on when a girl with black and turquoise hair chased after him with a broom. “DON’T YOU STEP ON MY DAMN FLOOR, BOY. I JUST CLEAN IT.”

“Savannah—”

“GIT!” She swatted the broom at him.

Tegan giggled. “Babe.”

Tenn leapt forward to get away from this Savannah girl—and cleared the entire living room. He stopped just beside Tegan in the foyer with us. He turned and glared at Savannah, then threw his hands up. “She’s cleaning the whole damn house! I keep getting kicked out of every room.”

Tegan patted his bare chest with the hand with the matching soulmate mark. “Babe. Just let her clean. She needs it.”

Tenn huffed and shook his head. “Why? The house is clean.”

“*IT IS NOW!*” Savannah yelled from the kitchen doorway. It was an open floor plan from the living room to dining room to the kitchen, but there was a small wall that blocked her from view. “MA’AM. DON’T YOU COME BACK IN HERE.”

“Ma’am?” Foster scratched the back of his neck. “Isn’t he a dude?”

Easton snorted. “Ma’am is gender neutral in Savannah-talk.”

“It’s actually more often used as a swear word.” Deacon chuckled.

Tennessee sighed and held up his bag of chips. “I’m hungry. I just wanted food. Not like *I* was gonna cook. I don’t cook. I just wanted to grab a few things—”

“Don’t!” Emersyn snapped her finger and a ball of fire hovered between Tennessee and the kitchen. “Let her clean my kitchen, dammit! Don’t interrupt.”

Bettina cackled. “She chased me to this couch, so I just haven’t moved. I’ll be reading until it’s safe to move.”

Tennessee shook his head at Bettina, and I realized they looked exactly alike, right down to their matching mismatched eyes. “Why? Why is she terrorizing the house?”

“It’s ‘cause she’s so fucked up.” Bentley grinned.

Tennessee grumbled and opened his bag of chips.

“DON’T YOU GET NO CRUMBS ON THAT CARPET, BOY!” Savannah yelled from the kitchen just as Tennessee shoved a handful of chips in his mouth.

Tennessee froze with his mouth full, then looked down at the ground. We all looked. Sure enough, there were chip crumbs on the foyer rug. He grimaced and flicked his wrist, and the crumbs lifted off the ground ... and straight into his mouth.

Bentley hung his head in disappointment. “Dude.”

Bettina pursed her lips and nodded. “*That’s* my brother.”

Tegan just shrugged. “Five second rule.”

Easton groaned and threw his hands up. “Sure, when Tenn eats food off the floor, it’s okay, but not when Easton does it.”

Deacon grimaced. “Your food was sticky, Easton. *Sticky*. There are no seconds for sticky foods.”

“This carpet is clean.” Tennessee shrugged but then he looked up and did a double take, finally spotting me and Foster standing just inside the door. His shoulders dropped. He turned to Tegan. “Do I want to know?”

Tegan grinned. “Probably not, babe. I got this. You go up to our room and let Savannah finish cleaning.”



Tennessee growled and stormed off. Savannah was back there still cleaning the kitchen and humming to herself, or maybe cursing everyone out. The back door opened and yet another blond dude marched inside. This one was tall and had thick shoulders and biceps. He looked like he would squish me like a bug. But his eyes were the same color as Tegan's, so I suspected this was another Bishop.

The guy stopped and frowned. "Where the hell have you two been?"

"Nowhere," Tegan and Bentley said at the exact same time with the exact same tone, the ones toddlers used when they got in trouble.

The new guy glared.

Bentley rolled his eyes. "Coop, we're clearly fine. Go punch something and feel better. Please?"

*Ah, Cooper Bishop. Eldest Bishop child and The Star Card.*

Cooper grumbled in a way only a stressed-out older brother could. But he turned, grabbed a rag and spray bottle off the kitchen island, and walked into the kitchen where Savannah—

"COOPER DEVON BISHOP, PUT THE RAG DOWN RIGHT NOW!"

Cooper leapt out of the kitchen backwards. Bottle in one hand, rag in the other. "I'm just trying to help you—"

Savannah followed him out, holding a dagger up at him.

*"Savannah."*

She raised both her dagger and her eyebrow.

Cooper shook his head, but he hadn't lowered his hands. "Are you threatening me with the dagger I gave you?" Then he did the stupid thing of trying to take it from her.

"I will murder you." She swished it around in the air. "I will drain you of every ounce of blood in your body and then clean up that blood and water my garden with it. And I will clean it up so thoroughly that no one will ever know that someone was killed here. Leave me alone. Right now."

Easton threw his head back and laughed. "Damn, she's fucked."

Savannah narrowed her blue eyes on him. "Yes, I know. But this is the only healthy outlet I have. Either you let me clean, or I start fighting people."

"Savannah, please—" Two black cats jumped off the top of the fridge onto Cooper's back and hissed. Cooper threw the bottle and rag at Savannah. "Fine, fine. I won't help you."

Savannah lowered her weapon and nodded. "Not helping me *is* helping me. Come, Luna and Freya." The cats leapt off Cooper's back and onto Savannah's shoulders. She reached up and scratched their chins. "Good girls."

Cooper backed away. "But throw me some chips?"

Savannah glared. "So you can drop crumbs on my clean floor? I think the fuck not."

Tegan flicked her wrist, and a bag of chips flew across the kitchen to Cooper. Then two huge jugs of Gatorade. "Bro. Just go up to my room with Tenn. She chased him out with chips too. He can use a distraction and a drink."

Cooper chuckled and took the items Tegan sent to him. He stuck his tongue out at Savannah, then turned and headed up the stairs. "Thanks. And please don't get in any potentially

life-threatening confrontations without warning me and Tenn. Be nice to our rattled nerves.”

Tegan chuckled. “I promise no battles without warning you first.”

Cooper stopped halfway up the flight of stairs and looked over his shoulder at her. “Warn us before you leave so we can go with you.”

“Fine. I promise.” She rolled her eyes and smirked.

Bentley gestured around the house. “See? This is what happens when you bring other people here. We look crazy.”

Tegan huffed. “I wasn’t summoning Koth to a random cabin in the forest when the Duenill had just been there.”

Foster frowned. “Koth is here?”

Tegan pointed to Foster. “Not yet. He will be once I call him. Wanted to give—”

Savannah cursed and swung the mop—and dragged two black cats with her. “*Freya, Luna, quit it!*” She screeched at her cats who were under her feet and attacking her cleaning supplies.

Deacon glanced at the kitchen. “You know, Bettina, we may need some spells on the house for protection ... from Savannah. Now that she’ll be living here.”

Bettina nodded and held up a thick, ancient-looking leatherbound book. “Why do you think I’m reading the Book of Shadows?”

Easton leaned to the side to get a better view. “I got twenty bucks on the cat on the right. She’s twisted.”

Savannah was hollering at the cats still, but with her thick southern accent, I had no idea what she was saying.

“She’s not sane enough for this today.” Deacon flicked his wrist and red mist shot over to the kitchen. “Come here, kitties.”

Both black cats sprinted out of the kitchen and jumped into Emersyn’s lap.

She giggled. “Hi, babies.”

The front door opened behind me, so I leapt to the side. A tall girl with long black hair and lavender eyes sauntered in like this was a runway show. She stopped and looked me and Foster up and down. “What’s this?”

“Lily, this is Inez and Foster. From Issale.”

“Oh, hey!” She smiled and nodded, then turned to the living room. “Easton, what are you doing?”

Easton gave Lily a sloppy, adorable, lovesick kind of smile. “Hi, love. Savannah smacked me with a wet mop when I walked on her floor and told me to sit here, so I just haven’t moved. But it’s okay. She’s going through something right now.”

“I like that girl.” Lily walked to the stairs and paused on the first step. “Well, if you follow me up to our room, I’ll let *you* work through something.”

Easton leapt over the couch, passed us in the foyer, and jumped onto the stairs. “You’re on your own, kids.”

They disappeared up the stairs. Everyone else just laughed.

Emersyn smiled. “Their excessive, borderline inappropriate PDA used to bother me. Now I’m just so happy for them.”

The back door opened again, but this time it was two men who were definitely *not* Coven members. In fact, they weren't even witches. My magic sensed that immediately, though I couldn't place what they were. They were the same height, with nearly identical faces and matching golden eyes. The one had long hair down to his elbows while the other's was short like Deacon's. They were beautiful in an otherworldly kind of way ... in a terrifying way.

The short-haired one leaned his elbows on the kitchen island. He reached forward with one finger—

*“MALACHI, IF YOU SMUDGE THAT, I WILL SMUDGE YOUR FACE.”*

The long-haired one walked around to lean in the doorway. “So ,you either clean or fight? That's it?”

Savannah turned, so I was just able to see her face. “Yes, Riah. So, GIT.”

Malachi shrugged. “Wanna fight?”

Riah nodded. “I could use a fight.”

Malachi cocked his head to the side. “My brother, shall we take this outside?”

Riah glanced around the house. “The house is very, very clean.”

Savannah narrowed her eyes at Riah, then glared at Malachi. “I will fight you. I'm not kidding or scared.”

Both guys grinned and stood up straight. White angel wings sprouted from their backs.

Riah rolled his shoulders. “I never did get back at you for that right hook.”

Malachi shot a ball of black smoke into Savannah that shoved her against cabinets. “What ya gonna do about it?”

Both angel guys sprinted out the back door.

Savannah threw her rag in the sink, then raced after them yelling, “FINE! BUT I’M DRAWING BLOOD!”

Once the house was quiet again, Bentley turned to us. “Sorry, we’ve got a lot of trauma-coping mechanisms in this house that go unchecked by medical professionals.”

Tegan giggled. “Issale may be full of animals, but they’re much more behaved than we are.”

Foster laughed and scrubbed his face with his hands. “I am overwhelmed and intimidated.”

I glanced around. “So, where is the rest of The Coven?”

Tegan’s face fell for the first time. “Damage control mostly. Still recovering from the side effects of Samhain in Salem.”

I grimaced. “That many demons?”

“We’re at war. It may not seem like that to everyone else just yet—which is what we want for civilians—but war has started, and it’s only getting worse.” Tegan shrugged. But then she took a deep breath and smiled at us. “SO, before my plan to bring you to a safe place to chat backfires on me anymore, let’s get back to your problem. You and your soulmate have a conflict to resolve.”

Foster flinched. “You know we’re soulmates?”

Tegan winked at him.

I gnawed on my bottom lip. “So, we didn’t know how to call Koth without anyone knowing because this is shady as

hell. We actually only discovered the last piece of it right before we called for you.”

“Okay. Let’s get him here.” Tegan reached up into her black and purple hair and tugged on the one braid on her whole head that was tucked on the bottom. “Just give it a second.”

Foster and I frowned at each other. Thirty seconds went by and then I heard heavy footsteps behind me. I had just turned to look when the front door swung open and Koth filled the doorway.

Koth took one look at me and Foster and cursed violently. “Elan said I wasn’t going to like today.”

Tegan grinned. “Hey, Koth, sorry to bother you.”

“Don’t apologize. If they’re here, then I want to be too.” Koth looked us over twice. “Foster, Inez ... are you all right?”

Foster cursed and ran his hands through his hair. “My Lord, no. Not at all.”

Koth’s brow sank low over his violet eyes. “I don’t like that.”

I cleared my throat. “I hope I didn’t overstep or offend you, but I didn’t know how to get ahold of you secretly and I know we need their help for this ... so I called them with my wand about ten minutes ago and then she brought us here—”

“Inez, The Coven are our greatest allies. I may be King of Issale, but I still report to them. If you’re in trouble and you can call on them, please do. But also, you’re a witch. They are your leaders as much as I am, if not more. And if you say we need them, then I’m glad you called on them. Crazy pants here can figure anything out.” He smiled but it was tight because he was definitely tense. “Okay?”

“Thank you.”

Koth’s gaze lowered to the glass pitcher in my hands. “Is that Elan’s potion for tonight? For the dragons to drink?”

“It’s what used to be Elan’s potion.”

Koth shook his head and steam came out of his nostrils. “Tegan, do you already know?”

“I mean, I’m me, so ... yes? But they have not told me their story. We summoned you first.”

Koth looked to us. “Okay, I’m listening. But tell me everything, please.”

Foster looked to me. “I have no words right now. I forgot why we’re even here after all that. Is that girl fighting two angels?”

“Yes,” everyone in the room said at the same time.

Foster nodded. “Cool, cool, cool.”

Koth opened his mouth, then shut it. “Nope, not gonna ask about Coven chaos. Inez, if you will?”

I cleared my throat. “Okay, so since I got to Issale, I’ve been helping Elan make some potions. Just the two of us. Then Tuesday night we were in his apothecary working on the potion for the Ostara initiation ritual that’s tonight. I was in there the whole time until it was finished. I helped him make it, though I really didn’t do much on this one because it’s the same potion they’ve been making for this ritual forever. When it was done, he asked me to smell it, which I did. Then he taught me this little trick for turning myself invisible—it’s some secret potion and spell combo for only the Shaman and shifters who are also witches, so Elan says. So, he teaches me the spell, I recite it and become invisible. Elan then told me to



stay in there by myself to practice holding the spell – which I think was bogus - and then Clayton snuck in. Like black hoodie bad movie villain kind of thing. He swapped Elan’s potion with an identical glass pitcher, then took off with Elan’s. I smelled the replacement, but it smelled like nothing. I ran right out looking for Elan and you, Koth, but before I could tell you, Silas said demon attack, so you left. Elan I actually have no idea where he is, but I haven’t been able to find him. So, I told Foster. You remember that from Tuesday?”

Koth nodded. “I do. I knew something was off.”

“So, we waited, hoping you’d be back before the ritual. Then, last night, Clayton tells me that Elan said I needed to go meet this witch named Vincent to get something to add to the potion—”

“Nope, don’t like that,” Deacon mumbled.

“Right? He said it was because of Lilith and stuff that we needed extra power. He told me and Foster this privately. Oh, and we were to be getting a new spell from him for the ritual.” Deacon whistled under his breath. I nodded, still clutching the pitcher. “He said I had to go because I’m a witch. Foster said he’d go with me, then Foster suggested the park near his cabin to meet this Vincent. So, we drive there with this potion. That’s where we meet Vincent.”

Foster growled, which made Koth breathe smoke.

“He added something to the potion. It was red rose flower petals. But as the petals hit the potion, they sparkled with red magic.” I paused. The four witches in the living room groaned. I sighed. “That was my exact thought too. Anyway, so this new potion smells *horrible*. Vincent handed us this piece of folded parchment paper with the spell, but before we had a chance to open it and look, we were attacked by the Duenill.”

Koth growled and cracked his knuckles.

“I think Vincent arranged the ambush,” Foster said. “The Duenill rolled up dressed as frat boys with college logos on their clothes and khakis—I’ve never seen them look like that. Then they attacked us. Inez went invisible, but she ... well, she was incredible with her wand, wrapping scarves around their guns so they couldn’t fire and blindfolding a few who’d tackled me.” He looked down at me and smirked. “But when one of them attacked Vincent, he said, *I’m not one of them, you idiot*, as if he’d arranged the hit.”

“Foster ripped their throats out.” Tegan grinned. “It was epic.”

Koth nodded, unfazed by Tegan. “Did you get injured?”

“I did. It happened so fast. I was focused on getting the potion in the truck so we’d have the proof to show you that Clayton is betraying us.” I shuddered. “Next thing I know, I’ve been sliced up by daggers.”

Foster growled.

“Foster killed them and took me to his cabin where he has all these healing potions.”

“Mama Foster.” Koth smirked. “I take it Clayton’s fake soulmate marks washed off from them?”

We both gasped.

Koth shrugged. “We knew it was bullshit. A witch with the shifter gene has a soulmate image of your Goddess, not of your animal. It’s always been that way, so when we saw it, we knew it was fake. Elan confirmed it with me.”

“*He knew*,” Foster growled.

“Did you know—”

“That Foster is your real soulmate? Yes.” Koth smiled. “It was fairly obvious. Especially before you learned to control your telepathy.”

I gasped and my face heated.

Foster looked to me with his eyebrows raised.

“In training that day I’d blocked off your telepathy so you could have privacy while training, but I cannot sever that link between soulmates. It’s beyond my pay grade, *so* when you spoke to each other, it was all the confirmation I needed.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

Koth scowled. “For the same reason you haven’t told me about *this* until now.”

Foster threw his arms up. “I can’t believe he did this to us, to me.”

I lifted the lid off the potion, but Tegan slammed it back on. “I don’t even want him sniffing it.”

Koth glared at the potion. “What did he do to it? What’s it for?”

“It’s going to prevent you from shifting.”

We all gasped.

Foster snagged the parchment with the spell out of my hand and held it out to Tegan. “The spell from Vincent was written as a ... a ... book cipher—”

“*An Ottendorf cipher?*” Bettina said with a gasp from her chair.

Foster blinked. “Um, yes?”

Bettina leapt off the chair and rushed to us, snagging the paper out of his hand. She held it up and grinned. “Someone in

real life did one! So cool.”

Tegan looked over her shoulder. “Which book was the key?”

“Count of Monte Cristo.”

“*Ohhhh*,” both Tegan and Bettina said.

“Hold up.” Tegan scowled and grabbed the paper. “That son of a bitch. He’s going to summon the Unseelie.”

My jaw dropped.

Koth closed his eyes and shuddered. “Are you sure?”

The back door opened. Riah, the long-haired blond angel dude, strolled inside. “You rang?”

Tegan held the parchment up. “Can you confirm this says what I think it says?”

“Oh, if *you* are asking me, then it doesn’t sound good.” His voice was low and gravelly but chipper at the same time. He crossed the room swiftly, then took the parchment from Tegan. That gorgeous, friendly face turned sinister. All of a sudden, the angles of his face were much sharper. “Unseelie.”

Tegan sighed. “I was hoping to be wrong.”

“Who in the fuck is summoning the Unseelie?”

“But would it work? Aren’t they blocked from Earth?”

“They let you think they are, but they are not. In October, Sage hunted a small group of them, then led Tegan and company there to kill them.” He shook his head. “It shouldn’t work, they shouldn’t be strong enough, but with Lilith this close, I wouldn’t trust that hope. I need to speak with my brother but also Thorne and Sage.”

“And Everest?”

Riah looked down at Tegan for a moment, then shook his head. “No, Everest is not yet ready for us.”

“Everest?” Malachi said from suddenly behind his brother. “I don’t like that we were called away from sparring the little darkling to converse on Everest.”

Riah held the paper up. “Look at this.”

Malachi read it, then snarled. “Ah, man. I was really hoping to avoid them this time. But you are correct, we cannot step into Everest’s world yet for reasons I am not at liberty to speak on.”

“We need to speak to Thorne and Sage.”

Malachi nodded. “See what preventenary measures we can take.”

Riah frowned. “Is that a word? Preventenary? Did you just make that up?”

“All words are made up, Brother.” He snagged the paper, then handed it back to Tegan. “We’re going to beat up the little darkling a bit longer so she doesn’t hurt someone or herself with all her trauma coping, but then Riah and I will go to Seelie to do everything we can to protect Earth from Unseelies.”

“I think we need to send a warning to Everest.” Riah scratched his jaw.

“Because knowing how to summon an Unseelie is a secret.” Tegan waved the paper. “This person shouldn’t have had this knowledge.”

“You’re thinking Lilith?” Koth growled.

Tegan, Riah, and Malachi all nodded.

Malachi sighed. “Thorne will get a message to Everest.”

Riah pointed at Tegan, then spoke in a language I’d never heard before. Tegan nodded. Then the two angel brothers vanished into black smoke.

“What language was that?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Angelic.” Tegan pulled on her bottom lip, but I saw the wheels turning in her eyes.

Foster snapped his fingers. “You think Clayton is trying to get Koth and the dragons killed, don’t you?”

“So let him try.”

Everyone looked to me with wide eyes. Koth’s expression almost made me laugh.

Tegan *did* laugh. “My kind of gal.”

Foster’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Let’s flip the script. Set a trap for Clayton. Right now, we don’t even know if anyone else in Issale is working with him.” I held the potion up. “So, let’s give him, or them, a taste of their own medicine. Let’s see exactly what the plan is so there are no doubts once it’s over.”

Koth stared at the ground and shook his head, but he was smirking.

Foster’s jaw dropped. He blinked at me. “That’s dangerous. And brilliant. But also dangerous.”

Tegan grinned. “Devious. I’m in.”

Bentley nodded. “I’m in. But not with *this*.” He took the pitcher from my hands, then spun away and marched into the kitchen.

“*Oh, Savannah gonna kill you,*” Deacon sang under his breath.

Tegan held her hand up to stop questions. “We need to make a new potion to send back with you to ensure your safety. I refuse to risk y’all, Koth.”

I nodded. “What will the new potion be? Elan’s?”

She grimaced. “We’ve never seen Elan’s, so we can’t be sure what exactly it is in order to re-create it. We’re going to give you a potion that protects the dragons but won’t do much. You may have to redo the ritual after, Koth.”

He nodded. “It wouldn’t be the first time it was delayed. Safety is more important.”

“Bettina, whip me up a spell that will sound ominous but creates a protection barrier around them—just in case.” Tegan handed the parchment to her. “And write it in our ancient language.”

“Bettina is their spellmaster,” Koth leaned over and whispered.

I looked to Bettina. “Can you use *Count of Monte Cristo* and re-create an Ottendorf cipher, so if this jackass checks, it’ll work with his key?”

“Shit, that’s brilliant.” Bettina cackled. “I like her, T.”

“Me too.” Tegan grinned. She tapped on her hand. “Did you put a tattoo on the Vincent guy? Did I see that right?”

“Yup. I put a little freckle tattoo on his hand so I could track my own magic to find him.”

Tegan grinned, and it was absolutely terrifying. “I know why Valathame chose you.”

I frowned. “Valathame?”

“That’s the Goddess’s name.” She held her hand out. “Let me see your wand?”

Without thinking about it, I just handed it to her. She took it and pressed it to my right pointer finger. Rainbow magic flashed, then my wand was gone, vanished into thin air. Pink magic swirled around my finger, then settled into my skin like a tattoo.

“You need to be able to use your magic while in wolf form. Now you can. Your finger is now your wand.”

My jaw dropped.

“And now I can hunt down Clayton’s little helper.” Tegan glared at nothing. “We’ll find him. He’s one of ours, and we will handle it.”

“Do you know who he is?” Foster asked.

She nodded. “Bentley has seen him. We’re already working on it.”

Koth cursed. “Let me know if there’s any more cause for concern with him?”

“Without hesitation. Tenn’s gonna love this.”

Foster scrubbed his face again. “What do we do now? What happens?”

“The potion and spell are going to take some time for us to make. In the meantime, Koth, return to wherever you were and act normal. Foster and Inez, I’ll send you back to his cabin. Just in case Clayton comes looking, I want you there. When we’re done, I’ll deliver them to you at the cabin.”

We nodded.



Tegan rubbed her hands together. “I’m not gonna tell you what’s coming. Your genuine reaction is necessary. You two return to Issale as if the exchange went as planned. You give Clayton the potion and the spell, then act normal. But stick together. Don’t separate and keep your eyes open. Koth knows more of the plan. I’ve already told him telepathically, so the dragons will be ready. Just know the potion you give is harmless. Just act normal. And remember, Clayton cannot be trusted.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FOSTER



AND THEN IT was just us. Back in my cabin.

I stood there not sure what to do with myself. That whole interaction with The Coven felt like I'd strapped myself to a pole during a hurricane. The dust had now settled, but my mind was blank.

Inez pushed her hair back and laughed. "I am so glad I'm not in The Coven. That was intense. That was a damned tornado."

"I was just thinking the same thing," I said with a laugh as I stumbled over to the sofa and then threw myself down on it. "Well, the storm part anyway. I don't want to even think about what it's like to be them."

She shuddered. "I know I have a lot of magic, more than some of my peers had in school, but I am nothing compared to them."

I held my hand out to her. "You are everything."

She giggled and rolled her eyes, but she was blushing. She put her hand in mine and let me pull her down onto the couch with me, her legs draped over my lap. "You're biased."

"Tell that to the rest of your pack."

She shook her head and leaned back. Her fingertips brushed over my bare hands. “You didn’t put your gloves back on.”

“No.” I eyed my scars with disgust but then her olive-toned fingers brushed over them, and it made my heart soar. “There’s no way I’m losing a single moment more of this. My insecurities and emotional trauma prevented us from discovering our truth. I know everything happens for a reason and all that jazz, but still.”

“Oh, Foster.” She took both of my hands in hers and squeezed. “People like to say time heals everything, but all it really does is shrink your grief ball smaller.”

I frowned. “Grief ball?”

“Yeah, when my mom passed, my dad explained it to me. So, think of yourself as a box—your life and your emotions and everything.” She flipped my palms over and held them side-by-side, then she used her right pointer finger, now covered in swirling pink lines, to create an outline of a square with her magic. Then she drew a circle that took up almost the whole square. “Now, your grief is this ball. At first, the ball is so big that it touches all the sides of the box at once. There’s no escaping it. No break. It’s so big it’s wedged in there. Stuck. Right?”

I nodded.

She wiggled her finger and the magic circle shrunk to half the size. Then the ball moved, bouncing around the square like one of those old screen savers on a computer. Granted, I hadn’t seen one of those in twenty years, but it jogged that memory.

“So as time goes on and we heal, the ball shrinks a little. It’s no longer wedged. It can move. And there are lots of times

that it doesn't touch the square at all, where you feel no pain. When you are carrying on just fine." As she spoke, the magic moved to demonstrate her words. The ball shrunk in half again, then a little more. "The smaller the ball, the less often it will touch you, the less often you succumb to the pain, but when you do ... the pain isn't any less. You just don't have to feel it so often. That's what time gives us."

I blinked, my eyes threatening to tear up. I cleared my throat. "By keeping my gloves on, I've prevented my grief ball from shrinking, haven't I?"

She waved her hand and her magic vanished, then she brought my hands up to her mouth and kissed the scars. "I lost my parents fourteen years apart. And when I lost Dad, I had my stepmother and two sisters. You had to lose both at the same time without that support system. You had to find your own coping mechanisms for healing. I mean, hell, look at The Coven and all their crazy."

I laughed.

"I'm just saying ... I would never judge your decisions. Of all people, I don't have to imagine what you feel. I feel it too." She sighed sadly, then flipped my hands over and started tracing her fingers over my scars again. "But you have me now, and I'd like to help you shrink that ball a little so you can breathe a little easier."

"You already are."

Her cheeks flushed bright-pink. She kissed my shoulder. "I'm glad, but I actually meant something specific."

I reached up and touched her cheek. "I'm listening."

She smiled and sat up, then stripped out of the long-sleeve shirt I'd given her. I must've made a face, because she snorted

and smacked me playfully. “Not *that*.”

“Well, you took your clothes off—”

“That’s a short-term distraction-”

“A good distraction—”

“I’m shooting a little higher than that.” She giggled, then pointed to her right bicep where a black and white flower tattoo covered her skin from shoulder to elbow like a sleeve. “Remember when you asked about my tattoos, and I said I did them to myself with magic?”

I nodded but had no idea where she was going with this.

“When I was a kid, I fell off my bike and tore my arm from shoulder to elbow. We used magic healing potions and stuff, but long story short, I wound up with a scar. It wasn’t that hideous or anything once it healed. Anyway, after Mom passed, seeing the scar made me think about her taking care of me all that time. It made my ball stay big. So, I put this tattoo over the scar of a gardenia flower because it’s my mom’s favorite flower. When I see it now, I think of my mom, but it hurts less. It’s not dragging up so many overwhelming memories.” She gave me a sad smile, then tapped on the rose tattoo covering her left collarbone and shoulder. “I have this cluster of freckles right here. Dad used to take a marker and connect the dots whenever I wasn’t looking. When he passed, I couldn’t handle seeing them, so I covered them. Both of these are made of magic so not permanent. They can be easily removed at any time.”

“They’re really beautiful. I bet your parents would love them as much as I do—wait.” I scowled and pointed to each tattoo. “I’m picking up what you’re putting down. I should cover my scars with tattoos?”

She held her wand finger up and wagged her eyebrows. “I’m just saying, I could cover and conceal the scars a bit so they’re not so obvious and painful for you. We can take it off at any time.”

I held my hands out in front of me. “What did you have in mind?”

“What is something they loved?”

“My mom was obsessed with the tree of life. Dad loved ... roses, actually.”

She smiled and took my hands in hers. When she closed her eyes, I closed mine too. Cold air wrapped around my hands. My skin tingled around my scars. My pulse quickened. She’d said these weren’t permanent, so I could have them removed if I hated it, yet I was still nervous. I wasn’t sure what this was going to look like.

“Okay, look.”

I opened my eyes, and my breath left me in a rush. The black and white design was the same on both hands, and it was beautiful. It was a rose with some swirling vines sticking out of it, but in the middle was a tree of life. My scars were gone. Sure, if you looked close, they were still there. However, she’d designed the image to distract from them.

A hot lump formed in my throat. Tears stung my eyes.

“Do you like it?”

I tried to answer her, but nothing came out. All I could do was stare at my hands as my emotions tried to settle and not explode.

“Foster? Are you okay? I can take them off if you don’t like them.”

I didn't remember moving, but suddenly my lips were on hers. She sighed and leaned into me. I didn't know if I pulled her down or if she pulled me but we crashed onto the couch together. My emotions were raw and burning a path up my throat. My love for this woman was overwhelming. It was like I'd been seeing the world in black and white before she came along and now it was bold, vibrant color.

My mind was a blur. I had no idea what I was even doing or how we'd gotten our clothes off so quickly. All I knew was the pounding of our hearts and the electricity that tingled everywhere we touched. My heart was full and bursting at the seams. This wasn't about passion and orgasms, this was a connection deep into our souls. To the very fiber of our beings. I wasn't quite sure how to express just much I felt for her so I was going to try and show her.

She arched her back, pressing herself into me. A low growl escaped my lips. I pushed her legs apart and gently lowered myself onto her, sheathing myself within the heat of her body in one push. She moaned in Spanish and wrapped her legs around my hips to pull me closer. Those golden eyes just sparkled up at me and sent a rush of emotions to my eyes. I blinked to try and reign myself in.

*"Mi corazón."* She took my face in her hands and kissed my eyes, my cheeks, and finally my lips. *"Mine."*

I moaned and rested my forehead against hers. Our bodies moved together like the gentle roll of water on a lakeshore. We breathed each other in. Each brush of her skin on mine sent my pulse fluttering. I knew how to fuck her but this ... this was learning how to make love to her. To let the tide of our passion grow slowly and slowly until our bodies trembled and sweat rolled down our spines. Her breaths grew tighter and shorter.



Her fingers dug deeper into my skin and I hoped they left a mark. I braced my hands on the couch and rolled my hips, bringing us both to that edge we'd needed to badly.

She came apart beneath me with my name as a whisper on her lips and her body locked around mine. I rolled my hips a few more times before the magic of my love for her flashed in my eyes and the world went dark. I moaned her name and squeezed my eyes shut so I could focus on the passion rolling through me.

When I opened my eyes again, I found Inez watching me with my face still in her hands. She giggled. "So, you like the tattoos then?"

I snorted. "I love them. Or should I demonstrate that again?"

Bright, white light flashed, filling my whole cabin. We both jumped and sat up, pulling the blanket from the couch over us just as Tegan appeared on the other side of the room.

"Here you go. One safe potion for the dragons and one safe spell to recite." She sat both on the kitchen counter. "Just remember to act normal and keep your eyes open."

I cleared my throat. "So, we can go back now?"

A white box opened up behind Tegan. She piled her black and purple hair on top of her head into a messy bun. "Good to go!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## INEZ



THE GLASS PITCHER might as well have been a bomb with a countdown in single digits for how I felt walking up to Pack House. *Que no cunda el pánico, Inés.*

Something moved in my peripheral vision so I looked over only to find it was Foster pulling his black leather gloves on. The new tattoo I gave him poked out of the top for one second longer before the gloves swallowed it whole. It filled my heart with happiness to know I was able to give him something to help with his pain and also his freedom. His hands lived in a bubble and they deserved to be free.

“I hate putting these on now,” Foster mumbled softly as we marched toward Pack House. I must’ve made a face because he reached down and squeezed my hand. It was only a moment then he let go again. “I just realized the tattoos might be a giveaway that something is up.”

I shook myself and smiled up at him. “*Por supuesto.* Tegan said to act normal and normal Foster wears gloves.”

“You okay?”

“No, but I trust her. *Them.* We just need to get this over with.” I took a deep breath then exhaled roughly. “I just want to be on the other side of this - whatever *this* is.”

“I’m right there with you.” He squeezed my elbow softly and glanced around. “Should we look for him?”

*Him.* There was only one person that could mean. Clayton. My stomach turned. *Hijo de puta.*

*Respira hondo, Inés.* I shook my head. “I want to change my clothes. If he sees me in yours it could be a red flag.”

He reached out and opened the front door for me. I ducked inside and hurried across the hall to the door to my apartment which was just on the right. Clayton’s apartment was across the hall so I needed to hurry if I didn’t want him to see me. I didn’t smell him through his door, which I usually could, so I took that as a sign he wasn’t around. I darted to my door and shoved my free hand on the handle - the door popped open immediately.

But then Foster started to turn. I grabbed his jacket and dragged him inside my apartment. Once the door shut behind him, I sighed. “We stick together. All night. Buddy system. That includes potty breaks and changing my clothes.”

He smiled and his shoulders sagged. “I was hoping you would say that. Go change, I’ll shut those curtains.”

I sat the glass pitcher down on my little work table then dove for my closet door. My nerves were shot. The attack from the Duenill last night was bad enough to rattle me for days but knowing trouble was coming our way tonight just made it worse. Sure, Tegan was now involved and I pitied the fool who went against her. Bentley made us a new potion that was safe for everyone to drink. Bettina, whom they called the spellmaster, had written a spell specifically for the dragons to keep them safe. All the signs pointed to this going well.

But the *what if* game was consuming my thoughts.

What if Clayton had another trick up his sleeve we didn't know about?

What if he caught on and attacked Foster?

What if someone got hurt tonight?

*¿Y si...? ¿Y si...? ¿Y si...? Para.*

*No, no, no. STOP THAT.* I pushed my hair back and shuddered. Those weren't healthy thoughts. Those thoughts weren't going to keep me on my toes and ready for anything. And I had to be ready for anything. I reached for clean clothes and made sure I picked garments that would keep me warm in the tundra tonight, the last thing I needed was to be freezing my ass off. My nerves were doing a good enough job of that already. My Ugg boots looked cozy and comfortable sitting on my closet floor yet I reached for my clean pair of black combat boots. I needed mobility and stability. As I tossed my clean boots, new socks, and that thick jacket Foster had bought for me my first week here onto the bed I spotted the markings on my pointer finger. My *wand finger*. The magic Tegan had given me was a blessing I would never wrap my head around, but it was also a flashing neon sign that said *WE GOT HELP FROM THE COVEN.*

"Hey, Foster?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you buy me gloves when I first got here?"

I smelled that fresh cut grass scent a split second before he leaned into my closet beside me to grab a pair of leather gloves tucked onto the little shelf on the wall. He stood up straight and handed them to me. "Covering your special finger?"

“Thanks.” I nodded and took them. “Don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

He chuckled and tucked my hair behind my ear. “What a surprise it will be.”

Then he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. I let myself get lost in his kiss for a moment then forced myself to step back. I licked my lips and sighed, tossing the gloves down onto my jacket. “If we don’t stop that right now—”

“I know.” He kissed me again but just a peck. “But I won’t be able to do that the rest of the night.”

My cheeks burned so I knew I was blushing. He winked then walked over and sat on the chair next to my work table, next to the potion. I tossed my clean jeans, sweater, and undergarments onto my bed with my other clothes I’d pulled out then hurried for the bathroom. I ripped my clothes off of me and put them inside my hamper, so that Clayton wouldn’t see Foster’s shirt and sweater if he helped himself to my room once again. *Wait.* I sped out of the bathroom and raced to my door.

“Inez?”

“He lets himself in my room. I don’t know how but he does.” I pressed my wand finger to the lock and recited the little locking spell I’d been using since childhood. Pinkish purple magic swirled around the door. I sighed with relief. “That spell overpowers magical locking systems.”

When I turned, I found Foster smirking with a blush on his cheeks. Those amber eyes looked me up and down. “Tegan was right. Separating at all tonight is a terrible idea.”

I followed his gaze then gasped. I was naked. “*Foster,*” I said with a snort. I smacked his shoulder playfully as I hurried

back to the bathroom.

Whenever my nerves were shot a splash of hot water on my face helped me recenter so I went straight to the sink - and froze as a scent carried up to my nose. I sniffed. Fresh cut grass. Foster hadn't been in my bathroom so that could only mean my clothes smelled like him. I dove for my hamper but the second I popped off the lid a wave of Foster's scent slammed into me. *Oh shit.* I brought my arms up to my nose and sniffed to see if it was in *me*. It was there. My stomach sank. We'd showered this morning but not since. That wasn't good. I lunged for the shower and turned the water on.

"Foster? Come in here." I hopped in the shower and sighed as the hot water spilled over my hair and bare skin. "And bring the potion with you."

He stepped in my bathroom and arched one eyebrow. The potion tucked safely under his arm. "I have questions."

"*Ven aquí.*" I chuckled. "Put the potion down on the shelf then get in here."

He cocked his head to the side. "I thought we made it clear a minute ago—"

"Yeah, and then I realized I smelled like you. So you probably smell like me. Think any of the animal noses in this ritual won't sniff that out?"

He opened his mouth then shut it with a huff.

"Sooo... *Ven aquí.*" I curled my finger at him, gesturing for him to join me. "Let's wash that off before we go out there and spoil everything?"

He grinned as he sat the pitcher on the shelf. Then he shut the bathroom door and locked it. "Just in case he comes looking."

*“Chico listo.”*

I meant to pick up the shampoo and wash my hair. I meant to make this a quick scrub ourselves with soap and get out there shower. But as he stalked naked across my bathroom toward me all I could do was stand under the water and stare. *He is mine.* My pulse quickened. When he pushed through the glass door and stepped into my shower I dove for him.

I’d never been so consumed by my need for someone until I had him.

I jumped up and wrapped my arms around his neck. Our tongues flicked and licked at each other. He gripped my thighs without hesitation and lifted my legs up to wrap around his body. The water rained over my head and then my back pressed into the cold tile. His body was a chiseled wall of heat pressing into me. I hadn’t even taken a breath before he slid inside of me. I moaned far too loud for communal living. My back slid up and down the cold, wet tile with each of his thrusts.

I fisted his hair and tipped his head back, forcing his eyes to look at me. *“Mine,”* I heard myself growl. I didn’t know why I kept saying that but I couldn’t stop myself.

He hissed and then his hips rocked into me with force. He pushed my legs up to hook over his shoulders and the new angle forced my breath from my lungs. My eyes rolled. A soft whimper left my lips. I clenched my teeth and dug my nails into his skin. I cried out his name. He cursed in my ear. The sounds of our bodies crashing together echoed around the small, tiled bathroom yet it only fueled my lust stronger and stronger.

I dug my heels into his ass. *“Foster. FOSTER.”*



He buried his face in the crook of my neck and trembled as his release rolled through his body like a tsunami. The sheer force of his passion sent mine over the edge into bliss. For a moment we just stood there in the aftermath of our love making, with our bodies twitching and trembling. The soft kiss he pressed to my lips made me want to curl up with him under a blanket and make love until the sun went down on the Equinox.

But as he lowered me to my feet and stepped under the fall of water I realized just how much was at risk here for me, just how much I could lose. Foster was my forever, the place my heart belonged to. I was terrified of what could happen with Clayton's plan and if my soulmate's life was in any danger.

"*Mi corazón,*" Foster whispered. He pulled me under the spray of water. "Tonight, we right the wrongs he's done and protect our people."

Despite the fact I wanted to stay and play in the shower, I knew time was limited. *We* knew. The ritual was set to start just after sunset, which was about an hour away. So we had to focus. We both scrubbed our bodies with soap as fast as we could, fortunately the soap was supplied by Issale for everyone so it wouldn't be weird if we both smelled like it.

Once we were dressed and *not* smelling like each other, I scooped up the glass pitcher in my gloved hands and headed for my door. Foster was a wall of anxiety behind me. As I reached for the handle my stomach tightened into knots. So maybe it wasn't only Foster that had anxiety over this. But I kept telling myself everything was going to be okay. The potion in my hands was harmless. Koth and the dragons knew what was up. The Coven knew. There was no logical reason to freak out and panic. Yet my emotions were far from logical.

Foster peeked through the gap between the curtain and my window then nodded. "All clear."

I nodded, took a deep breath, then opened my back door that led to the courtyard. Just as he'd said, there was no one in sight. Still, he slipped out my door and sidestepped to his door right beside mine so if anyone looked out their windows they would think he'd come out of his own. We were overthinking this, for sure. Foster had been in my apartment before. Yet our little secret made us act weird. I could only imagine what kind of bad spy movie style walk we both did across the courtyard, however the sun was setting which made the forest cast shadows on the courtyard so that probably helped hide us.

We made it about ten feet beyond the courtyard when Mischa rounded the corner. Her big blue eyes widened when she saw him. "Hey! There you two are!"

And then Clayton emerged from the tree line about thirty feet behind Mischa. I felt a wave of heat roll out of my real soulmate. My stomach tightened into knots. I cleared my throat. "*You talk to Mischa, I'll go to Clayton.*"

"*What? No,*" he whispered back. "*She said stay together.*"

"*She said act normal. He's going to act like my soulmate so you talk to Mischa,*" I whispered with a smile on my face as Mischa approached. "Hey Mischa!"

Foster stopped short then shuffled his weight around. "Hi, Mischa."

Luckily, Mischa gave me my escape when she said, "Oh, Inez, I think Clayton was looking for you."

I nodded. "He's right behind you, so if you excuse me, I'm just going to talk to him."

Mischa waved and she seemed oblivious to the panic in Foster's eyes. I smiled. Poor Foster, this was going to be hella awkward when she found out. However, Foster put on a good show of smiling friendly at her. I didn't look back. I didn't want to see Mischa fawning over my soulmate, I had enough of that visual to last a lifetime. He'd said he hadn't slept with her, not that I would've judged him for sleeping with her when we didn't know, but this was still too fresh for my heart. Later I would ask him for what they *had* done together, because I wasn't naïve enough to think nothing happened. For right now, I didn't care and didn't want to let my brain theorize.

Clayton looked up and met my eyes but then his gaze dropped to the pitcher in my hands, tucked half under my jacket, and he grinned. "Inez, my darling. You have returned."

I stopped in front of him and forced a smile. "Yeah, I just got back."

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my cheek, just barely missing my mouth. "I saw Foster's truck in the lot but then didn't see either of you—"

"Well, it's a long drive." I chuckled. "Neither of us wanted to stop for a potty break with Elan's special potion for tonight in the car."

"Of course, good thinking." His green eyes latched on the potion. "Did everything go all right? I won't lie, I was expecting you back last night."

I shuddered. "Foster thought he saw some Duenill so we hid out for a bit, not wanting to lead them back to Issale. Once the coast was clear there, the weather was atrocious. I insisted we just stay at his cabin. Didn't want to risk an accident with this."

He sighed. “So thoughtful and cautious. A perfect Priestess. Well I’m glad you’re both back safe and unharmed, and Foster isn’t wasting any time reconnecting with Mischa.”

My stomach turned but I didn’t let it show on my face. Instead I held the pitcher up. “Well would you like me to give this back to Elan?”

“And miss the beginning of the ritual? I think not.” He winked playfully and I wanted to rip his throat out like Foster had with the Duenill. “The pack was just gonna head over to the ritual, why don’t you three catch up with everyone? I’ll bring this to Elan and meet you there.”

*Of course you will. Hijo de puta. Sucia escoria. Eres una auténtica basura.* But again, I just smiled and nodded like everything was normal as I handed over the glass pitcher. Then I dug into my pocket for the Bettina’s tricky spell and held that out for him. I kissed his cheek then started backing away. “All right, I’ll see you over there then.”

“Yes, you will. Hurry, you don’t want to be late for your first ritual.” He wrapped his arm around the pitcher then turned and darted back between the trees.

I sighed. *Let the games begin.* Elan was undoubtedly going to be preoccupied with something, allowing Clayton the opportunity to make the switch. Even without his visions, at this point I assumed Koth had filled him in. My part in this was now over. All I had to do now was pretend everything was normal and keep my eyes open.

With that in mind, I bounced back over to Foster and Mischa with a smile. “Clayton says we better get going so we don’t miss the start of the ritual.”

“Oh shit, right!” She laughed. “Stupid me, that’s where I was headed. The pack is meeting on the other side of the building to go together. C’mon!”

As she skipped ahead, Foster and I exchanged nervous glances. Clayton had arranged for the pack to show up at the same time. There was a reason and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. When we rounded the other corner we found the whole pack was sitting there waiting. They spotted us in an instant and yelled their hellos.

“Sorry, we’re late.” Foster gestured to the trail ahead of us. “But shall we get going?”

“Lead the way, Mama Foster!” Jeffrey shouted from a few feet back. “Line ‘em up!”

“Single file like a good duckling, everyone!” Ronnie yelled and jumped to stand in a line behind Foster. “Let me see your best waddles.”

Their wives just rolled their eyes and got in line. Foster gave me one last glance but it was a stern look that made me jump. He was about to head off without me if I didn’t get in line. We were supposed to stay together, but by the time I got to the line Ronnie and Jeffrey started I was late to the party. Luckily, Isabella was behind Jeffrey, so she let me sneak in front of her. Which meant Foster was still close and in my eyesight. And my gut told me I could trust Isabella so I didn’t mind her behind me.

It turned out focusing was impossible once the *entire* line of wolves began to waddle like baby ducks behind Foster. The fact that most of them were quacking right along with Jeffrey and Ronnie made me laugh so hard tears actually slipped from my eyes. Foster kept glancing over his shoulder with a sideways grin like he was watching everyone but the way his

gaze landed on me first every time told me he was keeping tabs on me. That gave me all the warm and fuzzies.

Foster marched us all the way to the top of the mountain to the big clearing where they held all the big rituals or events that invited everyone. By the time we got there it seemed we were the last to arrive...so everyone turned to stare at the problem children. Everyone in our line was either laughing or quacking. Yet we were *all* waddling. It was contagious, I couldn't help myself. As we walked through the clearing every single child ran to join our line. Foster, the good sport he was, kept the march going like a conga line at a wedding reception.

Koth's boisterous laughter echoed around the clearing. I expected him to tell us to stop but then a teenager with wild hair and a crazy grin jumped into the line. I leaned back to Isabella and asked, "who's that?"

"Oh, that's Steve. He's a dragon."

"I'M A DUCKLING TONIGHT, ISABELLA!" Steve yelled and slid into line in front of me. He immediately began to waddle and quack.

I snort laughed. Then spotted Amelia off to the side so I threw my hand out to her. She grabbed Landy's hand and hurried to me. They jumped in behind Steve and in front of me. Steve spun to face them to give improvement tips on their waddles. The smile on Amelia's face made my heart happy. It wouldn't solve all her problems but it was a nice start. And I knew Deacon would be here soon after my suggestion. Unable to stop myself, I searched the crowd for Maddox. When I found him, I wasn't surprised to see him glaring. Though I was surprised that glare seemed directed at Steve. *Interesting.*

"STEVE!" Silas yelled with a growl.

“Ah, busted.” Steve winked to us then slipped out of the waddle conga line. “Coming, grandma!”

*Grandma.* I laughed. So Foster was mama and Silas was grandma. It was somehow fitting. At least Foster took it in stride. Silas would definitely snap at Steve for it. I glanced over my shoulder to see if Silas scolded him but instead found the dragons all lining up...with Elan and his glass pitcher.

“Over here, mother dearest!” Clayton called out.

Foster turned the waddle conga line, which had picked up speed to a full skip at this point, so we headed toward Clayton’s voice. When we got to him, I found Clayton beside a massive cauldron with a stack of cups. As each of us passed him, he handed us a cupful of a glowing blue potion. The line kept waddling until the very last person, which happened to be Mischa got their potion cup.

And then Koth cleared his throat and stepped forward.

Everyone froze in place.

Koth smiled and held a cup in the air. “Thank you to the pack for getting this ritual off to a good start.”

The pack, and the ones who’d joined in, all held their drinks up and cheered.

“Not that I want to ruin the fun and games, but we do need to get started. We can play the rest of the night away.” Koth laughed. He gestured to his left to Elan. “Our Shaman is going to say a few words to get this going. Elan?”

Elan stepped forward and bowed his head to Koth, then turned to everyone else. “Most of you know what tonight is about. But for the people who are new to our family, tonight is opening the Earth up for Spring. The equinox is in a few

weeks, where we'll do a much fancier ritual, but before that can happen we have to complete *this* ritual.”

Amelia gnawed on her bottom lip and wrung her hands.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her to my side.

“In order for us to complete the equinox we have to open our connection with the Earth. Ostara is here, let us prepare,” Elan continued. Those black lines darted across his face. “The Guard shall fill their cups of their potion, allowing us to get closer to this realm’s energy.”

“The Guard?” I frowned. “Have I heard that term before?”

Amelia shrugged. “It’s the dragons. They’re all members of The Guard, sworn to protect all shifters.”

As the dragons held their cups beneath the spot of that pitcher and filled my heart sank. Koth and Elan were doing a much better job at their show than I could have. Foster must have been in knots like me because he was suddenly just three feet to my right. Far enough apart to look normal and natural yet close enough to see each other.

Everyone held their drinks in the air still, the glowing blue potions swirling with light like they were lighters at a concert begging for an encore.

Steve and the younger dragons drank their potions first, the ones I hadn’t met yet. Followed by the twins Tyce and Dace, then Yaluk and Neka. Silas went next. Then Finn and Maddox at the same time. It was that moment I realized they’d drank in order of power. Finally, Koth drank his potion.

The moment he lowered his cup, everyone else drank theirs.



The potion was warm and tasted like hot chocolate. My whole body tingled. My feet felt weightless, like I was going to lift right off the ground. Light flashed to my left then to my right and again. I looked at each one only to find it was *people*. Their bodies were glowing that same blue color as the potion.

Heat danced in my toes. I gasped and looked down just as my body lit up like a Christmas tree. A blue one. My jaw dropped. I turned to Foster who just watched me with a smile on his glowing face.

Koth stepped forward with his arms raised. “My people, let the ritual begin.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## FOSTER



TEGAN HADN'T TOLD us a damn thing.

At the time, with the chaos that was Coven Headquarters, I'd just nodded and said okay without asking any questions. Yet now, with everything on the line, I felt like a lost puppy. We'd handed the potion over to Clayton, then joined the ritual and drank ours, and watched the dragons drink the fake-tainted potion. *Now what? We sit and wait for the unthinkable? The moment where the man who'd been a father to me for twenty years revealed himself as a monster.*

Up until this moment, I'd been pushing those emotions away - the ones that hurt. The sad ones. Instead I chose to focus on the rage. He'd tried to claim my soulmate as his and I didn't know how long it would've gone on that way before we finally figured it out. Because I never would have made a move on my adoptive father's soulmate. That code of ethics clearly was lost on him.

My stomach turned. I had no idea what was about to happen or more specifically what Clayton was going to try and do. Or how he would react when he realized we'd played him. Nausea bubbled up my throat. I swallowed roughly to try and keep it down before I puked up glowing blue potion. This man was a father to me. He'd raised me, treated me well, and

taught me everything I knew. He'd mentored me to be his Beta, to help the pack with everything and anything. I loved him like a father...and it was all a lie.

I didn't know how to handle it.

I wasn't prepared mentally or emotionally for what might happen tonight.

*"Foster?"*

I jumped and spun at the sound of my name but it was only Inez. I sighed so hard I swayed. "Sorry. Hi. You okay?"

She arched both of her eyebrows and smirked. "Let's turn that back on you for a hot second, please?"

"Oh. Um. Me?"

She glanced around and it was only when I followed her eyes I realized everyone else was getting into formation while I was still back at the cauldron. Granted it was only about ten feet away except it was about to be glaringly obvious.

"We better catch up." I cleared my throat and pointed to the side where I saw some open spots at the back. "Let's go over there, I don't want to be in the middle."

She nodded and let me lead the way but after a few feet she whispered, *"We've been so preoccupied with the plan that we haven't stopped to tend to how you're feeling."*

*"Oh, I feel fine,"* I whispered back, lying through my teeth.

"Foster." She shook her head then tapped on her side. *"There's no point in lying to me. I see you."*

We made it to the spot I'd aimed for, in the very back of the clearing with only the forest behind us. Since we didn't know if Clayton had people on his team, I didn't want anyone

behind me. Koth quieted everyone and started the ritual off, I wasn't paying attention. It'd been the same my whole life. However, Inez was staring up at me. So I pointed to Koth. "You don't want to miss it do you?"

She frowned, scrunching the skin between her eyebrows real tight. *"I'm a witch, I've done many rituals. And hopefully I'll do many more here. What I don't want to miss is my chance to check on you."*

I opened my mouth then closed it. There was both too much to say and not enough.

She gripped my elbow but the shadows from the towering pine trees cloaked most of us. *"It's okay to not be okay."*

*"Is it?"* We were whispering so no one else would hear us, though I was still surprised not a single person noticed.

Her face fell. *"He's been your father most of your life, and he's probably about to commit a heinous crime. There's no amount of preparation for that kind of betrayal."*

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose to try and reign in my runaway emotions. *"The what-ifs are a little suffocating right now. I don't know what's going to happen therefore I don't know how it's going to feel...or what I'm going to be able to do."*

She cocked her head to the side and glanced to Elan who was giving his ritual kickoff speech. Then her golden eyes snapped back to me. *"No one expects you to be the one to have to do something, Foster."*

I tapped my teeth against each other. *"How can you say that? I'm his Beta."*

*"You're his son, for all intents and purposes. No one expects you to act against him-"*

*“What about your friends we saw this morning?”* I arched my eyebrow, not wanting to say *The Coven* out loud just in case. Even though no one was paying us any attention. Even Clayton himself was up in the middle, as self-important as always. *“Won’t they expect me of all people to handle it?”*

She stared at me for a moment and I saw my own pain reflected in her eyes, as if she could feel what was in my heart. Then she closed her eyes and sighed. “No.”

*“You’re just saying that to—”*

*“NO.”* She opened her eyes and ducked until my gaze was forced to lock on her. *“Listen to me, a few months ago Jackson Lancaster discovered his best friend of ten years was their enemy and had gotten a lot of people killed. He tried to take him down himself, but in the end his own heart could not manage it. The others did it for him, gladly.”*

I frowned.

She reached down and squeezed my hand then let go. *“You don’t need to be the hero tonight, you just need to be here tomorrow. You understand? Let us handle it.”*

Every part of me wanted to fight her request, to insist I was more than capable...but deep in my soul I knew I wasn’t. I liked to think I’d be able to take action against someone for harming other people right in front of me even if that person was my adoptive father, my family, except I wasn’t one hundred percent sure. That hesitation and uncertainty was a liability that could get someone else hurt.

So I took a deep breath then nodded. *“I’ll be on defense tonight, watching for the others. But you need to be here tomorrow, too. Deal?”*

She grinned and nodded.

*Heavens, I love you, woman.* I opened my mouth to tell her that when light flashed in my peripheral vision. We both jumped and turned back to the crowd - but it was just everyone shifting. I exhaled with relief. The ritual was beginning, and so were the butterflies in my stomach. As always with this potion, our glowing human forms transformed into glowing animal forms. All around the clearing I saw animals of all types aside from all the wolves. Several types of bear. A wide range of big cats - though I wished we had lions, cheetahs, or tigers in our arsenal. But it wasn't just the big predatory animals. We had dogs, squirrels, rabbits, snakes, opossums, raccoons, every type of bird I could think of, and one iguana who was six feet long. It was a wide variety.

And they were all glowing a faint blue color.

I looked to Inez and nodded. We both closed our eyes and shifted. When I opened mine again I found Inez standing beside me in her black wolf form but unlike everyone else, she wasn't glowing blue. Pinkish-purple magic swirled around all of her paws.

"Inez, my darling?" Clayton called out from the center of the clearing. He glanced left and right. "Please step forward, don't be shy."

I clenched my teeth to stop myself from growling.

Inez stepped forward a few feet, that magic swirling around her feet even more.

Clayton grinned. "Ah, there you are. Can you shift back?"

Inez closed her eyes. A cloud of her pinkish-purple magic swirled around her like a tornado. In two short seconds she was standing on two feet again. She'd gotten good at shifting between her forms in such a short amount of time. I was very

proud of her. She was incredible...even as she looked at Clayton with a wide smile on her face that made me want to vomit.

“Yes? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no, dear.” Clayton held his hand out toward her and waved her forward. “Normally, for the Ostara initiation ritual I recite the spell but since our Priestess is here now I thought perhaps you’d like to do the honors?”

Inez blushed bright pink. She looked to Elan. “Shaman, is that all right?”

Those black lines shot across his face but he grinned. His eyes changed from green to gold to amber to violet to white. He twirled his staff slowly between his fingers, making the five crystals hanging from the top swirl around. “Yes, that sounds lovely.”

“Okay, cool.” Inez held her chin high and pushed her shoulders back. She didn’t look back at me, but that was impossible with everyone’s eyes on her. She marched through the crowd to the center of the clearing and stopped just in front of Clayton. “What do I do?”

Clayton grinned and tucked her hair behind her ear. I dug my claws into the ground. This sick son of a bitch knew she wasn’t his soulmate and yet he played the part. *Why? What do you have planned for her? What are you going to do to her?*

“Well, you’re going to just read this spell out loud.” He handed her that folded up piece of parchment paper I’d given him. Once I took it, he looked to everyone else. “Pack? Formation, please. Everyone else, you know your part.”

All at once everyone began to move. I’d explained in vivid detail the whole drive back how this ritual was supposed to go,



so she would know exactly what went wrong the moment it happened. Like the pro she was, she moved right into her spot. Meanwhile, the wolves were moving into formation which was really just several rows in a circle around her. I made sure to cut my way to be in the circle right behind her. It wasn't my usual place to be, I usually took the back row so I was the bridge between the pack and everyone else. A few people gave me funny looks, like they didn't know what I was doing.

Clayton chuckled and patted my shoulder. "You're always on top of things, Foster. Good idea to be up here to help her if she needs it."

Inez's gaze snapped to me then shot away. "When do I start?"

Clayton backed away until he was directly across from me in the same circle I was in. He nodded. "As soon as I shift, the pack will howl. Then you may begin."

He gave her a nauseating wink then shifted into his brown wolf form. All at once the pack stuck their noses to the sky and howled. I was so busy watching Clayton and Inez I missed it entirely. I glanced over to Elan and the dragons but their faces wore masks of ignorance. I envied their ability to act like this wasn't about to go to shit.

But then Inez began reciting the spell out loud and everyone flinched.

Because the words were in a language we didn't speak in Issale.

It was the ancient language of the arcana. Of witches.

Even I gasped. It surprised me because I hadn't expected The Coven to give it back to us in their language. Sure, Vincent the witch had given it to us that way but still. Though

I supposed it made sense. In English it would've been too obvious.

All of the animals glanced around at each other. I heard their telepathic thoughts in my head but I tuned them out. My focus was on Clayton, who shifted back to human form and started for Inez as if he was actually going to stop her. He put on quite a show of confused and nervous, clutching his figurative pearls and whispering to the people around him. Off to my right, the dragons all wore matching scowls - and they were all laser focused on my soulmate.

I had no idea what she was saying and I hadn't even looked at the spell before we handed it over but I knew it was about to be over because the air was crackling around my ears. The ground vibrated and grew warm. The breeze vanished. Clouds moved over our heads, blocking out the stars and moon. Everyone began to panic, lifting their paws off the ground and scurrying back. I heard squawks, growls, and hisses all around me.

My pulse quickened.

*This is it. Whatever Tegan had planned, it's about to happen.*

Inez lifted a few inches off the ground. Hot energy rolled off her like a tsunami. Everyone gasped and leapt backwards. Then pinkish-purple magic exploded out of her, painting the sky the color of her power. White light flashed from the other side of the clearing. Everyone spun toward it, their fur standing tall. Susan's mountain lion growl echoed between the trees. Every muscle in my body screamed at me to flee but I buried my claws in the dirt and held my position. I wasn't leaving Inez.

People lunged from within that white light and my heart stopped. I had no idea what I was expecting from Tegan and her sneaky plan but this was not it. People rushed toward us wearing antique silver body armor and matching helmets that looked straight out of a gladiator battle. There were dozens of them and they charged with gnarly looking swords gripped in their hands. Each of them had long straight hair down to their hips the same exact shade as fresh fallen snow. Their helmets had built in masks so I couldn't see any of their faces. I tried to look for eyes I recognized but it was impossible.

“Unseelie fae,” Koth growled.

*Wait WHAT? Tegan said that wasn't going to work. Is this part of her plan? How? Where is she?*

All of Issale was in a panic. The wolf pack rushed forward with the bears and big cats in line while the kids were rushed into the forest to flee. Magic flashed across the clearing and back. I stood frozen. For the first time in my adult life I didn't know what to do. The ground shook like an earthquake, knocking me and Inez off our feet. Clayton was screaming orders to the pack. Koth and the dragons leapt forward then slid to a stop and looked down at themselves.

“*I can't shift,*” Finn whisper shouted. He spun in a circle and smacked his body. “KOTH!”

The other dragons seemed to be struggling too.

My pulse beat faster than hummingbird wings. This wasn't right. The potion wasn't supposed to work. It wasn't Clayton's. Tegan and Bentley made it. Unless it was somehow part of their plan? None of this made sense. I was trying to keep my panic in check but the lightning that cracked across the sky was real. The river of ice-cold water that cut across the

clearing to my left was *definitely* real. Thick vines shot through the ground, knocking people to the ground.

Inez climbed to her knees but the ground shook so hard she couldn't get up right. I leapt toward her and pushed my body into hers to stabilize her. She wrapped her arm around my neck and grabbed a fistful of my fur. Her eyes were wide and bouncing left to right.

“PULL BACK!” Koth shouted. His violet eyes were wild with rage.

Finn spun and leapt toward Koth just as one of the Unseelie fae emerged from between the trees. I saw a flash of sapphire blue eyes before the fae flicked his arm and a vine as thick as my arm with three inch long thorns shot from the fae's palm and pierced through Finn's chest and out his back. Finn's green eyes widened. He threw his head back and gasped but blood gushed from his mouth. He dropped to the ground in a pool of blood.

“NO!” Maddox screamed and raced for his cousin. His face was sheet white. “NO, NO, NO!”

He dropped to his knees and reached for the vine - red lightning struck him right in the chest, in the same spot Finn had been struck. Maddox let out a strangled scream then his eyes rolled and he collapsed on the ground. Unmoving. Landy and her parents screamed his name and charged for him. But it was Amelia who got there first.

Everything was in shambles. Panic. Fear. Screaming.

This had to be real. It felt real. But how was it real? Tegan assured us she had a plan. I was too stunned to move - *no wait* - my feet were stuck. It was like an invisible forcefield had wrapped around me and Inez, pinning us in place. We both

fought against it but it didn't budge. All we could do was watch as these Unseelie fae warriors attacked our home. There were dozens of them waiting in the trees with their swords at the ready, like bullets in a magazine waiting to be fired.

Koth growled then flew back like something slammed into him. He gripped his throat and gasped for air. His face was bright red but his lips were turning blue. The other dragons were panicked to swat at the invisible strangler to no avail. Silas's entire body trembled and convulsed like he was pushing as hard as he could to force his shift. Smoke billowed from his nostrils.

Inez cursed and ripped her glove off. Her pinkish-purple magic shot like a rocket from the tip of her finger and burst in Koth's face. He gasped and fell backwards, crashing into Neka who caught him.

"ATTACK!" Clayton screamed. I turned toward his voice and found him in his human form. "ATTACK!"

I cursed. I'd forgotten to keep my eyes on him. There was too much happening all at once and it was horrific. Yet none of the Unseelie so much as glanced in our direction. They had the clearing surrounded, trapping everyone inside. There was so much screaming I couldn't tell whose voice was whose. I tried to move but it was useless.

Elan's eagle form swooped down to dive bomb a few of the Unseelie when the tallest one threw a sword like a spear. It skewered him right through the gut. He squawked and dropped out of the air, disappearing into the chaos.

Clayton's eyes widened. He spun away from our falling leaders and yelled, "ATTACK!"

The pack charged. Several of them pounced on Unseelie. I watched Clayton, unwilling to miss a single move he made. I expected him to attack, too. I expected him to pull a weapon and start hurting his fellow shifter. That had to be his plan. Except he didn't do that. He spun on his heels and sprinted to Koth, sliding to a stop in front of him. I held my breath and cringed but he just turned his back to Koth like he was shielding him. *No, no, no, I don't like that.*

*"Get away from him,"* Inez whispered. She cursed in Spanish and swatted at her legs. *"Let us go!"*

And that forcefield vanished. I shifted to my human form, took Inez's hand, and sprinted for our king. My stomach was in knots. Animals were dropping left and right. Three massive grizzly bears were toppled over from being hit with hail the size of baseballs. Inez mumbled behind me in Spanish.

The ground exploded under the dragons, throwing them apart from each other. Inez, Clayton, and I all crawled our way back to Koth at the same exact time. I met her stare and nodded. She slipped around Clayton so we had him sandwiched between us just in case.

Then I glanced over my shoulder and met Koth's gaze. *YOU OKAY?* I mouthed.

He nodded once, quick and short.

Yaluk screamed like a banshee. I looked up just as he threw himself in the air with all four limbs stretched wide like a starfish doing a bellyflop. He tackled four of the Unseelie with a grunt and scream. He popped back up but was splattered with fresh blood on his face and chest.

*"SILAS!"* Landy shrieked.

Silas had just been right beside Koth until that explosion. Now he was halfway across the clearing, clamoring to get back to us. He may not have been able to shift but he had a dagger in each hand. He leapt from Unseelie to Unseelie, slicing as he moved until he got to one of them who didn't go down easy. This fae was almost as tall as Silas. Their swords crashed into each other - and then he was ice. In the blink of an eye his entire body was frozen solid. That Unseelie did a tight spin, swinging their sword right through him.

My stomach turned. I looked away before I saw something I'd never unsee. Except my gaze landed right on Landy...with blood gushing from her throat. She dropped to the ground. Amelia screamed. She lunged forward, silvery light flashed all around her, and then she landed on all fours in the form of a massive white winged lion. Those violet eyes burned with rage. Amelia barreled across the clearing, plowing everything in her path until she got to us. Then she spun and threw her wings wide, blocking our enemies sight of Koth. She dug her paws into the dirt and roared.

Other animals raced toward us, filling in the space all around Koth. He was our king and in this moment we were his little army. A barrier to try and keep him alive and safe.

One of the bigger Unseelie guys grabbed Tyce and Dace by the back of their necks and slammed their heads together. Blood sprayed over the Unseelie's silver armor. He tossed them aside like dirty rags. Yaluk charged for him with a roar when a black cloud swallowed him whole. He choked and dropped lifelessly to the dirt.

Everyone was full blown panicking now, and part of me was right there with them. Tegan's confident words rang through my mind but it was hard to hang on to in the face of

this carnage. I glanced around and my heart stopped. Neka's body was twenty feet away engulfed in bright orange flames. My chest tightened. Koth was the only dragon left. Some of us had managed to take down a few Unseelie but they still outnumbered us. We only had the one dragon left and he couldn't even shift.

*Please let this be some sick joke.*

*Please don't let all of our worst fears come to life.*

Clayton yelled orders to the pack but my ears were ringing. And it didn't matter, I wasn't moving from this spot in front of Koth because an Unseelie was sprinting right for us and I did not like the look in those pale eyes. They were sharp and fierce. The air around this one pulsed.

"*Steady,*" I heard myself say with a growl.

But then the Unseelie turned into smoke and shot right through the narrow space between my body and Clayton's. One second they were in front of me, the next gone. I'd never seen a person become *smoke*. My breath caught in my throat. They reformed just in time to tackle Koth to the ground. The world seemed to slip into slow motion, like one of those horrible dreams where no matter how hard you kicked your legs you barely moved. It was happening too fast. I lunged forward just as the Unseelie raised their arm and a black dagger glistened in the moonlight, a swirl of magic with every color of the rainbow coiled around the blade. Inez got there first, tackling the Unseelie from the side like a linebacker. Their black dagger flew in the air so I dove forward to catch it, landing on my knees right beside Koth.

I picked up the dagger and started to stand when Clayton's hand gripped my wrist and pulled. He swept my legs out from under me at the same time he forced my hand down in a swift



swinging motion. I cursed and fought him but it was too late, I was too close. With both his hands still gripping my wrist, Clayton forced me to slam the dagger blade right into Koth's throat.

Blood gushed like a tidal wave.

*NOOOOOO!* But no sound came out. My body turned ice cold. I shivered and gagged. Koth choked on his own blood. His body turned a sickly gray shade and trembled as his life drained from the wound the dagger made...the dagger still gripped firmly in *my* hand. *What have I done? How did this happen? KOTH!*

Clayton screamed and leapt to his feet. "FOSTER WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!"

I flinched like he'd hit me. *ME?*

Clayton looked down at me in horror. He pushed his blood soaked hands into his brown hair. "YOU KILLED THE KING...FOSTER KILLED THE KING!"

My jaw dropped. Every ounce of oxygen left inside of me was sucked out as it all clicked into place in my mind. The last twenty years had all been a lie. He'd been prepping for this moment right here. Where in the midst of the chaos he would look like the hero who tried to save the King, and I was the one who killed him. This was his plan all along.

I was the calf raised for slaughter.

And Inez the traitorous soulmate. He'd faked their marks as a form of gaslighting everyone else into feeling bad for him, into thinking he was the victim.

Because there was no chance in hell he was going to let either of us live to see sunrise.

I glanced to Inez only to find that Unseelie had her pinned on her back.

And then Koth *sat up*.

I froze.

Clayton shrieked and reached for him like he wanted to help. “*My Lord—*”

“Stop.” Koth raised his hand and yanked the dagger out of his throat. With his violet eyes locked on Clayton, he slammed the blade into his other palm. Except, nothing happened. The blade should’ve gone out the other side but it didn’t. Koth arched one eyebrow. He pulled the dagger back then with one finger pressed on the tip of the blade *and it slid inside of the hilt*. “Well, would you look at that.”

It was a fake dagger. One of those toy daggers where the plastic blade retracted inside itself. It was definitely one of the good ones they used in theatre when they needed a kill to look believable.

I rolled onto all fours and retched.

Koth patted my back. “Breathe, my friend. It’ll be all right.”

I leaned back, sitting on my heels in the blood soaked dirt. Inez was still pinned beneath the Unseelie but neither of them were struggling. Amelia was *glaring* at Clayton with that lion tail swishing back and forth aggressively. She growled and sank into pounce position but then an Unseelie walked up beside her and put his hand on her shoulder, red smoke coiled around her face.

Koth jumped to his feet - and shifted into his massive black dragon form.

“What...how...” Clayton stuttered and stumbled backwards. “No...the potion...”

Koth growled so loud the ground rumbled under my feet. Smoke billowed from his nostrils. Silas stood up from where I’d seen him chopped up looking entirely normal, and then he, too, was in his dragon form. Yaluk lunged from the ground as that gnarly brown dragon with the spiked tail. The flames consuming Neka vanished the moment he shifted into that glorious blue dragon form of his. Tyce and Dace were next, followed by Steve, Kiev, and Tor. An Unseelie with ivy wrapped around his silver armor reached down and lifted a dazed but perfectly alive Finn to his feet. Maddox sat up already in his dragon form.

Elan walked out of the woods carrying that staff of his and rolling his shoulders.

All at once, every single shifter that had been slain during that battle stood up. They blinked and looked around in confusion.

Everyone turned to glare at Clayton in menacing silence.

It was Inez who spoke first. “*Diosa mía*, Clayton. Fuck around and you find out.”

He turned toward her with wide eyes. “*I beg your pardon.*”

She shook her head. “Too late for that.”

All of the other Unseelie moved forward, forming a perimeter circle. That Unseelie fae that had turned to smoke to attack Koth walked around Inez and glanced around the clearing. Once everyone was looking at them they raised their left hand in the air and snapped their fingers.

The silver armor vanished. Off all of them. Gone were the fierce warriors of the Unseelie fae. In their place stood two

dozen people in normal, casual clothing. Some as young as sixteen while a few seemed to be in their forties. I liked the flannel shirt on the one guy. One of them had indigo colored hair. Another had black *and* blonde hair. The tallest one held a six-foot-tall glowing sword and yet he still towered over it.

The one who'd snapped their fingers had black and purple hair and the palest green eyes I'd ever seen. I recognized her in an instant. Tegan Bishop stood there looking tall and terrible, like she owned the world. On her left arm, still raised in the air, was the Roman numeral *II* Marked in black on her pale skin.

I looked to the others and found all but a few had their own black Marks.

The Coven. The Unseelie fae were actually The Coven.

Tegan had assured us she had a plan and that our genuine reactions were a necessary evil...but dammit I was not prepared for *that*. My breath left me in a rush. I leaned forward and braced my hands in the dirt as oxygen burned a path down my throat. *It was fake. The whole thing was fake. Good GOD that was horrible.*

“*The Coven?*” Clayton shrieked. He spun and lunged – and tackled Inez to the ground in a move faster than I thought he was capable. He wrapped both hands around her throat and squeezed. “*You set me up!*”

Tegan's eyes widened and I snapped. That reaction from her was real. I pulled the dagger from where I stashed it inside my boot and threw it as hard as I could. It flipped hilt over blade three times before the blade pierced Clayton's skin and sank into his back. He cried out and arched his back, releasing his hands from her throat. It wasn't a killing blow, I knew that. We all knew that. And I wished it had been. This man had

tried to make me kill my own king then was strangling *my* soulmate...and yet my aim was just left of a killing blow.

Clayton glared over his shoulder at me. "*Foster?*"

"Get off my soulmate," I growled.

He gasped.

"Guess you picked the wrong girl to play house with, *darling.*" Inez pulled her sweater up to reveal to him, and to everyone, the image of a white wolf with amber eyes marked on her skin. White light flashed in her palm. She wrapped her hand around the light and thrust it forward. At the last second the light faded to reveal it was a serrated dagger and then she slammed it right into his chest. "Everyone knows who you are now."

Clayton gasped but choked on his own blood, just like Koth had a moment ago. His body went limp. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth and like a waterfall from the hole in his chest. He gasped again. His body twitched and slouched.

Inez jumped to her feet so she towered over him as he gulped for air that would never save him, because Inez had done what I couldn't. She'd delivered the killing blow in one swift, easy motion by a steady hand and hateful rage in her eyes. As he grasped for his final breaths of life she gripped the hilt and yanked the dagger out of his heart. "You're just mad we played your game better, asshole. Rot in the misery you deserve."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## INEZ



KOTH ROARED and fire rushed from his mouth. The last thing Clayton saw was the king he tried to assassinate setting him on fire...with the son he betrayed leaning over him. I handed the dagger to Tegan and leapt to Foster's side, taking his hand in mine.

Silence filled the clearing but for the crackling of the flames.

I felt no remorse or regret for what I'd just done. I felt only pain for my soulmate whose hand trembled in mine. This was going to leave a scar worse than the ones on his hand and I wasn't going to be able to cover it with a pretty tattoo. I reached down and tugged his leather gloves off so he could feel the warmth of my skin to anchor him. To remind him he wasn't alone.

I never would have imagined myself capable of such cold-blooded murder and there was a part of me that was going to be thoroughly *shooketh* once the shock of tonight wore off. But that man - that *monster* - attempted to kill my king. *Our* king. A king so pure of soul and goodness, a king who had done more for his people in a decade than any of his predecessors had in centuries. A king beloved by all of his kingdom - except for one jealous, power hungry jackass. That

alone was worth the deed. But then to frame my soulmate was salt to the gnarly wound of his betrayal.

We all watched in silence as Clayton's body burned to ashes on the dirt. I refused to take my eyes off of him, I needed to watch every second to know it happened. It only took a minute or two. When he was dust in the wind, I looked up and found hundreds of eyes on me. The rest of Issale stood frozen in shock, their eyes wide and jaws dropped. They were all still in animal form. None of them spoke, I wasn't even sure they were breathing. Not that I blamed them, they just watched all of that happen with no warning and no clue what was happening. Tegan had told me telepathically a few things so I knew it was them but judging by Foster's reactions she hadn't told him.

I glanced around the clearing to The Coven members and the few extras who'd come with them and felt my own nerves flutter. They were menacing and they just stood there. Emersyn had little flames dancing at the tips of her long blonde hair. Amelia was sitting beside Deacon, he had his arm around her shoulder. She was shaking but that red mist rolling out of him seemed to be calming her down. I spotted Bettina with ice covering her arms. Easton wore a full body of armor. The girl I assumed was his girlfriend had bright white light shining from her palms. The one who'd taken Finn down stood beside Finn's green dragon with flowers in his hair. I knew all of their names, they were famous among witches, but I couldn't match all those names to faces yet. There was of course Savannah who I wasn't surprised to find holding a pretty yet gnarly looking dagger - the same one she'd chased Cooper Bishop out of the kitchen with. But as he stood beside her looking like he dared someone threaten her, I figured there was no bad feelings about that incident.



Bentley stood next to Elan, who was back in his human form. The two of them were unsettling together. Bentley gripped the locket hanging around his neck and light kept flashing between his fingers. Orange flames kept dancing along his Hierophant Mark. While Elan's eyes changed colors so fast I barely registered the color before it changed again. And those black lines spread across his face over and over like a strobe light.

Tennessee gripped that glowing six-foot-long sword in his hand and marched across the clearing. He narrowed those mismatched eyes on everyone as he walked over and stopped in front of Tegan and Koth. Tegan turned to look up at Koth who towered over us in his black dragon form, then she nodded.

Koth growled deep in his throat.

Foster's eyes snapped to attention, looking to the rest of Issale.

I gripped his hand harder, wondering if Koth had just said something telepathically to everyone else and I missed it. Silas growled then craned his neck back and spit fire into the night sky. One by one each of the dragons followed suit.

Then Koth shifted back into his human form but the heat in his stare could've caused a wildfire. He balled his hands into fists at his side then stepped forward so he was shoulder to shoulder with Tennessee, yet only a few inches taller than my Coven Leader. The two of them glared at the crowd.

Tegan glanced left and right then stared ahead. "Jackson Lancaster, please come forward."

The guy who stepped out of the line of witches surrounding the clearing couldn't have been older than

Carmen yet there was no mistaking how lethal he was. That rose tattoo on his left thumb was a threat not a peace offering. His dark blond hair was pushed back away from his face. His eyes were the brightest aquamarine I'd ever seen, they reminded me of the ocean in Greece. But the curved sword he carried was as long as his arm and reminded me that pretty faces could be dangerous.

He stopped in front of Koth and bowed his head. "King Kothari," he said with a smooth British accent. I knew for a fact Koth was friends with The Coven so the sign of respect in front of his people was admirable and showed a lot about Jackson Lancaster's character.

Koth nodded. "I am in need of your assistance."

"Whatever you need, my liege." Jackson pressed his left hand to his chest. "And I can still read them while in animal form, if they are more comfortable as they are."

Koth squeezed his shoulder and nodded then stepped forward. "I'm going to explain what has happened here tonight, but first, I need to make sure we are safe. The Coven is here to assist us. Jackson Lancaster as the gift of truth. I'm going to ask you a question and you're all going to answer. Jackson is going to know if you're lying. Nod if you understand."

Everyone nodded. Their gazes bouncing from Koth to Jackson to Coven Leaders and back again.

"Good." Koth put his hands on his hips. "Were you involved in Clayton's plans for what happened tonight?"

*Diosa mía. Por favor, que sean inocentes.*

If possible, their eyes widened even more. Some of them stood frozen in place while others shook their heads rapidly.

Jackson looked left and right and back again. “They are all innocent.”

Foster sighed so hard he leaned into me. I understood his relief. This was a major blow, I couldn’t imagine any one else betraying us. I leaned into him, needing to feel the warmth radiating off of his body.

Koth exhaled roughly then scrubbed his face and cursed under his breath. Then he dropped his hands. “Thank you, Jackson.”

“Any time, my liege.” They shook hands. Then Jackson turned to his Coven Leaders.

“Thanks. That’s all.” Tenn nodded once. “Babe?”

Tegan smiled. She snapped her fingers and a white box appeared on the far side of the clearing, exactly where it had a few minutes ago when we thought the Unseelie Fae had been summoned. She gestured to it. “Thank you, my Coven for the assist. You may all go.”

The rest of The Coven nodded once to Koth then turned and marched right into that white box, vanishing from sight. Tegan’s portals blew my mind.

Amelia flinched then in a silvery flash shifted back into her human form. “Wait, Deacon!”

Deacon stopped and threw his arms open. Amelia dove for him. I wanted to cry at the sight of her squeezing onto him for dear life. Deacon rubbed his hand over her back a few times then stepped back. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Promise.” Then he winked to her, spun, and sprinted to catch up to Emersyn who had stopped just outside the portal. They joined hands then vanished.

Tegan and Tennessee didn't even blink. They stood there in their matching all black ensemble with their arms crossed over their chests just watching.

Once the portal box closed, Koth cleared his throat and turned his attention to his own people. "I am sorry for the fright you've been caused tonight. We are safe, you were not in danger at any point this evening-"

"Clayton tried to kill you!" One of the guys in the back yelled.

Koth sighed but he nodded. "Yes, he did. Elan and I have been watching him for weeks now, suspicious of his behavior alone and with the added insight of Elan's visions. Yet we did not have a clear picture of what he was planning. We took extra measures to ensure all of your safety, I assure you of that. But we had to wait it out, let him dig his own grave so to speak. When Clayton revealed himself as Inez's soulmate and showed the Markings that night at her welcome bonfire we knew it was fake because it didn't look the way it was supposed to. Fortunately, Inez is a good sport and is not holding that against us - at least not yet."

I chuckled. "I think we're even?"

"I like the question in there." Koth smirked at me and gave me a wink. Then his expression sobered as he turned back to the others. "Had we realized her real soulmate was a few feet away we would have handled it differently."

"It's best we didn't," Foster said softly.

Amelia gnawed on her bottom lip and raised her hand. "What happened exactly?"

"A few days ago Inez witnessed Clayton stealing the potion for tonight - the one for the dragons. Then Clayton sent

them on a little side quest to meet a witch to receive special ingredients to add to it and a special spell to recite...”

I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead to Foster’s shoulder. Koth continued to explain to everyone in detail what had happened with surprising detail. He really hadn’t missed a thing. I couldn’t believe we’d done all these things, that this was what we endured. Foster’s hand tightened on mine.

“Clayton sent the Duenill for you?” Amelia all but growled.

I looked up to her and frowned.

“No,” Tegan answered shortly. “The witch they met up with did, though we have not yet gotten the reasoning out of him.”

I gasped. “You found him?”

The answering smile on Tennessee’s face sent an arctic shiver down my spine. “We have him.”

Foster shuddered. “Glad to hear it. Thank you.”

“But we’re glad the Duenill attacked you - in a twisted kind of way - because it proved that the spell Inez created works.”

Everyone’s eyes snapped right to me.

Butterflies danced in my stomach. I peeked up at Koth. “May I tell them?”

He grinned. “Please do, Priestess.”

I licked my lips and turned to my fellow Issalians. “Elan and I worked together to make a potion and then the Goddess of the witches blessed it. I don’t want everyone to freak out and ask for it yet, we need to test it more just to be safe. So

Koth will make that call, but all you have to do is drink it once and then you'll be able to detect the Duenill on sight."

Everyone gasped.

Half of them startled themselves into human form.

"What do you mean?" Landy asked in a rush. "How exactly?"

"Think of it as an illusion, it's not really happening but it's just a way to warn you that the person who looks entirely normal is our enemy. When you see them, it will appear they are covered in ice. May be a lot or a little, but it'll be there. This may give us the warning we need to get to safety before they have a chance to attack."

"That would've been good a few months ago," Amelia grumbled.

Koth chuckled. "Indeed but we are excited and grateful our Priestess has given it to us now. As she said, I want to test it before we give it to everyone. We'll start with the dragons then move to the pack then onto some of you. If you can just be patient with us, we will get it to you as soon as possible."

Everyone grinned and turned to each other. They whispered and howled in excitement.

My heart soared. My favorite part of running my shop was getting to help my clients but this was that feeling on steroids. One simple little potion might save countless lives. It was going to be the first thing I perfected.

"Well, my friends," Koth said with a wide smile to Tennessee and Tegan. "Thank you for saving our asses tonight."

Tennessee smirked. "Oh, I think we still owe you a few."

“Yeah, and that was fun.”

“*Babe.*”

“What?” Tegan giggled and shrugged. “Did you *see* his face? Epic. And Koth’s acting skills? Chef’s kiss.”

Koth laughed. “Thank you.”

“You’re terrifying.” Foster shook his head at Tegan. “You know that?”

“Oh, she knows.” Tennessee chuckled. He held his left hand out to shake Koth’s. “We’ll leave you to your people now. But you know where to find us.”

“Of course. Right back at you.”

“OH! I have a couple things for you - where’s Elan?”

“I’m here!” Elan skipped out from behind Neka and over to Tegan, still carrying his tall staff with the crystals hanging from it. “I was trying not to spook everyone with my face.”

“That makes sense. Well I have these for you...” Tegan reached into the inside pocket of her studded black leather jacket and pulled out a vial with shimmery purple magic inside. “This is a calming potion made by the Lead Crone Myrtle Proctor and Lead Healer Katherine. They’re literally the best of the best at this stuff. They wanted to give your people something to take the edge off after tonight’s scare. Myrtle insisted Elan mix it with his usual calming potion - she said you’d know what that meant - and distribute it tonight. It’s imperative you do this before attempting to re-do the Ostara initiation ritual.”

“Ohhh.” Elan did a little dance as he took the vial, popped the top off, and sniffed it. “From Myrtle. What an honor.

Please give her my gratitude. I shall make it for everyone tonight.”

“Perfect. And the other thing...” She held her finger up. “Don’t move.”

She turned into smoke, vanishing from sight.

Everyone flinched.

Tennessee just shrugged. “She’s terrifying, remember? But she’s on our side.”

“Thank the Goddess for that.”

And then she was back, reappearing just as she’d left - like she hadn’t left at all. She grinned and held her left hand up to reveal a massive blue crystal. It glowed and shimmered in the moonlight.

Everyone gasped.

“The Air Stone,” Foster breathed in awe.

I frowned. “The Air Stone?”

Elan smiled and sighed with relief. “Ah, it is nice to have you back my old friend.” He took the crystal from her and placed it at the top of his staff.

“Sorry for keeping it longer than we expected-”

“No, it’s fine. We understand.” Koth nodded.

Tegan hooked her arm around Tennessee’s and smiled. “Ta ta for now!”

White light flashed and then they were gone...leaving Issale with only shifters again.

“What’s the Air Stone?”



“It’s one of the five Elemental Stones given to Earth from the Heavens,” Foster said softly. “One was given to each species.”

“The Air Stone is ours.” Koth stared at it like it might vanish again. “It gives us our magic to shift and protects us. The Coven had to borrow it a few months back but they gave us replacement crystals in the interim. Now they’ve returned it to us.”

“And we have the other crystals still.” Elan reached up and fidgeted with the crystals hanging. “Double trouble.”

We all chuckled.

Koth rubbed his hands together and turned back to everyone else. “I am sorry you all were kept in the dark for tonight, sometimes it’s a necessary evil to keep us all safe. I am especially sorry to the pack. I am not blaming any of you for Clayton’s actions, your alpha betrayed all of us. But I would like you to pick your new alpha. So you can take some time to think and discuss your options-”

Every single wolf leapt forward, racing toward Foster. They stopped in front of him, forming lines, then bowed low to the ground at his feet.

Foster sucked in a startled breath. I felt his pulse beat harder in his veins. His amber eyes widened as he looked down on our pack as they chose him. I stepped forward then turned to face him. His eyes watched me wearily. I just smiled and held his hand as I lowered to me knees in front of him. I was part of the pack, and I could not imagine a better person to lead us.

His eyes widened and sparkled like there were tears he was trying not to shed. His cheeks flushed pink. He opened his

mouth then shut it again.

Koth put his hand on Foster's shoulder. "Your pack has spoken. Do you accept role of Alpha?"

His amber gaze landed on me like he was somehow unsure of the answer. I grinned and nodded. This adorable, compassionate man did not know just how much of a gem he really was. He was the most selfless person I'd ever met. He never wanted power or control yet that made him the perfect candidate for Alpha.

*"I'm so proud of you,"* I whispered. *"You've got this."*

Foster blinked down at me then glanced to the rest of the pack behind me. He cleared his throat. "A-are you sure?"

They howled.

He smiled and it wobbled a little.

"What do you say, mama Foster?"

He nodded. "I accept."

The pack went nuts. They howled and jumped around.

Koth held his hand up, quieting the pack. "Pack, stay here. Everyone else, please go home and rest. We will be by at some point this evening to give each of you a potion but otherwise you are not needed this evening. Tomorrow night we will do the ritual again, but for real. You may all go."

All at once, the rest of Issale turned and fled the clearing.

Once it was just our pack and the dragons, Koth turned to Foster. "I like to do things my own way, to fit our current needs and life."

Foster frowned. "What does that mean exactly?"

Koth reached out and gripped Foster's left forearm. "Take mine and you'll see."

Foster didn't hesitate, he gripped Koth's arm and waited. Koth took a deep breath then blew smoke onto their arms. It left his mouth like a gray cloud then morphed into bright orange flames. The flame wrapped around their arms, coiling like a snake. I braced myself for Foster to flinch from pain but he only narrowed his eyes. The fire coiled around their arms a dozen times before evaporating into smoke and into the air.

In its place were two identical glowing orange bands halfway up on their left forearms.

Foster's jaw dropped.

Koth shook his arm gently. "This is our beacon. If we need the other, we use this band. The pack's role is too important yet too far from me, as Alpha you can now call on me whenever, wherever."

Foster blinked then a slow smile spread over his face. "Thank you, My Lord."

Koth lifted their arms in the air. "Your new Alpha."

The pack behind me howled in unison.

I jumped to my feet and tackled him with a hug. "I'm so happy for you."

He wrapped his arms around me tight. "I hope I don't let anyone down."

"You won't." I pulled back and cupped his face in my hands. "You're just not capable. You're going to be amazing and we all know it so you might as well accept it."

His answering blush took my breath away.

Koth clapped his hands together. “Okay. Guard, you’re dismissed. Thank you for your participation in Tegan’s crazy plan tonight.”

They all high-fived each other with their dragon hands then leapt straight up into the sky. I’d never get over how something so large could fly so fast while barely flapping their wings.

Koth chuckled. “All right, pack, you are also-”

“Wait. Please?” Foster held his hand up with his new Alpha band shimmering in the moonlight. “Sorry, Koth-”

“Don’t be. You’re their Alpha now.” He grinned. “What’s up?”

Foster cleared his throat. His face blushed red. “I need them for a moment longer. Um...Elan, can you stay? There’s something we need you for.”

Elan sighed with a big smile. Those black lines shot across his face for a second. “About time.”

I frowned. “Time for what?”

Foster turned to me with a sheepish smile. “I don’t know how they do it in Eden for witches...but in Issale there’s a ceremony soulmates do to complete it.”

My breath caught in my throat. I pressed my hand to my stomach, right over the Mark of his white wolf. “You do the ceremony before it finishes?”

Koth nodded. “For witches it must finish before the ceremony, but shifters it’s a two step process. The initial touch where you’re marked then the ceremony to complete it.”

“And for two people of different species it can vary even more.” Elan rocked back on his heels. “But have no fear, Elan

is here and I know what to do.”

Foster tugged on my hand. “What do you say?”

My pulse quickened. Butterflies danced in my stomach. It was soon, but looking into Foster’s eyes I felt no doubt or fear. “*Digo finalmente, mi amor. Sí. Yes.*”

A wide grin spread across his face. His amber eyes sparkled like diamonds. He stared down at me In awe for a moment then turned to Koth. “My Lord?”

He smiled and pressed his palm to his chest, right over his heart. He bowed slightly. “*Como tu Rey, bajo la mirada del Cielo, bendigo esta unión.*”

I gasped. “¡Hablas español!”

He wagged his eyebrows. “*¿Cómo puedo ser vuestro Rey si no sé hablar vuestra lengua? Forma parte de mi magia. Tú hablas español, así que yo hablo español. Fantástico, ¿verdad?*”

Foster glanced back and forth between us. “What did he say?”

I laughed. “First he said *As your King, under the eye of Heaven, I bless this union.* And then he said - well I don’t know how to explain what you meant by the second part.”

Koth chuckled. “I told her that part of the magic gifted to me as king allows me the ability to speak any language one of my people speaks. So because Inez, Isabella, and a handful of others spoke Spanish as a first language, I can speak Spanish. Mischa joined Issale so now I can speak Russian.”

Mischa choked on a gasp. “You speak Russian now?”

Koth gave her a crooked grin. “Did I forget to mention that to you?”

Mischa let out a strangled cry then blurted out a lot of words in Russian, none of them I knew.

Koth hung his head and laughed. “You’re right, I should have warned you. My apologies, I thought it would seem creepy if you knew but even saying that out loud I realize I was wrong.” Then he spoke to her in Russian.

Her cheeks flushed. She nodded. “Thank you, My Lord.”

Koth turned back to us. “But yes, I bless this union. I will leave you and the pack in Elan’s hands to handle the ceremony.”

“Thank you,” Foster and I said at the same time.

“You’re really soulmates?” Amelia asked. I hadn’t even realized she hadn’t left with the others. “This whole time? Did you know?”

“We found out last night when he was cleaning my wounds from being attacked by the Duenill.” I shuddered. “We should have known. My soulmate mark wasn’t supposed to have a black wolf, it was supposed to show the Goddess of the witches.”

Amelia’s eyes widened. Her mouth made that *O* shape.

I just winked. I wasn’t about to reveal her secret. I took Foster’s hand in mine and squeezed. “But I didn’t know that. I’m just glad we know now. I guess soulmate pairings between a witch and shifter aren’t common.”

“I don’t know about that.” Elan “But our previous king severed our relationship with Eden so shifters and witches didn’t really meet each other. Hopefully that will change. We are stronger together.”

Amelia “But, Elan, you knew?”

“Oh, yes.” He tapped on his face as those black lines spread across his cheekbones.

Foster rolled his eyes. “And that’s why I don’t want to wait another minute longer to do the ceremony. We’ve waited long enough for this.”

“On that note, we shall leave you to it.” Koth walked over to Amelia and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Come fireball, let’s fly.”

There was a flash of light and then the two of them took off into the sky, their wings spread wide.

Elan tapped his staff with the Air Stone onto the dirt like a judge with a gavel. “All right, let us unite these two soulmates.”

“Um, Inez?”

I turned toward my name and found Mischa gnawing on her bottom lip and twirling her purple hair around her fingers. “I’m sorry. I know you saw...me...with him...and he’s yours. I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I never would have if I’d known-”

“No, no. Mischa, no.” I reached out and took her hand. “If we didn’t know then how could you? It’s Clayton’s fault we were in this position and it sucks but it’s over now. I don’t blame you for trying to reel in a great catch.”

Her blue eyes filled with tears. “Well I want you to know you can trust me. I am no home wrecker and I would never -”

“I know, Mischa.” I squeezed her hand. “I trust you, and you did nothing wrong. But I appreciate your words.”

Foster cleared his throat. “Mischa, I’m sorry, too.”

She waved him off. “Don’t be. I consider myself lucky you even tried. Go on, you love birds. You earned this moment.”

She gestured to where Elan stood in the center of the clearing.

The second Mischa turned to walk away, Isabella tackle hugged us. “*¡Soy tan feliz que podría morir! ¡Sois perfectos el uno para el otro!*”

“*Gracias, Isabella.*”

She jumped back, blew us kisses, then spun and raced toward Mischa. They were both in wolf form by the time they got to Elan. Yet the rest of the pack was still just standing there watching us.

“All right, folks, what are ya waiting for?” Jeffrey yelled and clapped his hands. “You know the drill.”

Ronnie bounced up and down, walking backwards toward Elan. “Come on, let’s go, let’s go, let’s go. Get a move on!”

The two besties shifted into their wolf forms - which I’d just realized were matching gray wolves - and acted like herding dogs on a farm rounding up the sheep. But it worked. Within seconds they had the whole pack in a circle around Elan.

Elan smiled at us and pointed to the ground in front of him.

Foster took my hand and tugged me forward. I smiled and went with him. We stopped in front of Elan, still holding hands. He smiled at us and for once those black lines on his face didn’t creep me out. His eyes flashed between gold and amber and back again, like they were seeing my future with Foster. It filled me with the warm and fuzzies. He gripped his staff and stomped it in the dirt in front of him. The Air Stone sparkled like a firework, sending little rays of blue shimmering light down on us.

The pack all threw their heads back and howled at the golden crescent moon hanging in the navy-blue cloudless sky.



I looked up then did a double take. The moon was growing, filling out. The crescent shape suddenly became a big bright full full moon. My jaw dropped.

Elan chanted in their ancient language but I did not know it yet. I made a mental note to ask The Coven's spellmaster if she had any tricks to help me learn it quickly.

Foster squeezed my hand then winked - then shifted into his wolf form. For a second I just stared at him. Even as a wolf he was beautiful. His fur was as soft and pure as fresh fallen snow. But then he cocked his head to the side and I realized everyone was waiting on me. I cursed and forced myself to shift.

When my front paws dug into the cold dirt and our eyes were once again almost level I sighed. *"I'm here."*

*"You scared me for a second."*

*"Just lost in my tabs."*

He shook his head. Elan was still chanting but the tempo grew faster. The wolves howled in low tones around us. Foster looked up to the sky so I followed his gaze and my breath left me in a rush. The moon was shining a bright orange, unlike anything I'd ever seen. Shimmery bronze spotlight dropped down and wrapped around us. I felt it slide through my fur as a gentle breeze. Dirt lifted off the ground all around us. My body went weightless and numb but not uncomfortably. It was almost like I'd fallen asleep. Foster's body seemed to evaporate into white mist. My heart stopped but then I spotted my own body turning into black mist. In seconds we were nothing but glitter floating in the air. The bronze shimmer from the moon mixed with the dirt then swirled around us like a tornado picking up speed until I couldn't see or hear anything. It was sparkly darkness. But I felt Foster all around

me so I knew he was there. I felt the safety of his aura everywhere. Heat bloomed in my chest. It was intense and overwhelming yet I was not afraid. We kept swirling around in the tornado of glitter but then shapes took form within it. It took me a second to recognize them as runes, but not ones I knew.

And then the misty tornado vanished...leaving Foster and I back in our human forms.

I exhaled and shook my head.

“Hi,” Foster whispered.

I laughed. “Hi.”

“You okay?”

I nodded. “That was intense. What were those shapes?”

He lifted the hem of his shirt to reveal those runes I’d seen marked on his skin in dark brown. It looked like ink from henna tattoos but I knew it wasn’t. Then it clicked. I frowned and lifted my sweater and found the exact same runes on my body.

“The prayer marks us as completed,” Foster said softly.

*Ohh.* I smiled up at him. He’d told me before prayer runes would appear when it was finished. I smiled and opened my mouth to speak when something sparkled from Foster’s chest. I reached out and tugged his collar down and gasped. There on the center of his chest was something I recognized instantly. It was a mark like the others on our body, but it was in the shape of a heart. Soft, no sharp points but a heart nonetheless. And it was lavender. The start of a witch’s soulmate glyph.

Foster ran his finger over it then pulled my sweater down. I knew by his smile I had a matching one. “What is this?”

“That is the witch’s soulmate glyph. It could not start until *ours* was completed. You’ll have to do another ceremony for that one to finish, but i’m sure Inez can handle that.”

I grinned. “I can. Later.”

“Does the color mean something? The Coven had different colors.”

I nodded. “This is lavender. And It means I love you.”

Foster’s smile was the prettiest thing I’d ever seen. “I love you, too.”

Elan twirled his staff around, sending blue light around the clearing. Then he shifted into his eagle form and flew away without another word. The pack howled in a gorgeous harmony as they turned and ran off. Their howls echoed through the trees like an organ in a church.

And then it was just me and my soulmate, standing in the moonlight.

Foster fisted my sweater and pulled me in close. “It means you and me, forever.”

I covered his hand with mine. “You told me that soulmates are one soul split into two, sent into the world to find each other again.”

Foster’s amber eyes glistened with emotion. “You found me.”

“I did.” I stepped closer. “We only just met and yet I’ve never felt more at home.”

He cupped my face in his hands. “We were meant to be here and I can’t wait to get to know every single thing about you.”

“My middle name is Miriam. I have no idea why I just said that.”

He laughed. “Well...my real name is Archibald Chauncey.”

My jaw dropped. But then I shook myself. “What a name. Thank you for telling me. I want to know all about your family, the one you lost all those years ago.”

He lifted his hands off my face and looked at the tattoos I’d given him.

I gripped his shirt and tugged. “Would you like to go by that name now? We’d all understand, Foster Logan was the name Clayton gave you.”

He shook his head. “He may have turned out to be a monster beneath a friend’s face, but I never would have survived without him. Sure, he raised me for slaughter but reclaiming my birth name almost feels like admitting defeat. I’ve been Foster for twenty-three years, I refuse to let him win any more than he already did. I won’t let him take my identity. So no, I’d like to remain Foster. Though maybe not Logan. I can’t bear to keep his surname.”

“That’s understandable.” I lifted his knuckles to my mouth so I could kiss them. “So Foster Chauncey?”

He opened his mouth then shut it and frowned. “I don’t know, that name just doesn’t feel like it belongs to me anymore. Granted, I don’t know what name I would use if not that one.”

I grinned as an idea popped into my mind. “I’ve got one you could use.”

He cocked his head to the side and arched one eyebrow. “Are you asking me to take your name?”

I shrugged and pulled him closer to me. “A surname is a family name. You may have lost the two you had before, but third times a charm and we’d love to have you. What do you say, Alvarez?”

“Foster Alvarez.” He cupped my face in his hands then pressed his lips to mine. “I’ve never heard anything better.”

## EPILOGUE

## FOSTER



IT AMAZED me how much could change in one week.

And what a week it'd been. Being Alpha wasn't much of a change to my life, turned out at some point everyone started going to me for most things instead of Clayton. There were a few things I had to do now that I didn't before, but I found I didn't mind the responsibility. Koth, Silas, and I had been meeting every day to help smooth the transition over. Jeff and Ronnie acted as my self-appointed body guards. Isabella and Mischa were helping in every way they could. Starting with making Pack House a bit more comfortable for everyone. Apparently everyone hated the furniture on the courtyard and in the common rooms. The new stuff was perfect though. My friends had stepped up to support me and that meant more than I could say.

Inez had been busy working with Elan and Amelia though I had no idea what they were actually doing. The three of them spent many hours a day in Elan's apothecary brewing up potions and shit. They were all ecstatic to be there, like giddy children on Christmas morning. Their happiness was contagious.

The best part of the last week was just being with Inez. We were both still walking on cloud nine after our soulmate

ceremony. It was surreal and hadn't sunk in yet. We were soulmates. All that pining and desperate wishing had paid out. I got the girl. *My* girl. And it was a forever kind of thing. I couldn't remember a time I was happier.

Especially after Inez used her magic to remove the wall between our apartments. Some of the couples were jealous of how much space we had now, but I was the Alpha and she was the Priestess - the perks came with the territory. Granted, we opted to not tell everyone about the master ensuite bathroom Inez made for us complete with a massive jacuzzi tub and two separate toilets. Everyone needed a *little* privacy. We turned my room into a living room and put the massive king sized bed in her room.

It seemed like more than a week had gone by since that failed attempt at the ritual, which we'd redone the next night. Since Clayton's demise everything had been smooth sailing. Sure there were moments where the grief over what my adoptive father had done to me had overpowered me but having Inez there made it easier to work through. I knew healing was a long road, I'd done this before, but for the most part...I was happy. Confident. On top of the world.

But as Inez steered me through the chaos of New York City all of that confidence vanished. I had no idea where I was even though I'd been to this city more times than I could count. Yet in this moment my mind was blank. If it wasn't for Inez's tight grip on my hand as we weaved through people on the sidewalk I might've still been standing at the parking garage where we'd parked my truck staring into space. I was meeting her family. I shouldn't have been so nervous. It was just her stepmother and two sisters. I'd already met Carmen and Marta at the shop. My fear made no sense, it was entirely irrational.



This was my soulmate's family.

I just wanted them to like me.

New York City passed by me in a blur of flashing lights, honking horns, sirens, and the smell of roasting peanuts. The air was cold but not as bitter as it had been, winter was lightening up. I wondered if the rats scurrying across the street in front of us were as relieved by that as Inez was. Not that she noticed them. Her smile was plastered on her face as she dragged me down the street. We'd zigged and zagged, following the flow of the pedestrians while also never actually making it to a single cross walk. I'd never walked the streets of Manhattan with a local. I'd never even jaywalked before. But Inez was a New Yorker, they were a breed of their own. I vaguely recalled going up a few flights of stairs. My mind was a blur.

By the time she pulled us to a stop outside of an apartment door I was completely lost. I couldn't have said where we were or how we got there. I was out of breath and a ball of nerves. Inez was practically dancing. I didn't blame her. She hadn't seen her family since that night I showed up. I stood there with my hands shoved into my pockets and my lunch rolling up my throat waiting for them to open the door for us.

"You look like you're going to throw up."

I blinked and peeled my eyes off the door to look down at her. "Nope. Definitely not. Just waiting for them to answer."

"Foster." She pressed her hand to my stomach then jiggled a set of keys in her other hand. "This is my home, I'll let us in."

"Oh. *Oh*. Right. Right. Totally." I nodded and cleared my throat. "Go ahead then."

She scoffed. “Not when you look like *this*. *Háblame, mi amor.*”

I shook my head. “No, I’m -”

“*No digas que estás bien. Te pegaré si dices que estás bien.*”

“You’re speaking Spanish to me, you must also be nervous.” I arched one eyebrow. “Actually, you haven’t spoken English since we parked my truck.”

“I *am* Spanish, *mi amor*. This is normal for me. Okay, yeah maybe it’s a little more but this is home. These are people I know, people I normally speak Spanish to. I didn’t even realize I was speaking it.” She pushed up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to mine. “I am not nervous. I’m excited. I get to see my family and I get to introduce them to *you*.”

I sighed and pressed my forehead to hers. “I just want them to like me.”

“A person not liking *you* is a giant red flag. My girls are green flags for days.” She stepped back and held her keys up. “Just be yourself. They’ll love you the way everyone else does.”

I nodded and licked my lips. “What did they say about you bringing me home? About our plans for tonight?”

She grimaced. “I did not tell them. *Surprise?*”

I gasped.

She shoved her key in the lock then pushed the door open. A wall of Heaven slammed into my senses, making my mouth water and my stomach growl. All of the panic I felt over Inez not warning her family of what we had planned for tonight vanished in the scent of whatever they were cooking.

“Ah, Gabby is making paella.” Inez closed her eyes and fanned herself. “*No podría haber pedido nada mejor. Es el destino. Es perfecto.*”

“Perfecto?” I nodded. “Smells perfecto.”

She grinned and wagged her eyebrows as she grabbed my hand and dragged me over the threshold. I expected an instant greeting and excitement but thanks to Taylor Swift blaring through the bluetooth speakers in each corner, our entrance had gone unnoticed. Inez tangled her fingers with mine and sighed, leaning back into me. The apartment wasn’t large but I was surprised by how much space they had. The open floorplan really helped as did the floor to ceiling windows letting all the light from outside. Even though it was dark out, the bright lights of New York City were always sparkling and flashing.

The apartment was warm and cozy. The hardwood floors had seen some better days but I knew the building was old as hell. The brown leather couches looked soft to the touch and the sherpa blankets tossed over the back looked comfortable. The coffee table was littered with crystals, two different decks of tarot cards, and incense that was actively burning.

Actually, their apartment looked like a cozier version of Inez’s shop.

Marta sat on the living room floor at the coffee table making flashcards to study with while singing along to the music. On the far right side of the room, Carmen stood in front of a mannequin with her wand pointed at it. She flicked her wrist to the beat of the song and gave the mannequin a floor length sequin dress. In the back corner a woman with curly brown hair and deep olive toned skin stood with her back to us as she chopped tomatoes in the kitchen. The smell of seafood

filled the air. None of them were watching the door. None of them heard us.

The song changed from that high volume pop song about shaking it off to a softer, more mellow sound. Yet still none of them realized we were there. I looked down at my soulmate and arched my eyebrow.

Inez rolled her eyes and shook her head. But she was smiling. With her free hand, she reached back and slammed the front door closed as hard as she could. When all three of them jumped and spun around, Inez threw her hands up. “¿*Lo ves?* This is why we can’t have nice things. *Yo podría ser un ladrón.*”

All three of them gasped and screamed her name.

“INEZ!” Marta shrieked and lunged to her feet, not caring at all that she kicked all of her flashcards off the table. “¡*YA ESTÁS EN CASA! ¡YA ESTÁS AQUÍ! ¡MAMÁ! ¡INÉS ESTÁ AQUÍ!*”

“*Hola, mis amores-*” Inez gasped as Marta tackled her in a hug, wrapping her arms around her waist. “*Yo también te he echado de menos, Marta.*”

I smiled and dropped her hand so she could hug her sister better then I leaned back against the front door. This moment was not about me. This was about them. It was easy to forget the circumstances that led to Inez leaving New York but I imagined her family had been stressed about it since.

Carmen’s gold eyes were brimming with tears. Her long black curly hair was tied up into two messy buns on top of her head. She slid across the hardwood floors on thick fuzzy black socks. For a brief moment I wondered why she was practicing her spell on a mannequin and not on herself, given the

selection of baggy, stained sweatpants and a crop top with a ripped hem. But then I shook that thought from my mind.

“*¡Inés!*” Carmen lunged forward, tackling Inez over Marta’s head. She squeezed her eyes shut and held on tight. “*Llegas tarde.*”

*Tarde? That means late doesn’t it?* I chuckled to myself. I was pretty certain Carmen just scolded her for being late.

“*Chicas, chicas, atrás. Dejadla respirar.*” I hadn’t met Inez’s stepmother yet but seeing as she was the only adult in the apartment, and she looked like an older version of Carmen, I assumed this had to be her. I saw both of her daughters in her, actually. Marta shared the same dark brown hair shade while Carmen had her curls. Neither daughter had her hazel eyes, but they were just as beautiful. And her love for Inez was written in the tears in her eyes and the flush in her cheeks as she hurried over to give her a hug. “*Gracias a Dios que estás en casa.*”

“I know, I know.” Inez hugged her back, and I noticed she hugged Gabriela a little tighter than her sisters. This woman clearly meant more to her than she’d let on. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

“*¿Tarde? ¿A quién le importa? Ahora estás en casa, eso es lo que importa. Deja que te vea. ¿Qué tal estás? ¿Estás bien? ¿Estás herido?*” Gabriela seemed to pat Inez down like she was checking for wounds, which made sense to me. “*Estábamos muy preocupados.*”

Carmen shoved her wand into one of her messy buns. “*¿Dónde has estado? Y no me digas con The Coven. Me parece mentira.*”

Marta tugged on Inez's sweater sleeve. "*¿Qué pasó con los demonios? ¿Te salvaron los lobos? ¿Adónde fuisteis?*"

*Demonios? Is that Spanish for demons? Los lobos was wolves, I've heard Isabella say that one.* I really needed to start learning Spanish. I didn't want Inez to lose that part of herself. Plus I wanted to know what they were saying, instead of just picking up a single word here and there. Granted, I did not begrudge them this moment. Actually, seeing them freak out over her and panic even as she stood in front of them helped to bring my anxiety level down.

Carmen glanced up at me then did a double take. She gasped. "YOU."

Marta's gaze snapped right at me in an instant. "FOSTER! Mama, this is Foster. The guy I told you about. The one who came into the store with Billy that night."

Gabriela narrowed her eyes on me. "That night before you were attacked by demons and wolves?"

*Uh oh. It seems some of the story hadn't been told right.*

I smiled and stood up straight, pushing off the door. "I *am* a wolf, and I assure you we did not attack her."

"Guys, this is Foster." Inez reached out and reclaimed my hand with her own. I watched each of their three gazes watch as our fingers tangled together. Inez's cheeks flushed. "Foster, this is my family. You've met my sisters Carmen and Marta, but this is my stepmother Gabriela."

I held my free hand out toward her stepmother. "It's nice to finally meet you."

She shook my hand without hesitation. "You too, I've heard all about your visit to the shop that night. Billy was over here for dinner last night, nice boy."

“Oh, he was? That’s awesome. He’s a good kid, thanks for having him over. He’s used to having his big family around so I’m sure he needed it.”

Marta waved her hands around dramatically. “Yes, yes, Billy is great. But wait, you’re a couple?” She pointed to our hands.

Inez looked up at me and grinned. “He’s my soulmate.”

Silence.

“¿QUÉ? ¿QUÉ HAS DICHO?” Marta screamed.

“¿ALMATE? ¿TIENES UN ALMA GEMELA?” Carmen had her hands on her head in shock. “¿DESDE CUÁNDO? ¿CÓMO HA OCURRIDO?”

“¿QUÉ TE HA PASADO?” Gabriela reached out then dropped her hand. She shook her head. “¿QUÉ ESTÁ PASANDO, INÉS?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, that feels like an apt reaction.”

Inez pressed her hand to her forehead. “*Diosa mía*. Guys, I have quite a story to tell you and it will answer all of your questions. And if you think of more, I can answer them then. But can we just sit down and let me explain?”

Marta spun and sprinted to the couch. She sat on the far corner and patted the seat beside her. “*Dímelo*.”

“What she said.” Carmen nodded then took the seat on the chair to Marta’s right. “I can’t wait to hear this. But you better start with how you got back here with pretty boy.”

My eyebrows rose. “Pretty boy?”

She shrugged and rolled her eyes. “Don’t act like you don’t know you’re pretty.”

“Oh, he doesn’t.” Inez laughed. She took my hand and led me over to the couch that turned out to be even softer than I expected. Once we sat she took my hand back. “I will explain it all, in chronological order. But spoiler alert, as I’ve already said, Foster is my soulmate.”

Gabriela took the seat opposite Carmen, diagonal on my left. She smiled and patted my hand which was resting on the couch beside me. “Pardon our explosive reaction. It’s a lot to take in but we’re happy you’re here.”

“Okay, start talking, Inez.” Carmen crossed her arms over her chest. This girl was a tough one and I liked it. She was definitely going to give some poor guy hell, even though I was positive he’d deserve it. “I need all the details. All of them. Don’t leave a single thing out.”

Inez took a deep breath then launched into the story. She told them everything, minus a few more private details. But everything else was relayed. Her sisters and stepmother listened in riveted silence. Inez and I had discussed this part of the plan in detail. She was going to tell them about the prophecy and becoming a shifter. And definitely the parts about Clayton. She really did not miss a beat. When she finished, she leaned back and exhaled roughly.

Carmen opened her mouth then closed it and frowned.

Marta giggled and shook her head.

Gabriela pursed her lips like she was deep in thought.

“So let me see if I got this right...” Carmen leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. “You’re saying that you’re also a shifter and that you shift into a black wolf. But that you’re also this Priestess of the Pack from a prophecy? And now Foster is the Alpha of the wolf pack?”



“Yes.” Inez just kept grinning.

Marta sat forward and turned to the side more so she faced both of us. “Is Amelia coming back to SOMA? I really wanna meet her. OH, we met Steve! Did you meet Steve? He’s the best. So funny. Kiev and Tor are a little...meh. They need to loosen up. What’s Silas like? *All* the girls, and some of the guys, talk about him. Is he as drop dead gorgeous as they say? What’s Koth like? Is he scary? How big is he? Some of the students said he was like fifty feet tall. Did you get to ride on his back? Apparently The Coven has done that. Wait, what’s The Coven like? Did you meet -”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Easy, killer.” Carmen put her hand on Marta’s arm. “Don’t scare Foster off, he just got here. *Mierda.*”

Gabriela chuckled and leaned back in her seat just shaking her head.

Marta grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I laughed and squeezed Inez’s hand. I was warned you were a lot like this one, and I got a stream of consciousness much the same from her when she first got to Issale. “So I am used to it by now.”

“*See.*” Marta smacked Carmen’s hand. “He’s fine.”

“And yes, Silas is as drop dead gorgeous as everyone says but he’s a...look from afar and don’t get too close to him or he might eat you kind of guy.”

Inez giggled. “*That’s* the question you chose to answer?”

I shrugged. “Koth is only like twenty something feet tall?”

Inez rolled her golden eyes but she smiled.

“Wow.” Marta shook her head. Her gold eyes were big and bright. “That’s so cool.”

Carmen cocked her head to the side. “But you did meet The Coven? What were they like?”

I snorted. “Like being tied to a pole in a hurricane.”

Inez nodded. “They were intense. Intimidating as hell. But really awesome.”

Gabriela snapped her fingers. “What did you say they did to your wand? I think I did not follow that part.”

Inez held her right pointer finger up to show them the pink markings on her skin. She twirled it around and that pinkish-purple magic of hers sparkled from her fingertip. She flicked her hand and the lights in the room changed to pink then turned back to golden. “The High Priestess said I needed to be able to use my magic while in wolf form, so my finger is now my wand. I have no idea how she did it but apparently it’s best to just not ask Tegan questions on how she does things.”

“I heard the Bishop family is *all* gorgeous.” Marta said with a dreamy smile. “Is it true that the Hierophant used to be a kid?”

Carmen scowled. “Everyone *used* to be a kid, Marta. ¿*De qué estás hablando?*”

“*No*, Carmen. As in he was nine years old and then something happened last month and now he’s like an adult.” She snapped her fingers. “Like boom, that fast.”

I frowned. “God, is that true? I mean, I saw him.”

“You’re as bad as her.” Inez snorted. “I don’t know Bentley’s story-”

“Bentley? The Hierophant’s name is Bentley?” Carmen asked. When we nodded she nodded. “Cool name.”

“I did not ask him the story, we had more pressing concerns. But he is not an adult. He looks to be about Carmen’s age. Sixteen or seventeen maybe?”

“Hey, hey...” Marta wagged her eyebrows at Carmen. “Is he hot?”

Inez ruffled her hair. “I don’t know, Marta. He’s a child.”

Carmen closed her eyes and shook her head. “*Diosa. Sálvame.*”

Marta was unphased. She grinned at us. “I wonder if I can shift too.”

“Actually, that’s one of the things we needed to talk to you about.” I laughed. My concerns were entirely for Marta and not for Carmen. Marta was a loose canon, a wild one with far too much enthusiasm and not enough fear. She was the one who’d end up getting hurt or in trouble. Carmen was steady, rational. In fact, she acted older than her sixteen years should have had her acting. “Inez?”

Inez sighed. “Your professors at SOMA have already been warned that it’s possible and to watch. But you need to be careful. Don’t go looking for trouble or demons. Pay attention to your bodies, if you feel strange talk to the professors. Or Marcy and Christian, I’m told they’re the shifter Majors at school - the students appointed to help fellow students. Do you know them?”

“Nope.” Marta smiled.

Carmen nodded. “I do. I have a couple classes with them. I’ll talk to them and let them know.”

“Actually, we have a meeting with the school tomorrow.” I gestured around the room. “All of us. Koth asked us to speak with them with you present just so everyone is on the same page.”

“That’s right.” Inez looked to Gabriela. “There is a way to test them to see if the shifter gene is present. But I wanted to get your opinion on that.”

Gabriela nodded. “If it is present, can they trigger it to come out?”

“Yes. In a controlled setting so it doesn’t happen in a dangerous situation.”

“Well, I would say yes to the test.” She looked to her younger daughters and sighed. “But I will decide after if I want the trigger to happen.”

I smiled at her. “That’s fair. King Kothari will want to speak with you first anyway.”

“I wonder what we’d shift into?” Carmen asked quietly.

Marta gasped. “See! Now you’re asking the right questions!”

Carmen rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying. Inez is a wolf, does that mean we’d be wolves?”

“Not necessarily, no,” I answer with a laugh. “But it tends to happen that way among families. Not always though.”

Inez pointed at nothing. “That’s true. Maddox is a dragon but his parents and sister aren’t.”

Marta pursed her lips. “I wonder what dad shifted into?”

“Wait.” Carmen scowled. “Unless dad didn’t and she got it from her mother?”

Gabriela smiled sadly. “No, it was not from her mother. She was my best friend, she told me all about being a witch and her magic. I remember vividly the story of how she met your father...the day she was lost in the mountains in Spain when a Lynx – the wild big cat – led her back to safety then turned into a boy.”

Inez gasped, eyes teary. She squeezed my hand so hard her knuckles cracked. “*What? Really?*”

My eyes widened. “So he *was* a shifter? You knew that?”

She nodded. “He never told you, Inez, because for him it presented as a young child but it never came out for you. And since your mother was just a witch, he assumed you hadn’t inherited the gene.”

Inez exhaled in a rush and leaned back. She dropped my hand to scrub her face with both of hers.

“After we got married, he became a U.S. citizen because I was. We moved to New York because he wanted to be close to Issale but he didn’t know exactly where it was. He finally found it but as I am human we could not move there together. He used to go visit-“

*Hold on. This sounds familiar.* “Pablo?”

Inez jumped and sat forward. She gripped my arm with both of her hands. Everyone else just froze.

Silence.

“Pablo Manuel Alvarez.” I looked to Inez. “Was that your father?”

She nodded. “How did you know that?”

*Holy shit.* My breath left me in a rush. “Because we didn’t have any lynx who lived in Issale, until about ten years ago. I

remember him.”

“*You knew my father?*” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

I can’t believe I didn’t make that connection until just now. I was just out of high school.” I smiled as I remembered the day I met Pablo on the lake, right after Neka had startled him so bad he shifted. “We were friends. I caught him sneaking off the mountain one night and he confided in me that his new wife was pregnant. It all makes so much sense now.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “When is the last time you saw him?”

“A year ago? Maybe a little more?” I sighed and hung my head. “By that time we all knew he had kids and a human family so he was barely in Issale and he’d go long months between visits. We didn’t even know he’d died. I’m so sorry.”

“I can’t believe it.”

I turned to her and placed my hand over hers. “I’m so sorry I didn’t put that together until now. I’m especially sorry to hear he died, I hadn’t known that. But look, let me show you...” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened up the photo album. It took me a few seconds to find the picture I’d taken with Pablo many, many years ago.

“What is that? Is that - you don’t have -”

“A picture of me and Pablo in Burlington years ago.” I turned to camera to show her. “That’s him, right?”

A stray tear slid down her cheek. She nodded and buried her face in my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her head.

Carmen leaned forward and snagged my phone from Inez's grip. Her gold eyes widened but tears brimmed along her eyelashes. "That's dad."

"Let me see," Marta said softly. She jumped up and sat on the arm rest of Carmen's chair and peeked over her shoulder. A sad smile spread across her face. She leaned her head on Carmen's shoulder. "That *is* dad."

Gabriela sniffled and got to her feet. I didn't say anything as she hurried out of the room, I figured this might have been more emotionally triggering than she was prepared for. Inez sat up then moved over to sit on the other arm rest of Carmen's chair. All three of them staring at the picture on my phone like he would magically step out of the image. My chest was tight but my throat was worse. The hot lump of emotion was choking me up. I hadn't expected *this* revelation. I hadn't expected to need to mourn another person. Pablo had been a good friend to me, but it was hard to keep up with people when they left Issale. My heart filled with regret. I should have reached out to him more, yet I had wanted to give him his privacy and time with his children who didn't know about us.

*Don't focus on the sad parts. They've already lost him but you can tell them about the good memories.*

I opened my mouth to ask if they wanted to hear about my friendship with Pablo when Gabriela rushed back into the room...hugging a big stuffed animal of a white wolf to her chest. My words died on my tongue. I knew that stuffed animal. It was Pablo's. *I* gave it to him.

Inez jumped up and took the seat beside me again but she took the stuffed animal from Gabriela. She looked down at it then her sharp gaze shot up to me and I knew she'd put the pieces together. I smiled.

Marta frowned. “Why do you have dad’s wolf?”

“Why did dad even have that?” Carmen scowled. “He never said.”

“I gave it to him.” I chuckled. “It was right before his youngest daughter was born - I guess that was you, Marta. He’d told me he wasn’t going to be around in Issale as much with a new baby. We were out in Burlington that day and I spotted that in a store window. I bought it for him, partially as a joke, but as a little token of Issale. And inside joke, per se.”

Inez leaned into me. “I love you,” she whispered.

“You’re Archie.” Gabriela smiled wide. It wasn’t a question.

I cleared my throat through that hot lump of emotion. “I forgot I told him my real name, I don’t even know what made me do it.”

“I think you know exactly why.” Gabriela looked to Inez then back to me. “He used to talk about his friend the white wolf named Archie who used to let him crash in his apartment because he hated being alone in Issale. He talked about you a lot.”

“Wait, I remember that.” Inez chuckled then let out a sigh. “*No me lo puedo creer*. He told me about his friend Archie all the time and it was *you*. My literal soulmate.”

“I guess fate knew what it was doing all along.” I winked at her. “And I adored your dad.”

Gabriela sniffled and picked up the stuffed animal to hug it again. “He adored you, too.”

Inez cried. I wiped a tear off her cheek.



“He may not be here physically to see you two together, but I know he’s smiling down on you.” Gabriela’s voice was thick and quiet. “He’d be so proud of you both.”

Marta leapt off the chair and tackled me with a hug. “Welcome to the family. I’ve always wanted a brother.”

I chuckled and patted her back as she forced us back upright. “I’ve never been a brother, but I’m In.”

Carmen laughed and slid my phone across the coffee table to me. “We’re a crazy family, but we’re a close family. I hope you can handle us, Mr. Soulmate.”

Inez took a deep breath then let it out while making a goofy face. “Actually, that’s part of why we’re here. Obviously I wanted to see you, especially after what happened, however ...Foster and I did our shifter soulmate ceremony in Issale but we want to do the arcana ceremony, and I wanted you to be here.”

Marta climbed off my lap to sit on the coffee table facing us. “Is that like marriage?”

“No, it’s just a binding of souls.” We all must’ve made faces because Carmen just shrugged. “We learned about it in class. Soulmates are much, much more serious than marriage but not marriage.”

Inez looked up at me and grinned, her cheeks flushed pink. “Actually, we want to do both.”

They all gasped.

Inez giggled. “I expected that response. But...after everything we’ve been through we just want to start forever. We’re soulmates, we love each other, we’re ready to be married. There’s no reason to stretch it out when we know this is where we’ll end up.”

“And I’m in the market for a new last name...” I kissed her nose then turned to her sisters. “And Inez offered hers.”

They gasped. Again. Gabriela wiped her eyes and mumbled something in Spanish.

Marta giggled. “That’s not normal.”

Carmen’s eyes watered. She just blinked at me. “You’re going to take her name? *Our* name? You’re going to be Foster Alvarez?”

I smiled, trying to act cool and calm while my heart hammered in my chest. “If you three will have me.”

Gabriela stood and threw her arms out wide. I smiled and got to my feet. She stepped forward and pulled me in for a hug. She smelled like the seafood she’d been cooking in the kitchen. Her hug was warm and felt much better than I ever could have expected. As I stood there in her arms I tried to remember the last time I hugged a woman I wasn’t related to or dating but I came up blank. I probably hugged her longer than I was supposed to but she hadn’t let go of me either.

After a minute, she pulled back she took my face in her hands. “Pablo wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I told you not to worry, *mi amor*.”

“Okay, okay, okay.” Marta hopped around the couch like a bunny while clapping her hands. “What do we do? How do we do this? Tell me what to do.”

“Bring it down a notch, killer.” Carmen shook her head. But she smirked and got to her feet. “Though I am also curious, what do we need to make him an Alvarez? Do we have to go somewhere?”

Marta gasped. “What do we wear?”

“We’re not going anywhere.” Inez winked and typed on her phone. “Carmen, can you put the paella on hold? I don’t want that meal to go to waste. We’ll need food after, anyway.”

“I’m on it.” Carmen yanked her wand out of the messy bun on the left side of her head then skipped to the kitchen. “Paella on pause coming up.”

Marta skipped over to me and bounced on her toes. “We read tarot cards in class today and I just had this feeling it was talking about Inez and she *loves* mom’s paella. I came home from school today and told her she had to make it. I was so right.”

I laughed and ruffled her hair. There was just something so *little sister* about Marta. She was infectiously adorable and enthusiastic. I definitely saw a lot of Inez in her spirit. I also saw it was a damn good thing Carmen was around to give the little killer a heavy dose of chill.

“Okay. We ready?” Inez sat her phone on the table and rubbed her hands together. “It’s time.”

Gabriela cleared her throat as she glanced around her living room. “Are we...*here*?”

Bright white light flashed on the far side of the living room. We all jumped and spun toward it to find a white box like a doorway just sitting there. Two silhouettes filled the light. I knew who was supposed to walk through Tegan’s portal but I was still so new to seeing them that my pulse quickened and my stomach tightened into knots. I braced myself like we were about to be ambushed.

And then Deacon and Amelia English stepped through with their matching blonde hair and violet eyes. Even their smiles were identical. They were both barefoot. Amelia wore a

long-sleeved white dress she was hemmed just above her ankles. Deacon wore a sleeveless white sheath dress that went down to just past his knees. His Coven Mark stood out boldly on his left forearm. My gaze latched onto the black lines that looked like vines coiling all the way down his right arm and covered his fingers. On the back of his right hand was a lavender heart shaped crystal - which matched the ones on mine and Inez's chests. I wondered if we were going to have those black lines now, too.

Inez grinned. "Thanks for coming, guys."

"As if I would miss this." Amelia hurried over to give Inez a hug then turned and gave me one. "I'm so happy for you both."

I looked to Deacon and held my left hand out, since I'd learned that was how The Coven shook hands. Inez had taught me before we got here. "Thank you for doing this."

Deacon shook my hand and grinned. "My absolute pleasure. Plus, Amelia would've given me so much shit if I'd said no."

Amelia just shrugged one shoulder.

"This is my family. My stepmother Gabriela. And my sisters Carmen and Marta." Inez stood between the cousins and faced her family. "Guys, meet Deacon and Amelia English. Amelia, as I've told you, is a SOMA student who just discovered she was a shifter like me. Deacon is The Devil Card in The Coven, but you're going to behave yourself Marta."

Marta pouted.

"Amelia, which Suit are you?" Carmen asked shyly, a new look for her.

“I’m a Wand. Thank the Goddess.” Amelia grinned. “Inez told me you’re all Wands, too. As soon as Koth clears me to leave we’ll have to hang out.”

“Uh oh.” Deacon chuckled. “That’s got trouble written all over it.”

Amelia wrinkled her nose and shoved him. “Takes one to know one, *devil boy*.”

Gabriela smoothed her button-down shirt with her hands and cleared her throat. “Not to interrupt, but do we need to change clothes? You both seem...intentionally dressed.”

Deacon glanced down at himself. “Witches wear white for ceremonies and rituals. Coven Members wear these special sheaths-”

“But have no fear, I’ve got this handled.” Amelia pulled a wand out from where she’d tucked it under her white sleeve then pointed it at me. “*Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo*.”

Silver magic slammed into my chest. I gasped and stepped back - and my clothes had been swapped out for white slacks and a white v-neck t-shirt. My shoes were missing entirely. Amelia giggled then I saw the silver flash in my peripheral vision. I blinked and looked up to find Inez in a long, flowy white skirt and white camisole.

“OHHH. DO ME! DO ME!” Marta waved her arm in the air. “Can I have a tulle skirt?”

Amelia grinned and flicked her wand in Marta’s direction. When the silver light faded, Marta looked like a ballerina in her outfit. “I like that skirt. I’ll have to remember that one.”

Carmen shook her head and glanced back at her mannequin. “Wicked. After this ceremony I definitely need to pick your brain.”

“It’s my favorite spell work.” Amelia grinned and flicked her wand. “Just think about what you want to wear.”

When the light faded, Carmen wore the exact same dress as Amelia. Her cheeks flushed. “I panicked.”

We all laughed. I turned to Gabriela expecting her to be next but found she was already in a long flowing white dress. Everyone was decked in ceremonial white. I rather liked it. Made it feel special. Issale didn’t get particular on these kinds of details and I understood why, but still this was a nice touch.

I rubbed my hands together. “Okay, now what?”

“I say let’s get started-”

“Wait, wait! I wanna do magic!” Marta interrupted Deacon. She reached up and pulled Carmen’s wand out from her hair. She gnawed on her bottom lip and narrowed her eyes on the speakers on the wall. “I just learned this today.”

I hadn’t realized it until this moment that the Taylor Swift music we’d heard upon entering had been shut off, probably by Inez via her wand finger. But that realization was met by soft instrumental music that I was pretty certain was just Taylor Swift music without the lyrics. Sounded pretty, though.

Marta nodded at her handiwork then reached up to shove Carmen’s wand back.

“Dude.” Carmen snatched it out of her hand. “I want to try something *I* learned this week.”

She flicked her wand expertly. There was a pop and flash of turquoise light. When it faded, I found dozens and dozens of unlit white candles lined up around the apartment. My eyes widened. That was a lot of power, granted I wasn’t a witch.

Deacon whistled under his breath. “Like I said...trouble.”

Carmen grimaced. “Was that bad?”

“Not at all.” Deacon glanced around at the candles then winked. “I love a powerful witch. I’ll have to warn your teachers.”

Amelia nodded. “I have got to get back to SOMA. I’ve missed so much.”

“Soon. Promise.” Deacon patted her back. He looked to me. “Ready, Foster?”

I shook myself and grinned. “Kind of forgot what we were doing for a second. I just love watching magic. But yes. Yes, for sure.” I took Inez’s hand.

Amelia pursed her lips. “We need Emersyn for the candles.”

“Inez can do it.” Carmen gestured to my soulmate. “I’ve seen her work.”

Inez grinned and held her right pointer finger up with the pink lines marked into her skin. She took a deep breath then swirled her finger around. Pinkish-purple magic flashed - and then each candle wick danced with a tiny orange flame. “I rather like that one.”

*“I definitely need to get back to SOMA,”* Amelia whispered.

We all laughed.

Deacon gestured in a circle. “Inez and Foster stand in the middle. We’re going to stand in a circle around you.”

Inez pulled me to the center of the room. “We don’t need anything elaborate or fancy, we just want to be married.”

“I don’t know the fancy way, so we’re just gonna roll with it.” Deacon winked. “Let us begin so we can eat whatever that glorious smell is.”

The girls laughed. I meant to, it was funny. And he was right. But now that the five of them stood in a circle around us with the flickering flames everywhere this moment got really real. Inez and I had discussed this plan to be married right here tonight. She’d told me how it went down for witches, however I was eager to actually see it done.

Deacon smiled and crossed his wrists over each other. “Please face each other then take each other’s hands like this.”

I turned and found Inez’s gold gaze locked on me. The smile on her face took my breath away. We crossed our arms to make an *X* then joined hands. Suddenly, I was overwhelmingly grateful there were only a few witnesses. There was just something so deeply personal about this moment.

“By the honor blessed upon me by Valathame, by the power of The Coven, I gather you here today to unite two souls as one.” Deacon’s voice was soft yet steady. “Do you Foster and Inez join us here of your own free will, to honor the eternal bond shared between you?”

“I do,” we said at the same time.

“Here before witnesses, Foster and Inez have sworn their vows to each other.”

White bands of light shot out from between our clasped palms and began coiling around our hands like snakes. They slithered all the way around over our wrists.

*“Bind thy souls now as one, No life nor magic can be undone,”* Deacon chanted softly. *“Day by day, night by night,*



*Within eternity thy love shines bright.”*

The magical cords moved faster and faster, receding back down our arms. Growing smaller and smaller until they were narrow little strings that wrapped around our left ring fingers. The light faded bit by bit, leaving gold wedding bands in its place. My jaw dropped. Inez had promised we didn't need rings but she'd left that little surprise out of her explanation. I grinned and a little chuckle slipped out. It was beautiful. I looked into Inez's eyes and found them shining in the candlelight.

*“I love you,”* I whispered.

Her smile widened. *“I love you, too.”*

“Gabriela?” Deacon held his hand out to her with a piece of paper between his fingers. “When I tell you, please do the honor of reading the spell to The Goddess so we may begin the soulmate ceremony.”

Gabriela took the paper but her face was pale. “Really? But...i'm human?”

Deacon shook his head. “Not tonight you're not. Trust me.”

She smiled and nodded.

“Amelia, cast the circle, please? As I showed you.” Deacon said then returned his attention to us. “Now, you two, press your right palms to each other's chest, over the lavender crystals.”

Amelia walked around our little circle, casting the circle in salt— although I didn't actually know what she was doing besides that. She mumbled words in their ancient language. But I trusted her so I just went with it.

I met Inez's gaze once again with a smile. At the same time we reached out and pressed our right palms to the other's chest. Her skin was soft and warm. Beneath my palm her pulse beat strong and steady. The tattoo Inez had given me covered the back of my hand so I was quite curious to see if that got replaced or covered by the soulmate mark Inez assured me we'd get.

"Each spell to complete a soulmate glyph must be specific to that pair, and only the Goddess herself can give it. In a moment, Gabriela will read it aloud. *This* spell is the one requesting Her to give you the one you need. When She does - and you won't miss it, trust me - Foster and Inez, simply read it out loud. You'll know when it's over." Deacon waited until we nodded then turned his gaze to Amelia. "Close the circle, please."

Amelia made quick work to close the circle she'd drawn in salt. I wondered if she'd practiced before coming over here. The second we were closed in together the air around us changed, it pulsed with electricity and warmth. Energy seeped up from the ground and into my feet. Noises, lights, smells... all of our surroundings vanished.

It was just us.

*"We call our Goddess here and now, bless us with this special vow,"* Gabriela called out softly. *"To bind two souls as forever one, please show us how this can be done."*

Energy pulsed out of Inez's chest, tingling against my palm still pressed to her skin. My magic poured out of my hand, like I was going to shift but it didn't happen. Inez's magic pinkish-purple magic wrapped around us. The air crackled and popped, little flashes of light sparkled together

until words appeared written in the sky. The words were almost like clusters of stars hovering in the sky.

I gasped. I didn't know what I'd expected for this part but *this* was not it.

Inez squeezed my hands.

*"This call has been long awaited, for no two souls is better fated,"* we read the words out loud together. *"A spell to bless my chosen wand, with a soul so pure and truly fond, to love and howl forever and beyond."*

Bright white light pierced through the back of my hand. I saw the same flash shining up from my chest. My pulse skyrocketed. My whole body tingled. Dark brown lines shot down my right arm like vines until they got to my hand where they moved *around* my tattoo. Inez had warned me the witch soulmate glyph would do this but it still took my breath away. Those lines covered each of my fingers. I watched it travel up my soulmate's arm. I was riveted, locked on the transition rolling over us. My palm grew hot and tight. The white light got so bright I had to squint. I was about to look away when light erupted in the air between our bodies. That pulsing energy disappeared faster than it came on.

All I could do was stare into Inez's eyes. My heart fuller than it'd ever been. My eyes burned as tears tried to crawl their way to the surface. I licked my lips then smiled down at her.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife, you may kiss your bride."

I dropped her hands so I could reach up and take her face in my palms. She gripped my wrists and pushed up on her

tiptoes as I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. Cheering and applause exploded around us.

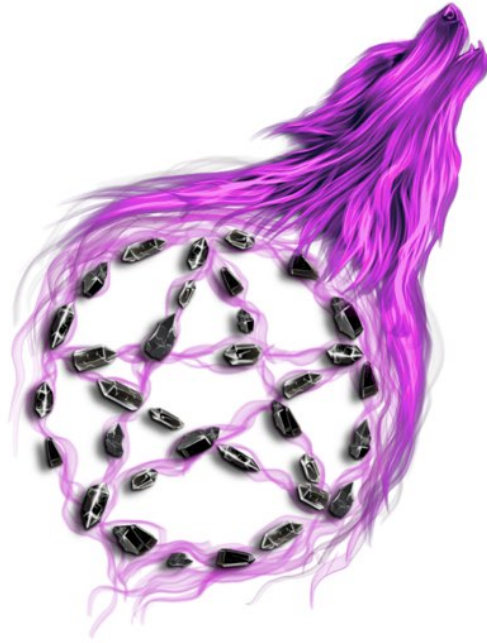
Marta squealed then tackled us. “YOU’RE OURS NOW!”

We laughed and pulled back just as Carmen threw herself on us. “I hope you like it here.”

“*Felicidades, Inés, mi amor. Mi corazón está lleno por ti,*” Gabriela said softly as she kissed Inez’s cheek. Then stepped forward and kissed my cheek. “Welcome to the family, Foster Archibald Alvarez.”

I grinned and looked down at my soulmate. My wife. My *eternity*. “I can’t think of anything better than this.”

Inez leaned into me, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Ya know, when my tarot card reading gave me The Tower I never expected *happily ever after.*”



I REALLY HOPE you enjoyed meeting Foster and Inez! For all my Coven fans, I hope you enjoyed getting a closer glimpse into life at Issale and all things shifters. While we will be leaving Issale for the next few books, I promise we will be back. Until then, keep reading for the link to preorder the next book [The Blood Witch!](#) *And if you keep reading there's a COVER REVEAL!*

If you're new to the world of The Coven then I hope you liked meeting these rambunctious characters of mine. There's no shortage of strong personalities in this world. If you want to see more of them then keep reading to find out more about the other books in The Coven Saga!

WANNA SEE WHAT RUNNING A WITCH SHOP LOOKS LIKE FOR INEZ? **RIGHT NOW?** WELL GREAT NEWS, [CLICK HERE](#) AND GO TO MY FACEBOOK GROUP AND READ A BONUS SCENE!

Become a Chandwitch and connect with me and other fans of The Coven! We're totally weird and crazy in there, but it's a whole lot of fun! Just [CLICK HERE](#) to join my Facebook group!

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**DO YOU LIKE SPICY ROMANCE?** The Coven has another stand-alone romance between a certain angel named Malachi and a witch named Chloe Lancaster. You don't have to have read the other Coven books to read this one so it's another great way to get a glimpse of The Coven Saga before diving in to the deep end. Read below to find out just how wild that story is!



**HIS MAGIC LURKS in the shadows...**

I feel his eyes on my back with every step I take. He's following me. Chasing me. There's nowhere for me to go,

nowhere to hide that he won't find me. He moves in smoke and shadows. He *is* the darkness. He tracks my every move like a predator with gold glowing eyes in the night. I know he's going to catch me, the only question is...why do I want him to?

I have no idea who he is or what he wants. I know I should be terrified...but I'm not.

There are things happening to me...things I can't control or explain...things that only I can see. Magic pours from me like a scarlet river and this locket around my neck pulses with dark, electric energy. I think it's what *he* wants...but he isn't the only thing on the hunt for it. Demons hide around every corner, they attack mercilessly and relentlessly - the only thing they seem to be afraid of is *him*.

That should be a warning, except there's something inside me that begs to be near him. I feel it like a magnet, drawing me closer and I'm running out of reasons to fight it.

He is the Prince of Hell...and he's either my savior or my damnation...

***The Rose Witch* is a novel set in *The Coven* saga but is designed to be read as a stand-alone.**

**[CLICK HERE](#) to read **The Rose Witch** now!**

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**IF YOU WANT TO START FROM THE BEGINNING...**

The Coven Saga officially started with Season One *Elemental Magic* ... the story about Tegan Bishop and her journey in joining The Coven. If you're curious, check out the cover and description next!

**[CLICK HERE](#)** to read Season One: **Elemental Magic Series** now!



**I THOUGHT magic was make believe...but I was *way* wrong.**

I was nobody. No matter how hard I tried, I never fit in with anyone at my high school. Now I know why.

Turns out I'm a witch. A scary powerful one, too. Except The Coven that claimed me won't teach me how to use my magic.

Suddenly, I'm selected by the Goddess to hunt down a mythical locket needed to save the world from destruction. The only person who actually tries to help me is the alarmingly attractive Tennessee. He has immeasurable power and breathtaking mismatched eyes. I'm drawn to him on a level I can't explain...and he's forbidden from getting too close to me.



When the quest takes an unexpected dangerous turn, I have to improvise. This supernatural world is unraveling at my fingertips and I need to master my magic fast. If I don't, I could get everyone I care about killed...



[CLICK HERE](#) to read Season One: **Elemental Magic Series** now!

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**THE NEXT BOOK IN THE COVEN SAGA IS THE BLOOD WITCH!** Season Four : Vampire Magic is already in the works and I hope to have Book One **The Blood Witch** to you by early summer. Check out the cover reveal below!

[CLICK HERE](#) to pre order **THE BLOOD WITCH** now!

CHANDELLE LAVAUN



THE COVEN: VAMPIRE MAGIC BOOK ONE

*This is for all of my Spanish speaking fans.*

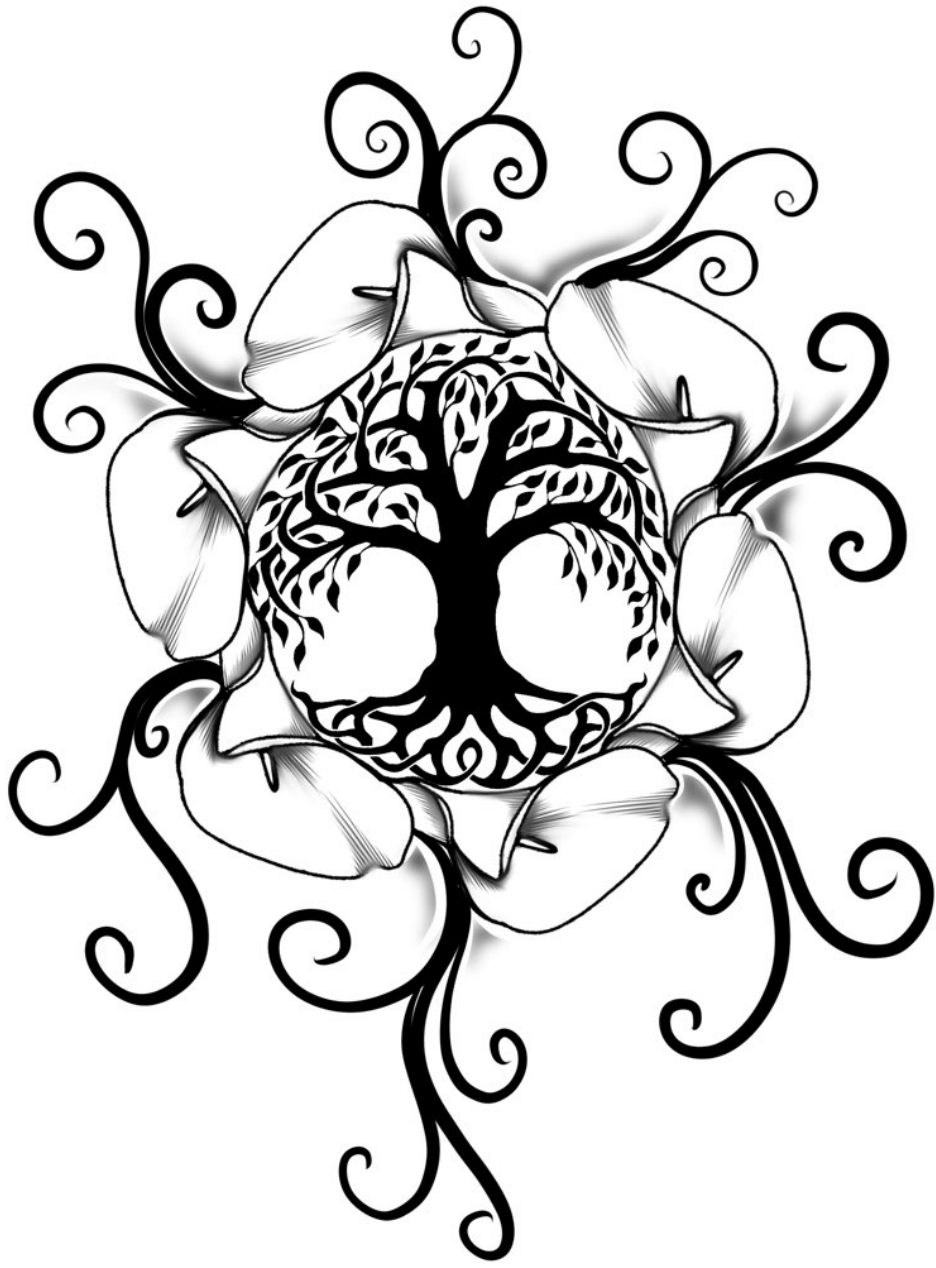
*My family is from Spain so I wanted to represent that part of my heritage but more importantly I wanted to represent all of YOU. I want all of my fans to feel represented in my books, to have the ability to see a bit of themselves in my characters. It may not be perfect but I try my best. The name Alvarez used to just be a name on my family tree, now it can live on with Inez, Carmen, and Marta...and Foster. Hopefully my effort to write your beautiful language was good enough to read and my sincerest apologies if I unintentionally butchered it.*











## THE COVEN

**0 : The Fool : Chutney Burroughs – Cups Suit – Communicates with animals.**

**I : The Magician : Willow Walcot – Wands Suit – Illusion magic**

**II : The High Priestess : Tegan Bishop – *Aether Witch* – All Suits – All elemental Magic**

**III : The Empress : Emersyn Bishop – Wands Suit – Fire, smoke, & metal magic**

**IV : The Emperor : Tennessee Wildes – Swords Suit – Wind, water, & earth magic**

**V : The Hierophant : Bentley Bishop – Cups Suit – Divination**

**VI : The Lovers : Easton Corey – Swords Suit – Magical armor**

**VII : The Chariot : Devon Howe Bishop – Swords Suit – Astral projection**

**VIII : Strength : Kessler Bishop – Swords Suit – Super strength**

**IX : The Hermit : Timothy Roth– Swords Suit – Speaks & reads all languages**

**X : Wheel of Fortune : Royce Redd – Wands Suit – Nature magic**

**XI : Justice : Constance Bell – Wands Suit – Crystal magic**

**XII : The Hanged Man : Thiago Diaz – Unknown Suit – Light & shadow magic**

**XIII : Death : Savannah Grace – Wands Suit – Communicates with the dead**



**XIV : Temperance : Hunter Bishop – Cups Suit – Emotions magic**

**XV : The Devil : Deacon English – Pentacles Suit – Persuasion magic**

**XVI : The Tower : “Frankie” – Suit Unknown – Potion magic**

**XVII : The Star : Cooper Bishop – Swords Suit – Dream magic**

**XVIII : The Moon : Henley Redd – Wands Suit – Moon magic**

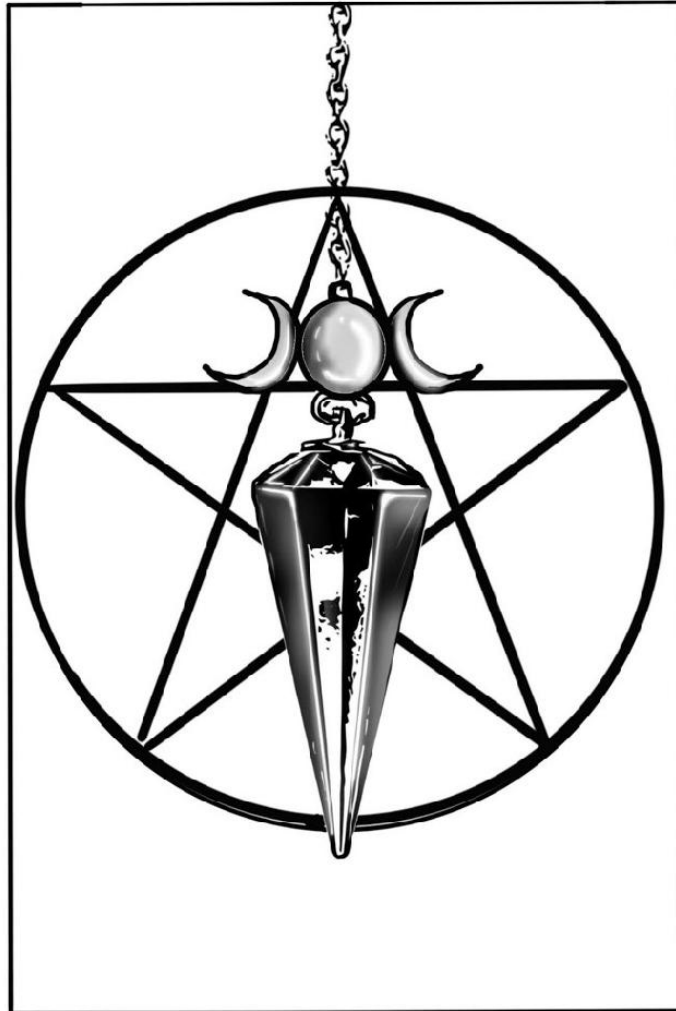
**XIX : The Sun : Lily Warren – Pentacles Suit – Sun magic**

**XX : Judgement : Bettina Blair – Swords Suit – Ice magic**

**XXI : The World : Jackson Lancaster – Swords Suit – Truth magic**



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THE COVEN

ALSO BY CHANDELLE LAVAUN

[The Coven: Elemental Magic Complete Series](#)

[The Coven: Academy Magic Complete Series](#)

[The Coven: School of Magical Arts Complete Novella Series](#)

[The Cursed Witch \(The Coven: Fae Magic Series Book 1\)](#)

[Queen of Death \(Gods Reborn Series Prequel\)](#)



# THE NIGHT REALM READING ORDER

## **MAGIC MARKED:**

Midnight Mage

Marvel Mage

Master Mage

## **CHRISTMAS MARKED:**

Bite Me, Santa

Jingle My Bells

Trim My Tree

Ride My Sleigh

Stuff My Stocking

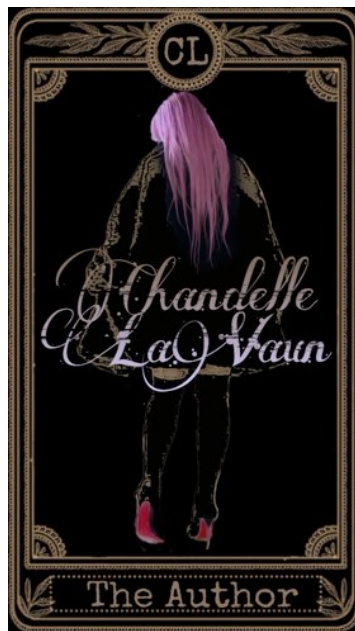
## **COURT MARKED:**

Fatal Fae

Fiery Fae (coming soon)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chandelle was born and raised in South Florida. She is the ultimate fangirl. Her love of Twilight, Harry Potter, and The Mortal Instruments inspired her to write her own books. When she's not writing she's on the beach soaking up the sun with a book in her hand. Her favorite things in life are dogs, pizza, slurpees, and anything that sparkles. She suffers from wanderlust and hopes to travel to every country in the world one day.



## **The Wolf Witch**

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CHANDELLE LAVAUN



THE  
WOLF  
WITCH

THE COVEN: SHIFTER MAGIC