


SKYE WILSON

A movie poster for 'Fated to the Wolf Lord' featuring Skye Wilson. She is shown from the waist up, wearing a strapless, shimmering black gown with a large, flowing train. Her long, dark hair is styled in waves. To her right, a grey werewolf's head is visible, looking towards the right. The background is a dark, starry space with a bright, glowing blue ring and a fiery, red and orange nebula. The title 'FATED TO THE WOLF LORD' is written in a stylized, golden font across the bottom half of the image.

FATED  
— TO THE —  
WOLF  
LORD

# Fated To The Wolf Lord

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*An Enemies To Lovers Paranormal Romance*

Lunar Bride

Book 2

**Skye Wilson**

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# Chapter 1

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*Celeste*

# Holding Cell

???, ???

I shivered and placed my freezing nose even further under my tail as I tried to curl into a tight ball. My paws were tucked beneath my frame, and though my snowy fur was thick, the chill from the stone floor was pervasive.

I'd been left in this cell for days, possibly even weeks. By now, I'd lost all track of time. There were no windows, only four concrete walls and bright fluorescent lights that seemed to glare down at me no matter the hour. The low hum of them threatened to drive me entirely mad. I'd never noticed the sounds *lights* made before, but trapped in this body, all my senses were dialed up times ten.

I tried to squeeze my eyes shut, yet I could still hear the slow *tap, tap, tap* of one of my guards casually strolling the hall. I was never left unguarded. Even when one of the vampires stopped walking or left the area, I could still hear the way they shuffled.

*Is this what Fenris always feels like?*

My heart squeezed at the thought of the Lunar Lord. I wondered if he was okay. I had no idea what happened to him when Sabine dropped in on Isla Caida and drop-kicked her way into my mind. I was only allowed to speculate in peace for a moment before my wolf came surging forward again, straining against my attempts to keep her under control. Just the thought of Fenris sent her into a near frenzy, and the last time she'd taken over, we'd spent at least twenty-four hours pacing and calling.

Isolation was awful, but it was even worse on a wolf. A pack animal wasn't meant to be alone, and my wolf wanted someone—*anyone*—to answer her, even if it wasn't the alpha she knew. He was out there somewhere, that much I knew. I could feel him—or I thought I could, anyway—in distant echoes. I felt him the strongest when I first woke up, when my wolf was at bay. It felt like looking through a smoky veil, catching only a glimpse of Fenris before my animal stirred and charged forward again.

That this was apparently the first time she'd woken up really wasn't

helping matters. It was hard to keep my thoughts together even when my wolf wasn't wrestling for control, but when she started fighting me...it was all I could do not to turn into an animal. I knew I had lost at least a few days in her mind, but I was so tired and confused when she'd first surged forward, I couldn't do anything to stop her. I didn't even know if I *could* stop her.

She growled as I tried to keep her at bay. I groaned, exhausted. Fighting wasn't making this any better, but I knew I needed to keep my wits about me if I had any chance of making it out of here.

Not that I was particularly sure where "here" was.

I knew it was *cold*, because the vampires occasionally commented on the poor weather when they shifted guard duty. Some were chattier than others. When Jillian, the only female voice I'd heard, and Matthew—*not* Matt—a male voice with a heavy Irish accent, came in for shifts, I always heard the most talking. Though the near-constant rain outside remained their favorite topic, they'd discussed Faulkner's downfall more than once.

If I'd heard correctly, Matthew had been with the older vampire for several decades. They'd come from Ireland to Florida together. The pair were still loyal to Faulkner—or his cause—but I still couldn't understand *why*. Maybe it was my wolf's heightened emotions clouding my better senses, or maybe it was one of those paranormal things I didn't know about yet.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

The slow footsteps approached, and I closed my eyes. I wouldn't call the guards *careless*, but they certainly seemed to talk more when they thought I was asleep. I heard the vampire pause outside my cell, and I tried to focus on my breathing. *I am calm. I am relaxed. I am asleep.*

My wolf growled and bristled, clearly worried about the presence of a vampire so close by. I took another breath and shifted my focus so I could restrain her before she gave away our cover. The metal door clicked and creaked as it slowly swung open. I tensed, still trying to modulate my breathing as the vampire stepped inside.

As I froze, I could hear the man snarl down at me. Somehow, my muscles managed to bunch up even further, and I twitched, fighting the urge to uncurl just enough to press myself further against the wall. There was nowhere for me to run, and I wanted to keep as much room between the vampire and me as possible. On this, at least, my wolf and I agreed.

Right now, pretending to be asleep felt like the safest option.

The sound of a metal dish clattering onto the slab floor made me jump,



claws skittering across the smooth surface. Dog kibble bounced and rolled. My stomach gurgled as the scent hit my nose, and I found myself both salivating and recoiling. Dog food had a particularly pungent odor even when I was a regular human, and that part of my brain wanted nothing to do with it. The wolf in me, however, rumbled and quietly keened, our hunger like an animal pacing around our ribcage.

I still didn't move, afraid of what the guard might do. He didn't move, either.

*"Pathetic,"* he snarled. I didn't recognize his voice.

*Must be one of the guards who doesn't talk much.*

Not that this knowledge meant much to my wolf. Thinking about her as part of me just felt incredibly strange.

Even if I knew a little about some of the others, I certainly couldn't talk in this form. I couldn't communicate telepathically, either. I'd made a few attempts early on to summon a basic flame or maybe a bit of wind, the way Val taught me, but nothing seemed to work. It didn't even feel the same. Being in a wolf's body clearly changed my magic in ways I didn't understand, and I wasn't in a position now to work it out.

Suddenly, I felt a boot prodding my ribs. I couldn't keep up the ruse any longer. My eyes flew open as I instinctively tried to curl up and protect myself.

The vampire looming over me sneered. "I have a hard time believing you're actually the Lunar Lord's fated mate," he grunted, contempt in his eyes. "You're so fucking *weak*. We'd be better off just killing you now and being done with it."

I swallowed hard, and in that moment of fear, my wolf pressed forward once more. My ears pressed tightly against my skull as I felt her hackles rise, my skin prickling as she tried to make us look a little bigger. My tail swept around my legs, and I bared my teeth. I just wanted him to go *away*, and if my wolf could make that happen, I wasn't inclined to stop her.

Suddenly, as if the universe sensed my wish to be set free of this man, a scream rang out from further in the building. The man jumped and spun around, slamming the door behind him as footsteps hurried away from me. Someone else screamed, and a chill ran down my spine as I pricked my ears, straining to listen for clues.

I didn't recognize the noises, but I was pretty sure there were at least a few people in the hallway. My sense of hearing was vastly different than

when I had “regular” human hearing. I wasn’t sure how to interpret it, or what sounds really meant anymore when they now had so much more detail.

I’d just gotten up, about to approach the door, when it burst open in a wave of heat. Fear coursed through me as I took a step backward. My nose prickled, and I realized I could smell something *burning*. As a hooded figure entered my cell, it quickly became apparent that it wasn’t the guards who’d started the fire. There was another yell from further away, and it was all I could do, in my blind terror, not to let my wolf have complete control.

*Who are you?!* I wanted to ask, but when I opened my mouth, all that came out was a whimper.

I couldn’t see the figure’s face, but from the way they tipped their head, I could’ve sworn they smiled, seeing me hunched over there. “You better run,” they said. Their voice sounded raspy, as if they were masking it somehow.

I couldn’t identify anything about them. Hell, I could barely get my head around what they’d said before they left. They disappeared, just like I’d seen Sabine do before, but the room was so hot that the burst of air as the figure disappeared didn’t even feel that cold.

*I’ve got to get out of here.*

It was the one thing running through my mind, and thankfully, my wolf seemed inclined to agree. As we bolted through the door, the full power of the blaze hit us, almost knocking us backward. The air was so hot that it outright reeked. I couldn’t see anything beyond the bright flames, and with that awful, burning stench...my stomach rolled, and I knew I didn’t *want* to see any further down the hall.

I gave myself a firm shake and bolted in the other direction. I had no idea where I was going, only that I wanted to get *away* from the awful, crackling heat. I rounded corners and almost fell down the stairs, hitting the tile with my knees, but I didn’t look behind me.

I saw a door up ahead. Fear mixed with a fresh burst of adrenaline rushed through me, and I galloped over, rocking back on my hind legs to slam my paws against it. To my surprise, it swung open, and I fell forward, landing in a heap. The cold air hit me like a slap in the face. I gasped, choking on my shock as I forced myself back up.

*You aren’t safe yet.*

I had no idea who that hooded figure was, or if they’d set the fire. Were they trying to help, or was I incidental? Would they come back for me?

I whimpered as the snow bit at my paws, but I couldn’t stop now. I had to

get as far away from here as my legs would take me.

## Chapter 2

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*Fenris*

# Alaskan Wilderness

## Arctic Circle

This time of year, nights in the far north were almost endless. There were a scant few hours of light, and for the rest of the day, we were enveloped in darkness. It certainly suited my current mood. Even with the help of Walter and Val, I'd found no trace of Celeste. We'd been searching for my mate for two weeks, and all I had to go on was the tenuous thread of connection us fated mates shared.

Fed up with our lack of progress, I'd left Walter and Val in a small human village hours ago. I hadn't caught the name of it, but it didn't matter to me. The mortals needed to sleep. They struggled at night, even when they weren't tired, but I was used to the dark. I *was* the dark.

For once, I embraced my wolf's most savage thoughts, the snow churning beneath my paws as I stormed a hostile landscape dotted with shrubs and little else. The environment, however, hadn't been entirely abandoned. I stopped to eye a fox's trail, and I could hear rodents digging beneath the snow. The distant scent of a shifter prickled my nose as well, but I couldn't afford to be distracted. Someone had taken Celeste, and they were insistent on keeping her hidden from me.

Something had changed in our bond. I didn't know what it was, but both my wolf and I assumed the worst. Sabine had gotten into Celeste's brain the way she had Abi and Cody. Celeste felt different to me because someone was interfering with her.

We would not—no, we *could not* stand for that. Whoever took her would pay. They would suffer, and I would see to it. My wolf wanted little more than to rip them limb from limb for daring to hurt her, and I had no reason to stop him.

It was nice not to fight him back for once.

I had no idea how long I'd been running when I felt a ripple in the bond. I came to a halt, pushing the dull ache in my muscles to the furthest corner of my mind, my nostrils flaring as I tried to focus on the feeling. I didn't know

*what* it was, precisely, but it was definitely stronger than before. My pulse quickened. There was only one thing that could mean.

*I was getting closer.*

Maybe I was close enough to reach out to her.

I forced myself to stop panting, trying to calm myself so I could focus on the link between Celeste and me. I had to rein my wolf in, but even he sensed the importance of this. Anything to get us closer to her.

Carefully, gently, I reached out to her mind, but Celeste didn't respond. I knew she was there. I knew it was her. Her mind felt familiar, even at this distance, but something felt...off. Unstable, as if the warm home I associated with her mind had been placed on a crumbling foundation.

Rage pulsed through me, and it was all I could do not to let it spill over into the bond. I wasn't angry with Celeste, and the last thing I wanted to do was frighten her more when she was clearly so off-kilter already.

I growled and retreated, not letting go, yet no longer pressing on her. I didn't want her to run, not from me, but I was also starting to run out of options.

I could smell at least one other shifter in the area, and that probably wasn't the only paranormal creature living out here. Here, where there were fewer mortals, there was more room for a supernatural being to live their life without constant worry. I bared my teeth in frustration, knowing that calling out to them would certainly expedite things—it might even call Celeste to me, if she could still tap into her magic—but there was an equal chance that I would summon whoever had taken her as well.

It was a risk I was willing to take. I had to put down whoever had taken her, anyway, and if they came to me now...well, that just spared me the effort.

I threw my head back and howled at the midnight sky, the Milky Way twinkling overhead as if it heard me. My call seemed to echo forever, as if traveling endlessly around me. I arched my tail high over my back, embracing every ounce of my alpha strength as I called, leaning into the Lunar Lord's power. I would summon the other creatures of the north to me.

My howl still echoing around me, I only started to move when it was truly quiet, even to my ears. The other shifter wasn't close enough to come at once, but I'd find them later. I trusted my feet to lead me in the right direction. Standing around waiting was something I could not abide.

The world became a blur as I started running again, and I noticed very

little until a faint, familiar scent stopped me dead in my tracks. *Orange blossom*. It was barely noticeable, even to my heightened senses, but when I lifted my nose to scent the air again, it was there, clear as day. That was no coincidence. There were no blossoms here.

Hope threatened to surge in me for the first time in weeks, and I paused only long enough to determine the direction of the breeze before I was off again, running even faster than before. I didn't care if my paws bled. I would not leave Celeste in danger for one second longer than I physically had to. The scent grew stronger the further I ran, as did a strange, charred smell.

It was putrid. Burnt plastic, or some caustic, chemical odor. Maybe even smoldering flesh. Whatever I'd felt moments before was crushed, burned away by whatever flame had struck there before I could arrive.

My heart almost stopped when I came across the scene. It was clearly a holding facility, if the chain link fence on the perimeter meant anything. That was easy enough for a wolf shifter to bound over, but the building...all that remained was the foundation and piles of rubble. Heat still radiated from them, indicating one of two things: I'd only just missed the inferno, or this blaze ran so hot that I could still feel it hours or days later.

I hoped it was the first scenario.

I could still sense Celeste, but she wasn't among the corpses here. *Maybe she set this fire. Maybe she made her escape.*

I had seen my mate practicing fire magic beneath the moonlight before. Perhaps she'd waited for an opportunity, and once it presented itself, she made her move. I knew I was grasping at straws, but there were no survivors here, no one to interrogate.

I circled the building's remains, almost choked by the overwhelming stench of *burning*. Celeste's fragrant, gentle scent was lost to the man-made smell, but I couldn't give up just because sensing her had become more difficult. I lowered my snout inches from the snow, carefully surveying the ground. Strangely, I didn't see any tracks leading away, which meant that the attack had come quickly. No one had a chance to escape.

Perhaps that meant whoever had attacked had already been inside, or—  
*Paw prints!*

I sucked in a breath as I recognized a shifter's prints, or what I thought looked like them. Scorch marks warped the tracks, but I followed them, ears pressed flat as I ran down their path. Once I put some distance between myself and the wreckage, I realized I was still on Celeste's trail. It was



orange blossom I smelled, and—

I huffed, unable to pick up the rest of the smell. There was something strangely antiseptic about it. *From the facility?* But then, whose tracks were these? Why hadn't they answered my call?

*How dare another wolf carry her away?!*

Fury gripped my senses, rivaling my sheer relief that Celeste had gotten away from the scene. Fear still permeated our bond. Whoever this other wolf was, they clearly didn't know who they were messing with.

I had almost caught up with them, and Celeste's scent was strong now. So was the presence of another shifter. There was an old hunting cabin not far from me.

*That must be where they're hiding.*

I crested a hill and charged toward the building. I threw my weight against the door before it slammed open, nearly ripping off its hinges. I stormed into the dilapidated shack and almost collided with a white wolf as I burst over the threshold. She yelped as I threw myself into the air at the last second, hurtling over her and landing on the other side, my claws clacking against the old wooden floor.

As I whirled around, my hackles standing up, I realized the other shifter was crouching against the rotting floor, her belly quivering, her tail firmly tucked between her legs as her ears went back. Silver eyes stared back at me, almost blind with fear.

The shock knocked all the air from my lungs. *Celeste?!*

I couldn't stop to think about it, afraid she might take off. It was clear she wasn't processing who I was. Most shifters had family members—or at the very least, pack members—present when they shifted for the first time, but Celeste had apparently shifted all on her own. She might not have even known what was happening until it was too late.

I made myself take a few breaths, trying to calm down. My wolf wanted nothing more than to bound over to his mate, but I worried that would only scare her into running again. I had to be careful.

Once I'd finally pulled him back, I shifted into my human form, barely aware of how cold it was. My usual business-casual attire wasn't exactly appropriate for the Alaskan wilderness, but I didn't care. I was a shifter; that sort of pain barely registered. Even if I were human, I wouldn't care if frostbite was in my future. All that mattered was her.

I took a step forward, holding out both hands in front of my body so she

knew I was no threat. Not to her.

“Celeste,” I murmured gently, trying to extend one hand.

The wolf growled softly, folding her ears further back. She got her feet beneath her frame and tried to push herself a little further away from me. I didn’t need to be a wolf shifter to know the animal in front of me was terrified. I’d seen this reaction before, but I’d never expected it to see it from my mate, who was now on the other side of me, nearly shaking with adrenaline. I took a breath and tried again.

“I know you’re in there, Celeste,” I said, trying to soothe. The only thing she needed right now was calm. Stability. “It’s odd to have someone else in there with you, too, isn’t it? Sharing your thoughts with a stranger. But she isn’t a stranger. You and your wolf, you’re both Celeste.”

That was what the Lunar Lord had ensured for his shifter subjects when he took on the curse.

The white wolf licked her lips, her silver eyes flickering over me, but the caution didn’t disappear. In an ideal world, I could have given Celeste all the time she needed. Then my mate would’ve shifted for the first time at will, rather than being forced to.

I bristled at that image before taking another breath. *Do not make this worse for her.*

The disconnect left me with only one option. “I’m going to help you gain control over your wolf,” I informed her, “but I’ll use an alpha command to do it. This won’t hurt you; you will both simply feel a compulsion. As soon as your wolf steps back and you step forward, you won’t feel it anymore.”

The wolf rumbled but didn’t move. Knowing this was likely the most consent or understanding I’d get from Celeste in this state, I inhaled. When I blinked, red colored my vision as I watched her, our eyes meeting. “You are calm,” I said, feeling the thrum of the power around me. “Celeste, you are safe. You are in control. Your wolf will rest, and you will come forward.”

The words hung in the air. The wolf shuddered, closing her eyes. When she opened them again, Celeste was sitting on the floor in her human form. She sucked in a wobbling breath, scrambling to her feet before she all but launched herself at me like I was her only safe harbor in a stormy sea.

“Fenris,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. She buried herself in my chest.

I could feel her hot tears through my shirt. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close against my chest as she began to shake. Regardless of the circumstances, a first shift could be intense. A pup might cry for her

parents, but Celeste had been robbed of that opportunity. I held her closer, gently rubbing my hand up and down her spine.

“You are safe,” I promised her, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head.

*How did I not realize she was a shifter all this time?*

Celeste was clearly terrified, so I had no reason to believe my fated mate was hiding this from me. However, someone had apparently gone to great lengths to suppress her magical abilities. Had they been able to restrict her from shifting? Was this all part of someone’s plan?

Celeste shuddered in my arms, derailing my train of thought. I held her closer to me and hummed deep in my chest as I willed the anxiety and adrenaline to release her. I didn’t know how long we stood like that, but I could’ve stood with her for the rest of time if she needed it.

Finally, she mumbled something against my chest.

“What was that?” I replied, craning my head.

Celeste sniffled, pulling her face away from my shirt just enough to speak. “I’m glad to see you,” she whispered, wiping at her face as though embarrassed by her tears.

As far as I was concerned, she had no reason to be. “I’ve never been more relieved,” I replied, meaning every word. “When I saw the state of that building back there—” I bristled and took a moment to force my wolf back down. “I will track down each and every person who took part in your capture and kill them for this.”

I didn’t care how violent I sounded. They deserved nothing less.

“You can’t,” Celeste said.

I ground my teeth together and growled. I knew my mate was soft-hearted, but I didn’t think even she could convince me to offer mercy this time. “I can and I will,” I said.

“No, I mean...” she began, shaking her head and wiping her face again. “They’re all dead. Someone showed up and set the entire place on fire. I watched them...literally *evaporate* a vampire right before my eyes.”

I inhaled, my mind already beginning to race. “Who was it? Did you see their face?”

“No,” she said miserably, shaking her head. “Whoever they were, they were wearing a full-body cloak.”

“How did you escape?”

Celeste gave a weak shrug. “They just left my cell open and let me go. I

don't know why. They didn't say anything, I... I don't know. I couldn't ask. I couldn't do anything. I was so scared, all I could do was..." She grew quiet, a fresh stream of tears trickling down her face.

I nodded, squeezing her gently. Obviously, she was a bit traumatized by the entire event, so I wasn't about to start interrogating her. "Okay," I said quietly, pulling her back against my chest.

"Where are the others?" Celeste said after a moment. "Are they okay? Is Lyka okay? Are you okay? What happened to you?" Her memories seemed to be coming back to her, one by one.

I sighed, trying to keep track of each question. "The others are safe. Val and Walter were helping me track you. They're resting right now." I licked my lips, not sure how to broach the rest.

Celeste shivered again, and I realized it wasn't just fear. Her skin was cool to the touch. She wasn't dressed for this sort of weather, either. She looked underfed, and who knew what else they had done to her while she was trapped in her wolf form?

"We can talk about it later," I said gently, holding her as close as I could, as if that might send some of my warmth to her. "First, we'll get you somewhere safe and warm where you can eat and rest. Everything else can come after."

She just nodded, leaning against me. I would be happy to carry all her weight if I needed to.

Before we left the cabin, I extended my paranormal senses and realized the shifter I'd sensed earlier was indeed on the move. *Good. They heard my summons.* Whoever they were, they were moving quickly, and I decided it'd be better to keep Celeste in this cabin until they arrived. It wasn't much, but at least it wasn't the exposed wilderness.

It didn't take long for the shifter to arrive in the hulking form of a grizzly bear, nudging past the broken door. As soon as he laid eyes on us, he took a step back and shifted into his human form.

A middle-aged man stood before us, hands tucked into his black and red-checked vest as he tried to give us a once-over without meeting my eyes. It was obvious he knew at once who I was, even as his messy salt-and-pepper hair fell over his forehead. His curiosity was now tinged with a hint of fear, and my wolf prowled closer to the surface, tempted by the potential meal.

"Who are you?" I asked the man brusquely.

"Kal," he replied, his voice hoarse. I wondered if it was from disuse. He

cleared his throat. “Kal. My name is Kal.”

I nodded. “Where do you live?”

He glanced over his shoulder toward the open door and looked back at me. “Coldfoot.” He nodded toward the door. “Well, just outside. Humans, you know?”

“I know.”

He hummed and nodded. “You’re welcome to my cabin. Got a radio and a snowmobile, too. Whatever you need.”

I nodded. “Good.” I looked down at Celeste, belatedly remembering my manners. “Thank you.”

My mate, clearly exhausted, said nothing, and worry flared up in my chest again. “She needs warmth. Immediately.”

Fortunately, Kal seemed to understand the urgency of the situation and wasted no time, heading back out the door before shifting again to lead the way.

We hurried over the snow to Kal’s remote cabin. Like he’d said, he was alone in the wilderness. I didn’t have the ability to notice anything else, too concerned about Celeste’s pale skin and the shiver she couldn’t seem to shake.

Kal stoked his cast-iron stove and produced a pile of blankets and furs for Celeste seemingly out of nowhere. “I got soup cooking,” he said softly, still refusing to make eye contact with us. “Would she like some? Or maybe the broth?”

“Yes,” I said simply.

The house didn’t have rooms; it wasn’t large enough for that. The bear shifter shuffled to the kitchen, dishware clinking. I didn’t want him to get too close to Celeste, but I didn’t want my wolf to openly display aggression toward the shifter helping us, either. I fought down the urge to bristle when he came close enough to set the bowls down nearby. He also gave us a black piece of plastic.

“Radio,” he said, indicating the object. “Phone’s on the couch, if you can get it to cooperate. Use whatever you need.” He began to retreat. “I’ll be checking my wood stock. Won’t be far if you need me.”

Kal excused himself, silence falling over the cabin once the door shut and he headed back out into the night. I was glad the grizzly shifter was

apparently more intuitive than most wolves I knew. My nerves were already frayed, and I wasn't sure I could handle another shifter hovering around Celeste, his home or not.

Still wrapped in blankets, Celeste finally moved, reaching for one of the bowls of broth. "This is really good," she murmured breathlessly after a few sips.

I gave her a wry smile. "Don't eat too fast," I cautioned. I sorely doubted they'd allowed her to hunt. I wasn't even sure how much they'd fed her.

Celeste simply nodded, focusing on the meal in front of her. Her small slurps were all I heard before she finally looked back up at me, seemingly sated enough to give the bowl a break. "Did you send someone to get me?"

I frowned, almost offended by the idea. "No. I would never rely on someone else for that."

Celeste frowned. "But...who set me free, then? And why would they do that, if they weren't one of your allies?"

"I don't know." I sighed. "You said they set everything on fire? A witch?"

Celeste shook her head. "No...I couldn't do magic, but I think I would've been able to sense elemental spells. Val showed me how to use them all the time." She sighed, taking another sip of her broth. "I guess I'm not one hundred percent sure. Are there other supernaturals who can do fire magic? Or is it only witches and warlocks?"

"I don't know who that could've been," I said slowly, deeply uncomfortable with the uncertainty. "But mark my words, I will find out."

Friend or foe, I *would*.

# Chapter 3

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*Celeste*



# Kal's Cabin

Outside of Coldfoot, Alaska

I never thought a bowl of soup could be so satisfying, but sitting by the fire, my shoulder brushing Fenris's, I couldn't imagine anything better. My relief at being rescued seemed to be rivaled only by Fenris's relief at finding me, and something about that was...touching. I may have been unable to respond to him when he'd talked to me in the cabin, but I'd understood his gentle tone. My wolf was still keenly aware, however, that the Lunar Lord could cause her great harm. Perhaps even more now than before, as an alpha shifter lording over a subject.

*Am I even a regular shifter?*

Fenris said once that shifters sometimes find mates outside their packs: other shifters, other paranormal creatures, even humans. *I guess a witch or a warlock falls into that second category...*

I had so many questions now that I had a little more space to think. My wolf, though present, wasn't quite as forceful now that I was back in my human form. She allowed me to reflect on them without interruption.

*Which one of my parents was a shifter? Did the other one know? Did either of them know? If I've gone without shifting for this long, why did I change now?*

My magic certainly would've been more useful than a wolf's speed or strength when I was held captive. If that fire-wielding stranger had turned on me instead of leaving the door open, I would've been powerless to stop them. At best, I could have rushed them, but I'd been so hungry, I doubted I could've made it in time, much less tackled them to the ground.

My stomach grumbled as if reminding me exactly how hungry I still was. I smiled and lifted the bowl back to my lips, the warm smell of chicken broth tickling my nose. I'd never really thought much about my sense of smell before, but now I knew it was more powerful than it'd ever been. I couldn't just smell the familiar scent of poultry, but the faint aromatics of sage, thyme, and rosemary as well. The smell was so specific, I was fairly certain the first

two were dried, but the latter was fresh.

*Maybe the bear shifter grows plants?*

I turned my head, trying to figure out if I could smell any potted herbs in the little cabin, when I was struck by the intensity of Fenris's smell. He'd always had a very specific scent. I'd know it anywhere. Woodsmoke and cinnamon, like the most luxurious camp, but now I realized how intense it was. I sniffed again. It wasn't just cinnamon. It was like Saigon cinnamon, those big bark rolls you'd only see in little specialty stores. You'd open the glass jar, and the most magical scent would envelop you...

That was what Fenris smelled like, that specific moment. I smiled, realizing belatedly that I probably looked a bit dreamy, but I was entirely unable to stop myself.

Fenris glanced over and smirked. "Are you scenting me, Celeste?"

I blushed, abruptly removed from my momentary wanderings. "Ah... yes?" He'd seen me do it. There was no use denying it.

He watched me a moment longer. "Are you having trouble controlling your wolf?"

I snorted. "She's had most of the control recently," I said in a sulk, thinking of all the hours we'd spent pacing the perimeter of my cell. I saw Fenris's brows lift higher, and I reached over to squeeze his knee gently. "I'm alright," I said. "We...we're both alright, I guess."

My wolf clearly still wanted to be in control, but she wasn't throwing herself against my will like an animal caught in a trap. Instead, it was more like a steady, persistent lean. It got easier to ignore her over time, and she didn't seem to fight that. She wasn't thrashing or insisting I pay attention. Something about Fenris's presence relaxed her, even if getting out of that facility had helped as well, and I wasn't about to argue with the result. I needed the break as much as I needed the bowl of broth in my hand.

"Well, you stay here," Fenris said. "I'll get in touch with Walter and ask him to send Delila."

I frowned, glancing over at him. "Delila?" I asked, certain I hadn't heard that name before. "Is she a pilot?"

"No." He shook his head. "The Ferry family has been in the Order of the Stars as long as Walter's. Delila is a very...eccentric woman, to the point that she'll refuse my calls sometimes. However, she has her grandmother's gift and is able to use conjuring magic to transport herself or others." He sniffed. "It took some work, but Piers and Gilbert managed to convince her to help

search for you. So, I'm sure she'll be eager to resume her life of solitude and will help us return home." Fenris paused for a moment, giving me a sideways look. "Teleportation is a very difficult, dangerous technique, so don't go getting any ideas. It took Delila decades to master—and trying to do it killed her mother."

My eyes widened. "Killed her?" I'd failed at a few spells Val had taught me the first few times I'd tried them on my own, but at worst, they had just... fizzled out. Once, the ends of my hair were singed by a flame, but that was it as far as damage.

"Conjuring magic is unstable to begin with. Delila's mother wasn't able to hold the portal, or so I am told. I wasn't there, but the event was catastrophic enough that even a few mortals noticed something odd going on in their neighborhood. The Order summoned me, and Piers and I contained it before word spread."

"Oh, wow," I said. In some respects, I wasn't that surprised, but Val had never even mentioned it. The only reason I knew such magic existed was because I'd seen Sabine do it, and she did things others wouldn't dream of.

The thought of her made my blood run cold. "Wait," I said, grabbing Fenris's shoulder as he moved to stand up. "I can't go back to Isla Lobo yet."

"Why not?" he asked, frowning.

"Because I need a safe place to practice spells similar to the ones I used on Abi and Cody, but modified. For me." I frowned, pressing my lips together. "Sabine...she was in my brain, Fenris. Imagine the loudest static you can, but inside your mind. It was *painful*." I shook my head. "I can't go back to Isla Lobo until I'm sure she's gone and can't get back in."

Fenris's eyes went wide, his nostrils flaring. "Is she there right now?" he hissed, grinding his molars. "Is she listening?"

I frowned. "I...I don't think so. I can't be certain, but it's...it hurt. It was like a migraine; it made it impossible to think. It was loud, and I could certainly feel it. It was planted before that, but...it wasn't active. I don't want to say she's gone, though. Not without being sure."

Fenris studied me silently for a few moments before giving a decisive nod. "Very well," he said, getting to his feet. "We will not return to Isla Lobo. I will get in touch with a member of the Order of the Stars, and we will stay at a secure location until you've expelled her." He walked over to where Kal had left the phone and picked it up, looking thoughtful before dialing a number.

“Walter, it’s me,” he rumbled, starting to pace back and forth across the tiny kitchen. The old linoleum groaned beneath his boots. “This isn’t a secure line. I need you to get in touch with Keziah Palm. I need a safe location.” He paused while Walter spoke. “Duration is unknown. Once you hear back, contact me at this number. If Kal answers, you may relay a yes or no answer to him. Don’t offer him any other information until I say so.”

I frowned. Kal had put us up in his home, but I supposed we didn’t know anything else about him.

Fenris hung up and paced back over to me quickly, settling back into the nest of blankets and pulling me close. I was glad I’d already emptied my soup, or I might have sloshed it.

I sighed, amused, and set the bowl next to me, allowing Fenris to manhandle me until we were both comfortable. I was still exhausted, and the peace he offered my wolf was priceless. He settled his chin over my shoulder, his nose tucking into my neck. I couldn't help but lean back, my eyes closing a bit as I exhaled. Fenris echoed me a moment later.

“You sound tired,” I murmured, fighting the urge to wiggle back against him. The comfort was divine, but...I didn’t want to get too used to it. After being isolated for weeks, part of me was still afraid all of this might be ripped away at any moment. And that would be so much worse.

When Fenris said nothing, I tried again. “How long will we need to wait to hear back from this Keziah person?” I asked, forcing my eyes back open. I shifted in his grip to look at him. “If there’s time, you should take a nap.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t have minded one, but I knew if I said that, Fenris would insist he stay awake to keep watch. At least I’d gotten some sleep while I was trapped. Fenris looked like he’d barely rested while searching for me.

Fenris grumbled, refusing to make eye contact. “Keziah is an alpha of one of the most stable packs on the continent and a member of the Order of the Stars. However, until we get to her pack lands in Colorado, I will not rest. If Sabine decides to meddle again, I refuse to be caught unaware.”

I sighed, but I knew that wasn’t an argument I could win. “So, I take it that means she survived her fight with your brother?” I asked quietly, watching his face for signs of emotion. “Did Lyka...is he okay?”

Fenris inhaled sharply, his expression freezing. “She was wearing him down,” he said after a moment. “I tried to intervene, and instead, I was the one who died instead of my brother. When I woke up in the temple, I realized

something had happened to you.” He paused, as if he needed to remind himself I was still there. “I began my search immediately and sent Walter back to Isla Caida to see what’d become of Lyka. Unfortunately, he couldn’t get too close while he was awake. Lyka survived, but he seems to have completely reverted to his feral state. The vampires I’d posted as guards had all been killed—whether by Lyka or Sabine, I’m still unsure. Given his state, Walter suspects Lyka’s been badly injured, and I’m inclined to agree.

“And Sabine?” I prompted.

Fenris grumbled again. “There was no sign of her. I surmise Lyka managed to injure her as well, or she wouldn’t have needed to perform an emergency escape. She would’ve finished what she started.” He growled softly at the idea before shaking his head. “Since Isla Caida was compromised, I’ve relocated my brother.”

“If Walter couldn’t get close to him, how did he move Lyka?”

Fenris’s mouth twitched. “He couldn’t move him while he was awake,” he said, looking vaguely amused. “Shifters can still be tranquilized, though, and I had something prepared. Once the tranquilizer took effect, Walter was able to transport Lyka with help from the Island Hopper Pack out of Miami. Thankfully, he didn’t wake up until everything was complete, so their intervention was quite minimal.”

I chewed the inside of my lip for a second. As much as I wanted to ask more questions, I didn’t want Fenris to get any more frustrated, nor did I want Sabine to know much else if it turned out she *was* still in my head and able to listen, even passively.

“You know,” I said, “if you don’t watch your real estate habit, you’re going to own every private island on this side of the world.”

Fenris snorted, and I was sure I saw a hint of a smile. “I wouldn’t mind,” he replied. “I prefer islands. They’re isolated and remote. That often means they’re disturbed, and wilder as well. More beautiful, too.”

I couldn’t help my giggle as I relaxed back into him. I should’ve known he’d have an answer like that.

A companionable silence fell over us like another blanket, and for a while, I was content to listen to the crackle and pop of the fire that Kal had prepared. I might not have moved at all if Fenris hadn’t gotten up to feed the fire another few logs.

“Hey, how many days do we have until the next full moon over the temple in Peru?” I asked. “I...really lost track of time these past few days.”

“Five,” Fenris replied brusquely, not doing much to mask his stress. I could sense an undercurrent of dread in his tone as well.

I licked my lips. “Time is flying,” I sighed, watching as he sat back down next to me. “You know, I felt like I had a hard time really focusing when I was...in my wolf form? Is that how you say it?” When Fenris shot a glance at me, I flushed. “Look, I have no idea what I’m talking about. I don’t want to be offensive or anything.”

His expression softened. “That’s fine,” he said, shrugging. “Though most shifters would simply say ‘as a wolf,’ or whatever form they take.”

“Ah.” I gave a nod. “Well, I had a hard time focusing, and it felt like we were constantly struggling with each other, but she didn’t seem violent or bloodthirsty. If anything, she was just as nervous as the human me.” I took another breath, trying not to ramble. “What I mean to say is, I can’t imagine living with a feral animal. I struggled with her. So, you know, I can see now why some folks don’t see you as all warm and fuzzy.”

I tried to keep my tone light. I knew pity was the last thing Fenris wanted, and truthfully, I didn’t pity him. I just felt like I understood a little more about him than I had before. That was all.

When he simply watched me, I offered a small smile. “Is there anything I can do to help you deal with it right now?” I asked.

The silence stretched on, and I was beginning to think I’d overstepped when Fenris finally moved, leaning forward to kiss my forehead. “Thank you,” he said, as close to awkward as I’d ever heard him. Belatedly, I realized that empathy was probably not something extended to the Lunar Lord very often. “But right now, the only thing that will help is for you to stay out of trouble for a while.”

A breathless laugh escaped me. “A little peace and quiet sounds fine right now,” I agreed.

But before I could say anything else, adrenaline surged through my body. It felt like I’d been sucker-punched in the gut, and all the air left my lungs. I shuddered like I’d been dropped back into that cold, soulless cement cell.

As I blinked, an image flashed before my eyes like a photograph developing. It was the bear shifter we’d just met—Kal. He was sprawled out in the snow, dark red oozing around his fur as he lay still and lifeless. I opened my eyes, but the vision didn’t stop.

A figure leaned over him, pushing his head to one side before it buried its fangs in his neck. I closed my eyes to focus, but instead, I felt like I was

running. *Am I running?* It was bizarre, like watching a flipbook with empty pages.

An intense, searing pain slammed into my back. I gasped, lurching forward as if someone had just struck me. Something bright flashed across my vision. I saw a wolf-shaped specter, but as the flash faded, so did everything else.

“Celeste?” Fenris hissed. He was gripping my arm so tight, it was beginning to hurt.

I whimpered and pulled my arm away. Fenris’s face fell, but before he could apologize, I reached out, taking his hand in mine as I closed my eyes, willing my memory to join his before any of the details faded. I’d never experienced a vision while awake—at least, nothing this powerful—but given what I’d seen in the hospital right before Fenris had rescued Cody, I didn’t want to take any chances.

Fenris swore under his breath. “Despite what I just said,” he growled, withdrawing his hand from mine, “it looks like I’m going to have to leave you alone for a moment.” He paused as he stood up, our gazes locked. “Stay right here, Celeste.”

I frowned. “But Kal—”

The shifter who’d helped us was out there, either about to be attacked or already dying. I stood as Fenris strode toward the door. He whirled around, his expression slightly feral. “Celeste,” he ground out, “if you endanger yourself right now, after everything that just happened and so close to the full moon, I will absolutely lose what little control I have scraped together since finding you. Am I clear?”

I paused, taken aback. “You are,” I said quietly, stopping in my tracks. I wanted to follow him, but Fenris losing control right now would only add to our problems.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, reaching for the door.

An unfamiliar feeling rang through me, and I frowned. It almost felt like the emotion itself was far away, just out of reach. Was it frustration?

*I guess Fenris is being pretty aggravating right now,* I reasoned with myself, trying to take a breath and steady my feelings.

“Be careful,” I said after giving myself a moment. “You aren’t the only one affected when we’re kept apart, you know. If you’re in danger from some other witch or warlock, I’m not just going to sit around like some girl scout at a sleepover.” I growled, barely recognizing the sound coming from me. “I’ll

rain down magic like hellfire on them.”

Fenris glanced back over his shoulder, his teeth gleaming as he offered me a wolfish smile. “I do love this possessive side of you,” he rumbled, winking before finally slipping off into the wintry night.

Not much time passed before I moved over to the cabin window and stared off into the night. As the moon drifted through the sky, my magic thrummed as if rejoiced to be a part of me again. My skin itched, and the longer Fenris was gone, the more awake my wolf seemed to be, irritated at being separated from her mate after they’d only just reunited. All that power made me feel like my head was going to explode.

I didn’t want to shift right now, and if I did, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to return to my human form. Truth be told, I wasn’t even sure I *could* consciously change into my wolf. After all, the first time hadn’t been on purpose but a reaction to whatever they’d done to me when throwing me in that holding cell.

I paced, not sure what else to do. Suddenly, pain flickered within the space I was beginning to recognize as the bond between Fenris and me.

Before I knew it, I was out the front door, heading into the snowy darkness. I almost felt numb to the chill, but I wasn’t worried this time. Not like I’d been in Antarctica.

Instead, I thought of what Val had taught me: the warmth of a fire. It was even easier to summon with the memory of Kal’s hearth so fresh in my mind’s eye and the moon high overhead.

I allowed the flickers and twinges in the bond to guide me as I hurried out into the wilderness. The sound of a snarl caught my ear. My pulse jumped, and I picked up the pace, struggling through the thick snow as quickly as I could.

A bright bolt almost blinded me, just like in my premonition. I tried to quash my rising fear as I crested a hill, but my heart dropped to my feet when I spotted Kal at the bottom of the other side. He was motionless and bloody, just like I’d seen in my vision.

Fenris was a few yards away, surrounded by what looked like a bunch of coyotes and a pair of vampires. A moment later, I realized there was a warlock, too. The man continued to hurl bolts of bright light at Fenris like he could do this all day.



*That's what hurt him!*

A bright, burning fury replaced the anxiety I'd felt moments ago. Before I could stop myself, I summoned a strong gust of wind, one headed straight for the warlock. Under the moon, my spells were more powerful than they'd been when I'd last practiced, and the man went flying several feet back, clearly not expecting the arrival of another player.

Unfortunately, it didn't just get *his* attention; everyone else knew I was there as well. The nearest vampire peeled off from the group, practically floating over the ground with his superior speed. Something glinted in his hand. I barely had time to inhale, mind drawing a blank on what type of spell I should use before Fenris lunged, using his weight to slam the other paranormal creature back into the snow.

In one simple motion, he ripped the vampire's throat out, his muzzle glistening as he turned on the others. Even as the coyotes tried to jump him in tandem, he seemed immune to their biting and clawing as he tore each of them apart.

Heart now lodged in my throat, I forced myself to look away and hurried down the hill, tripping over my own feet as I tried to get to Kal. As I kneeled beside the shifter, I realized he was still breathing. My eyes prickled as relief spread through me, and I glanced up at the sound of footsteps crunching through the snow. I was about to share the good news with Fenris when I saw the look on his face.

"What are you doing out here?!" he roared, giving me a menacing look. "I just about had a heart attack seeing you."

I scowled. "I wasn't going to just sit here while I felt you getting zapped. You want me to use magic, don't you? You'll have to deal with me actually *using it*, then."

Fenris glared at me a moment longer before his eyes fell on the shifter between us. He gritted his teeth. "What is your experience with healing spells?"

"Minimal," I said. Some of the relief I felt moments ago was already evaporating. "But I can't just leave him like this. If you can get him back to the cabin, I'll see what I can do."

Fenris said nothing, simply nodding before he crouched down to gather up Kal's body. I struggled to keep up with him in the snow as we hurried back toward the cabin, even though Fenris had the added weight of a whole person.

Something suddenly twinged in my gut, and I whirled, recognizing the sensation from my first premonition. I swept my hand out in front of me, using a burst of wind to ward anything off.

The silver knife hurtling through the air was flung sideways. I hadn't even seen it so much as I'd simply *known* something was coming.

I hadn't even processed what I'd just done when I saw Fenris's wolf rush by in a blur of dark fur. He pounced on the warlock and grabbed him by the shoulders. The man's scream was cut short as Fenris began to shake, immediately snapping the warlock's neck. I forced down the bile in my throat and looked away.

Fenris shifted back into his human form, shoulders slightly hunched as he marched by me to gather Kal back up. The poor shifter looked like Fenris had just dropped him in a heap in the snow.

"Did you really have to kill them all like that?" I said softly, staring at the back of Fenris's head as we resumed our journey back to the cabin.

"Sometimes, it's easier to give in to my wolf's violent tendencies, especially this close to the full moon." He sighed. "Dispatching the last of Faulkner's associates seemed as good a reason as any to unleash him for a bit."

I frowned but said nothing else. I knew I needed to be ready to help Kal in any way I could as soon as we returned to his home. For now, I had to focus on the task at hand.

# Chapter 4

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*Fenris*

# Kal's Cabin

Outside of Coldfoot, Alaska

It was a good thing Celeste was such a quick learner, or Kal would've surely been a goner. Even a shifter's enhanced ability to heal was no match for the dark magic Faulkner's warlock had wielded. I could feel the shifter's presence fading even as we hurried back to his cabin.

As soon as we were inside, I set Kal down on the pile of blankets we'd left by the fireplace. The flames were starting to dwindle. "What do you need me to do?" I asked Celeste, taking a step back as she crouched down next to Kal's limp form.

She shook her head, motioning with one hand. "Just space, please. I just need to focus."

I nodded, taking a few steps away. I secured the door before returning to the fire, spending a few moments reviving the flame. When I looked up, Celeste seemed hesitant.

"Do you think he has a first aid kit here? I—I mean—" She made a frustrated noise, looking down at her palms as if they'd betrayed her. "Any bandages he has would be helpful."

"I'm sure he does," I said confidently, quickly striding toward the tiny bathroom off the kitchen. It was barely big enough to turn around in, but there was a tiny medicine cabinet above the rusting sink. I didn't see a first aid kit, but there were several gauze pads and a roll of adhesive. It was the best we had in the moment.

I grabbed the supplies and returned to Celeste's side. We worked in near silence while she pointed to wounds too grievous to close with her magic alone. I wrapped them, protecting them from outside forces. At the very least, Kal wasn't bleeding nearly as profusely as he'd been before, which was a good start.

"I wish I could do more," Celeste said, sounding strained as she pulled her palms away. I watched the skin on Kal's exposed shoulder become a little less ragged, the blood flow diminishing. "If Val was here, she'd probably

have him all mended. And if Tessa was here, she'd have him on his feet again."

I snorted softly. "Both of those witches have decades more experience than you do," I said gently. "And if you're referring to what Tessa did with Cody, she had her entire home at her disposal. And all her tools. We're in the middle of Bumfuck Nowhere."

Celeste laughed and gave me a look, but at least she wasn't disparaging herself anymore. "I guess," she sighed, looking back at Kal's face. "But he needs real medical attention. And soon, or he won't survive."

"And he will get it," I said firmly. "Walter will meet us as soon as possible, and Kal will receive medical aid in Keziah Palm's pack. Both shifters and witches live within the Snowmass Pack, and there are several talented healers as well. He will be seen to."

Celeste sighed, giving Kal one last look before turning toward me. Before I could argue with her, she grabbed one of my arms and pushed back the remains of my tattered sleeve, scowling when she saw the burn mark the warlock had left behind on my skin.

"I'm fine," I said. "It will heal slowly, due to his magic. But it will heal." For me, "slowly" was still far more quickly than any human's healing ability.

Celeste cast me another dark look. "Let me do this," she huffed, gently hovering a hand over my arm. "I can hurry it along, at least."

"Alright," I agreed, forcing myself to relax as she closed her eyes. I decided to do the same, evening out my breaths as Celeste murmured something to herself. A moment later, a cooling sensation washed over my skin, starting at my fingertips and working its way up through my fingers, palm, and finally, my arm. It tingled, and I sighed softly. The sensation was surprisingly relaxing.

When I opened my eyes and glanced down, I realized that while my skin wasn't completely healed, the redness had faded from an angry color to a much more muted tone. "Thank you," I said quietly.

Celeste offered me a wavering smile. "Your other arm next," she said. I could hear the strain in her voice, and I shook my head.

"I'll be fine," I said. When she opened her mouth to argue, I held up a finger. "Celeste," I said, trying to keep my tone level. My wolf growled, his tail flicking in irritation. "I will be fine. Sabine did much worse, and I'm fine now, aren't I?"

She gave me a dark look. "You said she killed you."

I sighed. “She did,” I grumbled, running my tongue over my teeth. “And I recovered, did I not?”

Celeste narrowed her eyes. “I guess,” she said, albeit a bit mulishly.

“And I will recover from this, too. You’re clearly exhausted, and I am not a witch. If something happens to you, I won’t be able to do anything to help you until Walter gets us to Colorado.”

My mate studied me for a few moments before surrendering, her shoulders slumping. “That’s true,” she finally said, her gaze lingering on my burns before finally drifting back to Kal. “I just...I wish I could do *something*.”

“You did,” I argued. “If not for your vision, we probably wouldn’t have known anything was wrong until it was too late. Kal would already be dead, and his attackers would’ve come for us next.”

“How can you be so sure?” she asked.

I wrinkled my nose. “Because I’ve seen that warlock before. He works—worked—for Faulkner. I’m surprised to see him continuing to carry out Faulkner’s will, but...” I shrugged. “I suppose there would’ve been no one left to spread the word that Bryne died.”

Celeste went quiet, digesting what I’d told her. When she finally spoke again, she changed the topic back to healing. “Do you think any of the shifters or witches in the Snowmass Pack could help me learn a little more healing magic?”

I nodded. “I am sure they’d be happy to, if you asked them.”

She paused. “So...what kind of magic, exactly, is going to be required at the ceremony? The eclipse one.” Celeste looked down, fidgeting a little. “I don’t have all the time in the world, so I’d rather prioritize what’s actually relevant.”

I frowned, frustrated by how valid her concern was. I would have much rather given my mate all the time she needed and let her explore whatever her heart desired instead of focusing on one thing. One end. I knew it wasn’t fair to withhold information from her—what information I had, anyway—but I didn’t want to overload and overwhelm her, either.

The stark inequity of the situation hit me then. A wolf never asked for their fated mate. Celeste and I were lucky in that we got along, even if it wasn’t constantly. I knew of a shifter years ago whose fated mate truly could not stand him. There were others who had never found their mate. We—I—had been lucky enough to find Celeste, yet my situation demanded more of

her. She had to learn magic. Not just any magic, but something I would've wanted her to have decades to practice.

Instead, she had mere months, but she was willing to do that for me. It was only fair, then, that I trusted her with the knowledge I had, even if she could undo me with it. I'd never be more vulnerable than during the eclipse.

"I understand," I said slowly, taking her by the hand. "Sadly, it will be the first time for both of us, but—"

I was interrupted by the shrill ring of the cabin phone. Celeste shrieked and nearly jumped out of her skin. The sound alone almost sent my wolf into a frenzy, but thankfully, I was able to pull him back, recognizing the frequency a moment later.

I got back on my feet and hurried over, picking up the old plastic landline. "Hello?"

"Sir," Walter's familiar voice greeted me. "I've gotten in touch with Keziah Palm, and she is ready and willing to harbor the Lunar Lord and any of his associates."

"Did you explain to her that we may present our own danger?"

"I have explained whom you are sheltering from, and that Celeste may be linked to Sabine. I made it clear we do not know the complete degree of danger. Keziah has accepted all of this. She is confident that even if Sabine traces you to her pack lands, she has the strength to ward her off."

"Good," I growled, nodding. I could always trust Walter to be discreet with allies while still getting the point across.

"I have also gotten in touch with Delila Devins. She will be arriving shortly." Walter paused for a brief moment. "I would note, Fenris, that her mood is as pleasant as ever."

I chuckled. "Thank you, Walter. Stay safe."

After hanging up, I returned to Celeste's side, looking for anything we might need to carry with us as I repeated what Walter had just told me.

Celeste simply looked puzzled. "She's arriving shortly? How can she do that without knowing where we are? Do *you* even know where we are?"

"Not precisely," I replied, shrugging one shoulder. "The Alaskan wilderness." The exact coordinates hardly mattered to me. "I'm no warlock, but I understand the highest degrees of transportation magic involve something with the target's essence. I gave Delila one of my books. I used to pore over it as a young shifter, and I've spent countless hours with it. As Delila works with Keziah, I am sure she has one of Keziah's belongings as



well. If not, then she'll have something belonging to another shifter within the Snowmass Pack."

"I see," Celeste said, frowning. I could practically hear the gears turning behind those pretty silver eyes.

I gave her a stern look. "Do not attempt transportation magic," I said, aware we'd already gone over it.

Celeste shook her head. "It's not that."

She looked like she was going to say something else when a flash of magic lit up the room. Delila stepped forward, as if sensing we'd been discussing her. She sniffed, looking down her nose at me before glancing at Celeste and Kal.

"He looks pitiful, doesn't he?" she remarked, reaching up to adjust her small hat perched on a nest of messy brown hair. Where many witches I knew took great measures not to fall into the stereotypes humans associated with them, Delila leaned right into it. She dressed in all black. Her skin was wizened, and her nails were long and a bit yellowed. She was no older than Val, but she looked much more like a crone than my house witch.

Delila's many necklaces and bracelets jingled softly as she moved closer, leaning over Kal's still form. "Am I supposed to take him, too?"

"Please," Celeste said, almost breathlessly.

Delila said nothing, taking one of the bloody rags I'd cast aside earlier. Then she grabbed a few strands of Celeste's dark hair.

"Ouch!" Celeste jumped, clapping a hand to her scalp as she gave Delila a bewildered look. "What was that for?"

My wolf lurched forward a moment later, snapping angrily at the nerve of the witch. I pressed my lips together and silently wrestled for control. Delila was unconventional, and she would not put up with my wolf's protective nature if I let him out.

"You're coming, too, aren't you?" Delila grumbled at Celeste, stalking away from us both. She pulled my small book from one of the pouches swinging on her hip. Next came an old necklace, a cord, and a wolf's tooth. She placed the rag and Celeste's hair on the same page while muttering something under her breath. I knew she didn't have to verbalize her magic, but she was clearly reveling in the way Celeste was staring at her in awe.

Before Celeste could ask any other questions, the whole world blinked out of existence. A rushing cold swept over the four of us as my stomach dropped to my feet. It'd been years since I'd last asked a witch to transport

me, and I'd almost forgotten just how disorienting it could be.

Moments later, however, the world blinked back. It was at least thirty degrees warmer, and I could see trees towering overhead. My stomach bobbed back up to my nose. I could hear Celeste gag a few feet away as I turned to Delila.

"My thanks," I said. "Walter will be in touch if—"

She waved a hand at me before I could say anything else. "Do your best not to need me, Fenris," Delila said, giving me a sharp look. "I don't like being disturbed."

She gave no room for argument. In the space of a breath, Delila once again disappeared, leaving us in the middle of the Snowmass Pack's territory.

We weren't alone for long. Three tawny wolves came surging out of the tree line, headed by a dark brown wolf larger than the rest. They shifted midstride, and the leader offered a small nod as she greeted us.

"A pleasure, Lord Fenris," Keziah greeted me. She was a bit taller than average, her dark brown hair wrapped tightly back. All three of them wore plaid, and for a moment, I thought they were a pack of lumberjacks. I supposed that wouldn't be surprising in Colorado.

"Shari, Micah, get the Lunar Lord's friend here to Wuta at once," Keziah ordered. "Summon his apprentices as well. This man's going to need all the help he can get."

Two of Keziah's packmates stepped forward silently, arranging Kal between them. Keziah turned to the last wolf. "Noah, come with me. We'll help these two get settled."

It was not a long walk back to the small town at the heart of the Snowmass Pack's territory. Celeste walked beside me, her eyes growing impossibly wide as Noah, an older man with light brown hair and weathered skin, began pointing out who lived where and how we might get the things we needed.

"This place is lovely," she said quietly, as much to herself as to any of us. "I wonder if this is what the Carmel Valley Pack is like, too."

Keziah snorted, glancing over her broad shoulder. "Most packs in California are a little too happy-go-lucky for my tastes," she said, raising a brow. "They mingle with humans far more freely—don't seem to see the danger in that. We keep more to ourselves." She paused, motioning to the buildings stretching out ahead of us. "We're self-sufficient. I'd never stop a

packmate from traveling further into civilization if they had a need, but... well, we try to avoid that.”

I stayed silent as we walked on, aware of eyes falling on me and quickly flickering away. They may not have realized who I was as Fenris, but they certainly sensed the power of the Lunar Lord. My wolf rumbled, clearly pleased with the pack’s awe and hint of fear, but I tried to focus on Celeste instead.

“Do you completely avoid humans?” Celeste asked Keziah, trying to catch up with the alpha.

Keziah paused for a moment so Celeste could reach her. She scratched her chin. “I mean, we don’t mind humans,” she replied, shrugging. “They don’t tend to bother us. But a shifter always has to be a little on guard around them. Most paranormals do. It’s just more comfortable for us to be out here with our own folk.”

“That sounds nice,” Celeste said, looking thoughtful. “I think more people could use places where they really feel comfortable.”

Keziah studied Celeste for a moment, her green eyes twinkling. “Glad you think so,” she said after a moment, looking back at her home. “I’m pretty fond of it myself. We take great pride in the place, and in taking care of it. Speaking of which...” Her attention turned back to me. “I’ve also got a coven of witches about. They settled a few decades back and made an agreement with Grandma that both my mother and I have been happy to uphold. They’ve always got charms in place, but I’ve sent word for them to strengthen everything and be on high alert. If anyone is coming for you, sir, we’ll know long before they get here.”

“Good.” I paused for a moment as my eyes flickered to the back of Celeste’s head. Once, I wouldn’t have cared about all the deference I was being shown, but it simply felt strange now. I could wonder what had changed, but deep down, I knew. “And just ‘Fenris’ is fine. None of this title stuff.” I waved my hand in emphasis.

“Are you sure, sir?”

I gave Keziah a look. “I am quite sure, Pack Alpha Palm, but if you insist on such formality—”

“Okay, okay! I get your point.” She came to a stop in front of a log cabin a bit larger than the other houses in the row. “Thanks for your help, Noah. Can you go check in with the hunters and see how our stores are doing?”

“Of course,” the older man said, giving us all a nod before turning and

heading back.

Keziah looked at us, her hands on her hips as she smiled proudly. “Welcome to my home,” she said, sweeping one arm toward the building. The entire community reminded me of something from the American West in the 1800s, but truly built to last. As we walked up the front steps, I noticed the wooden porch didn’t even creak beneath our weight.

The female alpha smirked as she noticed how attentive I was to each detail, but said nothing else. “I’ll make the guest room up for the two of you,” she said as we stepped inside. The heavy door slammed shut behind us. “I’m sure it’s nothing like what you’re used to, but I’ll make sure there’s plenty of blankets and the fire is stoked so no one gets cold. Anything in my home is yours. You don’t even have to ask.”

Celeste glanced around, her gaze never lingering on anything for long. “Do you have a phone I can borrow?” she asked. When I gave her a look, she shrugged. “I’ve been gone for a few weeks. I want to make sure Abi is doing okay.”

She pressed her mouth into a worried line. As we talked, Keziah continued to walk down the hall.

I huffed. “I would never let any harm come to my mate’s close friend,” I said, annoyed at the implication. “Both Cody and Gilbert have been checking in at Isla Lobo regularly to ensure Abi’s safety. Walter has been monitoring everything as well.”

Celeste’s mouth flickered into a smile. “He’s good at everything, isn’t he?”

“He is,” I confirmed, something strange and familial stirring at the mention of him.

Keziah returned, holding a cell phone. “Here,” she said, offering it to Celeste. “You can borrow that. It’s fully charged. If you want some privacy, your guest room is up the stairs on the right. The bathroom is on the left.”

“Thank you,” Celeste said, smiling at the other alpha. “Really.”

Clutching the phone, she hurried up the stairs. I watched her go before turning back to our host.

“Keziah,” I said, the gears starting to turn in my mind. Celeste and I weren’t there for a little getaway, and besides, I couldn’t take any time to relax. “Summon some of your witches for me. I believe Celeste will need some ingredients for psychic magic spells, as well as any written resources they may have.”

# Chapter 5

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*Celeste*

# Keziah's Cabin

Snowmass, Colorado

Once I got upstairs, I shut the door and took a moment to listen. Half-shifter or not, my senses weren't as strong or as trained as Fenris's. I had to strain my ears and could only just make out Fenris and Keziah's voices downstairs, not any specific words.

I glanced around the small room. It was homey and comfortable, though the wood interiors made the place feel a bit dark. Still, after being cooped up in a cement cell for weeks, the cabin felt warm and inviting, and the queen bed layered with quilts and blankets looked positively divine. Before I could stop myself, I crawled in, propping myself up against a lumpy pillow before flipping Keziah's phone open.

Thankfully, it wasn't locked, and I was able to dial Abi's number. She picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?" she answered, sounding a little confused.

"Abi! It's me, Celeste," I said, realizing the number probably came up as "restricted."

"Celeste!" my friend all but shrieked into the phone. I winced and held it a few inches away from my ear. "Oh my god, Celeste! Celeste! I can't believe it! I've been so *worried* about you. I kept having dreams Fenris found you, but I'd wake up and would still be here and there was still no word and then I'd have nightmares and then I had awful dreams about the beach and —"

"Abigail, breathe!" I commanded. "I'm okay. Fenris found me."

*Well, I escaped, and not without a little help.*

"I can't believe this," she said, sounding both dazed and relieved.

"How are you doing?" I said, chewing on my lower lip. "I know it's been...a bit. How's your head? Have you had any weird after-effects from Sabine?"

"I'm fine," Abi replied. "The headaches went away right after, and I was having those stress dreams, like I said, but that's it. None of those horrifying

nightmares from before. The most I have to complain about has been being trapped here, you know? It's not such a paradise when you don't know where your best friend is and if she's okay."

"I'm sorry," I said lamely, feeling bad that I'd worried her.

"Celeste!" she scolded me gently. "Stop that. Unless you *asked* someone to knock you out and abduct you, it's not your fault. I just hate feeling useless. I asked Walter to bring me along, but he insisted I stay here. I even asked Fenris, but he said no, too. He didn't want someone getting a hold of me and using me as a pawn—again."

I cringed, feeling guilty for what happened to Abi in the first place. "Being bored isn't the worst thing," I finally said.

"Being bored is putting it lightly." Abi snorted. "I'm going kind of nuts being here all by myself! I probably left, like, a thousand voicemails on the island's secure line, by the way, so I didn't forget things. Tell your wolfy boy I'm sorry about that."

It was my turn to snort. "I will not be calling him that. Speaking of which, Fenris said you had not one but *two* men stopping in to make sure you were doing alright. What's up with that?"

Abi huffed into the phone. "You can dissect my weird...I can't even call it a love life, ugh! That would require a bit more...*y'know*." I could almost hear her waggling her brows over the line. "It's not that important. I want to know what happened to you. And where the hell are you, anyway?"

"Uh, I'm not totally sure where I am," I admitted. "I know Fenris mentioned where this pack was, but there's a lot that's been happening. We *were* in Alaska, and we're still in the United States, and it's warmer but still snowing. I know 'warmer than the Arctic' isn't saying a lot."

"So where were you in the first place? Who even took you?"

I frowned and looked toward the door. Even if I'd freed Abi from Sabine's clutches, I wasn't sure Fenris wanted information about his brother broadcast to anyone. "Fenris had something to check out on one of his islands," I said. It wasn't a lie; it was just...obscuring the truth. "I asked to go with him. Unfortunately, Sabine got a hold of me, I guess. I don't know how else to explain it. When I kicked her out of your brain and Cody's, she got a piece of mine, and she used that to find me. She surprised us and knocked me out. The last thing I felt was someone picking me up, and I knew it wasn't Fenris. When I woke up, I was in a cell. A freezing cell."

"Holy shit," Abi gasped. "They put you in magic prison?"



I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "It got, um, worse. Sorta. I... uh...well, I shifted into a wolf. I didn't mean to, but I did, so...that's a thing," I finally managed to say. I felt weird saying it out loud, even though Fenris knew. He'd even seen my wolf. If not for him, I might still have been stuck on four legs.

The other side of the line was quiet, and the silence stretched on and on. I cleared my throat, afraid I'd lost the call. "Abi?"

"Sorry, I'm just, like...wow. Is this some weird Lunar Lord thing? Or just a wolf thing? Do they infect you with their spit when you make out, or is it all the crazy wild sex you've been having?"

"Abi," I clucked, unable to help my laughter. "That isn't how that works. It has something to do with my parents. The ones I don't know anything about."

"Are you *sure* it wasn't a bite during the act? I've read werewo—sorry, *wolf shifter* romance novels, you know."

"I think I'd know if Fenris suddenly bit me," I said wryly. "He doesn't just go around biting things at random during sex."

"Maybe he should," Abi replied smugly. "I always liked a nice hickey myself."

"Anyway," I said, clearing my throat. "We were having an actual conversation. I think I'm out west, like Colorado or Montana. I can see the mountains in the distance. Fenris brought us to another shifter's pack, and I think she's quite powerful. There's even a coven of witches here protecting the area, so Sabine can't sneak up on us. It should give me the space to make sure *my* mind is protected and she can't do whatever she did back on the island when she jumped us the first time." I frowned, trying to count the days in my head. If I wasn't mistaken, the full moon was returning soon—and if that was the case, we'd probably need even longer. Hopefully, there'd be a safe place for Fenris to let his wolf out and run.

"Honestly," Abi said, "I'm just glad you're alive, and okay on top of that. Do you feel different now that you know you're a wolf shifter, or is it like you've always felt that way and some things just make more sense now?"

I paused, trying to figure out how to describe the sensation. "It's more like...it's more like my inner wolf woke up when I was in the most danger. It's not like she just appeared out of nowhere, but I never knew she was there. The downside of that is, well, she's awake now. And she wants to be in control, especially when I'm in wolf form."

Abi hummed thoughtfully. “Can I ask another question? There are a few things I’ve been wondering that I don’t want to ask Cody—and definitely not Fenris.”

I chuckled. “Shoot.” We’d been best friends for ages. There weren’t really any secrets between us, so I saw no reason to start now.

“Oh, good,” she said, giggling. “Because it’s more like a million questions. Do you hunt? Have you eaten a squirrel yet?”

“Um, no, not yet,” I said, wrinkling my nose at the idea. “I was trapped, so no hunting. They did try to feed me dog food, though.”

“Gross! Did you eat it?”

I made another face. “Well, I didn’t want to starve! The wolf side of me didn’t really mind, though…”

“That’s crazy,” Abi said. “Do dog whistles work on you? Can you see in color?”

“No idea about the whistles, but I can see just fine.”

“Neat. Do you feel the urge to pee everywhere, or is that just a boy thing? I’m pretty sure I’ve seen female—”

“Where on earth are you getting all these questions?”

“I dunno. My brain, I guess.”

I shook my head and smiled. I realized after a moment, however, that I couldn’t hear the sound of voices anymore; instead, I heard footsteps. “Hey, I think Fenris is done talking. Write down the questions, and I’ll answer them later.” I paused. “Abi, I’m really glad you’re okay, yeah? Stay safe.”

Abi paused. “You too, girl. Take care of yourself. If not for me, then because Fenris might spontaneously combust the next time you get yourself into such a crazy situation.”

I smiled at the phone as we said our goodbyes before I hung up, turning on the bed to look at the door. The shuffling continued on the floor below, so I decided to lie down and take a short nap.

I had no idea how long I was asleep, but when I finally woke up, I felt a little more refreshed. When I made my way downstairs, Fenris made a beeline for my side like I’d been gone days, not for a few minutes.

I smiled at him, and a dull ache in my chest I’d only just noticed began to settle again. Even though I knew it was likely my wolf to blame for that, I opted not to think about it too hard just yet. It was still too fresh.

“How was your call? Did you sleep okay?” he asked.

I leaned into his warmth. “It was good to hear Abi’s voice,” I said, holding the phone in one hand. It was comforting, like a slice of normality. “You know, Walter deserves a raise or a vacation. He’s so on top of everything, I bet Abi doesn’t even realize he’s the one organizing and making sure there’s still food being shipped to the island and stuff. And he’s so kind, Fenris.”

“Indeed.” I could hear Fenris’s smile more than see it. “I’ve worked with many members of his family over the decades, but even among them, Walter is uniquely organized and focused. I am not surprised to hear that your friend hasn’t noticed anything at all.”

I couldn’t help but smile in return. “You know,” I said, detecting the fondness for Walter in his voice, “you say you don’t keep people close, but I’m pretty sure Walter is your friend. Maybe even your best friend.” Perhaps even like family, but I knew not to push my luck by saying that.

Even calling Walter a friend was apparently a bit much because Fenris pointedly ignored my statement. Instead, he turned me around, steering me from the stairs through the open-floor plan and into Keziah’s kitchen. I barely got a chance to look around a room that looked like it’d come straight out of a *Good Housekeeping* magazine before my eyes fell upon what looked like a bounty of herbs, plants, and minerals on the large table.

“What’s all this?” I asked, peeling away from his side to get a closer look.

“Some members of the local coven brought ingredients for you. I wasn’t sure what you’d need, so...” He motioned to everything. “It looks like they were generous in their offerings.”

“That’s so nice,” I said, setting the phone down on one of the few open spaces on the table. I picked up a branch of dried lavender and took a sniff. The scent was so soothing—soothing enough that I decided not to pick at Fenris’s determination to remain emotionally isolated. I could leave that for another day.

Instead, my eyes fell on a small pile of books and papers at one end of the table. “And what’s this?”

“You mentioned psychic magic but didn’t elaborate any further than that,” Fenris replied as I moved over to them, his eyes following me. “I mentioned it to Keziah when I requested assistance from the coven, and this was what they turned up.”

“Wow.” I started leafing through the books and looking at the titles. “This

will really be helpful. I'd love to meet some of them sometime, or at least say thank you!"

"I'm sure they know," Fenris said. "It will be here if you want to rest some more or—"

"No," I said, picking up the most interesting title: *The Inner Workings of a Witch's Mind*. "I slept for almost two weeks and have wasted too much time. I want to make sure I've evicted Sabine and she never finds her way back."

I swore I saw Fenris smile as I took the book back into the living room and sat down to read in an overstuffed armchair.

"Ugh. I'm never going to figure this out." I squinted at the dried leaf I was holding between my fingertips. Frustrated, I dropped it back into the little pile I'd made.

Fenris glanced up from where he'd made himself comfortable on the couch, stretched out like a lord in an old Renaissance painting. "You will," he said with a certainty I wish I shared. Hell, if I could have had a quarter of his confidence, I'd be in great shape.

"Maybe if I had more time," I said, grumbling and glancing back at the pages I'd spread out next to me.

Fenris sat up a little more. "You've been learning at an incredibly rapid pace," he said, studying me. "The magic I've seen you pick up in the last few weeks has been remarkable. Plus, you've only been working on this for one day. Give yourself more credit than that."

"I can't," I said, shaking my head. "I have to make sure—"

Fenris grabbed my wrist, making me jump. He'd moved so quickly, I'd barely processed it, but he gently steered my hand away from the pages. "These will still be here if you take a break," he replied gently. "Keziah said you could take as much time as you need. If you need more space, she'll find it. Take a break and look at it later with fresh eyes."

"If this was astronomy..."

"But it isn't," Fenris said, turning me away from the table. "And you will get it, but you have to give yourself a break. You must be hungry by now. After we eat and clean up, you'll feel better, and perhaps all of this will make more sense."

I turned over my shoulder to look at him. We'd eaten at Kal's home, but

that was hours ago, and now that he'd mentioned it...yeah, I could definitely use a shower. The longer I thought about it, the more I saw how wild I must look. I'd been stuck as a wolf for days and days. When I was engaged to Ben, I was careful to be pristine, not a hair out of place. My legs were always smooth, and everything was always trimmed. If I got a zit, I zapped it, and even though I didn't usually wear makeup, I made sure I was always cleaned up.

And here I was, probably looking as much a hot mess as I felt, and Fenris was still looking at me like I'd personally hung the stars. *I don't think I'll ever get used to being looked at like that.* And maybe I didn't want to. I didn't want to start expecting it.

"Yeah, okay," I finally said. A shower would be refreshing, if nothing else. "I'll go clean up."

"As much as I would prefer to stay by my mate this close to the full moon, if you prefer some privacy, I can stay down here and find something for us to eat," Fenris offered after a moment.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs, inspecting him. A month ago—hell, even a few weeks ago—the "my mate" line would've irritated me. Instead, I found I felt the same way. After being kept apart for weeks, his presence was more comforting than anything else.

"I do want to clean up," I said at last. "But...I like having you around. I... I just feel safer with you nearby."

Fenris seemed to perk up when I said that, and with a flourish, he motioned toward the stairs. "After you, fair lady," he said.

I laughed and headed up the steps, finding the guest bathroom Keziah mentioned earlier. It looked no smaller than I imagined her master bathroom did. The stone floor was cold against my feet as I stripped. I let out a little shiver, but thankfully, the water heated up quickly. Once I'd opened the glass door and stepped inside, I was enveloped in a blanket of steam.

I'd barely felt the first splash of water over my shoulders when I found myself backed against the shower wall, at the mercy of a ferocious kiss. The water was warm, but Fenris's body was even warmer. I couldn't stop my groan as I leaned into his affection, settling my palms on his biceps. Somehow, he'd already gotten undressed, but I didn't question it. Anything I could do, Fenris could do faster.

It was a full-body affair that made my blood turn hot and my knees turn to pudding. If I'd thought the cold from outside would never leave, I was

sorely mistaken. Even with the water raining down around us, I could still hear Fenris's harsh breath as he pulled away, kissing my jawline instead. I tried to steer us back beneath the shower stream.

"I've been thinking of you from the moment I woke up," Fenris said, his voice low and smoky.

As if he didn't already have me crawling out of my skin with desire. After all, alone in the shower with him, it was easy to forget everything that'd brought us to this moment. The fear, the pain...I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to worry about what was waiting for us in the next few weeks, months...

I took a breath and focused on the feeling of Fenris pressing his body against mine. He was several inches taller than me, but it never mattered when we were like this. Fenris felt twice my size, like he could shield me from the world. I couldn't deny I enjoyed his shows of strength, either. I enjoyed Fenris lifting me onto his cock and driving into me, one hand leaving bruises on my waist, the other planted securely next to my head.

Apparently, this wasn't going to be like the nights he scooped me up against the bedroom door or held me against a wall. I only had a moment to catch my breath before throwing my hands out, plastering them against the shower tile.

Fenris rumbled and turned me around, pressing his chest to my shoulder as he forced me against the wall. My nipples moved against the tile, and I couldn't help but gasp at its coolness, the ceramic not yet as warm as the water or the steam. I felt dizzy already, yet the contrast produced such a heady rush of *sensation*, I shivered.

He made his way down the back of my neck with his teeth, and my skin prickled as another groan escaped me. I inexplicably felt the urge to tip my head and bare my neck, but Fenris had already made his way down to my shoulder, sucking a mark into my skin as he placed his right hand over mine, tangling our fingers together. I whimpered, focusing on the feeling of teeth, then the sharp pain that was soothed moments later by tongue and lips.

His hands didn't stay still for long. They began to trail down my sides, tracing my ribs and my stomach. He pinched a nipple before reaching down to palm my thighs, barely giving me a moment to catch my breath. I couldn't help making a small yelp when he brushed his hand between my legs, teasing that sensitive bundle of nerves before sliding away, driving me just mad enough without offering any real satisfaction.

My knees trembled again, and I squirmed, only to realize the hard line of Fenris's cock was grinding on my ass. Overcome, I leaned my head back and rested it against his shoulders. I didn't care that water was hitting me in the face; I only wanted a kiss. I wanted to breathe him in and nothing else.

Fenris dipped down, happy to oblige as he leaned over me, his dark hair leaving little rivulets running down my cheek as I sighed and groaned. It felt like I couldn't stop making these little noises. Despite being in the shower, I felt like a complete mess.

"I want to have you," Fenris rumbled into my ear, and I swore I almost came from the sound of his voice alone.

"Please," I whimpered, rolling my hips backward.

It was his turn to groan, all low and guttural.

He finally pulled me away from the wall. "Get on your hands and knees," he growled.

I moaned once more, complying at once. The tile wasn't exactly comfortable underneath my knees, but I didn't care, not while Fenris rearranged himself behind me and grabbed my hips. He exhaled as he lined himself up, and I tried to spread my legs a little further, as much as the shower would allow, groaning as my pussy brushed against the head of his cock. My stomach clenched, and for a moment, I thought he might just leave me here with only a taste.

"Fenris—"

I was just about to beg him to get on with it when my own groan interrupted me. My mouth fell open as Fenris moved one hand to spread my lips, stroking with lazy fingers as he touched my clit, then my opening, with the head of his cock. He licked the shell of my ear and ground up on me lazily when I was practically writhing for it. Impatient, I wriggled back against his head, but Fenris snickered, dragging his hand away to hold my hips in place.

He seemed intent on taking his damn time.

I felt so wet—not just between my legs, but with the growing heat of the shower, too. Slick was on my thighs, spreading across the skin wherever Fenris's fingers danced. With each touch, I felt a little more sensitive, and when Fenris held me tighter, I wanted to shout in desperation. His touch alone could set me on fire.

My head fell forward, pillowed on one of my arms. My hair fell in a dark veil around me as I tried to move back with Fenris's weight on me. I felt so

light-headed with want, I wondered if I would faint like some blushing bride. I gasped in a watery breath, but I couldn't even remember how to ask Fenris for what I wanted, words were so far out of my reach.

All at once, Fenris dragged me up beside him, wrapping one arm around my waist to anchor me in place as he pressed the head of his cock into my entrance. I tried to spread my legs, and this time, he rubbed himself there, groaning as he realized how badly I needed this.

"You're so wet," he murmured, sounding pleased with himself.

I wished I had a smart remark, but I didn't. Fenris kissed me instead as I arched back. "Please," I whispered. "Fenris, please."

Fenris didn't need to be asked twice. Finally, *finally*, he thrust inside me, savoring the motion. My breath was punched out of me, and I had to bite my arm to prevent myself from wailing. My body felt like it both resisted and craved him, the pressure, pull, pain, and pleasure of it all almost enough to send me over the edge right then and there.

Fenris thrust a little deeper, each push a little stronger, giving into his carnal need. He leaned down, and I relished the feeling of his weight covering me.

I lost track of time as he rutted, feeling both like I was about to come in a matter of moments and that it was taking me hours to reach my peak. "Fenris!" I whimpered, my eyes flashing open.

He said nothing, just leaned forward to press his teeth into the meat of my shoulder.

I shrieked, surprised by the force of the orgasm that ripped through me like a lightning strike. I barely even registered Fenris's groan as he quickly followed me over the edge, pressing his body into mine as I chanted his name over and over again in a filthy prayer to the god towering over me.

I exhaled, the breath almost knocked out of me as a realization struck: I was miles away from Florida or even Panama, but I'd finally found my way home.

We didn't speak as we finished our shower. Once I was clean and dressed in the warmer clothes Keziah had offered me, we found our way to the guest bedroom. I sat on the bed, running my hands over the old quilt top as Fenris joined me.

I looked up, and as our eyes met, my cheeks suddenly flushed.



Fenris raised a brow. “What’s wrong?” he said, looking me up and down. “Did I hurt you?”

“Oh no,” I said, quick to reassure him. “I, ah...” I trailed off and reached up to rub at the sore spot on my shoulder. I knew my cheeks were getting redder, and I couldn’t keep eye contact with him. I cleared my throat. “I really liked that. That’s all.”

“Mmm.” I could hear his skepticism. “That’s all?”

I sighed, shoulders sagging a little as I looked back at him. I knew he’d caught me in the lie. “Fine,” I said. “I...when you bit me...”

He certainly wasn’t the first partner who’d used their teeth on me, but those moments had been *fine* for me. Not bad, but not particularly amazing, either. They certainly hadn’t made me orgasm so hard, I’d nearly blacked out.

Just the thought of the sex we’d had made me feel warm all over, and I squirmed again, pressing my thighs together. *You do not have time for a second round, and certainly not on someone else’s bed!* Guest room or not, I didn’t want to make a habit of fooling around in Fenris’s allies’ houses.

“When I bit you...” Fenris prompted, moving a little closer. He bumped his knee against mine.

“I dunno. I just...I loved it. I wanted you to bite me harder. I wanted you to bite my neck. I wanted to bite *your* neck.” I had never been much of a marker myself and assumed it was just a thought brought on by the heat of the moment. But even now, sitting in a crowded little bedroom, just saying it out loud made my pussy clench again.

I grit my teeth, and Fenris looked at me, his pupils blown out.

“What?” I whispered, worried I might have just said something wrong. “Fenris, what is it?”

# Chapter 6

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*Fenris*

# Keziah's Cabin

Snowmass, Colorado

I blinked slowly, as if that would somehow set my head on straight after my fated mate had shared that...that...

*Get a hold of yourself, Fenris!*

My wolf stirred and rumbled, straining against our careful control. All he could imagine was the feel of Celeste's teeth against our skin, how it would feel to bite her back and return the mark. It was almost enough to send him over the edge. If we were any closer to the full moon, I didn't think I'd be able to keep him under control at all.

I cleared my throat and forced myself to focus. As much as I *wanted* to do that, as wild as it drove me that Celeste was thinking about it herself, I hadn't done it for a reason. At full strength, the Lunar Lord's bite could kill a human. And that wasn't a risk I was willing to take, especially not with Celeste.

She apparently began to interpret my silence as disgust. Her cheeks grew pinker and pinker as she avoided eye contact. "Forget it," she practically whispered.

I fought down an animal urge to growl, not wanting to upset her any further. "That is a perfectly normal urge for any wolf shifter," I said, reaching over to take her hand in mine. "That is how they mark one another as mates. Humans wear rings; wolf shifters have permanent bite scars." Celeste didn't say anything, but she glanced up at me, her expression curious if not guarded. "The urge is often stronger in fated mates," I explained gently. "And I'm sure all the recent events, coupled with your wolf's sudden awakening, have only heightened the instinct even more. Wolves are known to be possessive."

"Does anything happen once a wolf bonds?" she said quietly, finally looking back at me. "Or is it more a ceremonial thing, like with humans?"

"Much more than that," I said confidently. "Bonded mates are able to sense one another's emotions. They can even bear one another's pain if they opt to. However, a pair of fated mates have a bond like no other. They can

even communicate telepathically. I can't tell you much more than that, as I have never bonded. I have no firsthand experience."

Celeste nodded slowly. She studied her hands before she finally glanced up at me, as if working up the courage to ask what was really on her mind. "Then why haven't you bitten me?" she said, her voice soft. "Is it because you don't trust me? Because I shifted?"

The hurt coloring her voice made my chest ache. I almost choked on the breath I took next, my throat had closed so tight. *I'm doing this to her.* My paranoia, my struggle to share any details—

"No," I said, shaking my head. "That isn't why. I—I *am* a bit thrown off by the fact that you were a wolf shifter all along and I had no idea, but I'll look into that later. That isn't the problem."

"Then what is?" Celeste demanded, barely giving me a moment to speak.

"Because my bite would likely kill you," I said simply. "I'm not like other wolf shifters. It's not a risk I'm willing to take."

She blinked, sitting up a bit straighter. "Kill me? How?"

"Because the Lunar Lord has abilities beyond other shifters," I answered. "My bite can turn humans into wolf shifters—if it doesn't kill them first. It can kill a siren. It's deadly to vampires as well. The only time a Lunar Lord can safely claim his mate with complete certainty that he won't accidentally cause their death is during the solar eclipse, when their power wanes."

Celeste was quiet for a moment as she digested this information. "So, just to get this straight—wolf shifters normally bite one another to claim their mates, and that's fine. But you *can't* bite your mate unless it's during the solar eclipse—which lasts less than ten minutes, I might add—because otherwise you might kill them due to your power."

"Yes," I said solemnly.

She looked at my face for a moment. "And if we were to miss that window, we'd never be able to claim one another?"

I paused. "You would be able to claim me," I said after a moment. "But I could never return the claim. I would never be able to complete the bond." I sighed, wrinkling my nose. The eclipse certainly sat heavier on my mind now, and I knew it was bothering her, too. "Those ten minutes will also have to encompass a rather intricate ritual that would tie our life forces together. My understanding is that is how you would be granted an immortal life span."

"Oh," Celeste said, her eyes growing wider.

“Additionally, we would also try to leverage the bond to break the Lunar Lord’s curse and stop my wolf’s monthly madness.”

“Oh,” Celeste said again, her eyes now comically huge. “I...when you said I’d need to know magic, I assumed there would be a ritual of some sort involved, but nothing I’ve read has hinted at anything even remotely like that. I didn’t realize you were trying to break the curse using me. Or the bond.”

I recoiled, my nose wrinkling. I found the idea of *using* my mate for anything to be repulsive. “You aren’t a *tool*, Celeste,” I growled.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, waving a hand. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just didn’t realize that was something you could even *do*. I thought it was to prevent all shifters from going mad. Is this something every Lunar Lord has to perform?” She paused, frowning. “Wait, didn’t Lyka have a mate? Did he not go through the ceremony, too?”

My mood continued to sour. “All Lunar Lords are supposed to be able to alleviate the curse, yes,” I grumbled. “But Lyka found his mate, Sela, too late. He was already starting to lose his grip, and Sela was mortal, like you. She wasn’t even alive during the first solar eclipse in his lifetime, so they were never able to claim one another.” I paused, looking away. “I’ve always wondered if knowing he couldn’t complete the bond and that Sela would die, leaving him alone eternally, was part of what drove him to complete madness. I think it was much worse for him, knowing her and being unable to bond than simply having no mate at all.”

I glanced back at Celeste, trying to gauge how she was taking all of this. After avoiding her questions about the eclipse for weeks, it didn’t feel fair to dump everything on her at once, but she needed to know. She deserved to, and I should’ve told her sooner. I’d simply been too paranoid to see that.

To my surprise, Celeste nodded and said, “Okay.” She glanced back at me for a moment. “Thank you for telling me,” she said, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. “I really appreciate it.”

Perhaps even more surprising was the distinct lack of that clawing, sickening feeling that usually came when I felt too exposed. If anything, I felt...relieved to have shared this, and to have had it accepted in such a straightforward manner, no less. After my brother had practically ripped my heart out—and that was no figure of speech—I hadn’t shared with anyone like this. Until now, I hadn’t realized I’d actually missed it.

*Don’t get too ahead of yourself.*

This was progress, but the only reason we were in Colorado was because

we weren't certain Sabine was erased from Celeste's mind. My mate still had to take care of that, and I had to figure out where the Solar Sovereign was, too, once and for all. We hadn't tracked them down yet, and I was convinced their reemergence was the only possible reason both Faulkner and Sabine felt so emboldened to strike at once.

I took a breath. "Well, if your mind is feeling a bit clearer, perhaps it is time for you to try and excise Sabine for good," I suggested. As much as I wished we could simply lounge and enjoy one another's company all day, that wasn't an option for either of us.

"Yeah, good idea," Celeste said, stretching her arms over her head. "Do you think Keziah would mind if I borrowed something to wear? The clothes I was wearing before weren't exactly for cold weather, and I don't want to have to keep myself warm magically." She wrinkled her nose.

"She said we were welcome to anything," I said, getting to my feet. "Perhaps I will see if she has anything in my size as well."

Celeste took a little longer to get dressed. When she returned downstairs, she was in a pair of fleece-lined pants and a flannel shirt. Her dark hair was tied back in a messy bun, and I paused while soaking her in. We'd been here less than a day, but she fit in perfectly with this homey cabin.

I hated to admit it, but even I found a certain appeal here. It turned out Keziah had some men's clothing in her spare bedroom, and I helped myself to a pair of dark jeans and a plaid button-down. There was a certain comfort to it, as the smell of woodsmoke from dozens of fires permeated everything. Instead of finding it annoying, I found the scent rather grounding.

*Maybe once all this is behind us after the eclipse, I could look into getting a cabin of my own. I wonder if I could buy the rights to an entire mountainside. That's a bit like an island, isn't it?*

"Alright," Celeste said, talking to herself as much as she was addressing me. "Time to make this work."

"What can I do?" I said, rising from my chair to join her at the kitchen table.

Celeste was quiet for a moment as she arranged a few bundles of herbs, chewing on her lower lip. She looked like she was making floral arrangements rather than preparing materials for spells, but I knew better.

"Nothing," she finally said, shaking her head. "I guess just give me some

space? And even if something looks weird, don't shake me out of it. Losing control makes it worse."

"Of course," I said. As much as I wanted to help, I knew my own magical abilities were limited.

Picking up one of the books Celeste had set aside, I retreated across the open layout to the small living area, sprawling on the worn blue couch. A TV screen stared back at me, but I didn't dare interrupt Celeste's focus.

I flicked through a few pages but struggled to focus on the words before me. Curious, I glanced over my shoulder, peering back into the kitchen where Celeste continued to work. The low light spilled through one of the dusty kitchen windows, casting peculiar shadows on the log home's walls. Celeste stared down at the wooden table, her brow furrowed. I could tell she was looking at something, but it certainly wasn't the pile of herbs before her.

With a determined expression, she reached forward, grasping at something I could not see. I leaned forward, narrowing my eyes, and only then did I realize her fingertips were glowing faintly. I paused, stopping myself from making any noise. My fated mate's only request had been that I not disturb her, and I was determined to honor it.

Whispers of words I didn't understand fell past her lips. I strained my heightened hearing, but still couldn't make out the incantations. Nothing else seemed to happen.

At some point, her fingers began to tremble. Celeste took a ragged breath, but she didn't stop. She refused to—the determination was written across her face. She took another breath and straightened her shoulders, reaching out with both hands. Her left fingertips glowed, too, but—

There was a soft *crack*, and the light faded away. Celeste groaned, pressing her lips together as she shook her head. "Dammit. There's something here, but maybe I'm missing something."

"Are you alright?" I said, sitting up straighter.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm fine. Just annoyed. I can tell, at least, that her foothold is still there, but it's...dormant. Like my wolf was."

"Hmm." I frowned. "Well, that's something. Don't go chasing her back."

"Why?" Celeste said, frowning. "If I can figure out where she is, maybe I can—"

"Because that witch is twisted," I hissed, "and the last thing I want is for you to get trapped in the inner workings of her sick mind. We will keep working on this, but you're obviously getting tired. A witch's supply of



magic isn't limitless." I shook my head. "Rest. Try again under the full moon."

Celeste gave the cluttered table one last look. "Yeah, I guess so," she decided. She glanced toward the stairs. "Do you mind if I take a nap? I think that took a little more out of me than I realized."

"Do whatever you need," I replied, motioning toward the second floor. "I will be here."

Celeste offered me a tired smile, padding over to press a kiss to my temple. "Don't stress too much," she said quietly before disappearing up the stairs.

As Celeste headed upstairs, I stared up at the ceiling, trying to settle my wolf. There was one thing I'd left out about the upcoming eclipse, but it felt like all the information I'd shared was already a bit of an overload. I didn't want to overwhelm my fated mate entirely, yet...

When my power waned, I would become vulnerable. Not only would we need to act quickly in those ten minutes to seal our mate bond and deal with the Lunar Lord's curse, but we would also need to make sure we were entirely protected. When I was at my weakest, the Solar Sovereign would be at their strongest. Just as the moon strengthened me, my rival was the most powerful when the moon was eclipsed. I was the strongest when the same was true of the sun.

*I must find them.*

I was confident now that they were about, having crawled out of whatever hole they'd hid in for the past centuries. Perhaps I should've investigated more thoroughly in the past, but the Solar Sovereign had become little more than a rumor. Once, I'd even entertained the notion that they'd died and the line had finally passed into oblivion.

*If only I'd been so lucky.*

I'd listened to my hubris, and now I was paying the price. Their growing presence had emboldened Faulkner to try and stake more control over the United States. He'd even tried to busy himself with the shifters—my domain!

Just because no other problem had made itself known yet, I couldn't discount the possibility of another paranormal trying to carve out their own slice of my power. I had no doubt the Solar Sovereign was trying to do the same. If anyone else wanted to form their own fiefdom, they would have to do it before the solar eclipse, when the Solar Sovereign would attempt to assassinate me and consolidate their power over all shifters.

I could not let that happen.

I'd never met a Solar Sovereign, but they were written into the Celestial Pack's lore. Whereas the Handmaidens had called upon the Lunar Lord to shoulder the burden of madness for shifters, thus freeing those loyal to them of the generational curse, the Solar Sovereign derived their power *from* that suffering. No coven of witches had made an agreement; instead, they demanded sacrifices and bloodshed from their followers. The most loyal might be granted some of the Sovereign's own powers in exchange for what they gave, perpetuating the cycle.

The Solar Sovereign fed on the normal world as well, using humans as pawns in their machinations. In the distant past, the Celestial Pack and the Lunar Lord hadn't always been stronger than the Sovereign. The Sovereign would even cause human conflict in order to profit off the resulting bloodshed.

I couldn't let that happen. If I died, none of this would impact me, but...*Celeste*.

She would have to live with this new world order, and as my fated mate, I knew the Solar Sovereign would extract every last bit of terror and strength from her, eating both up like a delectable treat. My precious mate was a good, kind person, and now that she'd found this world, I couldn't imagine her abandoning it to chaos, even if I was gone. She would be doomed.

And it wouldn't just be Celeste I doomed, but all supernatural life. The shifters would be the worst off. My curse wouldn't be mine, it would be theirs: the pain, the horror, the lack of control, all of it. It would only be a matter of time before a shifter attacked a human, and the peace between the normal and paranormal worlds—

I shook my head before I could go further down that rabbit hole. I knew what could happen. Dwelling on it wouldn't do anything but waste my time.

*I need to know where they've been and who's been harboring them.*

Peeling myself off the couch and out of deep thought, I strode over to the table. Careful not to disturb any of Celeste's things, I retrieved the phone she'd left on the kitchen table earlier. Keziah had left it unlocked for us, so I opened the screen and quickly dialed Walter's number.

He picked it up after the first ring. "Hello?"

"Walter, it's me," I said. "Delila has transported us to Snowmass territory. I need you to get in touch with each member of the Order of the Stars and set up a meeting as soon as you can while accommodating as many

members as possible. Make sure the meeting falls after the upcoming full moon.”

“Of course,” Walter murmured, as if he’d never dream of overlapping with the lunar cycle.

I needed to get my allies accounted for as soon as possible. As much as I wished I didn’t have to deal with my wolf’s nature, I had little choice in the matter.

“Is that all?” he asked when I didn’t reply.

I cleared my throat, aware I was getting more and more distracted the closer the full moon approached. “No,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “Please prepare for another trip to Antarctica.”

“Understood.” Walter paused for a moment. “Are we bringing Celeste this time?” He sounded a bit hesitant. “After what happened last time...”

I growled despite myself. The memory of my wolf terrifying my fated mate would forever be emblazoned in my memory. I didn’t need to be reminded of it.

“Prepare things for her,” I said after a moment. I didn’t want her to be far from me at any time, but... “We will leave it up to her to decide if she’d like to come.”

# Chapter 7

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*Celeste*

# Snowmass Pack Territory

Snowmass, Colorado

I ended up sleeping for far longer than I'd meant to, but a good rest and another good meal went a long way. When I finally went for a walk outside, the sun had already sunk behind the horizon. I promised Fenris I wouldn't go far, and I thought fresh air might help me clear my mind. As much as I appreciated all the resources and materials the local coven had offered me, I was really missing having someone else here who could talk through the problem with me.

Even in graduate school, discussing a topic with one of my peers had always helped me work through more difficult ideas. Val was my teacher back on Isla Lobo, and explaining things back to her clarified the magic for me. I hadn't known Morgan, Val's niece, for long, but working through the potential ways that Sabine could have hooked herself into Cody and Abi's mind had aided me in untangling the snares she'd left behind.

And it worked! I'd actually been able to get Sabine's claws out of their brains.

But working on this on my own? I just wasn't having the same success, and I knew my frustration was only feeding the negative cycle.

The sound of someone laughing broke me out of my dark thoughts. I glanced up, my borrowed boots crunching in the snow. A few houses down the street, three children no older than ten were playing in a snowy yard.

"Tag!" one shrieked as she grabbed at one of the boys, darting away before he could swat back at her.

He yelped as he spun around. Before my very eyes, he shifted, a gangly young wolf bounding forward where a child had been a few moments before. The dark-haired girl and the younger boy both giggled, running in opposite directions as their friend raced after them.

He darted to the left, chasing after the little boy. When he got close, the second boy shifted as well, spinning in the snow. As the little cloud settled, a gray wolf wheeled away. But he wasn't quite quick enough, and the larger

brown wolf tackled him into the snow.

Moments later, they were both back in their human forms, laughing happily as the older boy climbed up and offered his friend a hand. As they got to their feet, the little girl yelled, "I'll race you back to my house!"

Before either of them could weigh in, a tawny animal took off away from me. The boys shifted back in the blink of an eye, yipping and yapping as they chased the girl down the street.

I smiled as I watched them, marveling at the ease with which they shifted back and forth from one form to another. I knew I shouldn't be envious of children, but part of me was a little jealous. They didn't look like they were at war with their wolves as they bounced back and forth between forms, having a wonderful time playing in the snow. When I had been in my wolf form, it was a constant fight just to keep my wits about me.

*Maybe I could have been like that, too, if I'd grown up with other shifters.*

I hadn't really grown up with any extended family at all. It was just my parents, and sometimes my Aunt Esme if she was in the country. I'd had friends, of course, but I felt like I'd drifted away from most of them as we grew up and went to different colleges. Abi and Liana were the exceptions to that rule, and those friendships were still wildly different.

Turning, I shook off the melancholy feeling before it could sink in. I decided I probably ought to head back to Keziah's house. I couldn't imagine anyone in her territory would come for me, but I didn't know the area, and the last thing I wanted was to get lost in the woods right after insisting to Fenris I'd be fine. He'd never trust me to take a little time for myself again.

When I got back, I stomped the snow off my boots and onto the deck before opening the door. I could hear voices, and when I entered, I saw Fenris and Keziah chatting on the couch. She brightened when I walked in.

"How was your stroll?" she asked.

"It was nice," I replied, taking off the coat she'd loaned me and hanging it on the rack next to the door. "It's so peaceful here. The cold's a bit different than Florida, but the snow is so pretty! I can see why someone would put up with the chill for that."

Keziah's warm smile spread to her eyes. "I always think the winter is the prettiest, but then I think that about every season when it rolls around. You'll have to visit us in the autumn. When the leaves change, the trees paint this valley with the most splendid colors." She sighed happily. "So, where's your pack from? Somewhere without snow, I assume."

“Ahh...” I felt my cheeks grow hot and sensed Fenris stilling himself beside me as I silently prayed that he wouldn’t say anything. It was embarrassing, but I could also handle this myself.

“I’m from Florida,” I said after a moment, hoping she’d either pick up what I was trying not to say or simply accept it. “Bad weather involves hurricanes and thunderstorms. Not really sure how that compares to snow, but I’m liking it so far!”

“Ah, yes. Florida.” Her expression grew distant for a moment before she stood. “Well, I am going to go over our pack’s territory lines with a few senior alphas,” she said, glancing between myself and Fenris. I tried not to breathe a sigh of relief at the change in subject. “Please make yourselves comfortable while I’m out. If you need anything, call Noah. I put his number on a sticky note by my fridge.”

As she headed out, I wandered into the kitchen, poking through her pantry. I tried not to think of my lack of a pack. Fenris hadn’t said anything about it before, but I suddenly found myself wondering if I was supposed to be...somewhere else.

*Even if you did know your pack, it wouldn’t change what’s happening now, I told myself a moment later, taking a breath. And later, there’ll be all the time in the world to research if I decide I really want to know, so...one thing at a time.*

I refocused on rummaging through Keziah’s pantry. There wasn’t much in the way of snacks, but there was some jerky. It wasn’t ideal, but once I had a bite of the savory treat, I thought I might have to change my mind about it. Or maybe that was just my wolf’s influence.

Fenris joined me in the kitchen a moment later.

“I think we ought to head out under the moon,” I said quietly. My body was still sore, and I knew I wasn’t as sharp as usual, but Fenris made a good point about my power under the moonlight. I didn’t want to waste any time while it was shining. The solar eclipse was getting closer every day, and I had no time to waste.

Fenris studied me for a moment. “I think you need more sleep.”

I snorted. “Are you telling me I look tired?” Then I paused. “Don’t answer that. You’re the one who suggested we practice under the light of the moon.”

“It’s only just risen. Get some rest, and I’ll wake you up when it’s at full power.”



I frowned at him. “And what about you? You aren’t exactly looking rested and refreshed yourself.”

He laughed softly. “I sleep better during the day when the full moon is approaching,” he said, still looking exhausted.

I studied him for a moment. *His wolf must be bothering him*, I decided. I finally gave a nod. “Don’t let me sleep too long,” I said, turning to head upstairs and curl up in the pile of blankets Keziah had left on the guest bed.

What was that? Was someone talking?

*I listened a little closer. Indeed, there was a voice, one I even recognized, but I realized it wasn’t speaking to me—just about me. A chill ran down my spine as I began to make out the words.*

*“Oh, this is fun. I never thought I’d get to play with a Handmaiden witch, you know, with the ‘extinction.’ I just figured it’d be so much more of a challenge.”*

*My mouth went dry. I could barely swallow. Sabine. I looked around, but I couldn’t see anything—or anyone. She sounded close, but not within view. There was nothing else here, though. Could she hear me? I fought the rising panic in the pit of my gut.*

*She was speaking again. “—all they were cracked up to be, I’m surprised they lasted as long as they did! No matter, though. Handmaiden Crusher would be a fun little title to add, don’t you think?”*

*I have to get out of here, I thought.*

*I spun on my heel to run, only to realize I was strapped in the back seat of a vehicle. When did I get in a car? I tugged on the seatbelt, but it only seemed to tighten, pressing me back against the fabric. “Hey!” I called, reaching forward. I grabbed the driver’s seat.*

*“We’re almost there, honey,” my mother said, not looking at me. She didn’t have to. I would’ve known her voice anywhere. Even now, years after she was gone. I swallowed hard, suddenly realizing why I recognized this car. I’d had this nightmare dozens of times, if not more. After my parents were killed in a car accident, it was all my subconscious mind had thought about.*

*Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no!*

*I began to struggle harder, but as much as I clicked the buckle, my seat belt never came free. I reached for the door, but the handle never moved.*

*Neither of my parents turned to look back at me. I never even saw their faces in this dream.*

*“Look out!” I screamed. They didn’t respond to me. “Dad, look out! A truck is going to run the red light up ahead! It’s a big truck, Dad, you’ve got to stop, please! Please listen to m—”*

I jolted awake, my face wet and my voice hoarse. Fenris hovered over me, his expression oscillating wildly between concern and anger.

“It was her, wasn’t it?” he said. When I didn’t answer right away, he continued. “Sabine was feeding off your dreams.”

It took me a moment to realize I was shaking, but I was safe. I was in a bed, not a car, and the only other person here was Fenris. I took a breath and sat up, wiping my cheeks.

“What did she show you?” Fenris tried again.

As my terror began to fade with the memory of the dream, a new anger stoked in my chest. “That bitch,” I hissed, throwing the blankets away and swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Rage festered in my blood. *How dare she use that memory? How dare she.*

I marched out of the room, down the hall and stairs, heading for the kitchen. Fenris trotted after me, staying silent as I gazed over the herbs still laid out on the table.

Instead of reaching for the notes I’d been taking, I closed my eyes and took a breath. Back on Isla Lobo, Morgan had shared several books about the Handmaiden witches with me. Now, I just needed to remember those books and lean on them. I’d never tried a memory-enhancing spell before, but compared to untangling someone’s mind, it didn’t seem too challenging.

As soon as I settled my heart rate, images of plants came to mind. The plants associated with the Handmaiden lineage became obvious, like I’d known them all along and had just forgotten. Not unlike my wolf.

With a defiant huff, I opened my eyes again and snatched up the plants, cradling them in one arm as I turned toward the front door. It took a serious effort not to whip the door open and slam it shut behind me, but this wasn’t my house. And it wasn’t Keziah who’d enraged me.

Once Fenris and I were several feet away from the alpha’s home and beneath the moon’s full light, I glanced at him. “You’re going to want to stand back,” I said sharply, crouching down to arrange the herbs around me

the way Morgan had sketched out. This spell would've been a backup plan if my first attempts to free Abi and Cody hadn't panned out. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before, but I was going to make it work now. There was no Plan C.

"Are you alright?" Fenris said, raising a brow. He didn't step back.

"Would you move?" I snapped, surprised by how short my temper was. "I'm fucking pissed, okay? I'm not about to let this witch stay in my head a second longer." I stood up and dusted the snow off my pants.

Fenris raised his brows, looking far less annoyed than I'd expected him to. "Heightened emotions aren't unusual for those newly shifted," he remarked. If anything, he almost looked amused. "Shifters might be a little more violent, or even bloodthirsty. I assure you it won't last long, but you seem to be using this to its fullest potential."

"Damn right I am," I replied, taking a breath. I didn't usually curse this much, either, but I was just so *angry*. "Bloodthirsty" was really the right word for what I was feeling. "That woman has overstayed her welcome."

As if there were any welcome to begin with.

I took a breath and forced my thoughts to settle before sitting down in the snow, finding this position to be a bit more grounding. I focused on the coolness of the icy crystals beneath me, and once my heart rate had evened out more, I focused on the little knot in the back of my mind. I hadn't tried to reach out to someone who wasn't right next to me before, so I thought of what I'd practiced: pressing my way into a shifter's mind.

Where Fenris's psyche had been like a tightly guarded fortress, Sabine's reminded me of a castle surrounded by a moat. And not just a moat, but an entire sea, ripe with deadly currents and hidden rocks. I refused not to let it cow me and forged my way forward, following the little tendril she'd left behind like a bridge. She'd had to leave it, or she wouldn't have any influence over me at all. And I was determined to make her regret that.

I stepped forward again, careful but certain. Each step got a little easier, and suddenly, the wind buffeting me seemed to die down—and then it reversed.

I inhaled sharply, fighting the urge to get excited. *I was getting somewhere.*

All at once, I was pulled forward, plunged into darkness as the fortress seemed to collapse in on itself. I was left in a little room, somewhere dark and hot and damp. I realized a few moments later that what I was sensing was

*pain*. As I tried to focus on it, the heat intensified. *Anger*. I winced and braced myself, determined not to be warded off so easily.

*What are you doing here?*

I turned and was greeted with a memory. I recognized Isla Caida at once. I saw Lyka, bloody and enraged, lunging at me—no, at Sabine. I could feel how her entire body ached as she tried to fight off the Lunar Lord. Her desperation almost became my own as she threw everything in her arsenal at him. If only she could—

*He must die. The Lunar Lord cannot be allowed to live when the sun overtakes the moon.*

I didn't recognize that voice, but Sabine did. Her entire being shuddered at the sound—or the memory—and she redoubled her efforts, pouring all her energy into the attacks. I could literally feel the life force being drained as—

I groaned and clutched my head. *No*. My head felt like someone had taken a splitting maul to it, and I groaned. I couldn't even open my eyes, afraid I might get sick. *Not yet*.

She didn't get to do this to me. Sabine didn't get to see through me, to use me to act out her sick plans.

With the last of my strength, I reached for that tenuous link between us and *yanked*, like snapping a loose thread from a shirt. I felt like a door inside me slammed, and I folded in on myself, trying not to tremble as pain echoed through me.

“Celeste?” Fenris asked, and I realized he'd crouched down next to me. “What did you see? Did you get into that psychopath's mind?”

I nodded, afraid to speak. I took a breath, focusing on the way the snow felt beneath me for several moments before the splitting pain began to subside. I opened my eyes carefully, grateful for the moon's gentle light. There was no way I could've handled the sun right then.

“I did,” I said quietly. My brain still felt tender. Even freeing Abi and Cody in the same day hadn't been that much *work*, and it certainly hadn't been this outright painful. I was starting to realize it wasn't even all my pain, as each echo grew a little weaker. Triumph began to rise inside me as the sickening sensations faded away.

“She's gone,” I said. “I ejected her.”

Fenris blinked, rocking back on his heels. A moment later, he smiled. “You are brilliant,” he murmured, leaning forward to press the gentlest kiss to my temple. “I have met a great many witches across my lifetime, but none

as impressive as you.”

I ducked my head, trying not to smile. “I saw some of her memories while I did it. Like when she attacked Lyka on his island.”

Fenris’s smile fell. “Did you see anything else?”

“Not as much as I heard things,” I said. “I’m not sure if it was a memory or...a psychic command. I didn’t recognize the voice, either, but Sabine definitely did. It made her...I think it made her nervous.”

“What did it say?” Fenris asked gravely.

“It told her the Lunar Lord could not be allowed to live when the sun overtook the moon,” I said, frowning as I tried to make sure I accurately reported what I’d heard. “But Lyka isn’t the Lunar Lord. Not anymore.” I paused, looking back at Fenris. “I don’t think it was just that, though. It felt... it felt personal. It felt like it was about *Lyka*.”

Fenris scowled, shaking his head. “That was the Solar Sovereign, I’m sure of it,” he growled. “But I am not sure what either of them have to gain by killing Lyka. I hold the Lunar Lord’s power, not him.”

“I wish I had more I could share,” I said, grimacing. “But the pain got so intense, I couldn’t continue.”

“You got her out of your head,” Fenris said, shaking it off. “That is an excellent step. We will be able to go home now, and you will be able to prepare for the eclipse in peace. I will continue gathering my allies.”

“Your allies?” My eyebrows shot up.

“Yes.” He studied me. “It is clear the Solar Sovereign is planning something, and they didn’t survive in the shadows this long by being a fool. If they’re going to attack me, they’ll do it when I’m weak during the eclipse. I will need my allies’ strength to hold them off.”

I frowned. *But...even if they did attack him and the worst happened, wouldn’t he just wake up in his temple afterward?*

Fenris didn’t seem like he was in a sharing mood right now, and if I was being honest with myself, I was ready to crawl back into bed and sleep for another day. I paused, watching the moonbeams sail across his face.

“Hey, the full moon is only a few days away,” I said. “Where will we go? I don’t think it’ll be safe for the others if we stay here.”

Fenris seemed surprised that I asked where “we” would be going, but I couldn’t imagine sending him away into isolation on his own, knowing this Solar Sovereign was trying to kill him. “I will be going to Antarctica, per usual,” he said a moment later. “You are welcome to come if you’d like, but

you don't have to."

I rolled my eyes. "The only reason I ran off last time was because you kept me in the dark and Piers convinced me I was going to be some kind of weird bridal sacrifice. Now that we're on the same page, I have no interest in getting lost in an Antarctic storm, thank you very much. I'm not going to sit around on a beach, waiting to find out if you're okay, yeah?"

Fenris smiled despite himself. "Very well," he said, leaning in to kiss me. "I wouldn't mind the company."

"I know," I said brightly.

Fenris smiled a little more. "I'll contact Walter so we can leave first thing in the morning." He paused, stifling a yawn. "But I think, if you don't mind, we might finally take that nap until then."

# Chapter 8

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*Fenris*



# Snowmass Pack Territory

Snowmass, Colorado

The sky had only just started to brighten when I rose out of bed. Celeste was still sound asleep and clutching the blankets around her. She'd looked exhausted after dealing with Sabine yesterday, and I wanted her to get as much rest as possible before we moved again.

I carefully slipped out of bed and slunk out of the room, pulling my shirt back on as I crept down the stairs. Keziah was already awake, pattering around her kitchen. I was glad I hadn't missed her. I had the feeling the pack alpha was trying to give me privacy, and while I appreciated that, it made her difficult to talk to.

"Good morning," she greeted me, careful to keep her voice low. Her bright eyes twinkled. "Sleeping Beauty getting a bit more rest?"

I nodded.

"Good," she said, turning back to her coffee pot as it gurgled and sputtered. "She looked exhausted. Coffee?" She glanced back over her shoulder at me.

"Please," I said, enjoying the scent of the brew. It smelled much darker than what I usually enjoyed, but I always tried to be an unobtrusive guest, if not a pleasant one.

We were both quiet as she pulled down a pair of plain mugs from her austere shelves. Neither of us spoke until the coffee was made and we were sitting at a cleared-off section of the table.

"Celeste was successful in her quest to clear her psyche," I informed the other alpha, nodding toward the eccentric bouquet. "I apologize for not cleaning this up last night. She was quite drained after the spells."

Keziah waved a hand. "It's just plants. No big deal." She looked over the piles. "I'll get in touch with the matriarch and see if she wants them back or if they...I don't know. You know how witches can be about their things."

"Indeed," I hummed. I took a sip of my coffee. Despite the darker roast, I found it enjoyable, perhaps because I'd gone several days without coffee. "I

wanted to thank you for your hospitality, Keziah. It would've been much more difficult for my mate to do her work without it."

She waved a hand again. "No need to thank me, Fenris. That's what the Order of the Stars does."

I frowned, shaking my head. Perhaps I'd taken the order for granted in the past, but I wouldn't any longer. "All the same, I appreciate it. I realize it was on extremely short notice." I paused. "And, unfortunately, I may have need of you again in the near future. You will hear from Walter regarding a meeting after the full moon."

"A meeting?" Keziah shrugged, clearly more concerned with the temperature of her coffee than the gathering I'd just mentioned. "I'll be there. As soon as I hear from him, I'll get everything square with my second-in-command."

"Good," I said, nodding. I loved to see a pack run so efficiently. I paused, looking toward the door. "Where is Kal staying?"

"Your bear shifter friend?" Keziah paused long enough for me to nod. She leaned back, pointing to what I imagined was down the street. "Toward the end of the row. Wuta's home is the only one that's painted bright green. He's our pack healer. Your friend is recovering, but he wanted to keep an eye on him until he was stronger." She grimaced. "Whatever he ran into really did a number on him."

I scowled. "A warlock." When Keziah eyed me, I offered her a wolf's smile. "He won't cause anyone else any trouble."

I got to my feet, quickly downing the rest of my coffee. I'd have rather taken my time, but I knew we'd be leaving for Antarctica soon, and I wanted to check in on the grizzly shifter before we left. "Thank you for the coffee," I said, excusing myself to head out the door and down the road.

It was a brisk walk down to Wuta's house, but I didn't mind the chill—if anything, I found it invigorating. Shifters always ran hotter. I probably could have been in a t-shirt and been fine.

Once I got to the dark green home, I walked up to the front door and knocked. As soon as I heard a shuffling inside, I let myself in. A dark-skinned man stared from across the room, raising a brow as he looked me up and down.

"You must be the Lunar Lord," he grumbled. When I said nothing, he motioned toward the door. "Well, don't let all the cold air out. You aren't the only man in here."

I scoffed but did as I was told. It was rare for someone to have the gall to scold me, but honestly, it was almost as refreshing as the snow outside. “Where is Kal?” I asked.

Wuta motioned toward the hallway. “Second room on the right.” He paused, looking up from the paste he was making. “There’s a young woman in the first room. Had a bad accident. She’s resting, so don’t bother her, you understand?”

I gave a solemn nod. “I’m only here to check on Kal,” I assured him, appreciating the ferocity with which he defended his patients.

I walked down the hall softly, careful not to make too much noise as I let myself into Kal’s room.

The bear shifter was sitting, propped against a few pillows. The room was tiny, with room only for the bed, a nightstand, and a single, rickety chair at the opposite end. As I shut the door behind me, Kal set down the novel he’d been reading by the low lamplight and gave me a soft smile. “Fenris,” he said quietly. “It is nice to see you.”

I sat in the small chair, ignoring the way it creaked and wriggled beneath me. It was clearly not long for this world. “It’s good to see you up,” I replied, allowing myself a small smile. “You were one step away from death’s door, I think.”

Kal’s expression fell a little. “I know,” he said quietly, looking down at the book in his hand for a moment. “I cannot thank you and your mate enough. If you hadn’t found me...” He trailed off, looking away. When he looked back at me, his voice trembled again. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” I said quietly. “As soon as we realized you might be in trouble...we would never just leave you.” I didn’t relish the memory of the bear shifter spread out in the snow, red blooming around him, but remembering the way Celeste had gone right into healing mode made my heart swell with pride. Those were the moments I felt honored simply to be in her presence.

“I apologize for taking you so far from your home,” I added a moment later, “but this was the only solution we could come up with to make sure you got the help you needed. The warlock who attacked you did a lot of damage.”

Kal shook his head. “It’s no problem. I’d much rather be alive in a foreign place than dead.”

I smiled. “Of course. But I am happy to buy your way back home—car, plane, train, whatever you’d prefer.”

“That’s very kind,” Kal said, glancing briefly toward the door. “But I don’t think Wuta is ready to let me leave, and that’s alright. I’m not feeling like myself just yet, anyway.” His smile grew a little fond before he seemed to give himself a little shake and turned back toward me. “Besides, I don’t mind the company. After being alone for so long, I didn’t realize I missed having a conversation with another shifter.”

I paused. “I understand.” *More than you know.* More than even before Celeste. Two months ago, I certainly wouldn’t have thought I’d be interested in checking in on someone, much less having a conversation just for the sake of it.

*How you’ve changed me, Celeste.*

Thoughts of my mate made me a little restless. I knew we were on the countdown before the full moon, and I couldn’t loiter.

I stood and paused at Kal’s bedside to rest a hand on the shifter’s shoulder. “I am glad you’re recovering,” I said earnestly. “Just get in touch when you are ready to go home, and I’ll see it done.” I paused for a moment. “And if you decide to stay in Colorado instead, perhaps I will be in touch for another reason.”

I wasn’t sure if Kal would consider himself my ally just yet, but I thought there was real potential there.

He smiled back at me. “I will keep that in mind. Be well, Fenris.”

Celeste was awake when I returned to Keziah’s cabin. After a quick breakfast, the alpha drove us to the nearest private airport. I was relieved not to have to go through any sort of terminal. Instead, Keziah drove us right up to the tarmac, waving goodbye as Walter disembarked from the jet to greet us.

“Fenris, Celeste,” he greeted, checking me over briefly before approaching my mate. “It is so good to see you both.”

He held Celeste’s shoulders in his hands as if he couldn’t quite believe she was standing there in front of him. “I’m okay, Walter,” she said quietly, offering a shy smile. “Can I have a hug?”

The prompt seemed to be all Walter needed because he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Celeste, holding her closely like a niece—or a daughter. I watched quietly, touched by his genuine concern for my mate. Walter was a consummate professional, and I would never demand that he be

friendly with anyone. Yet, seeing the people I was closest to embrace warmed me in a way I hadn't expected.

When Walter stepped back, he motioned toward the jet. "Let's get out of the snow. At least for the moment."

Celeste chuckled, shaking her head. "Out of the frying pan, into the fire," she replied. "Or...or out of the cold, into the freeze? I'll have to work on that."

"Indeed," Walter agreed as he walked up the stairs behind us and shut the door. "Fenris, you will find all your usual things packed. Celeste, I wasn't entirely sure what you would like, so I packed your bag the same as last time, as well as a few additions."

She smiled warmly. "Thank you, Walter. I'm sure it will all be fine," she said earnestly.

I had utmost faith in Walter's efforts, and I also knew my fated mate would make the best of any situation. He could have only packed a hairbrush and a few changes in underwear, and Celeste would still be fine. My wolf sighed, as if pleased with how resourceful she could be.

Walter looked back at me. "We will be making two stops based on our current location for strategic refueling. Val will meet us at the first to supply charms for the jet."

"Bad weather again?" I asked as I found my regular seat. Celeste settled down right next to me.

"It's Antarctica, Fenris. We'd need her charms even in good weather," she said, her eyes twinkling as she gave Walter's retreating form a knowing look.

I said nothing, but allowed myself a soft smile as I leaned back into the leather seat.

By some stroke of luck, I managed to fall asleep on the first leg of our trip, only stirring when Celeste got up to join Val in preparing spells. Though Val was perfectly capable—and I had a feeling that bringing her niece, Morgan, to Isla Lobo meant she'd also started training her to take over her role as my resident witch—I knew Celeste wanted to know every sort of magic possible.

I also knew that having not one but two witches to defend the plane against the Antarctic was more practical than just having one. Even witches got sick, after all. Yet I couldn't help the itchy feeling just below my skin. I

wanted Celeste as close to me as possible. However, the hour it took her and Val to prepare the plane for our journey to the South Pole aggravated my wolf, nearly to the point that I was pacing by the time Celeste returned to her seat.

“You okay?” she asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked me up and down. “I didn’t wake you up, did I?” She placed her hand over mine in concern.

I took a moment to observe how slender and delicate her fingers looked compared to mine. My wolf didn’t soften, but he found a brief respite from his misery as if marveling at the difference between our hands. And the similarities.

“Fenris?” she prompted.

“I’m fine,” I replied, fighting the urge to snap. I knew that was only my wolf’s temper, his patience growing shorter as the pain intensified and the threat of unbearable agony crept ever closer. I took a breath. “I’m fine,” I said again. “Just the moon.”

“Mmm hmm,” she murmured, giving my hand a little squeeze. “I know. I meant besides that.”

I paused, looking up from our hands to meet her eyes. I didn’t think of much outside of the impending lunar cycle—truth be told, it was almost *all* I could think about. My wolf not only became stronger during this time of the month but even less reasonable. He was all intensity, all feeling, all...I took a breath and exhaled. The more I thought of it, the more I fed him, and he didn’t need any extra strength right now.

“I’m fine,” I said again, belatedly realizing I hadn’t answered Celeste’s question.

She made a thoughtful noise and tipped her head to one side. For a moment, I thought she might argue with me. Instead, she just nodded and leaned back in her chair, making herself comfortable. “Okay. You mind if we chat a little bit, or do you need more rest?”

I offered a small smile—that was Celeste, always putting herself last. “This is plenty of rest. Besides, just as the moon’s presence gives you power, it gives me energy, too, though it doesn’t have to be visible.” I paused. “Anyway, what do you want to talk about?”

She thought for a moment. “Well...I guess I was wondering what a Lunar Bride actually *does*. I’m assuming that you don’t just expect me to sit around and look pretty.”

I gave her a wicked grin. “You’re already very good at that.”

Celeste snorted and gave me a playful swat. “Stop that. I’m being serious.”

“So am I. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on, and I am confident my opinion on the matter won’t change with time, with mateship, or with anything else. And if it does, I will only feel more certain in my assessment.” My smile grew a little. “But you are also correct in your assumption that the Lunar Bride does more than be a mate.” I sighed, my smile fading a moment later. “In the past, you would’ve been able to learn from the current lord’s mate, even if she was not officially a Lunar Bride herself. I am sorry that option isn’t available to you.”

Celeste’s expression softened. “That isn’t your fault, Fenris. You don’t have to apologize for that.”

“I am sorry, all the same.” I shook my head. Admittedly, I had no experience in this—Lyka had never officially claimed his mate, so she was never technically the Lunar Bride. The same was true of my mother. She simply had the benefit of being born into the Celestial Pack, so she didn’t suffer a mortal lifespan like Sela before Lyka killed her.

I racked my brain, aware that explanation wouldn’t satisfy Celeste. “When there was the Celestial Pack, my mother often supported the more... business-like aspects. She made sure no one was ever hungry, that everyone had all the resources they needed. This was especially important as my father got on in age and the time drew closer for my brother to take his place. She also raised us, of course, but I think she simply considered that her duty as a mother—to raise her children to be respectful, productive adults.”

Her brows lifted. “Your mother was a Lunar Bride, too?”

“No.” I ignored the urge to sigh. It was no shortcoming of my mother’s—or even my father’s, for that matter. We were all at the whims of time, in the end, and meeting my mother had never coincided with a total eclipse crossing over a sacred place before my father started to lose his mind. “A Lunar Bride is incredibly rare. As a planetary scientist, I’m sure you understand how *rarely* a total eclipse occurs in the same place. It’s a necessary part of the ceremony.”

“And if everything isn’t perfectly lined up...” She trailed off, her expression falling a little. “There’d be no second chances.”

“Exactly,” I said. “But my mother was a boon to the Celestial Pack, even without the title.”

Celeste looked back at me. “What else did she do?”

I thought of my mother for a moment. “She was also in charge of our pack’s history. Most of it was in the oral tradition. There is not much to say about that, because our pack would be you and me.”

Celeste bit her lip. “Yes, but what you went through is still important. And if your brother gets a little better...that’s a pack of three, isn’t it?” She frowned. “Is that something you miss, having a more...*complete* pack?”

That was hard to say. “In a sense,” I said slowly. “I certainly don’t miss being attacked left and right because my father or brother was the reigning Lunar Lord and someone else had their eye on the title. I don’t miss the scheming and plotting. But...” I frowned, looking away from Celeste and at the sky. All I could see were the clouds drifting lazily around us. Celeste had the window seat, and I couldn’t look out at the world below without leaning over her. For a moment, it felt like we were part of the heavens ourselves.

“But wolves are pack animals,” Celeste said quietly, drawing my attention back to her. “*You* are a pack animal. I know you don’t mind having our friends at Isla Lobo as much as you pretend to.” When I looked back, she was clearly trying not to grin.

I rolled my eyes. “They are not my friends,” I protested, but it sounded weak even to my ears.

“Then what are they? They aren’t just your allies,” Celeste pointed out.

My frown deepened. I opened my mouth to argue, but found I didn’t have a better word to describe them. “Piers and Gilbert are vampires,” I said instead, shaking my head. “They can’t be part of a shifter pack, even if they wanted to. Could you even imagine what Piers would say if you ever dared suggest it?”

Celeste laughed, her silver eyes sparkling. “Good grief,” she snickered. “His delicate sensibilities!” Her impersonation of his accent was terrible, but it did the job, and I found myself snickering alongside her.

The mood sufficiently lightened, I turned my hand upward so we were palm to palm, our fingers gently laced together. “Perhaps finding new members for the Celestial Pack is something we might consider,” I finally said, “but that will be a moot point if we don’t succeed during the eclipse. And as we would be re-founding the pack, so to speak, I think there would be room for you to lay out your responsibilities as you saw fit.”

Celeste nodded, looking thoughtful. “That doesn’t sound so bad,” she said. “And carrying on the history of the pack really doesn’t sound bad,



either. History was a pretty important part of my studies, you know.” She laughed to herself. “I’m sure I can think of some other things, though.” She turned back to me, still smiling. “I think I could make this work.”

“I know you can,” I rumbled in reply.

Once we arrived in Antarctica, I went over last-minute details with Walter. Val invited Celeste outside to coach her through setting up the weather shield. They’d kick up enough wind to send snow flying around my facility, but the real reason was to keep prying eyes away. The storm wouldn’t protect us as much as the suggestion of the bad weather would. Any scientists stationed at the nearby facility would have to be mad to venture over.

It felt like I’d done this thousands of times, but I still found myself more distracted than usual. Ever since Celeste’s wolf had fully woken, I could sense...I could sense *more* of her. I had no other way to describe it. Our bond had obviously strengthened, even if no claiming had occurred.

*If I can feel more of her, she must be able to sense me, too. Will my wolf’s madness influence her?*

It wasn’t a problem I’d had to consider the last time we’d been in Antarctica. Then, we’d had no idea that Celeste was a shifter. Her wolf had still been slumbering.

*Great. Yet another risk for me to manage.*

Sometimes, it felt like that’s all I did—manage risks. I turned to Walter, cutting him off.

“My wolf may cause Celeste to shift,” I said abruptly.

To his credit, Walter didn’t even blink, taking my lack of focus in stride.

“I see,” he said, studying me for a moment. We’d informed him earlier about Celeste’s unknown heritage, but hadn’t dropped other details. Frankly, we didn’t have any other details to give. “Will she be running with you?”

“Absolutely not,” I snapped, growling at the way my wolf fought and bristled within me. “I cannot be trusted in that state, even with her. Even if she’s a wolf. I must stay away from her, no matter what.” After what my wolf tried to do last time—

I’d never forgive myself if I caused her any harm.

“Of course,” Walter said, nodding sagely. “If Celeste shifts, with or without meaning to, we will make sure she stays safe and secure within the facility. I will inform Val as soon as she’s done with the charms.”

I frowned and looked around the small bunker. Suddenly, it felt more like a tin can than a quiet refuge. I knew Walter was trying his best, but...

*What if Celeste feels the effects of the curse?* Pain could be shared through a bond, but I didn't want her to endure any of it.

As if my concerns had summoned her, Celeste and Val suddenly walked through the door, apparently finished with their chore. Celeste saw my face and approached me right away. "What's wrong?" she asked, looking me up and down.

My frown deepened. *Do I look worried, or can she feel it?* Both scenarios weren't good. It meant my control was slipping even further. I was running out of time before I had to get as far away from her as I could.

I turned to her, about to explain my concern, when my wolf surged forward, brimming with power. I felt hot all over, like I'd started running a fever. I never sweat, but I could feel my skin growing damp as heat radiated from my body. Before I could stop myself, I was unbuttoning my top, trying to strip my many layers.

As I looked back at Celeste, I realized she looked just as flushed as I did. She wiped her brow, not meeting my eyes. "Did it get really hot in here?" she asked, looking from Walter to Val as she fanned her skin. She reached for her sweater and pulled it over her head.

*Shit.*

I'd just shared that little taste of moon sickness with her. Clearly, my control was further gone than I'd realized. The horror was enough to quench my wolf for a moment, and I took the opportunity to shove him back down. His smugness made my stomach turn over, and I forced a wall between us, no matter how temporary. I wouldn't keep feeding him.

As I wrestled with him, Celeste seemed to regain some of her wits. She turned to look at me, her silver eyes as wide as dish plates. "Was that...?"

She didn't finish. She didn't have to.

I gave a slow nod, my mouth dry. My tongue felt like ash.

"Perhaps some distance will keep you from feeling any more of that," I suggested, my voice hoarse. I glanced back at Walter. "Perhaps if Celeste returns to Isla Lobo, she won't feel any of it."

Celeste scowled. "I don't want to be that far," she argued. "Besides, what if something happens to you? You'll be here all alone without a way to leave, a witch to help, or your right-hand man."

I shook my head, struggling to make an argument. "I want you to be

safe.”

Celeste turned to Walter and Val. “If I shift, you can lock me up, okay? That way, I can’t possibly chase after him if my wolf takes over and I lose my mind a little.”

Val was quick to nod. “I can magically secure the location.”

“We won’t let Celeste into the wilderness,” Walter agreed.

Locking Celeste up didn’t seem like a better solution to me, but my time had run out. I couldn’t come up with any alternative.

My wolf snarled, surging forward again. The force almost knocked me off my feet, and I knew I couldn’t wait any longer. This solution would have to do.

I whirled on my heel and stormed out the door, four paws hitting the snow as I raced into the wilderness.

# Chapter 9

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*Celeste*

# Southern Sky Research Station

Antarctica

As soon as Fenris disappeared out the door, I knew I had no choice in the matter. I wheeled around and headed down the hall, locking myself in the guest room I'd stayed in last time. I could tell that Fenris had already shifted even though I hadn't seen it; I could feel the strain in his muscles as he galloped over the snow. That wasn't all I felt, either.

Wave after wave of pain rippled through our shared mental space, crashing into me like a storm well offshore. There was a dull ache deep as my bones. I whimpered, trying not to groan as I sat down on the cot. Each wash of agony was followed shortly by a spike of anger, as if Fenris's wolf was trying to beat back the pain with rage. I wasn't sure which sensation was winning when it seemed to surge, and a wild, animalistic fury smashed into my psyche without warning.

The bond was still there, but Fenris, as I knew him, was gone. I inhaled sharply, leaning forward to steady my swimming vision, but as I lifted my hands to cradle my head, I fell forward, landing in a heap on the floor. I groaned, and when I tried to stand, I tripped over my front legs, landing on my chin.

I yelped, ears flattening out to the side. I barely had time to process that I was on four paws instead of two feet when my wolf came rushing forward, pressing insistently on my mind. At least I wasn't taken as off-guard as I'd been the first time, but I still struggled to regain any semblance of control.

As I wrestled with my senses, my wolf grabbed the reins and trotted over to the door. We reared up while pawing at the entrance. Thankfully, a knob wasn't anything a wolf could deal with. I whined and stared up at it. It was so difficult to know that Fenris was out there, suffering, while I...while we were in here, sitting. Waiting. Doing nothing.

I circled and inspected the floor. After a moment, I began to dig, my nails clicking repeatedly against the surface. However, the bunker was quite sturdy. The cement wasn't going to give way any time soon. The bond held,

but the feeling of Fenris had become a blur, quiet and furious and distant.

I had no idea how long I was digging when I managed to get a few of my better senses back online. I took a breath and forced myself back. My paws didn't hurt, so that was something—but they were still paws. I stared down at them, mentally willing them to turn back into the feet I knew. Since Fenris had helped me shift back the first time, I hadn't learned how to do so on my own. All the research I'd done had centered on getting Sabine out of my mind, and as grateful as I was to have broken that link...

I sighed, my shoulders sagging. My tail hung limply against my back legs. Fenris was somewhere far, far away, a distant blip in my mind's space. At least that seemed to relax my wolf some; she was no longer so aggravated by his pain. Instead, exhaustion crept in, replacing the adrenaline surge that'd nearly driven me out of my mind.

Glancing around the room, I decided that if I took a nap, my wolf would relax enough to give up control. I had no other working theories. I padded over to the bed, eyeing it for a moment before grabbing the blanket gingerly between my teeth. I pulled it back before hopping onto the cot, flinching as it groaned. All it did was complain, though, so I circled once, twice, and—

*Ahh.*

Yeah, the third time was definitely the charm. With my spot perfectly beaten down, I flopped down in the center of the mattress, wriggling until I was perfectly comfortable. I closed my eyes and folded my tail over my nose, trying to focus on my breath instead of the distant echoes of someone else in Fenris's skin.

Something was clicking. My ears twitched, and I wrinkled my nose. Something clicked again, and I opened my eyes, blinking a few times as I reoriented myself.

To my surprise, my nap had been quite peaceful. I stirred, feeling more rested than I had in a few days. As I lifted my head, I realized someone was opening the door—Val.

I pressed my ears forward and gave a gentle wag with my tail, happy to see the witch. She paused in the doorway when she realized I was awake, clearly bracing herself. When I didn't jump off the cot and charge for the opening, she exhaled, offering me a wary smile. "Celeste?"

I nodded to her and sat up on the cot. I lifted my nose directly toward the

sky, stretching my neck and spine before shaking out my thick coat. The movement still felt strange, but not as alien as it'd been the first time I shifted. I looked back at Val and wagged my tail again, wanting to make sure she knew it was *me* in here. I was a wolf, but I wasn't feral like Fenris.

"How are you feeling?" Val asked, taking a step closer.

I tipped my head to the side, not exactly sure how she expected me to answer.

She seemed to realize the impracticality a second later. "Is it alright if I join you on the cot?"

I nodded, and Val walked over, sitting down next to me. I hadn't realized how large I was compared to a human, but I'd never recognized how big wolves were before, either. It made me appreciate the size of other shifters, especially alphas. Especially Fenris.

"Did you shift on purpose?" Val asked, folding her hands in her lap.

I shook my head.

"Okay. Are you able to shift back on your own?"

I shook my head again. I wished I could explain how Fenris had helped me last time, but trapped in a wolf's body, I couldn't project my thoughts or use any sort of magic.

Fortunately, Val seemed to catch on to the fact that my communication was limited to nodding yes or shaking my head no. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Would you like to shift back? If you would, I think perhaps a calming spell would be helpful...if that's alright with you?"

I nodded. I slipped off the bed, landing much more gracefully this time. I turned, sat on the floor, and rested my muzzle on Val's knees. I was more than okay with some help. Even my wolf didn't seem bothered by her presence, simply making herself known instead of trying to fight my every move.

Val smiled. "Goodness. You are a beautiful creature, Celeste," she murmured. "You're as white as the snow."

If I was a human, I might have blushed. As it was, I simply rumbled and closed my eyes while waiting for Val to start casting a spell. If she did, I couldn't tell. I felt...well, I felt fine, but I wouldn't say I felt more relaxed, one way or another. If anything, the silence soothed me, and I even felt a little sleepy when the door opened again.

"Ah," Walter said. I opened my eyes and looked at him, wagging my tail as I tried to reassure him that I wasn't feral like Fenris's wolf.



He approached us cautiously, eyes anxiously flickering over Val before returning to me.

“I think she’s stuck,” Val said after a moment, setting her hands back down. “I tried some relaxation, but...” She trailed off with a shrug.

“I see,” Walter said, looking thoughtful. He studied me for a moment. “Now, I am no shifter myself, but I’ve spent quite a lot of time with Fenris. I do have a suggestion, if you don’t mind.” He waited for me to nod before continuing. “I believe you’ll have better luck living alongside your wolf if you aren’t at odds. If, for example, you have a mutual goal, you will be able to work more harmoniously. You just have to figure out what that goal is.”

I thought about it for a moment. My wolf didn’t seem to object. The idea certainly had more merit than any of mine so far. And Val hadn’t been able to help, though not for lack of trying.

I took another breath and closed my eyes, trying to focus only on my wolf. It took me longer to settle my thoughts than I was used to. I reached out tentatively for my wolf’s presence and was relieved when she didn’t jump at me. Instead, she was simply there, as curious as I was. She almost reminded me of a puppy, and that made sense, in a way. She hadn’t grown up like those young shifters I saw playing in Snowmass territory. She’d just woken up one day. I probably felt as strange to her as she did to me.

I couldn’t figure out what she wanted, though. She was—well, she was a wolf. An animal. Her thoughts didn’t feel wildly complex. She wanted to be safe and warm and fed. And she cared about her fated mate.

I latched onto that. *Fenris*. I thought of him, of how beautiful his wolf was when he’d shifted on the beach of Isla Lobo, how strong. I thought of how stressed he was now, overcome with emotion and pain. I thought of how the last thing my wolf and I wanted to do was add to that anguish.

My wolf seemed to pause before growling. She took a step back, and then another. It felt like hauling myself out of a pool with only my arms and nothing else to grip onto. But eventually, my human self resurfaced, and I found myself sitting on the floor, staring up at Walter and Val.

“Oh!” Val exclaimed, her face lighting up. “Well done, Celeste!” She beamed at Walter. “That was a brilliant idea.”

“It was,” I agreed, smiling as his face turned a bit red.

“You did all the hard work,” he demurred. I was going to argue when my stomach gurgled loudly. It was my turn to blush as Walter gave me a knowing smile. “Shall I make dinner?” he asked.

“That would be really nice,” I said as I got to my feet. I brushed my pant legs off, watching Walter and Val leave for the little camp kitchen. He headed out first, but I didn’t miss the way Val watched the back of his head like he’d hung the moon.

Well, I thought, trying not to smile too much, *if I’m going to be stuck here, maybe I can help these two figure out this whole thing.* It was obvious they were into each other, but I was starting to think Walter would never give himself a chance. And Val was far too sweet to push the matter.

I followed after them toward the kitchen. “Do you mind if I help?” I suggested. “It would be a nice distraction.”

“Of course,” Walter said, making room for me at the tiny counter. There wasn’t much room, but the three of us made do. I’d never thought much about canned or camp food growing up, but Walter clearly had a magic touch. When we sat at the folding card table to eat, I never would’ve guessed half the meal came out of frozen packets if I hadn’t helped.

“Hey, Val,” I said once we’d all tucked in, “when I was with Keziah’s pack, I was able to use some of the spells Morgan and I worked out earlier.”

Val beamed, and I couldn’t help but smile back. Her pride in her niece was infectious.

“Do you have any other genius family members I should know about?” I asked.

Val laughed gently. “I’d say don’t tell her, but I don’t think that girl could get an ego no matter how high you tried to build her up.” She shook her head. “But outside of Morgan’s family, I have another sister. She never really manifested any magic, but she still lives in the coven with us.”

I blinked in surprise. “I had no idea not all witches came into magic. Does that happen often?”

Val nodded. “Magic is never guaranteed. A long time ago, families would arrange marriages, trying to create the strongest bloodlines. Some claimed success, but...” She shrugged. “There are always a few witches each generation who just don’t seem to develop magic. If there’s a rhyme or reason to it, we haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Huh.” I took another bite of mashed potatoes. As good as the meal was, I was certain it wouldn’t be that great if it got cold. But I wasn’t about to let this door Val had opened close, either.

“So, have you ever considered getting married again?” I asked her, as if I’d never considered that idea before. “Maybe it’d be easier if it was outside

the community?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Walter stare his food down as if he could turn his Salisbury steak into filet mignon if he looked at it hard enough. I tried not to grin as I focused again on Val.

Val gave me a shy smile. “I’ve thought about it.” She paused. “But I think about a lot of things.” Then she waved it off. “You can’t really be that curious about an old witch’s love life.” She took a bite of food that was entirely too large.

I took a sip of my water to keep from snickering and turned my attention to Walter. “Your turn!” I said cheerily. “I’ve always wondered: how long have you been working for Fenris?”

Walter seemed genuinely relieved by the question. “I came into the Lunar Lord’s employ when I was in my early twenties,” he replied. “Working for Fenris has been my only job, and I’ve never even thought of anything else.”

I couldn’t help but smile, genuinely touched by the answer—but that really wasn’t what I was after today. “Your family all trained for that, right? What about them?”

“My brother and sisters are very jealous,” Walter said, staring at his food. “That was never my intention, of course—only to serve Fenris the best I can.” He paused. “It does mean that one of my nieces or nephews will be the one to take up the mantle, though, as I have no children of my own.”

My mouth twitched as I saw my opening. “So you’ve never considered getting married, then? Having your own family? Did working for Fenris get in the way of that?”

Walter gave me a suspicious look. “I know you think he works me too hard,” he said, and I couldn’t help but duck my head. That was certainly something I’d considered before. “But he tried to let me go in my late thirties.”

I almost choked on my mouthful of food. “Seriously? What happened?” I asked once I swallowed.

Walter held a dry expression. “He didn’t want to get in the way of me having my own family. Apparently, my grandfather had taken that path: he was once Fenris’s assistant, only to leave when he met my grandmother. I can’t be upset about that, of course, or I might not be here.” He paused. “I stayed because I truly enjoy my job—and my family’s role as members of the Order of the Stars. I felt staying was the best way to uphold the oath my ancestors made centuries ago.” He paused, looking at Val and me. “Of

course, Fenris would probably not appreciate that I shared that bit of history with you two. If you say anything about it to him, I'll simply pretend I have no idea what you're talking about."

I chuckled and shook my head. "Your secret is safe," I replied. "So, you've never had any interest in dating?"

I saw his gaze dart in Val's direction before he cleared his throat. "I know this may be hard to believe, but I have not met many women who've had similar experiences across their lives." His expression turned melancholy. "Especially not in the human world where I 'belong.'"

I nodded, filing that thought away for later. Both Walter and Val were watching me carefully, so I decided not to press my current line of questioning. Changing the topic to hobbies got them to relax again, and before I knew it, Walter was regaling me with his quest to collect original versions of classic movies. Even Val seemed interested, though her taste tended more toward collecting music instead of films.

I leaned back in my chair, content to let them make eye contact—that is, before they looked away—as they fell onto the topic of keeping houseplants.

Suddenly, a spike of pain ripped through me. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing, not wanting to ruin the moment for Walter or Val.

*Fenris...I hope you're alright.*

I knew this was only an echo of what he was going through, but it still felt like a giant fist was trying to squeeze me like a tube of toothpaste. I couldn't imagine what the real deal felt like for him.

*No wonder Fenris wants to lift this curse.*

I still had mixed feelings about being someone's bride—especially after how things ended with Ben—but if I could help Fenris alleviate his suffering, I would. Leaving him to deal with this agony for an eternity wasn't something I could live with. I wasn't that type of person, and I didn't plan on changing now.

# Chapter 10

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*Fenris*

# Southern Sky Research Station

Antarctica

The light was almost blinding as I finally peeled my eyes open. I tipped my head to shield myself from the worst, only for the icy snow to bite at the side of my face.

I groaned and took stock. Everything ached. My lungs complained with every breath. My head felt like a ringing bell. But I was alright. I was whole.

I gave myself a few more moments to simply exist before forcing myself into an upright position. When I looked down at my lap, I realized I was caked in blood.

*Ugh.*

It was normal to wake up from a full moon like this. My wolf became a savage, unrecognizable monster. He killed and maimed for the sheer sport of it. It was a good thing there were no terrestrial mammals in Antarctica, or he would have been much more of an issue.

As I glanced around, I saw the remains of a seabird or two, and further away lay what remained of a leopard seal. *Well, that explains the blood.* However, much better to kill an animal than a researcher from one of the expeditions down here.

I eyed the body again. Leopard seals were notoriously vicious. It didn't surprise me that my wolf had chosen to go after something that would fight back. He'd have fed off the creature's fear and anger as well as its flesh.

I sat there a little while longer before forcing myself to my feet. The after-effects of the moon sickness would linger for another day or two, rendering me cold and uncomfortable, but at least my wolf had exhausted itself and I no longer felt like I'd snap at any given moment. I could return to Celeste and the others without putting them in danger.

I inhaled, then searched my mind for the little part that'd become the shared space with Celeste. It took me a moment to focus on it, disoriented as I was. It felt distant, like I was looking at something in the water or listening through panes of glass.

Celeste felt concerned, but I couldn't be entirely certain. *Perhaps I've wandered farther than I realized.*

I grimaced and scanned the horizon, but all I saw was snow, snow, and more snow. The only landmarks were the remains of the animals I'd killed. I scowled at the leopard seal. *How far did I drag that thing?*

Somehow, that didn't surprise me, either. Trotting a trophy around? How very like my wolf.

I shook off the thought and tried to reach for the bond again. I'd never tried to communicate with Celeste through it before, and while I wasn't up for a real conversation, I wanted her to know I was alright.

I closed my eyes, trying to focus on those calming, reassuring feelings. I couldn't be sure she received them, but I wasn't going to hang around and wait to find out.

Dragging my wolf back up from the depths, I shifted back to my four paws and began to run. *At least I'd never get lost.* If there was one thing my wolf and I agreed on, it was returning to Celeste's side.

The storm that Celeste and Val had stirred up to shield the Southern Sky Research Station from nosy scientists had grown on its own. By the time I finally got to the small outcropping of buildings, I'd been pelted by icy wind for at least three hours. I hadn't even made it to the door of the main structure when Celeste came rushing out, hair whipping around her head like a dark halo.

I froze, aware of what a sight I must have made: shivering, spent, and covered in blood, snow, and probably my own wolf's spit. Disgusting. But as I stood there, I realized there was no fear or even alarm in my mate's eyes.

"Fenris," she said, and the only thing I heard in her voice was relief. She wrapped her arms around her frame. "Jeez, it's freezing in here. Come on, get inside. You need to warm up."

I was helpless to do anything but obey—resistance never even crossed my mind. I stepped forward, almost stumbling over my feet as the snow crunched between my boots. She hurried me into the building, closing the door behind us and sealing the storm outside before ushering me back to one of the private rooms. I was so tired, I barely noticed where I was going.

Celeste said nothing as she began stripping me of my ruined clothes, tossing them to the side. I hadn't even noticed the little wash basin of



steaming water until she reached for it, gently wiping away the encrusted blood my wolf had left behind. She didn't take long—even if we were safe inside the bunker, it was only meant for survival, not luxury. The chill started to set in, but Celeste was already helping me get into clean clothes.

*Walter must have had those ready*, I thought distantly, not protesting as she ushered me toward the bed.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, not sitting until I was on the cot first.

I shook my head and looked over at her. “Not at all,” I grumbled. In fact, I always felt a little sick after my wolf's feral rampages, and he'd certainly gorged himself tonight.

“Okay,” Celeste said. “Okay.”

“You are all I need,” I said a moment later, barely stifling a yawn. I held out one arm, inviting her to join me. “Please,” I finally added. I was tired, but I wasn't a brute and I wasn't my wolf. I could remember my manners.

Celeste didn't even hesitate before settling down next to me, her back pressing into my chest. She gave a little wriggle before reaching down to pull the covers around us. A heavy sigh escaped me, and I'd almost completely drifted off when I heard Celeste murmur something.

“I really hate that curse.”

I blinked, barely able to open my eyes. I nuzzled the base of her neck. “Hm?” I hummed, not sure I hadn't dreamed it.

“I had no idea it was so bad,” she whispered. “But I'll help you stop it. Whatever you need, I'll do it.”

This time, I forced my eyes open and wrapped my arm around her middle, holding her close as I tried to process that promise. It'd been centuries since I had anyone to lean on. I hadn't needed that support, but I'd also given myself no choice in the matter because I hadn't *allowed* it. But I was a wolf shifter, and a wolf still needed a pack. A family.

I never let myself consider having another pack—another family—because the idea simply seemed too far-fetched. But I realized that deep down, I did want one. Just with *Celeste*.

I nuzzled into her neck again and let my eyelids rest. A dream came upon me at once, a pleasant one.

Except it wasn't a dream at all. It was Celeste, wondering and projecting what her life might look like if she became immortal. There were so many things I wanted to show her, but I was so tired, I didn't think I could broadcast them. I knew the moon sickness was still within me, too. I might

have felt saner, but I wouldn't be completely level-headed for another day or two. We could discuss it in earnest later.

I splayed my fingers over her belly and listened to the way she sighed. For now, I'd simply appreciate this moment.

I propped myself on my elbow to look down at my mate, brushing a strand of hair away from her forehead. I smiled and leaned in, kissing one eyebrow, then the other, and then her mouth. Celeste made another quiet, questioning sound, but I drew back before she could fully react, sliding my hand over her side and settling it on her hip.

Celeste made another quiet noise, a little more urgent than the last.

"You don't have to censor yourself," I murmured, leaning in to kiss her neck.

She groaned and bit her lip, tipping her chin upward to give me more space. "Walter and Val are in the common room," she whispered back. "It's not like they can just go outside."

I grinned against her nape. "They aren't shifters. They won't hear us."

"Fenris..."

My smile grew. "Very well," I replied, moving my hand from where it was tracing lazy circles on her thigh. "Roll over."

"Hmm?"

I gave her a gentle nudge. "Roll over so you're facing the wall with your back to me."

Celeste paused, giving me a thoughtful look. She lingered only long enough to press a kiss to my cheek before rolling onto her other side. Not a moment later did she give a little wiggle, pressing her ass into my growing erection.

"Just getting comfortable," she said innocently, as if she had no idea what was happening.

I laughed as she chuckled. I nipped at her earlobe, then forced myself to take a deep breath. I didn't want this to be all about *me*—if anything, I wanted it to be about *her*. I wanted to feel human, and that meant giving to her rather than only taking for myself.

I reached around, sliding my fingers against her skin. She tried to reach one arm back for me, but I nudged her away. "Let me," I insisted, kissing the back of her neck. "You make me...you make me *feel*, Celeste, even when my wolf tries to hollow me out. Let me do that for you in return."

She went still for a moment, and I heard her swallow. I allowed myself a

moment to wonder what she must be fantasizing about. “Okay,” she said softly, dropping her hand back in front of her. Her fingers picked at the fabric covering the cot.

“Thank you, *khuya*,” I whispered, tracing my fingers from her stomach down to the soft skin of her thighs.

She tensed instinctively before relaxing, no longer squirming against me but staying patient. I couldn’t help my mild amusement, aware she was trying not to drive me wild now that she understood my intent. But, oh, she’d never really be able to accomplish that, now would she?

She was my world. She could snap her fingers, and I’d fall apart. I’d have no say in the matter, but I’d do it all the same.

I cradled her with my arms and my body. She lay across my broad chest, her head pillowed by the crook of my elbow, arms spread before her. Her legs moved restlessly as I teased her a few moments longer, then I dipped my hand lower, brushing my fingertips against her outer lips.

She was already wet, her desire smeared against her thighs, and she parted her lips in a wordless request. I stroked her once or twice before I kissed her, sliding two fingers inside her velvet heat. She made another silent gasp, one I felt through our bond more than heard, and I adjusted my other hand as it caressed her throat. I wanted so desperately to bite her, but it wasn’t time. Not yet.

I inhaled the sweet scent of her arousal as I moved my index and middle fingers inside her, alternating lazy strokes with gentle caresses to her clit. The slowness of it was almost enough to drive her mad in and of itself. Each time she squirmed, a little whimper escaped. I could feel each breath reverberate on my palm as I squeezed her throat tighter.

Celeste gasped softly as my fingers traced steady, gentle lines and determined circles, mapping out her entire body. I would never tire of this: the quiet, shared moments, the intimacy in our presence.

I felt her climax roll through her, a slow, encroaching storm rather than a cresting wave. She shuddered and shook, silently panting as emotion surged.

I held her through it all, allowing my wolf to savor the way hers reached out to him. The connection was as satisfying as anything else, and my partner was so deep in her bliss...

“I love you, *khuya*,” I whispered, kissing her shoulder as she caught her breath.

I felt much more like myself with the arrival of the morning. After breakfast, Walter and I packed everything back up while Val and Celeste charmed the plane so it could withstand the arctic weather.

Celeste was quiet as our journey got underway, but it was a pleasant sort of silence. She curled up next to me in one of the plush leather seats, leaning on my shoulder as she watched a movie on the screen. She had asked what I preferred to watch, but I hadn't really cared. Now that I had my head on straight again, I had several things to figure out before we got back to Isla Lobo.

The first matter of business was making sure Celeste was secure on my private island. Once that was done, Val would conduct a lineage test on her. I didn't know much about how a witch performed one, but I would get Celeste everything she needed, no matter the cost. We needed to understand Celeste's bloodline, and Grant Oakley had only found dead end after dead end while researching her past through human records.

Celeste was also a shifter—a half-shifter, more accurately—which really put a wrench in the works. We still had to track down her Aunt Esme as well. I'd promised my fated mate I'd help find her, but I was starting to grow deeply suspicious of this person. The moment Celeste found out about the paranormal world, Esme seemed to disappear from the face of the earth, and the timing was, at the very least, a little odd.

Once Celeste's needs were seen to, I'd also need to check on my brother. I hadn't forgotten what Celeste had shared with me from Sabine's mind after she'd broken contact with the psychic witch. And I hadn't forgotten what Sabine had screamed at my brother, either.

*You have no idea how long I've waited to do this, Lyka. After you stole my sister from me—*

I frowned and pursed my lips. *Who is Sabine's sister?* I'd had no idea she'd even had one, much less that this sister and Lyka had apparently known one another. Lyka had lost his mind in bursts. If he was mad enough to tear his own mate to ribbons, it was no surprise that he'd killed a witch or two in one of his fits.

*But why wouldn't he have told me what he'd done? Even if it was a mistake, I would've helped him.*

I grimaced. *Shame.* Shame surely would've stopped him from telling me.

But I still didn't know who he'd actually killed. After all, it was Sabine we were talking about, and she wasn't exactly known for her honesty.

More alarming was the other voice Celeste had heard. Even if my fated mate couldn't place it, I knew it had to be the Solar Sovereign, finally ready to unmask themselves. They were after Lyka, too. Perhaps they didn't realize he wasn't the Lunar Lord anymore, but...

*I have to ask Lyka himself and hope he's sane enough to answer. Maybe he even saw the last Solar Sovereign during his reign.* The idea wasn't implausible.

I sighed and rubbed my face. *There will be quite a bit to do.* I'd take this moment of rest while I could.

No sooner did we arrive at Isla Lobo than we were greeted by Abigail. There was a blur of squeals and excited chatter as she practically swept Celeste off her feet. I took a step to the side, watching with mild disbelief as the pair of women talked. I saw some of my associates every other century, and I didn't think I ever had this much to say to them. Frankly, the women were talking so fast, I was impressed they could understand each other.

Piers and Gilbert joined soon after, meeting us on the walk up from the dock to my home. "It's good to see you well," Gilbert said to me, dipping his head.

Piers cracked a broad smile. "Yes! So glad you decided cliff-jumping was not the hobby for you." His brother pinched his side. "Ow! Gilbert, please."

Gilbert gave his twin a deadpan stare. "Do excuse my brother," he said, turning his hazel eyes to me. "What he meant to say is, we regret to inform you that despite searching several locations in Siberia, we were not able to turn up anything of value. One lead was a young vampire, using the name for clout—"

"Who we dispatched," Piers interjected, looking quite pleased with himself.

"—and the other was, well, nothing at all. Dead space. Snow." Gilbert sighed and shook his head. "I am sorry, Fenris."

I sighed. I hadn't expected them to find much in that part of the world, but I couldn't help my disappointment. I was certain the Solar Sovereign was active, and as long as they remained hidden from me, they had the upper claw.

"If the Sovereign is being hidden away, it'd be with sympathizers," I said. "Or those who feel they have something to gain if the Lunar Lord toppled." I

wrinkled my nose. “Perhaps the Netherlands should be your next stop. Or Romania.”

Piers gave an exaggerated sigh. “But we only just got back!” he complained. “Globe-trotting is fun if we actually get to spend some time in any given place. You know, experience the culture, meet the locals, have valuable life experiences! This is much too rushed.”

This time, Gilbert did roll his eyes. “Well, Piers, you are technically dead,” he reminded his brother. “And if you are so unhappy searching for clues regarding the Solar Sovereign, perhaps Fenris will make you go look for Sabine instead.” He narrowed his eyes. “I know how much you loved that last time.”

Piers paused, almost stumbling on a step as he ran his tongue over his teeth. I sensed his brief flash of nerves and withheld a smile. “I do love Romania this time of year,” he purred as if it’d been his idea all along. “Perhaps we will see some old friends! Any vampire worth his fangs would call Romania his second home.”

I shook my head, holding the door open for Celeste as we stepped inside my mansion.

“Hey, where’s Cody?” she asked, glancing around the entryway.

Abigail paused, dropping the happy expression on her face. “He went home to California,” she reported, glancing around the place. “It was pretty lonely here all by myself, but he wanted to make sure everything was on the up and up with his pack. And I can’t blame him after everything!”

I saw Gilbert roll his eyes at the mention of the happy-go-lucky shifter and pocketed that information for later.

“But!” Abi said, gesturing to our group. “Now you’re all here! Hell, we have enough people to play a game of beach volleyball! What do you think, Celeste—you, me, and the vampires versus Fenris, Walter, and Val? That’d be a fair match, right?”

Celeste laughed. “The day I see Fenris play beach volleyball is the day the stars fall straight out of the sky,” she retorted. She paused, glancing at me. “Abi and I are going to go upstairs to catch up, as long as you’re feeling alright?”

She didn’t say it, but I knew if I so much as hinted at the curse bothering me, she’d stay right by my side. “I’m fine,” I said, nodding to the pair of women. “I was thinking, though, it may be prudent to have Val test your blood again.” I paused. “I promise it won’t be like last time.”

That moment—that reaction—hadn't been my finest hour.

Celeste shook her head, her smile fading a little. "What would you find out from a test you didn't learn last time? Is this about the...shifter stuff?"

"We can worry about it later," I said, waving a hand. "I'm sure Val will need to gather supplies, anyway. In the meantime, I will call my hunter contact and see if he's turned up anything on your aunt while we've been out of touch."

Celeste's smile returned, and she leaned in to kiss my cheek. "Thank you," she murmured before taking Abi by the hand, the two of them already giggling as they scampered off.

As the guests dispersed, I returned to my office, glad to be back in a secure location with a private line. I dialed Grant's number, rumbling a greeting when he picked up.

"What have you found?" I asked, not wasting any time.

Fortunately, the former hunter had never been one for small talk. "Haven't found Celeste's father yet," he said. "I was able to run a search on some DNA records, though, with the hair sample Walter provided for me. I've traced several lines. Lots of destroyed records." He made a noise of disgust. "But I think I finally narrowed down who her mother is. I can't be one hundred percent certain, but she seems to be the only logical option. Plus, she was from a very long line—obscured, by the way, though I know how weird witches get about their secrets—only to disappear abruptly. And I mean literally disappear. Like the woman vanished into thin air."

"Hmm." The long line, I suspected, was the Handmaiden lineage. They often obscured their names and relations to protect themselves. I wasn't surprised that there was no paper trail.

"I was able to track down her last known location. Someone owed me a favor, and I was able to retrieve a few of her items. They were distributed amongst her coven when they finally decided she was never coming back. One of those items was a book."

"A book?" I repeated, skeptical.

"Mmm. One that no one can open. You know what that means."

"A grimoire," I murmured, intrigued.

"If this woman really is your Celeste's mother, Celeste is the only one who can open it. Blood rites and all that."

“Indeed,” I replied, impressed by how thorough Grant had been in his search. I’d had him vetted long before I even considered working with him, but it was always a pleasure when someone came through for me.

“I’ll be in Florida in a few days,” I said. “We can meet there. Bring the items and anything else you’ve learned.”

“Will do.”

“Before you go,” I said, sensing Grant was not a man to linger on the line once business was concluded, “did you find anything regarding Esme Mitchell?”

“Nope,” he grunted. “A few dead ends, but nothing else.”

“Keep looking,” I said. “If anything comes up, let me know. Otherwise, I’ll see you in Tallahassee.”

I hung up and leaned back in my chair, staring up at the airy ceiling. I’d still had no luck finding Esme, but hopefully, Celeste would be pleased to learn a bit more about her birth mother. It was progress, and that was something.



# Chapter 11

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

The door had barely clicked shut behind us before Abi whirled around, her eyes bright as she grabbed me by both shoulders. "Okay, Celeste," she said. Her serious tone would've been alarming if not for the wild grin on her face. "It's time to go full furry form. Show! Me! The wolf!"

I couldn't help but laugh and shook my head. "It's not that exciting, Abi."

"Easy for you to say!" she countered, floating over to the guest bed and plopping down. Her eyes were still glued to me. "I guess I, like, *know* some werewolves, but knowing one and having your best friend *be one* are two very different things."

"Wolf shifters, Abi," I reminded her gently. "Werewolves are what they used to be called." Now that I'd felt even a fraction of Fenris's moon sickness, the difference between the two was crystal-clear to me. It was also obvious now why shifters wouldn't want to be associated with the feral form they once took. It was painful, not just emotionally, but physically as well.

"Oh, right. Sorry, sorry," she said, her cheeks turning a little pink. "You're avoiding the topic, though. Wolf! Show me the wolf!"

"I can't," I said, laughing again. "My wolf and I aren't exactly on the same wavelength. And more than that, I just don't know that much about it yet. When I shift, it's...hard to get back to my human form."

So far, I'd needed Fenris's help once, and though I'd managed to do it alone, that was only because my wolf and I agreed we didn't want to worry Fenris. Right now, I wasn't sure how I'd coax her into giving back control.

Abi blinked. "Wait, what? You get *stuck* as a furry, stinky, slobbery, overgrown dog? I didn't know you could get *stuck*!" She looked vaguely horrified at the idea.

I walked across the room to sit down next to her, still cracking up. "I mean, yes, but it's not that bad. I don't stink, for one thing. Wolves are pretty clean. And I haven't had a problem with slobbering. That might just be a Cody thing." I raised a brow, smirking a little at her.

“That sounds awful,” Abi said, her smile gone. She completely ignored the dig about Cody.

I sighed. “I was stuck as a wolf the entire time I was captured,” I said. “It was cold, and the only thing I could do was huddle. They kept giving me dog food—I’m sure they thought that was funny. Of course, I had no idea what was going on, so that made it worse, but...it wasn’t my favorite time.”

“What the actual fuck,” Abi growled, her eyes flashing. “I hope Fenris—”

A knock on the door interrupted whatever she was about to say. When no one said anything, Abi and I gave each other a look. She shrugged and hopped off the bed, hurrying over to open the door.

“Oh, Gilbert! Hi,” she said, taking a step back to let him into the guest room.

The vampire remained in the hallway. “I’m heading out again,” he told her regretfully. I was surprised at how somber he sounded.

Abi’s shoulders sunk a little. “Oh. Okay.” She smiled up at him again as if determined not to let her disappointment show. “Well, kind of figured that’d happen when Fenris rolled back in. I’ll be here when you get back, though!” She laughed and shook her head, her grin turning a little wry. “I’d rather be a beach bum than some witch’s mindless pawn any day of the week.”

Gilbert’s face darkened. As exasperated as he often looked at his brother, I’d never seen him offer anything other than a polite look. “You mustn’t blame yourself for that,” he said firmly. He reached out and touched Abi’s shoulder. “Sabine is an extraordinarily powerful witch.” His eyebrows pinched together as the corner of his mouth twitched down. “You remaining here was not just the Lunar Lord’s call; I asked that he keep you safe. After what happened, I knew I wouldn’t be able to focus while he sent me abroad if you were left exposed and alone elsewhere.”

Abi’s hazel eyes went wide, and I had to duck my head to hide my grin.

“Oh, I don’t have a problem with being *safe*,” Abi said, laughing now, the smirk firmly back in place. “But I sure don’t like being useless while everyone else is running around, doing important work.”

As if on cue, Piers waltzed into the door frame. Gilbert released his grip on Abi’s shoulder just as Piers slapped a hand over his brother’s back. “Ah, I heard someone say ‘useless,’” he hummed in a sing-song voice. “I figured it must be Abigail complaining again. Would you like to trade, Abigail? I’d be *more* than happy to lounge on a luxurious private island while *you* go off

hunting for clues in the remote parts of Romania and Gilbert pouts to you.”

Abi’s brows shot up. “Gilbert *pouts*?” she repeated, a bit incredulous.

Piers’s smile turned positively diabolical. “Oh, yes,” he crooned, reaching up to pinch his brother’s cheek.

Gilbert swatted his hand away, refusing to make eye contact with either of them.

“Oh, Piers,” Piers continued, putting on a pitiful impression of his twin’s voice. “Hurry up. I must get back to check on—”

“Stop that,” Abi said, her cheeks now flaming red. “You sound ridiculous.”

Piers rolled his eyes dramatically and looked at me. “Goodness, do you think they could move any slower? By the time my brother works up the courage to give her the barest peck on her hand, she’ll be a ginger raisin. Human lifetimes pass so quickly!”

Gilbert’s expression went cold, and I could have sworn the temperature in the room dropped by ten degrees. “Piers,” he growled, “the next time you find yourself in an enemy’s claws, I do *not* have to go back to break you out.” He paused. “That definitely includes when you’re trapped in ridiculous love affairs.”

Piers laughed, his eyes sparkling. “Oh, you are so *fun* when you get testy! Now, Walter *is* waiting for us, so you’d better give this lovely *mortal* lady a kiss goodbye before she starts turning gray, hmm?”

Abi’s eyes flashed rather dangerously, but before she could retort, Piers was already down the hall, making strategic use of his superior speed. I tried to hold in a snicker.

Gilbert sighed, looking down the hall before his gaze returned to Abi. He seemed to wait an impossibly long time before he finally spoke, eyes briefly glancing in my direction. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with you when I return,” he said to her softly. “Hopefully, soon. And hopefully, *in private*.” He tacked the last bit on as he looked in the direction Piers had gone.

Abi just nodded. “Yeah, yeah, of course!” she stammered. I’d never seen my old friend trip over her own words before. “Safe travels and all that.”

He said nothing else, standing in the spot a bit too long before giving us a nod and retreating down the hall.

Abi sighed, closing the door before returning to the bed to flop down dramatically beside me, pressing her face into the comforter. “Uuuuuuugh,”

she groaned.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying not to laugh and giving her back a little pat.

Abi rolled onto her side. “I have literally lost the ability to flirt. At least with him.”

I blinked. “I don’t know if I believe that.”

Abi snorted. “You saw me!” She waved a hand toward where she’d been standing a few minutes prior. “I was a bumbling fawn. Everything was fine until about a week ago. Someone knocked on the door early in the morning, and I got out of bed. I was barely awake, didn’t think to put on clothes...and answered the door in my underwear.”

“And it was Gilbert?” I prompted, raising my brows.

“Uh huh,” Abi said, covering her face with both hands. “He just...he just made this *noise* like a starving man before literally *sprinting* down the hallway.” She uncovered her face to look at me. “Celeste. I’ve never had a man see me in my panties and *run away from me before.*”

I covered my mouth with my hand. My friend was obviously distressed, but the situation was just so absurd. “I’m sure it wasn’t that, Abi,” I reassured, trying to be supportive.

“You saw how awkward that was!” she said, finally propping herself back up.

“Maybe next time you should answer the door totally naked,” I suggested, waggling my eyebrows. “See if that gets you more than a groan.”

“Celeste!” Abi yelled, grabbing a pillow before whacking me with it. I fell backward, laughing. “I’m supposed to be the one with lewd suggestions, not you!”

“Turnabout is fair play!” I giggled, holding my arms in front of me as she tried to thump me again.

“Whatever!” She tossed the pillow at me. “Are you sure you don’t want to shift? Because you don’t seem any different to me. Maybe you’re making all this wolf business up.”

“I know what you’re doing,” I countered, sitting back up. I sighed. I didn’t really mind Abi changing the topic, but I still wasn’t certain that Walter’s suggestion would work again, especially when Fenris was just fine downstairs. “But...I didn’t exactly do it on purpose both times, and I don’t want to get stuck again.” I looked down. “You know, growing up, my Aunt Esme used to tell me all sorts of fantastic stories about witches and wolf

shifters and faeries. You name it, she had a story about them. But that's all I thought they were—stories.”

I took my head, quiet for a minute before looking back at my friend. “And here I am, you know? Sometimes, I feel like I'm stuck in the middle of one of my aunt's stories, like it can't possibly be real, and I just...I don't know. I just want to be normal. I kind of miss when all I had to stress about was a birthday party or if I was giving a tour tomorrow, you know? If the kids would be wild or not. Those were the stakes.”

Abi smiled in a quiet, understanding expression. She reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. “That makes sense.” She glanced around the room for a moment. “You know what I think? I think we should have a girls night soon. There's plenty of room down here if we want to hide away from Fenris.” She stood up and started to pace the floor. “We could invite Val, too! And her niece—what was her name? Morgan?”

“Yeah, that's right.” I frowned. “Morgan isn't on Isla Lobo right now, though. I'm not sure how easy it'd be for her to get here.”

Abi flapped a hand. “She's a witch, she can pull off a spell. Or say no. But I think we should still invite her.” I snorted, but Abi kept talking, never discouraged by logistics. Just like when we planned anything for our friend group in college. “We can watch a movie and do each other's nails—don't look at me like that! They always look better when someone else does them, professional or not. And Morgan and Val can give us all the good, witchy gossip.” She paused, grinning. “I could use a little bit of normal, too. I know you're training and stuff, but I think a break always helps.” She gave me a knowing smirk. “Just like college.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Back then, Abi *was* usually the one dragging me away from my desk whenever I'd hunched over a textbook so long, I had trouble standing up. Sometimes, it was just to go down the street and get a milkshake. Other times, she'd decide I was hers for the rest of the day and we'd explore a part of town we'd never been to before. At first, I worried these outings would harm my grades, but my best friend was usually right. Once I'd had a break, I felt refreshed, and it was easier to study the next day.

“Okay,” I said.

Abi bounced on the balls of her feet, clapping in excitement.

I leaned in closer. “But if we're going to do this, you're going to have to help me out with something.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her eyes brightened, and she moved in, clearly sensing a

secret was coming. “Go on.”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed the moon eyes Walter keeps giving Val, and how Val always gets all demure and shy when he notices her. I think we need to give them a little nudge or two, and I don’t want to be the only one playing matchmaker.”

“Ooooh,” Abi sighed, wiggling with excitement. “I’m totally on board. Operation *Valter* is a go.”

“Valter?” I repeated, trying not to laugh. “It sounds like you have a bad accent. Isn’t mashing up their names a little too on the nose?”

Abi sniffed. “When you think of a better name, you can rename our plan,” she retorted. She was quiet for a few moments before sitting beside me again on the bed. “Hey,” she said, sounding much more serious. “I know I have to be here with all this wild magic shit happening, but I’m kind of going stir-crazy, Celeste. I don’t even have any of my things. Would it be possible for me to get my stuff from my apartment in Tallahassee? I know I can’t grab it all, but to have my own phone, my Nintendo Switch, my *actual* romance books...” She paused, rubbing her chin. “I’d like to check in on my family, too. Give them a call.”

I frowned. “Wouldn’t Walter let you use the line on the island?”

“He would, but I don’t have everyone’s numbers memorized,” she sighed. “My parents got new numbers when they retired to South Carolina, and why remember those numbers when my phone does, you know? I never planned to be stranded on a remote island.”

I sighed, knowing exactly what she meant.

“And,” Abi added, “you know we never got to check back in with Liana, either.”

I groaned, rubbing my face with my hands. “Crap. You’re right.”

I needed to make sure Liana got paid—I seriously doubted my aunt had shown up to pay Liana for my wedding dress, only to disappear again without saying anything to anyone else. Liana had also broken up with her longtime boyfriend a few weeks prior to all this shit going down. That was part of the reason she was in Kansas in the first place.

A stone settled deep within my stomach. Liana had been putting on a brave face, but Abi and I had originally planned to take her out after my wedding to see how she was really doing. Obviously, none of that ever happened.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I’m a terrible friend.”



Abi gave me a stern look. “We’ve only been gone, like, a few weeks. No big deal. You are *not* a terrible friend. You discovered...well, magic! And then you were kidnapped. I’m sure if you explained it all—”

“I can’t. *We* can’t,” I said, cutting her off. “We can’t explain any of that, but we can at least check in with her. And it’s been more than *a couple* of weeks, Abi; it’s been, like, two months.” I sighed and shook my head, attempting to release the guilt. “I’ll see if Fenris is planning on going back to the United States soon. Maybe he’d be okay with bringing you along.”

Abi nodded, giving me an appraising look. After the silence stretched on for too long, I squirmed. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Abi, *what?*”

She shrugged. “Just noting that you seem to *like* Fenris now. For a while, you seemed pretty venomous toward him. Hate is a strong word, but...” Her expression went from casual observation to something more wicked. “If anything, I’d say it seems like the very *opposite* of hate now.”

I didn’t like feeling watched like a bug under a microscope. Abi had a point, though. I tried to reflect on the past few weeks, wondering exactly when I stopped actively disliking Fenris, but I wasn’t sure there had been a single moment. Fenris may have made a terrible first impression, but I’d come to realize that he’d done so intentionally. He didn’t *want* to get attached to people, and there were a lot of reasons behind that mindset.

“I think he’s a good person,” I said after a few moments of introspection. “I also think he’d deny that vehemently, but he is. He’s so standoffish because of his past, but I think...I think he’s really caring.”

“Aww,” Abi said, smiling earnestly. A moment later, her expression turned impish. “It probably doesn’t hurt that he’s gorgeous and powerful, and there’s that whole ‘destined mates’ situation.”

“Fated mates?”

Her eyes glittered. “Yes, that. It’s kind of dreamy. You two would have the cutest babies.” She paused. “Wait...do wolf shifters have babies, or do they have puppies? Oh my gosh, do they have *litters* of puppies?”

I made a gagging noise at the idea of having an entire *litter*. “Shut up,” I said, swatting at her. “You ruined the moment.”

Abi snickered before straightening up. “In all seriousness, though, I’m glad he’s not the asshole he seemed like when we first met. I was totally on board with Team Hate Fenris’s Guts, but...he’s grown on me, too.” She

grinned. “Like a fungus! And who knows, maybe you would’ve been head over heels if you’d gone on a date instead of being whisked away to his private island. Which was, you know, totally normal behavior.”

She’d meant to be funny, but I paused. “I guess we really haven’t had an actual date,” I said, frowning.

“Well, you should!” Abi slapped my shoulder playfully. “Go have a picnic if you can’t leave the island!”

For once, I didn’t argue with her. It wasn’t a half-bad idea.

# Chapter 12

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*Fenris*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

The sand churned beneath my feet as I galloped down the far stretch of the beach, the gentle rolling of the waves serving as the backdrop to my pulse. It always felt good to patrol my home territory when I returned from my full-moon excursions in Antarctica, but today, I found I had more pent-up energy than usual. My wolf should've been exhausted, but he already seemed to have recovered most of his stamina. It was irritating at best, and while I suspected learning our fated mate was *also* a wolf shifter had really thrown him for a loop, there was nothing he could do about it but accept it.

Of course, he still refused to be pleasant to work with, so I had no real reason to be surprised.

The fact that I'd spent most of the day contacting members of the Order of the Stars alongside Walter probably hadn't helped matters. My wolf always resented anything even remotely resembling "desk work," but it was simply too big of a task for Walter to manage on his own. I'd actually handled the last several calls myself. Now that I was back and Celeste was safe, I needed to see my brother's state for myself. The fact that Celeste had seen Lyka when disconnecting herself from Sabine's mind was extremely concerning, and it still wasn't clear to me *what* my brother had done to her or *who* he'd killed, except for one thing Sabine had said.

*Her sister...*

That still wasn't ringing a bell, though. All I could do was hope Lyka was lucid enough when we arrived that he'd be able to clear some of this up. If he wasn't...

My wolf snapped to attention as another paranormal presence caught his peripheral attention. I came to a halt, lifting my head toward our home just in time to see Celeste step out the door.

"Fenris!" she called.

She'd barely gotten the words past her lips before I was trotting in her direction, bushy tail waving over my spine as I pressed my ears forward. My

wolf may have been unsettled, but he was always pleased to see Celeste, especially once we were past the full moon. Once closer, I shifted back to my human form, taking the last few strides on two feet.

Celeste sighed as I leaned in to kiss her cheek, looking me up and down. “I’m so jealous,” she said, motioning at me.

“About what?” I said.

“That was so...so effortless,” she said. “The way you shifted between one step and the next. I can’t even do it on command, much less change without falling on my face. Why do wolves have such big paws?!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “They do,” I acknowledged. “But you’ve only shifted twice, Celeste. Pups struggle when they start, and any shifter who manifests their wolf later in life has a harder time than a pup. You aren’t any different.” I could only imagine how frustrating this felt for Celeste, but this was no failing on her part. “Besides, given how quickly you picked up on spellwork once you removed the barrier to your magic, I’m quite confident in your ability to pick up shifting with ease.”

Celeste’s cheeks turned a little pink, but the smile returned to her face. “Thank you,” she murmured as she briefly looked away. When she glanced back at me, she had an entirely different question. “Hey...I was just wondering...would you like to go on a date with me sometime? It doesn’t have to be right now or anything. I know you’re busy, and there’s the eclipse, and—”

“A date?” I repeated, tipping my head to the side.

Celeste paused, chewing the inside of her bottom lip for a moment. “Yes,” she finally said, sounding a bit more confident than before. “When we met, we sort of skipped right past ‘dating’ or ‘courting’ and jumped straight to ‘whisk the distressed damsel away for her safety’, you know?” She took a breath, seemingly settling her nerves before continuing. “I thought it would be good for us to try and start from the beginning. Like, what if you’d come to the planetarium, gone on my tour, and then asked me out for a drink afterward? Something like that.”

The corner of my mouth twitched. “If I recall correctly—” and I was certain I did “—I did offer to take you out for drinks.”

Celeste frowned. “And the rest of my colleagues,” she countered. “Well, I meant in a more normal way, not in the ‘kiss you senseless’ and ‘have a vampire hypnotize you to escape the other one’ way.”

My expression softened, and I leaned in to kiss her temple. “I see,” I said

quietly. My actions hadn't bothered me at the time—in fact, I'd been pleased to ensure Celeste's safety—but I could see this was weighing heavily on her. “I am sorry we got off on the wrong foot, *khuya*.” I frowned. “And I am *quite* sorry I asked Piers to hypnotize you.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. “What would you like to do for our first official date, then?”

It was Celeste's turn to look a little puzzled. “I...well, I guess I'm not entirely sure. Most first dates suck. They're either really awkward and no one talks, or only one person does. The only thing I remember about my time with Ben is that he said I couldn't pull off red lipstick.” She made a face, her shoulders slumping slightly. “I haven't worn it since. Hell of a thing to say to your date.” After a moment, she shook her head as if she could get rid of the memory. “Either way, it's just—well, it's a very normal thing to do, and if I'm going to be immortal in a few months, I want to enjoy my last weeks of normalcy.”

I wrinkled my nose when she'd brought up Ben, displeased not only that she was thinking of him but that the man had the audacity to put her down, even on a first date. I knew he'd been under some sort of spell, but that was no excuse for making a woman feel undesirable. Especially Celeste.

“I will plan the date,” I decided. I would make this outing one for the books. “But I would like you to consider wearing red lipstick for it.”

Celeste rolled her silver eyes, giving me a wry look. “That wasn't supposed to be a sob story, Fenris, and I don't have any red lipstick. Even if I did, it's not like I grabbed all my stuff from my apartment before I left. I just wanted to do this with you. I just want to be normal for a little while longer. Try not to let hunting the Solar Sovereign take over everything.”

I shrugged. “As you say.” I wasn't sure if her hesitation was because she was uncertain about becoming immortal or doing so *with me*, but I suspected it wasn't the right time to ask. I nodded toward my house. “Perhaps we should go inside and get some sleep while we can.”

Instead of retreating inside, though, Celeste glanced up at the moon. “Actually, I was thinking of coming out to practice. The moon's still pretty full, and I need all the help I can get, given the timeline I'm on.”

“You're welcome to train however you want,” I replied, not wanting to dictate to a witch. Even I knew better than that. “However, you've been through a *lot* lately, and with no time to recover, either. Consider resting with

me, just for one night, and returning to train under the moon tomorrow while I'm away."

I headed back inside, pleased to hear Celeste's footsteps following me as I walked through the entrance and moved toward the stairs. I hadn't exaggerated when I said I was going to rest.

"Where are you going? The States?" she asked once she closed the door to the master bedroom behind her.

"Hm?" I began to undress, taking off my shoes and pulling my button-down over my head.

"Oh, Abi and I were just talking about checking in with people back in Florida," she said. "Obviously, my aunt is missing, but Abi has family who will probably start getting concerned if they don't hear from her after a while. Her grandfather was in the hospital, too." When I glanced over my shoulder, I realized Celeste had frozen in place while looking concerned. "And our friend, Liana. I still owe her for my wedding dress—*plus* she broke up with her boyfriend. It's just...a lot to disappear from."

"I understand," I said, inclining my head. "Unfortunately, I am not heading to Florida tomorrow. However, I will be meeting with the Order of the Stars soon. You are welcome to join me."

"And Abi?"

My mouth twitched. I didn't like the idea of any of Celeste's friends in harm's way, especially after Sabine's attempt to drown my mate by controlling her best friend. Still, Abi was probably much more likely to be careful now, and I suspected she'd be easier to keep an eye on. "I will consider the feasibility," I decided, not wanting to promise too much and have to go back on my word.

"Okay," Celeste replied, evidently satisfied. She began to undress before slipping into the bed. "If you're going to be away, come here and cuddle me."

My mouth twitched, and I did as I was told.

I woke up with a start before jolting into an upright position. My muscles were tense, and a rivulet of cold sweat ran down my spine. I had been running, running, *running*, my paws churning up the damp earth. There were howls and snarls behind me, teeth tearing at my pelt. A never-ending forest surrounded me. I was no longer on a peaceful run but a—

*It was just a dream*, I told myself, forcing my wolf back from the surface.



*No. Just a memory.* And it was centuries in the past. My wolf and I were in my bedroom now. There was no danger.

I glanced over to reassure myself that Celeste was still there, only to realize she was also awake and staring back at me. My mouth pulled downward. “I’m sorry,” I said, ignoring how gruff my voice sounded. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Celeste watched me for a moment longer, licking her lips. She opened her mouth but said nothing, clearly struggling with the words. “I...I think I saw your dream,” she said softly as she stared at her hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I...I honestly have no idea how I did that while I was asleep.” She took a deep breath and looked back at me, concern written across her face. “Are you alright? Was that—?”

I nodded. “A memory, yes,” I confirmed, giving myself a little shake. “That was from a very long time ago, when my father was the Lunar Lord. Lyka was the one who came to my rescue; he helped chase off the Ardor family alongside me. He’s the one who stitched up the wounds so they’d heal.” I tried not to grimace, but I knew I was failing. “I could always count on him in those days.”

“I’m sure he felt the same way about you,” Celeste replied quietly, reaching over to rest her hand on my thigh. She gave me a gentle squeeze. “You’re a tough nut to crack, Fenris, but whenever you speak about him...I can feel how much you care, even if you don’t say the words. I’m positive he knew.”

I looked away. “I did my best to always have his back in return,” I replied, staring at the blank wall across from us. “But Lyka was the natural leader, not me. He had—oh, he had charisma, even more than our father. Before the madness seized him, he had so much more patience than I did, too. He took more after our mother.” I looked back at Celeste. “And I’m not being humble saying this, either,” I said, not wanting to be dismissed. “Lyka was suited for blending in with humans. He cared deeply about individuals, paranormal or not, and he was curious about new cultures and new places. When he first took over as Lunar Lord after my father, before the curse began to take its toll, there was more peace than in my father’s reign. Or after I took up the mantle.”

It almost felt like admitting to failure, but it was the simple truth. There was more unrest once I’d become the Lunar Lord.

I took another breath. Celeste hadn’t said anything, simply listening as I

explained things. Her hand was still on my thigh, tracing gentle circles through the single layer of sheets.

“Sometimes,” I continued, feeling a little less vulnerable in the dark, “I feel like I’m just a stand-in for my brother. I’m not even a very good one. I want my best friend and brother back. Even if he could never be Lunar Lord, I just want his *advice*.”

I licked my lips and shook my head, unwilling to let myself get too far down that rabbit hole. “I’m going to see him tomorrow,” I informed Celeste, finally leaning closer to her. “I need to see how Lyka is. I have no idea what the effect of Sabine’s attack on him will be, or moving his location. If he’s forgotten who I am again...”

I didn’t even want to entertain the idea.

Celeste gave me a small smile, moving her hand to grab mine. She laced our fingers together and squeezed gently. “Whatever happens, Fenris, we can weather it.”

I exhaled. “I regret that I can’t bring you, but after last time...” I wasn’t sure who I’d be placing in more danger, Celeste or Lyka. I didn’t want to put either of them at risk. “I don’t want to let my emotions rule me when I’m with him.”

“I understand,” she said gently. Relief washed over me—I hadn’t even realized how badly I’d needed to hear that. Celeste gave my hand another squeeze. “I’ll be fine while you’re gone, and don’t overlook the fact that Lyka survived everything. Now you have me to help, too. Even though I’m still training, I think I can figure out something to help your brother, Fenris. If I can kick Sabine out, I think I can help him as well.”

For the first time in weeks, I felt hope for Lyka. “Thank you,” I said as I kissed her cheek. If anyone could help my brother, I knew it was Celeste.

# Chapter 13

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Fifteen minutes after waking up in bed alone, I realized I was staring at the imprint of Fenris's head on his pillow. I blinked as my mind slowly came online. *Oh. I guess he didn't want to wake me up before he went to see Lyka.*

I sighed. I knew Fenris wanted me to rest, but I still wished I could've said goodbye and wished him luck before he traveled to see Lyka. Maybe given him a kiss for—

*Celeste. He'll be gone for two days at most. No need to get all mopey,* I scolded myself once I realized how wistful I was being. I'd spent weeks without him—without anyone I knew—when being held in that cell in Alaska. I could certainly survive for forty-eight hours in a luxurious mansion surrounded by friends. There was no need to get emotional because Fenris had been gone for a few hours.

*This means I'll have plenty of uninterrupted time to train today.*

That *was* something I looked forward to. As much as I enjoyed Fenris's company and increasingly loved spending time with him, it was hard to get challenging work done with him around. The Lunar Lord had a funny habit of distracting me.

By the time I'd gotten dressed and had a quick breakfast with Abi, Val had arrived on the shore from her little island a mile away. The three of us headed out to the beach so I could practice a new type of elemental magic: working with water. Abi took a seat by the dock while Val explained what we were doing.

I tried to settle my breathing as she spoke, but the more I tried to concentrate, the more my wolf awakened. By the time my mentor looked at me and motioned for me to begin, my wolf was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, practically pawing at me like I was a door she needed to knock down.

"Sorry," I said, rather embarrassed. "I didn't catch all of that. Could you explain the end one more time?"

"Of course," Val said, smiling softly. She tucked a silver strand of hair

behind her ear. “Water is a very powerful element. It can quench fire, of course, but it can also move earth and resist the wind. Or, depending on how you use it, it can be used in conjunction with any of those. Some of the most adept witches can use water to heal themselves.”

I nodded. I was trying to take all of this in, but it felt like it was going in one ear and out the other. “And what is it I’m supposed to be doing?” I asked. Suddenly, I felt like I’d never practiced magic before. My wolf rumbled, pushing against me again.

“We’re going to work on drawing water to a desired location. Moving water is one of the most straightforward ways to interact with it, though I wouldn’t exactly call it easy. Now, you will want to settle your mind and position yourself right next to the waves.”

I followed Val as we walked to the edge of the shore, just out of reach of the gentle waves rolling up against the golden sand. I took a breath, then another, but I didn’t feel any calmer than when I started trying to quiet my thoughts. If anything, I only felt more frustrated.

*You can’t expect everything to come easily all the time,* I scolded myself. After all, I hadn’t earned my master’s degree because it was easy. I loved astronomy and hadn’t minded studying hard to write a thesis and pass exams. I also just loved to learn. I loved the joy of discovery, and the sense of accomplishment I felt when conquering a difficult task or technique.

I ground my teeth as frustration welled back up. *Except I don’t have the time to wander through learning right now. I need to get this right. Fenris is counting on me. And it’s not just Fenris who needs me to get this right, either.*

I bit my lip and forced myself to take another breath, but I didn’t feel any calmer—and my thoughts didn’t stop zipping around. I barely even noticed the waves licking at my bare ankles, and only then did I realize that Val had been speaking to me the entire time I’d been monologuing to myself. My cheeks flushed, and I glanced down at the pale sand gently churning against my skin, knowing the older witch was watching me expectantly.

I racked my brain for what she might have just asked me to do. *Right. Water. Waves. I’m probably just drawing up a bigger wave.* That made sense, and it didn’t seem too complicated. I really shouldn’t be this distracted. *Damn Fenris for having to leave...and damn my wolf for caring so much.* After all, Ben and I had never lived together, and we’d only gotten to see each other once or twice a week if I was lucky. It had certainly never kept me

from getting my job done or completing my studies. *Seriously, get a grip!*

I tried to shake off these feelings by straightening my shoulders. Staring down at the water, I extended my hand toward it. I imagined I could feel the coolness of it in my hands, imagined that I could feel its fluidity as it rushed by me and—

A pathetic wave slapped my leg, and I snorted as I glanced down, not even sure I'd done that. For all I knew, it was natural. I made a frustrated noise and dropped my hands to the side.

Val cleared her throat softly, and when I looked up, she gave me an amused smile. "Would you like me to demonstrate?" she asked gently, motioning to the water. "While some perceive water as a lunar element, it's still elemental magic on its own. And we're under broad daylight."

I sighed. "I feel like I'm about to crawl out of my skin," I admitted. "I mean, maybe watching you do it again would help, but I can't even settle my thoughts, and that's the first step here."

Val didn't speak for a minute and rubbed her chin. "Interesting. Have you gone for a run as a wolf today?"

"No." I frowned. "What does that have to do with anything? I could barely even sense magic in that state, much less cast a spell."

"True, but if you're feeling that restless, it might be your wolf's energy. Fenris is gone, and I've heard wolves can get...difficult to live with when they're separated from their fated mate and the bond hasn't been completed. Of course, I'm no shifter and no expert, but Fenris isn't the only wolf I've met over the years." She offered me a small smile. "On top of that, you and your wolf have only just met, so to speak. I don't think it's unreasonable to assume the two of you haven't found a balance just yet."

My shoulders dropped, and another sigh escaped me. "Yeah," I said, chewing on my lip. "You're right about that last part."

Sometimes, when things were quiet, I forgot my wolf was there, only to be reminded—sometimes forcefully—that I was a shifter when my wolf slammed into my sense of self-control over something she wanted. And Fenris was definitely one of them. "If I shift, though, what if I get stuck again? I haven't exactly mastered the whole process."

Val's look somehow got even *more* knowing, and I found myself bristling a little before she caught my reaction. *Damn*, I thought, rubbing the back of my neck. *She's probably onto something with the discord between my wolf and me.* I'd never been irritated with Val before, especially when all the

kindly witch was doing was helping me with my magic.

“That’s something you’re going to have to master sooner or later, Celeste,” she said gently. “And since practicing magic doesn’t seem to be on the table right now, I’d say it’s a perfect moment to give it a shot. Besides, if you’re having a hard time shifting back, you have Walter and me, and in the worst-case scenario, Fenris will be back shortly. He’ll guide you if he must.”

After a moment of thought, I nodded. “You’re right,” I said, stepping out of the waves and back onto the warm sand. “I have to learn one way or another.” And if this wasn’t magic, it was still useful.

I took a deep breath, stepping away from Val in case my wolf did something weird when I ceded control to her. As I closed my eyes, I allowed myself to relax that straining hold of her, giving into the concern for Fenris, the desire for him, the yearning to just run off all this excess energy. When I opened my eyes again, I found myself looking up at Val, the sun warming my four paws.

Relief spread through me, and I huffed a breath out through my nostrils, the wind tickling my whiskers as I shook out my thick white coat.

“Celeste?!”

I whirled around at the sound of my best friend’s voice, watching her as she jogged across the sand with a huge smile on her face. I wagged my bushy tail, trying to assure her I was still friendly and still Celeste. Just, you know, fuzzy.

Abi didn’t seem concerned, however, and threw her arms around my neck. “Oh. My. *God*,” she squealed, shoving her face into my thick fur. “You are so *cool*. And soft. And pretty. Oh my god! I can’t believe you didn’t show me your wolf sooner!” She leaned back, still running her hands over my coat, and I couldn’t help but find it incredibly satisfying. *No wonder Fenris likes this so much*, I thought, panting happily as she smoothed her hands over my skull and stroked my ears.

Unfortunately, my patience was quickly waning, and I felt my wolf getting bored with the attention. The novelty wore off within a few minutes, and I backed away, giving Abi’s sleeve a playful nip before dashing off, her laughter ringing in my ears long after I’d left her in the dust.

I had no idea how long I’d been running, but when I returned to the spot on the beach where Val and I had been practicing, she and Abi were long gone.



My tongue hanging out of my mouth as my sides heaved, I leaned down to sniff at the sand. Tracking them back to Fenris's home, I sat outside the front entrance and woofed softly. No one came to the door, so I barked a little more loudly, rearing back onto my hind legs to paw at the handle.

I hadn't made any progress, but someone opened the door a moment later. I sat back down, offering Abi a wolfish grin as she ushered me inside. "Have a good jog, puppy?" she teased, reaching out to pet me again like she just couldn't help herself. "Do you need a home? A drink of water? Maybe I'll adopt you!"

Snorting, I reached out to playfully nip at her shorts.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, swatting at my muzzle. "Keep that up, and I'll charge Fenris for a new wardrobe!"

I trotted away, my claws clicking on the tile floor as I made my way down the hall to the vast storeroom where Val kept all her supplies. Stopping outside the closed door, I began to paw at it.

Thankfully, Val was inside, cataloging something that made my nose itch. I sneezed, and she gave me a fond smile.

"Feeling better?" she asked, leaving her chore behind. I was grateful she closed the door, even if the heavy herbal scent lingered on her dark linen dress as we walked to one of the living rooms, where Abi joined us moments later.

Val sat on one of the couches while Abi perched herself on an armchair, both of them watching me as I splayed out on one of the rugs. My claw caught a snag, and I snarled, trying to shake myself free as I wondered why Fenris would keep something so unfriendly to wolves in his home. The thought fluttered away, and eventually, my skin began to crawl at the feeling of two sets of eyes on me. *What?*, I wanted to demand, but all that came out was a short bark, my ears falling flat against my skull. My tail curled up behind my hind legs.

"Are you ready to shift back?" Val prompted.

I nodded, but nothing happened.

"Take your time," she said.

I growled to myself and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to force my wolf back so I could return to human form. She stubbornly refused and planted her paws down. I could feel our claws snag the rug again, and my frustration spiked. My wolf growled back at me, as if insisting I wasn't going to intimidate her.

*Ugh! This is important!*

But she wasn't listening, or maybe she couldn't listen. I still wasn't really sure how this all worked, and it wasn't like Fenris had the time to sit down and give me a primer on how to be a functional shifter. That'd probably take days we certainly didn't have.

*Come on!*

I had no idea how long I sat there, trying to force a change, but nothing was happening. When I opened my eyes, I was sitting in the same spot and at the same height. Smug triumph rippled through my wolf, and I groaned, wondering if I needed to go outside and run several more laps around the island. I'd caught my breath since returning to Fenris's home, but my muscles still burned with exertion. I certainly wasn't brimming over with energy now.

*What if I used up too much energy? I wondered, a cold rush of fear rolling through me. What if I can't shift back because I'm not strong enough?*

I laid down on the rug and whined, giving Val a plaintive look. She furrowed her eyebrows and shared a concerned look with Abi. "Are you alright?" she asked, even though I couldn't answer her.

*I can do this,* I thought, trying not to let desperation close in. I shut my eyes again, this time focusing on my breathing. I tried not to think about my wolf, just the stillness of letting the oxygen flow in and out of me. Being at peace with myself. Being indifferent to the world around me, but still being a part of it; not resisting it but flowing with it. My breaths deepened, the rhythm slowing. Everything became a little easier, and when I finally opened my eyes to prop myself back up, it was my palm spread across the floor, not my paw.

Exhausted, I smiled down my now-human skin.

"Well done!" Val praised, getting off the couch to offer me a hand. She looked me up and down where I stood. "But I think that will be quite enough training for now. We don't want to push you so far. You need days to recover."

As much as I wanted to keep working, I knew Val made a good point. A few extra gains wouldn't be worth days of recovery.

"Let's go get something to eat," Abi suggested, getting up and walking back to the kitchen. "I got hungry just watching you run."

As we entered the kitchen, Walter arrived at the same time from whatever chore he'd been tending to. He gave me a look. "Are you alright, Celeste?"

he asked, glancing at the other two women. “You aren’t pushing yourself too much with your magic training, are you?”

Val smiled and shook her head. “She was practicing shifting, actually,” she replied, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Celeste did quite well.”

Before I could say anything, Abi interjected, beaming at Walter. “You are just the nicest man,” she gushed, her eyes twinkling. “So concerned about everyone all the time.” She glanced over at Val and me. “Just like Val! She made sure Celeste stopped before she went too far. The two of you are just such great, kind mentors.”

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes at how heavy-handed Abi was being, but Val took it in stride. “I’d be a poor mentor if I didn’t guide younger witches against harm,” she replied, not quite meeting Walter’s gaze. “My own mentors were wonderful. I want to do them proud.”

“I’m sure you do,” Walter said softly as he turned to the refrigerator, clearly looking for something to prepare.

“Val, is that a new dress?” Abi asked a little too loudly. “I love it. The dark blue looks so good on you,” she added as she plopped down next to me.

I tried to keep my expression neutral as I shoved an elbow into her ribs. Abi needed to cool it, or she was going to blow the matchmaking.

Before Abi could say anything else, Walter’s phone rang. He closed the fridge while fishing it out of his pocket. It must have been something important, as he excused himself and hurried out of the kitchen to answer it.

I sighed, giving Abi a dark look as Val refused to look at us both. “Should I make you something to eat, Celeste?” she finally asked, chewing her lower lip. “I’m not sure if that call will take Walter away for a while, and you really should relax.”

“Speaking of relaxing,” Abi said, clearly not taking the hint, “Celeste and I were talking about that the other day. I think we *all* need a little bit of time to relax. You should join us for a girl’s night, Val!”

Val glanced at us, as if legitimately surprised we’d want to spend time with her outside of studying. That reaction made my heart ache, and I wondered just how isolated she’d been. For a moment, I even forgot to be annoyed with Abi.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling at Val. “I bet it’s been a little while since you’ve had the time to pamper yourself and just relax. I’m sure you’ve been really busy as Fenris’s house witch, and I get the feeling he doesn’t invite a lot of others over at any given time.”

“Well...” Val trailed off, looking down at her nails. “I suppose I don’t spend a lot of time on that sort of thing, no. But there isn’t really anyone to impress. Fenris simply cares that a job gets done, and if it gets done well.”

“Oh, Val,” I said quietly. “Surely there *is* someone to impress. And you know, even if there isn’t, you still can do your nails for *you* because you like them to look pretty, not because you want someone to notice them. I’m sure you’d be noticed no matter what, anyway.”

As much as I thought Val and Walter would be a lovely couple, I didn’t think making that match should come at the expense of her confidence. She deserved to pamper herself simply because she worked hard!

“We could invite Morgan, too!” Abi added, finally seeming to sense what I was hinting at.

Val’s smile grew a little wider. “That’s very kind, but she’s back with our coven. I don’t think she’d be able to get here tonight short of teleportation, and that’s really not an appropriate use of magic. If the two of you just want to—”

“You’re still invited,” I said firmly. “You work so hard. Abi’s right, we should all relax. Besides, maybe then we’ll all be refreshed enough to wake up early and get back to work tomorrow.”

My best friend snorted. “Speak for yourself,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I don’t wake up early for anyone.”

“That’s true,” I agreed, smirking. “You couldn’t even wake up early for class.”

“Shut up,” Abi whined, bopping me playfully as Walter returned, quietly resuming his food preparation. “Keep that up, and I will *not* braid your hair tonight, no matter how nicely you ask.”

“Whatever will I do?” I said, teasing back and grinning at Val. “You’d braid my hair, wouldn’t you?”

Val laughed, making my heart soar, and for a moment, I forgot how badly I missed Fenris. I just savored the moment with my friends, both new and old.

# Chapter 14

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*Fenris*

# Unnamed Private Island

Off the Coast of the Philippines

There were, in fact, few upsides to moving my brother halfway across the world. Not only did I have to fly for hours, but the island was so remote that it was only accessible by boat. The last thing I wanted to do when disembarking from my jet was board a small vessel and then navigate a previously uninhabited island. But after Sabine found Lyka a few weeks ago, I simply couldn't risk the same thing happening twice, even if it'd taken me a world away from Celeste. At least she was safe on Isla Lobo. It might even be the safest place I knew on the planet.

I dragged my dinghy up a tiny spit of sand, pulling a few palm fronds over it before glancing around the beach, if it could even be called that. Most of the geography was dominated by dark rocks shooting skyward and decorated with emerald foliage. This island was a more difficult place to live than Isla Caida, but it was also harder to pick out from the dozen small islands surrounding it. If someone flew overhead or whizzed nearby on a speedboat, they likely wouldn't see anyone—much less a wolf—among the branches.

The air was thick with humidity as I trudged further inland, forced to climb up sharp walls to reach the flatter area. I scented the air, and the smell of damp earth and foreign foliage filled my nose. I wasn't used to the scents of the plants here, and it took me several moments before I could finally pick up any trace of my brother.

I followed the scent a little further inland, coming across what looked like a small camp. There was a small lean-to framed with tree limbs, then layered with leaves and smaller branches to keep out the rain. Inside was a bed of larger leaves with an indent where I assumed Lyka slept. Scattered around the little clearing were a few whittled spears. One even had the remains of a fish on top.

I grimaced. *Imagine doing that climb while holding onto your meal.*

But Lyka didn't have much of a choice.

*So where is he?*

I turned and sniffed the air again. It was easier now to pick up Lyka's trail since his scent was wafting from the underbrush. I walked carefully, not sure what sort of headspace my older brother was in. I hadn't seen him since Sabine's attack, and she'd outright killed me. When I'd awoken in Peru, I was so far away from both Lyka and Celeste in that moment, I might as well have been on another planet.

The psychic witch had left me with no choice. As concerned as I'd been about Lyka's welfare, I'd had to find Celeste. He was injured, but she'd been taken, and I'd had no idea what Sabine had planned to do with her. I couldn't have abandoned my mate to the witch's devices.

But that decision had meant leaving Lyka to his own devices. I had no idea if he resented me for it or if he had been driven back to madness by the witch's assault. I certainly hoped for the best. His makeshift home seemed as civilized as when I checked on him on Isla Caida before everything fell apart, but I didn't want to get ahead of myself.

Before long, I found Lyka in human form, standing on the edge of a rock and looking out over the ocean. I followed his gaze, but all I saw were sapphire-blue waters, occasionally dotted with a seabird diving down to snatch a fish before flying away again.

I cleared my throat, but my brother didn't so much as blink. My frown deepened. *I certainly don't prefer this madness, but...* The man standing in front of me looked like my brother, but he was acting all wrong. Lyka never would have let me sneak up on him, even when he'd been completely out of his mind.

I took a few steps closer, looking him up and down, but nothing jumped out at me as out of place. My frown deepened. *Celeste did mention something about Sabine rooting around in his mind. Did she do this?*

The thought made my gut sour. "Lyka," I said quietly, not wanting to startle him. *How long has he been standing here?* The fish hadn't seemed fresh, exactly, but now I found myself questioning my senses.

I approached my brother and gently touched his arm. After what felt like ages, he finally turned to look at me, but his dark eyes were still unseeing. I withheld a sigh and took him by the hand. "Come with me."

Lyka seemed entirely numb, but at least he was placid, trailing after me like a young child. I guided him carefully back to his camp, constantly glancing back at him over my shoulder. I had no idea what would trigger



him, but I didn't want him to get the jump on me if something did.

"Lyka," I said again, letting go of his hand. He simply wandered into the camp, approaching a pile of branches as if I didn't exist.

I sighed, realizing I wasn't getting anywhere, and sat down, making myself comfortable against a log. I watched my brother settle down to whittle another fishing spear.

He'd completed almost three spreads before glancing up, eyes going wide as he suddenly took me in. His nostrils flared, and my entire body went rigid before he growled at me. His tool was flung to the side before Lyka threw himself at me, clawing at me with ragged nails as we crashed into the forest floor.

"Lyka!" I yelled, trying to get through to him. But I saw only the feral shifter I'd been watching for decades on end.

With a grunt, I heaved him off to the side. Lyka yelped, scuttling sideways like a young wolf. I looked at him as I got to my feet. As my brother jumped to his own feet, I finally realized how *thin* he was. He'd lost a significant amount of muscle, and that made him look *old*. I'd known him for centuries, and this was the first time in ages that my brother looked like he was older than me—and not for the better. Whatever was in his mind was clearly affecting his ability to hunt or care for himself.

I scowled, cursing Sabine to myself as I turned to leave, not interested in fighting with Lyka any longer. He'd only end up hurting himself, and I had to protect him any way I could.

As I stared out the jet's window into the distant ocean below, I couldn't force the sight of my brother from my head. His gaunt frame, his listless stare...at least when he'd been feral, he'd been robust. Powerful. He was still the man and the wolf I'd grown up with—perhaps even more so, in some ways. But this?

*It's like Sabine removed whatever made Lyka Lyka and left a hollow shell in his wake.* If she meant to kill him, she was only one or two steps away from that, I was certain.

I'd arranged for a member of the Order of the Stars located in Australia to place guards around Lyka's island. I'd hoped to let Lyka stay entirely anonymous, but it was clear now that I couldn't rely on my brother to hunt for himself. If someone was delivering food to the island so Lyka wouldn't

starve, additional measures would need to be taken to maintain secrecy.

I leaned against the window, trying to remind myself not to grind my teeth, yet every time my thoughts drifted back to Lyka's gaunt form, it was all I could do to keep my wolf from springing forward. He had a complicated relationship with Lyka—after all, our wolves had once been the best of friends—but if possible, he felt Lyka's betrayal even deeper than I did. Perhaps it was because there was no loyalty fiercer than a wolf's, and even now, my wolf was enraged by the idea that someone had *done* this to Lyka, our last remaining packmate. He railed at me, demanding we do something at once to bring the perpetrator to justice.

Truthfully, there was little I would like more. Sabine had attacked our mate *and* our brother. But if it was easy to track her down, I would've done so and strung her up myself. There was also the knowledge that the Solar Sovereign was awake and moving in the shadows, and I *still* didn't know who they were or where they were. For all the damage Sabine had done, I knew if I let my guard down and allowed an attack on those I cared about, anything the Solar Sovereign did would easily be ten times worse.

I closed my eyes and took a breath.

*And I couldn't protect them before...*

Worse than that, I didn't know how to help Lyka now. I took another breath, aware of the wolf lurking at the edges of my control. I couldn't lose it now. I licked my lips and racked my brain for any solution, but I'd never seen anything like this. Not in a wolf shifter, and not in one so close to me. I felt isolated. Paralyzed.

*You don't have to do this alone anymore.*

*Now you have me to help, too.*

Celeste's voice drifted to me, almost ethereal in nature. I inhaled sharply and considered my mate's talents. She'd not only cast Sabine out of her own mind, but had extricated the witch from Cody and Abigail's minds as well. Both of them had returned entirely to themselves. Celeste, too, seemed as vibrant as ever, but...

*What has Sabine done to Lyka's mind? What if she laid a trap?*

I knew little of psychic magic, but the witch's ability to jump from Abigail to Celeste was alarming. At least my mate was now aware of such a trick and wouldn't let it happen again.

*Who am I really trying to protect? Celeste, or myself?*

Celeste had proven herself to be a strong, capable witch. Not only that,

but she was incredibly clever, often seeing the world in ways I'd never considered. If there was any hidden clue or an alternative, it was Celeste who would come up with it.

*And she did ask me to stop keeping her in the dark...*

If I didn't share this with her now, I knew she'd resent that I'd gone back on my vow to share things with her. My word, especially with her, was something I meant to uphold.

I opened my eyes and rubbed my face with a groan. As much as I disliked the idea of putting my mate in harm's way, I saw no alternative to discovering what had happened to my brother.

*And she can always say no, I reminded myself. I'd never force Celeste to provide assistance if she couldn't. And maybe she'll have a good idea that doesn't involve her rooting around in his mind at all. Unlikely as that was, it provided little comfort for my wolf. And this can wait until after the eclipse. Then, if Lyka does anything to her in his madness—*

I shook my head before my mind conjured up images of what my brother did to his mate. At least Celeste would be tied to my life force by then, so if the worst happened...

My gut churned, and I had to halt that train of thought before my wolf got upset. We'd be landing in Santiago soon, and I intended to check on some of the local shifter packs in Chile before continuing on to Panama and Isla Lobo. It wouldn't do to show up like a feral beast.

After landing in Santiago, I checked in on the coven of vampires who'd made a home there. There was also a pair of mountain cat shifters and a fae community on the border of Chile and Peru. While traveling north, I checked in on a pack of wolf shifters hidden near La Reserva Nacional de Salinas y Aguada Blanca. It was a lot of work for a night and a day, and I was relieved to meet my jet back in Lima.

I would regularly check in with paranormal communities. Though I usually stuck to shifters, I wanted to see what other groups were up to as well. If the Solar Sovereign was moving, they would be trying to gain shifters' allegiance, but that didn't make everyone else immune to the Sovereign. After all, Faulkner had clearly been dabbling in something well outside his realm.

As I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes, finally tired enough to

get a bit of sleep, my phone buzzed. I growled to myself, having half a mind to ignore it entirely. But as I cracked open an eye and saw Gilbert's name on the screen, I knew I couldn't.

With a sigh, I hauled myself upright and slid my finger across the screen. "Hello," I said, pressing the phone to my ear. "What did you find?"

"Well, Romania is *lovely* this time of year," Piers crooned into my ear, and it took all of my strength not to hang up on him. "The smell of garlic is rather pervasive, though."

"We are not having much luck." Gilbert sighed a moment later, his remorse evident even over the phone.

"Perhaps we should stop chasing ghosts and focus on our *actual* enemies," Piers said, ever dramatic.

I narrowed my eyes. "Ah. Well, I am quite certain the Solar Sovereign is real, but I will humor you. You can return to tracking down Sabine and her current location."

Hearing the vampire's throat bob over the phone, I allowed myself a small smile.

"Ah, you know, you really should invest your resources in the biggest fish, yes?" Piers began. "We should really—"

My phone beeped suddenly, cutting him off. I was about to ask him to repeat himself when it beeped again. I frowned, pulling the cell away from my ear. Cody King's name flashed across the screen. It was so rare I got calls, and getting two at once was practically an anomaly.

"I have to go," I informed the twins, hitting the button to drop their call and pick up the next one. "Hello?"

"Fenris! Uh, sir! Hi!" Cody greeted me, enthusiastic as ever. I sighed, rubbing my temple with my free hand. I was already regretting whatever possessed me to share my number with the young shifter.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to keep the bite out of my voice. I was sure my effort wasn't a great success.

Cody cleared his throat. "So I went home to my pack in California, right? And everything's cool at first, my parents are happy to see me, blah blah. But then I'm catching up with a few of my friends, and they mention this older shifter, Fred Powis. He's pretty up there, though it's not like he's an elder or anything, and he likes to hang out at the bingo hall with all the—"

"Get to the point, Cody."

"Ha! Right, sorry." The young shifter chuckled, trying to mask his nerves.

“Anyway, my buddies said he started acting kind of weird. And then he started asking about *me*, and that’s even weirder because I’ve only ever talked to him when my Grammie used to play bingo with him, you know? But I don’t think too much of it until my next-door neighbor comes over and starts telling my parents about this big weird *fish* that’s shown up in the bay all of a sudden and no one will believe her, but she’s got a photo.”

“Your neighbor is human?”

“Uh-huh. Nice lady, probably in her forties. Has a bunch of cats that hate us.”

“And what was in the photo?” I prompted Cody, assuming it wasn’t a fish. Though with him, that wasn’t a sure thing.

“A siren,” he said, almost breathless. “Just the tail, but growing up on the ocean, our parents made sure we knew what they were, you know? Sirens aren’t afraid to snack on a shifter pup if they can get away with it!”

I stiffened in my seat. “You’re sure of this?”

“Oh, yeah. My parents saw it, too. Mom’s already gone to confer with our pack alpha. I knew you’d want to know right away because, well, our neighbor’s a human, and...”

I bit off a groan. I already had ninety-nine problems to deal with, and a siren was just another one. “And?” I prompted.

“Well, I asked around, and Fred Powis isn’t the only guy starting to act weird out of nowhere. Two shifters disappeared last month. No one really knows what happened to them, but all this...it, ah, reminds me of what Sabine did. Except, you know, it’s just a siren...”

My scowl deepened. “No, it’s worth looking into,” I said, glad that Cody hadn’t just written it off. It was odd for a siren to suddenly get so bold. Cody’s parents had been right in warning their children that a siren might lure a shifter pup for an easy meal, except the siren wouldn’t linger. They’d never survive a furious pack out for blood. That this one was clearly staying in the area spoke to something else.

*I wonder if the siren is working with the Solar Sovereign. If it’s luring shifters without killing them, perhaps the Sovereign is extracting their loyalty. It is odd the pack wasn’t able to identify what happened to them.*

Even if they hadn’t shared mate bonds, the pack should’ve still sensed some loss or disruption with the shifters’ deaths. It was all too strange. “I need you to come back to Florida,” I told Cody. “You will meet me at the meeting of the Order of the Stars. I’ll have Walter send you the details.”

“Seriously?!” I held my phone away from my ear as Cody whooped. “Hell yeah, I’m a...Star? I’m a member of the Order of the Stars?!”

I smiled wryly to myself. That wasn’t what I meant, but I *did* appreciate his assistance, so...I would let him enjoy that high for a day or two.

“Goodbye, Cody.”

“Bye, Fenris! See you soon!”

I tucked my phone back in my pocket after hanging up, managing to get a few blissful hours of uninterrupted sleep before we landed again.

When I finally made it back to Isla Lobo, it felt like two weeks had passed, not a handful of days. I was still quite tired, but the first thing I wanted to do was see how Celeste was faring.

She wasn’t hard to find, tucked into an overstuffed armchair in my library, leafing through a book. Her wolf must have sensed me before I walked in as she was suddenly on her feet, book set aside while she strode across the room. “You’re back!” she exclaimed, almost breathless with relief as she threw her arms around my shoulders.

I blinked, a little taken aback by the joy with which I was being greeted before I leaned closer, wrapping my arms around her and pressing her against my torso. “I am,” I said, my nose in her hair. I inhaled deeply, letting the calming scents of orange blossom and the ocean wash over me.

After she’d gotten her fill, Celeste pulled back and looked me over. “Are you alright? How was your visit with Lyka?”

“I am fine,” I said, shrugging off what I’d seen while visiting my brother.

“You’re sure?” Celeste pressed, sliding her hands down my arms before taking my hands in hers. “I know last time...didn’t end the way any of us expected things to. How is your brother doing?”

I paused, taking a moment to study her. Most would have simply accepted my first answer and moved on, but my mate was genuinely concerned with how I was *feeling* after visiting my brother, not just whether I’d been physically harmed. She cared if Lyka was alright, too.

I sighed, looking down into the space between us. “Lyka is not doing well,” I finally said, shaking my head before meeting her eyes once more. “I don’t know what Sabine did to him, but...he was vacant, for lack of a better word. He looked quite skinny. *Sickly*.” I pressed my lips together. “I was wondering, perhaps once you’re stronger, if you could peer into his mind the

way you did Abigail's and see if there's a way to help him."

"Of course, Fenris," Celeste agreed at once, giving my hands a little squeeze. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I found myself smiling at my mate, enraptured by her kindness.

# Chapter 15

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Later that evening, Walter made dinner for everyone on the island. As the five of us sat down, I couldn't help but be pleased to have a big group meal like this. Fenris's knee brushed against mine as he tried to look interested in the conversation, but I could tell he was having difficulty concentrating. Given everything going on, I couldn't exactly blame him, but I wasn't going to be distracted from my mission, either.

"This is great," I told Walter, trying not to laugh as Abi nodded enthusiastically despite her mouth being full. "What is this called?"

"*Lomo saltado*," Walter replied, and I couldn't help but feel a little jealous of how easily he pronounced Spanish words. "A traditional dish from Peru."

"Oh!" I glanced down at my plate. Marinated strips of steak, onions, and French fries had been dressed with a delicious sauce and served on rice. It didn't seem like it should work, but the smell alone had been more than enough to convince me to try it. "I didn't really get to eat anything except a quick breakfast when we were in Peru last."

"We should fix that," Walter said gently, smiling down at his own plate. "If Fenris doesn't mind, of course."

"This is a great intro," I replied, still grinning. "I didn't know you cooked Peruvian food! What other tricks do you have up your sleeve?"

I got him to laugh, and I didn't miss how Val's smile widened a little at the sound. "Fenris has a fondness for that particular cuisine. I do my best to make sure he wants for nothing."

"It's just like being there," Val said a moment later as she took another bite. Walter finally looked up, watching her for a split second before going back to his own meal. The two of them were impossibly cute, like children with their first crush. Except they were the only ones who didn't realize it.

Abi looked over at me, and I nodded, understanding her meaning at once. *Clearly*, our two favorite lovebirds needed a little nudge to get the ball rolling

between them. My best friend smirked and flashed a quick wink at me before returning to her meal.

“What’s with all the faces?” Fenris murmured, giving me a raised eyebrow.

I snorted. “Hush.”

His expression only darkened. “No one has shushed me in over six hundred years.”

My cheeks went a little pink as I realized he must be referring to his parents or perhaps his older brother. I leaned in. “Walter and Val are clearly crazy for each other,” I whispered, glad no one else at the table was a wolf shifter. I would’ve been mortified if they overheard me. “Abi and I are trying to get them to talk more.”

Fenris snorted and sat back in his chair a bit. “Is that all?” he asked, raising a brow at me again. He looked thoroughly unimpressed. “That’s easy.” Before I could stop him, he turned and addressed Walter and Val. “Do you remember when we traveled to Italy back in the 1980s?” he asked them. “We were tracking a problematic shifter pack down in Italy. They were causing quite a ruckus amongst human villages.”

I frowned, about to elbow him—this really wasn’t romantic talk—but Val was already nodding. “Oh, yes. We had the perfect weather the entire time—and that wasn’t even my doing,” she said, sighing fondly. “Those two days in Venice were incredible, even if it was mostly spent searching.”

Walter hummed, looking over at Val with a smile. My pulse quickened, and I tried not to stare at the pair of them. “The following night in Florence was quite nice, too,” he added. “I’ve never been able to replicate the pasta we had there.”

Val smiled warmly at him. “Oh, but your attempts are the closest I’ve ever tasted,” she said, and Walter flushed a little red. “It certainly outranks some of the ‘Italian food’ I’ve had in the cities we’ve visited.”

Walter nodded, looking like he wasn’t sure if he should keep looking at Val or stare his plate down. “I seem to recall a lovely vintage shop as well. You bought some Italian operas, yes? Records?”

Val turned bright pink.

Walter’s smile grew a little more. “It was an entire collection, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Ah, yes,” Val said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Perhaps I’d gone a bit overboard, but to see so many fine works of music in one place...I

couldn't resist. It was practically a siren song." She sighed wistfully. "It was so expensive, even then. My husband at the time wasn't particularly thrilled with me, but oh, it was worth it. I still listen to those records."

Walter's eyebrows threatened to pop out of his head, and Val cleared her throat, somehow turning even pinker. "Ah, my ex-husband wasn't thrilled about the trip at all. He was...hmm...how do I put this?"

"He was a sour, useless man and an even more pathetic warlock," Fenris said grumpily, rolling his eyes. "I'm glad you got rid of him."

I tried to keep my expression neutral as I leaned sideways, shoving my elbow right into Fenris's ribs, but I could already see the moment was lost.

Val was looking down at her meal now, poking at a few fries. "Ah, yes," she said, sounding a bit flustered. "You know, I'd better go take inventory of my herbs and ingredients. Morgan will be returning soon, and if I'm not leaving Isla Lobo, I'll need her to bring some things from our coven."

I sighed as an awkward, heavy mood fell over the table.

After dinner, I decided to return to the library to look into Lyka's symptoms. I knew we probably wouldn't have time to check in on him again before the solar eclipse, but I wanted to be ready after the event. Besides, if I found something groundbreaking, that'd be good.

However, just as I picked a tome and sat down, Fenris entered the library. I glanced up, raising a brow at his stormy expression. "Everything okay?" I asked, aware that the answer was probably not. I just wasn't sure what the issue was.

"What was that all about?" Fenris demanded, irritation obvious in his voice as he stalked across the library to sit in the armchair next to mine.

I almost smiled. Peeved or otherwise, he still wanted to be near me, and that felt really nice. My wolf thrummed deep inside me, clearly feeling the same way. "Which part?" I replied, laying my hand on the book's cover.

"The part where you elbowed me," he grouched, giving me an unreadable look. "I think you're also the only person who's done that since—" He trailed off.

"Since Lyka?" I asked gently. He nodded, and I sighed. "Because you really put your foot in your mouth there," I explained. "Abi and I were trying to get Walter and Val to talk, but her ex-husband isn't exactly a great topic, you know?"

“He’s just an ex,” Fenris grunted.

I snorted. “Fenris, you get your tail in a twist every time I even think about Ben. And *I* broke up with *him*. I’m with *you*. Imagine how Walter feels.”

He studied me for a moment, brows knitting further together. “What does this have to do with Walter?”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I pressed a hand over my mouth. *He really doesn’t get it*, I realized. In a way, a mate was black and white to him. It was fate, after all. But humans and witches and probably everyone else had to go through the messy process of figuring out who liked them and if they were liked in return. No wonder dating seemed foreign to him.

“You’re pulling my leg right now, aren’t you?” I teased him, setting the book on the table next to me.

Fenris frowned. “I assure you, I am not.”

I leaned forward, grinning at him. “C’mon, you’ve been around for centuries!”

“And?” I could see his frustration growing, but I just couldn’t stop myself. It was almost cute.

“Gosh, Fenris, did no one explain this to you? When two humans like each other very much, but they don’t want to—eep!”

Fenris moved with lightning speed, growling playfully as he scooped me up out of the chair, then held me bridal-style against his chest.

“Hey!” I scolded, unable to keep the smile off my face. “Don’t be a spoilsport. How often do I know something you don’t?”

“Probably more often than you think,” he replied, his mouth curling up on one side. He leaned down to give me a kiss.

I turned my head a little in his direction, returning his affection with a birdlike peck. It wasn’t often he said something nice, and I wanted to luxuriate in it. “What else?” I asked, beaming at him.

The skin around Fenris’s eyes crinkled a little. “Well, you certainly know more about stars in the scientific sense,” he replied breezily. “In fact, when I went on that tour at the Challenger Learning Center...” He trailed off, but offered me a wicked grin.

I rolled my eyes and squirmed in his grip, trying to get enough leverage to give his ribs a little pinch.

“Come here,” Fenris said after a minute, as if I weren’t already in his arms. I stopped my wriggling, allowing myself to lean into his sturdy chest.

“Kiss me,” he said.

I slowly looked up at him, admiring the way the sunbeam cut through the window and played off his features, defining the sharp lines of his jaw. Fenris moved one hand over to touch my face, running the pad of his thumb against my cheek before meeting me halfway. I melted into his touch at once, forgetting everything we were talking about. I didn't pull away until I was red in the face and out of breath.

Fenris looked quite pleased with himself and was flushed as well. He watched me for a second before rearranging things so I was straddling his lap in the chair instead of being cradled like a blushing bride. He moved just enough that his thigh was pressed between my legs, and I bit my lip, trying not to give him the satisfaction of a groan despite the heat rapidly building in my core.

“I was doing something,” I protested, even though that wasn't remotely true.

“We have more important things to take care of,” Fenris replied, grinning wickedly.

I laughed and kissed his jawline. “Like what?” I teased, splaying my fingers over his chest. “Were you going to tell me all the things I know better than you?”

“Perhaps,” he replied, sounding just as amused. “If that's what you'd really like. I could sing a song of your praises, or perhaps I could get you to sing my name if I—”

I heard footsteps seconds before Walter walked through the door frame. “Fenris—oh, my apologies,” he said, clearing his throat as he looked away. “Keziah Palm is calling. Should I inform her that you'll return her call when you're free?”

I bit my lip, feeling like I'd spontaneously combust if I met anyone's eyes. I looked down at once, counting backward from ten to combat my rising embarrassment.

“I'll call her back later,” Fenris snapped, but I was already starting to untangle myself from his arms.

“You better just take the call,” I mumbled, still not quite ready to look at him. “I'm going to go practice some spells under the moon.”

Fenris growled. I could almost sense his wolf's aggravation at being interrupted, but mine was as mortified as I was.

“Fine,” he muttered, seeming to sense this. As Walter handed the phone

to Fenris, I retreated from the library. Before I could make it down the hall and head upstairs, Walter caught up to me, catching me by the arm.

“Celeste,” he said quietly.

I gave him a small smile. “What’s up?” I said, careful to keep my voice down with Fenris on the phone.

“I do know what you and Abigail were up to at dinner,” he said, his face completely neutral.

I almost swallowed my tongue, but the shock must have been written across my face. Seeing my expression, he gave me a wry smile.

“I’m sorry,” I finally managed to choke out. “I’m sorry, the two of you just...”

“I have adored Val from afar for a very long time,” Walter said before I could stumble on, and I felt a rush of gratitude. “However, as you are aware, she was married when we first met. I’d never put a person in a position where they felt forced to choose, so I kept my feelings to myself.”

“Walter,” I said, my chest suddenly feeling too tight. I turned, taking one of his hands in mine as I squeezed. “That was a long time ago, though. They broke up, and you had nothing to do with that. You’re both free agents now, and you both deserve happiness. If that’s with each other, that’s all the better, isn’t it? No one else’s opinion but yours and hers should matter.”

Walter studied me for a moment, his expression growing warmer as he squeezed my hand in return. “You certainly have changed since we first met, Celeste,” he mused. “In fact, one might even say you’ve blossomed.”

“What?” I blinked, a bit taken aback. “What do you mean?”

Walter smiled. “When we first met, you were quite rigid about what you should and shouldn’t do—to the point of your own detriment. You were engaged to someone solely because it was practical.”

“I...” I paused, thinking through his point. I *had* dated Ben because it was safe, and I’d gotten engaged to him because it was the logical next step as an adult, not because I was crazy about him. I glanced down as I tried not to smile. “You’re right,” I said after a moment, then looked back up at Walter. “I guess a lot *has* changed since then. I feel...well, if I’m completely honest, I feel more like myself. Like I’m just *being* instead of thinking about how I *should* be and trying to act that out.”

Walter’s expression grew even warmer, and he gave my hand another squeeze before letting me go. “You know, you’ve also been very good for Fenris. He’s changed very little since I first met him, but he’s been evolving

bit by bit since you came into our lives. I've watched him isolate himself for decades, even to the point of misery. I'm happy to see him trust someone because he wants to."

My smile flickered a little as I thought about Fenris's past. It made sense *why* he'd become that way, but I didn't want to betray his trust, either.

"No changing the topic," I said, wagging a finger at Walter. "We were talking about you. Are you going to pursue Val now? She has no issue having a relationship with someone other than a witch."

"Hmm." He sighed and shook his head. "I suppose if we're staring down the end of the world, I don't have much time to waste, do I?"

My eyes went wide. "Excuse me?" I squeaked. I could hear myself swallow.

Walter cleared his throat, shaking his head. "I mean, if the Solar Sovereign is back, then I imagine our lives are about to become much more chaotic. I only know what Fenris has shared with me, but I'm positive we'll have to be on high alert once the eclipse rolls around. We—I—have a lot to lose, but that's what makes it worthwhile."

"I..."

"I should be going back downstairs. Have a good evening, Celeste."

"Um, thanks. You too," I muttered.

*End of the world? Did someone forget to tell me something?*



# Chapter 16

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*Fenris*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

I bid Keziah goodbye and hung up the phone, trying to quash my lingering irritation. It wasn't the pack alpha's fault for confirming that she'd be present at the Order of the Stars meeting tomorrow in Florida—quite the contrary, really—but the timing had been foul.

I wrinkled my nose and stared down at the phone's blank screen. I didn't want to get ready, but I knew we'd have to depart in a few hours. It was imperative I get to the meeting place early to inspect the area; I couldn't allow it to be attacked. Faulkner may have been dispatched, yet the chaos he'd caused in the past several weeks was alarming. Someone couldn't pick up where he'd left off.

Not for the first time, I wished I could shed my responsibilities. If I were just a normal shifter, none of these tasks would matter to me. But I wasn't one, and it was a waste of my time to consider anything else.

I pocketed my phone and rubbed my face, trying to quiet my wolf before exiting the library. Leaving Celeste *again* was the last thing I wanted, but this needed to be done—and she needed to use every moment she could to train. I wouldn't interrupt her learning process just because I was antsy.

Pushing myself out of the chair, I decided to head upstairs, but when I got to my room, I found it empty. *Odd*. I frowned and stepped back into the hall to sniff at the air. Celeste was certainly up here, but...I paced over to the guest room Celeste was staying in and opened the door.

There was a dark expression on her face when she stopped packing and looked up at me. I wanted little more than to kiss her until that frown disappeared, but I suspected she wouldn't appreciate it after the previous interruption.

“What's wrong?” I asked instead, letting myself all the way into the room.

Celeste didn't speak until I closed the door behind me. “What do you expect to happen at the solar eclipse?” she asked, turning to face me. She

folded her arms over her chest and looked small. “Not what’s supposed to happen. What do you think will *actually* happen?”

“We’ve discussed this. While I don’t know the explicit details, we will perform a ritual—well, mostly you will, though I will be present—and our life forces will be bound. We will be—”

“No, that’s what *supposed* to happen,” Celeste said, cutting me off. She made a face. “But now this Solar Sovereign person is around, right? You think they’re awake.”

“I’m certain of it,” I replied, unable to temper the growl in my voice.

“Then what happens if this person attacks us during the eclipse? What do we do? What if we can’t complete the ritual because they’re intervening? Even if they don’t kill us, they could still distract us for just long enough, right? The total eclipse doesn’t exactly last forever.” She swallowed hard. “Or what if they actually *defeat* you? You said...” She trailed off, breaking eye contact.

I hated to see my *khuya* like this. After everything that had happened, though, I knew platitudes wouldn’t cut it. Celeste needed to know the whole truth. Memories of Antarctica plagued me, but it was a lesson I wouldn’t waste. I wouldn’t throw Celeste into the eclipse underprepared, or worse, let her panic and end up getting hurt.

“The total eclipse over the moon temple,” I sighed, watching her face, “is the only time the Lunar Lord is completely stripped of his power. Even the Handmaidens can’t restore it then, full coven or not. During that brief period when the moon blocks the sun, I will be weak. Vulnerable. If I am killed, I will not be reborn.”

Celeste’s face turned even paler.

“In the past, the Lunar Lord’s enemies have often struck during that period. As it only happens once every four hundred years, this is my first time experiencing it as Lunar Lord. Since the Solar Sovereign is back, I expect they’ll attempt to kill me. It’s no coincidence they’ve decided to step out of the shadows *now*, so close to the eclipse.”

“And what does it mean for them to attack you?” Celeste asked quietly.

“They’ll target us,” I said evenly. “They’ll bring whatever allies they’ve gathered because this is all-or-nothing. If they don’t kill me, then they’ll have to wait another four hundred years. They will bring *everything*, and they’ll not just attack us but our loved ones. In the past, they would attack the entire Celestial Pack. Anything to distract the Lunar Lord or his mate from the task

they need to complete. That is why we need to gather *our* allies, because otherwise, the paranormal world could experience a seismic split.”

Celeste didn't say anything, but I could feel her acute spike of fear. My wolf, who'd normally gobble up such an intense emotion, recoiled and whined, upset that his mate was afraid.

I strode over, no longer able to stop myself, and wrapped my arms around her, holding her close. “It'll be okay,” I said.

“How on earth is it going to be okay?!” Celeste argued, pushing weakly against my chest. “You just told me we'd probably be facing magical *warfare*. And not just that, but against some being who is your only rival in power. We don't even know who or what that being is because they've been hiding. If we *fail*, we'll die. Our loved ones will be tortured, or worse.”

“Celeste.”

She kept going. “*I'm* the one responsible for whether or not we make it out of the solar eclipse! If I fail, it doesn't matter—you're stuck with your curse, and...and I feel like your life is in my hands, Fenris, and I don't know...” She cut herself off with a harsh breath.

I squeezed her tighter. “You won't be alone,” I said fiercely. “And I'll protect you. Our allies will protect *us*. That's why we're gathering them.”

“What happens if we fail? What happens if the Solar Sovereign wins? Do they become cursed?”

I shook my head. “To the best of my knowledge, no. Whereas the Lunar Lord was a title granted by the Handmaiden witches alongside the associated power, the first Solar Sovereign crowned themselves in response to that decision. As such, they weren't afflicted with this burden. If the Lunar Lord was destroyed, my curse would be as well, which means each shifter would experience the lunar madness the way I do. For example, wolf shifters would become the feral werewolves written about in old human texts.” I grimaced. “The Solar Sovereign feeds on fear, too, and there'll be *plenty* of that for the taking. In the past, Velaris, a Solar Sovereign from centuries ago, overthrew the Lunar Lord at the time. They have no issue involving humans in their affairs—and do you know what happens? Wolf hunts, witches burning at the stake.” I growled. “Thankfully, Fenrir, my father, killed them during the eclipse over eight hundred years ago, but imagine it happening in the modern era.”

I knew this explanation wasn't what anyone would find *comforting*, but it was the truth—and that was what Celeste deserved.

When she pulled back, she looked like she was about to be sick. “What if we just skip the eclipse altogether?” she asked, sounding choked up. “You know, just go hide somewhere on the other side of the world where the Solar Sovereign can’t find us.” She licked her lips. “Then you won’t be in danger, the eclipse will pass, and we’ll be able to go on with our lives happy and whole. All of us, the shifters included.”

I sighed. On the most surface level, I supposed that was true. “If we hide, we won’t be able to break the curse,” I murmured. “And more importantly, we won’t be able to bind your life force to mine. I will never be able to take you as my mate.”

“I know, but everyone else...”

“What about them? Sure, it’ll be fine for a time—but you will live a mortal lifespan and die a mortal death, and I will go mad just like my brother did. You’re the only Handmaiden witch I know. Even if you magically found more, we’d need a whole coven to be able to crown a new Lunar Lord. I don’t even know how that would work because Lyka and I are the last members of the Celestial Pack. I have no idea if a mortal shifter would be able to withstand the curse.” I scowled. “All shifters would be in the exact same place. It would simply be delayed by seventy or so years.”

“Fenris...”

“Even if you did find an entire coven of Handmaiden witches somewhere, and even if they magically found some other immortal shifter pack that’s been hidden for all of time, they’d be weak. And the Solar Sovereign could simply waltz in and end the ritual before it even began. They would have decades to gather their strength.” I sighed, considering my next words. “It would only delay the outcome, Celeste, not change it.”

Celeste refused to meet my gaze as she pressed her forehead against my chest. In turn, I rubbed my hand up and down her spine. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that all of this hinged on us—in a way, hinged on *her*, her ability to complete the ritual. I knew it was asking too much too fast, but...

“Okay,” she whispered, finally pulling away. She rubbed her face, then gave herself a little shake. “Okay,” she said once more with a little more strength. “Well, if that’s the way it is, then I really ought to be getting back to training.” She paused, finally looking back at me. “Hey, do you have—well, I don’t know why you would, but do you know if there’s a spell book that explains exactly what I’ll need to do during the eclipse? I think I need to focus on that, strictly. No guessing.”

I frowned, irritated with myself because I hadn't thought of that resource for her. "I do not," I said, "but the Handmaiden witches did keep fairly extensive records. I'm sure that information is recorded somewhere. I'll have someone go through their archives and find it at once." My frown deepened, remembering I'd never been privy to the coven's inner workings. It wasn't my place, and I wasn't one of their members.

*Perhaps Grant Oakley will be able to research this for me if I provide him with the archives. After all, he had found that...ah, the grimoire!*

I'd be retrieving that grimoire soon. If it *had* belonged to Celeste's birth mother, as we suspected, it was an excellent start. I had half a mind to mention it to Celeste, but decided against getting her hopes up in case Grant was wrong.

Instead, I told her, "I believe I know someone capable of doing that research."

"Okay," Celeste said, nodding. "Do you want to come down to the beach with me while I practice?"

There was nothing I wanted more, but I didn't have the time. I sighed heavily and walked back over to her. "I need to prepare for the meeting with the Order of the Stars," I said regretfully, leaning in to kiss her forehead. "But I would much rather be here with you." I felt her tiny smile more than I saw it. "When I get back, I'd like to go on that date you mentioned earlier."

Celeste's smile grew as she nodded. "I would love that, Fenris," she said quietly. She reached out and gave my hand a little squeeze. "I know you're going to be busy, but if you can, please consider taking Abi? She'd really like to get her stuff and let her family know she's okay so they don't call the police."

I groaned, but replied, "I'll see what I can do."

Celeste's eyes sparkled, then she pressed a kiss to my lips. In that moment, I would have moved the stars if she'd asked me to.

# Chapter 17

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

I still felt tired when I woke up, but seeing *1:17* flash across my phone screen made me groan, and I hauled myself out of bed. I used to hate sleeping in, and even now, I didn't love it. It didn't matter that I'd been practicing magic well into the wee hours of the morning and pushed myself harder than ever before. Everything Fenris had explained to me yesterday was still at the forefront of my mind. The idea of letting him down...of letting everyone down...

*Stop that.* I couldn't focus on that, or I'd be paralyzed. And then I'd be no good to anyone.

After taking a quick shower and changing into a fresh t-shirt and a pair of shorts, I headed downstairs to grab something quick to eat. Fenris had left for Florida while I was out training, and I assumed Walter had gone with him. I didn't mind—I'd been making food for myself for a while. It felt nice to do something for myself instead of having it done for me, but I also didn't have time to linger on these everyday pleasantries.

As I ate my sandwich, I considered what I should work on today. I felt like I had a pretty good grasp of manipulating water the way Val had taught me. *I wonder if she left today, like she'd mentioned at dinner. I hope not.* I could certainly use another lesson, but the kitchen was quiet and empty. I would've been concerned if not for the sticky note my best friend had left for me on the refrigerator door. Fenris had taken Abi with him to Florida. I'd miss them both, but I appreciated him doing that for me, and I hoped Abi could take care of everything she needed.

I finished eating and washed up my plate, sticking it in the drying rack before heading outside. The weather was almost perfect, as it often was on Isla Lobo. A gentle breeze rolled off the ocean, and out in the sun, it was warm enough to enjoy it without feeling too hot or too cold. With the breeze, it was just right. The sand shifted beneath my bare feet as the palms rustled further up inland.

Despite the idyllic scenery, I found myself growing restless the longer I stood there. I focused on my breathing, but my gut twisted and my pulse picked up. My anxiety was spiking for no good reason, but then again, that was why anxiety was called a disorder, right? I took a deep breath, trying to quash the restless feelings, when I suddenly realized what they really were.

*Is that my wolf?*

As soon as I acknowledged her, she pressed against me like an overeager German Shepherd, clawing to let herself out.

I sighed. *You know I can't practice magic when I'm a wolf.*

She didn't seem interested, however, and I—well, I knew I couldn't ignore her forever, especially if I *did* complete the ritual on the solar eclipse. I'd be a shifter forever, and that was a long, long time to fight someone.

*Maybe I'll feel better if I burn off some energy.* Whenever his wolf was hassling him, Fenris usually seemed more collected after a run, so I didn't see why that wouldn't work for me, too. *Okay*, I told my wolf as much as I told myself. *Let's try this. Maybe if we just—*

I didn't get to finish the thought before my wolf was chomping at the bit, barreling through my consciousness. I stumbled with the force, and when I landed on the sand, it was with four paws. She yipped happily, prancing in the afternoon sun, her bushy white tail waving like a banner. It was obvious that she was elated to get out and stretch her legs, so much so that it was difficult to be upset with her. If I could've smiled, I might have, even if I was still a bit annoyed to be barreled over like that.

Curious, we turned and pranced down to the water. I sighed, trying to urge my wolf to just *run* so we'd burn off some energy, but she sprang forward, slapping her large paws into the wave. She yipped gleefully, doing it again before ducking down to take a drink.

*No, wait—YUCK!* We gagged at the salty taste and shook our head, fur flying as we stamped our paws in outrage. *Gross!*

We whirled around, taking off up the stretch of sand, charging away with our tail spinning like a propeller. The faster we ran, the further I felt pushed into the back seat until I was just a passenger. My wolf blasted down the length of the island, not stopping until we reached the far end.

She panted, tongue lolling out of her mouth as she looked around, taking in her new home. This was wildly different from the cell, and though she did not know what to make of the heat just yet, there was the space! The sounds! *The smells!* It was so much better that she couldn't even quantify it, and as

soon as she'd caught her breath, she pressed her nose to the earth, nostrils flaring as she began to catalog the island the way a wolf would.

I zoned out while she continued to sniff, making her way back to the mansion much more slowly than on the way out. When I finally pressed her again, we could see Fenris's home. Evidently satisfied with her little adventure, she didn't resist at all when I took back control. I stepped forward, back on two feet and only wobbling a little. Something so simple shouldn't have made me smile, but it did. I was practically beaming as I made my way to the kitchen, following the faint sound of someone stirring something.

"Oh, Val!" I joined her at the stove. "That smells lovely! What is it?"

Val glanced over at me and took a step back from her pot. "I'm cooking a stock so I can make herbed rice pilaf. It's one of my comfort foods, really. You can have it with almost anything."

My smile grew. "A little homesick?" I asked gently.

"A bit," Val said as she looked back into the broth, where green flecks of herbs swirled around. "Part of me wishes I could take off as easily as Walter or Fenris, but I wouldn't want to leave you alone. Besides, this is just a very happy food for me."

I reached out, touching her elbow. "It's okay, Val. I'm a big girl, I've lived alone before! If you need some time—"

Val looked back at me. "Stop it. I enjoy my time here, and it's nice to have a purpose beyond charming a jet for the Lunar Lord twice a month. I enjoy our conversations greatly. I've never considered myself a social butterfly, and being constantly surrounded by my coven can be overwhelming at times. Having a student has been rather lovely for me." She smiled warmly. "Plus, it gave me a reason to finally get my niece to the island. I've wanted Morgan to visit for ages, but...well, you know how Fenris can be about new folks. Or used to be, perhaps." Her eyes twinkled knowingly. "I think you've had a positive influence on him."

I flushed a little, ducking my head. "You're in a very good mood," I noted. "Less homesick, then?"

Val looked away, and I narrowed my eyes. "What happened?" I inhaled. "Val..."

"Walter and I had a long walk on the beach before he and Fenris left for Florida last night," she said. She walked to the chopping board and prepared more herbs, but she couldn't hide her grin from me. "It was nice to talk with him."

“Val!” I couldn’t stop myself from squealing. The only reason I didn’t race over and give her a hug was that she held a knife and I didn’t want to risk her cutting herself. “Was it romantic? Did he give you a goodnight kiss?”

There was something incredibly charming about an older woman blushing. “Perhaps,” she said, gathering her herbs and returning to the pot. “Whatever happens between Walter and me, I am grateful for the little nudge you gave us, Celeste.” She finally turned to smile at me. “Now, would you mind preparing the vegetables?”

Val and I cooked dinner before we ate it out on the patio, enjoying the moon as it slowly crept up from the horizon. It may have been a calm night, but it was one of the nicest evenings I’d had in a while. Val was like the aunt I’d always wanted Esme to be, and being able to chat with her about anything and everything—magic, men, vacations to Mexico—fed my soul in a way I hadn’t realized I needed.

After we ate, we returned to our usual clearing in the woods to practice under the moonlight. Yet, as Val helped me work through slightly more advanced elemental magic, I still felt we were moving too slowly for me to be ready for the eclipse. I knew there wasn’t much I could do until Fenris’s contact uncovered the old Handmaiden records, but when Val retired to a guest room for the night, I felt I ought to be doing *something*.

I lasted about three minutes in the master bedroom before I headed down to the library. I didn’t really *know* what kind of spells were required of me, so it was difficult to practice. I just didn’t want to waste energy on something that wouldn’t be important in a few months. At the library, at least I could read up, and if something seemed particularly important, I could query Val about it tomorrow. We’d touched on all classes of magic except one: dark magic.

I frowned while looking around at the massive shelves. I kept the light low—after working under the moon, I didn’t want to be blinded. *Should I really be looking into this?* Nothing anyone had mentioned to me about the Handmaiden witches seemed to have anything to do with dark magic. The only *example* I’d seen, if it could even be called that, was Sabine’s manipulation of the minds around her.

And transportation.

*Delila used transportation magic. She seemed...well, a bit weird, but no*

*weirder than my Aunt Esme. And certainly not off the chain or violent like Sabine.*

After standing in the middle of the library for another minute or two, I decided it couldn't hurt to *look*. I was just gathering ideas and certainly had no intention of taking over anyone's mind.

Thankfully, there were books in the library detailing dark magic. Morgan and I had looked at one a few weeks earlier, when we were trying to figure out how to free Abi and Cody from Sabine's grasp. But I didn't see *A Practical Application of Dark Magic* anywhere on the shelf.

*Maybe Morgan borrowed it to take notes.* She kept more detailed notes than anyone I'd ever met, myself included.

I trailed my finger over the shelf until a book with a plain burgundy cover caught my eye. I pulled it out and began to flip through the pages. *A Shadowed Path*, as its title declared, detailed how dark magic differed from the other types. Not only did it demand more energetic input, but its effects lasted far longer than any other spell. If used frequently enough, the author suggested it began to change the witch or warlock casting the spells, slowly eroding them from the inside out.

*"This is the most insidious facet of this particular type of magic. It is not terrifying or painful, as perhaps our coven mothers would tell us. It is not the thing that goes bump in the night. It feels like a challenge to be conquered. The thrill of the chase is exhilarating, and once you experience it, you are looking for the next high. A witch may continue to chase this, only to realize months or years later that her quest has consumed her. She may not even recognize herself anymore."*

I frowned, licking my lips as I turned the page. *That isn't ominous at all.* I wondered if Sabine had started using dark magic while knowing the potential outcome. Did she understand the risks she was taking, or did she not care?

*I guess that doesn't really matter, does it? She went and did it, and she's certainly powerful now, but at the cost of her humanity.* And if I understood the text correctly, it would take more and more to feed her magic—and her youth—the longer she used it.

*I wonder if I could just use a bit, though. Not feeding on anyone, but if I could use dark magic to learn faster, that would help Fenris. And if it helps him, that's good for all shifters, right?*

I set down *A Shadowed Path* and returned to the shelf, leafing through a few more books. At last, I found one that looked a little more promising; it

had an entire section dedicated to transportation magic. Saving Fenris and me from bouncing back and forth would mean more time to prepare. If I could master that type of magic, I could win us extra days. Perhaps even a whole week or two.

I read the chapters twice before I set the book on the side table next to the chair I'd settled in. I had no idea what time it was, only that it was still dark outside. I didn't really care; I'd just sleep in again. I only needed the moon whispering down to me as I slowed my breath, closed my eyes, and reflected on what I'd just read.

*First things first. I'll be safe about this.*

The warnings in *A Shadowed Path* weren't veiled, and I took a moment to cast a preservation spell over myself. As a spell falling within the healing class, it prevented minor injuries, or at least warded off more severe ones. Hopefully, it would shield me from any rushes, too. But that was a mental issue, and if I could preserve my state of mind, I wouldn't be tempted to chase the "thrill" of dark magic, as the authors described it.

I took another breath and held out my hand. *I want an apple*, I thought. I had to be firm in my desire, or it would never manifest.

To my great surprise, I suddenly felt a weight in my palm. When I opened my eyes, the skin of a shiny red apple glinted in a moonbeam. I grinned wildly.

*I thought this was supposed to be hard! This is way simpler than healing magic, or even elemental!*

I set the apple next to my book and held out my palm again. It felt like the moon's rays were shining through me, like we were one, and I just knew I could do anything in this moment.

*I want a peach*, I thought, my confidence bolstered. I blinked, and a fuzzy peach, sun-kissed and tender, was in my hand.

A delighted giggle bubbled past my lips, and I set the peach down. *I want more than just fruit! I want a new pair of shoes—I need a new pair of shoes. Gorgeous blue heels, just like the ones my mother used to wear.*

A pair of navy-blue heels tottered in my hand, an exact replica of what my mother had worn on my parents' wedding anniversary the year before her death. Strangely, seeing them didn't make me miss her. Instead, I felt elated, like I'd just unlocked the keys to the universe. If I could do this with so much ease, I could surely transport myself anywhere. *I don't know what Fenris was so worried about.*

I took a breath to settle my pounding heart. The adrenaline was coursing through my veins. I could feel a buzzing in the back of my head, not unlike the same sixth sense I'd gotten when Abi had grabbed me and Sabine had "jumped ship," so to speak.

*Is that a side-effect of dark magic? I shouldn't overdo it. I don't want to take myself down with a migraine.*

That thought was sobering enough that I took a few more breaths, taking the time to center myself before recalling the text again. I would try this once, and that was it—it didn't matter if I was successful or not. I'd try one short transportation spell back to the library, and then I'd go to bed.

Grabbing the nameless text from the little side table, I hurried out of the library. I decided the kitchen was the perfect distance, and once I was there, I took a deep breath. I thought of the book in my hands, of where it belonged.

*The library. This belongs in the library. I want this to return to the library, and I must go with it.*

I repeated that mantra several times as I felt the air go still around me. The temperature suddenly plunged, and for a moment, I feared I'd accidentally sent myself to the Southern Sky Research Station, but when I opened my eyes, I was in the library. All feeling returned to me at once, and I barely bit back a scream as I crumpled to the floor. It felt like someone had hit me square in the temple with a hammer.

Dropping the book on one of the rugs, I gripped my head as I lurched forward, clenching my eyes shut as pain ran up and down my spine like white-hot lightning. Behind my eyes, I saw something—

*Abi. Liana. Fenris! Oh, hell, who's screaming? Why are they screaming?!*

It was bloodcurdling and awful. The voices seemed to be getting louder and more pained. I saw blood, but I didn't know who it belonged to. My heart pounded in my ears. *They're being tortured! Sabine?! The Solar Sovereign?!*

But the figures in front of me were people I knew. Walter and Val were there, too. Even Cody, wrapped up in silver chains as he moaned and screamed, and Piers with a stake through his heart. I wanted to scream or yell or cry, but I could only look on.

I needed to stop this, but I didn't know who—

*Oh my god. It's me. I'm the one—*

I wrenched my eyes open and lurched forward, retching. I barely managed to avoid throwing up on the carpet as the horror sank deep into my



guts. It wasn't Sabine torturing my friends—it was *me*. I was dragging forth their fear to—

My stomach churned again, and I pushed myself into an upright position. “I have to get out of here.”

I needed to take a cold fucking shower and never, *ever* touch dark magic again.

*I will never be like her.*

# Chapter 18

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*Fenris*

# Villa Vizcaya

Miami, Florida

I walked the gardens of Villa Vizcaya, slowly surveying the gardens. *Celeste would enjoy it here.* In fact, I would've much preferred to be strolling with her along the hedges, marveling at the designs. Given her former place of employment, I imagined she'd enjoy the museum as well. But instead, I was checking on the security features I'd put in place before the meeting of the Order of the Stars.

I'd summoned witches from both the Thalassa and Vitalis bloodlines to fortify the area, and with the Thalassa family specializing in elemental magic and the Vitalis line's prowess with healing magic, I felt confident our bases were covered. I'd also summoned members of the Island Hopper Pack to assist with the security. It was the largest gathering I'd personally hosted in centuries—if not in my entire lifetime—and I refused to be caught unawares the way I'd been at Tessa's house.

It bothered me, not knowing how Celeste was faring, but I knew I'd be distracted if she was here with me. I would have been concerned about her well-being, my attention split in two, and I knew I had to be at the top of my game. Not only had most covens sent their most senior matron or patriarch, but many shifter packs had sent their alpha. It wasn't just wolf shifters who'd convened, either—more solitary shifters, such as bears or big cats, still had a hierarchy based on strength, and the most powerful shifters from several regions were also attending. The Order of the Stars spread across all paranormal folk, even if the curse I held was only related to shifters.

After all, shifters certainly had a vested interest. If they were plagued by madness again, it would be almost impossible to hide our existence from humans, especially in the age of technology. One video could be ignored, maybe even two, but the evidence would only pile up. The fae would be in danger, and so would the vampires and sirens and skinwalkers. The list was simply endless.

I'd invited as many representatives as I could manage, as many as would

fit inside Villa Vizcaya without it bursting at the seams. However, this much magical power in one place was enough to make even *my* wolf uncomfortable, and he bristled as we stalked about.

“I believe everything is set, Fenris,” Walter said in that moment, as if sensing my unease.

I glanced over my shoulder. My assistant was a few steps behind me, eyes scanning the tablet in his hand as he went over a checklist. “Would you like to review this one more time?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I trust your organizational skills.” Far more than I trusted my own, in fact. Walter was more organized than most pack alphas I’d met over the years. If anyone was equipped to help run a meeting of the entire Order of the Stars—or at least, the members available on such short notice—it was him.

Walter nodded. “My cousin, Kenneth, will be arriving soon to help ensure everything goes off without a hitch. There’s too much ground for one man to cover. Even me.”

“I find that unlikely,” I said, showing a hint of a smile. “I assume he’s a lifelong member of the Order.”

“Indeed.” Walter nodded. “He’s only a year younger than I am, and we often studied together in school. I trust he’ll be most helpful.”

“Good.” I inhaled. “I’ll take one last survey of the perimeter. Will that be enough time for you to get everyone in the main foyer?”

“Of course.” With that, Walter finally smiled.

After a brief run as a wolf, I decided the perimeter was as undisturbed as when we’d arrived hours earlier. There was no reason to let this go on longer than it needed to—and I could hear the murmur of voices long before I got to the gathering. Despite the workout, my wolf was still restless, stressed by the presence of so many other paranormal beings.

I entered the room as quietly as I could, though I was noticed almost at once. A selkie leaned over and whispered to a siren. They gasped, their bright eyes wide, and of course every shifter in the vicinity heard them.

I barely withheld a sigh as silence fell over the crowd in a wave. *Time to get this over with.* I’d never liked speaking to large groups, and I hadn’t usually had to, either. Lyka was always much more charismatic than me. During the last eclipse, *he* was the Lunar Lord, and the Order was his to

address.

I shook off the melancholy before it could dig its talons into me.

As soon as I reached the head of the room, I turned to address the crowd. No one murmured, but everyone watched. Fear rolled off some of the weaker paranormals, while others stared with obvious curiosity. It wasn't as if I'd made such an appearance before, and with any luck, I wouldn't have to make one again. Even my wolf was thrown too far off his guard to lap at everyone's fear like he normally would.

"Thank you, everyone, for taking the time to come here today. I know the summons was quite last-minute." My voice boomed across the massive room, filling the space all the way up to the high, ornately decorated top. Light streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows on the other side of the room, dancing off the lavishly tiled floor. The room looked *old* without feeling dated, and something about that felt very right to me. My wolf stood up a little straighter.

"As I am sure you're all aware, the solar eclipse is rapidly approaching. This is the time a Lunar Lord is at their weakest. I know this. You know this. The Solar Sovereign knows this, too."

There were a few soft gasps at the mention of the Sovereign, but I wouldn't mince words. If these were my allies, they couldn't be coddled. My enemies certainly wouldn't treat them gently.

"Given the recent coordinated attacks on several members of the Order of the Stars, I believe the Solar Sovereign has decided to consolidate their power and attempt to weaken me in return. I expect they won't reveal themselves until they absolutely must, but they *will* strike during the eclipse, seeking to execute me and release the shifter's curse." I wrinkled my nose and bared my teeth, allowing some of my wolf to show.

"That is why I've called you. This matter is too big for me to handle alone. The Solar Sovereign will scrape up whatever allies they can by promising the world, but they won't deliver it. I will need your help to prevent them from getting what they want, but it will be a battle. People will be injured. Some will probably die. But we must prevent the Solar Sovereign from shifting the scales, or far more will suffer at their claws."

For a moment, the room was still. It was as if the entire gathering had forgotten how to breathe. I knew I could compel them to submit with an alpha command, but if I did that, I'd be no better than the force I was up against.

In the next breath, Keziah Palm stepped out of the crowd. “The Snowmass Pack is with you, Lord Fenris!” she called, her eyes flashing. “We will *not* let anyone take away our peace.” She let out a growl.

Several other wolf shifters stepped forward. “The wolves of Black Shale!”

“Robert Holdworth’s pack is with you!”

It was near madness after that, shifters and witches and fae all shouting their support and decrying the Solar Sovereign. Something in my chest warmed, and I growled, pleased to see such a rise out of those I’d gathered.

“We *will* defeat them,” I promised the Order. “And we won’t let them cause any more harm to our people!”

After what felt like hours, I finally managed to pry myself free from the alphas and matriarchs and kings and leaders before slipping back into the garden. Walter had taken a moment to visit with the members of the Smith family who’d traveled to the meeting, but I needed air. I also had more business outside of the Order, though I found myself wishing once again I could be done with it and return to Isla Lobo.

Still, the evening air was refreshing as the hedges cast long shadows in the disappearing sun. The gathered paranormals were already starting to disperse. I wasn’t the only one uncomfortable with so many gathered in one place. The sooner we could all return, the better.

I heard the sound of familiar voices and paused as my mind caught up with me a moment later. Unfortunately, and much to my chagrin, I’d already been noticed.

“Fenris!” Cody exclaimed, stopping mid-flirt to beam at me.

Abi snickered and wagged her finger at him. I couldn’t let Celeste’s friend go to Tallahassee alone and unprotected, but she’d said she didn’t mind enjoying the rest of the museum’s grounds during the meeting. It seemed she’d found some company when young Cody King finally arrived.

“Down, boy,” she teased Cody. “Next thing I know, you’re going to start wagging your tail!”

Cody scoffed, but I didn’t miss the dusting of pink on his cheekbones. “Hey, so I found out everything I could about that shifter that went missing. Or shifters, I should say,” he said, his voice dropping in volume as he walked closer to me, that sparkling smile falling away. He broke eye contact, looking

at the gravel pathway between us instead of me. “So last I knew, when I left about a day ago, twelve shifters had gone missing. They’re from a few different packs, which is why I didn’t know the number was so high, but there’s maybe a missing mountain lion shifter, too? But they’re so elusive, hard to say, you know?” He wrinkled his nose. “Fuckin’ cats.”

“Anything about the siren?” I asked.

“Beyond the photos? Nah. The only other detail was that one of the shifters from the Sequoia Pack came down to visit someone in my pack. Rode across the highway, but never made it.”

I frowned. It was a decent lead, and more importantly, the only viable one we had. “You’ll be returning to California to look into this. I will send Piers and Gilbert with you. If this siren is ‘disappearing’ shifters, it’s too dangerous to send one man alone.”

Cody stared at me for a moment and pushed out his lower lip. I stared back at him, unmoved. “Okay,” he said, clearing his throat. “I guess.”

As our conversation wound down, Abi drifted over from where she’d been chatting with Cody. “So, if you two are all done with ‘wolf talk,’ can we run up to Tallahassee so I can get my stuff? Plus, I want to make a few phone calls. My parents will freak out if they don’t hear from me soon, and my grandpa was in the hospital. I just want to know how he’s doing.”

I bit back a sigh. Truly, I wanted little more than to return to Isla Lobo and Celeste, but Celeste had asked me to escort Abi.

“We will go north as soon as I meet with Grant Oakley,” I replied, checking my watch. “Ah, he should be here shortly. I don’t expect this to be a terribly long meeting, so if you’d like to find Walter and let him know our plans...”

Abi gave me a curious look. “Who’s Grant? Some kind of professor?”

I knew she was making some kind of wisecrack, but I wasn’t interested in figuring it out. “A former hunter,” I said smoothly.

Cody made a wheezing sound, and I could feel his wolf bristle at the mention. Abi simply looked even more intrigued. “Like Buffy the Vampire Slayer?” she asked.

I laughed. “He used to hunt all manner of paranormals. Now, he assists me when I need to find information, be it from the normal or paranormal realm. He has seen the value in working *with* the Lunar Lord instead of antagonizing him.”

“That is so *cool*,” Abi said, a wide grin splitting her face. “Can I come?”



“Absolutely not. Go tell Walter we’re going to Tallahassee, or I’ll change my mind.”

Abi snorted. “You’re so boring,” she retorted, unable to stop smiling. But she didn’t argue further, and Cody went along with her, well-aware that I hadn’t invited him to this meeting, either.

Once I was certain they were well and truly off, I turned and walked back toward Villa Vizcaya, heading straight for the small room where Grant and I were meeting. True to form, the hunter was already standing in the room when I walked in, a broad silhouette against the last light peeking through the window. His graying hair was short, hidden mostly under a dusty cowboy hat. Beneath his dark blue jeans were an equally worn pair of cowboy boots—nothing fancy. Grant was nothing if not utilitarian. Even his dark gray button-down had extra gussets to allow for an extended range of motion.

*Once a hunter, always a hunter.* I smirked.

“Grant.”

“Fenris,” he replied, his voice low. He turned toward me and dipped his head. “Been looking into your target some more. Whoever Celeste knows—or knows her—is doing all they can to keep any information obscured. I’ve never had to work this hard to dig anything up on anyone.”

“I see,” I replied, my mouth twitching. If someone had been willing to suppress Celeste’s magic when she was a *child*, potentially severing her natural ability for a lifetime, it was no surprise that they’d erase any link to her family or her past. “Were you able to uncover anything new?”

“Nothing about shifters,” he said, his gaze steely.

*I wonder just how deep this goes.* The more I learned, the more I suspected someone powerful had been involved in twisting Celeste’s fate. Someone far greater than a meddling aunt.

I’d previously suspected Celeste knew more than she was letting on, that she was plotting against me and would twist our fated bond. But I was confident she had nothing to do with this. I didn’t even need to ask her.

*Perhaps I have changed. Perhaps she has changed me. Maybe for the better.*

“Did you bring the grimoire?” I asked.

“Uh huh.” Grant nodded and walked to one of the sitting chairs framing the massive windows. In the elegant, overstuffed chair sat a tired leather bag, looking entirely out of place against the brightly patterned fabric. He undid the satchel and pulled out a hefty tome before handing it over to me. “This is

the one.”

“Thank you,” I replied, smoothing my hand over the cover. The leather was well-worn but clearly cared for, supple to the touch. Some of the embossing was worn away at the edges, but the filigree still shimmered in the light. A large, perfectly round moonstone sat prominently in the center of the cover. I traced my hand over the gemstone, and for a moment, I could swear I felt a thrum of power.

*How interesting.*

I could not wait to share this with Celeste, but I still had a few errands left.

“Keep digging,” I told Grant as I tucked the book under my arm. “I need any detail you can find.”

“I understand,” he replied, giving a sharp nod. “I’ll get back to it.” He grabbed his bag and was about to leave when someone bounced in through the doorway.

“Hey, Fenris!” Abigail chirped, her hazel eyes sparkling mischievously. “Oh, hey there! You must be Grant!”

Grant raised a bushy brow and glanced at me before looking away, allowing the shadow cast by the hat brim to hide his expression. “Depends on who’s asking.”

“My name is Abigail Murphy. I wanted to know if you’ve ever trained anyone to do what you do.”

I couldn’t stop myself from chuckling. “Are you about to take up wolf hunting as a hobby?” I asked her dryly.

Abigail frowned at me. “No, I want to be useful. I’m the only human around here, aren’t I? And the next time some freaky bitch like Sabine comes at me, I want to be able to tell her to fuck off—and mean it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she kept talking. “Besides, I don’t want to be the cause of worry all the time. I want to be able to *help* Celeste if some psycho shifter or vampire attacks us, not be a liability.”

I had to admit, Abigail had made a compelling argument. I rubbed my chin before looking back at Grant. “Well? Do you take apprentices?”

He sighed. “Haven’t in a blue moon, but I suppose I could do it again if the Lunar Lord is asking.”

“Good,” I said as I made the decision for him. “You will be given access to my private island for this. Walter will contact you with more details later.”

“Alright,” Grant said, sounding weary already. “I’d best go get my things

in order, then.”

Abigail gave him a cheerful farewell as he left. Somehow, that seemed to wear him out even more, and I tried not to laugh at the notion of Grant training her.

I didn't have much time to entertain the idea, however, because Cody waltzed in moments after Grant left. “You look awfully pleased,” he said to Abigail.

She smirked. “I'm about to be a total badass after paranormal boot camp,” she said, flexing one arm and patting her bicep.

Cody snorted. “Those twins had better watch out for all those stakes you'll be packing.”

“Don't worry, I'll have a dog whistle for you shifters, too,” she said breezily, winking. “Now, c'mon, chop chop! Mr. Lunar Lord over here has things to do, and I have people to call!” Abigail marched past us out of the room.

I soon followed Celeste's best friend, for once in agreement with her. The faster we got through this, the faster I could return to Isla Lobo and take Celeste on that date I'd promised her. Nothing sounded better for easing the stress of this meeting.

# Chapter 19

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Fenris, Walter, and Abi returned the next day, just in time for the late lunch Val and I made. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing; we hadn't planned on making anything special, but cooking together the night before had been so...*needed*. It seemed silly not to take advantage of the relative peace of the island to do it again while we had the chance.

"Wow! It smells great in here!" Abi chirped as she bounced through the door, a bag slung over her shoulder. I grinned, happy to see Fenris had taken her back home to get her things. "Ohhh, did you guys make hush puppies? Yum!"

"Sure did," I said, grinning. "Val's family recipe. Come eat before it gets cold."

Abi didn't have to be told twice; she swung her bag over the back of the chair. She sat down and reached for a plate, already helping herself by the time Walter and Fenris finally sat down.

Walter looked at the small spread and smiled over at us. "What a nice surprise," he said quietly. "This looks lovely. Thank you. Both of you."

Val beamed, taking her place. "You deserve to have someone cook for you sometimes, too, Walter," she murmured, helping herself to the fresh salad I'd prepared as a side.

I had to bite down a grin at seeing them look at each other like that. "So, how did the meeting go?" I hoped the answer was *well*. No one looked *too* stormy.

"I believe we'll have several new allies," Walter reported, looking quite pleased.

"Yeah, and I got a new *sensei!*" Abi added before Walter could say anything else.

I frowned, glancing at Fenris, who hadn't said anything so far. He seemed both exasperated and amused. My frown deepened, and I looked back at my friend. "You're...taking up karate? Here? On Isla Lobo?"

She snickered and popped another hush puppy into her mouth, making me wait until she finished eating. “Nope. I met Fenris’s hunter-gone-rogue, and he said he’d take me on as an apprentice.” Her grin widened. “The next time a witch comes at me, I’ll be able to give her what for!”

“Uh huh.” I had no idea what she was talking about, but she looked really pleased. And if this was about self-defense, I couldn’t argue with that.

“I got my phone back, too,” Abi added. “Canceled the service so we can’t get tracked by the man or whatever, but I’ve left myself a lot of notes, and I want to get through all these voicemails.”

“Were you able to get in touch with your family before you guys left Florida?” I asked.

“Yeah! My grandpa is out of the hospital.” Abi’s smile softened a little. “I was really glad to hear that. I was able to get in touch with Kevin, too—he seemed way more normal than the last time we spoke. Liana’s back in Tallahassee—oh, that’s right! Fenris picked up your bill there.”

“What?!” I swallowed hard, giving Fenris a look. “I was going to take care of that.”

Fenris shrugged. “I was there, and Abigail was able to transfer the money through an app once I sent it to her. It was quite simple, and now your friend has been paid and you don’t have to worry about it.” His amber eyes twinkled. “We took care of all the outstanding bills. Your rent is also paid through the year.”

I sputtered, but Abi just smirked at me, looking like the cat that got the canary *and* the cream.

*Was this her idea or Fenris’s? Are they...are they conspiring?*

Now *that* was a scary thought. I’d have to grill my friend later.

“You two are dangerous together,” I finally said, taking a bite of my lunch.

Fenris just rolled his eyes, but Abi cackled. “And don’t you forget it!”

After lunch, Fenris asked me to meet him in the library, which seemed a bit odd to me. If he wanted a private conversation, his bedroom would’ve been the better choice. But I adored the library, so I had no real complaints.

When I arrived, he was already sitting in one of the chairs by the window, a nondescript bag sitting in his lap. I felt a tingle of curiosity and walked over as if magnetically drawn. “What’s that?” I asked, taking a seat next to him.

“Did you get a souvenir on your trip?”

Fenris gave me a fond smile, and for a moment, my heart stopped. I forgot all about the bag, even though I could hear him unlatching the leather strap. I couldn't look away from his warm amber eyes. “Not as such,” he murmured, his voice as soothing as honeyed whiskey. “But I did bring something back for you. My contact—the former hunter Abigail mentioned—retrieved this for me while trying to look into your background.”

I finally tore my eyes away from Fenris as he handed me a tome, but not just any tome. The book was absolutely *stunning*. My hands trembled as I held the dark leather and let my fingers brush the embossing. There was a moonstone the size of my palm in the middle, looking as pale as the moon until I angled it. Once it caught the sunlight, it seemed to transform, becoming almost luminescent in its soft blue glow. Every color of the rainbow appeared trapped within it.

“What's this?” I asked quietly.

“This is an old Handmaiden grimoire,” he replied. “It's been magically sealed. As one of the only known remaining Handmaiden witches, we reasoned you might be able to open it. It does have a blood seal, mind, but I believe that inside, you may find the context and the spells you were asking me about earlier.”

“Oh,” I said softly, unable to tear myself from it. I traced my fingers delicately over the leather strap and felt the faint hint of magic buzzing beneath. I knew at once that Fenris was correct about the seal, but...

*I hope I'm strong enough to open it.*

“There's something else.”

“Hm?” I finally looked up, trying not to sound too distracted.

“Grant and I think this belonged to your birth mother. We can't be entirely certain, as it won't open for either of us, but...” He trailed off, nodding toward the grimoire. “We have every reason to believe it was hers.”

“I—I—” My eyes prickled with warm tears. A few weeks ago, I hadn't even known this woman existed. The only mother I knew was Taylor Soliel, the woman who'd raised me, but this...

Excitement and anxiety swirled in my gut as my mind raced over what I might find inside. Before I could let myself get too worked up, I pulled the book to my chest. “I have a few pins upstairs in my things,” I whispered, not trusting myself to speak any louder.

Fenris nodded, and I paused just long enough to kiss his temple, a “thank



you” barely making it past my lips before I was hurrying up the stairs to his master suite.

As soon as I dug out my pins, I sat on the bed, the grimoire sitting in my lap. I pricked my thumb, so excited that I barely noticed the sting. I squeezed the pad of my finger before pressing it to the moonstone.

The gem thrummed low and deep before it gave off a little glow. Something flickered and clicked, and the leather strap fell away, releasing the cover. I took a deep breath and opened the book.

The smell of old pages filled my nose at once, and I inhaled, feeling almost delirious with wonder. But oh, the smell was just the appetizer. Each page was filled with writing inscribed in a beautiful cursive script that swept elegantly across the parchment. There were spells, recipes, even notes.

However, I quickly realized the notes weren’t just one person’s thoughts, but from generations of people. Someone else had printed their notes in short, choppy strokes. A third person’s letters were so squished together, they seemed impossible to read. It was like peering into the minds of my ancestors, and the sense of belonging, of raw emotion, was so strong that I could barely breathe.

As I reached the most recent notes, my pulse quickened. *This must be my birth mother...* I traced my fingers over the elegant signature on each of her notes.

*Enora? It’s nice to meet you, Enora.*

Her notes were meticulous, often with several contingencies. It was clear from the way she described her spells and observations that she saw magic as a tool to help others. She didn’t seem drawn to flashy magic but practical spells with clear uses. My smile grew the more I read her notes. *I think we would’ve gotten along.* I certainly would have liked her.

As I searched through the pages, I came across a poem. “Moonlight North and South – Robert Fuller Murray,” the little note detailed. I blinked and began to read the gently etched lines.

*Love, we have heard together  
The North Sea sing his tune,  
And felt the wind's wild feather  
Brush past our cheeks at noon,  
And seen the cloudy weather*

*Made wondrous with the moon.*

I stopped breathing. My eyes stung, and I sniffed. There was no way in the world this could have been written for *me*, but in a way, I felt like my mother had known I'd have this grimoire one day. A knot rose in my throat, and I swallowed hard, wiping at my face as I tried to will away the sadness welling up in my chest.

*I wish I could have met you*, I thought wistfully. What a bizarre thing to realize I had a birth mother only to realize she was gone, just like the woman who raised me. *I wonder if you two would've gotten along. I wonder if—*

“Celeste?” As I glanced up, I saw Fenris standing in the doorway. “Are you alright?”

I sniffed again, smiling despite my watery eyes. “More than,” I replied, laughing at how silly my voice sounded. “Despite appearances. I’m just—she—you know...” I stopped and shook my head, closing the book’s cover. “Thank you for bringing me this, Fenris. This is more than I ever could’ve dreamed of.”

His expression was warm. “I was going to ask you to come run with me, but...”

I shook my head. “That sounds great. I think I need a moment to collect myself before I dive into this book.” As much as I wanted to dive right in and absorb everything, I knew I was a little emotional, and Fenris had only just gotten back. If he missed me half as much as I’d missed him over the past few days, I knew his patience right now was of a herculean effort.

I set the book down on the quilt. “C’mon, let’s go,” I said, standing up to follow him into the hall and down the stairs.

As soon as we got outside, I took a deep breath. The ocean breeze always felt comforting to me, even if I’d never lived directly on the water. That, I thought, was something I could get used to—as well as the lack of pollution, the clear birdsong, the unobscured night sky. I’d always pictured myself as a city girl, but maybe I just hadn’t gotten to explore the more remote places that spoke to me.

“Are you ready?” Fenris asked, disturbing my introspection.

I nodded. “Yes.” I still felt I wasn’t practiced enough at shifting to and from my wolf form, but I knew I wouldn’t get any better with her if I didn’t try. I took a deep breath, trying to steady the sudden onslaught of sheer nerves.

“Good.” Fenris flashed me a mischievous smile, and in the blink of an eye, a large, dark wolf stood where he was moments earlier. His amber eyes were bright as he wagged his tail in a lazy arch over his back, his coat gleaming so bright in the afternoon sun that even the most pampered show dogs couldn’t compare.

Unable to help myself, I reached for him. My wolf whined as he stepped forward, pressing his warm muzzle into my hands. “You’re so handsome,” I crooned, unable to help myself as I smoothed my hands over his crown and velvet ears.

My wolf voiced her displeasure again while stamping her feet. I couldn’t help but laugh, lingering just long enough to kiss Fenris’s brow before taking a few steps back to give myself space, just in case I found a new way to mess this up. I took another deep breath and closed my eyes, but my wolf didn’t need any further convincing. As soon as I slackened my grip, she leaped forward, and when I opened my eyes again, I was on four paws.

Fenris practically towered over me. Alpha shifters were bigger than regular wolves, and the Lunar Lord was even larger than “normal” alphas. I was, as far as I knew, a run-of-the-mill shifter—or maybe I was even smaller than normal, being half-witch—but I didn’t mind. Mischief coursed through me, and before I could think better of it, I darted forward and nipped at Fenris’s shoulder.

I spun away immediately, charging up the beach, savoring the warm feeling of the sand beneath my paw pads. I could hear Fenris sprinting after me, and I gave a laughing little yip, bouncing to the side when he pulled up alongside me.

Instead of trying to race him, I spun away toward the shoreline, barking happily as the water hit my legs. It felt refreshing against my white fur, and I knew we’d dry out quickly in the sun. To my delight, Fenris soon joined me, and we pranced along the beach as if no one was watching us.

Only once I burned off my wolf’s excess energy did Fenris come closer, gently grabbing my ruff and giving a little tug. I turned, happy to follow him as he led us back up the shore and away from the water.

The jungle thrummed with life around us. Even as a human, it felt loud to me, but trotting through it as a wolf was like visiting another dimension. Not only could I hear the insects, but I could pick out individual songs and point to where the bugs were hiding. I couldn't just hear the birds chirping—I could hear the ruffle of wings as a bird preened itself, or the crouch of a mother bird as she readjusted herself on her nest. The sensations didn't feel so overwhelming this time, though. The powerful, damp scent of the earth felt comforting, like something I could always rely on.

I wasn't really paying attention to where Fenris was leading us, interested as I was in absorbing the surrounding sights and sounds. I'd been in the jungle dozens of times now—it was my favorite place to train with Val, after all—but this felt like an entirely new experience. It occurred to me I could spend hours in here simply investigating, and I'd never get bored.

*Perhaps after the eclipse, I'll have time to do that. It feels like it might be a good way to get better at being a wolf.*

"Over here," Fenris said, breaking my train of thought.

I whipped around, about to ask how on earth he could speak as a wolf only to realize he'd shifted back—and had brought us to a clearing that he'd *clearly* visited before. Spread before us was a soft, checkered blanket and the most luxurious picnic spread I'd ever seen. The sweet aromas of chocolate and berries drifting toward me made my mouth water, and as I stepped forward, my wolf abruptly gave up control, as if sensing this was best left to the human side.

I silently tried to express my appreciation as I joined Fenris, folding my legs as I sat down on the blanket. "This is beautiful!" I exclaimed, glancing around. Even the trees decorated with bright bromeliads looked like they belonged here. Beaming, I looked at Fenris. "When did you set this up?"

"I have my ways," he replied slyly as he joined me. He pulled open the top of the wicker basket, revealing a bottle of champagne nestled in a small bucket of ice.

"You shouldn't have," I said, my cheeks flushing as he pulled two glasses out and popped the cork.

"Why not?" he replied, pouring a glass for me.

"Isn't champagne for special occasions?"

He shrugged as he handed me a glass and poured his own. "I rather think our first official date *is* a special occasion, don't you?" he said smoothly.

My heart skipped a beat. I'd spent weeks with this man, yet I suddenly

found myself nervous, as if the words “first date” were a new hex he’d placed on me. “I guess it is,” I agreed, taking a delicate sip from my glass. “And a surprise one, no less.”

Fenris’s eyes twinkled merrily as he nudged a plate of fresh strawberries toward me. “Of course,” he said, watching me intently as I took one of the berries and bit into it carefully. I could feel the juice on my lips. It was probably the ripest strawberry I’d ever eaten.

“Mmm,” I murmured, my thoughts momentarily blank as I enjoyed the morsel. “I suppose that *is* pretty romantic of you,” I added a moment later, giving him a cheeky smile. I took another sip of my champagne.

“I have my moments,” Fenris replied smugly, finally leaning close to have a bite himself. “If we had more time, I’d have taken you to this exclusive restaurant in Marrakesh I think you’d like, but...” He shook his head. “Later, perhaps.”

“I should hope this isn’t the first and *last* date,” I teased. “I’m not that easy.”

“Nothing about you is easy, Celeste Soliel,” Fenris said, flashing his teeth. “And I wouldn’t change that for the world.”

My heart swelled, and I had to look away, feeling my cheeks get hot again. I tried to distract myself by taking another sip of champagne, feeling Fenris’s eyes on me as I moved. “I was just teasing,” I said softly, trying to lighten some of the intensity.

“I was being quite serious,” Fenris said, but there was a smile in those amber eyes. “You are one of a kind, unlike anyone I’ve ever met—and I’ve been around for centuries. Your perspective is unique, and you’re incredibly clever, determined, and kind, even to those you hardly know. I treasure that about you.”

I was certain I’d turned as red as a beet. “Stop that,” I chided quietly, dropping my eyes to the soft blanket beneath us. I traced my fingers over the beige checked pattern.

“I’ll never stop adoring you,” Fenris continued, gently lifting my chin with two of his fingers. “And I’ll never stop telling you as much, either. You deserve the moon and the stars, the heavens and the earth. But at the very least, Celeste, you deserve to know exactly how wonderful you are and how lucky I am to have met you in my lifetime. I thought I was destined never to meet my fated mate, and I’ve never been happier to be wrong in my entire life.”

I took a shuddering breath. My heart felt so full, I thought it might burst out of my chest at any moment. “Fenris...” I whispered, not sure what else to say.

“I love you, *khuya*,” he whispered, leaning forward to press our mouths together. I could taste the champagne fizz on his lips.

The realization was so staggering, it knocked the breath right out of me.

“I love you, too,” I said, and our lips met again.

Words were completely beyond us now, and I was grateful when Fenris pulled me into his lap. I was distantly aware of the champagne in my hand splashing a bit, but I didn’t care. I was far more interested in Fenris kissing me again, this time open-mouthed and sloppy. There was a tinge of desperation in it, and I mirrored him with a breathy sigh, dragging my hands over Fenris’s arms and picking at his sleeves.

He allowed us to linger like that a moment or two longer before he smoothed a hand down my back, coming to rest almost passively on the swell of my ass. Hot, fierce need surged through me, a longing like I’d never known. My wolf keened, and I couldn’t help but squirm in Fenris’s lap. Arousal struck me so quickly, it was almost painful, and I might have been embarrassed if I hadn’t felt the solid line of Fenris’s erection firmly against me.

“Lie down,” Fenris commanded, his voice uncharacteristically hoarse as he lowered me onto the blanket.

I went willingly, trying to make myself small to avoid knocking a glass or plate. Fenris seemed to notice my caution and snorted, pushing the picnic basket to the side. I wanted to protest, but Fenris was already looming over me, manhandling me as he arranged my legs around his waist.

Suddenly I was glad I wore a skirt. I usually opted for shorts, but the way Fenris scented the air and immediately slid his fingers beneath the light fabric sent a thrill racing up my spine. He kneeled there, keeping me perfectly still as he withheld any touch other than the kneading of my thighs, like the sight of me alone entranced him. I whimpered and gave a little squirm.

It was so hard for me to lay back like this. It wasn’t as if Fenris hadn’t seen me naked before, and he clearly liked what he saw. But...when I stopped to think, I found myself wondering how anyone this gorgeous could find someone as normal as me enrapturing. Fenris could have anyone in the world, but for some reason, he chose me.

*And he loves me...*

Just the memory of what he'd said moments before sent another thrill racing through me, and I shuddered, trying to press my thighs closed as another wave of arousal washed through me. I realized I could smell the arousal on myself, and I knew Fenris had noticed it long before.

He kept steady, refusing to let me squirm away or close myself up. His gaze crawled up my body like he was memorizing every curve, every shadow, every little birthmark, only leaning forward once he'd had his fill to seal our mouths together in a salacious kiss. One hand left my thigh, sliding up beneath my shirt to push my bra to the side and cup my breast. I gasped into Fenris's mouth as he caressed a nipple with lazy adoration.

We both grunted softly as his cock brushed against my thigh, hot and hard and inviting. I couldn't help grinding up against him, and Fenris finally pulled away, forcing his eyes to close for a moment as if he could barely contain himself.

A surge of power rushed through me. *I* had that effect on this gorgeous man. *Me*.

"Fenris, please," I whispered, not wanting him to regain himself. I wanted the unrestrained side of him, the wildly passionate side. I didn't want even breathing or control; I wanted him strung out and writhing, as electrified as I felt right now.

Fenris removed his hand from my breast and slid it up my skirt instead, quickly pushing my panties to the side before dragging two fingers over my pussy. I groaned and wiggled, trying to get more friction, and for once, he indulged me, stroking my lips a few times before plunging his fingers inside me.

I gasped, throwing my head back against the blanket as I arched my hips. "Please," I groaned, aware I was practically writhing on his fingers.

Fenris allowed himself a soft moan in return, as clumsy as he'd ever been as he pulled his hands away to fumble with his belt and slacks. "Roll over," he grunted.

I did as he asked, but not without grinning over my shoulder. "You like this view, huh?" I murmured, spreading my knees a little further as I arched my back. My ass was one of my finest features, in my opinion, and I didn't mind showing it off. Not when he had me so wound up like this.

Fenris admired me openly for a moment as he gave his erection a few quick strokes. "I like every view," he growled as he pressed back up against me, rubbing his hard cock against my skin. "But when you present yourself to

me like this...”

I shivered, my wolf briefly stirring as if Fenris had just said magic words. “Alpha,” I groaned, suddenly possessed by the image of him biting me again. It took all my strength not to share my fantasy with him. I knew that wasn’t something we could do yet—but oh, how I craved the moment we could.

Thankfully, Fenris didn’t require any more encouragement. Before I could ask again, he lined himself up and pressed the head of his cock inside me. I moaned and rocked back, using my position to slide along his thick length until he was fully seated inside me. Again, I moaned, not able to stay still. I wanted him inside me, on top of me, all over me.

As if sensing my growing desire, Fenris draped himself over my back instead of just kneeling behind me, weighing me down with his bulk as he started to thrust. There was something particularly primal about it, especially in the middle of the forest, both of us still half-dressed. Anyone could find us out here, though for some reason, that sent another thrill through me. I clenched around Fenris and whimpered at his girth.

“*Khuya*,” he murmured against my ear, closing his fingers around my throat. The pressure was gentle, just holding there as his other hand settled on my hips, providing pressure. Despite the liveliness of the forest, all I could hear now was the gentle slap of his flesh against mine, slowly driving me mad. I was close, I was so close, but I just couldn’t—

“Touch me, please,” I whimpered, my fingers twisting knots into the soft blanket. I bit my lip as if that could stop my desperate moan from escaping me, but it was no use. “Oh, Fenris. Alpha. *Please*.”

He growled savagely above me, and the hand pinching one of my nipples dragged down the length of my body before he shoved it down my skirt. The way he manhandled me made me even wetter in a way I didn’t even know I was capable of, but I couldn’t stop to think about it. All I could focus on was the feeling of his thick girth inside me, the way his fingertips played my clit like a musical instrument. Within moments, I was singing his name as my orgasm shook through me like an earthquake.

“Fenris!” I gasped, closing my eyes as my pussy spasmed around him. “Fenris, please.” I needed him to come inside me—

“*Khuya*,” he groaned, rutting against me as he spilled himself into me, rolling his hips in slow, lascivious rotations. “Oh, *khuya*. My beloved Celeste.”

My lips curled up as I sank into the blanket, riding the absolute bliss of



that moment. I wasn't sure I'd ever been happier.

# Chapter 20

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

When we returned to the mansion, I felt like I could walk on air. Fenris had wanted to know what the Handmaiden grimoire contained, but he had to check in with Piers and Gilbert to see if they'd learned anything. He also mentioned something about a siren, and as much as I wanted to know more, I needed to dive back into my mother's magical journal.

I made a beeline up to the master bedroom, practically flying to the bed and flopping on it. I only belatedly remembered to kick off my shoes as I rolled over and grabbed the tome, flipping it open to the back again. My mother's impeccable handwriting stared back at me, and I couldn't help but smile as I pictured a woman who looked like me, perhaps a little older than me now, sitting down at a quaint little desk to write. Maybe curled up in a cushy chair, or sitting somewhere with a grand fireplace...

As my mind wandered, I flipped the pages, observing the handwriting as much as I was reading the letters. It was like looking through a little window into this woman, with her tiny notes and the little curl under her *ys*.

One thing I noticed, however, was how each spell, hex, charm, and even recipe seemed to be entirely unique. If the notes weren't commented on by several witches, the original author had made some note about how a future witch might alter the magic to better suit herself. I hadn't tried anything like what most of them described, yet many of the notes simply made sense. I felt connected to this book in a way that, no matter how patient Val had been, I hadn't with the spells she'd taught me.

*Perhaps because I know this was written by my ancestors?*

I wasn't sure if it was just in my head, but I *did* know the power of positive thinking was real. If someone believed something was true, it was more likely to work for them. I certainly wanted this grimoire to work. Being connected to it through blood, the same way I was connected to the moonstone on the book cover, seemed perfectly logical to me. I wasn't going to try to convince myself otherwise.

*Maybe practicing something here will help me.*

I wanted to be able to perform advanced magic like transportation, but not so dark—the vision I'd had still made my blood run cold whenever I thought about it. I wanted to live up to my Handmaiden lineage, and even though I'd never met any of these witches, I wanted them to be proud of me. I wanted the birthmark on my neck to mean something. And more than anything, I wanted to do exactly what Fenris needed to break his curse once the solar eclipse came around.

I felt my chest get a little tight, and I took a breath. *No time to get emotional*, I told myself.

I gently set the book down and got up to wash up in the bathroom. After slipping into a more comfortable pair of shorts and a loose-fitting tee, I wiggled back into the bed, propping myself up against two fluffy pillows. Taking a quick break had given me enough time to come up with a game plan: I would see what I could find of recorded history, especially anything relating to the eclipse. As much as I wanted to master every spell and hex written in here, I knew I wouldn't have enough time. Even if I didn't sleep from now until the moment the moon crossed in front of the sun.

Flipping back to the beginning of the tome, I found the elegant cursive script again. I also saw the name at the very beginning—*A History as Written by Roa*.

*Roa. Who were you?* If nothing else, I'd have the names of women among the Handmaiden witches, and I could research them later when time wasn't of the essence. I flipped the page, settling in to read Roa's recounting of the Handmaidens. It seemed even she didn't know the exact origin of their power or their beginning as an actual coven versus a loose confederation of witches, but she referenced several notes she'd made later on.

*What is important, I do believe, is the nature of a Handmaiden's power. We are intrinsically connected to the moon and her cycles—I do so wonder, did Luna come down to kiss us each upon our skin once we were born? Or have we always had this little bit of moondust running through our veins? Ah, but I am speculating again.*

*A Handmaiden is most powerful during the full moon, except at a few specific points—if a witch is lucky enough to be alive during such an event. The solar eclipse—when the moon blots out the sun—is when our power increases infinitely. I cannot even describe what I felt as I stood at the Temple of the Moon.*

I paused in my reading, flipping the cover shut for a moment. This book was at *least* four hundred years old, if not more. That was simply the most recent total solar eclipse at the Temple of the Moon. I trembled a little as I returned to the page I was reading.

*This is how the Handmaidens were able to empower the first Lunar Lord and lift the curse from all shifter kind—bestowing it upon this single wolf. The Lunar Lord’s power is now, for better or worse, forever tied to this heavenly event. I wonder about the practicality, but I assume my foremothers were desperate to resolve the problem before the wolf hunters and witch trials got even worse. I cannot claim I’d have been calmer or more thoughtful if I were in their stead.*

*But our work remains unfinished. Regardless of what goes on in the space between these total eclipses, the Lunar Lord needs the Handmaidens the most during this time. Just as the Lord is bound to uphold the vows he took upon claiming his mantle, we must uphold our own and make sure his life is not in immediate danger at the point when he is at his weakest. If the Lunar Lord is to be killed, the curse will be released upon the paranormal world once more. We, as witches, will not take on the madness the shifters once shouldered, but I fear the witch hunts would follow shortly thereafter.*

*I have recorded several spells my coven used to defend our Lord most recently, though they were not needed as such. These were told to me by my mother, but it seems impractical for me to rely on word of mouth alone. It is my hope my future sisters and daughters will find these spells useful long after I am gone.*

Anticipation tingled in my fingertips as if I’d just grabbed an electric fence. I turned the page, holding my breath, not entirely sure what I’d find. Spread before me was a spell page, just as Roa had indicated, but there were notes from other witches, too. I recognized my mother’s handwriting in an annotation at once.

*While elementally speaking, water is a friend of the moon, I suspect using fire—the sun’s energy—is critical in tempering this spell. It seems counterintuitive, but it works on a day-to-day basis. She who practices during the next full solar eclipse, please do inform us if my theory is correct.*

I blinked, tracing my fingers over Enora’s note. *I wish you could be here*, I thought. Maybe I even whispered it. I knew so little about this woman, but the way she wrote and described magic left me certain that she’d have been a great ally to us. I knew Val was doing everything she could to help me—and,

ultimately, Fenris—but at the end of the day, she was from an entirely different bloodline. This wasn't her type of magic, or her history.

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. At the very least, Val would help me make sense of the spells I was reading, and I knew if I asked, she'd accompany me in practicing them. As I flipped through the pages, I found a spell used for identifying a mate—a pair of mates, rather. It seemed more straightforward than some of the other things this described, so I made note of the page number for later.

After what seemed like dozens of pages, I found what I was looking for: an explanation of how the Lunar Lord and his mate bind their life forces, which essentially eases his suffering by taming his curse. I swallowed hard as I read the words, but I was getting to the point where everything looked a little fake as I read, as if the words weren't even real anymore.

*How am I going to get close to performing this spell successfully when someone has written here that these spells still aren't perfected? My own mother left notes about experimentation! I bit my bottom lip as I stared at the words, not taking any of them in. If they couldn't master the spell when working together, what am I supposed to do?*

I leaned back against the bed frame and stared up at the ceiling. I bit my lip, trying not to feel overwhelmed. I loved my mother dearly, but I still found myself wishing that Enora had been around to raise me. Maybe by now, I'd have been much further along in my training—and even if I weren't, I'd at least have another Handmaiden witch to lean on. Fenris's fate wouldn't be entirely in my untrained hands.

I took another breath. *You're working yourself up. And your mother did a good job raising you. It isn't her fault she wasn't a witch.*

No, she'd taken me in. I could never be ungrateful for that.

I was about to close the book when I suddenly paused, feeling that electric tingle once again. I looked more closely at the page the book had fallen open on.

*A record of birthmarks?*

Morgan mentioned that powerful witches had a birthmark that represented their coven, but I didn't realize until now she'd meant it literally. Next to the sketch of a crescent moon was the Handmaiden name. There was a water droplet for the Thalassa witches, which made sense, given Val's specialty. For the name Marquette, there were three lines, something I took to represent wind. There were more names than types of magic, and I realized

some covens must overlap.

Tracing my finger down the list, I looked for any other lunar-looking marks when I stopped on what looked like a star or a sunburst. There was a little note next to it.

*This mark is peculiar, as it always turns up rosy or red, unlike most others. Witches of the Aurora coven take their power from the sun, so it is only expected—*

My brain slammed to a halt before I could finish the sentence. *Red?! I'd seen that exact mark before—many times, in fact—during my childhood. My Aunt Esme had that exact mark on her upper arm. The first time she'd come over in a dress, I'd asked her about it as nosy children do. My mother was mortified, but my aunt explained that it was from an old tattoo she'd had removed. Something foolish from her teenage years, a scar she'd have to live with now. That had made sense to a child's mind, and I'd never thought about it again. Until now.*

I knew now, without a shadow of a doubt, that my aunt was a witch. Not just any witch, either, but a powerful member of the Aurora coven. All her “tall tales” about the Lunar Lord and shifters and sirens and banshees, and every other paranormal story she told me...those were probably all true. All those months she'd disappeared, going radio silent until she randomly appeared back on our doorstep? Those hadn't been fits of eccentricity. She'd probably been visiting her coven.

*She...she lied to me! She let me believe these were just stories! She never stopped my parents when they told me magic wasn't real! The thoughts raced through my mind, and I exhaled sharply, unfamiliar with the anger broiling from the pit of my gut. Hot flames of betrayal licked my chest. All these years, and she said nothing, even after my parents died! There was no one else to hide it from, and she just...she just...she disappeared right when I needed her the most!*

Despite Fenris's best efforts—or the best efforts of that hunter—Esme was nowhere to be found. The sense of betrayal was even stronger now, and I scowled, even though I was alone in the room. *She's hiding from me! She must know, or why suddenly make herself scarce?!*

Once my magic was revealed...

I hissed, remembering Fenris's rage when he discovered someone had been suppressing my magic from a young age. *Was all that Esme's doing? He'd insisted someone was doing it on purpose, but I just couldn't fathom*



Aunt Esme doing that. Quirky, kind, free-spirited Aunt Esme—no, I thought she must've gotten the wrong ingredient by accident because she was a space cadet. Or that's what I'd *wanted* to believe, and it'd been easy to forget about it until now, with everything else going on.

*I need answers.*

I tried to settle my swirling emotions. I'd been able to connect psychically with Sabine before, though she *had* laid the groundwork. Still, at least I knew what it was supposed to feel like, and I knew more about Esme than almost any other witch.

I closed my eyes and thought of my aunt, the way she'd always sweep through our front door when I'd least expected it. I thought of the times she'd come back with beads in her hair or a new tan. Sometimes, she looked like she'd literally blown in, like a tumbleweed.

As I focused on these memories, the shape of a doorway began to appear, but the moment I tried to home in on it, a dark cloud descended on it. It was like I'd just driven into a fog bank, but nothing made the mist disperse. I scowled and retreated when I realized I wasn't getting anywhere.

*Am I too angry to focus, or is that her blocking me?*

I couldn't say, but I wouldn't know for sure until I calmed down some. I'd practice, and Val would have something to say about it, too. But for now, I needed space.

Leaving the Handmaiden grimoire tucked beneath a pillow in the master bedroom, I walked down the hall to Abi's room, knocking once on the door before letting myself in. She was sprawled comfortably on the bed, cell phone in hand as a recording played, before she rolled onto her side and grinned at me.

"Most of these are *hilarious*," she said, waggling her eyebrows at me. "Maybe I missed my calling as a comedian. You want to come here and listen?"

My mood certainly needed some lifting right now. "Definitely," I said, joining Abi on the bed. I flopped over so we were side by side, and she moved on to the next message. "You learn any deep secrets about yourself yet? Any torrid romances you forgot?"

She laughed and gave me a gentle shove. "I wish," she replied. "Nah, mostly monologues. A few pocket dials. No revelations."

“That’s alright,” I replied, settling in. “Funny one-sided conversations sound good right about now.”

*“Hey, I just did some, like, WILD math—and you know how much I don’t like math. So, I just ate an entire box of Frosted Flakes, which is, like, 1,000 grams—why don’t we use grams more in the States? Anyway, I’m like, I dunno, 58 kilograms? Something like that. But do you know what that means? I’m like...1% Frosted Flakes right now. Isn’t that crazy?!”*

I choked on a laugh. “Abi, were you high?”

She shoved my shoulder. “Probably just hungry. You know how I get.”

I grinned as she played the next one.

*“Abigail Murphy, this is an important message: the corner store sells glowsticks. One more time, just in case you didn’t hear me—the corner store sells GLOWSTICKS. Pick some up.”*

“Glowsticks? Were you planning a rave?”

“No.” Abi snorted. “I had a really cool idea for your next birthday, but I was going to need a *lot* of glowsticks, so I wanted to start gathering them early.” She frowned. “Man, I’m going to have to collect them all over again.”

I couldn’t help but raise my eyebrows, slightly concerned. “What were you planning...”

Her grin turned devious. “You’ll have to wait for your next birthday to find out, won’t you?” she said in a sing-song voice, hitting “play” on the next message to cut me off.

*“These chickens look horrible. I don’t like them.”*

Silence followed as we waited for Abi to say something else, but she never did. We burst out laughing, a single tear rolling down my face as I tried to steady myself. “You shouldn’t judge chickens so harshly,” I laughed, wondering what on earth she’d been doing.

“Yeah, they’re probably doing their best,” she agreed, shaking her head.

*“Hey! Hey, girl, it’s me. You. I..I don’t know how to explain this. Worst headache—ugh, hang on.”* There were shuffling noises, as if someone had dropped the phone or fallen down heavily. *“Ugh. I’ll make this quick. The sound of my own voice—ugh. Stay away from Celeste. It’s important. So, so important. Protect her, yeah? I’ll thank you for it later.”*

Our laughter died away at once while we stared at the phone, an uncomfortable silence falling between us.

“Hey,” Abi said quietly, finally tearing her gaze away to look at me. “I’m really sorry that bitch used me as a puppet to hurt you. I still can’t believe I tried to drown you.”

“Abi, seriously. It’s alright,” I said, just as serious as she was. “I know it wasn’t you—not the real you. Sabine is a psycho, and a strong one. It wasn’t your fault.” I shook my head. “But if it makes you feel better, I’ll turn you into a frog for twenty-four hours, or hex you to...I don’t know, stub your toe real bad.”

Abi snorted. “That’s mean,” she replied, the grin returning to her face as she played the next message.

*“Hey, Abi! It’s me—ah, it’s Cody. California is so boring now that I’ve been to Florida. Really wish you took me up on the offer to check it out! But I get it. ‘Wolfy stuff,’ hah! Hey, when we catch up, I’d love to take you out sometime. Let me know when you’re free, yeah?”*

Abi’s eyes went wide, and she stared at the phone. “Oh, crap!” she laughed,

her face turning pink. “I just ran into him when Fenris took me to Florida. I had no idea he’d asked me out!”

“What?!” I knew it wasn’t nice, but that misfortune was pretty hilarious. “Abi, what did you do?”

“Nothing! He didn’t say anything! Aw, man, he probably thinks I’m some stone-cold bitch now!” She laughed again, shaking her head. “Damn.”

I raised a brow. “It’s fine, he seems like a nice guy. He doesn’t seem like the type to hold rejection against you.” I paused. “Wait...do you *want* to reject him? I thought you were gonna ‘talk’ to Gilbert when he got back to Florida. What’s going on with that?”

“I don’t know!” Abi wailed dramatically, flopping onto her back as she stared at the ceiling. “I’ve never had two guys this legitimately interested in me at once—and hell, they’re both hot, Celeste. One is older and definitely smarter, but the other is a lot more spontaneous and unpredictable! How am I supposed to choose?”

I sighed and shook my head. “Okay, how about this—imagine you’re waking up in the morning. You roll over, and someone kisses your forehead.”

“Okay...” Abi’s eyes were already shut.

“Who are you picturing?”

“Gilbert,” she said slowly, like she was waiting for me to spring a trap on her.

“Okay,” I said. “Now, imagine you’ve just been told some really bad news. You don’t know what to do. Who do you turn to?”

Her eyes fluttered back open, and she turned to frown at me. “Now that’s not fair—it’s you or Liana! One of my girls.”

I shrugged. “That’s fine. That’s what friends are for.” I leaned over to give her knee a squeeze. “But if you were really mad at me, who would you tell?”

Abi made a face. “I think...yeah, it’d probably be Gilbert.”

“Well...” I trailed off and shrugged. “I don’t know, being with Fenris feels like finding something I was missing before. He’s not, like, my perfect match in every way—I think we’re quite opposite sometimes—but...it fits.”

“Yeah...that’s one of the things I like about Gilbert, you know? My whole world got flipped upside-down learning that vampires were a real thing, and he was as cool as a cucumber the whole time. Nothing I do seems to fluster him, and he’s really smart. Always has a good comeback. Sometimes, his sense of humor is so dry, you’d miss it if you weren’t paying

attention.” Her smile grew a little. “Quite opposite, heh. Like you said. Something just feels *right* when I talk to him.”

I smiled at her, but she frowned. “Wait...but if I never got to see Cody again, I’d really miss him! He’s a lot of fun to be around.”

“He is,” I agreed. “But you guys might just be good friends. You’re both really similar—lots of charisma, too many jokes, never met someone you couldn’t flirt with.” I raised a brow. “You sure you don’t like him just because it’s like looking in the mirror?”

“Hey!” She laughed. “Yeah...yeah. There’s no reason we can’t be friends.”

“I think you need to have both those conversations, though.”

“Yeah.” Abi sighed, settling down a little. “I do.”

“You can do it.” I paused. “Hey, there’s something I need to tell you. About my aunt.”

“Oh!” She perked right up. “Is that why you came in here? Fenris found her?”

I shook my head. “I wish. But no, I was looking in a grimoire Fenris gave me.”

“He gave you a grimoire? That’s so cool,” Abi said, interrupting me as she leaned forward. “Can I see it?”

“It’s back in my room, but I’ll show you in a little bit.” I paused, wondering if I should share its origin, but quickly dismissed my concerns. This was Abi, my best friend. I could tell her anything. “It’s from my birth mother. From all the Handmaiden witches, and since I’m the last one...”

“Oh, wow,” Abi said softly, some of the wild excitement fading from her grin. “Where did he find it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think someone else found it for him, but I’m not sure where it was hidden.” It would be nice to know which witches had been caring for it or if it had been simply hidden away. I wanted to see where it had been found. Perhaps my birth mother had hidden something else for me there.

“That’s amazing,” Abi said, bringing me back to the present. “So, it’s really old? Did your mom—sorry, your birth mom, that’s still hard for me to get my head around—leave you any notes or anything?”

I couldn’t help my small smile. “Not just her. It’s not just like...it’s not like a cookbook with a bunch of recipes, and it’s not exactly a journal, either, but a combination of both those things. There are directions for performing

spells or brewing potions, sure, but there's also a lot of notes. Some of them are just trains of thought, but others are more practical observations. Then, other witches leave their own thoughts on the matter. It's amazing, really."

Abi smiled. "I'm so glad Fenris was able to find that for you," she said, looking genuinely pleased for my good fortune. "And you think it's going to help you find your aunt? Is there a spell for finding people?"

*That'd be helpful.* I hadn't cataloged all the spells yet, but I remembered seeing one about finding someone's fated mate. I'd have to take a closer look at it.

"Not quite, though it's a pretty full tome. I found someone's list of the birthmarks associated with families and lines, like the Handmaidens'. Like mine." I leaned forward and tapped my neck in case my friend had forgotten about it. "The list was illustrated, and I recognized one of them. Do you remember how my aunt had this old scar? She said she'd gotten a tattoo lasered off? That's what she told everyone, anyway."

Abi's eyes went comically wide. "Oh my god, Celeste! Was it in the book? Was it a birthmark?"

I nodded, and somehow, Abi's eyes got even wider, her expression even more animated as she kept talking. "Oh my god! She was a witch this whole time?! What the fuck, Celeste?!"

"I know!" Just saying it made my anger spike all over again. "I know. I just...I can hardly believe it, but it makes sense, doesn't it? And why her 'stories' made so much sense—because they weren't stories! Because she *lied* to me!"

"But why?"

"I wish I knew." I shook my head and forced myself to take a breath.

"Are you going to do some magic shit to track her down?"

It was my turn to snort. "I'm going to do my best."

I needed answers. No, I *deserved* them.

# Chapter 21

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*Fenris*



# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

I didn't finish making calls and following up on messages until the moon was high in the sky. My shoulders complained, and I stood up, stretching my arms over my head as I walked back down the hall. I knew without reaching out to sense her that my mate would be near the shore or in the clearing, practicing. Her dedication was admirable.

When I arrived, she appeared to be in the middle of something. Celeste's focus was evident, even if I couldn't see her handiwork. I sat on one of the logs surrounding the clearing, content to wait while she wove her magic.

"This isn't anything I've seen you do before," I noted when her state of concentration broke and she looked at me. "Did Val teach you this?"

"No." The corners of her mouth lifted. "The grimoire you gave me is a treasure trove. I wanted to try one of the more straightforward spells while they were still on my mind."

I couldn't help but smile back. "I'm glad it's already proven useful." I paused. "You look tired. How long have you been working on this?"

Celeste shrugged a shoulder. "Not that long. I was hanging out with Abi earlier. I waited for the moon to get up in the sky before I came out."

I frowned. "I don't want you burning yourself out. Do not work too hard, Celeste."

She raised a brow. "Fenris, there is no room to take it easy right now. Your fate is, quite literally, in my hands. If I mess this up...or if I do everything right, but I'm not strong enough..." Celeste cut herself off and shook her head.

"Celeste..."

She held up one finger. "Everything is much easier for me under the full moon. Smoother, even." She raised an eyebrow, even as the corner of her mouth twitched. "Trust me to know my own limits. I know what it feels like when I've gone too far—and that takes time to recover from. I won't take that same risk."

“Alright,” I said, making myself comfortable. “Well, I’ll stop interrupting you, then.”

“Thanks.” Celeste chuckled. “Here, this is something else I saw and wanted to try. Check it out.”

I sat up a little straighter, content to watch my mate. Even as she took the time to center herself before the magic began, I couldn’t help but think of how beautiful she was. The way the moonlight caught her dark hair, the curve of her neck as she looked up and smiled. I could live in this moment forever.

“Ah!”

Celeste’s cry of pain made my blood run cold. I was on my feet within seconds, springing across the sand to catch her before she hit the ground. She cried out again, clutching her hands as she crumpled forward, supported only by me as I slowly lowered her down.

I recognized the distant look on her face at once—she was having a waking vision. My heart swam in my chest as I gently held her. All I could do was ensure she was safe until the moment passed. I didn’t dare wake her.

When she gasped and sat up blinking only moments later, I hugged her against my chest. “Are you alright?” I asked, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “What did you see?”

She jolted and looked up at me with wild eyes. “It was Lyka,” she said, almost breathless. “He’s in danger, Fenris.”

“What?” I felt like I’d swallowed my tongue. “What do you mean?”

Instead of explaining, I felt her reach out to me mentally. I forced myself to relax my barriers and received an image from her mind’s eye. It was my brother, walking himself out to the ocean. His expression was blank, seemingly indifferent to the wave smashing into him and knocking him down. He didn’t even try to stand up.

“He’s going to drown,” she said with a gasp.

“*Shit.*” I felt like someone had just removed me from my own body as I took a step back, shoving my hand into my pocket as I fumbled for my phone. I needed to call Delila at once. I needed to get to Lyka’s island. I had no idea if she’d even answer, but I had to try. I had to get to him.

Celeste was getting to her feet and setting her jaw.

“What are you—Celeste!”

I recognized the feeling of the dark magic more than the sight of it. I’d never thought I’d see her perform it. Here was a dangerous slope I’d seen more than one witch slide down in my lifetime. My eyes widened, and for a

moment, just a moment, I'd forgotten what she'd just shown me.

I reached for her wrist. "Celeste, don't."

"We need to go *now*," she replied as she stepped out of reach. "I don't have time for your lecture." She scowled fiercely at me. "I need your blood to reach the island," she said before removing one of the studs from her ear.

I hissed, but took the stud and poked my thumb with it before holding it out to her. She swept her fingertips over the shimmering blob of silver and whispered something under her breath. Her eyes closed, and I wondered, for a moment, if it would work.

A second later, unbearable cold fell on us, and then the darkness swallowed us up. I forced myself not to panic. My wolf howled and writhed against the unnatural feeling of dark magic, but when I opened my eyes again, we were on new sand. I didn't need to look to know my brother wasn't far off.

I was on all four paws without another word, charging down the length of the beach before I found Lyka. I bounded in, clawing my way past the waves as I grabbed him in my jaws. The waves were still pummeling him, but he did nothing to stop it, still unresponsive as I dragged him back toward dry land. As soon as my paws hit the sand, I shifted back to my human form so I could carry him in my arms.

*He is so light.*

"Celeste!" When she didn't answer right away, I stopped walking and glanced around. "Celeste!"

Lyka didn't even stir as I shouted. I turned, realizing Celeste had managed to get a few feet from where we'd appeared on the island before she'd seemingly passed out. "Shit."

I fumbled with Lyka and fished my phone back out of my pocket. "Call Walter," I commanded, barely able to bark the orders with the phone pressed to my ear. Thankfully, Walter understood the urgency—I would apologize for my curt replies later. Time was of the essence.

"I'll send your nearest allies immediately," he said as I carried Lyka further toward the tree line. "What are we doing with Lyka?"

"He's coming with us," I growled. "To Isla Lobo. Obviously, I cannot leave him here. There's a silver-lined cell in the far wing." I hated the idea of imprisoning my brother, but surely that was better than leaving him to slowly drown here. The wing was also locked, so no one could bother him—or vice versa. "We'll keep him there until we can undo whatever's been done to his

mind.”

“Understood, sir.”

Walter hung up without another word. I set Lyka down and raced back to the shore for Celeste, cradling her against my chest. For the first time in centuries, I felt truly powerless to help the only other being I really cared about.

Hazel, a local vampire from one of the larger islands, arrived within a few hours, though it might as well have been years. “I commandeered the first boat I could find,” she assured me, helping get Lyka onboard while I carried my mate. I hadn’t seen her in years, and I’d almost forgotten that she was not the same type of vampire as the twins.

Stunningly beautiful, she looked like she belonged on a runway in Manila rather than in a remote tropical forest, but she assured me she preferred the privacy away from humans, except when she needed to feed. I could understand that particular desire. In any case, if I could get in touch with Hazel when I needed to, I didn’t really care how she spent her time.

“Walter said he’ll have your witch meet you on the nearby island. It was the only one she had a connection to, but I’ll get you there as quickly as I can,” she promised, moving to man the motor. It buzzed to life, and though we were soon skirting over the waves, this speed still felt entirely too slow.

It felt like we’d never see my private jet until it finally came into view. The sun had long since set over the horizon, but the glow from the small port city outlined a ray of hope. Delila would be there—unwillingly, as always—but I didn’t care. I didn’t care what payment she’d require. I’d do anything if it meant my brother and mate were safe.

## Chapter 22

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

Ow.

*The first thing I noticed when I finally stirred was how sore I felt. I felt like I'd run a marathon, or so I imagined. I didn't mind a walk or a nature hike, but marathons or weightlifting were way beyond me.*

*I got up slowly and glanced around. The room was dim. A gentle breeze rolled in through the window, the cool ocean air making the gauzy sheets dance like strange spirits.*

*I gave a little shiver. I wonder if a storm is rolling in. Now that I thought about it, I could scarcely remember a cloudy day on Isla Lobo. The only real storm I could remember was from when I tried to escape.*

*That seems so long ago...*

*Except I knew it wasn't. Giving myself a little shake, I glanced around the room for any sign of Fenris. The pillow was cold, and I couldn't smell any more of him than was expected for the lingering remains of a resident shifter. Odd.*

*It wasn't unusual for Fenris to leave me sleeping, but I should have smelled his presence by now. Trying to shake off my unease, I stretched my arms over my head and headed toward the bathroom. Despite sleeping well into the day, I still felt tired. I was hungry, too, but I couldn't think of anything to eat. Maybe Walter will have an idea.*

*Splashing some water into my face, I glanced into the mirror to check my hair. The face staring back at me knocked the breath right out of my lungs. My dark hair had been chopped short, not even touching my shoulders. My skin looked...tired. It wasn't wrinkled, and I certainly didn't look like a seventy-year-old woman, but I suddenly realized that was exactly how I felt. Exhausted with time. With age. With malnourishment.*

*If not for the silver eyes staring back at me, I might not have even recognized the woman in the mirror.*

*I took a breath and steadied myself, straightening my shoulders as I*

turned away and grabbed something black from the closet to pull on before hurrying down the stairs. The mansion was quiet—so quiet, I could hear the distant churn of the waves against the shoreline through the open windows.

Where is everyone?

I couldn't help my irritation. "Walter!" I called, grimacing a little at the sound of my tone. The man was always right where I needed him to be, so why had he suddenly disappeared when I found myself in such need? I glanced around, briefly checking the butler's pantry. It was emptier than it should've been, and I scowled. He must be out restocking.

But why leave when it was about to storm? And where the hell had Fenris gone?

Aggravation building, I took a deep breath. Getting flustered never gets you anywhere, I schooled myself, reaching up to smooth my hair back. There was a slight tremble in my hands, and I frowned, studying my black nails and gnarled fingers.

This isn't right.

Pulse quickening, I turned, hurrying toward the patio to head out to the beach. I didn't know where else to find Fenris or the others, but as I rounded the corner, I heard a strange, faraway noise. I paused to listen. It almost sounded like a voice, but the wind coming off the water was picking up, drowning it out. I let myself outside, frowning as I realized there was a small, shed-like structure way down the beach, not too far from the docks where Walter usually kept the boats.

I don't recall that shed...am I that unobservant? As I walked closer, my frown deepened. Wait. The boats are still there. So where—

My train of thought was cut off by the sound of the voice again. There was something familiar about it, and if I wasn't mistaken, it was coming from the shed.

Ignoring how cold the sand felt on my bare feet, I hurried over, lifting my dark skirt. The shed had a strange, almost medicinal odor to it—so strong, I was almost repelled—but my curiosity was stronger. I grabbed the handle and jiggled, scowling before it seemed to recognize my grip and the lock undid itself. I stared in wonder, almost forgetting there was someone inside until they spoke.

"Oh, god. Oh, please. Leave me alone," Abigail wailed, curled up in a ball on a tiny bed—if the board and poor excuse for a mattress could even be called a bed.



*I took a step inside, and she flinched, trying to make herself smaller while refusing to look at me.*

*“Abi!” I called, ignoring my rapidly growing hunger. “Abi, are you hurt?”*

*“Oh, fuck you!” she spat, lifting her head just enough to glower at me from beneath her stringy bangs. “You know exactly what you did.”*

*What I did?*

*I took a step back as I drew a sharp breath, realizing I could smell—no, taste—something sweet. So incredibly sweet. There was a strange, almost chemical aftertaste to it, and before I realized what I was doing, I found myself licking my lips, trying to figure out what it was. Was it in the air? Was it—*

*“Get away from me, you creep!” Abi shouted, pressing herself into the rudimentary wall. At once, the taste got stronger, and I looked at her with sudden understanding.*

*I can taste her emotion. No, I can taste her fear.*

*And it was so sweet.*

*I bit the inside of my mouth, looking down at my hands. With each breath I took, I felt a little stronger. My hunger was dimming, and the tremble in my fingers was gone...*

*Holy shit. Holy shit.*

*I was feeding off of Abi’s psyche.*

*Someone screamed—I wasn’t sure if it was me or her—and I threw myself out of the little shack, leaving the door wide open as I stumbled in the sand. The storm had already rolled in, thunder growling overhead as a fierce wind pulled at my hair. Cold rain pelted my face as I turned, running almost blindly toward the angry sea.*

*What have I done? I thought over and over again. The waves splashed against my ankles. My dress became soaked at once, but I didn’t care, forcing myself deeper into the water.*

*What have I done?*

*Ugh. My head.*

*The first thing I noticed when I finally stirred was that soreness again. I felt like I’d just completed a triathlon—or at least what I imagined I’d feel if I was an athlete, tackling extreme events of strength and endurance. Shifting*

into a wolf and going for a run was plenty athletic for me. The idea of a marathon—

*Wait...*

Fear surged through me as I bolted upright in bed and glanced around wildly. I half-expected to see cloudy skies and Fenris's empty side of the bed, but the light filtering through the window was bright and pervasive. I knew it must be well into the afternoon. There was a firm weight at my back that prevented me from rolling over, and I knew it was Fenris even without looking. *He's right here.* My wolf was quiet, clearly comforted by his presence after the fucked-up dream I'd just had.

Honestly, I didn't mind his presence, either—no, that was an understatement. There was something really satisfying about the warmth of someone else radiating through the blankets, and that primal need to be *near* someone was all the more sated when it was *him*. I sighed, which turned into a groan as I propped myself up, stretching my arms high over my head. Every muscle gave a little complaint, and I wrinkled my nose.

*This is just like—*

I forced the intrusive thoughts to stop before I could get myself too worked up.

*No, it's not. That was just a nightmare. Surely even witches have regular nightmares.*

Yet nothing about that dream felt particularly *normal*. I swore I could still feel the ghost of the cold wind on my face.

"You're awake," Fenris said, sounding grave. My warm fuzzies coughed and sputtered, turning back into anxious moths flapping around in my gut. *That doesn't sound good. Did he sense my dream?* Before I could ask how he was, Fenris fixed me with a furious stare. "Don't you *ever* touch dark magic again, do you understand?"

I balked, still half-asleep and surprised to hear him take that tone with me. That I'd just had a nightmare also wasn't doing me any favors when it came to getting my wits about me.

"But that was the only way to get to Lyka!" I protested. Even if Fenris had called Delila, she'd have had to get to us and then travel to the island. That was also assuming she picked up, and if she hadn't...as far as I was aware, she was the only witch Fenris used for transportation. Lyka would've run out of time, and that was nothing to say of the fact that Delila would need something of his. There had been way too much uncertainty for this

emergency. “He was drowning! We didn’t have time to waste.”

Fenris took a breath that sounded forced. “I know,” he said, grinding out the words. I could practically hear him clench his molars together. “And I will always be grateful that you made that decision. If we hadn’t arrived when—” he cut himself off and shook his head, as if the rest of the sentence was too painful to even consider. “I am allowed to be angry you took that risk with *yourself*, Celeste. You could’ve died! It would be like trading my mate for my brother!”

I scowled, unable to help myself. “You don’t know that.”

His amber eyes flashed. “Val said how weak you felt to her magically. Even you understand that your power—that any witch’s power—is not eternally renewable. If you drain yourself of all energy, that’s it! You aren’t immortal yet.” His mouth twitched. “If you die, that is the end. Forever.”

My shoulders tensed. I knew Val had meant well, and how she’d found Fenris, Lyka, and me had probably frightened her, but I knew my limits. “It wasn’t *that* close,” I insisted, unable to stop the defensive tightening of my shoulders. “Why don’t you trust me?”

“If you died, I’d have lost my mind on the spot. I’m sure of it. I’d have slaughtered Lyka. I would have become as he is, maybe even worse. I certainly have more resources now with all the changes of modernity than he did when he killed Sela. What then, hmm? What about everyone who’d have been at my mercy afterward?”

I pressed my lips together. “I’m not responsible for you!” I hissed, folding my arms over my chest. “And I’m telling you, I was *tired*, but I wasn’t going to *die*. It was a risk I was willing to take—and I’d do it again if I had to!”

“But it wasn’t a risk *I* was willing to take!” Fenris shot back. “Promise me you won’t ever touch dark magic again, no matter what.”

I recoiled at the ultimatum. “No!” I shook my head. “If something happens to you and I need to get there, I’m going to use whatever resources I need, Fenris.” My scowl deepened. “You might be lord of the shifters, but you don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t do with *my* magic. Not as a witch, and not as your fated mate.”

He bared his teeth at me, and my wolf recoiled, alarmed to see her mate show such fury toward us. My blood ran cold, but I stood my ground.

“Celeste,” he growled, and I swore I saw the wolf in his eyes. “You *will* promise me.”

Before I could answer, I saw a hint of red creep into his amber irises. I snarled back at him, realizing exactly what he was about to do.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I snapped, ignoring the tremble in my hand as I pointed at him. “Don’t you dare use your alpha command on me, Fenris.”

Fenris blinked, and the red faded away. He even looked startled for a moment, like he hadn’t known what he was doing. But I didn’t care if it was instinct or heightened emotion; I could scarcely believe what I’d just seen on his face. My chest felt too tight for my heart, and the ache there suddenly magnified. I knew it wasn’t just exhaustion, either.

“I—”

“Get out,” I said, jabbing my finger toward the door, barely able to control my emotions. Between the nightmare I was beginning to suspect had been caused by my use of dark magic and Fenris’s reaction just now, I knew I couldn’t keep my cool for much longer. “I don’t want to speak to you right now, *your lordship*.”

He stood up slowly, like if he wasn’t careful enough, I would disappear like a flighty animal. “Celeste, I...I just want to make sure you’ll be okay,” he said softly. Shame was written plain as day across his face. “I will leave you be while you rest.”

“Good,” I snapped, staring daggers at him. My wolf whined, torn between the betrayal and the instinct to comfort her mate. I shoved her back down, though, refusing to give in. Fenris was in the wrong, and I wouldn’t apologize for telling him off. “Now go.”

He paused for a moment before his shoulders dropped. He nodded, finally turning toward the door. He left the bedroom without saying anything else.

I stared after him, but he didn’t return. Finally, I leaned back, all the tension releasing from my body.

“What the hell was that?” I asked myself.

Someone knocked on the door a little bit later. I didn’t move, just glowered in that direction, but my wolf sighed. It wasn’t Fenris. “Come in,” I said.

Val poked her head in, smiling as she saw me. “Oh, good, you’re awake,” she said, her expression warm as she closed the door. She joined me and sat on the edge of the bed. “You really gave me a fright yesterday, Celeste,” Val said, reaching over to pat my knee. “You’re looking much better now, though. How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” I said, though some of it was heartsickness as much as exhaustion. “But I’ve felt worse before. I’ll be back to normal in no time, I’m sure.”

I wasn’t totally certain of that, in fact, but I didn’t want to worry anyone.

“Glad to hear it,” Val said, putting her hands back in her lap. “I’m starting to run out of ingredients here on Isla Lobo, but Morgan should be returning to the island within the next few hours. I’ve asked her to bring things back from the coven. If you have any special requests, let me know soon.”

I nodded, thinking of my grimoire. I’d have to flick through the spells I wanted to practice to see if there was anything I needed. “I will,” I replied, grateful that Val hadn’t made any comment on my magic use. At least someone here didn’t feel the need to lecture me like I was an overgrown child.

A moment or two later, Abi burst through the door, allowing it to slam shut as she hurried over. “I thought I heard you!” she said, throwing her arms around me in a fierce embrace. “You have *got* to stop disappearing on me like that!” she chided me. “How am I supposed to be your badass best friend slash sidekick if I don’t know where you are?”

I chuckled and gave her a squeeze. “You are *not* my sidekick, Abi.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Stop avoiding my question.”

“I’m sorry I scared you,” I said earnestly. If Fenris hadn’t turned on me with such immediate anger...

I pushed thoughts of him away, focusing on the two women here with me instead. “It’s alright now. It was urgent, but it’s been handled.”

Abi raised an eyebrow. “Well, alright,” she said, releasing me so she could sit on the bed. “I’m not gonna ask anything else, because Mr. Moonie looked like he could have killed a man when you came back last night. There was someone else, though—who was that? He looked totally zoned out. Did you do that?”

I rolled my eyes. *Of course Fenris came back looking like he was on the warpath.* “No,” I sighed. “I didn’t do that. That’s how we found him. The whole thing is a long, long story. I don’t really want to get into it.” Even if I was still upset with Fenris, I wasn’t going to reveal the truth about his brother. Something was obviously still going on with Lyka, and I was pretty certain it was Sabine’s doing. I didn’t want to get Abi or Val tangled up in it until we knew exactly what was going on with the former Lunar Lord.

“No worries,” Abi replied, giving me a little smile. “I get it. Want to hear something crazy?”

“Sure,” I replied, glad to change the topic.

“Walter told me this morning that both the twins *and* Cody are due back today. Ack!” Abi threw her hands up in the air. “I’m going to have to talk to both Gilbert and Cody. Today. *Today!* You think I can just keep pretending I never heard that voicemail?”

I gave my friend a wry smile. “You could,” I said, “and Cody would be none the wiser...but I know it’s just going to keep bugging you if you ignore it.”

My best friend heaved a heavy sigh. “Yeah, I know,” she agreed, flopping backward dramatically. Abi kept talking with her hands. “How come I’ve never had two hot guys interested in me when my best friend *wasn’t* awakening her inner wolf or witch or whatever? I don’t have the bandwidth for a sordid romance triangle right now! What the heck, universe?!”

“Alternatively,” I said, wiggling on the bed to get in a better position, “we could just pit Cody and Gilbert against one another and watch them fight it out for your affection. You know, like sexy gladiators.” I paused and glanced over at Val. “Who do you think would win, Val? Shifter or vampire?”

“Oh, dear,” the older witch said, giving a gentle chuckle. “That certainly would be entertaining, though I’m not sure in the way Isla Lobo needs right now.”

Abi snorted. “No kidding.” She propped herself up on her elbows to look at me. “Hey, I saw *his lordship* storming down the hall earlier. Trouble in paradise?”

I groaned, hoping we’d left the topic of Fenris behind. “Sometimes, having a...relationship with someone as powerful as the Lunar Lord is more complicated than I ever imagined,” I grumbled, realizing Fenris and I had never *officially* put a name to it.

*Are we dating now? I guess we went on a date—a very nice date—wait, no, he was just a complete ass to me. Don’t get wishy-washy.*

Fortunately, Abi didn’t seem to be in a prying mood. “It happens,” she said, turning her gaze to Val. I realized that, no, she *was* in one, but I simply wasn’t the most interesting target right now. I tried not to grin as she smirked at Val. “So, how’s Walter?”

“He’s fine,” Val said primly, her cheeks going pink.

“Uh huh,” Abi said, sitting back up. She leaned in. “C’mon, you can tell

us. How's it going?"

"I really don't think that's important right now."

I shook my head. "It sure is," I disagreed. "Someone around here deserves a bit of happiness!" That person clearly wasn't me, and I suspected Abi had a bit of angst to get through before her own life could blossom.

Val couldn't hide her smile as she looked down, staring at her hands folded against her pale blue dress. "It's going well. *Slowly*, which is a good thing. I've...been out of the game for quite some time, and now I find myself a little flustered over every little thing. It's...invigorating, in a way."

Abi and I sighed "aw" in tandem, and Val went even pinker.

"Walter said he is planning a little getaway for us," she continued.

"Oh yeah?" Abi said, leaning in. "Where are you going? Somewhere gorgeous and tropical, I'd bet."

"And quiet," I added.

Val shrugged. "He said it was a surprise, and I don't want to spoil it."

"That is so sweet," I gushed, beaming at the idea of Walter spirited Val away to a little private island or a remote cabin so the two of them could spend some uninterrupted time together. If anyone deserved it, it was those two.

"It is," Val agreed, standing. "Now, I just wanted to see how you were feeling, Celeste. I'm going to finish organizing my supplies so it'll be easier to catalog everything that Morgan brings for me." She paused on her way out. "Try to take it easy, Celeste, okay?"

I couldn't help but smile back, always touched by the genuine care in her voice. "I will. I think I'm just going to go for a walk down the beach and stretch my legs. Maybe say hi to Piers and Gilbert when they get back."

Val took her leave as Abi groaned dramatically at the mention of the twins. I smirked at her while I got out of bed, heading to the dresser to rummage around for a clean set of clothing. "Maybe I'll tell Gilbert about Cody's message," I teased.

"Hey!" Abi huffed. "I'm supposed to be the instigator, not you!"

"I know," I chirped, turning my back so I could change. It wasn't as if Abi hadn't seen all of that before; we'd been college roommates, after all. Sometimes, we'd been up so late the night before, we'd wake up mere minutes before class. No one had time for modesty then. "I just want a front seat for the drama."

Abi rolled her eyes and made a shooing motion. "Get outta here before I

regret telling you,” she said, though I understood she meant absolutely none of it.

Val must have let Walter know I was awake when she left my room because when I got downstairs, the smell of fresh coffee greeted me. He had a small plate of French toast on the table moments after I sat down.

I wrapped my hands around the warm mug and sighed blissfully. “If I don’t know better, I’d swear you were a warlock, too,” I remarked, grinning at Walter’s pleased expression. “This is literally a work of magic.”

“Just practice,” he replied, turning to the sink to tidy up the dishes. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright. Just a bit sore. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Walter said nothing else on the matter, and I ate quietly, trying not to think too hard about the fight I’d just had with Fenris or the awful nightmare I’d had.

“How’s Lyka?” I asked quietly, though Abi hadn’t followed me downstairs. “Is he here? On the island?”

“He is,” Walter confirmed, turning to face me as he dried a clean bowl. His lips pulled down. “Unfortunately, he seemed to snap out of his daze last night shortly after arriving. He was completely feral and had to be contained in the silver-lined safe room.”

I sighed, poking at my French toast. Honestly, I wasn’t sure what was better—the despondent Lyka, or the raving animal bent on violence. Both probably weighed heavily on Fenris, and I looked to the door that led outside.

“Fenris has gone to visit him,” Walter mentioned after a moment, turning to grab another dish. “Though he seemed...more wound up than usual when he came through.”

“Yeah. We had a fight,” I said, pressing my lips together. “And he was already pretty keyed up before that.”

*He must be really stressed out right now.* After what had happened to Lyka, and then to me, I could see why Fenris was at his breaking point. I bit my lower lip. I was still pretty pissed at him for even thinking of using a command on me, but ultimately, he hadn’t. And maybe he never would’ve if I hadn’t told him off. It was obviously a crutch he was used to relying on when things didn’t go his way, but...

*At least he stopped when I told him to.*



That, at least, was something.

I finished my meal in silence, turning over Lyka's condition in my head. Regardless of what was going on between me and the Lunar Lord, I wanted to help his brother if I could. If this was Sabine's doing, maybe it could be undone. I probably couldn't resolve his madness, especially if that part of his curse could only be undone by his fated mate, but the least I could do was remove Sabine's influence, which I imagined was nothing less than painful.

As I got up to bring my dish over to the sink, Val let herself in from the sliding glass doors that led to the patio. "Gilbert and Piers have returned," she announced.

I smirked, but before I could even call up the stairs to Abi, she came thundering down, practically flying past me to hurry outside.

"Hey!" I called to her, laughing as we trotted down the sandy stretch toward the dock.

"You're back!" Abi called out to Gilbert, stopping just short of pulling him into a hug. The older of the twins looked flustered as he licked his lips, dipping his head to greet Abi much more quickly.

I snickered and stepped to the side, bumping my shoulder against Piers. "You survived your boring trip to Romania, huh?"

He beamed at me. "Oh, it wasn't so bad. I forgot how beautiful the people are out there—even the vampires are lovely. It made the trip much more interesting."

I rolled my eyes but nearly smiled. "Thank goodness for that." My eyes flickered back to where Abi and Gilbert were standing, pressed even closer together. "Did he pine the entire time you two were away?"

"Oh, yes," Piers said, nodding sagely. His eyes flashed as he grinned, clearly pleased to discuss it with someone. The urge to gossip and having no outlet while traveling must have killed him. "Poor thing nearly perished of loneliness," he replied, loud enough that the other two could overhear us. "I'm glad, for one, that I tie myself to no woman or man. How boring life would be if I didn't have a bit of variety!"

Gilbert shot his twin a dark look before touching Abi's elbow and motioning toward the house. Obviously, he didn't want an audience for whatever he had to say.

I gave Abi a bright grin, hoping I looked more encouraging than manic as the two began walking up toward the mansion.

Piers sighed as they headed off. "I suppose that leaves me to report back

to Fenris,” he sighed, giving me a mournful look. “Unless you...”

“You really think he’d appreciate it if you handed off your report to me?”

“No,” he whined oh-so-dramatically. “Though perhaps if you’d distract him for me...”

“Piers!” I exclaimed, chuckling. “We’re friends, you and I, but we’re not *that* close. Go make your report. He’s not going to *eat* you.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” He flapped a hand at me. “I best get this over with.”

I watched him turn to the mansion as well, and I was tempted to follow him to check Lyka’s condition—and to see how Fenris was holding up. But before I could make up my mind, Val called to me from the patio.

“I’ve made another tincture for you, Celeste,” she said. “This should help with your soreness.”

Deciding to take the universe’s subtle hint on that one, I nodded and walked back to the house.

## Chapter 23

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*Fenris*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

*Click, click, click.*

The sound of my heels against the floor irritated me with each step, but standing still was much worse. Every time I stopped to think, I saw Celeste's face, the hurt and shock flashing across her face before the anger took hold. Anger, I could deal with; it didn't bother me. But to see the betrayal, the pain in her expression, and to know I'd put it there—

I snarled to myself and wheeled around to pace in the other direction. *I shouldn't have done that.* But it was practically automatic at this point. If someone wouldn't agree with me, I simply made their agreement inevitable, or I walked away if it wasn't worth the effort. Celeste was always worth the effort, but *commanding* your mate was something no alpha should do. Even *I* knew that, and yet I'd almost done it without even thinking.

I was disgusted with myself.

I paused and turned to look at the door to Lyka's cell. Silence echoed back at me. Late last night, before I returned to Celeste's side, he was practically a rabid monster. Entirely unrecognizable. It was awful to listen to, but imagining him staring blankly at a wall while he withered away to nothing wasn't much better.

Before I'd decided whether to check on him, I sensed someone approaching. Piers sauntered over, offering me a little dip of his head. "Fenris! Hello!" He paused and eyed the cell I was standing in front of. "Ah, have we a prisoner? Did you lock someone up?"

My wolf snarled, and I didn't stop myself from mirroring the action. "Either tell me what you need to, or get out," I snapped.

Piers recoiled, but my wolf growled, pleased with the fear. For once, I let him savor it, and he lapped it up like fresh spring water.

"Ah, yes. Obviously, we're back from Romania. No Solar Sovereign, I'm afraid," Piers managed to say. My wolf reveled in the little tremble in the vampire's voice, and I knew I was too irritated to keep a tighter rein on him.

“However, a few vampires were missing. Most notable was Viorel, Sire of the Carpathians. However, I was told he was looking into a disturbance in southern Poland.” He shrugged. “It seemed reasonable.”

“Hmm.” I thought of the siren off the coast of Carmel Valley almost at once. “I need you to track them down.” Either I needed their locations confirmed—or wherever they were off on their little errands—or I needed their missing statuses confirmed. It didn’t make much of a pattern if I wasn’t certain. I frowned. “And keep your ear to the ground for Sabine. We can’t let her get away with all she’s done.”

Celeste had mentioned she thought the psychic witch had been looking for my brother. If her interpretation was correct, and Sabine did have a magical way to track Lyka, I didn’t want her to find Isla Lobo.

“Of course,” Piers replied, nodding. He paused, and for a moment, I thought he was going to spout yet another excuse for why *he* wasn’t the best one to find Sabine or look for missing vampires, or whatever his latest complaint involved. “Fenris, the meeting you’ve just held with the Order of the Stars...there are already murmurs in the world—in our world—about the fight that’s coming up. Now, normally, I would tell you that I’m a lover, not a fighter, but...” He looked so uncharacteristically serious that I forgot the smart remark I was about to fire off. “If you need something, Gilbert and I are here.”

I frowned, realizing a bit belatedly that Piers was attempting to express his friendship without using those words. I opened my mouth, trying to find my own words, when an absolute racket exploded out of the cell behind me.

Clearly back in his own mind, Lyka roared, enraged at finding himself trapped in a box. I heard the scratch of claws against the floor and the heavy slam of his shoulder against the door.

Piers jumped, eyebrows shooting up. “I do *not* need to know who’s being held in there,” the vampire rambled as he quickly turned and hurried away.

I chuckled darkly and turned back to the door. I couldn’t see within the cell, but could only assume Lyka was in his wolf form. There was another slam, and I closed my eyes, mentally directing my brother to be calm again. I hated seeing him so vacant, but at least he was no longer at risk of hurting himself. Not here, at least. There was no ocean to drown in.

*Where have you gone, Lyka?*

Once, my brother was my most trusted confidant. I would’ve told him anything. These days, I doubted he’d understand if I spoke. Instead, he’d only

become enraged by the sound of my voice, or completely despondent. Both possibilities were awful. Even what I'd seen on Isla Caida had been such an improvement. If I could just witness that again...

*Celeste did mention she might be able to help.*

But at what cost?

Seeing her perform dark magic to get us to Lyka's location had sent fear through me like nothing I'd ever known. I didn't want to live through that again, and I didn't want to risk my mate's safety, even for Lyka.

*But perhaps in his weakened state...*

I wasn't a warlock, so I couldn't be certain, but perhaps she would be able to *see* into his mind. More information would be better than where I stood now.

*I should ask—properly. I am sure she would help if I asked.* I paused, a sour taste in my mouth. *Well, if she isn't still angry with me.*

My alpha command was a gut reaction, and I'd allowed my wolf and my emotions to rule me. She had every right to be upset, loath as I was to admit it.

Steeling myself, I left Lyka's cell to speak to Celeste.

When I returned to the mansion, I realized the twins weren't the only ones who'd arrived on my island. Before I could pinpoint the supernatural sensations prickling my consciousness, I realized someone was approaching. That presence, however, I recognized without even looking—*Cody King*.

I steeled myself, ignoring the urge to sigh heavily before turning to face the overexcited young shifter, except he froze on the spot. For a moment, I thought he was staring at *me*, but he was staring right through my person—in fact, it was like the mansion walls themselves were transparent. He lifted his chin, scenting the air so powerfully that his chest heaved and his ribs shook. It looked absolutely comical in his human form.

“Cody.”

He didn't even blink; it was like I hadn't spoken at all. He took a step forward, and suddenly, he was on all fours, a manic wolf sprinting toward the front door.

I knew that look—that was a wolf who'd just scented his fated mate for the first time. I hurried after him and grabbed the large chestnut wolf by the scruff. He was heavy, larger than a normal shifter, but he wasn't the first

alpha I'd had to wrestle in all my years. Those born in the Celestial Pack were much larger.

Cody growled as he realized he was being restrained, but he was so focused on the smell that all he did was try to shrug me off while clawing at the ground to propel himself forward. He couldn't have cared less about me right then.

I could sense, now that I was actively trying to determine who was inside, that the only "new" arrival was Val's niece.

*Is she—?*

By the looks of it, she most certainly was.

"Cody," I commanded, allowing my alpha power to flow into my voice. "Enough."

The younger shifter stopped at once, still in my grip. I tentatively let him back down. "Why don't you shift back?" I suggested, not wanting to command him now that he was able to listen once more. "You don't want to startle your fated mate. I didn't...handle it particularly well the first time I met Celeste, and it took quite a bit of time to undo that first impression."

I frowned at the memory. *And perhaps now I've undone it all over again.*

The wolf took a breath, his sides huffing in and out before he took a few steps backward. With another heavy sigh, Cody reappeared in front of me, running his hands frantically through dark blond hair. "Yeah, yeah. You're totally right," he said, still staring at the door.

I snorted, well-aware he hadn't relaxed at all. "Take a deep breath," I said. "You only get to make one first impression." Besides, what I'd seen of Val's niece inclined me to think rushing in and kicking a door down would only turn her off.

Before I could say anything else, Cody inhaled and then opened the door, marching right to the stairs and hurrying up to the second floor. I rolled my eyes and closed the door before hurrying after him. He'd even stopped in front of the room while giving himself a little pep talk under his breath. "You can totally do this," he said. "Just be cool. Don't freak her out, and just be cool, Cody."

He opened the door, smiling like a big ball of sunshine. It was all I could do not to roll my eyes, but that only lasted until he laid eyes on Val's niece. Morgan and Celeste were looking over a page and discussing something when they looked up.

"Cody?" Celeste said, raising a brow. "Everything okay?"



Cody's brain seemed to short-circuit, and he just blinked. He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

*Oh, boy...*

Morgan cleared her throat, smoothing out her black dress. "Hi," she said shyly, offering him a little smile. "I don't think we met the last time I was here." Her eyes darted to me, clearly nervous, before her gaze settled back on Cody. She straightened up and walked a few steps closer, holding out a hand to the young shifter. "My name is Morgan Fletcher. It's nice to meet you."

Cody made a strange noise, and I saw something flicker across Morgan's face. I stepped forward before the younger alpha made this any worse.

"Cody, Morgan is Val's niece and a very talented young witch," I prompted him, making sure to give him a subtle nudge as I stepped to the side. I didn't miss the surprised look Morgan gave me. "Morgan, this is Cody King. He's been working with me recently and has proven to be a key member of the team." Talking him up a little couldn't hurt. My touch seemed to knock something loose in Cody, and he finally stepped forward, taking her hand before it got too awkward.

"It's nice to meet you," Morgan said, extracting her hand after a moment. She looked back at Celeste, and I didn't have to be a shifter to see the stress of the awkward situation written across her face. "I still have some things to bring inside—I brought quite a bit from my coven. I don't want to leave it on the patio."

"I'll carry it for you!" Cody blurted out.

Celeste's eyebrows shot up before realization dawned across her face. She lifted her hand, covering her smile with her fingers.

"I'd carry anything for you," Cody blabbered. "I'll even carry *you*, if you'd like!"

Morgan took a step back, looking vaguely alarmed by how strong Cody was coming on. "Ah, no. That's okay, thanks. I know where everything needs to go. I'd rather do it myself." She gave him a worried smile and hurried toward the door, clearly regretting that she'd introduced herself at all.

Cody turned, and I grabbed him by the elbow, shaking my head.

Val sighed. "Now, Cody," she said, looking sterner than I'd ever seen her, "you are a lovely young man, but our family...has some rather *strong* feelings about dating anyone outside of the magic community."

He grinned at her. "Good thing I'm a shifter, then, huh? No normie here!" Her expression went flat. "You and I both know that isn't what I mean."

“Eh, I know. Sucks for them, though, because I’m not so easily deterred.”

Celeste frowned at him. “I don’t think Morgan would appreciate you being so flippant about her family,” she cautioned.

Cody waved his hand at her. “I’d never put Morgan in a position like that! I’d meet them, of course. And I’d be so charming, they’ll forget they ever cared about whether or not I was a warlock.”

“I’d advise against rushing things,” I cautioned him.

“Yeah, no way,” Cody said, nodding, and I frowned, trying to puzzle out if he meant “yes” or “no.”

He turned around. “Anyway, I’m gonna go make sure she doesn’t have to carry any boxes,” he said before leaving.

Val sighed. “I suppose I better go down to my storeroom to make sure Cody doesn’t distract Morgan too badly. Or move my things.”

“Good luck,” Celeste said, offering a smile as the older witch left.

Once it was just the two of us in the room, Celeste’s silver eyes finally fell back on me. “Wow,” she said, her eyes returning to the door. “I didn’t see *that* coming. They’re fated mates, aren’t they?”

“It would appear so,” I said, shaking my head. Hopefully, Cody would heed everyone’s warnings about coming on too strong, but he seemed completely lovestruck. “It’s a strange thing, having one’s world completely flipped on its head once you realize, but it’s not a bad feeling. Not at all.” I paused. “I am glad Cody found his mate. He is a good wolf. He deserves that.”

When I looked back at Celeste, I saw she was smiling. “Be careful,” she warned, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “Keep that up, and I’ll start thinking you’re actually fond of him.” Before I could counter, her smile fell away. “Oh, shit. I’d better go find Abi and tell her about this development. It’s really going to change things for her.”

“Wait,” I said, holding out a hand before she could pass me. “About earlier...” I paused, taking a breath. “I am sorry about the way I reacted. I shouldn’t have been so volatile.”

Celeste’s frown didn’t budge. “You almost commanded me,” she said, sounding a bit mulish.

I fought the urge to get frustrated. “I did,” I agreed. Arguing otherwise would be pointless. She’d seen the truth in my eyes.

“You obviously don’t trust me as much as you say if you’d let your alpha command forbid me from doing something, Fenris,” she said.

“It’s not trust. It’s paranoia.” I sighed, pressing my lips together. My wolf growled softly, his ears now flat against his skull.

She shook her head. “Trust and paranoia are two sides of the same coin,” she said, folding her arms over her chest. “We can talk more about this later. I need to talk to Abi before she finds Cody.”

I didn’t argue any further, merely stepping to the side so Celeste could leave the room. I stared after her, roiling over what she’d just said. As a heavy feeling settled in the pit of my gut, I realized she was right—trust and paranoia were inextricably linked. If I kept feeding the latter, I’d only starve the former.

*I need to get past this.*

I needed to, or I’d drive a permanent wedge between my mate and me.

# Chapter 24

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*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

*I hope I'm not too late.*

As funny as Abi's love triangle was, I didn't want my friend to embarrass herself now that Cody had found his fated mate. Walter had told me he'd last seen Abi and Gilbert heading toward the library over an hour ago, but he hadn't seen them since. I swung around the corner, hoping I'd find my friend before she—

"Oh!" I blinked, taking a step back. "I am so sorry!"

Well, she certainly hadn't been talking to Cody. But she and Gilbert weren't exactly talking, either. Not with the way they were locking lips!

Gilbert took a step back and gently cleared his throat. His eyes never left Abi's lips, which were puffy from all the kissing. "I should go find my brother," he said regretfully. "It is odd he didn't try to come find me right after speaking with Fenris. I should make sure he didn't say something foolish and get himself into trouble."

"Okay," Abi sighed, sounding just as regretful. As she leaned up for another kiss, he pressed a gentle peck to her lips. "See you later."

Dumbstruck, I watched Gilbert walk away. *What is in the air today?*

As I watched him go, Abi seemed to remember how to breathe. She hurried over to me, counting to five under her breath before letting out a squeal. "Celeeeeeeste!" she nearly yelled, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "Celeste, did you see that? What an amazing kisser. I think that was the best I've ever experienced."

"I did see!" I said excitedly, glancing over my shoulder as if Gilbert might suddenly reappear.

He didn't, but we heard, "You know I can hear you" from down the hall.

Both of us let out a little shriek, and Abi turned bright red as I cackled. "I think he even sounded a little smug!" I said, pausing to listen. I strained, trying to pull on my newly improved senses, but I didn't even hear footsteps, just the sound of Abi breathing and the rustling of her blouse as she gripped

my arm.

Deciding Gilbert was really gone this time, Abi gave me a little shake. “I still can’t even believe that just happened,” she said. “I feel like I’m floating. He is so *romantic*, Celeste. He was sort of awkward at first—and even that was adorable, by the way—but once he got going...he has such a way with words.”

I chuckled. “Careful, you look like you might drift away.”

“We had a really good talk.”

“Uh huh.” I wagged my brows.

“It was just a talk! And, uh, what you saw.” She grinned again. “But I bet if I open the doors in just my undies again, Gilbert won’t run off.”

“I don’t think so,” I agreed, shaking my head.

“Wait!” Abigail suddenly froze, the smile falling from her face. “I still haven’t talked to Cody. What if he doesn’t want to be my friend anymore? If he just thought of me *that way*?”

I frowned. “If he doesn’t want to be your friend because you don’t want to sleep with him, then he was a shit friend to start with. But I don’t think Cody’s that kind of guy. Besides, it’s kind of a moot point now.”

Abi looked confused. “What? What do you mean?”

My grin returned. “I’m not one hundred percent positive, but I’m pretty sure he’s just found his fated mate. He went sort of nuts when he met Morgan a little while ago. Fenris seemed pretty convinced of it, too.”

“Oh!” For a moment, I thought Abi might be hurt, but her smile returned a moment later. “Man, now I’m sorry I missed that. Well, this works out great, doesn’t it? We get to be Cody’s wing women while he woos Morgan!”

I snorted. “Based on what I saw, he’s going to need it.” I paused. “And I think Morgan might need a friend, too, you know, with the whole wolf shifter thing.”

Abi wagged her eyebrows at me as I braced myself for the inevitable jokes.

Suddenly, Piers poked his head through the library door. “Abigail,” he said as he came inside. “I have come to lodge an official complaint.” He paused just long enough to give her a wistful look. “I’ve been informed by my brother that he’s actually spoken to you and this is no longer a one-sided, pining affair. You have driven him completely mad, thus taking over my role!”

Abi blinked, looking confused for a moment before bursting into

laughter. “I dunno, Piers. I don’t think anyone can drive him crazy like you do.”

Piers fixed her with a wicked smile. “*Au contraire*, my dear.”

“Are you here just to complain?”

“Alas, no. Cruel fate is sending us on another mission already.” He now sobered up a bit. “Gilbert would never say he was already missing you, but that is why he’s lucky he has *me*, his loving brother. I think it’d be best if you give him a kiss goodbye. You know, for morale.”

“For once, I think you have the right idea,” Abi replied, beaming at him. She gave me a wink. “I’ll catch you later.”

Piers followed after her, leaving me alone with my wolf. She’d already been restless for hours, but her nervous energy was slowly growing, and now that I didn’t have any other distractions, it was increasingly hard to ignore her. I still didn’t feel strong enough to practice any magic, but my wolf didn’t feel drained in the same way.

*I guess it couldn’t hurt to stretch my legs.* I supposed I shouldn’t really be neglecting her, either. Not now that she’d made herself known.

Now that I was certain my mother was the witch in my family, I reasoned my father must have been the shifter. *I wonder what he was like. Was he a white wolf, too? Did he like science, or reading, or...?* There were so many possibilities, and all I knew was that he had to have been a shifter. For all I knew, he could have been a latent one, too.

*I guess learning to be a better shifter is the only place to start.*

Taking a deep breath once I got out the door and on the patio, I let go of the mental reins. My wolf was eager to take the lead, giving a joyful yelp as her paws hit the stone. We scabbled across the sand and raced toward the jungle.

I’d only been running for a few minutes before I ran into a tawny wolf. I didn’t recognize him by sight immediately, but I knew his smell.

*Cody?*

My wolf was curious enough that she allowed me to shift back, and he did the same.

“Hey!” he greeted, all cheerful and breathless. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “I’m surprised to see you out here. I thought you were going to pick things up and put them down.”

To my surprise, Cody blushed a little. “Hah! Aw, yeah, I dunno. Fenris warned me not to be too intense right away or I might frighten Morgan. She



seemed sort of surprised when we met, you know? I didn't want to make it worse, but I had so much energy!" He motioned wildly with his arms, and I certainly got the picture. "She's just—I just—I just *really* want her to like me, you know? But no one wants to be smothered! So here I am, running! Until my wolf chills out."

"Is it working?" I said, my eyebrows rising even higher. He seemed more energetic than ever.

"I dunno. Better than freaking her out, though!" He paused, giving me a once-over. "Hey, is it true Fenris freaked you out when you met? He said he made a bad first impression."

I blinked, surprised to hear that Fenris would ever admit that to anyone, much less to the Californian shifter. "Yes," I said a moment later, shrugging. "But he also whisked me here when we'd only just met. He was gruff, prickly, and private, and I felt completely kept in the dark." I snorted. "I get the feeling none of that will be your problem, though."

He laughed. "I don't think I could pull off dark and mysterious, but I get it. Fenris is like the shifter god, practically, and he's been around so long! Who knows what he's seen?"

"Yeah," I said, sighing. I only had the slightest notion of how lonely Fenris had been.

*And now he might be losing one of the only people he has.*

That reminded me—I still hadn't seen Lyka. "I have go check on something," I said. "You keep running that energy off, yeah?"

Cody just laughed and gave me the finger guns. "You got it!" he chirped, turning around before dashing off into the jungle, his tawny wolf's tail spinning wildly behind him.

I returned to the mansion, and Walter directed me to the saferoom beneath the home. It wasn't difficult to find once I knew where to look.

I let myself into the hallway and found the lone room. Fenris had apparently returned here after Cody chased after Morgan. He stood silently, staring at a heavy metal door.

Approaching quietly, I stopped beside him and listened—the silence was intense. If I didn't know Lyka was in there, I might have struggled to sense him at all. "How is he?" I asked softly, unable to listen to the stillness any longer.

Fenris sighed, tearing his gaze away from the industrial door. “I need to talk to you about something,” he said quietly, taking a step away from the door. He motioned for me to join him, and despite feeling like someone had just dropped several stones into my gut, I followed.

“What’s up?” I asked, making sure I kept my voice low. The last thing I wanted to do was disturb Lyka with whatever I was about to hear.

Fenris licked his lips, watching me with a somber expression. I’d never seen that look on his face before. I felt my stomach sink even lower, and now it dropped to my shoes while my heart rate began to pick up. I had no idea what he was about to say, but the what-ifs were already bombarding me.

*What if Lyka is dying?*

*What if Fenris is dying?*

*What if he’s going to—*

“I need to apologize for what I did earlier,” Fenris said, his voice solemn.

“What?” I blurted out before he could continue. My heart skipped a beat. *Apologize?* That was one of the last things I’d expected from him.

He sighed heavily, and I realized he was almost physically struggling with what he wanted to say. “For almost...for almost using an alpha command on you,” Fenris continued.

I blinked, barely able to process what was happening, but at least I was staying quiet.

“I was scared—no, I was terrified of what might happen to you if you continued doing that. In that moment, I allowed myself—and my wolf—to react like we always would. But you aren’t everyone else, Celeste.” Fenris drew a sharp breath as if that very thought offended him. “You are nothing like them. I shouldn’t have treated you like that.” He paused, and I held my breath, afraid to break whatever spell had fallen over us. “And I am sorry I almost used an alpha command on you. That shouldn’t have even crossed my mind.”

I licked my lips, suddenly at a loss for what to say. “I think you might have if I hadn’t interrupted you.” It wasn’t meant to be an accusation, but I couldn’t help myself. What Fenris had done, what he’d *almost* done...that hurt. “I feel like you don’t trust me.”

“I think I might have, too,” Fenris said, and that honesty stung, but I knew a lie would’ve hurt more. Both of us knew what he’d planned to do in that moment, and it wasn’t okay. At least he’d admitted to that. “And I *do* trust you, Celeste, but if I lose you—”

I held up a finger, and he quieted down. “Apologies don’t come with ‘buts,’” I said gently. “Thank you for...” I frowned, not entirely sure what words I was looking for. I swallowed and tried again. “I know that this...” I motioned between us, trying to indicate whatever responsibility Fenris was taking over me, “I know this isn’t easy for you, and I appreciate you doing it. But what you did, what you *intended* to do, Fenris...that really hurt me.”

I saw him flinch, and it took all my willpower not to crumple right then. I knew Fenris wasn’t trying to elicit a specific response out of me, which somehow made this even worse.

After what felt like an hour, he spoke again. “That...was never my intention,” he said gravely. “And I realize that isn’t really the point. You were, after all, hurt, but...” He shook his head, finally looking away.

Despite myself, I stepped toward him and gently squeezed his elbow. “You might be a shifter god,” I said quietly, “but you’re still a person. I’m upset with you, and that might linger a little, but I forgive you, Fenris.” When he gave me a sideways look, I offered a little smile. “And I trust you’ll do better next time, too.”

A determined look crossed his face. “Absolutely,” he said, practically transforming before my eyes into the Lunar Lord.

My lips twitched. “Good.” I turned, nodding toward Lyka’s cell. “Now... how is your brother doing?”

Fenris grunted and faced the metal door again. His expression went sour. “He keeps switching between complete madness and total despondence,” he reported. “He had another outburst earlier today. They seem to come out of nowhere.”

He looked so...“helpless” wasn’t a word I easily assigned to the Lunar Lord, but in that moment, I saw a younger brother aching to help his sibling, but powerless to do so. I gave Fenris’s arm a squeeze. I was still frustrated with him, but that didn’t mean I wanted him to suffer.

“Do you want me to see if I can reach his mind?” I offered quietly. “I don’t know what will help because I don’t know what’s going on, but understanding would be a good start, right?” At least I’d get an idea of what I needed to research.

Fenris watched me for a moment, his expression drawn. “I wanted to wait until after the eclipse,” he said. “I didn’t want to distract you, and if anything went wrong with Lyka...” He trailed off, looking back toward the door. He took a breath, shaking off his thoughts before looking at me again. “I don’t

want to ask you for that until you've had a chance to recover.”

I shrugged. “I went for a run with my wolf. That helped—and night is falling.” The moon wasn't nearly as full anymore, but any presence of it was helpful. It still left me feeling more energetic than during the day or during the new moon. “I'm not proposing anything extravagant. Just a simple psychic spell to try and sense what's going on in there.”

Fenris gave me a look, but he was assessing me rather than shutting me down.

“I'm going to get my grimoire,” I told him. “I'll be right back.”

It only took a few minutes to trot upstairs and fetch the Handmaiden book from the master bedroom. When I returned, Fenris looked a little calmer. I gave him a smile and leafed through a few of the pages I'd marked for myself. Once I found the spell I wanted, I motioned him over. “Why don't you come help?”

“Help?” he repeated, lifting a brow. “How do I do that?”

I couldn't help my catlike grin. “Well, I think this will be easier for me if I can focus strictly on the magic and on Lyka's mind. I haven't tried to reach someone through a door before. If you could hold the book, that'd really help.”

Fenris smirked. “You want me to be your table, is that it?”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. “Well, yes,” I said, giving him a wink. “The most handsome table I've ever seen. But I also want you to just...be steady through our mating bond, if that makes sense. The more solid everything is around me, the more I can focus on the magic—and Lyka. That should make this a little less exhausting.”

Fenris gave a nod. “I'll be the best table you could ever ask for,” he said gravely, as if I had assigned him the most serious of tasks.

My smile grew. “Thank you,” I replied, taking a breath to steady myself. As I did, I could feel Fenris's presence press against mine within our bond. It wasn't unlike waking up against someone early in the morning. He was solid and warm but unobtrusive. It was perfect, exactly what I needed in this moment.

I took another few moments to regulate my breathing, and then I began to recite the words written down in the Handmaiden's grimoire. Lyka's mind became more apparent to me. It couldn't have been more different from Fenris's. Where the Lunar Lord's mind reminded me of a castle or a fortress, Lyka's was a small hut in the middle of a treacherous swamp littered with

pitfalls. *I could drown in here*, I realized. The swamp was alive, and the branches and brambles seemed to be *watching me* as I attempted my way to the hut's old wooden door.

There were also obvious signs of struggle, reminding me of images of old battlefields I'd seen in high school. Places where the trees had been blown up, as if someone had used a weapon on them, or old divots overtaken by the wetlands. As I struggled onward, I realized the flood itself might even be a sign of something wrong. The trees here didn't belong in water.

As I got closer to the door, it felt like everything shuddered. An earthquake...no, that was Lyka trying to force me back out. I hurried onward and grasped the door handle. It was cold and well-worn beneath my fingers. I didn't want to force anything, but I knew Lyka wouldn't let me in willingly. After everything that had happened, why would he?

I took a breath and nudged the door with my shoulder, its old hinges groaning as I got one foot inside. Almost at once, I was hit with a memory, bright and intrusive.

*A woman who appeared to be about Fenris's age twirled a long strand of dark brown hair. As she spoke, I felt irritated. Why doesn't she ever do anything to help?*

*Another flash. There she was again, berating me for something I had nothing to do with. I blinked, and we were somewhere else. I was struggling to help two shifters put aside their differences and prevent the conflict from escalating into something worse. The tension in the room was palpable, and as one leaned in and snarled something to the other, I glanced over. "Sela," I said, giving the brown-haired woman a nudge. "I need your help."*

*She gave me a baleful look. "You're the Lunar Lord, aren't you? Fix it yourself."*

I took a breath and tried to steady myself as Lyka's memories kept flowing freely. *Was Sela his mate? Weren't they fated mates?* They acted like they couldn't stand each other.

I took another breath and withdrew from the little hut in the swamp. The world stopped shuddering around me, as if Lyka had breathed a sigh of relief.

"What did you see?" Fenris asked.

"I'm not done yet," I said, flipping the pages wildly to find another spell I'd marked as interesting. There was something about the way Sela had kept staring daggers at Lyka...

*Ah! Here it is!* The spell that could help a shifter find their fated mate. "I

need to do something else. Just do exactly what you did before.”

Fenris nodded, resuming his silence as I scanned the handwriting quickly, not wanting to lose anything. I took a breath and dove back into the swamp, this time calling a bit more on the moon’s power. I could feel my body start to ache again as I searched for a thread, a thin line coming from his...*there!*

I touched it, and Lyka reacted violently. I stumbled backward, falling on my rear from the force with which he’d rejected me from his mind.

“Celeste!” Fenris exclaimed, reaching for me immediately.

I stared up at him, unable to believe what I’d just uncovered. If Sela was Lyka’s mate, that line would’ve been severed when he’d ripped her to shreds.

“Fenris,” I said, breathless with my discovery, “Lyka’s fated mate is still out there somewhere.”

# Chapter 25

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*Fenris*



# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

“*What?*” I paused helping Celeste back to her feet, staring at her as I tried to wrap my mind around what she’d just said. “No, that isn’t possible. I watched him rip his mate to shreds. She is dead.”

“His fated mate is out there,” Celeste repeated, sounding more confident. “I’m certain.”

I shook my head, offering her my hand as she hoisted herself off the floor. “A shifter only has one fated mate,” I argued. “That is why the loss of a mate is so devastating. You can never replace that bond.”

Celeste shrugged, brushing her shorts and legs off. “Then this Sela person wasn’t his true fated mate,” she replied, reaching for the grimoire I was still holding. “That’s possible, isn’t it? They didn’t seem to like each other, much less share any sort of deep bond.”

My frown deepened. I *had* heard, on rare occasions, of mates rejecting one another, but that was exceedingly rare. “Perhaps,” I said, unable to say for certain. Celeste was the one who’d peered inside Lyka’s mind, after all. “But from what I remember, they did everything together. They didn’t seem to be in strife.”

“Hm,” Celeste said. “Well, I only saw a few memories. It’s possible I was just seeing the worst ones because those are the most painful for him. They were sticking out.” She looked thoughtful. “Would you mind telling me about Sela and Lyka?”

I tried to remember. “They met a little less than a century after the full solar eclipse. Sela wasn’t from the Celestial Pack. That meant they’d never be able to complete the ritual, and she’d only live a mortal lifetime, so they did everything together. Sometimes, I felt a bit pushed out of Lyka’s life, but I didn’t hold it against him. I knew he’d have less than a century with Sela while we’d have forever. He wanted to spend as much time with his mate while he could.”

“Where did they meet?” Celeste asked. “Was their first meeting like Cody

and Morgan's earlier?"

I frowned. "I don't know. I wasn't there. Lyka's behavior was starting to shift a little, and he was already becoming more antisocial—one of the first signs that the curse was taking him. One day, he simply came back to our home with this young woman. Who was I to argue?"

*Should I have, though?* At the time, I hadn't known anyone else in the Celestial Pack who'd found their mate. Naively, perhaps, I had hoped meeting Sela would slow my brother's descent into madness—but it'd done quite the opposite.

"His feral behavior got worse after that," I said, looking back toward the door. "He became more unpredictable. His disappearances lasted longer, but Sela always disappeared with him. I really hoped that finding her would help him, but the knowledge that she'd die a mortal death must've weighed heavily on him. It was almost like he was practicing...*shit*."

"What?" Celeste asked, moving closer. She held her book against her chest. "What was he practicing?"

I scowled fiercely. "*That* is what happens when witches start practicing dark magic and get addicted to its thrill," I hissed. "Someone must have been using dark magic *on him*. When Sabine was trying to kill him, she yelled something about Lyka stealing her sister. It made no sense, but—"

"Sela must have been Sabine's sister," Celeste finished for me, her eyes growing wide. "Sela was...what? Using him? Manipulating him?" Her face fell, and she looked back to the door. "No wonder he went mad."

"Indeed." Fury and sadness warred within my chest. I couldn't believe I'd never noticed the presence of witchcraft, insidious and sneaky as it was.

Celeste looked back at me. "If we find this person before the eclipse—Lyka's actual fated mate, I mean—would he be able to recover? Would they be able to help him heal?"

"I..." I hadn't thought of that. "I admit I've never heard of a situation where someone posed as a shifter's fated mate. But I don't think finding his true fated mate could hurt, as long as we protect them from him if he responds poorly."

"Of course," Celeste said, nodding. "We wouldn't let them get hurt."

I felt a swell of hope for Lyka. Perhaps not all was lost and he wouldn't be destined to an eternity of madness, where the only way out was either slowly finding his way back, like on Isla Caida before Sabine's intervention, or being put down like a rabid dog.

I groaned and rubbed my face. “As if we don’t have enough to do in the coming weeks,” I lamented. I would do it, of course. I would do everything I could to help Lyka, but Celeste still had to train and I had to gather strength before the Solar Sovereign made their play.

“I can help with this,” Celeste said as the brightness returned to her expression. She flipped the grimoire back open, already leafing through pages. “Perhaps if I can help him untangle some of his memories, we could look for clues.”

I reached out, touching her elbow gently. “I think you’ve done enough for one night,” I said quietly. “You have done more for Lyka in the past thirty minutes than I’ve been able to accomplish over the past several centuries.”

Celeste paused, looking up at me. “Fenris,” she said quietly, “that’s not true. You kept him safe.”

“It is true,” I insisted, shaking my head. “I kept him isolated. I kept the world safe from him as much as I kept him safe from the world. My only tactic was to hope time would help him heal. I never would’ve imagined that Sela was posing as his fated mate. *Never.*” I gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “I think it is best if we give *him* a little time. I don’t think having his mind prodded, after everything, is his favorite thing. And *you* had a big day yesterday.”

She considered me for a moment before nodding and closing the grimoire. “You’re right,” she said, looking toward the door. “This is all probably incredibly uncomfortable for him, no matter our intentions.”

I smiled. “Thank you,” I said. “Come back to the mansion with me?”

“Okay.” She nodded, and we fell into lockstep as we departed Lyka’s chamber.

For a while, we walked in silence. I was enjoying the sound of the island’s wildlife when Celeste looked up at me and smirked. “I ran into Cody before coming to find Lyka,” she said, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “Sounds like you’ve gotten quite the soft spot for that wolf.”

I couldn’t help but sigh. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Celeste snickered. “You’re trying to help him out with his fated mate situation! I think that’s rather sweet. After all, you *could* just let him flounder all on his own.”

I scoffed. “What alpha lets another shifter flounder? Besides, if I can minimize the drama playing out on my island, I will. I’m used to living with only Walter—and the most drama that comes with him is the saucy novels he

thinks I don't know are stashed on the private jet."

Surprised laughter followed, and I smiled, pleased I could make Celeste laugh like that. "You can't keep denying it," she told me, wagging a finger. "I know you like everyone. Not just me and Walter, but the rest of them. Even Piers. Even Cody."

I snorted, but she kept speaking. "I like seeing this other side of you. It means you're not so afraid of letting your guard down, and I love that."

I paused, biting the inside of my mouth instead of arguing. I supposed, in a way, having all these guests on my island was starting to feel like being in a pack again. But instead of a pack full of shifters constantly trying to kill me and those I cared about, it was full of characters who were trying to enjoy life in their own way. Piers and his constant quests to find beautiful people. Cody and his truly absurd sense of humor. Even Abigail and Celeste's friendship was something I liked witnessing.

"Perhaps," I said slowly, not entirely willing to admit it. "Unfortunately, we have just over a month until the eclipse, and that barely gives us time to prepare, much less be social with everyone." I sighed, looking up at the night sky. "I'll have to travel again to see if I can pick up some of these loose threads the Solar Sovereign left behind. Anything I can find will be useful, and we must go into this with every advantage we can." I scowled. "And I *will* find Sabine before she makes another attempt on Lyka's life." Now that I realized who Sabine's sister *was*, I was certain Sabine wouldn't give up until she got revenge.

Celeste chuckled. "It's kind of obnoxious how seamlessly you swap from kind and sweet to fierce Lunar Lord mode," she commented, bumping our shoulders together. "But you're right. We don't have much time, and I'm not leaving any of this to chance. Tomorrow, it's back to work."

I gave her a sideways smirk, pleased with how driven she was. We weren't so different in that respect. "Of course," I agreed as I opened the door to my home for her. "But for now, we sleep."

"Yeah," Celeste said, stifling a yawn. "For now, we sleep."

## Chapter 26

---

*Celeste*

# Fenris's Private Villa

Isla Lobo, Panama

*Aunt Esme was sitting in a chair. As I looked around, I realized that even though the chair looked like one of those that used to sit at my mother's kitchen table, this was not my parents' house. The floor was a dull, matte gray, cold and unforgiving. There was nothing on the walls—or maybe I couldn't see them? I blinked.*

*Is this a dream?*

*I approached my aunt, trying to get her attention. "Aunt Esme?"*

*She didn't react, just kept staring straight ahead at something else. Her dark brown eyes were open wide, her expression drawn with concern. As I watched her, she looked like she'd aged years since I'd seen her last. There were wrinkles on her skin that were never there before. Her hair looked gray and dull. Frizzy, even. As a woman who was eccentric and free-spirited, she often looked like she'd blown in from a runway in Paris or a lavish beach party in Thailand. Now, she looked like a frail old woman, not a world traveler. Despite my anger with her, I suddenly felt concerned.*

*"Aunt Esme?" I called again, trying to reach out to her.*

*She still didn't acknowledge me, and I glanced around, almost shrieking as Sabine strolled by. But she didn't seem to notice me, either, considering her eyes were glued to my aunt.*

*I knew as soon as I saw the psychic witch that this wasn't a distant memory. Long, angry claw marks raked the left side of Sabine's face—Lyka's doing. The immortal shifter had clearly left a mark, ruining the perfect visage Sabine had once crafted. But somehow, the scars lent to her terrifying grin.*

*She reached forward, and I swore I could see the air move between her and Esme. Sabine inhaled deeply, and the angry claw marks seemed to fade just a touch.*

*Holy shit, I realized. She's feeding off of Esme's fear!*

*"Leave her alone!" I shouted, but neither woman noticed me. I glanced around again, looking for anything that would indicate if this was happening*

*right now, like when I'd seen Lyka, or was about to happen, like my vision involving Kal.*

*A pretty fae suddenly walked in, passing me on my left. "Excuse me, ma'am," she said in a high-pitched voice to Sabine, and I couldn't help but wince. "I hate to interrupt, but Zyanya has given her orders. We'll be leaving Abu Ghurab within the day. I was to inform you that you need to finish with your Aurora witch before we leave."*

*Sabine turned, giving the fae a wicked grin. "I—"*

I bolted upright, cold sweat pouring down my back as I gasped. "Shit!" I whispered, my pulse roaring in my ears. I couldn't be certain, but it didn't matter if it was happening now or was about to. Either way, Esme was somewhere in Abu Ghurab, and she was in danger. "Shit, shit, shit!"

I flung myself out of bed but tried to steady my breathing. Panicking wouldn't help Esme. I was still angry with my aunt for giving me the "medicine" that had completely silenced my magic, but that didn't mean I wanted her to be tortured to death. I wanted closure, not revenge.

"Celeste?" Fenris sat up in bed, squinting at me as I fumbled around for my clothes. He still looked groggy. "What is it? Another dream?"

"My aunt is in Abu Ghurab," I blurted out, pulling my blouse over my head.

I could practically hear Fenris's frown. "How do you know she's in Egypt?"

"I had a dream—a vision," I rambled, grabbing a pair of sneakers. "She's being held there by Sabine. She looked so *old*, Fenris. Sabine is feeding off of her—and someone walked in just before I woke up, telling Sabine to finish my aunt off before they leave. Someone named Zyanya told them to leave." I paused. "Who's that? Is she another psychic witch?"

"I've never heard that name before," Fenris said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Celeste—Celeste, wait. Calm down. This might be a trap."

"A trap?" I froze, scowling at him. "How would this be a trap?"

"We haven't been able to detect your aunt *at all*, despite dedicating a resource to that very goal," he said slowly. "And then she suddenly appears to you in a dream? If she was the one who silenced your magic *because* you were having prophetic dreams, she'd know you have them. Perhaps she'd



even try to use them against you.” His frown deepened. “How do you know it isn’t *Sabine* using your dreams against you?”

I growled. “I *know* it wasn’t Sabine,” I snapped. “I know what her influence feels like now, and that was a dream, a vision. This is a psychic warning. How many of these have I had now?” I shook my head. “I have to help Esme.”

“Even if that’s the case, it could still be a trap just to get you there.” He growled at me. “If Sabine is there with a fae and this Zyanya person, they could be torturing your aunt to get you to show up.” He shook his head. “I’ll call my allies in Egypt, and we’ll get someone out there as soon as possible.”

I bristled at the finality in his voice. Even if he was sorry for the way he’d almost commanded me, he clearly hadn’t learned his lesson. This was *my* aunt, and I wasn’t about to let her die a horrible death.

“I’m not leaving her,” I replied stubbornly. “She’s all the family I have left, even if we were never actually related. And despite everything, she was good to me when I was a little girl. If I didn’t have her, I wouldn’t know anything about magic at all.”

“Celeste—”

“She has the answers I need, Fenris,” I hissed as I finished dressing. “If you can’t understand not sacrificing someone you care about, then you can at least understand *that*. I am not going to let Sabine have her.”

“I’m not going to let Sabine have *you*,” he hissed, rounding the bed.

I sneered at him. “Then maybe you should just *command* me to stay,” I snapped, unable to stop myself, “since you clearly want to control everything I do!”

“Maybe I will, if you don’t start acting logically!” Fenris snapped back. “I’m going to wake Walter up to get the jet and call my contact in Egypt. *You* will take a moment to calm down.”

I snarled at the door as he hurried out of the master bedroom. *I’m not a wallflower, Fenris*. My heart hadn’t stopped racing, and the pit in my stomach felt like a gaping sinkhole. I knew time was running out, and if I waited to fly to Egypt on Fenris’s private jet, we’d be too late. Esme would be dead, and Sabine and her allies would be gone.

I took a breath and hurried to the guest room, where I kept the few items I’d brought with me from Florida. In one of my bags was a beaded necklace Esme had given me. She’d said she’d gotten it on her travels, but I loved it so much as a little girl, she gifted it to me when I turned sixteen.

Holding it firmly in my hand, I hurried downstairs and out the door, racing past the patio under the moonlight. I knew I'd need all the strength I could get to transport myself to her, and I didn't want to fall over the moment I arrived.

I took a breath and tried to focus on the necklace...but nothing happened.

I took a breath, trying to steady my heartbeat, but when I tried again—still nothing.

My sense of desperation grew in leaps and bounds. *No, no, no, no, no! Did Fenris do this? Did he actually cast a command over me? No, he didn't give any verbal commands. I'm just not focused enough. I need to want this—to need this. I need to get to Esme right now more than anything. I must help her. I must—*

I felt the familiar rush of frigid air right as I heard Fenris calling my name, but he was too late.

Moments later, I appeared in the room I'd just dreamed of—but Sabine was already gone. I panted, realizing the dim light was not part of my dream but the reality of the setting. The walls were dull and dark.

“Esme!” I called out, trying to fight off the lingering dizziness that came with transporting myself. “Aunt Es—oh!”

I hurried to the chair where my aunt was slumped over, her eyes closed, blood running from her temple. I fought back tears as I smoothed my hand over her skin, trying to assess the damage. “I'm so sorry,” I whispered as I applied shaking fingers to her neck. She still had a pulse—it was faint, but still there. “I am so, so sorry. I'm going to get you out of here.”

I knelt down, trying to undo the knots that bound her in place. The ropes bit back, and I yelped, realizing after a moment that they were laced with silver thread. I just needed to get Esme out of here, and I was debating if I could transport my aunt, chair and all, when a rush of cold air hit my back.

“Hello there,” a familiar voice greeted me, and a chill ran down my spine. *I know that voice. That's the person who freed me in Alaska.*

I slowly stood up. As I turned, I saw a woman in the doorway. I wasn't sure if I hadn't noticed her presence in my panic, or if she'd somehow formed that door with her magic.

I swallowed hard and tried to subtly prepare a defensive spell. Just because the fire-wielder had freed me didn't mean she was friendly—not if

she was in this place. “What do you want?”

The figure stepped closer and pushed back her hood, revealing an elegant woman with wavy brown hair. She looked about my aunt’s age—before Sabine had fed off Esme, anyway. As she blinked, I realized there was something terrifying about her eyes. They weren’t...they weren’t *human*. They were golden, almost glowing like the sun, and they looked like a *dragon’s* eyes.

I swallowed hard. *Well, that fire makes sense now.*

“Drop your defensive spell,” she purred.

To my horror, my hands stopped moving and I dropped my arms at my sides. “What? Wait, no!” I gasped, trying to force my arms to lift, but they felt like barbells.

The woman smiled in a way that made my skin crawl, and she prowled closer to me. “Good girl,” she purred. “Now, you will kneel.”

“I will n—” But my knees buckled and complied against my will. I hit the stone floor with a thump.

“I am Zyanya,” the witch said, studying me like a cat might a mouse. “Though I suspect you know me by my title.”

*Eyes like the sun...*

“The Solar Sovereign?” I managed to choke out, hating the way my voice trembled.

“Ah, you got it in one try. Living up to your reputation,” she said. “I am pleased to meet you, little one.”

“I’m not going to help you,” I managed to stammer out. “You aren’t going to kill the Lunar Lord.”

Zyanya beamed at me. “Oh no,” she said, reaching forward to stroke my hair. “*You’ll* be doing that, my dear. *You’ll* be doing just that.”

## Chapter 27

---

*Celeste*

???

Abu Ghurab, Egypt

I could barely hear my thoughts over the roar in my ears as Zyanya stared down at me, her smile small but predatory. *Fenris was right this whole time.*

I hadn't doubted his senses—after all, he'd been alive for centuries longer than me—but I had wondered how someone could escape him for that long. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on my end, but some small corner of my mind hoped we'd make it to the eclipse and I'd be able to perform the ritual without interruption. Fenris's friends and allies would be assembled, but in the end, we wouldn't need any help at all because this "Solar Sovereign" had never appeared. It'd either be a rumor some upstart shifter had made up, or the Sovereign was simply too weak to face Fenris after all the time they'd spent hiding in the shadows.

Looking at Zyanya now, I could feel that last shred of hope splinter like a ship upon a rocky coast. I swallowed hard, trying to find any of my remaining nerves. If I had any hope of surviving, I had to get out of here.

*Don't panic*, I told myself, trying to remember to keep breathing. I tried to pull my legs closer under myself to prop myself back up and stand, but nothing happened. I swallowed the rising horror and tried again, but my limbs remained dead weights. My arms wouldn't swing forward, and I couldn't even turn my head. I was stuck, staring up at Fenris's mortal enemy.

My growing terror must have shown in my eyes, as Zyanya's cruel grin spread further. "Having trouble?" she crooned, her mock concern sickening. "That's what an alpha command feels like, little bird."

*What?*

Even in my terrified haze, I suddenly realized it stood to reason dragon shifters had alphas just like wolves did. For all I knew, they also had packs and fated mates. But that didn't matter to me. I hadn't seen the bright shine of red in her gaze like I'd seen in Fenris's when he'd used his command. Zyanya simply spoke, and I'd been compelled to obey.

*How did this happen?* I hadn't even known she existed before I'd

transported myself to Egypt, and that couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes ago.

*I have to figure out how to get out of here.* Zyanya had proclaimed that I would be the one to kill Fenris, and there was no way on earth I'd stick around long enough for her to cast a spell or give me another alpha command. *I just have to get my legs to move!*

"Oh, dear, you are still trying, aren't you?" Zyanya murmured, crouching down to grin right at me. "It isn't going to work, I'm afraid. You'll do as I ask, whether it be to kiss my boot or kill your precious Lunar Lord."

I froze as if she'd slapped me. "I won't," I replied, working up my last ounce of courage as I stared her in the eyes. "I won't kill him." The very idea of harming my fated mate made my guts twist and my wolf writhe.

The woman in front of me laughed and shook her head as if I were a small child explaining something simple but misguided to her. Her laughter sounded almost mechanical.

"That's not how this works," she replied, righting herself. "Let me spell this out for you, child. The Lunar Lord and I have been playing this game for a *very* long time. So long, a mere mortal could simply not comprehend. A move of one piece could extend far past your meager lifetime." Her grin sharpened, and I felt another chill run through me. "What you think on the matter is entirely inconsequential."

I shivered despite myself. "You can't make me," I whispered, feeling more like a petulant child than a strong witch or an adult shifter.

Zyanya blinked, slow and lizard-like. "I seem to recall your mother saying the same thing to me," she said after a pause that lasted too long. "Hmm, yes, that's who it was. She was a bit harder to track than some of the other Handmaiden witches, but all she ended up doing was delaying the inevitable." She clicked her tongue. "She thought she'd hide her child and preserve the Handmaiden line. We see how well that turned out for her, hmm?" Her yellow gaze slid back to me.

My throat thickened as I tried to swallow. *Is that...my mother was killed by this...this monster? And the others? They all met this fate? Why didn't anyone help them? Why didn't Fenris help them?*

"What's the point?" I finally managed, my voice raspy with fear. "You have me. What's the point of killing them all off?"

Zyanya ran her tongue over her teeth, revealing a pair of wickedly pointed canines that I tried not to gape at. "I can't risk those irritating witches

crowning a new Lunar Lord right after I kill the old one, now can I?” She arched a brow. “They picked the first one so arbitrarily, after all. A complete overreach of their power. They couldn’t be trusted not to meddle, and if their precious little lord was taken away, I’m certain they would do the exact same thing all over again.” She hissed, an entirely serpentine sound, and bared her teeth in her first show of real emotion.

My fear almost made me gag. Even my wolf seemed to have curled up, taking up so little space in my mind, it was like she’d disappeared.

“No. I would not run the risk of the witches hiding a new lord from me,” she continued. “They couldn’t be allowed to live. Not one of them.” Her gaze moved back to me. “How lucky for me that *you*, of all people, were the last of them.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my skin crawling. I wanted to know, but also really didn’t want to know. I couldn’t stop myself from asking. “I hadn’t even *heard* of you until a few weeks ago. Don’t pretend you’re some great, overarching influence.”

She laughed again, an awful, tinny sound. “Girl, do you think I would leave loose ends dangling?” she demanded, her golden eyes flashing dangerously. “Your mother was difficult to track, but I found her. Enora thought herself so secretive, but she wasn’t. Not compared to me.” She snorted. “I found a friend of hers. I thought he might lead me to her, but oh, even I couldn’t foresee the treasure he would offer me. He was an alpha of a small pack. A pathetic creature. I was going to torture him to find out where he was hiding Enora, but he would do anything to defend his pack from harm—and so he did. He pledged his loyalty, his pack’s loyalty, and all his future progeny to me.” Zyanya stopped talking, her smile curling up at the ends.

*Future progeny...my father gave me away before I was born? To her?* I felt like I might be sick, but being frozen in place, I couldn’t even retch.

“I let him be on his way after that,” Zyanya continued. “Why tire myself searching for this Handmaiden witch when this fool would bring me to her and give me any of her children? I couldn’t have planned it better. Sabine just gave him...a little nudge, and he became convinced they were fated mates. And here you are, just as loyal to me as he was.” She waved a hand at me, smiling at me like I was her favorite pet.

I bit my lip. “Why not just kill me alongside my mother?” I whispered. “That would be easier. No Handmaiden witches to make a Lunar Lord. None of this.”



She sneered. “You don’t get to question me,” she snarled, and her eyes looked molten for a moment. “I’ve waited *centuries* for this eclipse, and I won’t risk the Lunar Lord going into hiding to spare himself. He *will* die, once and for all. And he won’t even fight it, not with his fated mate.” Zyanya bared her teeth. “I *will* take my ancestors’ power back. The Handmaiden witches stole it from us, and nothing could be more just than the last Handmaiden handing it back. Your lifetime is but a blink, girl. Do not flatter yourself thinking I have spent time agonizing over each event. It’s simple—one must shape a tool for a job if they expect the job to be done well, and indeed, you are no more than that. A tool. *My* tool.”

My cold fear finally gave way to a rage I hadn’t known myself capable of. This woman—this *creature*—she had done *everything*. Killed my birth mother, enslaved my biological father. She’d taken his pack, and for all I knew, she’d killed them alongside all the Handmaiden witches, just to avoid leaving “loose ends.”

Suddenly, I realized she must’ve organized the people who adopted me. Why else was Grant Oakley unable to find anything?

*Aunt Esme. The Aurora witches pledged to the Solar Sovereign, right?*

My anger grew even hotter when I thought of the woman I’d grown to love over my childhood. *Esme is the one who hid my magic from me.* Once, I was willing to believe she’d done it accidentally or that someone had tricked her into doing it, but I was certain now it’d been an order from the Solar Sovereign. That, and everything else my “aunt” had done—they had all been part of the plan.

*So why did she even bother telling me stories about magic? About the Lunar Lord?* The stories were too specific to be a coincidence, but how did they help further Zyanya’s plan? My eyes darted to where Esme still sat, motionless. I had so many questions, and it was possible I’d never be able to ask them.

I looked back at the Solar Sovereign and felt nothing but white-hot fury. She wasn’t just Fenris’s enemy; she was mine, too. She’d hurt everyone I loved, and she wasn’t even content with that. She somehow had much more planned.

My wolf snarled as if summoned by the intensity of my anger, and we agreed on the topic at hand—get the hell out of here and ruin Zyanya’s grand plan to get her power back. I took a breath, about to release control to my inner wolf. She was a step away from surging forward when Zyanya snapped

her fingers.

“None of that,” she growled. “You may not shift until I give you permission, Celeste.”

Just like that, my wolf stopped dead in her tracks, and I screamed like I’d just been shocked, shaken, or someone had ripped rows of barbed wire across my skin—maybe all three. The sensation was sheer agony in a way I couldn’t even pinpoint anywhere on my body, and then it stopped as abruptly as it had come on, leaving me out of breath and itchy like I was covered in freshly healed burns. But I couldn’t even scratch my skin.

Zyanya laughed, sneering at me like I was something she’d found on the bottom of her heeled boot. “It hurts, doesn’t it?” She sniffed, nodding at me as I writhed, unable to stop it. “Imagine spending centuries like that, unable to take your true form.”

*Centuries?*

I wasn’t sure if the Solar Sovereign was admitting to me that she couldn’t shift, but I wasn’t about to ask: she looked angry enough that she might bite my head off, and not in a figurative sense. I glanced back over at Esme, but she still wasn’t moving. I watched her sides, trying to make sure she was breathing when a familiar *snap* followed by a cold burst of wind sent shivers down my spine.

“How far you’ve fallen since we last met,” Sabine said to me as I turned to look at her. There were those angry wounds across her previously picture-perfect face, and I knew at once Lyka had indeed taken his pound of flesh from her. *If only you could have finished her off, Lyka*, I thought wistfully.

I noticed belatedly that two other masked figures had also entered the room, standing several feet behind Zyanya and Sabine.

“Are the Aurora witches prepared?” Zyanya asked Sabine. Apparently, she couldn’t be bothered to acknowledge the other figures.

“They are,” Sabine confirmed before nodding at the other two figures.

The two began to move. The walls shifted after that, and I noticed they were opening windows. I had to look away, almost blinded by the intense light after sitting in the darkness for so long. I couldn’t make out the details of the room as my vision swam, and all I saw were moving shadows and shapes. I realized too late that the witches had surrounded me as well as Zyanya.

*So, Zyanya’s a witch? Is she like me?* The thought was revolting. *No, she’s nothing like me.*

The witches were clearly preparing a spell, and it seemed to be making the sunlight in the room even brighter. This was solar magic, the opposite side of the coin to astrological, but I knew almost nothing about it. I was, however, able to recognize a few elements of fire, and I would've bet money on Sabine using dark magic. That was clearly her specialty. Why give up something you'd worked so hard, and given up so much, to achieve?

*What do I do? I need to—*

My thought was cut off by the sound of someone screaming. I only realized a few moments later that it was *me*. It felt like my chest had been set on fire. When I looked down, a glowing brand stared back at me from right above my left breast.

I was still gasping for air when Zyanya approached me, wiping her hands on her eggplant-purple pants. "You see, there are simply too many loopholes that people take when I only issue commands verbally, even when I gave an alpha command," she said, again speaking to me like I was a child. "This death mark will ensure you are much more motivated to do as you're told." She smiled at me, and her eyes seemed to shimmer with gold. "Celeste, I order you to kill Fenris, Lunar Lord, before the end of the total solar eclipse, or the mark over your heart shall burn you to ash from the inside out." She took a breath as her smile grew. "If you try to speak a word of this to anyone, you will burn. If you try to pledge your loyalty to the Lunar Lord over me, you will burn. If you try to communicate with anyone regarding your mark, *you will burn*. Have I made myself quite clear?"

Sabine looked positively thrilled while I bit back a growl. "What is the point of this?" I snapped. "Why free me in Alaska if you were just going to drag me back here to do this? I know that was you!"

Zyanya sniffed but looked a bit peeved. "That idiotic vampire thought himself far cleverer than he was and wanted to win my favor." She licked her lips. "You saw how well that worked out for him. Besides, I wasn't ready to make my move yet. I returned my pawn to Fenris's side of the board, and you did just as I thought you would."

"And what was that?" I demanded.

Zyanya just rolled her eyes. Sabine skittered over to where Esme sat slumped over, grabbing her by her hair and yanking her head back.

"It's about time we killed this traitor," she sang as if the idea brought her great joy. "There's so little left of her psyche, anyway. Just let me have her."

Zyanya waved a hand, apparently giving the other witch permission.

Sabine beamed as she stepped back before dropping Esme's hair to prepare a spell.

Anger surged through me again, and I tried to stand. Nothing happened. Frustrated and desperate, I called on every ounce of magic I had left while simply flinging power out around me. I didn't even really know what I was doing, so much that I was doing something. I had to make them get away from Esme.

Zyanya snarled, throwing up a wall of fire to defend herself, but Sabine was flung backward, stumbling. Esme remained motionless. I didn't see where the other two Aurora witches had gone or if they'd retreated once Zyanya's binding spell was complete, but I didn't care so long as they stayed away from Esme and me.

My power faded and my vision swam, narrowing to pinpricks as I swayed.

"You fucking bitch," Sabine snarled, brushing her dress off as she rounded on me.

"Mistress!" a vaguely familiar voice called. A few moments later, the fae I'd seen in my dream darted by me and bowed deeply in front of Zyanya. "Your sources have informed me the Lunar Lord's forces will arrive any moment."

Zyanya sniffed and nodded, dismissing the fae with a wave of her hand. She paused to smile at me. "I will see you at the lunar eclipse, little bird," she said. "I'm so looking forward to your display."

Before I could answer, she looked at Sabine. "Take us away," she commanded.

Sabine averted her eyes from me, hurrying to obey the Solar Sovereign at once. They were gone with the familiar rush of cold air. As I glanced around, I realized none of the Aurora witches remained. Only Esme and I were left in the room.

With Zyanya gone, I tried to move again, and with exhausted relief, I realized I'd finally regained control of my limbs. Forcing myself to my feet, I staggered over to Esme, almost collapsing next to her. As I ran my fingers over her skin, looking for a pulse, I studied her face. She looked almost ashen, like she'd aged twenty years in the past several weeks.

*What do we do now?* I thought, trying not to panic. I could feel my hands shaking as I searched for my aunt's pulse. *Fenris was right not to trust you. He's going to be so—*

I was so tired that I couldn't finish the thought. Exhaustion threatened to take over, and I knew that as soon as Fenris found me here, I'd just be feeding into all his fears and paranoias. And more than that, he'd be right—he shouldn't trust me at all, and I wouldn't be able to tell him why. After all I'd done to get him to open up to me, I'd probably end up betraying him, just like Lyka.

One last thought floated across my mind as unconsciousness finally dragged me all the way down.

*What have I done?*

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# Fated To The Wolf Lord

## Lunar Bride: Book 2

Skye Wilson

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