

# BLOOD

BOOK SEVEN

CARA CLARE

# **THE PHOENIX PROPHECY: BLOOD**

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## BOOK SEVEN

# CARA CLARE

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## Acknowledgments

## NOVA

**I**t is my turn to watch.

Mack rises from his chair and steps out from behind the desk. He's not looking at me – he's looking at Sam.

Leaning back against the windowsill, I grip it tightly as heat skitters up the inside of my thighs.

Striding to the door, Mack locks it with a swipe of his hand, then turns around and folds his arms across his chest. The dark gray t-shirt he's wearing emphasizes the ice-blue of his eyes, and when he meets Sam's gaze, I feel Sam's heart begin to race.

Hands at his sides, Sam flexes his fingers. His jaw twitches. His muscles tense with anticipation.

Seeing them look at each other like this never gets old. When they told me what happened in the woods when I was gone, I could tell they were nervous; worried I'd be upset that they took pleasure in each other while they were grieving me.

Upset? I could hardly stop myself from laughing when they sat there, eyes wide with worry, waiting for my response. The thought of Mack and Sam *together* is something I'd never contemplated, but as soon as the image formed in my mind... suddenly, I could think of nothing I needed to see more.

And when I did see it... holy stars, it was better than I ever thought it would be.

Now, Mack closes the gap between him and Sam in one confident move. He is taller and broader, and he clasps the back of Sam's head with a force



that makes my breath hitch in my chest.

Without saying a word, Mack brings Sam's lips to his own. They kiss deeply, exploring each other as if it's the first time. They are doing it for me... they know I like them to go slowly.

When Sam moves his lips to Mack's neck, Mack tilts his head back. A deep, growl-like groan parts his lips. He winds his fingers into Sam's dark, curly hair. Then his other hand settles at Sam's waist.

Sam's chest rises and falls in anticipation as his fingers trail up Mack's body, finally coming to rest on the hem of Mack's t-shirt. Teasingly, he pulls it off, exposing broad shoulders and strong arms that ripple with muscle.

Mack takes Sam's shirt off next. Sam sucks in a deep breath as Mack runs his hands across the scars on his back. They stand there like that for a moment, their chests rising and falling together as they take in each other's warmth. I can feel my own breath hitch at the sight of them standing so close together.

Mack gets down on his knees, never breaking eye contact with Sam. His hands grip Sam's hips while he leans forward and kisses his stomach, licking his way down until he is between Sam's legs.

My heart is pounding in my chest and a fierce heat rushes up from between my legs, flooding my core. I lift up my skirt and begin to touch myself, pressing against the pleasure point that is begging for attention.

Finally, Mack unfastens Sam's belt and pulls his jeans and boxers down over his hips. His cock springs free, and Mack immediately seals his mouth over its tip, swirling his tongue over the sensitive head before taking Sam deeper toward the back of his throat.

A shuddering breath swells in my ribcage, and I press harder on the spot just above my clit.

Until now, neither of my boys has looked at me. But now Sam's gaze collides with mine. He bites his lower lip, taking in my flushed face and the way my hand is moving between my legs.

A guttural moan causes him to sway on his feet. He grasps Mack's shoulder for support and thrusts harder into the Professor's mouth.

And that image – Mack on his knees, letting Sam fuck his mouth – makes pleasure bloom fiercely between my legs.

When Mack moves faster, tongue flicking against Sam's inner thighs, I find myself mirroring their movements with my hand between my legs, desperate for some release from the pressure coiling in my body.

Sam's face is beautiful with strain, his mouth parted slightly, his eyes squeezed shut. The cords in his neck stand out as he pumps his hips forward.

I cup my breasts through my shirt, then quickly pull my bra down under them, pinching my nipples through the fabric as Sam spasms in his orgasm.

As soon as he comes, Mack keeps sucking until Sam groans once more in pleasure.

When Sam finally collapses against the desk, and Mack stands to look at me, sparks flutter from my skin into Mack's dimly lit office.

Gently, Sam kisses Mack on the lips before he moves his hips back and slides his jeans back up his thighs. He reaches for a bottle of water, takes a sip, then hands it to Mack.

Mack takes a drink, then he looks at me. "Are you okay, Little Star?"

I am so turned on right now that I can hardly form words. My body sparkles with arousal, and my hands are shaking – I can barely hold myself up. There is no way I'm going to be *okay* for a while.

"Yes," I manage to say. "But I need you to fuck me now, Daddy."

With a growl, Mack shoves the water bottle back into Sam's hands and strides toward me.

I hardly have time to unbutton my shirt before he is on me, his mouth against my neck and his hands on my breasts.

"Fuck," he growls. "I love seeing you this turned on."

He yanks my shirt down and takes a nipple into his mouth, sucking so hard I cry out in pleasure.

"The two of you together," I whisper, meeting Sam's eyes over Mack's shoulder. "It's..."

I lose the words I'm trying to find because Mack's fingers have found my clit.

Sliding my hand between our stomachs, I press against the hardness I find there. "I need you inside me, Daddy. I need you to fuck me."

A low rumble vibrates through Mack's chest. With one hand, he pulls me forward and tears at the front of my panties. With the other, he spins me around.

Sam doesn't move from where he's standing, just watches as Mack bends me over the desk beside him.

My breasts, hot and wet from Mack's mouth, meet the cold wooden top of the desk. I stretch out my arms and grip the furthest edge. Then I feel Mack's palm on the small of my back, pressing down hard as he fills me with

his cock.

I cry out as he thrusts into me. His hips buck against my ass and his hands grasp my waist. He pulls and grinds, and I feel his nails needling my skin as he sinks himself deeper into my cunt.

The pleasure is so intense that it takes me a moment to realize Mack is saying my name. “Nova,” he whispers. “Nova.”

“I’m yours.” I’m totally breathless as I say it, and I can barely hear my own voice.

“Who do you belong to?”

“You, Daddy.”

He grabs my arms, then pulls at my wrists, making me arch my back and lift my ass. As he holds me there, he fucks me harder.

Pleasure runs like electricity from my clit to my toes. I try to keep myself together, but I can no longer focus on anything except the way my body feels under Mack’s hands.

Beside me, Sam leans in and slides his hand down between my legs. My eyes widen, and my legs buckle as Sam makes large firm circles around my clit.

“Don’t stop,” I beg them as volcanic heat begins to swirl inside me.

“Good girl,” Mack growls. “Tell us what you need.”

“I need...” A moan rips out of my throat. I reach back, pressing my hips into Mack as my orgasm rips through me. Fast and brutal, every muscle in my body stiffening with pleasure.

With a final thrust, Mack releases inside me. His breath comes hot on my back, and I can feel his body coiling as he clasps his arm around my waist, holding himself up.

With his other hand, he runs his fingers across my inner thigh. They meet Sam’s and for a moment both of them stroke me gently, as if they’re trying to soothe the ache that throbs there.

“You’re soaked, Little Star,” Mack whispers as Sam moves in behind me.

Pulling my hair to one side, kissing up my throat, Sam whispers against my ear, “Do you need more, Little Star?”

I nod, leaning into the pressure of Mack’s palm between my legs.

Stepping back, Mack spins me around and lifts me onto the desk. Then he steps aside and lets Sam kneel in front of me.

“Fuck,” Sam groans. “If I put my tongue on your pussy, I’ll taste you both.” He looks sideways at Mack, his eyes glistening with arousal. When he

looks back at me, he says, “Would you like me to do that, Little Star?”

Hooking my legs over his shoulders, gripping the desk, I nod but can't reply with words.

I have no words.

Only the desperate, undeniable need to come again with Sam's mouth on my clit.

I'm still whimpering as he wraps his hands under my ass and lifts me to his mouth. His tongue slides over me, from my opening to my clit. When he teases me there, I cry out in pleasure.

With one finger, he presses down on my clit and rubs it, in small circles, just the way I like.

“Please, Sam. Oh, please.”

Pulling his finger away, Sam brings his tongue down instead. It flicks against my clit and he takes me into his mouth, licking, sucking, tasting.

I arch my back and open myself to him, feeling the pleasure build even higher while Mack watches, his eyes are glazed with desire.

I know he wants to fuck me again, but right now, he is content to watch Sam make me spark.

And the feel of Mack's gaze on me as I shudder in Sam's mouth is enough to bring me to my second orgasm.

The wave of pleasure that takes me is more intense than ever before. Like a thousand stars are exploding inside me and radiating outward, my whole body is on fire.

Literally.

I feel my power surge through me as if it's been unleashed from the very depths of my soul.

As I cry out in ecstasy, the room around us fills with an incredible heat.

My vision blurs and I see sparks of orange and red light dancing around the room like tiny fireflies being drawn to me.

Then suddenly, as if by some unseen force, my back arches and I feel something strange happening beneath my skin.

Not again.

A tingling sensation spreads across my body and I know exactly what is happening.

Mack and Sam both spring back, putting some space between us.

I stand up, crying out with pleasure and pain as – sprouting from my shoulder blades - a pair of wings made of pure flame appear.

I flex them without meaning to, my head still fizzing from my orgasm.

With an audible whoosh, they sweep over the desk and set light to a stray sheet of paper on the desk. Extending further, the flames lick at the walls but are quickly extinguished by a gust of wind that blows through the office.

Mack tilts his head, his eyes glimmering with appreciation while he lowers his hand, letting the air return to normal.

“Little Star,” he says. “I think we need to put magick lessons back on the agenda. Either that, or we’ll have to stop giving you such earth-shattering orgasms.”

Laughing, my wings shrinking in size and ferocity as the remnants of my pleasure dissolve, I tease my fingers through my auburn hair and shake my head.

“The orgasms can never stop,” I tell him. “So, yes, I agree. Time to get these wings under control before they do some real damage.”

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## MACK

“**S**he’s fucking radiant when she’s like that,” Sam whispers to me as we follow Nova out of the station.

“I’m not arguing,” I tell him. “But she can’t keep setting things on fire every time she—”

Sam shrugs. “No, but it’s kinda cool.” He grins, and the playful side of him that often remains hidden shines through for a moment. “Watching her lose control...”

“Cool, but dangerous.” I’m trying to be the sensible one. But deep down, I agree with Sam; knowing we can do things to her that make her powers surge to life. Uncontained. Uncontrolled. It’s hot as hell. No pun intended.

“*Can* you teach her, though?” Sam asks as we round the corner onto Main Street. “Would you even know where to start?”

I tilt my head to the side, considering the question. No. I’m not sure I would. But I don’t tell Sam that. “I’m sure I’ll figure something out,” I say instead, attempting to sound as confident as I’m supposed to.

Ahead, Nova moves as if she’s on a different plane. Faster, smoother, like she’s flying instead of walking, even though her wings have dissolved back inside her. She looks over her shoulder at us and grins. “Come on, boys. We said we’d be there for Kole’s opening night.” She snaps her fingers, and my cock twitches at the commanding edge in her voice. “He won’t appreciate it if we’re late because we...” She trails off, biting her lower lip in that sinfully delicious way of hers.

We quicken our pace, Sam nudging my side with his elbow. But when we’re a few paces from the door of The Cross, I stop.

The air has shifted, and I feel suddenly too hot and too cold.

Ever since The Split opened, even after it was sealed again, Phoenix Falls has felt different. There is a darkness here now, an energy we can't seem to shift. But the way I'm feeling isn't because of that. It's something else.

The next time the sensation hits me, it's enough to make me stop and brace my hand on a nearby lamppost.

"Mack?" Sam ducks to meet my eyes. "You okay, Professor?"

I try to answer him, but my mouth is dry as sandpaper and my tongue feels too big for my mouth. The sudden, overwhelming need to find Snow washes over me.

"Snow..." I mutter, searching up and down the street as if he might appear from nowhere, even though I *know* he's back at the cabin because I can hear him snoring in the back of my mind.

"Nova..." Sam calls, his voice unsteady and his eyes now filled with unease.

"I need..." I sink down to the ground. There's a tightness in my chest. A heat that winds its way between my ribs and starts to swell, pushing them apart as if it's trying to make them rip free from my chest.

Pain ricochets down my arm and I clutch my shoulder.

"I think he's having a heart attack." Sam's voice again, more distant this time.

"Go get Tanner," Nova yells. Then her face is in front of me. Those eyes, two different colors, swimming with concern. Her hair. Like flames.

"Mack? Just breathe. It's okay..."

But then it is dark.



"IT WASN'T A HEART ATTACK." Tanner's voice, distant but in the same room, fills my ears. I prise my eyes open. Pristine white curtains. Pale walls. Scratchy sheets. Damn it, I'm in a fucking hospital.

I groan and try to sit up, pulling at the cords protruding from the small plastic pads on my chest.

"Mack..." Tanner takes hold of my hands. "It's okay, buddy. You're okay."

"What the fuck happened?" I shove him off me, but leave the cords alone

and search for water instead.

It's Nova who hands me a tumbler with a plastic straw. I pick the straw out, toss it to the floor, then down the water.

"It's not your heart," she says, smoothing her hand over my chest.

Her warmth usually calms me, but right now it simply makes me grunt and pull away from her.

She glances at Tanner, and he suggests she go fill in Sam who's waiting outside.

When the door closes, Tanner pulls up a stool and sits down next to me. "Come on, Baloo. No need to snap at our girl."

My jaw twitches.

"It wasn't your heart..."

"Why do you keep saying that? Why would it be my heart? I'm not that damned old." My grip tightens on the tumbler. Something still feels off. Am I sweating? I touch my index finger to my temple and frown at the clamminess that greets it.

Watching me, Tanner tilts his head. We have a deal that he doesn't snoop around in our heads – especially since he got super charged with Nova's phoenix blood – but right now I'm probably giving off so much anxiety he can feel it without trying.

He smirks a little and nudges my elbow with his fist. "Just thought your evening with Sam and Nova might have been a bit much, that's all." He raises an eyebrow, trying to lighten the tone.

I don't allow myself to be placated. "Well, now we know it wasn't anything to do with Sam and Nova and my heart..." I shuffle to sit up on the pillows, suddenly feeling every single one of my fifty-three years despite not usually giving a rat's ass about numbers on a birthday card. "What was it?" I ask, meeting Tanner's gaze.

As his eyes flicker, just the smallest amount, for once I feel as if it's me reading him and not the other way around. He's worried.

He clears his throat and shuffles in his seat. "The doctors aren't sure," he says. "I'll get one of them to come talk to you now you're awake, but all your tests came back clear."

"Then why do I feel like a tonne of dog shit?" I bite back, adjusting the scratchy sheets around my bare midriff.

Giving me his best nurse's smile, Tanner squeezes my upper arm. "We'll figure it out, Baloo. Don't worry." He stands up, gesturing to the water jug on



the side. "I'll fill this up and be right back."

He's at the door when I yell after him, "You're a water mage, Tanner. You could fill that by blinking at it."

He turns, guilt creasing his usually retriever-like features. As he opens his mouth to speak, I shake my head. "Just..." I inhale deeply through flared nostrils. "Just don't bullshit me, Tanner."

At that, he nods firmly. "All right." He looks at the jug and, as he stares at it, water bubbles up, expanding, multiplying, filling it almost to the rim.

He strides back over, sets the jug down next to the bed, then points to the door. "I'm going to go and talk to Nova, then the doctors. I'll be back soon."

"Better," I huff. "And Tanner?"

He swipes his fingers through his floppy hair as he waits for me to continue.

"Have Luther or Kole check on Snow? I think this is the furthest apart we've been and I'm..." I swallow forcefully, trying to dislodge the knot of uneasiness that has lodged itself in my throat. "I'm having trouble sensing him."

Tanner's stance changes. It's almost imperceptible, but his muscles have tensed and his eyes have narrowed. "Can you feel him at all, Mack?"

I twist the sheets between my fingers and squeeze. Hard. When I meet Tanner's gaze, my words come out quietly. Barely audible above the low hum of the machine and the hospital air-con and the overhead lights. "No. I can't."

## NOVA

“I can’t get through to Luther,” Sam frowns, pocketing his phone.

I’m pacing up and down the corridor. Tanner is worried. I can see it in his face the way he sees every thought and feeling and need and want that ever enters my head.

“I’ll go to the cabin and check on Snow.” I’m already turning to start running down the corridor. Sam catches my elbow, but before he can ask if he should come with me, I shake my head. “I’ll be quicker on my own.”

Stepping back, he nods. Then a smile twitches on his lips as he gets ready to watch me speed off into the distance.

My newfound powers still amaze us all. Speed, strength, and the fiery orgasms... we should be getting used to them by now. But three months after The Shadow King was defeated, and Phoenix Falls was reclaimed, we are still navigating our new normal.

The flying is a bitch, too. And not something even Mack knows how to help me with.

For now, instead of flying – because it seems my navigational skills from up high aren’t the absolute best – I choose running.

Fast.

I cross town in less than half the time it would have taken in the truck. I don’t stop at the bar, although I do feel bad for Kole. His opening night, reclaiming The Cross, and not one of his people is there to support him.

Unless Luther’s there, several whiskeys in, and forgetting to check his phone.

I roll my eyes, slowing as I reach the woods on the outskirts of town. It’s

dark, which wouldn't usually bother me, but seeing Mack like that – vulnerable and hurting – has left me on edge.

As a twig snaps under foot, I flinch. But not because of the noise; because I caught myself wondering if it might be better if it had been his heart. Because then at least we'd know what made him collapse.

Approaching the cabin, I try to tell myself that I'm just falling into old habits.

I spent so long living on the edge of disaster that I'm still constantly waiting for something to go wrong. For one of my mates to be taken away from me. For the world to end... again.

I have just about talked myself into calming down when I spot the cabin up ahead. It's far too small for six of us plus a frigging polar bear, but Mack doesn't want to return to The Hollow. And I am inclined to agree. Too much happened there and, besides, even with magick, it would take a lifetime to rectify the damage caused by The King and his followers.

I'm at the bottom of the steps when something tells me to turn around. I spin so I'm facing the jetty. Beyond it, the lake is darkening. Gray and choppy, its surface is unfriendly today.

My eyes land on something. A large white shape. My heart lightens instantly and I grin, waiting for it to draw nearer.

But it isn't moving.

"Snow..." I start to run and it's not long before I realize that Luther is crouched next to him, waving at me with tight, urgent arms.

He calls my name and rushes toward me, grabbing my upper arms and nodding back at where Snow lies on his side, breathing heavily.

His eyes are closed. A deep rumble shakes his chest each time he exhales.

"What happened to him?"

"I found him like this." Luther reaches into his pocket and waves his phone. "No hell-damned signal out here with the force field still in place, but I didn't want to leave him."

"Mack's sick too." I crouch next to Snow and weave my fingers into the fur on his shoulder. He sighs and seems to lean into my touch, but his eyes only flutter open a little, then close again.

"Mack's sick?" Luther's entire expression darkens. He, too, more than the others, almost as much as me, has been waiting for the next bad thing.

While Tanner and Sam have told us not to be so dramatic, and Kole has stoically tried to focus on the bar, Luther and I have been the ones issuing

words of caution like *don't get too comfortable* and *the Anti-Magick Alliance is still out there*.

As always, Mack has floated somewhere between the two camps. Neither worried nor calm. Waiting, assessing, keeping the peace.

“What the hell do we do with him?” I ask, looking up from where I’m now crouched on the decking. “We can’t carry a polar bear inside. Not even the six of us could manage him.” I worry at my bottom lip with my teeth. “Are there magickal vets around here?”

At that, Luther almost scoffs. He still finds it amusing how little knowledge I have of their world. Despite saving it, and becoming something of a celebrity among supers up and down the country.

“There are some consultants who specialize in shifters, but they’re rare. None in Phoenix Falls, that’s for sure. And seeing as Mack and Snow are, as far as I know, the first shifters to be separated from one another, I’m not sure even the best consultant in the country would know what to do with them.”

“Well, we can’t leave him like this.” Feebly, I attempt to tuck my arms under Snow’s giant front leg and heave as if I might be able to encourage him to stand up.

He doesn’t even flinch.

Luther folds his arms, looking at me quizzically, amusement wrinkling the worry that had hardened his features. After letting me try one more time to move the ten tonne bear in front of us, he takes my arm and helps me to my feet. “Okay, Supernova. Enough,” he says. “I’ll stay with the bear. You go get somewhere there’s signal and call Tanner.”

“And then what?” I ask, hands on hips now, anger flaring beneath my skin because there’s nothing I hate more than feeling helpless when someone I love is in trouble.

“Then we hope someone at that hospital has a plan.”

## KOLE

I sense her before she's even close. For the third time this evening, her essence crawls beneath my skin, snaking through my veins, tugging at my heart. And other body parts. Distracting me from the job at hand, which is re-opening The Solar Cross after far too fucking long.

But, for the third time, she does not show.

She flits away before I've had the chance to catch hold of her properly. And, the way it does every time she leaves a hell-damned room these days, my heart constricts with the memory of losing her.

"Need some clean glasses, boss." Jake who, thank fuck, decided to quit the police force and do something more suited to his skill-set, waves at me from behind the bar.

I nod and, even though he should be the one doing this shit, begin collecting empties from the tables near the back.

The mood is intoxicating.

Before, people came here for a good time. But they didn't *need* a good time. Now, every single mage, witch, or vampire who walks through the door is desperate for release. Desperate to feel normal for a few hours. To forget there's a great big ugly scar down the center of our town, and a darkness that still hasn't shifted.

To forget that, even though the Bureau insists we're imagining it, not *all* the creatures who escaped from Hell returned there when The Split healed.

Over by the jukebox, the water witch Luther used to fuck turns the volume up loud. When she sees me looking at her, she straightens her back, juts out her tits, and licks her lower lip. I go back to picking up glasses and

try to focus on Nova.

Where *is* she?

As if she's read my mind, the water witch nudges me with her hip and coos, "Where's your girlfriend this evening? With one of her other conquests?"

Anger pulses behind my canines. I do not look at her.

Then I feel it. A rush of heat. Before I can look up, I hear her voice. The Phoenix. "Get the fuck *away* from my boyfriend."

My lips curl into a cocky-ass smile. This time, I do look up. The water witch is tapping her foot, arms crossed, while Nova crackles with heat. Literally.

As she squares up to the witch, sparks flutter into the room and the bar goes quiet.

The witch considers her for a moment then makes a tutting sound with her tongue on the roof of her mouth, tosses her hair over her shoulder, and flounces away.

Nova stares at her until she's back over by the jukebox, then pivots toward me. As she meets my eyes, her shoulders relax and the heat simmers to a slow-boil. "Sorry," she says. "I'm finding it hard to control myself these days."

I put down the glasses and hook my arm around her waist. Fuck, I love how soft she is. The place where her waist curves into her hip. My hand is about to slip lower, and grab her ass in full view of everyone because why the hell shouldn't I show them how irresistible I find her, when she puts her hands on my chest and looks up into my eyes.

"What happened?" I ask, interpreting the worry that crinkles the edges of her eyes without even needing to try.

*Mack and Snow are sick. I don't think we should talk about it here.*

Her voice drips through me, sending a physical shiver down my spine. I take her hand, squeeze, and tug her wordlessly through the crowd.

When the office door closes behind us, Nova glances at the desk. I wonder if she's thinking what I am, but then I mentally kick myself for visualizing her hiding under there while Tanner and I—

"Kole..." She smiles a little, tweaking her index finger under my chin. "Focus."

As usual, she knows exactly what I'm thinking without me having to say it out loud. "They're sick?"

In the bar, someone turns up the jukebox and Jake hollers, “Hey, guys, turn it down,” in a tone that no fucker is going to pay any attention to.

Nova walks over to the desk and leans against it, folding her arms in front of her stomach. She’s wearing a plaid shirt, tucked into a knee-length denim skirt that shows off her waist and her hips. “Mack collapsed outside. We took him to the hospital. Tanner and Sam are with him, but they don’t know what’s wrong.” As she speaks, her words speed up and match the quickening of her pulse.

“Is he conscious?”

She nods, threading her fingers together and squeezing so her knuckles whiten. “But Snow’s not. Barely, anyway. Mack was worried about him, so I went to the cabin. Luther found him on the jetty. We couldn’t move him.”

Dark, inky fear solidifies in my gut. Somehow, Snow being injured hits harder than Mack being sick.

“I called the hospital. Tanner and Sam are coming back now.”

I close the gap between us and brace my hands on her hips.

“I’m sorry. It’s opening night, but could you...”

Before she can finish, I’m striding to the back of the desk, grabbing my jacket and the keys to the bike, and taking her hand. “Let’s go.”

**NOVA**

**R**iding with my arms clasped tightly around Kole's trunk-like abdomen usually gives me a thrill. Tonight, I rest my cheek on his back and focus on the feel of his breathing. I am trying not to think ten steps ahead. Trying and failing.

When we arrive back at the cabin, we head straight for the jetty. Luther is still there. He's lit a fire and is crouched beside it. Snow hasn't moved. Luther's standing to squeeze Kole's shoulder when we hear Tanner's truck rumbling through the trees toward us. It comes to a stop just out of sight. Doors open and close, and muffled voices float toward me on the breeze.

I tune into them. Tanner, Sam, and... "Mack?"

I glance at Luther and Kole, frowning. When I look back, three silhouettes emerge. Positioned either side of Mack, Tanner and Sam are attempting to help him walk, but he is resisting. When he sees Snow, he stops dead in his tracks. This time, he does reach out. Bracing his hands on Sam and Tanner's shoulders, he sucks in a deep breath.

Illuminated by pale strands of moonlight, the expression on his face sends a shiver of fear through my bones. His lips move and, although I can't make out the word, I know what he's saying.

"Snow..."

Beside Luther, Snow grumbles and his eyes flutter open. I crouch beside him and stroke the top of his head. "Did you hear Mack? He's here. He's come to check on you, silly bear. So, you better wake up now."

Snow doesn't wake, but he does grumble again. Deep in the back of his throat. And his breathing changes. Less shallow. More full.



“He heard you.” I call to Mack, smiling. “I think he might be waking up.”

Still unsteady, Mack lets go of Tanner and Sam. He straightens himself up and smiles as he approaches us. While Mack kneels down beside me, the boys all step back, watching.

I put my hand on Mack’s thigh and let it rest there. He glances at me and, in a whisper, asks what happened.

“We’re not sure. But it seems like whatever hurt you is hurting him, too.”

As Mack smooths his hand over Snow’s shoulder, leaning in to press his forehead to Snow’s, the big white bear sighs deeply. A sound that I’ve always likened to a purr escapes his lips and – finally – he opens his eyes.

“There you are, buddy.” Mack’s voice cracks as he speaks. He sighs too, tension melting from his shoulders. I can almost see the strength returning to them both. Their bodies, in sync, become fuller and stronger and Snow rolls onto his stomach, taking up a position that reminds me of a dog preparing for a good stretch after a long sleep.

Yawning, Snow releases a low growl. Mack hooks an arm around his neck and shakes his head. “I don’t know. But we’ll figure it out,” he says softly.

“Mack?” Tanner hesitantly puts a hand on Mack’s shoulder. “You look better. Do you feel better?”

Clearly struggling to take his eyes off Snow, Mack answers without turning around. “As soon as I saw him, I felt... different.” His forehead creases into a frown. This time, he does turn to look at Tanner. “Before I saw him it was like every nerve in my body was on fire, but ice-cold too. Not pain but...” He rubs his palm over his face as he searches for the words. “The anticipation of pain. Like I was on the edge of something that would break me.”

“And now?” I ask quietly.

Looking from me to Tanner, Mack says, “It’s still there, but the closer I got to Snow the more diluted it became.”

As if he agrees, Snow grumbles then heaves himself to his feet. Shaking his head, he nudges Mack with his snout and looks toward the cabin.

“He wants to go inside. He’s hungry.” Mack stands up, a smile playing on his lips.

“No fish inside,” Luther says gruffly. “I don’t care if you’re sick.”

Snow narrows his eyes and huffs.



INSIDE THE CABIN, we gather in the main room. Luther throws fire into the grate, and it casts a warm glow over the room. Even though he and I don't really need the extra warmth – we run hotter than most – the others gather around it. Mack and Snow settle on the floor near the flames. Snow licks his front paws but shoots Luther a grumpy glance; he's still annoyed he wasn't allowed to eat inside.

Sam, always the curious one, finally breaks the silence. "So, any theories about what's happening with these two?" He accepts a beer from Luther and takes a deep swig.

Having all my guys in the same room makes me almost giddy with contentment. With them close to me, I'm at peace. And I wonder if that's how Mack feels about Snow, except magnified tenfold because Snow is – was – part of him.

Sinking onto the couch, Kole grunts, "Shifters aren't meant to be separated from their animal selves. It's not natural. I'm not sure it's ever happened before. So, we're in un-chartered territory here." He looks at Mack for confirmation.

"Not that I've heard of," the professor replies.

"Could it be that you were too far apart... physically?" Tanner says, picking an apple from the fruit bowl on the coffee table and tossing it from one hand to the other.

I shake my head, trying not to focus on the way Tanner's forearms ripple as he toys with the apple. "You've been further apart than that since your split happened. Haven't you?" I slip my hand into Mack's and he pulls me onto his lap, looping his arms around my waist.

"We have but I think Tanner's right." Mack's breath is warm on my neck, and I'm fighting the urge to spin around and kiss him because every time I come close to thinking about losing one of them it makes me want to cover myself in their kisses and love and desire until the fear goes away again.

Sam taps his chin thoughtfully. "Magnets," he mutters. "Maybe it's like magnets... like two magnets that are meant to be together. The further apart they are, the weaker they become. But once they are in close proximity, they regain their strength."

"So, you just need to stay super close to Snow and you'll be okay?" I smile and nod at Mack, even though I can hear the naivety in my voice.

It will not be that simple.

It's never that simple.

"Let's hope so, Little Star." Mack kisses my forehead but before he can press his lips to mine, a yawn stretches his lips. He sweeps his fingers through his hair and apologizes.

"Don't say sorry." I stand up, grab a blanket from the back of the couch, and hand it to him. "Get some rest. Both of you."

Meeting my eyes, Snow blinks drowsily. He's as exhausted as I am. And he doesn't want me to leave.

"All right." I chuckle, sitting back down and leaning into Snow's side while Mack does the same, curling the blanket around us both. "I'll rest if you'll rest."

Quietly, the others retreat upstairs, leaving Mack, Snow, and I to fall asleep.

Except I don't sleep.

When Mack's breathing has slowed and Snow is snoring loudly, I untangle myself from them and grab my jacket from the hook by the door. I'm outside, descending the steps, when Tanner's voice finds me. "Rev?" he asks, not needing to finish his sentence.

"She should know what happened."

He nods, darts back inside, and returns with the keys to the truck.

I was going to run to Rev's, but being alone with Tanner in the truck still gives me a thrill. Even now. So, I take his hand and follow him through the trees.

"It's bad isn't it?" I ask quietly when the doors are closed. For a moment, I stare into my lap but then I turn and meet Tanner's gaze. "Be honest."

"Honestly, I don't know." Tanner reaches for me and trails his fingers up my arm until they come to rest on my elbow. "And that's what worries me." He bites his lower lip. "Like Kole said, we're in un-chartered territory. Which in itself is not a good sign." He tries to smile, but it dissolves almost instantly and he braces his hands on the steering wheel instead of me. Drumming his fingers, he inhales deeply.

"Rev might be able to help. She knows stuff." I laugh a little. "She knows all the stuff."

## TANNER

**N**ova is scared. She's doing a good job at pretending not to be, but inside she's a swirling tornado of emotions. Pretty much all of them related to fear.

Mack is scared too. Even if I wasn't an empath, I'd have read it on his face in the hospital when I relayed Nova's message about Snow being sick too. It was like he was physically crumbling in front of me. His features stiffened then collapsed as a wave of despair washed over him, and out from him, and into me.

Since becoming super-charged by Nova's powers, I've been better able to control the gates that let in other peoples' feelings. But when I do let them in, they're stronger than ever. And sometimes, when my own emotions are heightened, I forget to keep the gates closed.

"I think they're going to fire me soon," I mutter, trying to distract both Nova and myself from thinking about Mack as we make the drive from the woods to Rev's place.

"Fire you?" Nova spins in her seat, hands laced together in her lap.

"I've been pretty unreliable the past few months. They've been understanding, but..." I trail off, wondering why I don't care as much as I thought I would that I might be on the verge of losing my job as a nurse.

"I'm not sure I'd mind that," Nova says, a smile playing on her pillowy lips. "If it meant I got to see more of you."

Grinning back at her, because I can't fucking resist when she looks at me like that, I raise my eyebrows. "You can see as much of me as you like any time you like, Little Star."

Playfully, Nova slides her hand up my thigh but stops before she gets high enough that I'm in danger of crashing the hell-damned truck. "I'll hold you to that," she whispers.

"If we weren't doing something super important," I tell her, trying to stay focussed on the road, "I'd be pulling this truck over, hauling you out, and fucking you on the hood."

Sighing, Nova takes her hand from my thigh and shuffles in her seat. "We might get lucky," she says. "Rev could know exactly what's going on, and then we can have a celebratory hood fuck on the way home."

I bark out a loud laugh that makes Nova laugh in return.

"Or..." she ventures. "If Rev can't help, a commiseratory hood fuck."

"That," I tell her. "Sounds like an excellent plan."

"Either way, we get to fuck."

"Precisely."

She laughs again, but this time it's tainted with something sadder. Despite the banter, and the fact I can't think of a time I wouldn't be in the mood for devouring Nova's body, we're both bullshitting. We're both scared. And although I know why Nova's hoping Rev can help, I also know we're clutching at straws if we think she'll have an answer that all the doctors and consultants at the hospital don't.



REV ANSWERS in a green satin robe, hair wrapped in a matching silk scarf, arms folded grumpily in front of her. "It's late. You guys can't call first?" Before either of us can answer, she adds, "Let me guess... shit's going down, and it's urgent?"

Nova nods and offers an apologetic smile that softens Rev's expression.

"All right," she says. "I'll put the kettle on. You talk."

Inside, Nova and I settle at the table. "Nico's not here?" she asks, scanning the room.

No. He's not. I can't feel him, and I always feel him when he's close. The hellhound that lives inside him now is impossible *not* to feel. It is rage, and anger, and bloodlust. And it amazes me that he's managing to keep it under control.

"Long story." Rev smiles reassuringly as she takes the kettle off the

stove. “Nothing bad, don’t worry,” she tells Nova. “But something tells me what you’ve got going on is a bit more... pressing.”

Nodding, accepting a mug of Rev’s latest herbal concoction, Nova explains what happened to Mack and Snow. Rev listens intently, hands wrapped around her own mug, leaning back against the counter.

“Shit,” she says matter-of-factly. “That’s not good.”

Nova exhales loudly, her shoulders drooping.

“Any ideas what might be going on?” I wrinkle my nose at the contents of my own mug. I swear these teas get worse instead of better.

Setting down her mug, Rev begins to pace up and down the small stretch of kitchen between the countertop and the table where Nova and I are sitting. “Well, I think you’re right about it being something to do with the separation. But my knowledge of shifters is next to useless. Didn’t anyone at the hospital...?” She trails off when she notices me shaking my head. “No, of course they didn’t.”

“It could have been a one-off.” Nova is staring into her tea, talking more to herself than to us. “They might be fine now.”

“Maybe,” Rev says, deep in thought. “But either way, this is probably a sign that you guys should look into it a bit more.” She shrugs, taking another sip from her steaming mug. “I mean, we all just kind of accepted that Mack and Snow are separate now. But this has never happened before, and we don’t know enough about it to know what the long-term effects might be.”

“Where would we even start?” I stretch out my legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Werewolves... we can deal with. There are wolf experts in every supernatural hospital in the country. And wolf clinics all over Eastern Europe. Shifters? Bear shifters? Not so many experts in that field.”

“Isn’t it the same kind of thing?” Nova asks tentatively. “Surely their biology can’t be so different from the wolves’ biology?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Rev says. “I visited my aunt in England a few years ago, and she took me to an exhibit at the underground occult museum. It was fascinating. They had...” She trails off, and her aura changes instantly.

Brightens.

“My aunt...” Rev whispers. “She works at the anthropology museum in Cambridge. There’s a professor there. He curated the exhibition.” She taps her temple as if she’s trying to nudge a memory to the forefront of her mind. “Lucien Thornfield.”

“He knows about shifters?” Nova inches forward in her chair, studying

Rev's face.

"I'm not saying that," Rev replies. "It's a long shot. But I have a feeling..." She closes her eyes, tilts her head from one side to the other. She sees in a different way to Kole; where he gets vivid snatches of the future, Rev knows things without having a concrete reason for knowing them. When she opens her eyes again, she nods. "I have a feeling Thornfield can help in some way."

"Can you call your aunt for us?" I stand and set my mug down in the sink. I'm not drinking the rest, no matter how much she scowls at me.

Rev glances at the clock. "It's morning in England. She should be up." She takes her cell from the charging dock on the counter and gestures to the living room. "I'll call her now."

But even before Rev returns to the room, I know she has not received the answer we were hoping for. Worry and anxiety twinge at the sides of my mind, and when Rev does appear they intensify.

"I spoke to the professor," she says. "He answered my aunt's phone."

Nova glances at me. Rev is clutching her cell in front of her chest, close to her heart.

"She's missing. He thinks something bad has happened to her."

## TANNER

“**W**ere you joking about the commiseration sex?” Nova stops with her hand on the hood of the truck. She looks at me over her shoulder, eyes wide. A skitter of electric heat zips down my spine, and I’m not sure if it’s my arousal or hers that I’m feeling.

I stride toward her and grab her by the waist. “I never joke about fucking you, Little Star.”

We are parked out the back of Rev’s store. The alley is dark and quiet. Only a few apartments have lights in their windows. On the other side of the truck, sentinel-like trees would offer us a shield if we wanted one but right now I can’t think of anything hotter than fucking her out in the open.

As she meets my eyes, challenging me to do it, I slam her body against the hood and reach under her shirt. She gasps as my hands find her breasts then lets out a shuddering moan as I cup them in my palms. I kiss her hard as our bodies move together. My heart is thumping like crazy and I struggle to remember to breathe as the sensations that fill her body fill mine too.

My hands are shaking as I slide them up beneath her skirt. She gasps when I yank her panties to one side. They are already wet, and the thick patch of moisture makes my cock throb with anticipation.

Her arms go around my neck and she pulls me closer, our mouths melding together as my hands rove over her body.

When I unbutton her shirt and ease her bra down, she shivers. But I know she’s not cold. My phoenix never feels the cold.

While her hands go to my waist, fumbling with my belt, her nipples pebble beneath my fingertips. She arches against me with a throaty moan that



sends shockwaves through my entire body.

Impatient, I reach down between us and unzip my fly, pushing aside the denim and freeing my cock.

Nova glances down, smiles, then starts running her fingertips along my length.

She knows me now. Knows exactly which notes to hit to make me breathless and dazed and desperate for her.

Unable to wait any longer, I spin her round and ease her skirt up around her waist. As she juts out her hips, waiting for me, a moan escapes my lips.

Bracing her hands on the hood, breasts resting against the cold metal, she presses back against me.

With one smooth thrust that sends tremors through us both, I slide inside her.

Her back arches and her head drops forward. With a low moan, she starts to move. I grab her hips as I pull out then ease back in as she rocks against me.

Together we find a rhythm, and I close my eyes as the pleasure begins to build.

And this is the part that blows my mind... the part where her pleasure dissolves into mine. The part where I feel what she's feeling when I touch her, and what *I'm* feeling, and it's so fucking mind blowing I can barely contain myself.

Desperate to make her spark, I reach down and stroke her clit. Her body jerks and she lets out a little keening cry.

A jolt of pleasure powers into my core.

I speed up my thrusts, harder, deeper, until I can't think straight. Her little pants of pleasure, her soft moans, the tightness of her pussy all send heat swirling through me.

She is warm, and the night is cold. Our breath comes out in thick billowing clouds, and I want her to scream so loud that all the lights in the entire fucking town come on and people run to their windows to watch.

I press my lips to her shoulder. Her skin is soft, and tastes of vanilla and heat. I can feel her pulse pounding against my lips. I'm not sure how long I can last, but I know her orgasm is close.

Using two fingers now, making large swirling movements over her clit, I wait for her breathing to change and her body to stiffen.

There it is.

She slams her palm onto the hood and cries out. I lean back.

Fuck.

The wings.

As I come, hard, filling her up, she shudders against me and a pair of fiery gold and orange wings burst into life. Blooming on her skin and illuminating the dark.

I am mesmerized by them. By her.

I trace their shape with my palm, not touching them, but close enough for the heat to lick my skin.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, looking at me over her shoulder, eyes only just visible through the flickering flames of her wings.

“Don’t ever be sorry.” I shake my head, spinning her around so she’s facing me and helping her stand. “You’re a fucking *phoenix*. Don’t ever apologize for letting your light show.”



BY THE TIME we’re back at the cabin, it’s only a few hours away from sunrise, and I know we won’t be sleeping. Mack and Snow are still laid out by the fire, which has dwindled, but the others must have heard us come back in because they appear on the stairs and pad down quietly to join us in the kitchen.

As Kole makes coffee, Luther heats up the fire again. Despite the noise we’re making, Mack and Snow don’t stir.

Tucking herself into Luther’s embrace, Nova’s skin glitters with heat. Her wings are gone, but she’s still glowing from our encounter and Luther is staring at her as if he wants to know every detail, but also knows it’s not the time to be getting his kicks from story time.

As she explains what Rev told us, the others listen intently.

Sam, however, frowns the entire time.

Raised away from magick, stuck in that fetid shit hole of a club, he still has trouble accepting the weight of Kole and Rev’s ‘feelings’ about things.

He wants something more concrete than the fact they’re seers and have a kind of intuition the rest of us don’t. He wants information... a *reason*.

It’s a new and different side of his personality. When he first arrived in Phoenix Falls and became part of the group, he was trusting. When Nova

died, he was the one who believed without question that she would come back.

But when Nova told him the truth about her fated five, something inside him shifted. Twisted. Hardened.

Finding out he wasn't one of us – even though we have all made it crystal clear that he *is* still one of us – did something to Sam.

It made him rebel against the idea of fate, and prophecy, and intuition. Now, he wants to know why.

Specifically, right now, he wants to know why the hell we're interested in a professor in England when, surely, there must be people closer to home who could help. And why we're getting distracted by the fact a British witch has been misplaced for a few days.

“She's not just a witch, Sam.” Nova taps her foot and gives him the stare she reserves for when she's chiding us about something. “She's Rev's aunt.”

Sam raises his eyebrow at her. His shoulders ripple, and he pushes his thick curly hair from his eyes.

“And she knows the professor who could help us—”

“A guy we've never heard of? A guy who, a few years ago, curated some shifter-related artefacts?” Sam's eyes widen as he looks at Nova.

Before Nova can reply, Mack's gruff timbre interrupts. “Lucien Thornfield.”

I take the coffee Kole's offering me – so much better than Rev's tea – and turn around.

Mack is walking slowly, like he's in pain, like every muscle in his body is throbbing. I let my gates down a little, and the sensation that fills me almost knocks me from my feet.

Shit.

He really is in pain.

As he meets my gaze, sensing exactly what I'm doing, I slam the gates back up and deliberately do not offer to help him as he eases into a stool at the counter. Instead, I pass him my coffee and he nods appreciatively.

“You know this guy?” Sam asks.

“I know *of* this guy.” Mack slurps the coffee then asks Kole to pass him some potato chips from the cupboard above the sink. “He's a scholar, an academic, with a special interest in shifters. He's a collector, too.”

“A collector?” Nova asks, leaving Luther's side and taking the stool next to Mack instead.

“Artefacts related to shifter lore and history. To the humans, he’s simply a professor of magickal history. Curator, I think, at one of the Cambridge museums. Below ground, rumor has it he keeps his own private collection of occult relics.”

“Then we should ask for his help.” Nova’s entire face brightens with optimism.

Mack offers her a wry smile and shakes his head slowly. “He’s also a vampire,” he says, “and part of the mafia family that runs pretty much everything in a sixty-mile radius of London.”

“Mafia?” Nova almost laughs, but stops when she realizes Mack’s serious. “Well, he sounds...”

“Like someone we shouldn’t be messing with,” Luther gruffs. Having finished his coffee, he takes the whiskey from beneath the sink and pours a glass.

Nova narrows her eyes, clearly mulling over the new information. “But if he’s our best shot at figuring this out, then we might not have a choice.”

Sam, still playing the skeptic, raises an eyebrow. “So, let me get this straight. We’re going to ask for help from a vampire mafia lord who lives half way across the world. This is your plan?”

Luther gulps down his whiskey, his eyes flicking between the group. “It’s not the ideal scenario, but we can’t just sit around and wait for Mack and Snow to get worse.”

Nova cuts him off. “Then we approach carefully. We do our homework. We figure out what he wants, what he needs. We find a way to negotiate and *make* him help us.”

Mack grunts, taking another sip of his coffee. “Trust me, Little Star, Thornfield is no fool. From what I’ve heard, he’ll see through any facade in an instant. If we’re going to approach him, it needs to be with honesty and a show of respect.”

Luther scoffs. “Respect for a bloodsucking mafioso?”

Mack meets his gaze evenly. “Respect for someone with the power and resources to help us... or hurt us.”

## NOVA

**A**s dawn breaks over the lake, I stand on the edge of the jetty and watch the sun creeping up over the trees on the far side of the water. I sense Kole before I hear him. His presence fills my entire body and turns it into a velvety mess of feelings I can't name.

"You fucked Tanner last night," he whispers in my ear.

I stiffen, heat instantly flooding my core.

"Do you still taste of him?" he asks, hands gliding over my shoulders and dipping beneath my shirt to gently palm my breasts.

"Do you want to find out?"

He leans down, almost growling into my ear as he whispers, "Turn around, panties off."

I do as he says, turning to face him then easing my skirt up and my underwear down over my hips. Kneeling in front of me, Kole gently lifts my leg and rests it on his shoulder. I brace myself on the wooden post beside us, and sigh a breath of warm air into the cold morning.

Gently, Kole trails a torturous finger from my knee to my inner thigh. When he reaches my pussy, he stops.

"Ask for it," he whispers.

"Please," I breathe.

"Ask me," he hushes, "Ask me for my tongue."

"Please," I grit, "Please, Kole, please put your tongue inside me."

Still, he doesn't give it to me. Not straight away. His tongue teases my entrance, and I grip the back of his head, pulling his ponytail loose then digging my fingers into his thick black hair.

Then there it is... inside me.

He hums with pleasure and the vibration makes my legs waver.

“Did Tanner come inside you?” he asks, even though he must know already because he can taste him.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Did you show him your wings?”

“Yes.” This time, my answer is snatched away by a sharp intake of breath as Kole replaces his tongue with his fingers, and swirls it around my clit instead.

I know I won't come, not now, not with thoughts of Mack and English vampire lords distracting me, but it doesn't matter.

I still don't want it to end.

Sinking into the sensation of Kole's tongue and fingers – stroking, swirling, coaxing – I tilt my head back and sigh with pleasure.

*Can I bite you, Little Star?*

Kole's voice fills me up.

*Always.*

There's a pause. The circles on my clit slow, and his hot breath at the apex of my thighs makes my skin prickle.

He presses his thumb to the fleshiest part of my inner thigh.

*Can I bite you here?*

My breath hitches in my chest. He has bitten my neck plenty of times, but he has never bitten me here.

“Do it,” I tell him forcefully, hand on the back of his head.

Kole takes my thigh between his teeth and bites, hard. The sensation shoots through me like a bolt of electricity and I gasp, blood dripping down my leg. Hot and wet.

As he sucks, and pleasure ricochets through the gaps between my bones, I cry out.

Kole's hands find my ass and grip hard. Blood drips down his chin, and the sounds he makes as he sucks drive all other thoughts from my head.

I thrust my hand between my legs and the moment I touch myself, I'm coming hard, arching my back and gripping his shoulders as wave after wave of pleasure radiates outwards from the epicenter of my core. My breathing is ragged and Kole's fingers are inside me now, pushing me higher until I can take no more and finally collapse into him, trembling with pleasure.

I look down at him, and don't need to speak. Wordlessly, he takes his

pants off and I lower myself onto him.

He wraps his arms around my waist as the tip of his cock enters me. The sensation is electric – like lightning has struck us both at once. Reaching down between us, I trace my fingers through the blood on my thigh then raise them to his lips.

As he sucks beads of crimson from my skin, he closes his eyes and eases me down onto the decking. When I'm on my back, he arches over me, holding one leg flush against his chest so he can thrust deep enough to make me yell his name.

He is clutching my hands, pinning them up above my head, lips tainted with the hue of my blood, when his orgasm rocks through him.

Silently, his body tenses then uncoils.

His teeth find my neck, but don't puncture my skin. Instead, they nibble gently. Then he kisses me. My throat, my lips, my forehead.

"Did I taste of him?" I whisper, lips teasing his earlobe.

"Yes," he says. "But now you taste of me too."

**MACK**

**D**espite the warm rays, a chill runs through my bones that has nothing to do with the temperature. My body feels like it's turning against me, muscles aching, the crevices between my ribs creaking.

It's like an amplified version of the way I used to feel when I needed to shift. Except, now, I can't. So, there's no release. Just a pressure cooker building and building.

I do my best to hide my discomfort from the others, but I know Nova senses it. In the back of Tanner's truck, her eyes keep darting my way, full of concern.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" she asks quietly.

I fucking hate the way she's staring at me. Like suddenly she's the one looking after me instead of me taking care of her.

It shouldn't be this way.

She might be the most powerful witch in the world, but she's still learning. She still needs me. Perhaps more than ever.

"We need Thornfield's contact details. There's no email listed on the faculty website. If Rev's aunt can get us in touch with him, then maybe he can shed some light..." I wince as the now-familiar sensation of blinding heat and freezing cold grips my limbs.

Pressure building, ready to crack me open.

"Okay, Daddy." Nova smiles at me. *That* word on her lips usually makes me instantly hard. This morning, all I can muster is a twinge of arousal which is soon drowned out by more nauseating heat.

Her features crumple a little, worry creasing the edges of her beautiful big



eyes.

Sometimes, I try to figure out which color I like best. The brown or the blue. Truth is, I could spend hours staring into either.

I attempt a smile and put my arm around her, sighing as her warmth nuzzles into my chest.

Up front, Tanner cranks up the radio and starts to sing. He has a terrible singing voice but Sam's is a little sweeter. When they turn and high-five each other, after reaching the crescendo of the song, Nova grins and joins in.

Her breath is soft on my neck. She rests her palm on my chest, just above my heart, as she sings.

I close my eyes.

I'm tired.

So fucking tired.

"Rhone?" Rev's dulcet tones make me snap my eyes open. "Are you all right?"

Nova, Sam, and Tanner are outside on the sidewalk, but Rev slides onto the back seat with me.

When did we get here? I only closed my eyes for a second... "I'm fine." I shuffle to sit up straight, but Rev rolls her eyes.

"Bullshit," she says frankly, folding her arms so her gold bangles tingle against one another.

"Okay, not so fine," I admit. "Nova filled you in?"

"She did."

"Any news on your aunt?"

She shakes her head.

"But you think the professor she works with can help?"

"I *feel* like he can, yes." Rev toys with a large hooped earring that dangles from her right ear. "But I spoke to Thornfield last night and—"

"You spoke to him personally?"

"He answered her phone." Rev worries with the bangles. "He didn't seem very interested in a discussion though."

"Try again." I know I'm not showing enough sympathy. I've glossed over the fact her aunt is missing and I'm making it pretty damn clear that all I'm interested in is getting hold of someone who can help me figure this out.

I know I sound crabby and irritable. But as the heat and the cold and the aches start to build again, pounding like an encroaching migraine that vibrates in every cell of my body, I take Rev's hand and squeeze. Hard.

“Please try again.”

Rev hesitates, looking down at our entwined hands. When her gaze returns to mine, she nods then takes her cell from her pocket and hits redial on the last number.

“Professor Thornfield? Yes, it’s Rev. Miranda’s niece.” She pinches the bridge of her nose then quickly begins to explain our predicament. “We were hoping you might be able to help or, at least, point us in the direction of someone who can? I was also hoping you might have some news about my aunt. It’s not like her to—”

Thornfield interrupts and, as he begins to speak, Rev hits the hands free button. A strange, mostly British, accent fills the truck.

“Tell your friends to come and see me.”

“Come and see you?”

“I can’t help them over the phone.”

My eyes widen and I clear my throat to speak even though Rev is shaking her head at me. “Professor Thornfield? My name is Rhone Mackenzie—”

“The shifter who split in two,” Thornfield hums.

“Have you heard of this happening before? Is there a precedence for this kind of thing? I’ve read your work and I’m pretty sure if you don’t know then no one will.”

My attempt at flattery does nothing to change Thornfield’s tone as he replies, “You are correct. If I can’t help you, no one can. Which is why you should come to Cambridge as soon as possible.”

“Cambridge? I can’t just—”

“Bring the bear.”

The line goes dead. Thornfield hung up.

Furiously, Rev tries to call again. And again. And again.

No answer.

“Hell damn it, Rhone. I needed to speak to him about Aunt Miranda. They’ve worked together for years. He should care that she’s missing.”

Before I can apologize, a low rumble sounds in the distance. The truck windows rattle, and Rev’s earrings sway back and forth. We exchange confused glances.

Another rumble, closer this time. Screams sound somewhere in the distance, and Rev’s face goes pale. “The shield,” she gasps.



WE RUSH OUTSIDE to see several small explosions detonating against the invisible barrier above the town. It's been in place ever since the AMA decided to label Phoenix Falls a 'hell mouth' which – along with its residents – should be destroyed.

The town had barely recovered from what happened when the attacks began.

"They must have found a way past the forest protections," Rev says, fingers splayed, ready to cast if she needs to.

"They won't make it through the shield, there's simply no way they can." I raise my voice over the sound of the explosions. Beside me, Nova has begun to glow. Her eyes flash, and Tanner reaches for her.

"It's okay," he whispers, trying to calm her.

But as more bombs strike, and supers emerge onto the street, screaming and pointing, dread solidifies in my stomach.

"It's okay," Tanner tries again. "They won't breach it."

Nova pulls away from him and steps forward. She has become the poster witch for everything the AMA hates about supers. Despite the fact she saved us all, they have used her power against her. Dubbed her a danger to humanity. Not far from the edge of the shield, there are pickets, signs, disgusting specimens like Johnny shouting names that make me want to rip their fucking heads off.

So far, the SDB is managing to control the situation.

But, while they're not coming for Nova, the American Government isn't doing anything to help her – or us – either.

"We can't give them any more ammunition," Rev says, resting her hand on Nova's shoulder.

But our phoenix is quivering with heat. "I should stop them," she says as plumes of thin orange smoke begin to waft from her skin into the air around her.

I squeeze her hand. Her palm sizzles against mine. "Nova, it's okay. They can't get past the shield."

Another blow.

Then another.

Nova splays out her arms. At the same time, her wings appear. Darker than the ones that bloom when she comes. Like they are laced with ash.

Another blow.

Another.

Each impact is like an assault on my senses.

Tanner and Sam step in front of Nova, trying to keep her grounded.

My head pounds, my vision blurs. I sway as my knees weaken. I brace my hand on the truck.

“Mack? What’s wrong?” Her voice sounds far away. Darkness creeps into my peripheral vision.

My legs give out and I collapse to the ground. Weakness courses through me. My body is failing. Something is sapping my strength. I’m crumbling.

Nova kneels beside me, her hands fluttering over me helplessly. “Rhone... say something.”

I try to respond, but my tongue feels thick and useless. The darkness closes in, swallowing me whole.



# NOVA

**A**nger and fear swell in my veins like molten, bubbling lava. I am ready to explode. I'm ready to burst through the shield and destroy every single one of those monsters outside.

I'm ready to do to them what I did to Johnny.

I'm ready to punish them for their small minds and their black hearts.

I don't try to control the power surging inside me. Even though Mack has been trying to teach me how to harness it, right now, I don't want to. I want to let it explode. I want to burn them all.

But then Mack collapses. I see him from the corner of my eye. He stumbles, reaches for the truck to steady himself, then falls to the ground.

Around us, supers are spilling out into the street. Some are angry. Some are afraid. Some are sad.

I search for Tanner. Before he drank from me, he'd have found it hard to block the intense surge of emotion filling the air. Now, he is better able to shut it out.

Crouching in front of Mack, he asks Sam to help him and – together – they heave him back into the truck.

“Go...” Rev says. “I need to try to reach Nico.”

Tanner nods at her as he climbs into the driver's seat. In the back, Sam and I reach for each other. He hugs me close. Mack's head is in my lap. He is breathing but not responding to my voice or my touch.

“Hospital?” Sam asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “He needs Snow. Take him to Snow.”



AS WE DRAW CLOSER to the cabin, the explosions stop and Mack begins to open his eyes. We've just parked the truck when Snow comes ambling through the trees ahead. He is unsteady on his feet, like he's moving through treacle. Luther and Kole are close behind him.

Kole glances at the sky as if he's waiting for another hit on the shield. But Luther focuses on me.

He's angry too. I can feel the heat radiating off him from here.

When Snow reaches the truck, he slams his shoulder into it and Sam tells him to stand back so we can open the door.

Together, we help Mack down. He leans his entire body into Snow's and the two of them stand together. Eyes closed. Breathing heavily.

I wrap my arms around my waist.

"Magnets," Sam mutters.

"They need to be back together." I glance at him then the others. "That's what's happening, right? They shouldn't be like this. They need to be one not two."

Tanner combs his fingers through his hair and bites his lower lip. "I think so," he says.

Luther flicks a flame into his hand then extinguishes it then flicks it to life again, the way he does when he's thinking. Mulling something over. "But how the hell do we do that?"

"The vampire." Mack is still hanging onto Snow, but has turned to face us. I hate how fragile he looks. "He told me to come to Cambridge with Snow."

Cambridge... Kole's not speaking out loud, but I hear his voice. It is thick with an emotion I don't recognize. Fear? Dread?

"And if you do that, he'll help you?" Tanner asks.

"That seemed to be the implication, yes." Mack inhales deeply and rubs Snow's shoulder.

"Seems to be?" I frown.

Mack straightens himself up, and nods.

"Do you think there could be another way? Someone else who could help us? The Bureau? Maybe Annalise..."

"I can try." Mack moves to take his cell from his pocket but Luther interjects.

“Sorry, buddy. Kole and I spoke to her while you were with Rev.” He exchanges a regretful look with Kole. “She searched the database while we were on the line with her. There’s no spell, on record at least, that would reunite you two.”

“Then I guess we’re taking a vacation.” I put one hand on Mack’s shoulder and one hand on Snow’s. My wings have receded again and the bubbling anger has abated. “I could use a break from this place, anyway.”

“Should we...” Sam trails off, laughs a little, and shakes his head. “I was going to ask whether we should talk about it a little more. But then I remembered that when you’ve made up your mind about something, talking about it only delays the inevitable.”

“The inevitable?”

“That we’ll agree with you and do what you say.” He smiles. The hint of a silvery scar is visible at the neck of his navy t-shirt. It makes me want to kiss it.

“Just one problem.” Tanner rubs his chin. He’s staring at Snow. When he looks at me, he raises an eyebrow. “How the hell are we going to get a polar bear to England?”





## SAM

I pace back and forth outside the cabin, my paws hitting the dry earth. The others are inside, their voices a low hum as they pore over spell books and scrolls. I made an excuse about needing to shift and left as soon as they started.

Despite the circumstances, there was a buzz in the air. A renewed sense of purpose because they've got something to focus on. Something new to try to fix. Except, I don't feel that way.

Sometimes I wonder if this is how Snow feels – left out, useless. But he has Mack. They have that profound bond that comes from sharing a soul. Me? I'm just an outsider who happened to fall for Nova. Sure, we share a history that she doesn't share with the others. But I'm not one of her fated mates. Just a guy who got lucky, who she cares about, but who will never truly be a part of her the way the others are.

No matter how hard I try to buy them, these thoughts gnaw at me. Since I arrived in Phoenix Falls, I've struggled to feel like I belong. Like anyone could truly want me around. Nova and the others already shared something special. They'd been a part of her salvation, her transformation. They'd witnessed her changing and growing.

I was the new guy. The one who was fumbling around trying to navigate his feelings and his past.

I don't know magick. I know next to nothing about the supernatural world beyond what I learned in the club and from Madame.

And in the end, it was Nico that Nova needed. Not me.

I try not to let the thoughts torment me. I know Tanner senses them, and a

couple of times he's tried to broach the subject with me. But I don't want to talk about them. What good will talking do?

Being with Nova helps. Being with Nova and Mack helps even more.

But moments like this bring my insecurities clawing to the surface.

Vicious, destructive voices in my head tell me that the others merely tolerate my presence for Nova's sake. That *she* only tolerates me because she feels sorry for me. Because she knows I'd have nowhere to go and no one to run to if she told me she didn't want me anymore.

A breeze ruffles my fur and brings with it the coppery tang of blood. Not human blood, but animal. I raise my snout, sniffing, trying to push aside my melancholy thoughts. There's something familiar about the scent underneath the raw meat smell. Instincts kicking in, I abandon my pacing and take off in the direction of the blood, paws kicking up dust.

I dart between the trees, following the scent through the forest. It grows stronger as I near a small clearing blanketed with ferns. In the center, a shape I'd recognize anywhere...

Nico.

Feasting on the carcass of a deer, sharp teeth ripping flesh from bone, his shoulders ripple and a deep growl rumbles in his throat.

Even now, I struggle to see him like this. In such a monstrous form.

Gray skin stretches tight over his bones, his jaws drip with blood and saliva, and his eyes flash as he looks up at me.

When he lifts his muzzle from the deer's ribs, his nostrils flare. He blinks his burning red eyes in recognition.

My stomach twists. Some wolves feed on animals like this but I've never been able to do it. Even back at *Spine*, I refused the meat we were offered.

Shaking his head, Nico leaves the deer and prowls closer.

*It has been too long, brother, he says silently.*

*Where have you been?* I ask, trying not to sound as dejected as I feel. For the first few weeks after it all ended, he and I hunted together every night. I didn't feast, but I enjoyed the thrill of the chase. But then our hunts became fewer, and fewer.

With a flurry of movement, Nico shifts back to human form and gestures for me to do the same.

He strides over and embraces me, clapping me on the back. "You saw the attack?" he asks.

I nod.

“AMA.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

“The SDB confirmed it?”

Nico rubs the back of his neck. “I confirmed it.” He grimaces, the smile slipping from his face. “I’ve been meaning to tell you. I just wasn’t sure how...”

I frown, putting my hands into my pockets. “Meaning to tell me what?”

Nico wrinkles his nose guiltily. “Rev and I are working with the Bureau. They asked for my help to track down the demons that got out when the split opened.”

I open my mouth to speak but then close it again. Nico working for the SDB? A dry laugh shakes my chest. Wow. I really am the only one with nothing to offer.

As if he can tell I’m feeling inadequate, Nico says, “I wish I wasn’t someone who could help them. But apparently, I can sense demonic energy the way others can’t. And I can get closer to them, too. The demons.”

“So that’s where you’ve been?”

Nico nods.

“You’ve been beyond the shield?”

“Most of the demons escaped before the shield was erected. So, yeah. I’ve been... around.” Before I can say anything else, he fixes me with an intense stare. “Listen, Sam. We got wind of a new rumor, one that has us worried. Word is the AMA’s planning something big. Gathering resources, recruiting new members, acquiring weapons. We’re not sure exactly what they’re up to, but if they’re gearing up like this, it can’t be good.” His jaw twitches. “Our theory is that all the noise they’re making outside of town is just a distraction.”

My chest tightens with anxiety. “Okay. Do you need our help?”

Nico shakes his head quickly. “No, we’ve got it covered. I just wanted you to know so you can look out for Nova. I know she’s able to take care of herself these days but...”

“Actually, we were just talking about getting Nova out of here for a while.”

“Out of Phoenix Falls?”

“Out of the country.” I lower myself to the ground and lean against a thick tree trunk. When Nico sits beside me, clearly trying hard not to let his gaze keep returning to the carcass nearby, I draw my knees up to my chest and sigh.

I fill him in on Snow and Mack, then tell him about the vampire professor in Cambridge.

I expect him to tell me it's ridiculous for us to go that far when we don't know if the guy can actually help. But instead he nods slowly, brow furrowed. "Good idea," he says. "Getting Nova out of here.. it's a good idea."

"You think so?"

Nico nods firmly. He fixes me again with that intense stare. "But is there..." He hesitates. "Any chance you could stick around while she's gone?"

"You want me to stay behind?"

My stomach twists uncomfortably.

"I could really use eyes and ears on the ground here in town while Nova's away. And that wolf nose of yours could come in handy sniffing out trouble."

I hesitate, conflicted. The thought of Nova leaving the country without me sends an ache through my heart.

"Let me think about it," I hedge, buying myself time. Nico clasps my shoulder, expression grim but understanding.

"Take your time," he says, glancing up to assess the position of the sun in the sky. A smile plays on his lips, and he rubs his upper arms. "I'll be at home with my super-hot girlfriend if you need me."

I roll my eyes but chuckle. It's nice to see him so happy.

"I've been away from her for far too long."

As Nico disappears into the trees, a sigh shakes my chest. "I know the feeling."



WHEN I GET BACK to the cabin, the others are gathered around an old book laid out on the table. Snow stands apart from them, glowering at them all with distrust. As I enter, Nova looks up, her face brightening when she sees me.

"There you are! We think we figured out how to get Snow to England without attracting too much attention." She grins excitedly and flips the book around to show me a page of words I can't read. "We just have to tweak this reduction spell a bit. Not sure it's ever been used on a polar bear before."

Snow lets out a disgruntled huff, his lips curling back to show sharp teeth.

Mack reaches out to pat his back reassuringly. “I know, I know. But it won’t be for long, just until we get you across the ocean safely. And it means we can stay together.”

“Ready?” Kole asks gruffly, tapping the book.

Mack glances at Snow. “He’s ready.”

I stand back and watch as the five of them hold hands and circle Snow.

They start to chant, and as their words bleed into one another’s, their tone shifts. Their voices become almost indistinguishable. Nova tilts her head back, exhales as if waves of pleasure are coursing through her, then turns her gaze on Snow.

The air seems to shimmer around the giant bear as the magick takes effect. He tries to back away, breaking through the group’s circle, but the shimmer follows him, enveloping him in a glowing green aura. He yawns loudly, almost a growl.

Then, before my eyes, the great white bear begins to shrink down, becoming more compact. His limbs shorten, his torso condenses, and he disappears behind the couch.

Finally, the glow fades.

Together, we step forward and peer over the back of the couch.

Sitting beside the coffee table, instead of a big white bear, there is now a small, fluffy, Samoyed sized creature. A miniature version of Snow.

He looks utterly ridiculous and seems to know it. He growls, clearly unhappy with his new undignified form. Nova glances at Tanner.

I bite the inside of my cheek.

We all try and fail to hold back laughter at the comical sight of the once-massive predator reduced to a mop of fluff. His lips peel back to reveal a mouth still full of very bear-like teeth. But it only makes us laugh harder.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get back to your normal imposing self once we’ve seen Professor Thornfield. I promise.” Nova ruffles the fur on Snow’s head.

In response, Snow nips at Nova hand with his sharp teeth, making his feelings on the situation clear. Nova just laughs and hugs him.

But as the others start talking about travel arrangements, I take a deep breath, readying myself for what I have to say next. Time to tell her about my conversation with Nico. “So, about the trip...”



# NOVA

“I don’t want you to stay behind.” Anger simmers on my skin. Luther is in the shower, and I’m pacing back and forth by the sink. I want to join him, but I’m too pissed.

“Nova, I can’t leave Sam here alone. He’s still in training.”

“Surely, someone...”

The water stops running, and he steps out, butt naked, dark skin glistening with moisture.

Despite myself, my eyes go to his cock and the metal piercings that feel so fucking good in my mouth and in my pussy. Luther catches me watching and smirks.

“I think I know how to make you stop being mad at me,” he says, opening his palm and glancing at it so a ball of white hot fire appears in his grasp.

I inhale sharply.

Since the whole dying and coming back to life thing, my tolerance to heat has increased tenfold. Fire play with Luther is now one of my favorite kinks. And he knows it.

He steps closer to me, and the fire radiating from his body meets mine. I moisten my lips in anticipation and close my eyes. My wings appear without me having to even try.

I turn so I’m facing the mirror and watch as Luther slides one hand down my back, reaching through the flames the way no one else can, then resting his palm against my skin as if we’re already making love.

When I spin back around, he kisses me hard, his tongue exploring my mouth greedily. He picks me up with ease, and I wrap my legs around his



waist as my wings caress his naked shoulders.

In a cocoon of fire, we stumble from the bathroom into the kitchen.

Luther heaves me onto the counter and stretches both arms out at his sides. His eyes flash and fire dances on his skin. I stroke it, coax it with my fingers, sigh as it caresses my skin.

The fire in his hand intensifies and then he reaches out, pulls off my clothes, unclasps my bra, and runs the flames over my waiting nipples. I gasp at the sensation – the heat is intense and unbearable at first, but before long, it starts to sizzle gently like a warm embrace that only Luther can provide.

“Guys, what the fuck...?” Tanner appears in my peripheral vision. He’s stomping out my burning shirt then sends a spurt of water from the sink to put out the flames completely.

I mumble an apology, but Luther is moving his fire down my body, trailing a line of sparks along my skin. I shiver in anticipation of him reaching my core.

He’s about to tug off my pants when Tanner says, “Move, damn it. You’ll set the whole place on fire.”

With Luther still flaming, Tanner steps in. He removes my pants then my underwear, then stops to look at me. A smile tweaks his upper lip, and he leans in to kiss me.

“You know what goes well with fire?” he smirks, glancing at Luther, who is watching us intently. “Ice...”

Pleasure zips through me and settles at the apex of my thighs as Tanner trails a freezing cold finger over my clit. I gasp and my eyes widen, then I lie back on the counter as Luther and Tanner position themselves between my legs.

While Luther provides the heat with his flaming hand, Tanner follows it up with a torrent of ice, which causes a heady contrast of sensations that have me panting and trembling. They take turns to tease my clit with fire and ice, alternately scorching then cooling my flesh. Nipples, clit, thighs, stomach, neck, nipples, clit, thighs..

I writhe on the countertop as they continue to alternate between fire and ice, exploring every inch of my body until I’m completely wrung out and breathless. Finally, both hands are withdrawn at the same time, leaving me gasping for more.

I sit up on my elbows as Tanner rips off his clothes and Luther pulls me to the edge of the counter.

He slides inside me, pushing his cock in deeper as a sigh parts my lips and I lie back, reaching for Tanner. While Luther's hands lock onto my hips, and he thrusts harder and deeper, Tanner moves in for a kiss. His lips are cold and electric, the perfect contrast to Luther's heat in my cunt.

Luther takes hold of my wrists and pins them above my head, indicating for Tanner to hold them. Then he watches as Tanner kisses my throat and my chest and pulls my nipple into his mouth.

I grip the back of Tanner's head and move with them both, then I find Tanner's cock and wrap my fingers around his length.

He shudders, moaning into my mouth as Luther uses his thumb to draw heavy circles around my clit while he fucks me.

Finally, Luther groans deeply and I feel him swell inside me. Tanner clamps his mouth down hard on my nipple, and I pump his cock as my entire body begins to unravel.

Tanner comes first, in long shuddering waves, his hot cum meeting my warm stomach.

Sparks flutter into the surrounding air. My toes curl. I wrap my legs tighter around Luther's waist and slip my hand down to take over from his thumb, rubbing furious circles around my swollen clit as waves of electricity spread through my body.

Luther comes loudly. Usually, he's quiet, but today he yells and falls forward, bracing his hands on the edge of the counter.

Gently, Tanner kisses me.

Luther moves slowly, his cock still hard despite his orgasm.

I close my eyes and let the fireworks explode.



## MACK

Snow is pissed. He is pacing up and down on the porch looking like a grumpy white ball of fluff. Occasionally, he attempts to growl but it comes out as more of a high-pitched bark. Which makes him even more pissed.

Inside, the sound of Nova's pleasure presses up against the walls of the cabin.

I want to join them.

I want to watch her – because watching her come never stops being fucking incredible – but I'm not exactly in a fit state to join in. And watching will definitely make me want to join in.

“It's temporary.” I sit down on the top step and, reluctantly, Snow sits beside me. I put my arm around him and he leans in a little closer. “As much as I love being able to see you, even like this,” I chuckle then stop myself, “we've got to fix this, buddy. We're not meant to exist like this. You know that, right?”

Snow huffs loudly, but then meets my eyes.

He knows.

If he feels the way I do – on the verge of breaking in half at any second - then he knows.

“Always wanted to go to England,” I mumble.

Snow doesn't reply.

“It's not as pleasant as you'd expect.” Kole appears from the shadows. He's holding a cigarette, even though he hasn't smoked in years, and is twirling it between his fingers.

He's on edge. His body more tightly coiled than usual.

"You were in Cambridge before you came back," I say quietly.

Kole has never told us what happened when he was in Europe. Not the extent of it. All we know is that he had to go to a dark fucking place in order to make his way back to us.

"I was," he says gruffly, sitting down the other side of Snow.

"You can stay here with Sam and Luther."

"No," he says quickly. "I can't risk..." he trails off, unfastens his hair and lets it shake loose over his shoulders.

I raise my eyebrows at him, shifting uncomfortably even though – being this close to Snow – the worst of the alien sensations in my body have faded.

"Cambridge is a big FHB town," he says. "I got caught up with their queen. Zephyra."

I exhale slowly and pinch the bridge of my nose. "I had no idea."

"She..." Kole is clearly struggling to find the words. "I was her pet. Her favorite. If she finds out Nova's in town and that she has a connection to me..." Kole meets my eyes. "I have to be there to protect her."

I nod and clasp my fingers together in my lap. "All right. But don't do anything to put yourself at risk, Kole. If FHB is rife—"

"I can handle it."

"I'm sure you can, but—"

A loud scream interrupts us followed by Tanner and Luther yelling words I can't make out. We jump to our feet and rush inside, only to find the entire kitchen on fire.

A few feet away, standing between the kitchen and the couch, Nova is engulfed in flame. Luther is holding her shoulders, instructing her to take deep breaths and try to calm down.

In the kitchen itself, Tanner is frantically trying to put out the flames, but Nova's powers have already done their damage.

"It's okay," Luther says loudly, wrapping his arms around her as her wings and the fire licking her limbs starts to subside. "It's okay."

When Tanner finally finishes extinguishing the flames, he stands back, panting.

Now, the kitchen is dripping as well as charred.

"What happened?" Kole asks, eyebrow raised.

Nova looks embarrassed. "I'm sorry." She rubs her face with her palms. "It seems to be getting worse. Every time I come, my powers just go..." She

splays out her fingers. “Boom.”

I can see Tanner trying his hardest not to laugh. “Worse things have happened,” he says. “Maybe it means *we’re* getting better.” He meets Luther’s eyes and grins.

But Luther doesn’t look amused. “Or it means we need to cool it for a while, so you can practise taking control.” He takes the blanket from the back of the sofa and wraps it around Nova’s shoulders. Then he kisses her forehead.

Seeing him being tender with Nova still surprises me. Perhaps because they spent so long hating each other, perhaps because he spent so long not letting anyone get close to him.

“We’ll do some more lessons on the plane.” I close the gap between us and kiss her softly on the lips. “We lost focus, but we’ll go back to basics.”

“Have you booked a flight?” Nova asks.

At that, Kole and Luther scoff in unison.

“What’s funny?” she asks, brow creased into a frown.

“Mack doesn’t fly commercial,” Luther replies.

“Okay.” She looks confused. “Well, I don’t think I’m capable of flying across the Atlantic. Let alone taking you guys as passengers. So...”

“He has a plane.” Tanner is attempting to make coffee in the charred remains of the kitchen.

“A plane?” Nova laughs then realizes Tanner’s not joking. “You have a plane?” she asks, folding her arms as if she’s annoyed this is something I haven’t mentioned before.

“My family had a plane. Now it’s my plane. I’ve called the airfield. It’ll be ready to depart tomorrow. Normally, I’d fly us myself but under the circumstances I don’t think that’s a good idea. So, they’re arranging a pilot.”

Slipping her hand into mine, Nova looks up at me and shakes her head. “Are you ever going to tell me where your family got all their money from?”

“Maybe.” I kiss her knuckles. “But not today.”

Turning to the others, as Tanner manages to get the stove to light, I put my hands in my pockets and inhale slowly. “We’ll leave town before sunrise. Get out while it’s dark as we’re having to cross through the shield. I’ve got permission from the SDB, so we’ll pass through with no problem. But still, I’d rather not risk coming into contact with a rogue AMA nut on our way.”

Crossing the room to accept a mug of coffee from Tanner, Nova takes a sip then smiles. “Our first vacation,” she says. “What’s the weather like in

England at this time of year?”

At that, Kole chuckles deep in his chest. “Pretty much the same as the rest of the year... gray and raining. So, make sure you pack an umbrella.”

“Great. Our first vacation and I need a raincoat instead of a bikini.”

“At least the rain might cool you down for a while,” Tanner quips, looking at her over his coffee cup.

Nova gives him a look that makes him almost visibly start blushing. “Doubtful,” she says. “Highly doubtful.”

The night air is cool and damp as we load up the trucks. A knot forms in my stomach knowing that Sam and Luther won't be coming with us. I understand it, but I don't like it.

For the first time since everything was fixed, and was supposed to be 'normal', we're going to be separated. And it doesn't feel right. If this is even half the way Mack feels being separated from Snow, I suddenly understand how hard it must have been for him since their division happened.

Luther, as usual, is cool as fuck about the whole thing. He acts as if he's not even remotely bothered and makes a joke about sexy video calling and dick pics while we're gone. But Sam looks distraught.

I know he's been finding it hard to reconcile the fact he's not one of my fated mates. We haven't spoken about it in months, and we probably should have because I can see it in his face every now and again – the sensation that he doesn't belong. The questions he's grappling with about how he fits into everything.

It shows most obviously in his reaction to Kole and Rev. He used to be completely open to the idea of seers, and fate, and he was the one who kept the others strong while I was gone. But now it's like he holds them personally responsible for the fact that his purpose was taken away from him.

To me, it makes no difference. Nico was fated to help me save the world, not to love me. He fell for Rev almost instantly and they clearly have something special. Sam, as far as I'm concerned, is fated to me in a different way. He was fated to love me. He does love me.

Sam was a part of my story long before the others. In fact, I once pointed out to him, that he was the reason my powers first showed themselves. So, his role is bigger and more complex than a few words in an old prophecy.

I think what gets to him the most is the fact he is not part of The Original Six. After The Split healed, and The Shadow King was defeated, Mack filled Annalise in on everything and she released a press statement in which she

explained exactly who we were. Who I was. How it was that I was the one who defeated him.

Of course, a lot of human vitriol followed. The Original Six, at its heart, is a piece of our joint history – supers and humans – that humans would rather forget. Having it brought to the forefront, and proved more than just a cute supernatural fairy tale, was not something they embraced.

But in the magick community, we have all reached something close to celebrity status. In fact, if Phoenix Falls wasn't sealed off to anyone other than inhabitants right now, I'm pretty sure we'd be inundated with supers making pilgrimages to the site of The Original Six's graves. To the place where Ava and her lovers came back to help us save the world, and where her ancestors now live – repeating her story, but with a happy ending.

For Sam to have to watch that, on the news and in peoples' faces when we pass through town, must be extremely hard for him.

“Do you think he's okay?” I ask Tanner, nodding to where Sam is sitting on the steps, elbows on knees, watching us.

Tanner sighs. He doesn't need to use his powers of empathy. It's obvious from Sam's face that he is not okay. “Go say goodbye. I'll finish loading the bags.”

I nod at him, and fight a smile as Snow struggles to jump into the back of the truck. “He's not yet accustomed to his new size, I don't think.” I sit down next to Sam and nudge him with my elbow when he doesn't respond to me. “How you doing?”

“I'm fine.” He nudges me back.

“You're sad.” I lean on his shoulder and tuck my arm into his. “I don't like you being sad.”

“I'm okay, Supernova.” He kisses my forehead.

“You can change your mind. You can come with us.”

Knotting his fingers with mine, he squeezes my hand. “Nico asked me to help him. I can't say no. At least here, I'm useful.”

“You're always useful.” I sit up and meet his eyes.

But Sam shakes his head. “You need Kole to show you the city. You need Tanner to tell you if this professor can be trusted. You need Mack and Snow because they're the ones who need to be sewed back together.” His tone changes. It's not bitter or angry, just resigned. “What do you need me for?”

Cupping his face in my hands, I lean in and press my lips to his. “I need you for me.”



Sam closes his eyes and kisses me back. As the kiss deepens, he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer.

When we pull apart, I'm breathless and my heart is beating too fast.

"Calm down," he says playfully. "We can't afford another firework display right now."

I grin and kiss him again. Lighter this time. Quicker. "That's better," I tell him. "Happy Sam is back."

"Only for now. As soon as you're gone, I'll be mopey Sam again."

"Well," I tell him, standing up then pulling him to his feet too. "I'll give you the same promise I gave Luther."

Sam raises his eyebrows.

"At least one boob pic a day while I'm gone."

"One a day?" Sam allows his gaze to drop to my chest then chews his lower lip for a moment. "I mean it's not as good as full boob access, but it's better than nothing."

Hugging me again, he folds me into a tight embrace and I feel him inhaling the scent of my hair. I inhale him back. He smells of pine and wilderness and Sam.

"Be safe," he says sternly.

I nod against his chest, then pull back to look up at him. "You too. And you'll let us know if anything changes with the AMA. If Nico says anything? If they..."

Sam nods. "I will." His hand cups my face. "We'll be back together before you know it, and everything here will be fine. You saved the world, Nova. This next bit is just clean up duty."

I lean into his touch then hear Tanner calling to us from the truck. "Sorry, guys. Time to go."

At the same moment, Luther emerges from inside. He's carrying a duffel bag and hands it to me. "Packed you a few extra things," he says.

I frown at him.

"For our video chats." He shrugs. "You know... if we have time."

I'm about to open the bag when he catches hold of my wrist. "If you have time. Call me. We'll open the bag together."

A flutter of heat works its way to the base of my spine. "I'm supposed to be practising some self-restraint for a while, remember?"

"Okay, then I'll rephrase..." Luther leans in and we come together in a fierce, desperate kiss. "If you have time, and if you manage to find the key to

not setting everything on fire when you come, then you call me. And then we open the bag.” He raises his eyebrows, brushing his lips against mine one last time.

“Nova,” Tanner calls. “Sorry, Little Star, we have to go.”

I give Sam and Luther one last kiss each. “We’ll talk all the time,” I promise them, turning and jogging down the steps toward the truck.

They stand together, silhouetted against the glow of the cabin, and watch as I climb into the back of the truck and slip in alongside Mack.

“You all right, Little Star?” Mack puts his arm around me and hugs me close to his side.

Tears bite at my eyes but I swallow them down and turn to look at my gorgeous shifter. “I hate leaving them. But we need to get you fixed.”

From somewhere beneath my skin, Kole’s voice finds me. *Don’t get your hopes up, Little Star. We don’t know what awaits us.*



## MACK

“This plane is the fanciest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” Tanner says as he takes the steps two at a time. “I won’t ask why you never offered to send it to rescue Kole when he was in England trying to get home.”

I narrow my eyes and ascend the steps slowly.

Tanner stands in the middle of the cabin and whistles loudly. “Kinda wish Sam could be here for this,” he mutters, then shoots Nova an apologetic look. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

She shakes her head at him. “It’s fine. You’re right. He’d love it.”

“We’ll take him flying another time,” I promise them, suddenly picturing being alone up here with Sam and Nova. Flying them myself.

I take a seat near one of the windows and watch the others excitedly acclimating themselves with the jet. Snow climbs into the seat next to me and gives me a withering stare.

When I picture the future... what does it look like for me and Snow?

I’ve never really allowed myself to think about whether I want to be reunited with him properly. Do I want us to be one again or do I like this version of us? The version where we exist side-by-side instead of *inside*.

Snow meets my eyes.

He’s wondering the same thing.

Even though we’re separate, his thoughts and feelings are known to me as if they were my own.

There is no distinction between the two of us.

There is just us.

So, perhaps it doesn't matter whether we're together or apart. As long as we continue to *be*.

From the cockpit, a hostess emerges carrying a tray of drinks. She flashes a bright white smile at Tanner, but quickly realizes there's no point flirting because he is fixated on Nova.

A little despondently, she sashays past with a tray of drinks. We all accept one, and then she tells us to buckle up and that the plane will be leaving soon.

Beside me, Snow looks equally ridiculous and miserable. He's the size of a small labrador but white and fluffy and very clearly bear-like. Of course, no one will assume he's a miniature polar bear. But if they looked close enough, they'd see that's exactly what he is.

Climbing down from the chair he'd been sitting in, he ambles over to the other side of the plane and flops down on the floor. Groaning, almost rolling his eyes, he turns away from us and looks like he's going to attempt to sleep.

We've been in the air less than an hour when Kole and Tanner start snoring, and the air hostess slinks off into the cockpit.

Nova is attempting to sleep on the seats behind them, but I can sense her restlessly moving, adjusting position, trying to talk herself into being comfortable.

I get up and take the seat opposite her, then gesture for her to come sit in my lap. She does so without question, hooking her arms around my neck and kissing me gently. "How are you doing, Daddy?" she asks in a voice that sends shockwaves of pleasure through my aching body.

"I thought we should use the time to work on your..." I swallow hard because she's stroking the hair that protrudes from the top of my white t-shirt. "Control."

Taking back her hand, Nova nods at me. "All right," she says.

I shuffle a little, wishing I hadn't asked her to sit like this because her ass against my crotch is making my dick pay too much attention. "Okay." I try to find my best teaching voice. "Tell me what it feels like when your powers surge."

"You mean when I come?" She's toying with me. Deliberately, she moves her hips so her ass grinds down on my stiffening cock.

"Yes." I clear my throat, meeting her sinful eyes. "When you come."

This time, her expression changes. Her forehead creases and she bites her lower lip thoughtfully. "The heat builds with the orgasm. It grows and grows and gets stronger and hotter and when I come it just..." She touches her

finger to her throat and swallows hard, “explodes.”

Nova’s admission sends a wave of desire crashing over me. So strong it almost drowns out the heat, and the ache, and the cold, and the fragility.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, struggling to keep the urge I have to grab her hips and please her with my fingers under control.

But then she starts talking again. She describes the way it feels when she’s about to come and how the pleasure radiates through her body like an electric current. She describes how powerful she feels. Like she could burn the world down if she wanted to, and like maybe, now she’s found her power, that’s exactly what she *does* want. As she speaks, her body warms, her face flushes, her words become honey on her tongue.

“You’ve spent a lifetime in pain, Little Star. Now you’re a queen. You will never feel that way again,” I tell her as my hands settle on her hips - soft curves that fit perfectly into my palms as if they’re made for me.

“I guess,” she says. “But how do I stop myself exploding, Daddy?” She lowers her voice to a whisper this time. “How do I make it stop?”

“Practise.”

Gently, I slide my hands beneath her sweater and start to move my fingers over her skin, gliding them up and down, tracing circles on her back.

Nova’s breathing quickens as I explore further.

“Try to slow your breathing. Latch onto the heat. Own it. Control it. Imagine yourself controlling it. Imagine it exploding inside you and staying inside you.” I move my hands to her breasts and, through the soft fabric of her bra, feel her nipples stiffen. “You are in control, Little Star.”

“I’m not a little star anymore,” she whispers, grabbing my hand and forcing me to squeeze her breasts tightly. “I’m a fucking phoenix.”

I sit back, meet her eyes, and grin. “Yes, you are. So, act like one.”

I change tact, taking control. “I’m going to make you come and you are not going to let the fire out. Do you hear me?”

She blinks at my tone, then looks around us at the cabin of the plane. “Mack... are you sure that’s a good idea? If it happens up here.”

“That’s why it’s a good idea. High stakes. You fail, we plunge to our death.” I pinch her nipple hard and she exhales sharply.

With my other hand, I begin to tease between her thighs. She lets out a tiny moan as I start to finger her through the fabric of her jeans, pushing against all the sensitive spots I’ve learned over the past few months. Showing her I know exactly how to coax her body into a stupor.

Her breathing is shallow. Her eyes are closed. She's concentrating but I'm going to push her harder.

Easing her off my lap, I make her stand in front of me, unbutton her jeans, and pull them down over her hips. She's wearing a black thong. I trace the edge with my index finger, then tell her to remove that too.

"And the rest." I wave at her sweater.

She glances over my shoulder at Tanner and Kole. I'm not sure if she's hoping they'll wake up and join in or that they'll stay asleep in case they try to stop us.

Completely naked, she shudders.

"Spread your legs."

She widens her stance, allowing me to slide my hand between her thighs and gently circle her entrance with two steady fingers.

Closing her eyes, she scrapes her fingers through her hair. Her body shimmers, her skin glistening.

"Fight the heat," I tell her as I hook two fingers inside her.

She is wet, and warm, and she tilts her hips to lean down into them as they thrust up inside her.

From deep in my throat, I release an involuntary moan.

My dick is so hard it's straining against my pants.

As if she can read my mind, Nova leans down, tugs them over my hips, and allows my cock to spring free. She smiles wickedly then falls to her knees, but I hoist her back up and shake my head. "Not today." I turn her around and pull her back onto my lap.

She slides onto my cock with ease and lets out a loud sigh as she settles in place.

Although I can't see her face, and I fucking love seeing her face when she comes, I also love this position. From here, I have full access to her breasts, her nipples, the swell of her hips, her soft stomach, her clit.

From here, I can play all the notes her body loves.

From here, I can edge her into oblivion.

And as the thought crosses my mind, I realize... perhaps that is the answer. Perhaps that's how we get her to stop sparking. Teach her what it feels like to almost explode and for that sensation to go away.

So, I start slowly. I run my hands over her body, focussing on all the sensual spots I've learned drive her wild. Each time, building pressure, alternating between rough and smooth, hard and soft, fast and slow.

As I play with her clit, making large circles that bring shaky breaths to her chest, she gasps and encourages me to move faster. Keep the rhythm. Don't break it. Don't stop.

She's climbing towards a climax.

I remind her to focus.

Her skin is getting hot. A small spark of ash flutters from her back.

She's getting close. I can feel the tension of her muscles around me as I thrust up into her.

And just as she's coiling up, ready to unravel, I stop.

She almost jerks forward with disappointment. "Mack... no. Don't stop..."

I kiss her neck, pulling her soft auburn hair to one side. Then slide my hands up her stomach toward her breasts.

"Please.." She grabs my hand, but when I won't move it, she thrusts her own fingers down toward her clit.

I take hold of her wrist, then decide to let her play.

Her breathing changes. She braces one hand on my thigh and tilts her hips to find a new angle. But then I take her hips and ease her off my lap.

Stumbling she turns around and looks down at me, frustration simmering in her mismatched eyes.

Without speaking, I take her hands and ease her back onto my shaft. She loops her arms around my neck and kisses me deeply.

"Are you going to let me come?" she pants.

"Eventually." I trace her lips with my finger. "When I'm certain you can be trusted."

With a groan of frustration, Nova begins to move more forcefully up and down, as if she'll win whatever game we're playing if she can make me come before she does.

I grab her hips, fingers digging into her softness. Then I move my hands to her ass. Watching her on top of me is driving me to the edge, and when she encourages my mouth to her nipples, I almost lose it completely.

Leaning back, making room for my hand between us, she brings my fingers back to her clit. I find the same rhythm, the quick-quick-slowwww-quick-quick-slowwww that drives her wild.

This time, I allow a few more sparks to fly before I stop.

Nova punches the seat behind my head and her eyes flash angrily.

Then her eyes catch on something and widen.



I turn, peering over her shoulder to see Kole and Tanner making out in the seats behind us.

They don't often kiss, but when they do it is guaranteed to make Nova instantly wet.

"Tell me what you see," I whisper, dipping my hand back between Nova's legs as I start to move inside her again.

"I have a better idea." Nova doesn't speak, just gestures with her index finger. And suddenly, Kole is in the seat next to me with Tanner standing in front of him.

Leaning down, Tanner kisses Kole hungrily.

Their tongues flit between each other's mouths like electric sparks and, each looking at Nova, they reach for each other's bodies eagerly.

As Kole slides his hand inside Tanner's shirt to caress his bare chest, Tanner holds onto Kole's shoulders and allows him to unfasten his belt.

On top of me, Nova sighs heavily.

Tanner closes his eyes and Kole sits forward, taking his dick into his mouth.

"Oh my stars." Nova grabs my shoulder tightly, then leans down and kisses me. "I need you to make me come, Daddy," she whispers. "Please."

"Do you think you can be a good girl for me, Nova?" I cup her face with my hands and stare into her eyes.

I've stopped moving, and her walls tighten around me with the need for more. Faster. Harder.

"I can. I promise."

"You know what's at stake."

She nods. "I know. I can do it. Please..."

I kiss her deeply. Then, as she turns to kiss Tanner and he groans into her mouth, I go back to her clit.

Quick.

Quick.

Slow.

Quick.

Quick.

Slow.

I take her nipple into my mouth and moisten it with my tongue.

Quick.

Quick.

Slow.

She reaches for Tanner and their tongues begin to savagely explore each other's mouths. Next to me, Kole reaches for her other nipple. He licks his finger then swirls it around her hard pink peak. Pinching, stroking, pinching.

Quick.

Quick.

Slow.

Nova scrapes her fingers through my hair. She's growing warmer. The heat building around my dick is enough to make me jolt with pleasure and pain at the same time.

I study her body for sparks. One, then another.

But this time, I decide to trust her.

I don't stop.

Quick.

Quick.

Slow.

Next to us, Tanner yells and grabs Kole's face thrusting hard into his mouth. "Fuck," he shouts, shuddering as an orgasm grips him.

Nova's body tenses. She stretches out her arms, grabbing Tanner's shoulder, using him to steady herself. Kole leans over and takes her nipple in his mouth now.

I move my hands to her hips.

Tanner takes over the rhythm; he knows how to play her too.

Quick.

Quick.

Slow.

She cries out, a word that doesn't sound like anything other than pure vicious pleasure.

Sparks begin to fly. I meet Tanner's gaze and he holds out his hand, ready to extinguish the flames if they burst free.

They appear on her skin, licking it, turning it pink, and gold, and flushed.

Nova's back arches. Her body uncoils. She starts to shake, and her core pulses around me. She kisses me but it's as if she's trying to hold on to me. As if she's falling and I'm the only thing stopping her toppling over the edge.

She is so hot she is burning me now. I can hardly touch her. My palms burn.

Her eyes fly open, and she cries so loudly it's almost as if she's in pain.

But then the flames subside.

They're gone.

She did it.

She fought the flames back. She took control.



## LUTHER

I'm showing Sam the stack of paperwork we need to process this morning when a now-familiar sound shakes the room. Another fucking explosion at the barrier.

Bolting up from the desk, flames already dancing across my palms as adrenaline kicks in, I dart for the door.

Sam is close behind me.

He's the first wolf we've had on the force and, as such, has been given permission by the SDB to carry a firearm. The rest of us have spells. Sam has a gun.

I say 'the rest of us'... right now, it's just me and him.

With Mack gone, Jake tending bar, and Tanya out of town, there's only a handful of officers left and most of them are on desk duty after being injured in the big battle.

Even from the edge of town, as we head up Main Street, it's clear that the shield has been damaged somehow. It's flickering, unnaturally visible in the early morning light.

"Head for the checkpoint?" Sam asks. "Or assume they'll fuck off when they're bored?"

He hasn't noticed the weakening of the shield. I don't point it out, just tell him that yeah we should go to the checkpoint and thank my lucky stars that Nova's already out of town.

When we get there, the sight that greets us is worse than I feared.

At least fifty AMA fuckers are gathered on the other side of the shield.

"You got your wake up call, I see, Deputy." The human speaking to me is

called Tobias. Tobias Fletcher.

The self-appointed leader of the AMA's rebellion against Phoenix Falls and The Original Six.

I scan the signage along the picket.

*BURN THE ORIGINAL WITCH*

*BURN THE HELL HOLE*

A lot of burning. "Not exactly a creative bunch of fuckers, are you?" I drawl.

Tobias square up to me. I wonder if he'd be so cocky if there wasn't an invisible shield stopping me from squeezing the life out of his wretched body.

"Look," I say, folding my arms. "You're wasting ammo with these explosions, man. All they're doing is scaring the wildlife and the kids. So, why don't you just carry on with your protest. Call us names. Shout, wave your little signs. But stop trying to antagonize a town full of supers."

"Is that a threat?" Tobias' eyes flash.

I glance at Sam. Damn right it's a threat, asshole. "No, Tobias, it's not a threat. I'm just asking nicely for you to give it a rest. It's Sunday, after all."

"Like you supernatural freaks give a damn about Sundays," Tobias spits. Literally. Onto the floor.

Sam's upper lip curls. His body is tense. He wants to shift. He's been holding back ever since Nova left.

While he and I aren't close, not like he is with Tanner and Mack, I've observed him over the past few months and I think I have a pretty good idea of how he operates. It's why I asked him to join the force; because he needs a purpose.

When Nova and I broke him out of *Spine*, he thought he had one – help Nova save the world. Then he found out he wasn't so much part of the whole prophecy thing after all.

Since then, he's been lost.

Tanner is still nursing – at least until they get sick of his almost daily disappearing acts– Kole's got the bar, Mack and I have the police force, and Nova has a shit tonne of power and a part-time job at Rev's while she figures out what she wants to do apart from saving the world.

Even that sniveling rat Nico seems to have found something to do. I almost called bullshit when Sam said Nico's working with the SDB. But I guess it makes sense. Who better to track demons than an actual demon?

But Sam?

Until he joined the force, and starting his training, he had nothing.

“Stay calm,” I tell him, nodding to the myriad of cellphones that are – right now – recording this interaction. “We don’t need a full on wolf-shift to be caught on camera.”

Sam grits his teeth. But before he can reply, a scream that’s loud enough to curdle my blood slices through the air. A hulking, twisted form appears in the midst of the AMA rebels.

“Is that...?” Sam breathes.

“A fucking demon,” I reply.

“Damn right it’s a demon.” A familiar voice behind me makes me turn, and I see Rev running toward us at top speed.

Beyond the shield, the humans start to scream as the demon, with black scales and gnashing teeth, tosses them aside one-by-one like they’re no more than chess pieces on a playing board.

“What should we do?” Sam asks, eyes grazing over the shield. “Do we help them?”

I fold my arms in front of my chest and shake my head.

The demon picks up a nearby human, breaks their neck, then tosses their carcass to the ground.

Tobias screams and bangs his fist on the shield. “Let us in. Help us!”

“Sorry.” I shrug. “No can do, buddy.”

But then, from the trees behind the barrier, another form appears. And this one is familiar.

“Nico?” I glance at Sam, and he nods.

“Damn it.” I roll my eyes as Nico charges for the demon.

“It’s a Nalgarth demon,” Rev calls loudly. “It’ll have one iridescent scale amongst the black. Near its heart. Pluck it out and the spot beneath it is his weakness.”

In reply, Nico – in full hellhound mode – barks back.

Rev glances at me. “He can handle it.”

“I was hoping he wouldn’t.” I raise my eyebrows at her. Rev shakes her head.

“I know,” she sighs. “But we can’t just let them die.”

“You think if they got in here they wouldn’t be trying to slaughter every single one of us?”

Nico is on top of the Nalgarth now, biting its shoulder.

“Of course, they would,” Rev replies. “But we’re not like them. Are we?”

The demon releases a loud cry and tosses Nico to the floor. Something glints in the sun. Nico spots it too. As the Nalgarth leans over him, he hooks a claw into the scale and plucks it free. Then he bites. His jaws sink into the demon's chest, and nausea rolls in the pit of my stomach as Nico quite literally rips the Nalgarth open and tears out his heart.



BLOOD AND GORE spatter everywhere and through the shield I can see the humans recoiling in horror.

Ever the calm and stoic one, Tobias starts screaming again, banging on the shield as Nico turns to him with dripping jaws and flashing red eyes.

“You can’t leave us out here!” he yells.

I don’t flinch. “I think you’ll find we can.”

I turn to walk away, gesturing for Sam to follow, but Rev says, “Wait. Nico...”

When I turn back, Nico is panting, his skin-like fur coated in blood. But where there used to be an aura of desperation about him, now it’s like he has found his strength and is enjoying it.

It’s disturbing.

*He* is disturbing.

And knowing how much Nova struggles with her newfound powers makes me wonder whether Nico really is as trustworthy as everyone seems to think he is.

Granted, I’m biased. I already loathe the guy because, yeah, okay, he came through for Nova in the end. But look at what he did to her before that..

“Nico, come on...” Rev beckons for him to cross through the shield. Another thing that makes me uncomfortable... him having access in and out of town whenever he pleases.

“Did you catch it on camera?” Tobias yells, talking to his minions but looking at me.

“You mean did they catch a supernatural creature protecting you from a demon?”

“No,” Tobias spits. “I mean did they catch the supernatural state police standing there doing absolutely fuck all while two vicious hell demons nearly tore us to shreds.”



While Same looks so angry it's as if he wants to launch himself through the shield and throttle them all, I simply grit my teeth and sigh.

"Call Annalise," I instruct my phone.

It dials instantly.

When she picks up, I speak quickly. "Nico just took out a..." I glance at Rev and she reminds me of the demon's name, "a Nasgarth demon. Outside the shield. It attacked a few humans."

"AMA?" Annalise asks.

"Fraid so. They caught it on camera. They'll sew the footage together to make it look like we stood by and did nothing to help, even though Nico took the thing out."

"Nico?" Annalise clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. She doesn't know that we're aware of the SDB's arrangement with Nico and Rev.

"We know, Annalise. No need for pretence here."

She sighs a little, but doesn't say anything else except, "All right. We'll do damage control. As much as possible."

"Any other news?" I stop her before she hangs up.

There's a long pause. "Other news?"

"Anything we should know about. Related to the AMA?"

She clicks her tongue again. "If there is, you'll be the first to know, Luther. You have my word."

And with that, she hangs up.

I pocket my phone and turn away from the chaos on the other side. I have always trusted Annalise's word.

Always.

She's proved herself again and again to be an ally. Even when it's put her in a difficult position.

Except something in her tone just now told me she was lying.

"There's something she's not telling us," I mutter to Sam as we walk back toward Main Street.

Beside Sam, Nico – now back to being human – cranes his head to meet my eyes. "Like what?"

"I don't know. But as you're on the inside now, Nico... you're going to have to be the one to find out for us."



# NOVA

The landing is bumpy, to say the least. The small private jet shudders and dips as it descends through dark, rolling clouds. Rain pelts the windows, reducing visibility to almost zero. I grip Tanner's hand tightly with each jolt and sway, knuckles turning white.

"Please tell me one of you knows how to fly this thing if our pilot passes out," I say through gritted teeth as we hit another pocket of turbulence.

Kole, face as stoic as ever, simply grips his seatbelt and doesn't reply. Mack gives me a strained smile. "We'll be fine. The airfield is just ahead. And I can fly us if I have to, Little Star."

Even so, I'm filled with relief when I feel the wheels finally bounce down on tarmac after a nauseatingly long descent. We hydroplane for a few alarming seconds before the jet finally slows to a stop with squealing brakes.

I let out a shaky breath as the engines power down, my heartbeat gradually returning to normal. Through the fogged up windows, I can just make out a few small hangars and buildings - the private airfield located just outside Cambridge.

We disembark down a set of slippery metal steps to find ourselves nearly blinded by a relentless curtain of pouring rain. The wind whips my hair violently into my face as I stare around at the bleak English countryside. Gray skies loom over rolling green fields divided by ancient stone walls and hedgerows. A far cry from the red rock and the temperatures I'm used to back home.

Tanner has to raise his voice to be heard over the howling wind and rain. "Let's hurry up and get our bags so we can find the car Mack arranged."

Within moments, I'm soaked through, even with Tanner's suit jacket draped over my head as a makeshift hood. The wheels of my case scrape and slip over the slick tarmac, splashing through puddles. Mack and Kole load up the trunk of the nondescript black sedan parked near the hangar. We all pile in, shivering and damp.

As the car sets off down a narrow, winding road between the endless gray fields, I peer out at the rain-blurred scenery. "So this is England, huh?"

Kole – who's driving – merely grunts in reply while Mack reaches over and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, it's pretty much always like this. Just a bit of rain. You'll get used to it soon enough."

I sigh, watching rivulets of water stream down the fogged up window glass. The wipers are struggling to keep up. "Sure they're not expecting a November heatwave?"

Tanner grins and nudges me with his elbow. "Oh, yeah, I'm sure there's one right around the corner. Did you pack your sundresses?"

I glance at the bag Luther gave me before we left. "I'm not sure. Maybe."

Tanner chuckles. "I don't think Luther packed sundresses in that bag." He raises his eyebrows. "It's too heavy, for a start."

"You're sure this is the way?" Mack asks, checking his phone.

"Parking in the city is a nightmare. We'll leave the car down a side-street and walk." Kole speaks through gritted teeth, and I can't tell if it's because he's annoyed at having to explain himself or because he's battling all kinds of feelings about being back here.

Usually, he lets me in.

But now, his thoughts are silent.

As Kole navigates through a maze of tiny residential streets, I wait for him to speak to me. but the words don't come. He is shutting me out.

Finally, we reach a road that contains houses on one side and a line of parked cars on the other. Kole manages to park in the smallest space I've ever seen, and we all pile out, squinting into the rain as he locks it.

Opposite, the houses are all lit up. Some are already sporting fairy lights and Christmas decorations.

"This way." Kole strides off into the gloomy street. Despite it being mid-afternoon, the storm clouds that darken the skies above us make it seem like the middle of the night.

We cross a busy road, Snow trotting at Mack's side like the world's most obedient puppy. I fight the urge to keep checking they're okay.

We walk for what feels like forever. Probably because I'm exhausted from the flight... and the out-of-body orgasm.

I didn't think I'd be able to do it. I thought I was going to burn the entire plane to the ground, but then something clicked and it was like I turned the fire inwards.

And when I did... holy stars and moons.

I have never felt anything like it. Even now, as we walk, my legs are still shaky.

Numb from the cold and wet conditions, we reach a path that runs aside a choppy looking river and follow it toward the city center.

While I keep pace with Mack, I notice Tanner grab hold of Kole's arm and whisper something to him. But Kole doesn't reply. Just keeps walking.

The rain continues to pour, sending rivulets winding along the pavement and reflecting in streetlights that seem far too bright for this gray afternoon. It's well past midday, but darkness lingers everywhere and causes my mood to darken as well.

We all trudge along with our heads down, huddling close together under umbrellas, unwilling to speak upon this strange entrance into Cambridge. The imposing stone buildings only serve to amplify how small I feel compared to this ancient city – something grander than anything I've ever seen before.

An elderly couple hurries by us on their way out of town, arms laden with bags from their afternoon shopping trip. They cast curious glances at us but say nothing before they disappear around a corner.

We continue squelching through puddles as the unrelenting rain drums down around us. After what seems like an eternity, as Kole continues to walk fast, head down, as if he can't reach our destination quickly enough, we emerge onto a busier street that leads us toward a bustling market square.

Despite the weather, the city is heaving with movement. Christmas lights decorate the front of an imposing town hall, and the smell of roasting chestnuts wafts toward me from a vendor nearby.

"I kinda wish we were here on vacation," I mutter to Mack, arm still tucked into his.

"I'll bring you back another time," he says softly, in a tone that makes my skin flush with heat. Next to him, Snow huffs and Mack adds, talking to Snow now and not to me, "Hopefully by then, we'll either be reunited or able to be apart for five minutes without one of us collapsing."

Water beading on his fur, Snow shakes his head. I'm not sure if he's

displeased with the idea of being reunited with Mack or with them being able to be apart more often.

“This way,” Kole calls from up ahead.

We are not moving quickly enough for him. Discomfort hums on his skin. His entire body is tense, his shoulders are hunched, and he’s staring straight ahead as if he can’t stand looking at our surroundings.

“Has he ever told you what happened when he was here?” I ask Mack.

Pushing back his shoulders like he’s breathing through an ache or a jolt of pain, Mack looks at the ground. “Never. But the state he was in when he returned to Phoenix Falls...” He trails off and scratches his silvery beard with his thumb and forefinger. “Whatever happened here was *not* good.”

“Do you think that’s why Tanner’s staying so close?” I nod up ahead to where Tanner is making a concerted effort to keep up with Kole’s large strides.

Mack nods solemnly but before we can say anymore, Kole looks over his shoulder at us and says, “Just around the corner. Not far.”



## NOVA

When we finally arrive at a large archway and duck through it, Kole points at a sign above a pair of large oak doors.

“The Museum of Anthropology,” Tanner murmurs. “This is it.”

“Do we just go in and ask for Thornfield?” I look from Mack to Tanner.

“He didn’t answer his cell when I tried him at the airfield.” Mack takes his phone from his pocket and scrolls to the number he last dialed.

“He could be sleeping.” I shrug and look up at the darkened sky. “I know it’s a gray day, but he *is* a vampire, right? So he should sleep during the day?”

“Maybe,” Mack grumbles. “Either way, I’ve had enough of this weather already, so let’s go inside shall we?”

Nodding, stonily quiet, Kole pushes the doors open. We’ve only just stepped inside when we’re approached by someone who looks like a security guard.

“No pets allowed,” he says gruffly, pointing at Snow.

Immediately, Snow’s lip begins to curl into a growl. The guard’s eyes widen. I stoop down and stroke Snow’s head. “Play along,” I whisper into his ear. “Unless you want to be left outside in the rain.”

“He’s my service animal,” Mack says, using his Sheriff voice. “He has to stay with me.”

“I don’t see a jacket,” the guard says, assessing Snow as if he might have missed a high-vis vest or some kind of badge indicating he’s a working animal.

“Left it at my hotel.” Mack’s fingers twitch at his side. He’s usually much



better at keeping his composure, but irritation burns in his eyes.

Stepping in, Tanner rests a firm hand on the guard's forearm. At first, the guard frowns and looks like he's going to jerk away from him, but then Tanner meets his eyes.

A shudder runs through me. Tanner rarely uses his ability to influence others. Since he drank from me, his powers have been amplified. But he hasn't pushed them or tested them, he's just been happy to be better at shutting out all the voices and thoughts and feelings that usually crowd his head.

Now, though, his eyes glimmer and his features soften. His face changes. He doesn't look like him anymore, even though he *is* very much him. He glances at the guard's name badge. "Tony," he says quietly, "you're happy to see us, aren't you Tony?"

Tony's lips spread into a comically wide smile. "Oh, sure," he says. "Really happy."

"And you love dogs, don't you Tony?"

Tony looks at Snow and grins wider. "Love them," he coos.

"And you're so happy that my friend has brought his service animal to the museum. Right, Tony? Because this dog, right here, is special."

"Special." Tony nods. Then he steps aside and gestures to the foyer behind him. "Head on in, guys."

Darting past, our footsteps echo on the marble floors as we make our way to the front desk. I catch Tanner's elbow and meet his eyes. As he looks at me, he shakes his head and exhales loudly.

"You changed his thoughts?" I ask, an uneasy sensation in my chest.

Tanner glances back at Tony, who's still smiling at Snow as if he's the cutest darn thing he's ever seen. "No, his feelings." When he notices my lips tightening, Tanner takes my hand and adds, "I've never..."

He stares into my eyes, and I reach up on tiptoes to kiss him. "I know, it's okay. I know you wouldn't."

"We're here to see Professor Thornfield," Mack has approached the ticket desk.

A bored-looking young man clicking away on a computer looks up lazily. He either can't see Snow from behind the desk or doesn't care. "Do you have an appointment?"

"He's expecting us," Mack replies, avoiding giving a concrete answer.

A few more clicks. A frown. "You're not in his diary."

“I spoke to him yesterday. He’s expecting us,” Mack repeats.

The boy sighs then picks up the phone next to him. It rings several times, then he shrugs. “He’s not in his office. You can try the occult exhibition on the second floor.” He takes a leaflet from the stack next to the card machine and opens it, tapping on a floor-plan to indicate a room labeled The Durham Hall. “If he’s not there, I can’t help you. You’ll have to make a proper appointment.”

Leaving the boy to his computer, we head for the grand staircase just beyond the reception desk.

I take the map from Mack and lead the others in the direction of The Durham Hall, the worn-out steps creaking softly beneath our feet. The leaflet guides us through several other large rooms, filled with knights and swords, toward Thornfield’s exhibition.

As we round the corner, a dimly lit hall unfolds before us, populated with glass cases that gleam mysteriously under the subtle lighting.

“Whoa,” Tanner murmurs, his eyes darting around the vast collection. “This is...”

“Bullshit.” Kole has stopped in front of a large glass case. “Trinkets arranged for humans to gawk at.”

“I dunno.” Tanner tilts his head, squinting into a smaller case beneath a large stained glass window. “Some of it’s pretty cool.”

I step up beside him. Inside the case is a mixture of curved blades, jewelry engraved with strange symbols, and neatly bundled herbs and feathers labeled with words I can’t read.

Nearby, hands in pockets, Mack is looking at a larger display. I walk over to him and slip my arm through his.

“Divination,” he says, pointing to the collection of objects in front of us.

Behind the glass, crystal balls shimmer subtly, while decks of tarot cards and bone-carved rune stones decorate the shelves. Beneath them is a selection of what looks like Ouija boards of different eras paired with ancient books about mediumship and channeling.

“Do those things really work?” I ask, tilting my head to read the description next to one of the ouija boards.

Mack shrugs and tuts a little. “Some. Wouldn’t recommend it though.”

I shiver a little and keep walking. Beside the ouija board case, a sign catches my eye: *The Cambridge Coven*. An entire section dedicated to the city’s occult history. In the center, a book written by Professor Lucien

Thornfield. *Histories and Mysteries of the Cambridge Coven*. It is displayed on an ostentatious velvet cushion, and it's open on the introduction.

I trace my fingers over the page and read out loud.

"The storied history of the Cambridge Coven traces back to the early 14th century. As the city blossomed as an academic hub, drawing scholars from across the lands, so did its allure for those who practiced the arcane arts. Vampires, especially, found solace amidst the cobblestone streets and spired architecture. Legend has it that the coven was formed by a trio of vampires who sought knowledge above bloodlust.

"Led by the enigmatic Lady Isolde, a former Byzantine princess turned vampire, the coven merged the worlds of scholastics and sorcery. Cambridge became an underground haven for Supernaturals. Old manuscripts indicate that the university's underground catacombs were not just constructed for storage, but served as secret meeting places and shelters for the coven.

"However, the tranquility was short-lived. As the Renaissance era dawned and fear of the occult grew, hunts for supernaturals intensified. Cambridge wasn't spared, and the coven was forced into hiding.

"Yet the coven's legacy persisted, thanks to Lady Isolde's foresight. Before her mysterious disappearance, she hid numerous artefacts and scrolls that held the collective knowledge of the coven. Some believe that these relics, if discovered, hold the key to a new age of understanding between mundanes and supernaturals."

I stop and look at Mack. "Mundanes?"

"It's what the British call humans," he says with a note of disdain. "They have a flare for the eccentric."

"Do you think it's true? The relics?"

Mack's eyes graze the text. "I don't know enough about European supernatural history to answer that, Little Star. But no one thought The Original Six was a true piece of our history, so it's possible."

"Guys..." Tanner's voice drifts over. But it's laced with something that makes my blood run cold.

As Mack and I venture deeper into the hall, heading toward him, the ambiance darkens. At the back, in a section with no natural light, Tanner is standing below a sign that reads, *Persecution Through The Ages*.

I shudder.

Ice-cold fingers of dread tiptoe down my spine.

In front of us, gruesome tools of torment — iron maidens and spiked

chairs and manacles made of unbreakable steel — loom tall. But these aren't just relics; they are instruments once used to torture accused witches and supers.

My eyes land on a large digital screen showing a looped video of a witch being burned at the stake. It's a horrific twenty-second clip in which she screams silently while flames lick her dress.

Images of Ava flit through my mind. I see her. I feel her.

I see the fire around her feet, and I hear her calling for her child.

I close my eyes and wrap my arms around myself, the weight of the memories pressing down on me.

Kole has appeared beside us.

For a moment, we stand in silence. I don't realize I'm crying until Tanner puts his arm around me and pulls me toward him.

"Horrible, isn't it? The things humans do?"

My entire body stiffens.

That voice.

It's silky, but there's an underlying bite to it — a tone that hints he could rip us apart in a split second if he chose to. A level of power that makes my breath swell in my chest and my skin feel instantly clammy.

I turn slowly and there he stands, Professor Lucien Thornfield. With jet black hair that cascades to his shoulders and pale, nearly translucent skin, he has thick shoulders and a solid jaw. His dark onyx eyes assess me, one corner of his mouth quirked up in a slight smile.

But it's his aura — a potent mix of danger and allure — that commands the room.

"Nova," he says, extending his hand to take mine.

Without meaning to, I leave Tanner's embrace and glide forward, sliding my hand into his.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." He dips his head and kisses my knuckles. Just a brush of his lips on my skin, but it's enough to send a skitter of heat down my spine.

Behind me, I feel the others gather closer.

A mixture of fear and curiosity pools in my limbs, flooding the gaps between my bones. Every instinct tells me to bolt. But instead, I'm rooted to the spot. There's something about Thornfield, something that pulls and repels me all at once.

"I'm sorry my exhibition upset you, Nova."

The way he says my name...

I'm still crying. Quiet tears trickling down my cheeks.

Thornfield catches one of them with his thumb and brushes it away.

He wears a tailored black suit, the fabric absorbing the dim lighting of the room. On his left hand, a silver ring adorned with a crimson stone catches my eye. It seems to pulse with an energy of its own.

"Don't cry, Fire Bird," he says.

I inhale sharply. Eve was the last person to call me that, but from Thornfield it feels different. As though he speaks it with reverence and respect and curiosity.

His voice is gentle, almost melodic, but there's a darkness there, lurking just beneath the surface.

I open my mouth to speak, but no sound comes out.

Then suddenly, Mack is stepping in front of me, placing himself between Thornfield and me. "Professor Thornfield," Mack acknowledges, his tone wary.

Thornfield purposefully turns his gaze on Mack. His eyes dance with amusement, as if he's privy to a joke the rest of us aren't. "Rhone Mackenzie." He casts a quick glance at Snow. "And the bear." He chuckles deep in his throat. "I commend your creativity. I have to say, I wondered how you would manage to get a bear onto a plane."

"We've had a long journey," Mack says, clearly not willing to entertain pleasantries. "Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

Thornfield smirks. "Is this not private enough? We are alone. The mundanes of this city care little for my displays. Not matter how hard I try to enlighten them."

"No," Kole steps forward. He's taller than Thornfield, and broader, and his entire body hums with annoyance. "It is not private enough."

Thornfield doesn't flinch, just looks Kole up and down and nods. "Ink Heart," he says. "So, you have returned. Zephyra will be thrilled."

At that, Kole's entire body jolts with shock. He lunges forward and reaches for Thornfield's throat, but the vampire simply stands stock still and catches Kole's wrist in mid-air.

Closing his fingers around Kole's, Thornfield forces his arm lower.

"Do not say her name in my presence," Kole spits, eyes darkening.

My heartbeat quickens. *Who is Zephyra?* I send the question from my mind to Kole's but he does not answer me.

Thornfield releases Kole's hand. "Very well," he says smoothly, brushing down his suit as though it might have become creased from the brief encounter. "My apologies."

The tension in the room is thick enough to slice with a knife.

Snow growls softly. Thornfield's eyes flit toward him, then back to Mack. "We can talk in my office. This way."



## KOLE

**T**hornfield's office is just as ostentatious as the guy himself. Heavy velvet curtains block out any hint of daylight, while candelabras cast flickering shadows across the walls. As we take our seats, he offers us drinks from a decanter on his desk.

"Some port, perhaps?"

While Tanner politely declines and Mack accepts, I say nothing. I fold my arms and, from the corner of the room, assess the vampire we're supposed to be trusting to help us.

I wait for a vision to hit me. For a sign. For something. But nothing comes.

It's not that I don't trust Rev; of course, I do. But I wish I'd felt it myself. I wish I could be sure this trip would be worth the risk. Being back in this city, this *building*, is like picking at a scab that's barely healed.

As I watch Thornfield pour the port, I catch sight of his right hand. He's wearing a ring that catches the light. A large ruby set in ornate silver. I know instantly what it is, although word hadn't spread to the vamps in Cambridge the last time I was here. Thornfield hands a glass to Mack then looks at me. He follows my gaze and smiles thinly, brushing a pale finger across the top of the ring. "Ah yes, one of my most prized possessions. Crafted centuries ago by a rather skilled witch."

I glance at Nova. "It allows him to walk in the daylight."

Her eyes widen. I feel her pulse quicken, which means Thornfield does too. The bastard even moistens his canines right in front of me.

I clench my fists. Beside me, Tanner gives a brief shake of his head. He's



known how on edge I've been ever since we landed, and no doubt he can feel the anxious thrumming in my veins turning to anger. Not ideal, but in a city that nearly broke me – now in the company of a vamp who clearly wants to drink our girl's blood – what does he expect?

Instead of sitting, Thornfield remains standing and clinks glasses with Mack.

Mack doesn't smile just takes a sip and says, "You're partial to port?"

"I'm partial to many things." Thornfield's eyes drift back to Nova and the look he gives her makes my skin crawl. This time, Mack reacts too, his knuckles whitening as his grip tightens on the glass.

Nova, however, returns Thornfield's stare with a smile.

Even Snow seems unsettled. And I'm pretty sure that right now each of us wants to tear this vamp's throat out. Nova may be the Phoenix, but Thornfield is a dangerous fucker.

He's no dead beat baby vamp like Pete or the FHB addicts I knew when I was last here.

He's old.

The oldest vamp I've been in contact with, judging from the way he moves and talks. Zephyra was a child in comparison.

Nova shifts uncomfortably in her seat under his lingering stare, even though the flush in her cheeks tells me she's flattered by his attention. Sensing her unease, Snow lets out a warning growl. Thornfield merely chuckles in response.

"Fascinating," he murmurs, shaking his head and looking from Mack to Snow. "Simply fascinating..."

Stepping in front of Nova, Mack sets his glass down on Thornfield's desk.

Thornfield looks at it, picks it up, and places it on a coaster instead.

"Let's get to business, shall we?" Mack says. "We've come a long way to speak with you, and you know why we're here." He looks exhausted, but he's doing his best to be the Mack we all know. The boss. Taking control.

Thornfield sighs, dragging his gaze away from Nova for the hundredth time. "Yes, of course. How may I be of service?"

His tone is polite, but the mocking gleam remains in his dark eyes. He's enjoying toying with us. I resist the urge to wipe that smug expression off his face for good.

Before Thornfield can say anything else, Mack holds up a hand. "First

things first – we promised Rev news of her aunt. Miranda. She works with you, but she hasn't been seen for several days.”

I didn't know Miranda and Rev were related when I was last here. But then, perhaps that is how she knew my name the second I sat down at her desk in this very building.

Thornfield presses his fingertips together, regarding Mack evenly. “I have begun making inquiries about my friend's absence, put out some feelers amongst my contacts. But these things take time.

“I'm sure with your *contacts*, the issue could be expedited,” Mack replies, an edge creeping into his tone.

“And I shall.” Thornfield's voice remains smooth and unruffled. “But you have greater concerns at the moment, do you not?” He crouches down in front of Snow, tilting his head to examine him closely.

Mack's jaw clenches, and he gives a tight nod. Snow narrows his eyes.

“Fascinating,” Thornfield repeats, steepling his fingers. Then he stands, baring just a hint of fang. His ruby ring glints ominously. “All right,” he says, sinking into the chair behind his desk. “From what I understand, you drank the Fire Bird's blood and then you became...” He smirks a little. “Two instead of one.”

Hearing him call her *Fire Bird* makes my blood begin to simmer. Eve called her *Fire Bird*. How does he know that name?

“That's right.” Nova answers instead of Mack, striding forward so she's at the front of the group. Suddenly, the hold Thornfield had over her seems to have broken and she's *her* again. Fierce, staring at him with a sceptical glare. “And now they're sick. It began two days ago. Mack collapsed. He was apart from Snow at the time, and Snow collapsed too. Now, they can't be more than a few feet apart or they start to feel...”

She glances at Mack.

“Weak,” he says. And he sounds it, too. There's a vulnerability in his voice I haven't heard before. And I don't like it. Until this moment, I hadn't really considered the possibility that this could be serious. But now I'm looking at Mack, and realizing... shit, this could be bad. Real bad.

Mack continues. “Hot, cold, fragile. Like I might crack open. The way I used to feel when I needed to shift, except now I can't. So the feeling keeps building.” He glances at Snow. “It's the same for him.”

Thornfield nods, then stands again and strides to a bookcase at the back of the room.

Predictable as fuck, he tugs on a large protruding book and the wall opens up. “Come,” he says, coiling his finger at us. “There are things you should see before I offer you my *expertise*.”



## NOVA

**T**he moment Thornfield touches the spine of a particular leather-bound tome, the bookshelf in front of us creaks and swings open.

As he stands aside and gestures for me to pass through the doorway first, my entire body tingles.

His presence is intoxicating.

He is scary, and creepy, and too suave for his own good. But he's also mesmerizing. When he looks at me, every cell in my body lights up. Pays attention. Yearns to let him in.

I won't, of course. Because he's also weird as fuck, and the guys can't stand him.

But that doesn't stop me inhaling sharply as his hand brushes my hip.

Behind me, Tanner is the one who whispers in Thornfield's ear. "We're here for your help, that doesn't mean we'll put up with your shit, Professor." I turn to see Tanner fixing his gaze on Thornfield's. "Touch her again, and you'll find out exactly how many ways I can make you pray for a stake in the heart to relieve your suffering."

Thornfield's lips twitch. He nods his head in a short, sharp stroke, but does not reply with words.

As the others follow, I step into a dimly lit space that feels like we've just walked into another universe. The air is cool and heavy, like in old libraries or churches. In front of us, a shimmering barrier that I recognize as high-level protection magick.

"This," Thornfield says, spreading his arms to encompass the vast space, "is my private collection. Only supers are privy to its existence. A storehouse

of artefacts, histories, and relics that the human world isn't ready to handle."

I pass through the barrier and stop at the top of a large iron staircase. It winds down into a large hall, full to the brim with objects and books. I try to take it all in.

"Please, go ahead..." Thornfield gestures to the staircase. "Take a look."

I descend slowly, Mack, Tanner and Kole at my heels. Snow so close to Mack he's almost fused to his leg.

As we venture deeper into the concealed section of the museum, Thornfield gestures to a series of towering bookcases. "This section is dedicated entirely to shifter lore," he says proudly. "I have written many books on the subject. Not that you'll find any upstairs." He almost rolls his eyes but then seems to stop himself.

"I've read many of your works," Mack says.

Thornfield nods. "As I'd expect from a fellow scholar," he says, a note of condescension in his tone.

Mack is about to reply when I notice Snow pace away from him. Mack calls him back, but Snow ignores him. He walks several paces then stops, staring into the shadows at the end of the row of bookcases.

"Ah, yes." Thornfield claps his hands, and a spotlight is illuminated.

"What the...?" Mack breathes.

I inhale sharply.

Encased in glass, a skeleton stands erect, large and imposing. But is unlike any I've ever seen. At first glance, it looks human, but there's a wild, feral twist to it.

"What is it?" I ask, my fingers brushing lightly over the glass as we come to a stop directly in front of it.

Thornfield's eyes gleam with pride. "Ah, this is one of the rarest pieces in my collection. A tiger shifter. In its human form."

I tilt my head, trying to reconcile the differences.

"See," he says. "The skull, though predominantly human, has an elongated jaw, equipped with pronounced canine teeth reminiscent of a tiger's lethal fangs. The eye sockets are slightly larger, hinting at the predatory gaze of the big cat. The finger bones are also elongated, the joints more pronounced, suggesting a structure that could extend into formidable claws. But it's the legs that truly fascinate me." He taps the glass, diverting my gaze to the skeleton's lower half.

"While the thighs and calves are unmistakably human, the foot structure

deviates. The heel bone is raised, the structure indicating a semi-digitigrade stance, like the poised foot of a tiger ready to pounce.” Thornfield looks at Mack, as if expecting him to be surprised. “The ribcage is slightly expanded too, of course – perhaps for a more significant lung capacity – and the spine...”

I trail my gaze along the vertebrae.

“Notice the elongated tailbone, not a mere stub as humans have but a remnant of something once full and expressive.”

“It’s...” I can’t find the words.

Kole interrupts me. “It’s irrelevant to our problem.” He steps in front of the glass and folds his arms.

“Not so,” Thornfield shakes his head, eyes flashing with annoyance. “These remains serve as a reminder of the shifter’s unique nature—the constant tension between the human and the beast. Notice the pelvis and the way it’s structured? Built for bipedal movement but adapted for the powerful, ground-covering strides of a tiger.”

“I still don’t—”

Thornfield’s jaws snap with annoyance. “This,” he says, rapping his knuckles on the glass, “should prove to you how *impossible* it is for a shifter to be separated from his animal counterpart. They are one. Inextricable from one another.” He looks again at Mack and Snow. “Yet, here you are.”

With a sigh, Thornfield rests his palm on the glass and looks at Mack. “Your kind have always been an integral part of our supernatural world. Bears are rare, but you function much the way other non-wolf shifters function. Your connection with your animal counterparts is profound, woven by the threads of ancient magick. To separate a shifter from their animal is to sever their life force, their essence. It has never been done because it is understood to be a violation of the natural order.”

“But it happened to us,” Mack mutters.

“Because you consumed a power greater than anything that has ever existed.” Thornfield looks at me. This time, I do not fizz or feel giddy. I feel... powerful. Because he is staring at me as though he is terrified of what I am.

“I wondered...” I meet his eyes. “If my blood did this... could my blood reunite them?”

Thornfield inhales slowly. “Believe it or not,” he says, “I have been doing a lot of research since I heard about what happened to you.” He gestures to

the textbooks surrounding us. “Sadly, I believe not. The transformation that happened to you was intertwined with the prophecy. And prophecies have a law all of their own.”

He looks at Kole as if he expects him to laugh because they’re sharing a funny in-joke only seers and supers would understand.

Kole simply glowers at him.

“You could try it, but I fear all that would happen is that you’d get a nice high from the Fire Bird’s very *special* blend.”

“You need to watch your mouth, vamp.” Tanner – clearly feeling overly protective of every single one of us right now – bristles and closes the gap between him and Thornfield.

Thornfield holds up both hands and smiles apologetically.

“If my blood won’t help,” I nudge Tanner to stand beside me and take his hand in an attempt to keep him grounded, “then what will?”

“Ah...” Professor Lucien Thornfield casts his stony gaze around the room, his eyes flickering with something that looks almost like excitement. “Well, this is why I was so keen for you to visit my fine city.” He puts an arm around Mack, then one around me. “Because I believe we can help each other...”





## SAM

“**H**ave you heard from them?” I ask, lingering by Luther’s desk. He glances up from his paperwork, curls his fingers around the coffee mug next to him and waits for it to start steaming before he drinks from it.

Another magick trick I wish I knew how to perform; heating lukewarm coffee until it’s piping hot again is probably the skill of Luther’s I’m most jealous of.

Apart from his ability to get Nova riled up in a way the rest of us don’t; the way he coaxes anger from her and weaves it into passion.

“Mack texted when they arrived.” Luther looks at his phone and taps the screen. No new messages. “Guessing they’ll have found Thornfield by now.”

I pace over to the window and look out at the quiet street in front of the station. Since The Split healed, Phoenix Falls has been different. Not just because half of its residents left, but because of the invisible gray mist that hangs over us now. A sense that nothing will be the same again. A sense that, despite what we’re telling ourselves, it is too early to be complacent about our safety.

“Do you think he’ll come back?” I ask, tracing a bead of condensation with my index finger.

Luther slurps his coffee and sighs. “No,” he says bluntly. “But it’s not demons we need to worry about right now.”

He picks up the remote next to him and flicks on the TV. Already, news coverage of the explosions at the barrier has morphed into footage of what *looks* like two demons attacking a bunch of peaceful protestors. Thankfully,

they didn't catch Nico shifting back into human form.

Hell knows what would happen if they had concrete evidence of the town's deputy walking side-by-side with a hellhound.

"Bastards," I mutter, snaking my hands through my hair. Thick and curly, it reminds me of my mother every time I catch a glimpse of it. And when the memory hits, so does the vision of her. So close. Then gone.

I grit my teeth and stride over to the fancy-ass coffee machine in the corner of the room.

I make myself a double espresso and down it quickly.

"You could have gone with them," Luther says, leaning forward onto his elbows.

"No," I mutter. "I couldn't."

"Sam—"

Before he can say any more, his phone starts to ring. He holds up a finger to indicate 'one second' then picks up. "Luther speaking... Annalise. Sure. But—"

He looks down at the phone. Clearly, Annalise hung up.

"She's on her way." He stands up, looking strangely on edge. "She asked to meet us at Rev's."

"Why?" I put my hands into my pockets, already feeling shaky from the caffeine hit.

"She has news." Luther downs the last of his coffee and grabs his jacket. "And I don't think it's the happy kind."



## MACK

The air down here feels thick, as if we're submerged deep underwater.

Thornfield waits patiently in the center of the room, gesturing for us to gather around. His gaze is unfathomable as it sweeps over each of us. "Centuries ago, an artefact of immense power, The Scepter of Dissolution, was entrusted to the care of my ancestors. It holds the ability to dismantle any form of magick, to strip it down to nothing."

"The Cambridge Coven has looked after this, and many other artefacts, for as long as I care to remember." His expression darkens. "But it is no longer in my possession. Several weeks ago, it was stolen." He stands aside and points to a large empty glass case. "Just the scepter. Nothing else."

"So, someone stole your family's magick eraser," Tanner quips. "I'm sorry, but I don't see—"

"Do not trivialize this, boy," Thornfield barks. "Used incorrectly, the scepter could tear apart the very fabric of our world. It could destroy every supernatural creature on our planet. *Erase us. Forever.*"

Tanner narrows his eyes. He's searching Thornfield's aura. I can see it in his eyes.

I also see when realization dawns on his face. His features stretch and crease and darken all at once. "Shit," he says. "You're serious?"

"Deadly serious," Thornfield replies. "No pun intended."

"How does this relate to Mack and Snow?" Kole asks, casting a concerned glance at me.

"Well," he says, lips curling. "This is the remarkable thing... I believe the same elixir that can render the scepter inert could be the very remedy to help

reunite our shifter friends.”

“I am no friend of yours, Thornfield.” Anger swirls in my gut. “I came for answers. Not maybes and what ifs.”

“Do you have any other solution?” Thornfield raises his eyebrows, but his voice remains calm, inquisitive, as if he’s genuinely curious about what I’ll do if I walk out of here right now telling him to go fuck himself.

When I don’t reply, he turns to the others and says, “Your friend’s aunt, Miranda, is a witch with profound and ancient knowledge. Her family has been tied to mine for centuries, and she alone knows the recipe for an elixir. The Elixir of Equilibrium.”

“Explain,” Nova says. “Explain how this elixir can do both things. Destroy the scepter *and* help Mack?”

Thornfield pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs a little. It’s an expression I recognize. One I used to wear myself, frequently, when students asked me to explain things I felt were easily understandable without an explanation.

Looking at Nova, staring straight into her eyes in a way that makes me grind my teeth so hard they feel like they might crack, Thornfield says, “Being split into two separate entities, Mack and Snow are both unbalanced manifestations of a single being. Snow, the physical aspect, represents raw power, instinct, and primal urges, while Mack embodies intellect, human consciousness, and control. The Elixir can act as a bridge between these two halves, harmonizing their energies. When ingested, it would pave the way for their energies to realign, balance, and merge back into one cohesive being, with both parts in equilibrium.

“In essence, the Elixir of Equilibrium acts as a universal balancer, ensuring that magical energies find their natural state of harmony and stability, regardless of the environment or context in which they exist.”

Nova glances at me. I take her hand and squeeze it.

“All right,” Tanner says, frowning. “But you didn’t answer Nova’s question. How can the elixir save Mack and Snow *and* destroy the scepter.”

This time, Thornfield tuts and mutters, “Moon and stars, I thought it was perfectly obvious.” Then he puts one hand on his hip and gesticulates wildly as he says, “The Scepter of Dissolution’s inherent power lies in its ability to unravel and unweave magical energies. The core of the scepter operates on a principle of chaos and unbalance.

“When the Elixir of Equilibrium is introduced to the Scepter, it’s not just

a matter of neutralizing its functions. The elixir forces a rapid and aggressive balance onto the scepter. Since the scepter's entire essence is built upon unbalancing magick, introducing such a potent force of stability and equilibrium creates an overwhelming contradiction within its structure.

"Imagine a structure built entirely out of materials that resist any form of balance. Suddenly, the very foundation of that structure is replaced by a force that enforces balance. This clash causes the structure – in this case, the Scepter of Dissolution – to fracture and break down. The Elixir doesn't just neutralize the scepter; it completely goes against its nature, causing it to self-destruct.

"This is different from simply stopping its function. The Elixir, when introduced in sufficient quantity, would cause the scepter to crumble and disintegrate, rendering it powerless and broken beyond repair. This destruction is brought about by the internal contradictions the Elixir introduces to the scepter's core function."

I exhale forcefully and scrape my fingers through my hair. "All right."

"That made sense to you?" Kole whispers.

"It didn't make sense to you?" I ask, loudly.

Tanner rolls his eyes.

Nova simply folds her arms in front of her chest and taps her foot against the floor.

"All right. So, we need Miranda. We need Rev's aunt. That's what you're saying?"

"Precisely." Thornfield nods.

"So, why haven't you found her already?" Kole growls. "We all know the power you hold over this city, Professor."

Flexing his fingers at his sides, Thornfield licks his canines with irritation. "I suspect Queen Zephyra has Miranda. And here lies the crux of the matter – a vow, ancient as the scepter itself, prohibits my family from causing any harm to the scepter. I am bound to protect it. And because my intent is to destroy it, every attempt I have made to find Miranda has been blocked somehow. At least, I believe it has."

"So, that's why you brought us here. To find her." Nova raises her eyebrows. Now, she is irritated too. She spent too long being controlled and manipulated. She does not appreciate it when she doesn't have the facts up front.

"Yes, Fire Bird. I need Kole's abilities as a seer to locate her. And when

we have, we will share the elixir. On the condition you help me destroy the scepter, of course.”

“Of course,” Tanner mutters sarcastically. “Wouldn’t expect anything less than a treacherous death mission and a bargain with a mafia vampire.”

“Why us?” I ask, still reeling from the hope he dangled before me. I frown at him. “You don’t care whether I live or die. You’re bargaining with us because you need us, and that’s fine. Because it seems we need you too. But why? You must have plenty of others you could ask..”

Assessing my question, Thornfield’s lips twitch into a rare, genuine smile. “You, all of you, are descendants of the Original Six. There’s a power in that lineage, a trustworthiness that’s hard to find. Especially when dealing with an artefact that could change the very nature of our world.”

He looks at Nova and fixes his eyes on her. Only her.

“You saved the world once, Fire Bird. Do you think you can do it a second time?”





## NOVA

Our hotel is small and quaint. One of the few places Mack could find that would accept dogs – or a creature that looks like a dog, at least.

“We have two rooms,” Mack says. He’s holding two old-fashioned keys, not the card-kind, handed to him by a blonde receptionist with big red lips.

“Two?” I frown, aware I’m pouting.

“They’re not quite as open-minded here as they are back home,” Tanner says quietly. “Pretty sure if we all tried to pile into one room, they’d have something to say about it.”

I bite my lower lip. Choosing which of my boyfriends to sleep with, when usually we’re all curled together in Luther’s giant bed back at the cabin, feels wrong. Unnatural.

“I can’t choose.” I shake my head. “You guys will have to draw straws.”

“It’s okay,” Tanner says. “I should sleep with Mack and Snow. In case...” He trails off, not wanting to say what we’re all thinking. *In case Mack gets sicker.*

I glance at Kole. My heart lightens a little. Perhaps this is what we need – a few hours alone, so I can check on him. Persuade him to open up to me about how it feels being back here.

Instead of looking pleased, Kole simply nods and takes the key Mack is offering him. In one gruff movement, he picks up my bags and his holdall, and marches off down the corridor.

When the door closes quietly behind us, we stand in silence for a moment. In the dark.

The room is small, and cold.

A large window opposite lets in a soft orange glow from the street outside, but the large buildings that surround us block out the moon and stars.

Kole stands facing the window, shoulders rising and falling with a tremor that hurts my heart.

*Talk to me*, I whisper, reaching out to him with my voice.

He still doesn't move, but his hands flex at his sides and another shudder shakes his back.

"Kole..." I pace toward him and skim my palm over his shoulder. "Talk to me. Last time you were here... bad things happened." He doesn't reply. "Zephyra. The vampire Thornfield talked about—"

"Don't say her name." Kole's voice is tight and deep. It curls around my limbs and squeezes hard. He is in pain. But his walls are going up. I can feel them.

In a desperate attempt to keep him with me, I duck in front of him and cup his face in my hands. I stroke his beard, kiss his cheek, then his lips.

But he doesn't lean into me.

Instead of dissolving into passion, the kiss is fleeting and cold.

"I need some time to think." He turns and strides back toward the door. When he reaches it, he stops and – without looking at me – says, "I'll be back."

I wait for what feels like forever, but is only a few hours, before texting Tanner.

— *How's Mack? Kole went for a walk, but he's not back. I'm worried.*

Tanner replies almost instantly. *Mack & Snow both sleeping. Did K say where he was going?*

I sigh and tap the screen with my fingernails.

— *No. Just said he needed some time to think.* I pause, then send another message. *His FHB use was bad last time he was here, right?*

— *Right.*

— *You don't think?*

— *No. He wouldn't... . . . . Get some sleep, Little Star. He'll be back. Try not to worry.*

— *But if he's not?*

— *If he's not back by sunrise, I'll go look for him. Promise.*

I start to tap out another reply, then stop. Put the phone down and walk to the window. It is pitch dark outside. Just a few lights illuminating the street.

I glance at the time. Nearly midnight.  
Fuck this.  
I'm not waiting.  
I grab my jacket and the room key, and head for the door.



THE NIGHT AIR bites at my skin as I step outside alone. I wrap my arms around myself against the chill, eyes searching the dark streets for any sign of Kole. Anxiety wells up inside me as I reach out with my senses again and again, only to find nothing. No trace of him.

I start walking, my boots echoing hollowly on the pavement, only a few street-lamps pooling dim light along my path. I peer into shadowy alleyways as I pass, hoping to catch a glimpse of his tall, familiar frame. But he could be anywhere.

He knows this city. If he wants to hide, I won't find him easily.

Worry starts to gnaw a vicious hole in my stomach. I should never have let him leave alone, not when this place holds such painful memories for him. Hell, if he's gone looking for FHB... If being here brought back the hunger he's done so well to fight back...

No. I can't think like that. He has to be okay.

The night air grows colder, raising goosebumps on my skin as I wander farther from the hotel.

As I make my way deeper into town, I emerge into the main market square. It's a Friday night, so crowds of people are spilling out of bars and restaurants, their laughter and chatter filling the air. Couples stroll arm in arm across the cobblestones, smiling and lost in their own worlds.

The normalcy of it all feels strange. And it occurs to me that we've never had this.

Me, Kole, Mack, Luther, Tanner, Sam.

Not once, since we met, since we fell in love with each other, have we had *normal*.

I thought when The Split healed and The King was defeated that it would be the start of our next chapter.

I waited for everything to feel happy and perfect and wonderful.

Sure, we've had our perfect *moments*.

But we haven't had date nights or movie nights or picnics in the park.  
We've spent the last three months fighting fires. Literally.

The AMA.

The escaped demons.

The *mundanes* – I like that word – who want me to burn because they think I'm a danger to humanity.

I stop and wrap my arms around myself. A group of people in paper Christmas crowns, waving their arms and singing, tumble out of a restaurant.

“Merry Christmas, boss!” one of them shouts. The man in the center of the group, wearing a smart blue suit, smiles and starts to make a speech. At the back of the crowd, a face stands out among the others.

A guy about Tanner's age, wearing thick black glasses. Sandy hair. Stubbled jaw. A checked shirt, buttoned up high, and a sensible gray jacket. He adjusts his glasses on his nose.

While the others are paying attention to their leader and his over the top mutterings about what a wonderful year they've had, and how the team at Thomas, Hewitt, and Parker is truly special, the guy in glasses scans the market square.

Something in his face makes me keep watching.

It's as if he's looking for something too.

And then his gaze snags on mine.

I blink and look away.

When I look back, he's gone. The crowd is still there, the boss is still speaking, but the guy in glasses has disappeared.

Turning away from them, trying to dislodge the sense that something significant just happened, I'm about to take out my phone and call Tanner – ask him to come search with me – when the guy with glasses flits back into my line of sight.

He's turned into a small dark alleyway, but someone is following him.

At first, I think it's Kole because the figure is *huge*.

Tall, and broad, but with a hood over its head and a gait that does *not* belong to my viking.

The figure hesitates in the opening of the alley. It glances back, in my direction, and that's when I see it...

The way its eyes catch the light.

Bright green with thick dark slits in their center.

Fire crackles to life beneath my skin.

Shit.  
Demon.



## KIM

The Lethurian demon has me pinned. Its claws dig into my throat as it lifts me off the ground. I can't breathe. Panic sets in as my vision starts to blur. I'm usually more prepared than this, but I couldn't bring a satchel full of weapons to my office Christmas party could I?

I scroll quickly through my photographic memory.

Lethurian.

Lethurian.

My vision starts to blur. His hood falls back, revealing gaunt, chalky white skin, in stark contrast to the shadowy robes that hang from its six-foot frame.

Thin, almost skeletal, it's strangely broad at the same time.

And right now, its elongated fingers are closing around my throat.

I glance down and have to fight the familiar twinge of excitement I feel whenever I encounter something I've only ever read about in books. Instead of feet, the Lethurian's lower half fades into a wispy, ethereal tail that constantly emits a smoky mist.

Cool.

No, focus, Kim.

*To kill Lethurian, a ritual known as the Erudite Sacrifice must be performed. This ritual is as much about intellect and willpower as it is about physical items. The ritual must be conducted in a place of significant academic importance, ideally at the heart of Cambridge University.*

Well, fuck. I'm screwed.

Just when I think I'm done for, a voice shouts from the end of the alley.



“Hey!”

The demon’s head snaps toward the sound, eyes flashing angrily. In an instant, it drops me in a heap and stalks away from me.

I stumble to my feet.

Crap.

A petite, curvy as fuck, red head is standing at the end of the alleyway.

“Get out of here!” I yell.

But she doesn’t move. Instead, she runs toward us. As she moves, she stretches out her arms. I yell again, but then flames – huge, fiery, orange flames – appear behind her. Dancing like wings in the dark, they grow and grow and fill almost the entire width of the alleyway.

She stops.

The Lethurian tilts its head. It is curious. Wondering what the hell she is.

Can’t say I blame it. Who is she? Some kind of superhero? I have no idea, but her timing couldn’t be better.

While her wings continue to burn, she snaps her fingers and a spark lands in her palm. Grows. Blooms.

The Lethurian lunges at her. She dodges smoothly, launching a fireball into its back. It roars in pain and rage, spinning to swipe at her with outstretched claws. But somehow, she anticipates each attack, moving with the kind of speed and agility I only *wish* I could replicate.

“You can’t kill it,” I yell, dodging as the Lethurian falls back then rights itself. “There’s a ritual. It has to be...”

She ignores me completely. As it comes for her again, in one swift motion, she slides between its legs, popping up behind to grab its head and twists hard. The crack of bone splits the air. The creature falls lifeless to the ground before dissolving into ash.

I push my glasses up my nose then rub the back of my neck. “Holy crap.”

My rescuer dusts off her jacket and her thighs, which are covered in a light dusting of Lethurian ash, then turns to face me. Slowly, her wings flutter and pale and disappear.

Fuck, she’s beautiful.

Her eyes... one green, one blue.

And that hair... like fire.

She approaches me cautiously. “Are you okay?” She speaks with a sultry American accent.

I nod, though I’m struggling to regain my breath. When I speak, my voice

comes out hoarse and shaky as I thank her. “Thanks to you. Although I had it all under control.”

“Sure looked like it,” she says. Then she extends her hand to shake mine. “I’m Nova.”

“Nova...” her name fizzes on my tongue. “Kim.”

“You’re human?” she asks, frowning.

I nod. “You’re not.”

At that, she smiles, and I can’t help smiling back.

“Long story,” she says. “Kinda used to be.”

“Okay, well now I’m hooked. Magick. Hot as fuck. Mysterious past.”

Her eyes glimmer as she looks at me, and she barks out a laugh that swells in the alleyway and flutters up into the sky. “Slow it down, human. We just met.” She gestures to the pile of ash on the floor. “Want to tell me how you know so much about demons, and why this guy was following you?”

“Sure, but I feel like we should do that over coffee.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to say yes. I picture taking this girl to a coffee shop, sitting with her until the sun rises, learning who she is and *why* she is and how the hell she came into my life right at this moment.

On this night of all nights.

The night I should be remembering...

“I’m sorry. I can’t.” She takes a step back, nods at me, and says, “I’m glad you’re okay. Maybe don’t go down dark alleyways alone in the future.”

I open my mouth to speak. To ask for her number.

“Bye, Kim.”

And then she’s gone.



## LUTHER

Rev and Annalise do *not* get along. The tension between them is palpable as Rev stands, arms folded, purposefully not offering Annalise a cup of tea.

Annalise, for her part, looks completely out of place. All high-heels and tightly fitted suit. Perfect hair. Perfect makeup.

Hard to imagine now that I used to have the world's biggest mother fucking crush on this woman. Now that all I think about is Nova.

Clicking across the kitchen, Annalise steepled her fingers and looks at Nico. "You did well. With the demon beyond the barrier."

Nico shrugs, scraping his fingers through his damp black hair. He's wearing a navy blue college hoodie and jeans. Still, even after all these months, he looks uncomfortable in his own body. Like he isn't sure how to stand or look or talk. Like he isn't sure of himself yet.

Frequently, he looks to Rev for reassurance.

The way she glances at the kitchen chairs and he immediately takes a seat tells me he's used to taking orders from her, and that he likes it.

Each to their own, I guess.

I like it when Nova goads me, pisses me off, gets fiery and brattish.

Not sure I'd like her telling me what to do.

Still, maybe we should try it some time.

"Luther? Are you listening?" Annalise meets my eyes, temper flaring, but not in a sexy way. More like a disgruntled second grade teacher.

"Yep." I flop down into a seat beside Nico while Sam moves to stand beside his brother, resting a hand briefly on his shoulder.

“You all know the trouble we’ve been having with the AMA.”

“Really? I’d missed that,” I quip, unable to stop myself being sarcastic because, frankly, I’m pissed that the Bureau is doing sweet fuck all to help us get those rednecks away from the barrier.

Annalise shoots me a withering stare.

“We’ve believed for a while that Tobias and his gang out there are little more than a distraction technique. All theatrics and noise. Diverting the world’s attention while the big guns concoct something else behind the scenes.”

“Something else?” Nico leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He looks tired. How many hours has he been working for the Bureau these past weeks? Does he ever get a break? Perhaps he thinks if he slays enough demons, he’ll be able to atone for his past. For what he is.

Annalise leans back against Rev’s countertop, catches Rev raising an unimpressed eyebrow at her, then stands up straight and rests her hands on her hips instead. “A weapon has become available on the dark magick circuit.”

Weapon? Now I’m paying attention.

“We believe there is going to be a bidding war. An auction. The Anti Magick Alliance will be doing their best to get their hands on it.”

“What kind of weapon?” Sam asks, folding his arms.

Annalise tucks her hair behind her ear and sighs. She looks tired too. “Have any of you heard of the Scepter of Dissolution?”



## NOVA

**M**y pulse is still thudding with adrenaline when I return to the hotel. I wanted to say yes.

When the geeky British guy with the hot glasses and the weird knowledge of demons asked me for coffee, I wanted to say yes.

But I didn't because all I could think about was finding Kole.

Except, I didn't find him.

Now, it's nearly three a.m., I'm exhausted, and he is still missing.

I take the stairs up to our floor, and round the corner, key in hand. Ready to flop down on my bed and sleep the worry away.

"You locked me out, Little Star." His voice sends a shockwave of relief through my body. He's leaning against the doorframe, tall and brooding and perfect.

I run to him and tuck myself into his arms. "Where did you go?"

"Where did *you* go?"

"I was looking for you." I lean back and he kisses me. Properly this time.

Kole's jaw twitches. "I went looking for Zephyra," he says. "But her lair.. it's moved. It's not where it was when I was last here."

I slot my hand into his and intertwine our fingers. "You shouldn't have gone alone." I search his eyes. I'm looking for flickers of darkness. A sign that he might have given in and found something to take the edge off his hunger.

"I didn't," he says as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"I'm sorry, I..."

He shakes his head. "I thought about it." He tweaks his finger under my

chin. "I'm still thinking about it." He kisses me again. "But there's something that would take my mind off it."

A grin twitches on my lips. I reach past him and turn the key in the lock, and we tumble inside, kissing furiously as he lifts me into his arms and I wrap my legs around his waist.

We're on the bed, and he's tugging my boots off, throwing them to the floor, when my phone rings. Kole huffs loudly, glances at it, then says, "It's Luther."

"We should answer." I sit up, cheeks flushed, thighs aching for him to nestle between them.

"You answer," Kole thrusts the phone at me. "I'm busy."

BEFORE I CAN PROTEST, he's pushing my legs apart and kissing his way down my body. His tongue is teasing the inside of my thighs; his hands are skimming up and down my sides, eliciting a moan of pleasure from me with each pass.

I answer the phone and Luther's voice carries through from the other side. "Nova? Any news? Did you speak to Thornfield?"

Kole glances up at me, eyebrows raised in question. I reply to Luther, with a shaky voice, "Ah, y-yes, we spoke to him." I bite my lower lip and accidentally release a sharp sigh.

Luther pauses for a moment then says, "Nova?"

"Ah ha..."

I start to respond but Kole is already shaking his head no, and he brings his mouth back to my thigh and continues his exploration of my body.

"What's going on?"

"I..."

"I mean, right now, what's happening?"

Kole's tongue sweeps over my clit, and a wave of pleasure overcomes me. I can't speak.

"Put me on video call..." Luther growls. "Now."

I scramble to switch to video call. I'm blushing, embarrassed for Luther to see us. Even though we've participated in group activities plenty of times, this feels different somehow.

But Kole's hands are now pulling me into him, and all I can do is moan in pleasure as Luther watches us from the other side of the world.



On screen, Luther takes a deep breath and says in a firm voice, “Kole, get the bag I sent with Nova.”

Kole pauses for a moment before rising to his feet to retrieve the bag from the corner of the room. He unzips it, revealing an array of sex toys inside: vibrators; dildos; clamps; feathers; lubricants.

“Put the phone somewhere I can see you. Then sit her on your cock and use the vibrator on her clit.” Luther orders through clenched teeth.

My breath hitches in anticipation as Kole follows Luther’s instructions. He takes the phone from me and rests it on the dresser opposite the bed. Then, sitting up against the pillows, he guides me on top of him, so I’m facing the phone.

He slides himself into me slowly, filling me up completely until I’m gasping for air. When we’re both ready, he turns the vibrator on and presses it against my clit.

“Nova, take hold of it so Kole can play with your nipples.”

I stare at the phone as I bring the vibrator to rest between my legs.

Kole slicks his fingers then begins to tease my nipples.

On the screen, Luther stands and removes his pants. Then he takes his cock in his hand, fisting it hard. The way I would if he was here right now.

Behind me, Kole moans loudly. His lips graze my neck. Lips, then teeth.

“Drink,” I tell him, using my spare hand to hold his head in place. “Take whatever you need.”

He doesn’t need telling twice.

A loud cry parts my lips as his sharpened canines pierce my flesh.

Luther’s groans fill the room and merge with ours.

I press the vibrations harder against my clit.

The heat starts to build. Fire, and power, and passion, threatening to burst from my body and burn the hotel to the ground.

I latch onto it, pin it down, keep it inside.

My body coils, I drop the vibrator and lean forward, bracing my hands on Kole’s trunk-like thighs.

He moves with me, still drinking.

My vision blurs.

Luther yells, and I open my eyes to see white hot cum drenching his hand and his shaft.

When I come, Kole bites down harder.

He holds me close to his chest, thrusting viciously inside me as blood

trickles down between my breasts. Then he grabs me, flips me over and positions himself between my legs.

Now I'm on my back, he licks the blood from my chest. Swirls his tongue over my nipples, and reaches down to coax my clit into a second orgasm while he comes inside me.

From behind us, on the dresser, Luther says, "Next time, we'll try the clamps."



## NOVA

**B**efore he hangs up, when Kole and I are tangled together beneath the sheets and I'm holding the phone so it feels almost as if Luther is with us, he says, "I need to tell you both something."

I sit up, resting on my elbow and angle the phone so I can see him better. "What is it? Are you both okay?"

I haven't asked where Sam is or why he wasn't on the phone too.

"We're fine. Sam's fine. The town's fine." Luther clears his throat. "For now."

Wrapping an arm around my waist, sitting behind me, Kole tugs me closer and peers over my shoulder so he can see Luther too. "What's going on, Luther?"

Exhaling loudly, Luther clicks a flame into his palm.

Click.

Gone.

Click.

Gone.

"Annalise came to see us. The SDB thinks the Alliance's picket line outside of town is all a big distraction."

"Distraction from what?"

"They're trying to get hold of a weapon. Apparently it was stolen from some occult relic collection and is now floating around on the dark magick circuit. Some kind of scepter that can make the entire supernatural world go 'poof' if it gets into the wrong hands."

My chest tightens as the air in my lungs turns to molten lead. "Scepter?"

“Stolen from a collector?” Kole breathes out hard and shakes his head, his long dark hair hanging loose over his shoulders.

“Why do I feel like you guys know exactly what I’m talking about?” Luther asks, bringing a glass of whiskey to his lips.

I glance at Kole and he nods for me to tell Luther about our encounter with Thornfield. By the time I’ve finished, Luther is smiling. But it’s not a happy smile. It’s a *what the fuck* smile.

“Of course,” he says dryly. “Why wouldn’t Thornfield – the one guy who can help Mack and Snow – be linked to this somehow?”

“Maybe this is a good thing,” I venture. “Thornfield seems pretty determined to get the scepter back. If Annalise can tell us the details of the auction, Thornfield might be able to outbid the AMA or use his connections or...” I shrug, aware I have no idea how the whole ‘mafia vampire’ thing works. “Something.”

Luther chuckles at me but nods at the same time. “Right,” he says. “Okay. Talk to Thornfield in the morning. I’ll ask Annalise if she’d be willing to cooperate with him. Although, I’m not sure how the Bureau would feel about Thornfield taking control of it.”

“It belongs to his family, and he swore he wanted to destroy it.”

Luther and Kole exchange a wary look through the phone. “I’m not sure we should just blindly believe what Thornfield tells us, Supernova. But let’s start with getting the damn thing back, and go from there.”

Before hanging up, Luther promises to fill Rev in on what’s happening with Miranda. And he tells me he loves me.

Hearing those words from his lips never get old.

Never.

And as I lean back into Kole’s warm arms, he whispers the same.

“Are you feeling okay?” I ask, stroking his beard.

He trails a soft finger over the angry bite mark on my neck. “I am now,” he says. “But I’m sorry if I took too much.”

Lacing my fingers with his, I kiss his knuckles. “No such thing as too much.”



## TANNER

**M**ack and Snow both have a restless night. By the time morning rolls around, I know without doubt we're going to have to accept Thornfield's deal.

Find Miranda.

Share the elixir.

Help him retrieve and destroy his family's most dangerous weapon.

Over coffee and breakfast in the small dining room of the hotel, the others agree.

"The AMA being involved feels like a sign," Nova says. She glances at Kole. "I know you haven't seen anything. I know it's not prophesized but—"

"That doesn't mean it isn't meant to be," Kole says. "I don't believe in coincidences, Little Star."

When she nods at him, Mack rises from the table, kisses Nova on the forehead, and throws Snow an extra bit of bacon. Then the two of them head out – back to the museum – to tell Thornfield what we've decided.

When they're out of sight, I turn to the others. "I didn't want to say this in front of Mack, but..." I sigh and rub my palms over my face. "He had a bad night. He's in pain. I can feel it coming off him in waves, even though I'm not trying to reach for it. And it's getting worse."

"So, you're saying we need to track Miranda sooner rather than later."

I cast a knowing look in Nova's direction.

She catches my gaze and inhales slowly. "You're going to suggest jumping aren't you?"

Kole growls a little and leans forward onto his elbows. His knee touches

mine beneath the table. With Nova on the other side, I can't help wishing this was a weekend vacation rather than another mission likely to get us frigging' killed or worse – get humanity killed if we fuck it up.

“Kole, we could wander the city for hours trying to trigger a vision that will tell us where she is. Even if you *are* supercharged from Nova's blood.”

The two of them smile. Kole's is hungry. Nova's is coy, and a little turned on.

“But if I jump, we'll get an answer straight away.”

“The last time—” Nova slides her hand down my arm and takes hold of my hand.

“I'm stronger now. I've rested.”

Her jaw sets tightly. She looks toward the door, as if she can see the memory of Mack lingering there. Pressing her eyes closed, she nods. When she looks at me, this time it's with a fiery determination. The kind that gets me hot as hell. “All right,” she says. “Where and when?”

“Upstairs. Now.” I push my seat back, down the last of my coffee and head for the door.

In Nova and Kole's room, I ask her for a scarf or something I can use to limit my sensory input.

Nova's lips curl and she giggles before opening up the holdall I saw Luther pass her before we left. She sifts through, showing me flashes of pink and purple. Are those...?

I shake my head.

Not the time, Tanner.

Not the time.

“Here...” She pulls out a black blindfold and dangles it from her index finger. “Seems like Luther packed me for all eventualities.”

Taking it from her, imagining slipping it over her mesmerizing eyes and taking it in turns with Kole to do all kinds of things to her while she's forced to guess whose touch is whose, I kiss the tip of her nose.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter. “Could you stop being so cute for five minutes? I need to focus.”

Grinning at me, Nova gestures to the bathroom. “You need water?”

I nod, and head for the tub, then run a few inches from the tap, sit on the side and submerge my feet.

Nova turns the light out as I slip the blindfold over my eyes.

“We'll be right here if you need us.” She and Kole position themselves at



the back of the room.

A weight settles in my chest, heavy, suffocating. She's scared, and Kole is too, which means I'm starting to feel scared too.

Memories of pain, and the sensation of my mind breaking near clean in two, make me shudder. If I'm going to pull this off, I need... more. I slip the blindfold back onto my forehead and turn to Nova. "I think I need..."

Without hesitating, she closes the gap between us, sits on the edge of the tub next to me, and presents her wrist. I trace her pale blue veins with my forefinger, then kiss them lightly.

I look for Kole, but he's already there. Kneeling, so he's positioned between us, he lowers his mouth to Nova's wrist. With one quick bite, his sharpened front teeth pierce her skin.

She inhales sharply, and her eyes flutter.

Kole's eyes blacken. His jaw twitches, and his fists clench.

But then he tears himself away, and stands up, moving away from us.

The scent hits me now — iron-rich, potent. My canines don't quite have the lethal edge Kole's do. Thankfully, I don't need them to now he's opened her for me.

She raises her wrist to my mouth, and her blood drips onto my lips.

I drink, wincing at first, but then sinking into the taste of her. The feel of her blood entering my body. Her power. Her essence.

The world is sharpening around me.

Power surges, electrifying, pulling me into a heightened state of awareness.

I close my eyes, reaching out. Searching for that familiar energy.

*Focus. Reach. Find.*

Miranda.

There was a time when I'd need an object or something that belonged to the person in order to find them. Now, I simply picture the photograph Rev showed us before we left, and mutter her name.

Suddenly, I'm gone. Whisked away. Darkness gives way to a dim room draped in crimson, echoes of hushed conversations, and the metallic tang of blood in the air.

Eyes. I'm seeing through someone else's. Miranda's.

My hands – her hands – are bound, restless, nervous. Voices drift closer. The mention of a deal, the AMA, the importance of secrecy. And then... a laughter, cold, cruel, unmistakable.

A woman with long black hair flits into view. Ethereal, but with a darkness surrounding her that makes me want to scream.

*I feel you. Who are you? Why are you here?*

That voice.. who was that?

*You are in my head. Who are you?*

Holy fuck. This has never happened before. A host has never spoken to me, never acknowledged my presence. I didn't even know this was possible.

*So, you're an empath. A powerful one, it seems.*

She can hear me. My thoughts. Fuck.

*Would you mind putting a cap on the curse words, my dear? I do abhor swearing.*

I mutter a wordless apology and my host – Miranda – seems to relax.

*Are you here to help or hinder?*

Before I've answered, she sighs contentedly.

*My niece and the professor. They sent you. Good. But I can't tell you where I am. I have no idea. Only that Zephyra's henchmen are the ones who took me.*

Zephyra. That's the second time I've heard the name.

*I've been here three days. A train goes past every fifty minutes, which I think means I'm close to the Cambridge to London line. A dog barks incessantly. Early in the morning. And at night it's deathly quiet.*

She blinks, turning so I can see her cell. Black. Dark. Not a cell... a room. In what looks like a completely ordinary house, except for the boarded-up windows.

She turns again, and another shadow flits across the doorway.

This time, it stops and turns in our direction. A male vampire. Tall, skinny, with black veins undulating beneath his skin.

"Witch," he says. "Are you ready for today's session?"

Miranda is silent now, but the fear coursing through her is so strong it almost makes me vomit.

"I shall tell you nothing, no matter how many ways you find to torture me, young man."

With a flicker of movement, the vampire appears in front of her. Vice-like hand tighten on her shoulders. "I am not a young man, witch. I'm older than this hell-damned city itself. And I haven't even begun to find all the ways to torture you yet."

A crack of pain blooms on the side of my head. Miranda falls sideways.

Another crack. And another.

And then it's like I'm being yanked out of a dream. Reality crashes back. I'm in the tub, flailing in the few inches of cool water.

Nova and Kole heave me out. I'm damp, not soaked, but I'm breathing so fast it feels like my lungs can't keep up with my heart.

"Thornfield was right. Zephyra took her." I look at Kole as a dark shadow settles on his face.

"I think it's time you tell us who she is, Kole." Nova reaches for Kole's hand and squeezes it.

He flexes his fingers, his eyes black pools in a haunted face. "She's the queen," he says. "Queen of the South. Her FHB operation is the biggest in Europe."

"And how do you know her?" I ask as my own feelings of nausea merge with Kole's.

He leans back on the sink and ties back his hair, shoulders rippling with the movement. "I know her because I was her slave."

A jolt of jealousy hits my chest, coming straight from Nova.

"She used me in exchange for all the FHB I wanted."

"Used you how?" Nova asks, voice barely a whisper because she knows the answer from the tone of Kole's words.

"In every way," he says. "And I hate myself for it."

For a long moment, none of us speaks. But then Nova strides over to Kole, reaches up on tiptoe and rests her hands on his shoulders. "It doesn't matter what happened. What you did. That was then, and this is now. And right now, I need to know if you'd be willing to come face to face with Zephyra again if it meant we could save Mack? Can you do it, Kole?"

He meets her gaze. His body is tense, his muscles throbbing. Fear cascades off him so fiercely I'm surprised Nova can't see it too. It rolls along the floor, and up the walls, and barrels into me so hard I can barely breathe.

"I can do it," he says.

He's lying.

"I'll do it." He looks from Nova to me.

I close my eyes as the room spins and jumps and threatens to shatter.

We all make sacrifices for those we love.

Perhaps Mack isn't the only one who risks losing himself, though



## KIM

I'd know her voice anywhere. The soft American lilt, the hint of power, the sexy as fuck edge to it that makes me feel like she could do anything she wanted to me at any moment because she's... whatever the hell she is.

I'm clutching a coffee in one hand and a huge Chelsea bun in the other.

I turn and catch her drifting past the doorway, King's College looming tall behind her.

She's wearing a leather jacket, the same one she wore last night. Her red hair hangs thick and loose over her shoulders, and her hips sway as she walks.

I swipe my phone over the card machine, wait for the beep and run.

Following a few paces behind, I take in her black leather boots, clicking loudly on the pavement as she strides along next to two tall-as-hell guys.

One looks like something out of a Norse myth. Taller than should be physically possible, thick black hair fastened into a bun at the back of his head, and a beard it would take me approximately twenty years to grow.

The other guy, younger, is more athletic in build and closer to my age. He has a lightness about him, a fluidity to his movements.

And it's then I realize... they're mages.

"We can't just wander up and down the entire length of train-track between here and London looking for a house near a barking dog," she says.

The Norse god mumbles something. The younger one puts his hand on Nova's shoulder as if he's telling her not to worry.

"What other choice do we have?" The Norse god stops, hands on hips,

glowering at the other two. “We have to get Miranda out of Zephyra’s clutches before it’s too late. If Tanner’s vision is anything to go by, they’re running out of ways to torture her. And if she doesn’t give them what they want, they’ll get bored and—”

Fuck. I can’t believe I’m about to do this.

“Sorry, excuse me...” I interrupt, nudging my glasses up my nose and managing to spill coffee on my shirt at the same time.

All three of them turn to stare at me.

As she takes me in, Nova’s eyes widen. “Kim?”

“You know this guy?” the young one asks quizzically.

“Long story,” she says. “I saved him from a demon last night.” She stops and shrugs. “Oh, guess it wasn’t a long story after-all.”

We’re surrounded by people and, although supers have been out of the shadows here in England almost as long as they have in the States, it’s not something that’s shouted about too loudly on the streets of Cambridge. “Less of the demon talk,” I mutter, tucking my Chelsea bun into my jacket pocket as we – in tandem – step back to avoid being run over by a cyclist who isn’t wearing a helmet.

“We’re busy.” The Norse god huffs at me and turns to walk away but I dart in front of him.

“I heard you talking. You’re looking for Queen Zephyra.”

At the mention of her name, all three of them stiffen.

“I can help.” I look at Nova this time, hoping she can sense that she can trust me.

“Why would you help?” she asks, forehead crinkling into a frown. Perhaps not, then.

“You helped me,” I tell her. “One good turn deserves another.”

As I wait for her reply, she looks at the younger one and he nods almost imperceptibly. “He’s telling the truth. We can trust him.”

“All right then.” The Norse god grabs hold of my coffee and dumps it into a nearby bin. “Come with us.”



“HE’S KOLE, and that’s Tanner.” Nova points to the mages who are striding up ahead.

“And they’re your...” I glance at her, praying the answer isn’t what I think it’s going to be.

“Boyfriends,” she says, not a hint of embarrassment.

“Right.” I adjust my glasses on the bridge of my nose. “Course.”

A smile plays on her lips, but she doesn’t say anymore and we walk in silence until we reach the imposing building that houses the Museum of Anthropology.

“Sightseeing?” I ask as Nova pushes open the doors.

The security guard smiles at her, and waves us past. “Your friend was here earlier with his adorable dog. Such a lovely dog.”

Nova smiles back. “He’s adorable, isn’t he?”

“Dog?” I mutter. But she shakes her head at me.

“I’ll explain in a minute.”

We move quickly, passing through room after room until we arrive at the occult exhibit. From here, we take a set of stairs and arrive at a large oak door, which Nova taps once with her knuckles before pushing open.

Inside, my eyes adjust to the darkness.

A cloying sense of trepidation settles on my skin like tension building before a storm. At the desk in front of us, a pale dark-haired man in a tailored suit is speaking into a phone. Not in a language I recognize.

He looks up, smiles at Nova in a way that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, then barks what sounds like a goodbye at whoever he’s speaking to and hangs up.

It’s only then that I notice Nova crossing the room and tucking herself into the arms of a silver-haired dude who – quite frankly – looks old enough to be my dad. At his feet, a large white dog is giving me the world’s grumpiest stare.

Weird looking dog.

I squint at it and tilt my head.

It looks more like a...

“Polar bear.” Nova catches me staring. “He’s a polar bear. Just travel sized.”

“Who is this?” The suave guy behind the desk stands up and moves, lightning fast, to stand in front of me.

Immediately, catching a flash of the ring he’s wearing, everything drops into place. “Lucien Thornfield.” I look him up and down, and fold my arms in front of my chest. “I thought you were an urban legend.”

“My name is on the museum website,” Thornfield quips, cool as ice. “Clearly, you didn’t investigate very hard.”

“Let me rephrase.” I square up to him. I might be shorter and more human, but I’m not scared of him. Fangs or no fangs. “I thought your role in this city’s shady dealings was exaggerated. Seems like I was wrong.”

“I don’t know what you mean, boy.” Thornfield narrows his eyes.

I point to the ring. “Only the head of the family that runs the city’s supernatural activity can wear that ring. I’ve read tales of—”

“Once again,” Thornfield snaps, turning away from me and cutting me off mid-sentence. “I’ll ask you all nicely... who *is* this mundane and why is he standing in my office?”

“He said he’s good at tracking things. People. Demons.” Nova steps in, leaving papa bear frowning. “I found him last night in an alleyway about to get eaten by a demon. But he *does* seem to have a lot of knowledge. He said he could help us find Queen Zephyra.”

“Zephyra isn’t easy to find, and I’m not sure why we...” Thornfield’s face drops when Tanner, the floppy-haired one, interrupts him.

“We located Miranda,” he says. While I listen intently, trying to put the pieces together, wondering who the fuck Miranda is and how she has got caught up with Cambridge’s queen vamp, he continues, “I jumped, but she must be one hell of a powerful witch because she sensed me there. That’s never happened before.”

“Yes,” Thornfield replies. “She is powerful.”

“She told me she’s being kept somewhere a train passes every fifty minutes. She thinks it’s on the line between Cambridge and London, and that there’s a dog nearby that barks a lot.”

“That’s all you gleaned?” Thornfield’s cool demeanor slips and a look of pure anger flits across his face.

“That and the fact it was Zephyra who took her.”

Thornfield turns around and braces his hands on the desk. He reaches for a glass of what looks like either port or whiskey and sighs heavily.

“And you?” he turns to me and jerks his finger up and down. “What do you offer? And why? How did you get caught up in this?”

“I was tracking a Lethurian demon last night and ran into Nova. She kindly extracted me from his claws and...” I pause, glancing at her and almost getting lost in those hypnotic eyes. “She despatched him for me.”

“It was a team effort,” she says, which isn’t true. But I appreciate the



show of solidarity.

“You don’t look like the demon hunting type.” Thornfield takes a long sip from his glass.

In answer, I shrug and try to stand a little taller. I want to adjust my glasses, but hold back. “That’s where you’re wrong.” My jaw tics. “I’ve killed fifty demons in the last eighteen months.”

“Fifty?” Thornfield’s eyes twitch. Casually, as if he’s completely certain I’ll fuck up, he says, “Name them.”

The others are all watching me intently. Nova purses her lips. She looks curious, interested. The urge to impress her swells in my gut.

“Azazel, beleth, cimeries, cantalionm, eurynomos, focalor, gusion, haures, ipos, jezebeth, karsus, leraje, malthus, naberius, oriax, paimon, qemuel, ronove, shax, tannin—” I reel off the first twenty breeds, then stop because Thornfield is holding up his palm at me.

“All right,” he drawls. “Enough.” He sets down the glass then turns to Tanner and Kole. “You feel you need the help of a Mundane demon hunter? Or can you handle this alone?”

When they take too long to answer, Thornfield wave his arms in the air in what I assume is a rare display of raw emotion, and says, “Fine. Fine. Just find her.” He checks his ostentatious wrist watch then heads toward the bookcase at the back of the room. “I have calls to make.” He glances back at the silver-haired guy. “This auction either needs to be stopped altogether or *I* need to be the one to win it.” Now he looks at the others. “Either way, we need Miranda and we need the elixir. So, do what you have to do... *find* her.”

Like something from a Hollywood movie – a cross between Count Dracula and a Bond villain – Thornfield disappears behind a secret door in the bookshelf.

When it swings shut behind him, I adjust my glasses. My stomach growls, so I take the Chelsea bun from my pocket. It’s a bit squashed, but I bite into it and – with a full mouth – say, “I guess that means I’m part of the gang?”



## NOVA

**K**im strides ahead confidently as we leave the museum, his shoulders back and head high. Who would've thought the geeky guy I saved last night could be so bold?

"Are you sure you were tracking that demon last night?" I hiss as we descend the steps out front.

He glances at me, wiping the remains of his pastry from his lips.

"It's just that, from where I was standing, it kind of looked like he was tracking you..."

"So little faith," he quips. "I was luring him into the alleyway, obviously."

"Obviously." I bite back a chuckle. Something about his British accent makes me feel like I'm constantly on the verge of smiling or giggling.

"Before we go any further," Mack says, leaning on the wall at the bottom of the steps. "I think we need to get a few things clear."

Kim shrugs and puts his hands into his pockets. "Sure," he says, waiting expectantly for Mack to continue talking.

Mack frowns. He is tantalizingly hot when he's being grumpy and protective, and he's clearly not happy about a stray human joining our group – or about the way Kim's looking at me. Because I *know* the guys have noticed it.

"Don't you want to know what all this is about?" Mack asks, straightening himself up as Snow leans against his leg.

"Not sure it matters, does it?" Kim asks, glancing at me. "Nova helped me, now she needs help. From what I've gathered, you guys are here looking

for a witch who Queen Vamp has in her clutches. No idea why you're working with Thornfield or why the witch is so important, and I'm guessing the auction he talked about isn't for an antique stamp collection he's got his eye on." He scrapes his foot against the damp concrete floor. "But, like I said, it doesn't really matter why. What matters is that I owe Nova a good turn, and I can help you find what you're looking for."

"And how exactly will you do that?" Kole asks. His entire body is tense and puffed up like he's trying to make himself as tall as possible. He folds his arms in front of his chest, cords of muscle in his forearms twitching, tattoos peeking out from the neck of the black sweater he's wearing with the sleeves rolled up.

He looks good in cold weather, I have to say.

Kim takes off his glasses, wipes them – because a fine mist is falling and has started to cloud them up – then repositions them on his nose. "I have talents," he says. "Well-honed talents."

I swallow hard and fight the urge to giggle again. Fuck, what's happening to me? It must be the accent.

"Do you want to talk about them or do you just want me to show you?" he asks, gesturing toward the archway that leads to the busy street beyond the museum.

"Let's go." Tanner steps in, nodding at Mack and Kole. "I trust him, and we need this done as soon as possible."

Reluctantly, the others step into line, allowing Kim and I to walk up front.

He's not built like Kole or Tanner, lacking their athletic build and height, but there's a certain energy about him that's hard to ignore. He wears a smart gray jacket over a checked shirt, the fabric stretching slightly across a frame that's clearly more accustomed to books than barbells. His jeans are a comfortable fit, and a pair of sensible brown leather shoes tap softly against the pavement.

He looks at me quickly and smiles. "I'm glad we bumped into each other again," he says. His glasses add to his intellectual vibe, and I can't help but be drawn to the quiet intensity in his eyes.

"Don't get too excited," I tell him, narrowly avoiding a puddle as we cross the street. "Things like this, with us, usually end in drama."

"I got the feeling you guys were accustomed to drama," Kim says, pointing toward an alleyway ahead. "This way. Shortcut toward the station."

Kole, Mack, and Tanner follow behind us, and I can feel their eyes on

me. Bringing flutters of heat to my skin because I know, as much as they're focussed on the task at hand, they're also being eaten up with jealousy right now.

And *that* is hot as fuck.

"So, I know you're not into sharing, but how exactly is it that you're good at tracking demons?" I can't help but ask as we reach the train station. Kim's eyes are closed, and he's turning his head slowly. Listening. Seeking.

He opens his eyes and looks at me, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "I guess the closest thing I can liken it to is those psychics you see on TV."

"You're a psychic?" I ask, quirking an eyebrow at him and hoping Kole didn't hear me because seers and human 'psychics' do *not* get on.

"No," Kim says, shrugging inside his jacket as a cold wind whips across our faces. "But I've always been able to sense demonic energy. Ever since I was a kid. It's like a frequency in the back of my mind, a pull towards the chaos and darkness that demons bring."

"That sounds scary."

His eyes flicker. They're pale green, almost blue, but they darken as he looks at me. "Yeah, it can be," he says. "It was when I was a kid, for sure. But I learned to fine-tune it over the years."

"And now you work in an office during the day and track demons at night?"

"A mundane superhero," Tanner interrupts me, skimming his hand over the small of my back and letting it rest on my hip. He's smiling, but there's a bite to his tone.

"Something like that," Kim replies.

"And you're confident you can track Zephyra?" I probe, genuinely curious. "Even though she's a vampire not a demon?"

Kim nods, then his gaze sharpens as he gets back to work, turning toward an empty building site behind the station. "Demons, vampires, anything that originated from the dark realms. I can feel them, track them. It's not perfect, but I'm not usually wrong."

"Not usually," Kole says – channeling Luther in his level of animosity. "That's great."

We're standing beneath a tall, not yet constructed building, with scaffolding and empty cranes surrounding us, when Kim comes to a standstill. His body is rigid as he closes his eyes, presumably searching for that sinister frequency only he can sense.

His brows furrow in concentration, a testament to the effort he's putting in. His breathing slows, becoming almost imperceptible, as if he's trying to minimize any distractions. It reminds me of when Tanner jumps, only much less treacherous I hope.

As Kim breathes slowly, I can see the tension in his slender frame, the way his hands clench at his sides, knuckles whitening.

There's suddenly an intensity about him, something that wasn't as palpable before. It's subtle, but it's there—a slight hum in the air, a vibrational shift that tells me he's tapped into something none of the rest of us can feel. Despite his lack of physical prowess, there's a strength in his focus, a resilience in the way he holds himself.

I watch as his head tilts slightly to the side, his glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose as he hones in on the demonic energy he's tracking.

“THE ENERGY...IT'S murky, twisted. I can feel the chaos, the darkness. She's doing something to mask her location, but it's not enough to keep me out,” he murmurs, almost to himself. His voice is low, a whisper in the night, yet it carries a certainty that reassures me.

Finally, his eyes snap open. “This way,” he says, his voice steadier now.

Without a word, we fall into step behind him, moving with a renewed sense of urgency as storm clouds rumble above us and the midday sky darkens.

As we walk, the building site turns to houses, and then the houses fall away too.

I turn to look for Mack. He seems okay, keeping pace with the rest of us, but the way Tanner is staying close to his side makes me think he is *not* as okay as he's pretending to be.

Now, trees crowd the landscape, their bare branches clawing at the sky.

Somewhere ahead, a dog's distant bark carries on the wind. Kim freezes, holding up a hand.

“Miranda mentioned a dog,” Tanner says.

Adrenaline floods my veins instantly, my body lighting up with the anticipation of a fight.

Kim meets my eyes. “We're getting close.”



## NOVA

**D**ark clouds loom above us. The day has turned to night, which seems appropriate given the circumstances. Drizzle touches my face. I knew England would be cold and damp, but I'm kinda sick of it already.

"This is it." Kim staggers through some trees ahead and the ground turns from earth to concrete.

"What the fuck?" Tanner breathes.

We're standing outside what looks like an old carnival, and it's as if time itself has decided to forget this place. It's eerie, abandoned, the once vibrant colors now faded and lifeless, as if drained of all their joy. The air smells of rust and damp wood.

I wrinkle my nose and glance at the others.

In front of us, the Ferris wheel stands silent. It reminds me of the kind I rode as a kid, and as I stare at it, laughter, lights, and the taste of candy-floss flood my memory.

We walk slowly forward. As we move, the Ferris wheel's seats swing gently in the wind, creaking ominously. The carousel is no better, its horses frozen mid-gallop, their painted eyes staring blankly into the distance.

At the entrance, the ticket booth is empty. Its window shattered, the once bright sign now dim and peeling.

"This place gives me the fucking creeps," Tanner says.

When I look at him, I realize that – although he's being flippant – he's having to try extremely hard not to let the memories held in this place overwhelm him.

"I hear you on that," Kim says.



“Which way?” We’re standing beside the Ferris wheel now. “You’re sure she’s here?”

Kim nods. “The place reeks of demons. The energy... it’s...” He swallows hard.

“I can feel it too.” Tanner’s jaw sets tightly as he speaks.

“This way.” Kim points to a pathway that leads into the heart of the carnival. It’s littered with fallen leaves and debris.

The entire place sends shivers through me.

Snow growls in agreement.

We keep walking, cautiously, but Kole freezes. He grips my hand hard.

“Kole?” I turn to look up at him. His eyes have darkened. Even the swirling tattoos on the side of his face seem darker than they were a moment ago.

“I don’t think I can do this,” he says, his voice strained.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Panic rises in me, quick, sharp.

“I can feel her. Zephyra.” His eyes, haunted, meet mine.

“You can...?” I trail off. The others are watching us, listening, probably as confused as I am because why the heck have we involved Kim in this if Kole could tell us where Zephyra was?

“I drank her blood, and she drank mine.” He closes his eyes. I notice Mack and Tanner exchange a knowing glance. “I can feel her when she’s close.”

Blood. The realization hits like a punch. “A blood bond?” My voice cracks, panic squeezing my chest.

“No, not that. Not like ours.” His grip tightens on my hand as if he’s desperate for me to believe him. “But I can sense her when she’s close. And she’s too close now.”

The world tilts. It’s colder, harsher, all of a sudden. I squeeze his hand back, trying to offer comfort. But inside, my mind’s racing. I thought the bond Kole and I shared was unlike anything either of us had experienced before.

I knew he’d been with other women, but I never thought about him drinking from one the way he drinks from me.

The image of a super-hot, dark-haired vampire queen, straddling my viking, pummels my brain.

“Can you tell where she is?” I ask, trying to focus.

He closes his eyes, concentrating. “Can’t be sure where. Just... close.”

I turn to Kim. “What about you?”

“The energy is swirling,” he says, looking around and narrowing his eyes. “There’s a lot of it. It’s hard to pin down. Whatever she’s using to try to shield herself, it’s confusing things.” He holds up his index finger then says, “One minute.” And paces away, tilting his head as if he’s listening very hard for something.

The others circle around me, faces grim.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. I can’t afford to get lost in my feelings about Kole and Zephyra. Not now. “Okay,” I say, more to myself. “Kole, Mack, Snow head back and tell Thornfield we think we’ve located Zephyra. When Kim’s pinpointed her location, Tanner and I will go in.”

KOLE’S ABOUT TO PROTEST; I see it in his eyes, that protective glint. The feeling that he needs to be with me even though he knows it could break him to be so close to reminders of his past.

I raise a hand, stopping him before he can start. “No arguing. Mack and Snow aren’t well enough to fight.”

Mack rubs his palm over his face and turns away from me. He feels useless. I know he does. But I don’t have time to pander to his ego. I meet his eyes and give him a defiant stare.

His lips twitch into a smile, understanding what I’m telling him. Then he raises his hands and says, “All right, Little Star. Whatever you say.”

Next to Mack, Kole clenches his jaw, clearly not happy, but he nods.

“When we find her, how exactly...” Tanner trails off, his words drowned out by the sound of footsteps racing toward us.

Emerging from behind an abandoned hot dog stand, Kim waves his arms frantically. “Run!” he shouts.

My heartbeat thunders in my chest. At the same moment, the sky rumbles and the rain starts to fall. Properly now. Large, hard, droplets that land with purpose on my skin.

“It’s a trap!” Kim skids on a slippery patch of ground. He tries to steady himself but falls forward. His glasses tumble from his nose and skid across the floor toward me.

He’s scrambling to his feet when I hear it.

Laughter.

My blood runs cold.



## LUCIEN

**I**n the dimly lit grandeur of my study, surrounded by antiquities and rare tomes, I find myself facing the glow of the computer screen. Shadows dance upon the walls, animated by the flickering flames from the fireplace.

It took little time to find out where and when the auction was to take place.

The very fact I am being forced to do this, to claim back that which was stolen from me, is an insult. More than an insult.

But, for now, that cannot be my concern.

The vow that runs in my family's blood – to protect the scepter at all costs – runs hot and furious. I failed. I allowed it to be stolen from me. I shall not fail again.

I grit my teeth and take a sip of whiskey.

The Scepter of Dissolution, a relic of unfathomable power and dark lineage, is to be sold at auction. A relic my family kept safe for centuries – about to be offered to the highest bidder.

The event transpires in the digital realm, a convergence of power and secrecy in the shadows of the internet.

I have been to such events before, of course. Most of my collection was obtained this way.

Perhaps that is... what's the word... karma?

I delicately adjust the gold cufflinks at my wrists as I navigate the encrypted space. The assembly is an ingenious blend of ancient mysticism and modern technology, only accessible to those with a true mastery of the

dark arts.

Like me.

The auctioneer, nothing but a shadow behind the screen, commences the event with a voice modulated to echo through the digital expanse. “Esteemed guests, beings of influence and power, welcome. Tonight, we gather in pursuit of the Scepter of Dissolution. Let the bidding commence.”

The bidding erupts, a rapid-fire exchange of numbers and cryptic usernames filling the screen. I remain calm, my fingers poised above the keyboard, strategically placing my bids. The price escalates, a testament to the Scepter’s magnetic pull.

As usual, however, the bidding escalates from money to things the participants value more than money.

A new contender enters the arena. ‘AMAlliance’ flashes upon the screen, a moniker that sends ripples through the digital space. The Anti Magick Alliance.

Of course.

I reach into the top drawer of my desk. I hoped to give this to Nova as a parting gift – because in the few minutes we have spent together, she truly has enchanted me – but I shall have to think of something else for her to remember me by.

I run my thumb over the label on the vial. *The Tears of the First Witch*, a potion of unparalleled power. A relic that can turn the tide of any magical endeavor. “I bid the Tears of the First Witch,” I pronounce, my voice steady, commanding as I hold up the vial for the camera.

The digital room falls silent, the gravity of my bid evident to all. “A formidable offer,” he declares.

But then, another voice, cold and unrelenting, cuts through the silence. “We bid the Covenant of Shadows.”

My grip tightens angrily on the vial. The glass creaks, and I put it down before it breaks.

The Covenant of Shadows — a pact made with the very forces that govern magick, held by the Anti Magick Alliance? How is that possible?

My brow furrows, my mind racing. I have wealth, influence, connections within the darkest corners of the world. But the Covenant is a promise of loyalty, a pact that transcends the mortal realm. It’s a bid that cannot be quantified, a pledge of allegiance from the very shadows themselves.

I have no idea how the AMA got their hands on it or why no one is

stopping them seizing the scepter. Do they not realize what awaits us if the very organization who wishes to wipe our kind from the earth gets their clutches on a weapon that could do just that?

The auctioneer hesitates, the weight of the decision heavy upon him. Perhaps he is thinking the same thoughts.

But the rules of the auction are clear.

To break or bend them now would be to throw the entire dark market into disarray.

“Do I have a higher bid?” he calls out, his voice uncertain.

But what is higher than a pledge from the shadows? I search the depths of my extensive connections, the myriad of relics and favors at my disposal. In this moment, against such a bid, they seem inconsequential.

“Going once, going twice...”

Anger bubbles in my veins, my fangs ache, I pick up my whiskey glass.

“Sold, to the Anti Magick Alliance.”

I hurl the glass across the room. It meets the bookcase and shatters into a million pieces.

The digital chamber dissolves, the encrypted connection fading into the ether. I brace my hands on the desk, breathing heavily, ribs throbbing as if they too might crack and splinter.

I lost it.

The scepter is gone.

And in the hands of the Anti Magick Alliance, it could be the destruction of us all.



## KOLE

**T**he deafening roar of rain fills the air, but I can't focus on it. My senses are on high alert, and the world narrows down to one thing: her.

The Queen.

I haven't seen her since I left, and everything in me screams to turn and run. But I can't. Not with Nova and the others in danger.

I feel her before I see her, a dark aura spreading through the air. Then she steps out from the shadows, flanked by her vampires.

They're everywhere. They were here all along.

How did we miss them?

I try not to look at her, but I can't turn away. She's as stunning and terrifying as I remember. Her eyes find mine, and it's like a punch to the gut.

"Ink Heart," she purrs, a cruel smile playing on her lips. The nickname she gave me when we were... closer. My skin prickles at the sound of it. I don't want it to affect me, but it does.

"Zephyra." My voice comes out steadier than I feel.

"Oh, Kole. Always so serious." She steps closer, and I fight the urge to back away. "It's been too long."

"It hasn't been long enough," I snap, my anger rising. I need it. It's the only thing keeping me grounded right now.

Her laughter rings out, sending shivers down my spine. "Still angry, I see. I thought time healed all wounds." She tuts then adds, "And really, it's *me* who should be angry. After all, you were the one who left without saying goodbye."

I force myself to look at her, to not let her see how much she affects me.



To not let Nova see. “We want Miranda. Give her to us, and we’ll leave.”

Zephyra looks me up and down as if she’s trying to decide whether to eat me or rip out my heart.

A wave of heat hits my back and I realize Nova is beginning to spark.

Zephyra simply tilts her head and releases a low chuckle. “And who is this?” she asks me, beckoning for me to come closer. “Your new pet?”

I try not to, but my feet carry me forward without my consent.

“Leave her out of this,” I growl.

“Touch him and I’ll end you, vampire.” Nova shouts above the rain and the wind, but Zephyra simply rolls her eyes with annoyance.

I am standing in front of her now. She licks her lower lip, then flicks her tongue over her canines.

“Enough...” Tanner’s voice. I can see him from the corner of my eye, fingers outstretched, flexing.

“Any moment now, fire and rain will wipe you from this earth,” I spit at Zephyra. “You should prepare yourself, Queen.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.” Zephyra tuts. “Your powers are useless here. Miranda made me a lovely little spell. You can use them, of course,” she says. “But you’ve no guarantee they’ll behave the way you expect.” She jerks her gaze toward Nova. “Try it, if you like, Fire Bird.”

In an instant, Nova conjures a ball of fire and lurches it in Zephyra’s direction. Mid-air, it changes course, starts to spin like a firework, spitting flames into the air, then it explodes, bouncing off the Ferris wheel and landing in the dark puddles that scatter the floor.

Nova’s eyes widen.

Either side of her, Mack and Tanner flex their fingers but do not conjure.

“Zephyra—” I start to speak but her eyes flash and my words fade.

“You will address me as Queen,” she yells.

Behind her, her enclave of vampires spring into action. Fangs bared.

In a matter of seconds, they have us surrounded. Kim is grabbed from behind and hauled to his feet. He tries to fight, but he’s not strong enough.

Zephyra’s vamp pierces Kim’s neck, and a trickle of hot red liquid pools beneath the vampire’s mouth.

As the smell of fresh blood fills the air, Zephyra sighs heavily.

The hunger stirs within me.

Nova screams, but Snow charges forward, forgetting he’s small and not much of a match for them. He barks loudly. Mack yells for him to come

back, but he's hit with a crossbow bolt, and goes down hard.

"Snow..." Nova's scream is filled with terror and rage. I can sense the power building in her, but she hesitates. She knows she can't use her powers without risking our lives.

None of us can.

"Now, now, Fire Bird..." Zephyra's voice is sickly sweet as she steps closer to her. "I'd think twice before doing anything rash. You wouldn't want to hurt your friends, would you?"

Two female vamps catch hold of my arms.

"I've been following your journey." Zephyra splashes through puddles, water staining the hem of her white silk dress. "You are a fascinating creature," she says. Then she inhales slowly, inches away from Nova's face. "And your blood would be a true asset to my operation." She glances back at me, over her shoulder, and flashes a pearly grin. "Wouldn't you say, Ink Heart? Don't you think my punters would go *crazy* for a vial imbued with your girlfriend's blood?"

"If you touch her..."

Zephyra tuts loudly. "You'll what? Be very, very cross and then run away?" She laughs now, a loud bark that echoes in the air around us. "I have to say..." She folds her arms, and taps her foot. "This couldn't have worked out better." A blade-like grin stretches her lips. "I think we're going to have fun."

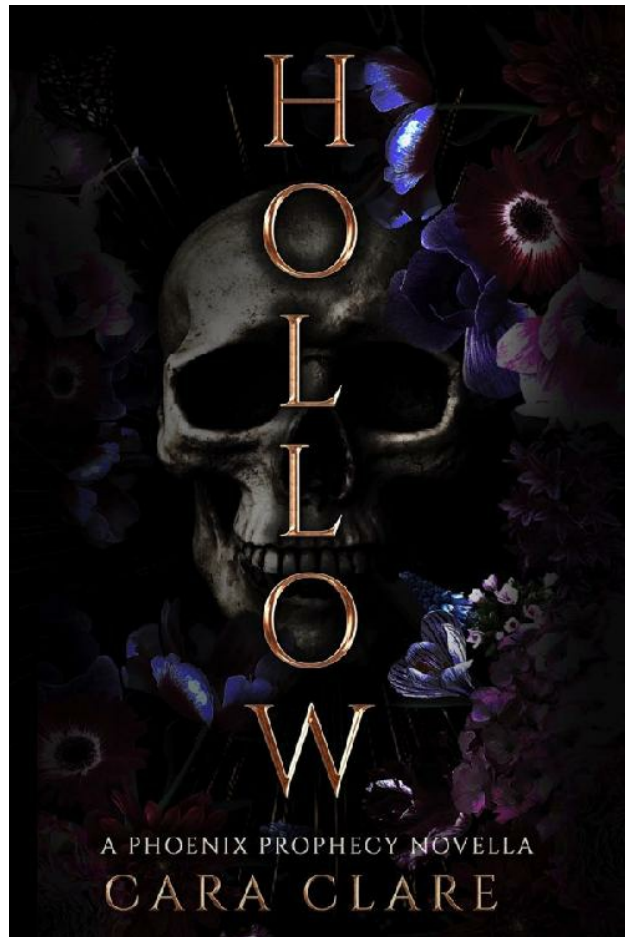


*Thank you to everyone who is returning to The Phoenix Prophecy series! It wouldn't be a Cara Clare book without a cliffhanger, right?!*

***You can now pre-order Book Eight: Ice.***

*But if you can't wait to continue Nova's quest, you can dive into 'Hollow' right away to discover how Kole & Zephyra met.*

*You can read a sneak peek on the following pages...*



## *CHAPTER ONE*

### *KOLE*

The pendulum swings hypnotically. Tourists gather to take pictures, more entranced by a golden disc with a grasshopper sitting on it than the centuries-old building that looms behind them.

They point and stare as if the clock is moved by magick, but it is not magick that gives it motion; it is physics. Pure and simple.

In England, magick is still buried in corners and crevices. There are no magick towns, like there are in the States, only magick alleyways. Dark, shadowy places that humans instinctively avoid.

In England, it is as if supers never really made it out of the shadows all those years ago. And in Cambridge, a city steeped in tradition and bowing under the weight of its own reputation, magick is only a whisper in the air.

The stuffy academics who inhabit its colleges and town houses try to *explain* and *quantify* and *understand* the way magick works. They want to study us; to put us under a microscope and learn what makes us so different.

But magick cannot be understood like that. Magick cannot be distilled into words and diagrams in big, thick textbooks.

Perhaps that is why, here, I can pass unnoticed through the crowds; because they do not want to see what I am. They do not want to recognize the black veins that discolor my skin. They do not want to see bloodlust on my lips or the power that burns like hot coals in my inky eyes.

Despite the fact I stand head and shoulders above them, have long black hair, and a Viking-like beard, they accept me as simply another Cambridge eccentric. They do not see what they are risking when they stray too close to me. Probably, they don't even know mages like me exist; mages who crave human blood but who are not—like vampires—confined to the shadows.

After pushing through the crowd in front of the clock, I turn the corner, pass the black railings opposite *The Eagle* public house, then make a right.

One of the city's lesser-known museums appears on my left. I duck through an archway into the parking lot, then head for the gloomy corner at the back. I take the set of concrete stairs two at a time. At the bottom, I knock on the large steel door.

It is not my first time here, and it won't be my last.

There is a long silence before I hear feet shuffling inside. Felix answers. His neck is peppered with scars. The rest are hidden beneath a long-sleeved shirt and dark jeans. "Back again," he smirks.

The blood, which is crusted around the bite marks on his throat, makes my tongue dart out to moisten my lips. Felix notices but doesn't flinch, just ushers me inside.

Down another set of steps, and through another large door, we reach the underbelly of the museum. A series of wide, dark tunnels takes us to a depressingly cold room that looks like an empty warehouse—vast and housing nothing but some overturned crates.

I found this place by accident. I came to Cambridge after years of scuttling across Europe because I was told it was *the* place in England to buy F.H.B. Since arriving, however, all I've managed to find are humans like Felix; humans who make a living selling themselves to vamps. It's not the same; human blood which hasn't been through the fermentation process doesn't offer the same buzz. It satiates The Hunger, but not enough to stop

me coming back here.

Felix had never met a mage like me before. Until I arrived, most of his clients were vamps, which means he trusts me more than he should.

Felix sits down on one of the crates and tilts his head. He taps his foot and raises an eyebrow. He has dark hair, not as long as mine, and ice-blue eyes.

“Thigh,” I tell him, taking a wad of cash from my back pocket.

Felix raises his eyebrows. “Two-hundred for the delicate parts.”

I thrust the money into his hand. Unashamedly, he counts it, then lifts up his shirt, tucks the money into the pouch he wears close to his body, and nods.

I kneel on the hard concrete floor. The throbbing in my ears grows louder. Moisture floods my mouth, saliva coating my pointed and filed canines.

“Who did that for you?” Felix drops his pants and rolls up his boxer leg. “Is it a thing back in the States? Mages having their teeth filed so they can bite humans?” He laughs and folds his arms. “Seems like something the S.D.B. would disapprove of.”

I don’t reply. Shoving him down hard on the crates, I run my hands up the inside of his legs and hear myself growl. He grips the side of the crate as I push his legs apart and lower my head between his thighs.

“Two minutes,” he says. “Time starts now, Ink Heart.”

My eyes flash at the sound of *that* nickname—I don’t know if I revealed it when I arrived or if Felix found out about it somewhere else. “I told you not to call me that.”

Before Felix can reply, I rip into his flesh with my teeth. Blood bubbles to the surface of the untidy puncture wounds. Its metallic taste fills my mouth. Not F.H.B. but human—at least it’s human.

As I start to suck, Felix groans. His cock is growing hard. I could fuck him if I wanted to, but that’s not what I’m here for.

My ears throb. My veins sing. I feel the black spider lines at the sides of my eyes taper out toward my temples where they lodge themselves in my skull and demand more. I grip his creamy thigh tighter and rip his skin wider.

“Careful,” he warns, tugging my ponytail.

His voice rips through me. The Hunger surges in my gut. It roars in my head. I slam my hands on his hips and hold him still. Whatever he can give me is not enough. I know that and yet something inside me screams for me to keep drinking.

*Keep drinking and maybe you'll find a drop that tastes the way it should; the way the F.H.B. tasted when they poured it into your mouth, pumped it into your veins, made you lap it up from the floor at their feet.*

“Kole, fucking stop.” Felix shoves my shoulder. “Don’t make me—” There’s a pause and then pain blinds me.

I fall back, my heart racing, my hands trembling. I can barely see. Black mist clouds my vision. I try to crawl back toward it; the smell, the blood, the heat.

“Fuck, man. We could have had some fun.” Felix shakes his head at me. “At least vamps can fucking control themselves. This is the last time. You’re barred.”

I blink through the mist. Felix is pulling his pants back up. The magick-laced taser he used to shock me is sitting on the crate next to him. When his pants are on, blood seeping through the fabric, he picks the weapon up and strides over to me.

“You need help.”

“I need F.H.B.” I growl and wipe my mouth, staggering to my feet. “I told you that when we met. You said you’d help me. If I can get some F.H.B. —”

“I don’t have any.”

“But you know where I can find some.” I square up to him, but stop myself before I reach for his collar. “I came to Cambridge because I was told this was where *she*—”

Felix pushes his fingers through his hair. He pities me, but I don’t give a damn. “You really want to meet The Queen? You want to go down that road? Because I’m telling you, once you’re *in* with her there’s no getting *out*. And she’s heard your reputation, Ink Heart. She’ll expect things. A lot of things.”

“What could a human possibly know about how a vampire queen runs her operation?”

A slow smile parts Felix’s lips. “Fine,” he says. “Have it your way.” From his pocket, he takes a scrap of paper. There’s a number on it: thirteen.

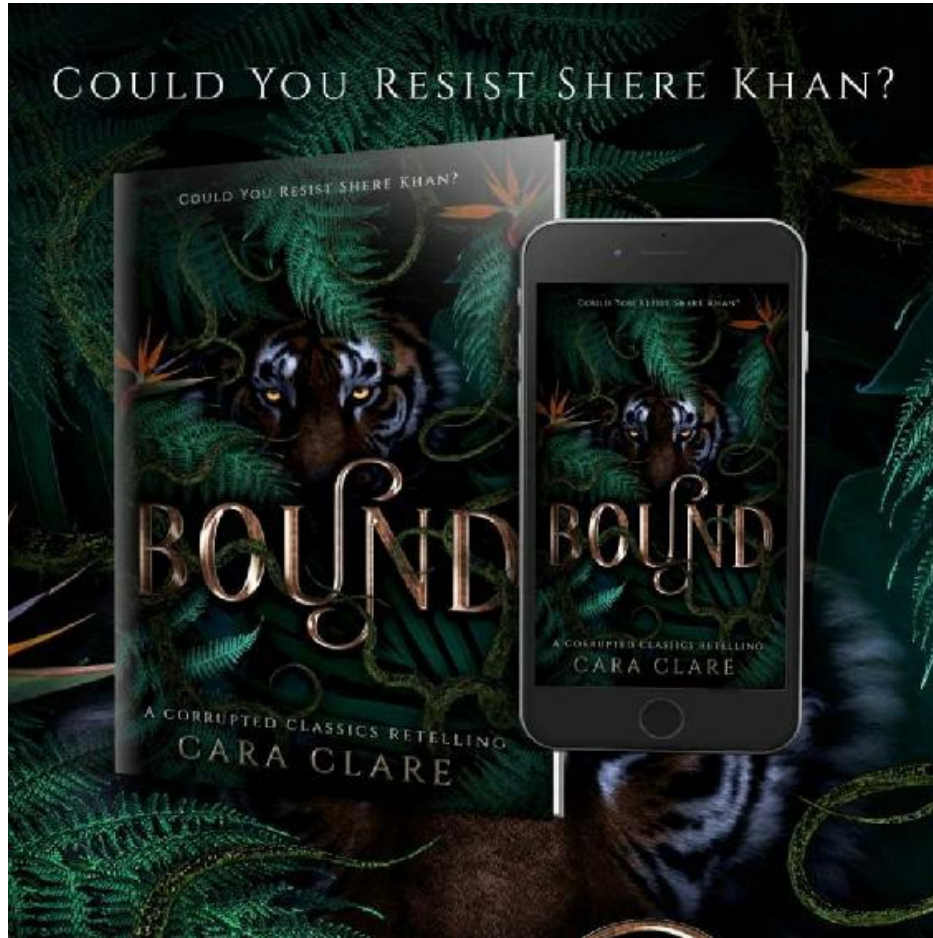
“Elizabeth Avenue. I’ll tell them to expect you.”

I frown at the lettering on the paper. “That nickname... where did you hear it?”

Felix looks me up and down, laughs, then tells me to go fuck myself, leaving me to wallow in my disappointing high.

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## SNEAK PEEK: (THE JUNGLE'S QUEEN BOOK ONE)



### ***BLURB***

For nearly ten years, Shere Khan the tiger, has watched my every move, but I have never seen his face. Legend says he was once a man. A man with a black heart and an evil soul—cursed to roam the jungle for the rest of his life. Never satisfied. Always alone.

Legend says he can only be tamed by witchcraft.

When he finally comes for me, will I be able to resist? Or am I bound to be his? Body and soul. Khan's to corrupt.

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## ***SNEAK PEEK***

### *Prologue*

#### *NOW*

Thunder vibrates through my body, coiling around my heart and squeezing it tight. Like he did. As I stumble away from him, damp leaves stroke my inflamed skin, but they do nothing to calm the fire that burns inside me. Rage and heartbreak splinter my bones, leaving sharp, jagged pieces that scratch the depths of my soul.

Even as darkness falls and my eyes cloud with tears, I can still see him. His face, his gaze, his scars. The striped flesh that told me his story when he refused to speak it himself.

I stop as the rain grows heavier, curling myself into the shelter of a tree that must be hundreds of years old.

Growing up, I was forbidden to enter the jungle. I heard her, though. For as long as I can remember, every night, I sat on the cold concrete sill of my window, and I let her song wash over me. I imagined what it would be like to shed my father's manacles and run to her. To be cocooned by her strength, her darkness, and her power. What I didn't know then was that my wish would come true. And that it would lead me to *him*.

From my hiding place, I watch as the jungle descends into night. Her shapes become shadows, and the shadows become whispers of their own selves.

I lower myself to the ground. The tree's gnarled skin leaves a trail of scratches on my back, but the pain that trickles through me is not enough. It ignites a spark of memory; the way he made me feel the first time he touched me. The intoxicating mixture of unrivalled pleasure and unrelenting passion he coaxed from my body.

I will never feel that way again.

He has left me with nothing but memories and questions. Endless questions.

Did he know it would end this way? Was this what he planned? To pull me into his orbit, to make my body come alive, and to show me just how good it can feel to be free before discarding me. Leaving me empty, lost, and alone. The illusion of power dripping from my skin – washed away by the same rainstorm that cleanses the jungle.

Surely, death would be a kinder fate.

Surely, this is the most exquisite torture he could ever have devised for me.

I look down at my bare legs. I am wearing nothing but his shirt, which finishes just above my knees. That's how tall he is – tall enough that when he towers over me, I could stand on the tips of my toes and still only reach the groove beneath his chin.

I slide the fabric up my thigh. My skin bears his imprint; mottled bruises which will fade far too quickly. I try to memorize them. I try to capture the heat of his breath on my neck, and his hands on my hips, so I can recall them when he is far away and no more than a silhouette in the doorway of my past. But remembering brings a different kind of pain – a tightness in my chest that threatens to turn into a scream.

I fight it.

I swallow it down and hug my waist tight, determined to keep the hurt inside. But when the next groan of thunder fills the air – rolling through the sky so loudly it shakes the fabric of the jungle’s canopy – I can’t hold it in any longer.

I scramble to my feet and into the rain, then I tip my head back and scream. Water falls in heavy droplets onto my skin and into my mouth. I screw my eyes closed, stretch out my arms, and keep on screaming. Then I drop to my knees and finally allow myself to cry. Not just for him, but for all of it. The moments that led to this one. The choices I made, and the ones I wasn’t brave enough to make.

I am bent in half, fingers gripping the muddy floor beneath me, cold dirt worming its way under my fingernails, when something makes me look up.

A feeling.

A whisper of movement.

Silent seconds stretch for an eternity as I wait. Anticipation drips through my body. My tears bleed into the rain and stain my cheeks wet.

“Stand up.” His voice barrels into me so hard I lose the ability to breathe.

He does not repeat his command.

I stand slowly. Mud slithers down my unclothed legs. His shirt clings to my body, cold and damp, hugging the parts of me he claimed.

I begin to tremble, and I do not know if it’s because I am cold and soaked to the skin or because of his voice. When the silence thickens, I turn around, searching the darkness. I wait for him to speak again. I wait for him to show himself to me. I stay perfectly still because I know he can see me even though I can’t see him.

Seconds become minutes. The rain keeps falling and the thunder keeps growling.

As I wait, I begin to understand. *Finally*, I understand.

This is why he sent me away; because only by being out here alone, walking away from him, would I see the truth.

That I belong to him, and always have. That we are bound to one another, and to this place, and that running is no longer an option. For either of us.

“Let me see you.” I tilt my chin and square my shoulders. My fingers twitch at my sides and vibrations, like electricity, skitter down my limbs.

There is a rustle of movement. Then there he is... my punisher and my protector.

My tiger.

Shere Khan.

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## ABOUT CARA

If you love why-choose romance, magic, super-hot mages, and even hotter RH scenes, then we're destined to be friends.

I mean it when I say I love keeping in touch with my readers. So, come say hi in my Facebook group, on TikTok, or follow me on Amazon for updates.

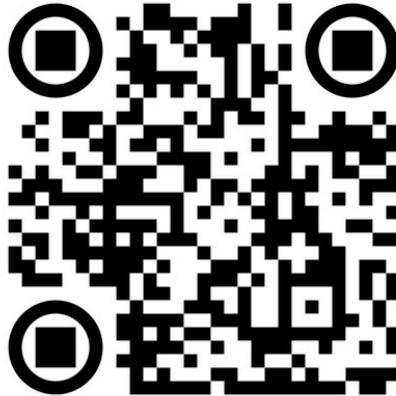
The Cara Clare direct store is now available, and is home to merch, signed copies, and more!

[www.caraclare.com](http://www.caraclare.com)

P.S. There has been a lot of discussion in the book community recently about removing the term RH and referring to the genre as why-choose instead. I'd like to assure readers I'm working on making this change throughout my catalog but it will take time for the algorithms of various platforms - as well as reader awareness - to catch up. Therefore, you may still see the term Reverse Harem alongside why-choose for a short period.



## CONTENT WARNINGS



Please scan the QR code above to access the full list of content warnings for this book or visit the author's website [caraclare.com](http://caraclare.com).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For all the fans who've missed Nova and the gang, I hope this satiates your appetite a little!

Huge thanks also to my fabulous sister Maya Tate, who has been driven nearly completely bonkers by my erratic publishing schedule.

And to all my author buddies who've supported me through a challenging year. You know who you are and how much I appreciate you.

I'm pretty sure this is what it feels like when you set yourself free... and I bloody love it!

C xxx