



BORN BY MOONLIGHT

PARANORMAL SHIFTER ROMANCE
SUPERNATURAL INSTITUTE
BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KRISTA STREET

Born by Moonlight

Supernatural Institute
Book Two

KRISTA STREET

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Preface

Born by Moonlight is a paranormal shifter romance and is the second book in the four-book *Supernatural Institute* series. The recommended reading age is 18+.

∞ ∞ ∞

To note, this book ends on a cliffhanger.

Chapter 1

~ *WYATT* ~

My feet pounded on the floor as I sprinted down the healing center's hallway. Wes McCloy, my boss and the top commander of the Supernatural Forces, ran right behind me.

Magic permeated the air, scents of fear drenching it, but my thoughts focused on one thing and one thing only—Avery Meyers.

A young healing witch waited just outside of Avery's patient room. Bavar Fieldstone, my friend and fellow Major, stood right beside her.

Bavar's bright orange hair looked disheveled, as if he'd run his hands through it repeatedly. "Wyatt, I tried to call you—"

I pushed past him. I knew he'd tried to call, but Douglas—a top SF sorcerer—had reached us first, and right now, all I cared about was getting to Avery's side.

The second I careened into her room, her lilac scent hit me. It overrode the healing magic surrounding her, but more importantly, that scent verified she was still alive.

My racing heart slowed, if only a little.

She was awake and sitting upright. Long mahogany hair tumbled down her back, and her inquisitive brown eyes flecked with gold assessed me in confusion. A quick scan of her had my rapid pulse slowing more.

The malevolent purple magic that had vibrated from her body only hours before was absent.

"Avery?" I said hoarsely, dropping to my knees by her bed with a thump. Relief pounded through me in unrelenting waves. She looked unharmed.

"Wyatt?" Surprise laced her tone, but then her eyes narrowed with distrust.

I nearly doubled over. Her apprehensive stare was like a punch to my gut.

My inner wolf snarled at me. He *hated* that I'd turned my back on our mate three months ago. It was my actions that caused her accusing glare, but I'd made that choice for so many reasons—to protect her dream of becoming an ambassador, to not pressure her into a long-distance relationship that would inevitably last years, and to uphold my promise to Marcus, which meant I *couldn't* be fired from the SF—something that would have happened if I'd pursued a relationship with her.

Still . . . it had been an agonizing choice, and it had all come down to timing. *Fucking timing*. If only I'd met her again two years in the future and not three months ago.

But now was not the time to think about that.

"You're alive and awake." I curled my fingers into my palms to stop myself from touching her.

She brought a hand to her forehead. "Why does everyone seem so surprised by that?"

I frowned, wondering how much she remembered of the Safrinite comet and the effects its arrival in the fae lands had on her.

Only five hours ago, we'd been lying in a field outside of the fae lands' capital waiting for the ancient comet to arrive. The entire country had been celebrating since the comet would invigorate the fae realm with new magic.

Avery massaged her temples. Darkness still tinted the windows in her patient room. It was barely five in the morning, and the sun still hadn't risen. The most agonizing night in my life *still*

hadn't ended.

Her hands dropped and she watched me, her suspicious stare palpable.

More than anything I wanted to pull her into my arms, hold her, kiss her, reassure myself that she was still *here* with me. But I didn't.

Because she wouldn't want that.

She clutched the bedsheet to her chest, as if shielding herself from not only the unfamiliar events unfolding around her but from me as well.

"Do you remember what happened tonight?" I asked softly.

"I remember going to the fae lands." Her face screwed up into a knot of confusion. "We were in a field. Eliza and Charlotte were with me, then we saw you, Major Fieldstone, and your friends." She shook her head. "But then . . . it gets fuzzy."

"You don't remember what happened to you when the comet arrived?"

She shook her head.

My pulse quickened. Avery had been incapacitated only hours ago. At the time, I'd feared she wouldn't survive.

I still feared it.

"It's not unusual for an event like that to result in patchy memories," Douglas said. The middle-aged sorcerer stood near the wall, Wes at his side.

I'd completely forgotten they were there. Was it really only minutes ago that Douglas had called Wes and me, urging us to return to the healing center? But why? Avery looked fine.

I scented Wes's trepidation. He knew my true feelings for Avery, but Douglas didn't. Nobody else did, not even Avery. Only Wes and Dee Armund knew, and Bavar had probably guessed it.

Avery winced, bringing her hand to her forehead again.

Alarm shot through me as Farrah—the healing center's highest-trained healing witch—dampened a cloth and pressed it to Avery's forehead. Avery's eyes closed in bliss, and it was only then I became aware of the heat rising from her.

Heat that should never rise from a mixed-blood supernatural if she was healthy.

Panic squeezed my veins. I shot to standing and whirled around. "What's wrong with her?"

Douglas's eyebrows pinched together. The sorcerer jerked his head toward the door.

Farrah handed the cloth to Cora, another healing witch, and came to the end of Avery's bed. Both Farrah and Douglas wore worried expressions.

My wolf snarled inside me as Wes and I followed them out of the room.

I cast another anxious glance over my shoulder at my mate, but the other witches had already moved in, using their potions, spells, and comforting hands to care for her. Avery leaned back in the bed and closed her eyes, her long lashes fluttering on her flushed cheeks.

My wolf paced in agitation. Something desperately wrong had happened to my mate.

And it didn't appear anyone was doing anything about it.

A growl tore from my throat. "Why is she—"

"Come with us," Farrah said briskly before striding down the hall.

Seething, I followed.

"You need to see this. It's why I called you," Douglas said to Wes.

The three of us followed hot on the witch's heels. She led us to a room two doors down.

I passed Bavar on the way. He was leaning against the wall. When he caught my expression, he straightened, but I shook my head. Now wasn't the time to fill him in.

We followed Farrah inside the room. The walls glowed with a magical hue. Images of a

person's body stared back at us. Organs, vessels, bones . . . the organic matter was laid bare for all to see.

"Why isn't she better?" I demanded. "The purple magic isn't around her anymore."

Farrah merely inclined her head toward one of the scans. "That's why." She pointed at a circular object in the center of a person's chest—*inside* their chest.

"That magic is still inside her, but it's changed." Farrah crossed her arms. "It was pulsing and growing when she initially arrived, but with each minute that's passed, it's grown dimmer, almost shrinking in on itself."

Wes frowned, his gray eyebrows knitting together. "What does that mean?"

"We don't know," Douglas replied. "But we do know it's not a hex or a spell. Our tests would have detected if it were, which means it was the comet that caused this. Yet despite conducting every test in our arsenal, all of them have yielded either nothing or inconclusive results. The bottom line is that we simply don't know what the comet did to her. But we're confident it's done something. Her fever began when the magic turned inward. It's hard to say what will ultimately happen, but the reason I called you and told you to come so urgently is because of this."

He shifted, moving to a magical apparatus. It showed lines, numbers, spheres, and graphs. Everything glowed from the holographic machine like a shining rainbow of bad news. "This monitors a supernatural's life force and magic. And if you look at this graph here, you'll see that it's moving very slowly downward."

My muscles seized. "Meaning what?"

Douglas's eyes dimmed. "Meaning that whatever happened to her in the fae lands will inevitably kill her. Right now, she's on borrowed time."

Chapter 2

~ *EVERY* ~

I leaned back in the bed, letting the witches care for me, but already I was feeling better. I knew I had a fever, but I was pretty sure it was going down.

“Will I be able to go home soon?” I asked Cora.

She eyed me, worry creasing her brow. She dabbed my forehead again with the cool cloth. “As long as Farrah deems it safe for you to do so, I imagine yes.”

“Do you know when she’ll decide?”

She patted my hand. “All in good time, dear.”

I suppressed an eye roll. Fatigue weighed me down, making me sluggish and crabby. It was near dawn, and even though they said I’d been unconscious when I arrived at the healing center, I didn’t feel rested.

A nagging headache thrummed in my skull, and an itching fullness filled my chest. I scratched near my breastbone again. The damned itching wouldn’t stop.

Sighing, I thumped my head back against my pillow and let my hand fall. It wasn’t like scratching alleviated the feeling anyway, but since nobody had told me that anything was actually wrong with me—despite the fever—I didn’t see why I had to stay.

At this point, all I wanted to do was go home to my apartment in the barracks. Even though I still felt warm, I didn’t feel it wasn’t something a good sleep and a strong potion couldn’t cure. And although my recollection of events from last night was fuzzy, I figured that was because I’d passed out. And since when was fainting cause for such concern?

I also imagined Eliza and Charlotte—my roommates and fellow new recruit squad members—were wondering where I was. It had literally been *hours* since I’d come here, and another hour had already passed since Wyatt and Wes arrived.

My cheeks heated and not from the fever. When I thought about my commander and Wes McCloy—the man in charge of the entire Supernatural Forces—seeing me in this state, *ugh*. When would anyone want their employers seeing them so vulnerable?

But they won’t be my employers for much longer. I took some comfort in that thought, then sighed. So much had changed in such little time.

A few months ago, I would’ve craved Wyatt’s presence in this room. Just his energy would have brought a soothing sense of relief. And seeing his dark hair, broad shoulders, and moss-colored eyes would have squeezed my insides in the most delicious way, eliciting quickened breaths and tingles down my spine. And his oak and pine scent . . . that would have shot meteors to my toes.

But now?

No.

He’d betrayed me.

I wouldn’t forget that, and I *wouldn’t* allow myself to fantasize about him even though my heart still stuttered every time he neared.

Stupid heart.

I snorted when I remembered Wyatt’s worry. He’d barreled into my room when he’d arrived, so

unlike his usual predatory silence. For a second, I'd almost been fooled again and believed that he cared for me.

But I knew better. The fact that he'd almost slept with me all those weeks ago, had called me his *Little Flower*, but then acted like nothing had happened between us and told me I'd gotten the wrong impression, had shown his true colors.

I wouldn't be duped by him again.

Voices from the hallway carried into my room, making me straighten. The soft pillows crumpled behind me, and the cotton sheets fell to my waist when I pushed upright. Farrah and Douglas returned, their expressions grim.

"How are you feeling?" Farrah, the lead healing witch, eyed me shrewdly, assessing me from head to toe.

"Fine. Can I go home now?" She and Douglas shared a concerned look, and this time I *did* roll my eyes. "Really, I'm fine. Please? Can I leave?"

A wave of alpha power rolled into the room, carrying with it a familiar rhythm and cadence that I knew only belonged to one person. Anguish distorted Wyatt's features when he stepped through the doorway and flanked Farrah's side.

My pulse leaped, that agonizing emotion of unrequited attraction shooting through me again. But I gritted my teeth and stuffed it down, anything to keep my attention on the healer who had the power to release me.

"I really don't think I need to stay here, ma'am," I added. "Honestly, I don't feel bad. I'm sure I'm fine."

"We still haven't figured out what happened to you," she said.

My eyebrows shot up, frustration filling me. "Does that mean I can't leave until you do?"

Douglas frowned, his brow folding together like a book snapping shut. "No, but we would like you to return for daily check-ups in the hope that eventually we can solve whatever ails you."

I swept the sheets off me. "Great. Not a problem. I'll just be on my way then and will stop in again tomorrow."

Wyatt was instantly at my side, using his werewolf speed to blur to the edge of the bed. He placed a hand under my arm, his warm, calloused palm reminding me of the night we'd laid beneath the stars and kissed passionately in one another's naked embrace. I'd given him my soul that night, and in return he'd shredded it.

I glared at him before shrugging his hand off.

I didn't even care if the others saw it. Just because Wyatt was my commander didn't mean he had the right to touch me. Besides, Major Armund had basically taken over my self-defense training anyway, so it wasn't like Wyatt was even training me anymore. The only time I saw him now was during drills. And in eleven short days I would have my final test, then I would be off to the Supernatural Ambassador Institute. Wyatt Jamison would be no more than a speck in my memory, so screw him.

I scowled again, just to ensure he knew I didn't appreciate his unwelcome aid.

Wyatt grew rigid, his expression darkening, but he took a step back, giving me space.

I placed my hands on the edge of the bed. "What time should I come back tomorrow?"

"You can report here to the healing center every morning after you wake," Farrah replied.

"Will do. I'll see you then."

Wyatt continued watching, his expression of fake anguish only increasing, but I ignored him and hunted for my shoes.

Wes was still hovering near the door when I slipped them on, his attention drifting between me and Wyatt, as if watching a tennis match.

“I’ll escort you back to your barracks,” Wyatt said gruffly.

I stood, swaying for the briefest moment, but then I locked my knees and faced him.

Wyatt’s emerald eyes, the color of green-leafed trees, regarded me with wary trepidation. His chiseled features looked set in stone—his jaw locked, his brow furrowed, those soft alluring lips pressed into a tight line.

A wave of *wanting* ran through me despite my best efforts to stop it.

Damn him.

I grabbed my purse, which someone had set on the counter near the wall. “I’m fine, sir. I can see myself back.”

Douglas stirred, the middle-aged sorcerer giving Wyatt and me a perplexed look. The energy rippling between my commander and me charged the room.

“An escort back to your apartment would be a wise idea,” the sorcerer said. “Since the event is still fresh and you’re still slightly febrile, it would be best if you’re not alone.”

“I have to say I agree,” Wes stated.

I inhaled a long, slow breath, willing myself to remain dignified. “Of course, sir, although I believe Major Fieldstone is in the hallway. Perhaps he could escort me?”

A low growl erupted from Wyatt, but Wes gave him a sharp look, and Wyatt immediately quieted.

I didn’t know what to make of that exchange and frankly didn’t really care. All I wanted was a shower, my soft cotton pjs, and bed.

“Did I just hear my name?” Bavar popped into the room, his eyes curious.

“Major Fieldstone, would you please escort Private Meyers back to her barracks?” Wes asked.

Bavar dipped his head. “Of course, sir.”

“Thank you, sir.” I didn’t look back when I walked from the room, not even when Wyatt’s throbbing energy ignited the nerve endings along my spine.

∞ ∞ ∞

Bavar and I strolled outside on the sidewalk as cool autumn wind flowed over us. The dawn sun had breached the surrounding hills, setting the distant Idaho forest aglow in golden light.

“You gave us quite a scare,” Bavar commented after several minutes of silence. “We didn’t know if you were going to make it.”

I blinked my gritty eyes against the brightening sun. “Sorry. It wasn’t intentional.”

He frowned, peering down at my squinty eyes. “Tired?”

“You could say that,” I replied sarcastically, my crabbiness getting the better of me since I hadn’t slept. “If I had stronger magic, I would make myself look as fresh as you, but I don’t, so you’re stuck with looking at my puffy eyes and bearing the brunt of my prickly mood.”

The fairy chuckled while looking as fresh as a babe after a long afternoon nap. He appraised me again under arched eyebrows. “I certainly hope this little event doesn’t hamper any further baking on your part.”

“Is it a cake you’re wanting this time? Or cookies? Or perhaps a tart?” Some of my moodiness lifted. My baking skills had become somewhat well-known over the past few months.

Bavar’s eyes twinkled. “A tart, did you say? Oh my, I haven’t had one of those yet. Perhaps that would be preferable.”

“Okay, fine. You’ll get a tart, but I don’t know if I’ll be baking anytime soon. Sleep’s all I’m thinking about right now.”

He brought a hand to his chest. “I shall die of sorrow if that cake you baked for me last night was the last of my enjoyments. You’re truly a magician in the kitchen, so I’ll be holding you to your promise of a tart for whenever you feel well enough to bake it.”

I laughed as disbelief coursed through me that it’d only been yesterday morning that Bavar had bested me in sparring, which meant I’d had to bake him a cake.

“So dramatic . . . *sir*.” I tacked on that last part since half the time I forgot that Major Fieldstone was my superior. “But yes, fine, I do promise that I won’t leave the SF before supplying you with a tasty tart.”

He gave a mock bow. “I shall hold you to that promise. Shall we make it a fairy bargain?” He held out his hand, magic sparkling around it.

I rolled my eyes. “Nice try, but I won’t be making fairy bargains with you or anyone else, thank you very much.” Because if I did, I would be held accountable by fairy magic, and seriously, a tart just wasn’t worth that risk.

Bavar chuckled deeply. “I was kidding about the bargain. Well, mostly.”

I snorted.

We reached my barracks’ door a minute later, and after scanning us in, he glided up the stairs behind me.

At my door, I pressed my finger pad against the holographic lock since I was too tired to get my keys out, and the door clicked open.

It wasn’t until I crossed the threshold that Bavar finally said his goodbye. “Rest well today, Private.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He slipped back to the stairwell and disappeared as quietly as he’d come.

I trudged inside, dropping my purse on the kitchen counter. I didn’t even want to know how many parking tickets my Explorer would have if I didn’t pick it up some time today. It was still parked on the street downtown, near the entrance to the supernatural marketplace.

“Later,” I muttered to myself, then stumbled to the bathroom to relieve myself, brush my teeth, and take a quick shower. Following that, it took everything in me to keep my eyes open long enough to comb my damp hair, drape cotton pajamas over my head, pull the curtains, and sink under my covers.

That itching started in my chest again, but I couldn’t be bothered scratching it.

I needed sleep more. My lids grew heavy just as a sparrow’s morning song carried through the window, then sleep pulled me under.

∞ ∞ ∞

A blazing fire roared from a pit in the earth. Robed figures stood in a circle around it. Their chanting and low humming filled the air.

Goosebumps sprouted on my arms, and my body felt weightless as I hovered above the ground. I lifted my hand, but the appendage that stared back at me was practically translucent. My eyes widened when I realized I was a spectral spirit hovering above the earth.

Terror coiled in my belly. Something about this felt . . . wrong, and it wasn’t because I looked like a ghost. It went deeper than that. A force tugged in my chest and felt so completely foreign—alien almost.

One thing I knew for certain, this roaring fire pit wasn’t where I was supposed to be.

Regardless, I glided upward toward the top of the fire, completely out of control of my movements, as a steady heat grew in my belly.

I resisted, trying to stop myself from being revealed to this circle of . . . whatever they were, but I couldn't.

The robed figures looked skyward, their faces cast in dark shadows.

My heart pounded as icy-cold terror filled my core, making my weightless body feel as if I'd just plunged into the Arctic sea.

I needed to leave. Escape. Run.

I screamed, but no sound came out.

One of the figures turned his head, ever so slightly, and I knew that he'd spotted my ghostly silhouette.

No!

He smiled, only his lips revealed, the rest of his face hidden in shadows. The gesture was so cold, so clinical.

I cried out again, but as before . . . nothing.

No! No!

I had to escape, before . . . before . . .

"Avery!" someone shouted in my ear.

I shot to sitting, sweat-drenched hair coating my forehead. My breaths came quickly as my chest heaved.

I gulped in another breath. *Where am I?*

Blurry-eyed, I took in my surroundings. I was in a bed as a fae face peered at me worriedly. Sunlight lit the room.

"Eliza," I breathed, before collapsing back on the mattress. "Holy shit." I brought a hand to my forehead, blood still thundering in my ears. I was in my room. In my apartment. And apparently, it was daytime.

"You were screaming most dreadfully." Eliza perched on the edge of my bed, worry puckering her mouth. The fairy's purple hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. Her pointed ears poked through the thick strands. "Were you having a nightmare?"

"Um . . ." *Had I been?* I tried to remember why I'd felt so terrified, but all I could remember was *fear*. That was it. No other details. "Yeah, I guess so." How odd. I usually never had nightmares.

"It must have been quite unpleasant. You were screaming loud enough to wake those in the underworld."

"Right." I shook my head, embarrassment making my cheeks heat. Even though I couldn't remember what I'd been dreaming about, a sickly sense of doom clung to me.

I tucked tendrils of damp hair behind my ear, then rubbed my face, but my brain was still foggy and disoriented. "What time is it? And what day is it?"

"It's early afternoon on Saturday. Char and I awoke a few hours ago, but we didn't want to disturb your slumber." She looked me up and down again. "That purple light's gone, so that's fortuitous, right? Did they surmise what happened to you?"

Was it really only early this morning that I'd been in the healing center? That all felt like a bad dream.

I touched my forehead again. My skin still felt warm, and sweat beaded my brow. I scratched at my chest absentmindedly, still feeling out of sorts.

I shook my head. "They don't know what caused it."

“Well, I must say, despite that it’s a relief to see you are in what appears to be decent health, especially after we came to the healing center last night and Major Jamison told us we had to leave.”

“You came to the healing center last night?”

“Indeed we did.”

I frowned. “What happened to me last night? I don’t really remember it.”

“Oh my, Avery, it was most dreadful. Something happened to you when the comet appeared. Purple magic began shooting from your body, and then you fell unconscious. Nobody could rouse you.”

My eyes bugged out. “Seriously? Holy shit. I had no idea.”

“And you truly remember nothing of the event?”

I shook my head.

She patted my hand. “It must have been quite traumatic. I hear that trauma can cause memory loss. Perhaps that’s what happened?”

“Must be. The sorcerer at the healing center said it’s not unusual to have memory loss following an accident.” I itched my chest again.

“But everything is fine now?”

“I guess so. They didn’t say otherwise, and I’m assuming they would have told me in the healing center if I was actually sick, but they said to just check in with them every morning.”

Eliza gave me a placating nod. “Then I’m sure all is well. What time did you arrive home? We were worried—” Her chatting stopped, a frown taking its place. She lay a hand across my forehead. “Oh my, you feel quite warm. Maybe you’re still unwell?”

I licked my dry lips. “I’m okay, really.” I pulled away, and her hand dropped, but she was right. I was drenched in sweat. “I just need another shower, but I don’t feel sick.” And I didn’t. I just felt . . . off.

“I can make you sustenance.” Eliza jumped up from the bed. “Char’s traveled to the grocery store to purchase a few culinary items. She should be back soon. I can make all of us a nutritious meal while you’re showering.”

Even though I was the one who usually did the cooking and baking in our apartment, I was glad for the offer. Fatigue still wore on my bones. “Sounds good. I’ll be quick.”

“No need,” she replied, giving me a dazzling smile. “Please bathe at your leisure.”

∞ ∞ ∞

By the time I’d showered and dressed, Charlotte had returned. From the bathroom, I heard both her and Eliza in the kitchen, chatting easily as they made lunch together while I twirled my long, damp hair into a messy bun.

My cheap drugstore shampoo wafted through my senses as I lay a hand on my chest, in between my breasts.

A hum ran through the center of my body. I scratched my breastbone.

Weird.

When I finally emerged, Charlotte’s appraising stare surveyed my loungewear—black leggings, an oversized aqua sweater, and fluffy socks. “I take it you’re not going anywhere today?”

I sank down on the couch. “Wasn’t planning on it.” Outside the window, autumn-colored leaves fluttered in the breeze.

Charlotte carried the plates of food to our small dining table. Steam lifted from the rice concoction.

“What’d you two make?” I asked curiously.

Charlotte planted a hand on her lean hip. At six foot tall, her build was athletic and powerful. Normally, confidence oozed from her like rays from the sun, but as she evaluated the food she replied, “Um, I suppose you could say it’s chicken fried rice? I mean, that’s what you would call it if you heat up rice, chicken, and some vegetables, right?”

“Yeah, that works. Is it homemade?”

“It is, unfortunately. Eliza tried to help, but she’s never cooked chicken before either.”

Eliza shrugged her shoulders helplessly. “I believe it’s cooked. That’s all I can promise.”

I laughed, unable to help it. In the few months we’d been living together, I’d never seen Charlotte cook anything, and the most Eliza had done was make ham sandwiches.

“Hopefully you’re feeling fine now so you can cook our meals again?” Charlotte waggled her eyebrows, but worry creased her forehead, as if she thought I may not have the strength to cook anything.

“Or we could go to the cafeteria, if you’re tired or not feeling well.” Eliza squealed. “Oh! I just had the most magnificent idea. We could order a *pizza*. I’ve been wanting to do that.”

Even though my roommates were trying to act normal, I could tell both were still concerned. I laughed to ease the tension. “We definitely need to order pizza. Should we do that tonight?”

Charlotte’s shoulders loosened, and Eliza smiled sweetly.

“Yes, tonight it shall be,” the fairy replied.

Some of my anxiety over all that had happened since the arrival of the Safrinite comet dimmed in the presence of my squad mates. I pulled out my chair at the table and had a seat.

They both joined me and eyed their plates.

Charlotte speared a piece of chicken. “So are you feeling okay then?”

I picked my fork up. “Yeah, of course. I’m fine.”

Eliza cocked her head. “Does that mean you shall finish training?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Nobody’s told me that I can’t.” I popped a broccoli floret into my mouth.

“Speaking of training . . .” Charlotte smirked, then gave Eliza a side-eye.

I frowned at their shared look. “What?”

“Our trainer,” Eliza replied in a conspiratorial whisper, “also referred to as Major Jamison, has already been here *twice*.”

I nearly choked when I tried to swallow. Coughing, I said, “Wyatt’s been—I mean—*Major Jamison’s* already been here to our apartment two times?”

Charlotte nodded. “He stopped by mid-morning and then right before I went to the grocery store. He kept asking how you were. I think he’s worried.”

I put a small piece of chicken in my mouth, but it felt like rubber as I chewed it. Why would he come here? What kind of fucked-up game was he trying to play now? My stomach twisted. I didn’t want to know.

I finally managed to swallow the chicken. “And what’d you tell him?”

Charlotte shrugged. “That you were sleeping.”

“But you should probably contact him,” Eliza added. “So he knows how you fare.”

I managed a tight smile. After hearing about Wyatt’s visits, the food tasted like sawdust.

“I guess I could.” If nothing else, it would appease my roommates. They had no idea that a few months ago Wyatt had played me like a fiddle, and then dumped me like yesterday’s trash. “I’ll send him a message after lunch.”

Chapter 3

~ *WYATT* ~

I paced my living room, mentally reviewing the checklist of items I needed to complete before I left for my assignment in the fae lands. A part of me was thankful for the slew of things to do. The thought of leaving my mate was making my wolf and me increasingly agitated.

It didn't help that I wished I was going to the Bulgarian libraries instead of the fae lands', but we still didn't have clearance to the most coveted libraries in the world even though our gargoyle representative, the vampire Nicholas Fitzpatrick, had also sent a petition to the supernatural courts.

But on the upside, I did have two SF gargoyles working in the Supernatural Forces' private library at this very moment. Masters Mallory and Alarus had been working since sunrise and would report to me any important findings while I was scouring the fae lands' libraries.

So, for the time being, this current plan would have to do. And if the Gods were with me, the fae lands' archives or the SF scrolls would have the answers I sought, then I'd have a cure for the mysterious illness that plagued my mate, and I wouldn't have to venture to Bulgaria.

If they didn't present a solution, I could only hope that the supernatural courts would give me access to the Bulgarian libraries soon.

My heart thrummed rapidly, as it had ever since last night when my mate fell unconscious. I didn't want to think about what failing this assignment would mean.

My tablet buzzed. I whipped it out, expecting the message to be from Wes, but when I saw the name at the top of the text, I nearly tripped.

Little Flower.

Of course, Avery had no idea that I used the nickname I'd secretly given her in high school as her contact name in my tablet.

With a shaking finger, I tapped her message.

I was told you were asking how I was doing. I'm fine. Thank you for checking, sir. Avery

My chest heaved. *Sir.* The formality was like a punch to my gut, even though addressing me that way was required since I was her superior. Still, it felt *wrong*. She was my mate. My mate was my equal, yet here at the Supernatural Forces, she would never be seen as such given she was a new recruit.

A growl rumbled low in my belly, because my reaction wasn't even the concerning part. I read her text again, my growl strengthening.

I'm fine.

But she wasn't fine. How could she believe that? The events last night weren't inconsequential, but she apparently thought they were.

But why?

And then it hit me.

Shit.

She thought she was okay, because *nobody had told her the truth*. I slammed a hand through my hair and stormed about my apartment again. *She needs to know*.

My feet came to a standstill. Avery was awake now. I could see her before I left, and I could tell her the truth about what had happened to her.

I grabbed my keys and headed to the door. I'd already been to her apartment twice today, but she'd been sleeping both times.

I wasn't surprised by how tired she was. The magic that had permeated her system was slowly destroying her. If I wasn't able to find answers and was too late . . .

No. I can't think that way.

I wouldn't allow her to die.



Five minutes later, I was knocking on Avery's apartment door, my back rigid. The industrial-strength carpet beneath my soles had been recently washed. Hints of cleaning agents buzzed through my senses, but I made myself stand still despite its noxious odor.

I knocked a second time, more urgently.

Charlotte answered, her eyebrows shooting up as her tall form straightened. "Major Jamison. Nice to see you again. Are you here to see Avery, sir?"

I peeked over her shoulder. The living room was empty. "Yes. She texted me, so I'm assuming she's awake now."

Charlotte's head tilted, curiosity strumming across her features. I couldn't blame her. It was my third visit to their apartment today, which wasn't exactly normal behavior for a commander. "Of course, sir. I'll get her."

She left the door open but since she hadn't invited me inside, I stayed in the hallway.

A murmur came from the back of their apartment, then the scent of lilacs drifted toward me like a soft breeze.

My Little Flower.

I inhaled, as my wolf perked up inside me, his tail beginning to wag. My stomach clenched, and electricity buzzed through my limbs. Avery's scent had always gotten a reaction from me.

My mate rounded the corner to the living room, and my breath caught.

Long dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. Full breasts strained against her fluffy sweater, and her shapely legs were accentuated in black leggings. Damn, she was so beautiful.

Her brown-and-gold-colored eyes narrowed when she saw me.

My gut tightened. I would never forgive myself for ruining her trust in me, but perhaps, with baby steps, I could remedy it.

"Private Meyers, may I speak with you?" I kept my words low and non-authoritative. If she didn't want to speak with me, I wouldn't make her, but I also knew that since I was her commander, she probably wouldn't refuse.

Those power issues were one of the reasons I'd pulled back from a relationship with her. Dating a subordinate was forbidden in the SF. The only way we could have dated was if we waited until her training finished, she quit her new recruit program, or I left the SF.

If we waited for her to finish, she would have been forced into a two-year long distance relationship from the get go. Not exactly a good start to a happy relationship.

And Avery quitting wasn't an option. She'd worked too hard for her degree and wanted to be an ambassador too desperately to give it all up, and if I quit that meant breaking a promise to my fallen

squad member, someone I'd considered a brother, who'd died in battle protecting me.

I owed him my life—literally. I couldn't break my promise to him, not when it was the last thing he'd asked of me just before he died.

For that reason, I had to stay employed at the SF for at least two more years. Marcus had asked me to look out for his son, Elijah, and personally train him when he joined the Supernatural Forces. But Elijah was only seventeen. He couldn't join the SF for another year, and I promised I would be his commander when he arrived. I had to honor that commitment, which meant I had to stay in the SF for the time being.

So I'd sacrificed what I wanted most in the world—my mate. I'd made myself halt any progression of my feelings for her, and I'd put distance between us despite my wolf's obsession with her, even though I had fully intended to pursue her no matter where she was in two years' time.

But that plan had ended disastrously.

The hurt and pain that had shadowed Avery's eyes—after I'd rejected her following that night under the stars—would haunt me forever.

"Private Meyers?" I said again when she just stood there.

She jolted, as if coming out of a trance before stumbling through the living room into the hallway. She clutched the door's handle and closed it, probably so her roommates wouldn't overhear us.

When it was just the two of us in the hall, she faced me and wrapped her arms protectively around herself. Distrust oozed from her, and she arched an eyebrow in question, that delicate winged feature as beautiful as the rest of her. But it wasn't just her beauty that had always captivated me. It was also her heart and her fire.

Already, I scented the anger stirring inside her at my intrusion even though she was trying to hide it. I had a feeling that if I wasn't her superior she would have told me to fuck off.

Damn. I loved her grit. Even though her magic was weak, her soul was strong.

But then reality set in. She was also only here, standing with me in her hallway, willing to talk to me because she felt she *had* to. She clearly didn't want to.

"Sir? Charlotte said you wanted to see me?" Her face remained blank.

I jerked my spine into a rigid line. How long had I been gazing at her in silence? I forced a tight smile. "Sorry to barge in on you, but I had to—" *Shit.* Where did I begin? How did I tell her that the Safrinite comet had done something sinister to her? That within hours, days, weeks, months, who knew . . . she could be dead?

Both of her eyebrows rose when my silence continued. "Had to . . . *what, sir?*"

I took a deep breath. "Did Farrah or Douglas tell you anything about your condition?"

"You mean what happened last night in the fae lands?" She shook her head. "Not really. They just told me to come back every morning so they could check on me. Why?"

"They didn't say anything about the comet's lingering effects?"

"No." Her brow furrowed, and irritation rose from her like steam. "What is it you're trying to say, sir?"

I opened my mouth to tell her. To confess what I'd been privy to last night—that the scans had shown her life force and magic were dwindling, that slowly but surely whatever power the Safrinite comet had planted inside her would inevitably kill her.

But nothing came out.

I plowed a hand through my hair in disbelief at how unsure I was acting. Incompetence was not something I was used to feeling.

Dropping a bomb like that would inevitably lead to questions. Questions she deserved answers

to. But I wasn't a diagnostic sorcerer or a healing witch. I wouldn't know how to address her concerns.

My voice grew rough when I replied, "You deserve to be told everything. Tomorrow, when you check in at the healing center, demand that they tell you."

"Is that an order, *sir*?"

Shit. I hated this. Because she was right. That had *definitely* sounded like an order issued from a superior to a subordinate. Fucking SF rules.

I softened my tone. "It's not an order, Avery. It's a request."

She went utterly still.

I inched closer to her. "And I'm not here on official SF business. I'm here as your—" *Mate.* I swallowed that word down. "As your *friend* who cares about you."

Her head whipped back. "A *friend* who cares about me? Is that really where this conversation is going, *sir*?"

I groaned, then bit back an admiring smile. She was all fire, but I also knew she wouldn't find my esteem for her spirit amusing.

I kept my expression contrite. "No, my intention wasn't to rehash past events or discuss how you may think I feel about you." My breath stopped. It was the closest we'd come to discussing that night under the stars since she'd brought me cookies, which I hadn't accepted. I inhaled deeply as shock lit her eyes. "I simply wanted you aware that last night information was revealed to me that I don't think was shared with you."

For a moment, she just stood there, then she shook her head and her expression cleared. "Information about the comet?"

"Not about the comet. About *you*."

Her lips parted. "Is it bad?"

"Yeah, it's bad. Demand that they tell you about everything the Safrinite comet did to you."

"So that's why you're here? Because you're concerned about my . . . well-being?" She sounded so skeptical.

Fuck, she distrusted me *that* much.

I nearly took a step forward. I so desperately wanted to touch her, reassure her, *convince* her that I cared so fucking much about her and that had never stopped.

But I could tell that she wasn't open to that. She still didn't trust that I simply cared about her *well-being*, even though the truth was that I savagely loved her to the depths of my soul.

But she wouldn't believe that because of how I'd treated her. I'd made a huge fucking mess of things between us.

Somehow, I managed to lock my frame into a rigid line and swallow my self-directed disgust. "I care more about your well-being than you probably realize."

Her gaze only narrowed further, her expression turning wary.

I sighed. "Please, Avery. I'm not trying to trick you, and I'm not lying to you. *Please* just ask them tomorrow about what the comet did to you."

A slightly fearful tint crept into her scent. "Should I be worried?"

A growl erupted from me before I could stop it. "Dammit. I'm sorry. Worrying you was not my intention. I just wanted to ensure that you were entirely aware of what's going on."

I cursed myself for not being better prepared. But I hadn't had time. I could be leaving within minutes if Wes's text came through, and I had no idea when I would be returning or when I would see her again. I'd just known that I couldn't leave knowing she'd never been told the truth.

“And you won’t just tell me now?” Irritation washed through her words.

“It’s not that simple. If I understood it, I would.”

She huffed, but some of the anger left her scent.

An amused smile again tugged at my lips, but I schooled my features even though my fingers itched to touch her, to feel her fire and passion.

It didn’t help that her fluffy aqua sweater highlighted her full breasts or that her leggings amplified her shapely legs. And her damned intoxicating lilac scent was doing a number on my arousal. How long had it been since I’d touched her?

My wolf whined inside me. He missed her, too, and he wanted to shift and lick her cheeks, nuzzle her hand, and romp in the fields with her. When she was around, he turned into a huge puppy who wanted to play. Only a mate could bring that side out of a full-grown alpha wolf.

I’m sorry, I said internally to him. The past three months hadn’t just been hard on me. They’d been hard on him too.

Avery shifted, her arms folding tighter over her chest. She still watched me warily, but given how she chewed her lip, I couldn’t help but think she was remembering things about us too. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

I watched her teeth nip at her lip, and a memory surfaced. My blood heated. It was of her naked and writhing in my arms as my fingers plunged deep inside her slick, hot folds. She’d cried out when I’d made her climax, and she’d come right on my face.

My breath hitched as a rush of blood went straight to my cock. I jerked upright.

Fucking hell. I’d be tenting in seconds if I didn’t control myself, and she didn’t need anything like *that* from me right now.

Maybe I could talk to her now. Explain to her how I really felt and why I’d rejected her.

But then I shook my head. No, I couldn’t even do that. Even though I wanted to come clean and explain everything about Marcus, about why I’d pushed her away, and the truth about how I honestly felt for her, I couldn’t.

It wasn’t fair to offload all of that on her when she already had bad news coming from the healing center, and I could literally be leaving within minutes and wouldn’t have time to properly explain how I felt.

So I settled with, “Just promise me, Avery, that you’ll make them tell you. And promise me that you’ll hold on to life. Whatever you do, keep fighting and hold on.”

The anger and mistrust in her eyes abruptly vanished, shock taking its place. “Hold on to life?” Then she shook herself. “So, this is actually serious. *That’s* actually why you’re here.”

My insides withered. It was as though she finally believed that I was here with pure intentions and not just to torment her. That was how little she thought of me. “It is. I swear that I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t.”

A wary yet resolved expression washed over her features. “Okay. I’ll ask tomorrow morning when I stop in.” She walked to her door, and was about to open it, but then paused and turned back to me.

Her gaze met mine. Some of the distrust and agitation that had oozed from her the second she’d spotted me standing in her hallway had dispersed. Confusion still filled her scent but something else did too. Something I couldn’t quite identify.

“Thank you,” she said hesitantly. “For telling me.”

I managed a curt nod as my heart ached. I balled my hands into fists, my arms rigid at my sides. I longed to crush her to me, to hold on to her and never let go, but she didn’t want that from me. Right

now, that was the last thing she wanted.

I gritted my teeth, hoping she wouldn't see the tornado of emotions ripping through me.

She gave me a curious look, then opened her door and stepped inside.

"Avery?" I called to her before she could close the door. "There's one other thing. I'm leaving today for a new assignment."

"You are? Where are you going?"

"The fae lands. Major Fieldstone will be in charge of your squad until I return. I just wanted you to know."

"Okay, will you . . . uh . . . be in danger?"

"No, not on this assignment." Which was the truth. Whatever had happened to Avery seemed to be a lone, rare celestial event.

Her expression smoothed, and I wished more than anything I knew what she was thinking. I cleared my throat. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

Her heartbeat picked up, the sound soft and fluttering in my ears. "I will. You too."

She closed the door, disappearing inside her apartment, and I let out the breath I'd been holding.

For a moment, I just stood there, clouded in her scent. Memories of that night under the stars, so many weeks ago, now felt like a distant dream that I'd been too stupid to hold on to.

How I wished I could have wrapped her in my arms, nuzzled into her neck, and simply *felt* her before leaving.

But she didn't want that. Not anymore. Maybe not ever.

I inhaled deeply, her fragrance imprinting on my memory and searing into my soul. With a regretful sigh, I knew that was the last time I'd see her for who knew how long.

Turning, I strode down her hallway just as my tablet buzzed. Pulling it out, the text I'd been waiting for from Wes appeared.

The meeting is set in thirty minutes earth time. They're waiting for you in the fae lands.

My jaw locked. The time had come. After I retrieved my bags, I would venture to the fae realm, and my assignment would begin.

I flew down the stairs and out the door. My heart pounded. This wasn't like other assignments the SF had given me.

No, this one was personal, and I couldn't fail at it.

If I did, I would lose my mate forever.

Chapter 4

~ *EVERY* ~

I frowned heavily as I listened to Wyatt's retreating footsteps along the hallway. Confusion still flooded me that he'd actually seemed genuine in his concern for me, but that quickly gave way to unease.

I told myself it was entirely because of the bomb he'd just dropped on me—his sinister message about my health—but I knew that wasn't the only reason.

He was leaving for an assignment, and I had no idea if I'd ever see him again.

I shook my head. *No, that's no longer my concern.* He was simply doing his job, and that had nothing to do with me.

Instead, I focused on his dire warning, and my stomach twisted, worry slithering through my gut like a venomous serpent.

What did the healers withhold from me this morning and why?

"Avery? Is something amiss?" Eliza's singsong tone carried to me from the couch. The purple-haired fairy was sipping a cup of herbal tea while reading a trashy magazine. She'd become obsessed with them in the past few weeks, ever since discovering them at the grocery store downtown.

I forced a smile. "No. Everything's fine."

I retreated to my room, pacing the length of it while scratching at my sternum. The damned itching had started again along with that weird hum in my chest.

Promise me that you'll make them tell you. And promise me that you'll hold on to life.

His cryptic words quickened my pacing. A part of me debated if I should head to the healing center now to insist on an explanation, but I felt fine. I truly did.

Surely, it couldn't be that serious, but still, I would ask tomorrow.

∞ ∞ ∞

I didn't need the magical alarm to wake up the next day. I hadn't slept well, tossing and turning as I waited for my morning appointment at the healing center even though I'd spent most of yesterday trying to convince myself that Wyatt had been overreacting.

At least I hadn't had another nightmare—no screaming awake today.

Much to my roommates' surprise, I was the first one up and dressed. Eliza had only just pulled out the coffee pot while Charlotte stumbled out of her room, bleary-eyed and still in her pajamas, as I headed to the front door to slip on my shoes.

"Is there a sufficient reason you've risen from bed before the sun's shining on a Sunday?" Eliza asked, her hand still in the coffee canister as she tried to fish out the scoop.

"I have to check in with the healing center every morning. Be back soon." I rushed out the door before more questions could follow.

I'd told my roommates about Wyatt's new assignment yesterday, but I hadn't told them about his concern for my health.

I didn't fully understand *why* I hadn't told them everything. A part of me wondered if my subconscious thought that if I didn't speak of Wyatt's ominous warning, nothing bad could come from

it. Some weird cosmic shit like that, as though giving Wyatt's comments more time and energy only made them more relevant.

Shaking my head, I jogged down the stairs. Regardless of whatever was going on with me, the bottom line was, I didn't have time to be sick—if that's what had truly happened to me.

I had my ambassador job starting soon. I had a final test to pass. Then I would be off to Geneva to officially begin my life.

I'd been waiting for this moment for *years*.

Thinking of my future job at the Supernatural Ambassador Institute helped calm me as I pushed open the doors to the outside. How long had I dreamed of getting to this place in my life? I'd worked so hard over the past few months here at the SF, not to mention the years of studying beforehand, and it was all about to pay off.

Moonlight bathed the grounds as I picked up a brisk pace on the sidewalk. It was still ridiculously early, but at least it wasn't as cool today, although I knew that was thanks to the Supernatural Forces' wards which helped control the outdoor temperature.

When I reached the healing center, it was dark on the ward. Nighttime lights gave off a bluish glow.

"Private Meyers, good morning." One of the witches sitting behind the main station greeted me in hushed tones. She was young with blond hair and a wide mouth. "Farrah isn't here yet. Her shift doesn't start for another hour."

"Oh." *Crap*. "What about Douglas? Is he here?"

"No, he doesn't ever work here unless he's specifically called in."

I bit my lip. "Well, I'm here for my check-in. I was told to come in each day after I woke up, and I was hoping to talk to someone more about the comet's effects on me. Could you do that?"

The young witch shared a wary look with her co-worker who was fiddling with potions in one of the cabinets.

"I'm afraid not, but I'll give Farrah a call and see if she can come in early." The witch extracted her SF tablet, the magical device buzzing to life. "Why don't you have a seat, although in the future it would probably be best if you didn't arrive quite so early."

I grumbled under my breath but did as she asked. It would have been helpful if I'd been given more specific instructions. Like a *time* to show up here.

Irritation washed through me, but then I reasoned that I had come in particularly early today. But that was also because I still needed to retrieve my Explorer from downtown. I'd completely forgotten about it yesterday after I'd woken up in the afternoon, and it'd been nearly two days since I'd parked it on the street outside of the supernatural marketplace, which meant I would be lucky if it wasn't towed.

I groaned. That additional stressor was all I needed right now.

I kicked myself again for forgetting about my car, but it had completely slipped my mind after spending half the day sleeping, then having Wyatt show up, then trying to get out of explaining everything to my roommates, and finally spending two hours on the phone with my parents when they'd called.

That conversation had been exhausting enough. Apparently, my parents had missed multiple calls from my commander on Friday night—while I'd been unconscious in the healing center—telling them that something had happened to me.

They'd finally connected with him yesterday morning, but Wyatt's recount of the event hadn't put them at ease. So I'd spent most of our phone call yesterday reassuring them that I was fine, even

though after my conversation with my commander, I wasn't actually sure if I *was*.

Initially, my parents had insisted on coming back from their positions in India to be with me in the States, but I'd managed to convince them not to.

"Avery?"

Farrah's voice jolted me from my mulling. The older healing witch stared down at me, her astute expression already raking over my form, as if her gaze could magically assess my organs and internal well-being.

I forced a smile. "Hi. I'm here for my check-up."

"Come with me."

I followed her down the hall, the blue-tinted lights dipping everything into shadows, before she stopped at a room full of machinery.

She led me inside. "We'll do a few scans, then you can be on your way."

"Speaking of scans . . ." I hopped onto the table she waved toward. "Can you tell me more about what happened to me? Is everything okay? Or am I actually sick?"

Her hand stilled by the magical device near the wall, but she quickly recovered and pulled the machine over. "What exactly do you remember about your condition?"

"Um, not much. Honestly, that entire night is kind of a blur."

"Let's just see where things are at first, then I'll explain." She had me slip into a loose gown before attaching electrical probes to my head, chest, and legs. A buzz of magic washed over me once they were all in place. Following that, she told me to lie down before positioning the scan above me.

"This will just take a few seconds." She pushed a button, and a swath of magical lasers erupted from the machine, scanning me from head to toe. When finished, she had me sit upright again before pulling the sticky probes off.

The hum of magic that had been encasing me ceased, and I quickly dressed before sitting down on one of the vinyl chairs lining the wall.

Farrah reviewed some things on the machine's data, her expression impossible to read. Following that, she grabbed the chair at my side, scooting it over until it faced me.

She sat, a soft whirring of her magic registering in my senses, but her next words took my breath away. "What I'm about to tell you may be upsetting, but please know that the SF is doing everything in its power to ensure that you remain well."

She whispered a spell, and the lights shut off completely before an area in the far wall lit up. An image of the scan she'd just taken stared back at me.

"Do you see this here?" She pointed, and a magical spark shot from her fingertip, glowing around a circular object in my chest that the scan had brought up. The image was white and dense, as if whatever was inside me was as strong and thick as bone. "This is what the Safrinite comet did to you. It's encased your magic, and if you look over here—" More magical sparks erupted from her fingertips, highlighting some kind of graph. "You'll see the effect that it's having on your magic and life source."

I stared at the jumble of brightly colored lines and numbers. "What does all of that mean?"

After she whispered another spell, the magical display ended, and the lights kicked on. Farrah's mouth downturned, her eyes growing soft. She took a deep breath. "It means that unless we can figure out what that comet did to you and reverse it, you will inevitably die."

"*What?*" For a moment, I just sat there, immobile.

There was no way I'd heard her right.

But then Wyatt's dire warning came crashing back. *Promise me that you'll make them tell you.*

And promise me that you'll hold on to life.

I scratched my chest again, the itching increasing. Farrah opened her mouth to reply, but I jumped up, my heart thundering. So *this* was what Wyatt had been referring to? Still, I shook my head. Denial grew in me so strongly, I was swimming in it. “You have to be wrong. That can’t possibly be the case.”

“Avery, it’s not wrong. The scans show—”

Blood pounded through my ears. “If that *is* true, why wasn’t I told this yesterday? Why did I have to ask this now to learn about my inevitable *death*? What if I’d never asked? Would anyone have ever told me?”

A guilty look overtook her face. “I’m sorry. We should have explained better yesterday—”

“You didn’t explain at all! And if I hadn’t brought it up today, would *anyone* have told me?”

“Yes, we would have. Actually, today I would have after this scan. I’m sorry, perhaps we should have told you everything yesterday, but we’ve often found that most individuals who have experienced trauma aren’t in the right frame of mind for education directly following an incident. But today, you’re rested and feeling better, so I’m happy to explain everything.”

For a moment, I sat numbly. Her demeanor was so calm and apologetic. Still, I oscillated between whether I should be angry or cry. “You should have told me yesterday, even if you had to explain it again today.”

She inclined her head. “And for that I’m sorry, but if you’ll let me, I’ll explain now.” After I gave a curt nod, she continued. “Whatever magic infected you is eating away at your insides. It seems to be consuming both your life force and magic. Why? We don’t know. In fact, we’ve never seen anything like this.”

“So you don’t know how to fix it?”

Her lips thinned. “At this point, no, we don’t, but we’ll continue trying potions and spells when you visit us each morning. We’re not giving up, but you may notice the effects of the comet as the days pass. Or you may not. Its effects may come on suddenly instead of gradually. Honestly, we just don’t know. I wish I had better news for you.”

I dropped my chin, staring at my fingers. “Can I even finish training? Or will that weaken me further?”

Farrah reached for me, but I pulled back. The entire world suddenly began tumbling down. Did everything stop here? Was everything I’d been working toward just made obsolete? Was this officially the end of my dream?

My hands began to shake. *No. No. No.*

As if sensing my growing meltdown, Farrah licked her lips and replied in a quiet, steady voice, “We don’t believe training will harm you. If it did, we would have notified you and your commander. From what we can tell, and from what our tests have shown us, nothing will alter the course you’re currently on. You could lie in bed all day, or run a marathon each morning—it wouldn’t matter—your magic and life force are being influenced by whatever the Safrinite comet did, not by what *you’re* doing, if that makes sense. So, if you would like to finish your last week of training, you may. However, if you would rather stop training entirely while we try to get to the bottom of this, that’s fine too. I’m sure everyone would understand.”

My chest heaved as her words sank in. It didn’t matter what I did. I could train, not train—nothing would stop this.

Everything inside me went cold, as if I’d just turned off. “I need a minute.”

“Of course.”

A million thoughts slammed through my mind as my head fell into my hands. The speed of my whirling thoughts made it impossible to think rationally.

But Wyatt's quiet warning whispered through the back of my mind.

Promise me that you'll make them tell you. And promise me that you'll hold on to life.

I choked on my breath, which got a concerned look from Farrah, but I stayed quiet. She and Douglas may have meant well, but it was wrong to keep this kind of information from me. They should have told me immediately.

"Would you like me to write a note to your commander, relieving you of your duties?" Farrah asked.

Her quiet question only made me realize how serious this was, but a new sense of resolve grew within me.

I wasn't ready to give up, and I sure as hell wasn't ready to tuck tail and run from the SF to my inevitable funeral. I'd worked too damned hard over the past three months to give up now. I could afford to spend my last full week at the SF finishing training, especially if the physical exertion didn't alter the pre-destined course that the Safrinite comet had forced me on.

I sat up a little straighter and took a deep breath. "No. I'm going to finish what I started here."

She nodded, her expression gentle, and in that look I could see the lingering question lurking beneath the surface—*and then what?*

But I wasn't ready to face that yet. I still had my ambassador position waiting in Geneva. Maybe by some miracle, the SF would figure out in the next few days what had happened to me and reverse it. Then I could continue with my life as I'd planned—which meant I definitely needed to finish my training and complete my final test.

"Is there anything *I* can do to stop this?" I asked. "Maybe if I try to fight the comet's magic with my own, even though it's encased? Or maybe I could return to the fae lands to see if that reverses it?"

Her brow furrowed. "You're of course welcome to try whatever you like, but I don't want to give you false hope." My expression must have fallen, because she lurched forward to grip my hand comfortingly. "But rest assured that the SF is looking into this."

I pushed to a stand, my pulse racing, but at least I'd made up my mind about not giving up. "In that case, I should go. I have to get my car."

Farrah stood, too, her lips pressed into a sympathetic smile. "If you change your mind about training, just drop by and let me know. Otherwise, I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Right. See you tomorrow." I somehow managed to keep my chin up as a numb feeling coated my insides. But I focused on the task at hand—the only thing in my life that I could control right now—getting my car.

Thinking about anything beyond that would surely dissolve me into an emotional mess.

I left the room, and once on the ground floor, I pushed through the exit door to the outside.

A few SF members strolled by on the sidewalk, and the dawn sun lit the land in pale light. I rubbed my arms, more from nerves than cold, and just stood there.

What am I doing now?

Oh, right. Going to the garage.

I picked up my pace, eventually breaking into a jog as I ran toward the SF garage. I kept my focus on what I needed to do today, using it to ground me—get my car, maybe go for a walk, eat, then sleep. That was it. It was Sunday, a day off, so I could spend today taking it easy and trying to process everything that I'd learned.

Tomorrow, after training, I could try to find answers about what had happened to me and

hopefully find a way to stop it.

Suddenly, I wished I hadn't told my parents to stay in India. I wished that they were here with me now.

No. You're fine. The SF or you will figure out what's wrong with you and fix it. Mom and Dad don't even need to know.

A few minutes later, I reached the garage.

One of the technicians raised his eyebrows when I barreled through the door. "Private Meyers? May I help you?"

I ran a shaky hand through my hair. Labored breaths made my chest rise and fall. Maybe I shouldn't have run.

I forced a smile. "Sorry, I just need to get my car from downtown. I was hoping someone could —"

But my jumbled words ground to a halt when I spotted a familiar black Explorer parked near the end of the garage.

"Is that my car?" I blurted.

The technician turned his lanky body toward it. "Indeed it is. Are you checking out?"

I shook my head, confusion making me frown. *Did I get my car yesterday and not remember doing it?* Oh my Gods, if that were the case, what the hell did *that* mean?

"No, I . . . uh, I guess I don't need to go anywhere. I came here to get a ride downtown so I could retrieve my car, but I see that it's already here." I shuffled my feet. "Did *I* bring that back here yesterday?" *Please say no. Please say no.*

He cocked his head, his brows pinching together. "I don't recall seeing you in the vehicle. I believe it was just Major Jamison who retrieved it."

I exhaled a sigh of relief that more hours of my life hadn't just slipped from my memory, but then surprise made my head snap back. "Wait, *Major Jamison* got it?"

"Yes, I'm quite certain that was who drove it."

My lips parted. That meant that Wyatt had gone out of his way to get my car for me, apparently not expecting anything in return, on a day when he was preparing to leave for a new assignment.

A flare of begrudging gratitude filled me. "That was very"—I frowned—"thoughtful of him."

The technician smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. He was probably wondering why a crazy-looking new recruit was bothering him at this ungodly hour with questions about a vehicle that she had no intention of actually doing anything with.

Banging sounds came from the other end of the garage. He looked over his shoulder toward it. "Indeed. Now, if there's nothing else . . ."

He let his words hang, and I backed up. "No, sorry for the confusion. Thanks for your time."

I exited the garage before I could act even more chaotic and forced myself to walk at a slower pace back to my apartment.

I took deep breaths the entire time, yet I still couldn't believe Wyatt had done something so *nice* for me.

The itching sensation began in my chest again, and for the first time, I realized that sensation lay exactly where the scan said the Safrinite comet had encased my magic and life force. So that was what caused the itching.

I dropped my hand and looked down, as if I could see into myself. See this *thing* that had taken a hold of me.

My lips parted as the enormity of that hit.

Tears formed in my eyes, my numb feeling slipping. Another SF member passed me, eyeing me, but I quickly averted my face and wiped the tears away.

No. I need to keep it together. All I needed to do today was eat and sleep. That was it.

I squared my shoulders and reminded myself that eventually I would be fixed, and that this wouldn't be the end. Because this couldn't be how my life ended. I was too young. I had too much I wanted to do.

I pictured Wyatt's dark hair, square chin, and green eyes. A flutter ran through me. He'd actually been kind enough to check on me yesterday and retrieve my car when he probably had a gazillion other things he needed to be doing.

Dammit. Why was he being so nice? It was harder to dredge up my hatred for him when he acted that way.

Yet when I reached my barracks, the sneaking realization that Wyatt had not only retrieved my car, but that he'd also made a point to *visit* me before he left, truly hit me. He'd wanted me to know the truth about my condition.

He'd essentially been the only one who had deemed me worthy of that information right away—information that was by right *mine*.

And as I opened the door to my apartment, it struck me for the first time that Wyatt had been the only one on my side.

Chapter 5

~ *EVERY* ~

My final full week at the SF passed slowly. If I wasn't training, I was in the library searching for anything I could find about the Safrinite comet, but the only info I discovered was the date of its last arrival. That was it.

So on Wednesday, I went back to the fae lands, to the exact same spot on the field where the comet had attacked me, desperately hoping that a return visit would magically reverse the comet's poison.

It didn't.

But even as I sat there amongst the wildflowers, in the same space the comet had infected me, not one memory was triggered. I'd also been hoping that perhaps remembering the actual event would reveal its clandestine motive, but similar to the library, a big fat nothing had resulted from that venture too.

Sighing in frustration, I'd returned to earth, knowing that I couldn't spend much time in the fae lands anyway because of the time fluctuations, and I resolved to continue searching in the library.

So, the week carried on.

I attended all of my healing center check-ins and scans. I trained. I researched. I did everything I was supposed to do.

But nothing changed.

And each morning as my last week drifted by, those colorful lines and graphs from the healing center's morning scans didn't bolster me with any hope. Because each day they fell a little bit more, and none of the experimental spells and potions the healing center was trying were reversing it.

And if that wasn't bad enough, I also had the insufferable nagging emotions of acknowledging what Wyatt had done for me before he left. He'd gone out of his way to retrieve my car, he'd checked in on me, and he'd told me the truth about what had happened to me.

Nobody else had done that.

And it had been bugging me ever since.

His actions reminded me of the Wyatt I'd known from high school. Back then he'd been so kind, yet strong and unyielding. The Wyatt I'd seen on Saturday was a whisper of that person—the person I'd fallen in love with.

But that didn't jive with the Wyatt I'd come to know over the past months—the one who'd played me and discarded me as if I were easily disposable.

I took a deep breath. I needed to remember what he'd done, because the concern I'd seen in Wyatt's eyes before he left . . . *that* kind of look could be my undoing, and I'd worked too hard to erect a protective concrete wall around my heart. I couldn't let a few soft words and nice gestures from him crumble it down.

I needed to remember that.

“Meyers, pay attention!” Major Armund called from the sidelines.

I snapped my attention back to the petite vampire I was sparring with. But I was too late. The female vamp came at me at a dizzying speed, once again landing me flat on my back.

Damn, that hurt.

She helped me up. Even though she stood no more than five feet tall and had thin limbs, as if her bones were made of delicate china, she jerked me to my feet with no problem. I'd come to learn that looks could be deceiving.

"All right. That's enough for this morning," Major Armund called out when the clock struck noon.

Reese stood at her side, a concerned look on the sorcerer's face. Not surprising given how poorly I'd performed today.

I groaned and stretched while the vamp merely studied her fingernails before dusting them off on her impeccable cotton shirt.

"Thanks for stopping by," Major Armund said to her. "I know you were supposed to head out this morning."

"Not a problem." Her thin lips parted in a smile. "I shall send my bill to Wes, and best of luck to you on your final test, Private Meyers." With that, she bid us a pleasant day before gliding out of the training room.

My trainers turned to me with crossed arms as I blurted out, "Her bill?"

Major Armund nodded. "She's a consultant, not a fully employed SF member. When we use her, we pay her for her time."

I winced. "Hopefully it wasn't too expensive. I'd hate for the SF to spend thousands for me to merely have my ass kicked."

"Nothing Wyatt can't cover."

Hearing my commander's name brought a flip to my stomach, but so did her statement. "Wyatt's paying for my training?"

Instead of answering my question, Major Armund stroked her chin, her dark brown skin blemish-free as usual. "You did okay with the vamp, all things considered, but I thought you would do better, even though you were near the exit several times before she pounced on you."

"I know. I'm sorry, ma'am. I did my best, but she was so damned fast and my spells weren't strong enough to hold her."

Reese rubbed his jaw, his concerned expression still in place. "I was thinking the same. She broke through your spells a bit sooner than I would have liked. How's your magic feeling?"

Since both he and Major Armund had been asking me that all week, I gave them the answer I always did. "I don't know. Okay, I guess? My magic's still there, but whatever the comet's doing to me—" I shook my head. "I just don't know."

"No worries, but perhaps we should spend the afternoon reviewing your spells," he replied. "Perhaps it's just nerves from all that you've experienced."

I nodded and grabbed my water bottle. "Can we break for lunch first, sir? I'm starving."

"That's fine," Major Armund answered for him. "You'll need your strength up, because after you finish refreshing your spells with Reese, I'm bringing another male wolf in."

Her comment reminded me of the last wolf I'd battled—Wyatt.

I took a drink of water before saying hesitantly, "Hopefully whoever this wolf is *wants* to help with my training, ma'am?"

Major Armund cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

I thought back to when I'd sparred with Wyatt, the day of the Safrinite comet last week actually, and how angry he'd been at being roped into it. "I just mean how Major Jamison didn't enjoy sparring with me, ma'am."

She eyed me, her expression impossible to read. “Is that how you interpreted it?”

“Well, yeah, I mean he was pissed off the entire time.”

Her face remained impassive. “I suppose that’s one way to see it, but I saw it differently.”

“You did? How did you see it, ma’am?”

She gave me a brittle smile. “Let’s just say I now understand why he asked me to give up a trip to the Caribbean to be your instructor.”

I sputtered, nearly blowing water through my nose. Coughing, I replied, “You gave up a *trip* to train me? Why?”

“Because I owed Jamison a hefty debt. He called that debt in when he asked me to train you.”

“You mean your private training isn’t something that’s done for all ambassador recruits?”

Major Armund barked out a sharp laugh. “No, not at all. In fact, you’re the first ambassador recruit to ever get one-on-one training.”

My mouth opened then closed as I gaped like a fish. “I don’t understand, ma’am. Why would Major Jamison ask that of you?”

She arched a brow. “I don’t know, but it does make you wonder, doesn’t it?”

Her cryptic words made my nerves tingle. I took another drink. This time I actually swallowed, but as the cool rush of liquid filled my mouth all I could think about were Wyatt’s actions last weekend and how during all of these months, he’d had me specially trained, while letting me think he wanted nothing to do with me.

That, quite simply, didn’t make sense.



I headed back to my apartment later that afternoon, a frown tugging on my lips. Since it was already Friday, I only had days before my final test. Come next Wednesday, I would be in the ring and my three months of training would be on display for all to see while the judges assessed my every move.

And that scared the shit out of me.

Not because I feared the test, but because I feared my ailing body. Each day this week, it felt as if I’d grown a little bit weaker.

It didn’t help that I’d had a particularly bad day at training today. After that vamp this morning, Major Armund had brought in three different species for me to spar with, and I didn’t get anywhere near the exit door with any of them. Not even close.

Both she and Reese had shared more than a few concerned looks at my horrible performance, because I’d had a hard time with my spells, whether it be from nerves, fatigue, or the comet’s effects on my magic, I didn’t know, but I gave both of them shaky smiles and apologies, telling them that I would do better next time.

Only thing, there weren’t many more *next times*.

In *five days*, I would have my final test. There was only so much time left for me to train and prepare.

“Hey, girl, why the sad face?”

I stopped mid-stride on the sidewalk, nearly plowing into Charlotte. She peered down at me, her light-brown eyes alight with curiosity while her auburn hair blazed around her in the autumn wind. The shade of those strands matched the leaves turning on the maple trees.

“I had a shitty day at training.” I forced a smile.

“Oh damn, what happened?”

I sighed. “Where do I start? Let’s see, I couldn’t properly use my spells. Each opponent brought in to spar with me kicked my ass. It’s Friday, which means we only have two more training days before our test, and if today is any indication of how I’ll do, I might as well accept my resignation now.”

She gave me a sympathetic look. “So what you’re saying is that it went really well?”

I couldn’t stop my laugh.

“Seriously, though, girl. That sucks. I’m sorry it was a bad day.”

“Thanks.” But it was more than just a bad day. It was because of my dying magic. I *knew* that was the true reason. I could thank the Safrinite comet for my crappy performance.

I nibbled my lip, once again wondering if I should tell Charlotte and Eliza what was going on with me. But like I’d felt earlier in the week, I still didn’t want to speak about it, because if I did this would truly be *real*.

“Anyway.” I shrugged. “I’ll get over it, but what about you? How was training for you today?”

“Not bad.” She tried to avert her gaze, but I still saw the excitement dancing in her eyes.

“Okay, spill. What’s got you so excited?”

She clapped her hands and gave a little jump. “I mean, I know you had a shit day, so sorry if this sounds insensitive, but can you believe that this time next week I’ll be an official SF member of Squad Three? And despite what you think, you’re going to pass your test, which means *you’ll* be in Geneva, probably jet-lagged and just settling into your new position.” She gave another little dance. “How can we not be excited about that?”

Somehow I managed to keep my smile in place because Charlotte truly thought today was simply a bad day, but it was so much more. “Well, you’re right. You’ll definitely be the newest member to Squad Three, but I won’t be in Geneva unless I pass my test.”

She swished her hand. “Oh pshaw, easy-peasy. You’re totally going to pass it.”

A snort of laughter flew out of me. “Did you just say *pschaw*?”

She cackled. “I did, didn’t I? How hoity-toity of me.”

“And now you just said *hoity-toity*. What has Major Fieldstone done to you?”

She bit her lip, her eyes filled with mirth. “Major Fieldstone, ah yes, he can talk as funny as Eliza, but he’s still a nice piece of ass that I would tap in a heartbeat.”

I grimaced. “Always so descriptive.”

“I know, right? But seriously,” she said, latching onto my arm and tugging me toward the barracks. “Have you seen him shirtless? The man is built like a god. And he’s so freakin’ strong. None of us can come close to touching him in the sparring ring.”

“That makes two of us.”

Her eyes popped. “You’ve sparred with him?”

“Yeah, last week. Major Armund isn’t going easy on me.”

“Oh, right! You had to bake him that cake when you lost.”

“Yep. I’ve also been practicing with vamps and male wolves.”

She scrunched her nose. “That’s brutal. Sorry, friend.”

I shrugged. “What doesn’t kill you—”

“Makes you more bruised?” Eliza’s cheery voice called from behind us.

We twirled around to see the purple-haired fairy hurrying toward us.

“Um, no, that’s not really how that saying goes,” Charlotte replied.

But Eliza didn’t seem fazed. Instead, she said to Charlotte, “Sorry I didn’t follow you out right away. Major Fieldstone promised to show me that tuck and roll maneuver.” Her cheeks glowed pink.

Charlotte snickered. "Is that all he showed you?"

She swatted Charlotte's arm. "Of course. What are you implying?" But the blush on her cheeks darkened.

The three of us carried on toward the barracks, and my roommates' chipper attitudes and easy banter helped disperse the gloomy cloud that had rained over me all day.

By the time we were inside our apartment with our shoes kicked off, I was feeling positive enough to head into the kitchen to pull out my recipes. I owed Bavar a tart, after all. And now that it was the weekend, I finally had an idle moment to make it since I'd spent every night this week in the library.

"Whatcha making this time?" Charlotte asked as she plopped down on the couch and turned the TV on.

"I was thinking of making a rhubarb and custard tart. I did promise Major Fieldstone that I would bake him something before I left the SF."

"Ooh, think you can make a double batch so we get some too?" Charlotte waggled her eyebrows. I laughed. "I suppose."

Eliza slid onto the stool at the counter and toyed with her hair. "Will you need help carrying it over to his barracks after you finish?"

I knew I would have no problems carrying a tart, but from the eager look in Eliza's eyes, which reminded me of a love-starved puppy, I couldn't stop my, "Most definitely. I'll probably have at least a few plates to carry."

She grinned and hopped off the stool, and I quickly let the magic of baking soothe away my concerns as I began measuring sugar and sifting flour.

But it didn't stop the ferocious itching that began in my chest halfway through my endeavors. By evening, it felt as if it was on fire.

Chapter 6

~ *WYATT* ~

“You’re sure this is all you have?” I asked the fairy guard in the palace’s library.

“Yes, Major Jamison. Those are the last of the scrolls.”

My fingers curled around the parchment as the fairy’s Adam’s apple bobbed. Irritation rose inside me, coiling into my magic and fusing with my alpha power. I tried to keep my dominance under wraps, but it had been ten earth days with no answers, and the palace library was my last hope for information in the fae lands.

I stabbed a hand through my hair and peered out the stone spire’s narrow windows that were shaped like icicles.

Below, the fae lands’ sprawling capital spread out in a blanket of thatched roofs, charming boutiques, and cobblestone lanes.

Growling, I turned away from the idyllic scene. The fairy guard jumped when I began pacing.

Ten earth days I’d been searching for answers, which equated to nearly a month in the fae lands. A month here of endless prowling through their various archives. A month of little sleep. And a month without Avery.

My wolf snarled. Images of tearing the fairy guard’s throat out rose in my mind. I suppressed them, knowing my wolf’s instincts to maim and kill, since we hadn’t protected our mate, would only compound my problems.

It wasn’t the guard’s fault that the palace didn’t have any further information. He was just doing his job—fetching me items as I asked for them. He even brought me tea and cakes initially, until he realized they went untouched.

He meant well.

But he also didn’t have the answers I sought.

“Major Jamison?” the fairy squeaked from where he stood in the doorway. His shiny green hair, as bright as a Granny Smith apple, gleamed in the soft lights. “Would you like me to look in the west dungeon? There’s one area there that I haven’t checked. We haven’t stored scrolls there in centuries, but it’s possible one or two got left behind.”

I ground to a halt. “Yes. Check and let me know what you find.”

After the guard scampered away, I retreated to the tall table that filled the middle of the room. My boots kicked up dust motes on the stone floor before I surveyed the piles of manuscripts and scrolls that covered the table like puff pastry.

The king and queen had graciously accepted my request to plunder their archives, although *gracious* was putting it nicely. It’d cost the SF a thousand rulibs—nearly ten thousand US dollars—for the king and queen to cooperate.

Since the fae lands fell out of the Supernatural Forces’ jurisdiction, the king and queen didn’t have to fulfill our requests. Luckily, money still talked, and Wes had deemed Avery’s condition important enough to pay the hefty fee the king and queen demanded. If Wes hadn’t, I would have paid the fee out of my own pocket.

I growled and balled my hands into fists, barely suppressing the urge to swipe my arm across the

massive table and rake it of its contents.

Because all I had to show for that money was this large table piled with scrolls that contained nothing important about the Safrinite comet. The only information I'd found was the date of its last appearance, the fact that it infused the fae lands with new magic, and the date of its next occurrence—basically everything we already knew. There was nothing in the ancient scrolls containing information about the Safrinite comet sickening fairies or other supernatural creatures with its power. Nothing about it harming anyone at all.

I'd literally found zero new information.

And even though the fae lands' gargoyles had been assisting me during the past few weeks when I'd plundered *all* of the fae databases, our search had been in vain.

I began pacing again. Scents of old parchment filled the room as distant noise from the city filtered in through the window. My only hope now was the Bulgarian libraries, and that was only *if* the supernatural courts allowed my entry. According to Wes's last message, he was still working on securing that permit, but at least our gargoyle representative—Nicholas Fitzpatrick—was on standby.

My lips thinned when I pictured myself meeting with Nicholas.

If the courts allowed my entry, Nicholas would be the first supernatural I'd meet there. A snarl erupted from my throat when my mind flooded with our last encounter. Three months ago, he'd made an appearance at the SF and had dined in the cafeteria with my mate while she'd succumbed to his sexual prowess. I could only thank the Gods she hadn't acted on it. Still, it wasn't a memory I cared to dwell on. Scenting Avery's arousal for the vampire had made me see red.

However, if Nicholas could help me find answers and cure Avery from the comet's ailments, then I would swallow my abhorrence for him.

“Sir?” the fairy guard called breathlessly from the doorway. I swung around to face him. He wore an apologetic expression. “I'm afraid—”

“It's fine.” One glance at his empty hands dashed my remaining hope. “Thank you for your time and assistance.”

A wave of alpha power shot from me even though I tried to suppress it. He cringed when it hit him, and I immediately pulled it back inside me and gave him a tight smile.

But it didn't stop my wolf from snarling internally. For ten earth days my wolf and I had been away from Avery, hoping and praying that she would survive while we were gone, only for us to have wasted all of that time.

I grabbed my backpack that contained my notes from all of my reading during the past month. “I need to get back to earth if there's nothing here.”

The guard scurried out of my way when I exited the room, then jogged behind me as I headed toward the main entrance. Tapestries lined the tall halls and narrow corridors in the castle. Above, fairy globes lit the dark passages like miniature suns. The stench of magic was everywhere. You couldn't get away from it in here.

I whipped out my tablet as I strode down a hall. On the chance this moment came, I'd pre-written a plea to the supernatural courts to consider extending me a pass to the Bulgarian libraries. I knew Wes was working on it too. He'd been working on it all week back on earth, but Wes had a hundred other things he was also trying to accomplish.

In other words, I couldn't wait for some clerk in the courts to process Wes's multiple requests. I was going outside of the normal chain, sending my plea to every supernatural I'd ever worked with that was employed by the courts. I'd never done that before, and it certainly wasn't proper, but screw formalities.

My mate was dying.

With a swipe of my finger, I re-read my plea:

Please see multiple requests sent by Wes McCloy, General of the Supernatural Forces, this week regarding Avery Meyers. I'm aware that my contacting you is not the norm when requesting the courts' help, but I urge you to read this entire message.

We find ourselves in a dire situation. Despite extensively searching the fae lands' libraries and the royal archives, no further information has been found regarding the Safrinite comet and its effects on half witch, quarter werewolf, new ambassador recruit, Avery Meyers. Attached are her latest medical assessments and scans. As you can see, this illness is progressing rapidly. Time is of the essence. If you are able to help expedite our request, I implore you for your help. We need an immediate pass to the Bulgarian libraries for gargoyle assistance. Avery Meyers' life depends on it.

Respectfully,

Major Wyatt Jamison, Squad Eleven commander, Supernatural Forces

I sent the message to those I knew in the courts, flagging it as high priority, then sent a copy to Wes so he would know that I'd taken it upon myself to try and facilitate their assistance.

Once the messages showed as sent, I shoved the tablet back into my pocket.

My nostrils flared as I rounded a corner past an ancient rug cloaked in preserving magic. The nauseating aroma made anger rise in me all over again. This realm swam in magic, yet no magic in this universe was able to help me uncover what had happened to my mate.

I made my way down the castle's endless halls and spiraling staircases leading to the main doors as the guard followed behind me. Once I reached the grand entrance, I paused to address him one last time.

"Please pass along my thanks to the king and queen."

He bowed, his shiny green hair catching the sun. "Of course, sir. It was their pleasure to assist you."

I bet. They're one thousand rulibs richer and didn't have to lift a finger. My lip curled even though a thousand rulibs was nothing compared to the vast fortune the royal family harbored. That amount of money was pittance to them.

What made it even more maddening was that the money could have been used to feed the poorer families in the fae lands, but I knew the king and queen would keep it for themselves, either storing it in their vaults or squandering it on more jewels they didn't need.

"Good day, sir." The guard bowed again when I took my leave.

The sentries stationed at the palace doors watched me with their pitch-black eyes when I strode past. Deadly-looking spears were clenched in their grasps, and their golden-hued skin had an otherworldly glow to it.

I didn't slow when a shimmer of magic hit me. The huge palace doors, with their ornate golden rims and carved mystical engravings, opened automatically when the magic triggered them. Their heavy solid mass moved soundlessly as I passed between them, but the echo when they slammed shut behind me reverberated through the valley.

Outside, the sun hit me. The pale-green sky was cloudless, the midday sun high. It was already

Wednesday morning on earth, which meant that Avery's final test at the SF was in a few short hours.

Thinking of her made my throat tighten. I'd received daily updates on her condition so I knew she was still alive, but the last update Farrah sent me had set my nerves on edge.

Avery's magical essence had plummeted a whopping fifty percent over the weekend, and it had declined again on Monday and again yesterday.

When I'd read that report, my heart had nearly stopped, thinking the same would happen to her life force at any moment.

I'd only begun breathing again when I read and re-read three times that her life force was still relatively stable, only dropping another five percent since its plateau last week. It was currently at ninety percent. Still, none of us knew if her life force would take a similar trajectory. For all we knew, come tomorrow, Avery could be dead.

I picked up a jog on the winding road that sloped down from the castle. The nearest portal to the supernatural marketplace in Boise was only a ten-minute walk from the royal palace but even that felt too long. I'd already requested that my bags be shipped back to my apartment in the SF. With any luck, they would arrive before I did.

Ten minutes later, I crossed through the portal into the supernatural marketplace, but I didn't let the sights, sounds, or smells distract me. I immediately exited the marketplace to the busy downtown Boise streets and waited for the SF ride I'd signaled.

A sleek SUV pulled up to the curb a minute later. I slipped into the backseat as the technician maneuvered expertly away from the curb.

"Major Jamison, good to have you back on earth."

I grunted, in no mood to talk. All I wanted was to get back to the SF and see Avery. I knew the thrumming unease that pulsed through my veins wouldn't abate until I laid eyes on her and could confirm that she still lived.

The technician drove swiftly through the downtown streets to the gently undulating hills north of the city. When we passed through the magical barrier that surrounded the SF, the glowing red line of the warded system swept right through the vehicle as we plummeted through the portal transfer. It activated our clearance via the magical element embedded in the car, confirming the identities of the technician and me as SF members.

The technician drove into the garage, easily gliding the SUV around an infinity craft that was being repaired in the center. He pulled into a parking spot near the south door.

"Thanks for the ride," I said to the technician before climbing out and heading for the underground tunnel.

I didn't wait for his reply.

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Her scent hit me the second I stepped into the training room. Avery stood on the sidelines, flanked by Charlotte and Eliza. Chris was sparring in the center with two other wolves, in the midst of his final test. Each wolf came at him relentlessly.

The judges' panel flanked the far wall. A string of six high-ranking SF members sat behind the table, their astute expressions and demeanors appraising as they assessed Chris's performance and jotted down their comments.

The rest of the squad were there too—Zaden, Bo, and Nick—cheering him on.

Even from the distance, I was able to pick up on the worried lines around Avery's eyes and the delicate flare of her nostrils. Her scent flooded my senses amidst the multitude of smells permeating

the air. It was as though my body knew which scent was hers and homed in on it.

I slipped through the crowd. Several other groups of new recruits were also being tested on other mats. The training room was alive with excited energy, nervous anticipation, and the active scent of magic being cast.

I kept my attention on Avery as I made my way toward her.

She kept scratching her chest while Chris sprang into the air in the center of the room. However, Avery wasn't focused on her squad mate. She wasn't even looking at Chris. Instead, her gaze was focused on the floor a few feet in front of her, her expression worried.

"I wondered if you'd make it here." Dee Armund, the female werewolf who I'd recruited to train Avery, stepped directly in my path.

Reese stood a few yards behind her, but the sorcerer wasn't paying us any attention. He kept glancing anxiously at Avery.

"When did you get back?" Dee asked.

"Just now. Has she already gone?" I asked, nodding toward my mate.

Dee's mouth tightened. "No. She's next."

My gaze narrowed when the sorcerer's fearful scent hit me. "Why's Reese so nervous?"

"Avery's been . . . struggling lately. He's worried about her test."

I tensed. "Struggling in what way?"

"Her magic's grown even weaker. For the last two days, she could barely manage the spells she mastered last month. That's never happened before."

A stone lodged in my stomach. "Her magical force has sank that much?"

Dee nodded grimly. "It's nearly gone. She was just told this morning, but she still has some left. Thank the Gods. She'll need it."

My breath lodged in my throat. I hadn't received the healing center's reports from today yet. "And her life force? Did that sink more too?" I held my breath.

"It fell another ten percent, but it's not falling as drastically as her magic."

Ten percent. That meant it was down to eighty.

A snarl threatened to tear from me, but I suppressed it. "That comet is sucking the life right out of her."

"It is." Dee shook her head, her expression grim. "I'm getting genuinely concerned about her. What about your assignment. Did you find anything?" She took one look at my face and grimaced. "Shit. That bad?"

"There's nothing, Dee. Absolutely *nothing* in the fae lands about the comet negatively affecting anyone. I just wasted ten days searching, and for what?"

She sighed. "It's not for what. You know this is how it goes. If our jobs were easy, we wouldn't be such a large organization. What about here, in our SF library? Did Masters Mallory or Alarus find anything?"

"As of last night, no, but I'm still waiting on their report for today. If that comes up with nothing, our last hope is the Bulgarian libraries."

Avery shuffled her feet, snatching my attention again. She scratched her chest vigorously, and that distracted, panicked expression stole over her face again. It couldn't just be nerves about her upcoming test that was causing her to look that way.

I took a step toward her, but Reese stopped me. "Easy there, Wyatt. She can do this, and sorry to be frank, but she doesn't need any further distractions right now."

A growl rumbled in my chest, but Reese was right. The last thing Avery needed was an alpha

wolf prowling all around her.

All I could do was watch as my mate prepared to step into the ring.

Chapter 7

~ *EVERY* ~

The itching in my chest grew with a vengeance. When that had happened over the weekend, the Safrinite comet had annihilated my magic, destroying most of it in one fell swoop.

I scratched again, fervently hoping this wouldn't be like last time, that instead the itching would be short-lived and abruptly stop.

But the itching grew.

Around me, the crowd cheered and shouted. Chris was in the ring, valiantly fighting two male werewolves simultaneously. They weren't going easy on him, but he was admirably holding his own.

Even though I stood on the sidelines with my other squad mates, none of them noticed the panic welling up inside me. It felt as if termites were crawling around my rib cage, eating away at the shredded ribbon of magic I had left.

I forced myself to take a deep breath. My final test was next. I only had minutes until I stepped into the ring. All I needed was a little bit of magic to use my spells.

A feeling of hopelessness hit me hard when the itching became so bad that I wanted to scream.

And then . . . it stopped.

My lips parted when a feeling of weightlessness filled my center. *What the hell?*

I searched inside me just as Chris was knocked to the ground, blood gushing from his split lip. In a second, he was up again.

My breathing grew rapid. *Where? Where did it go?*

I called upon my magic—my weak, pathetic magic.

But I felt . . . nothing.

I gasped. *Oh gods, no, no, no!*

Tears pricked my eyes as I searched frantically inside me again. *Where are you? Please! Don't be gone!*

But it was.

My last bit of magic had just disappeared down the drain like a swirling whirlpool. The Safrinite comet had finally and totally destroyed it.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, and my hand on my chest dropped. I nearly cried at the irony. Yesterday, I still had a sliver of magic. My spells hadn't been strong, but I'd still been able to wield them.

But now?

No.

I had nothing, and my test hadn't even begun. *Shit!* The only weapon in my arsenal had just disappeared, and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

"It's almost time for your test," Eliza said nudging me. "Are you nervous?"

Her question snapped my attention back to reality just as she let out another cheer for Chris. I licked my dry lips and forced myself to keep the tears at bay. "A little. You did fantastic, by the way."

Eliza shrugged nonchalantly, but her cheeks turned pink in a rosy glow of satisfaction.

If only I were that lucky, but I wasn't. The Safrinite comet had finally taken the last remnant of

my power, which meant I had nothing to battle with other than my two hands, my strong legs, and my barely faster-than-human speed.

I knew that come tomorrow morning—if I was still alive and my life force hadn't followed in my magic's footsteps—that when I showed up at the healing center for my daily check-in, Farrah would be looking at me with shadowed eyes and downturned lips as she unveiled the news of something I already knew.

My magic was gone.

Totally and completely gone.

Everything I've been working on, has vanished, just like that.

Stifled breaths raised my chest. The room dissolved into an unsteady wave. It felt as if I was under water, struggling to breathe and hear. How could this be happening?

I forced another deep breath, some of my mind clearing. The cheers finally calmed, then applause rose. Chris stood triumphantly in the middle of the mat.

One of the judges faced me, calling my name. My final test was here. And I had zero magic to fall back on.

“Good luck,” someone said beside me. A few back pats and squeezes followed.

But I couldn't move.

Couldn't breathe.

Couldn't think.

How could I do this? How could I fight? I tumbled into a void, drowning in the onslaught of frayed nerves and a dark future. My magic was gone. The Safrinite comet had destroyed it.

My life force would be next.

The clock was ticking.

And the only loser would be me.

“Avery!” Major Armund's loud voice snapped me from my dazed coma.

I blinked. She stood right in front of me, shaking me as Eliza stood at my side, wearing a worried expression.

I took an automatic step back, but my trainer's fingers dug into my shoulders, halting my retreat. “Avery? Are you ready? It's your turn.”

Behind her, Reese stood near the wall biting his nails, and just to the left of him—

I jolted.

Wyatt waited.

My commander wore an unreadable expression as his stormy gaze locked onto mine. He stood taller than most of those around him. The brief realization hit me that I was seeing him one last time before I left the SF.

It hit me like a ton of bricks.

I tried to twist my gaze away, but I was like a moth ensnared in a flame. He looked even sexier than I remembered. A thin beard covered his cheeks, and his eyes were rimmed in gold. His rugged appearance and agitated energy made him even more attractive in a deadly sort of way.

But he'd betrayed me.

As soon as that thought came so did the knowledge that he'd assigned me to Major Armund. Because of him I'd received the best training possible. He'd also picked up my car while I'd been sleeping after the healing center, and he'd come to my apartment to tell me the truth about my condition.

But he'd still betrayed me.

Pain played me again. Wyatt's complete and total rejection after the night under the stars still cut me *so* deep.

Exactly. Don't be tricked by him again. Don't let his nice gestures play you for a fool.

I shook my head. I knew better, but his behavior was still so confusing.

"Avery!" my trainer shouted. She grabbed my chin and jerked my attention to her. "Hey, don't look at him. You look at me, and you listen to what I'm telling you. Okay?"

My eyes widened at her sharp tone.

"You focus on yourself and what you need to do right now. Your time has come. Your test is now! So you go in there and you show them what you're made of. Do you understand?" Her dark-brown eyes held no sympathy. The woman was made of fire and steel.

My shoulders slumped as that empty feeling filled me again. "But my magic—"

"I know." For the merest second, her expression faltered. "I know it's dwindling—"

"No! It's *gone*. I felt it go a few minutes ago. I have *nothing*."

Her determined look slipped, if only for a second. "Okay, so we have two options. You can withdraw or continue. If you withdraw, I don't know what will happen. We've never had an ambassador recruit do that before, so I don't know if they'd give you a second chance or not. If you continue, you have to win one of your three tests. That's it. Only one. All you have to do is make it six feet off the mat without being pinned. What do you want to do?"

Withdraw? Now? With no guarantee I could redo my test?

Fuck. I'd worked so hard for this. I couldn't take that chance. "I don't want to give up now. I want to pass so I can go to the Institute."

Her diamond eyes cut through me like glass. "Okay, then you're going to play this with everything I taught you. And you don't have *nothing*. You remember your moves, right? You know how to fight. If your spells fail, they fail. You can't do anything about that, but you *can* get in there and fight like hell. Do you understand, Private?"

I nodded and licked my lips just as the judge gave an impatient wave for me to enter the ring.

How long had I been standing there unresponsive? Seconds? Minutes? It could have been hours, and I wouldn't have known.

Major Armund squeezed my chin again. "You got this." She stepped off the mat.

I didn't look at Wyatt again. Before, when my magic had still been intact, I would have no doubt sensed his pulsing alpha energy. But now—nothing.

"Good luck, Avery," Eliza whispered from behind me.

"Go get 'em!" Charlotte added, squeezing my shoulder.

I gave them a wan smile, then entered the ring.

My opponent cut through the crowd on the other side. She was a woman, I could see that much, but I didn't know anything else about her.

Since this was my final test, I wasn't briefed on who I would be fighting or what they could do. Normally, my magic would have given me a heads-up as my internal radar registered their strength, but as I stared at the supernatural who appeared across the mat—a tall female with slanted eyes—nothing came to me. Not a hint. Not a whisper. Her stare was merely a cold, hard glare that carried neither weight nor clues to her power.

She could have been human for all I knew.

I could have been human.

Since I no longer have magic, does that mean I am one?

But I forced that thought off and remembered what Major Armund said. I may not have magic,

but I still knew how to fight.

Don't forget that, Avery.

I bent my knees, loosening my joints as I scouted for exit points. If I could just make it off the mat and six feet away from the ring, it would count as a victory. Normally, at these final tests, the judges wanted to see direct combat while using powers that were unique to each supernatural. But as an ambassador student, my role was different. If I were in this position in my ambassador job in real life, I would run—I wouldn't fight. So that was how I was tested.

The many weeks of training that Major Armund had drilled into me came back with a vengeance, as if second nature. My breathing calmed as the judges' watchful eyes looked on.

My trainer was right.

I could do this.

The judge raised his arm from behind the panel. "Begin!"

The tall supernatural gave me a sly grin and prowled along the edge of the mat. I inhaled deeply, trying to decipher *something* from her that would give away her species, but all I detected was the scent of sweat and rubber.

The crowd hushed, their attention now focused on me and my opponent. I knew to the bottom of my soul that my magic was gone, but I still began whispering my binding spell, desperately hoping it would work, but when I reached the last word—nothing.

Not a spark, click, or flare registered in my chest where my magic had resided.

My breath stopped. It really was gone.

Which meant I needed to run.

Now.

Out of nowhere, she leaped.

I dove out of the way at the last moment, barely escaping her tackle, but just as I was about to roll to my feet and make a leap for safety, she grabbed my shoulder from behind and yanked me down.

I fell on my back. Hard.

But I rolled out of the way just as she went in for a kill shot that would have effectively ended the test.

I sprang to my feet and ran again, catapulting myself toward the ring's edge.

A hiss of anticipation rose from the crowd.

But just when I reached the mat's edge, the woman grabbed me from behind, although not as forcefully, probably because I was an ambassador student.

Gods. She was cutting me a break.

I took advantage of her hesitance, dipped, and slashed with my arms through her restraint. Out of my peripheral view, Major Armund nodded.

Another opening presented itself, to the right. I dodged and ran, but as before, the woman was faster. She cut me off, then locked her hand around my throat.

I was flat on my back before I knew what hit me.

Her hand was latched around my windpipe, a gleam in her eyes. She'd effectively engaged a kill shot. So much for going easier on me.

And then it hit me. I'd just lost.

My eyes flashed wide. *Holy shit.* My first test was over that fast? It couldn't have been more than two minutes.

Nobody had been defeated that quickly.

Sighs and murmured comments rose from the crowd. The tall supernatural stood, her grip

loosening before she offered me her hand.

She pulled me up as shock zinged along my nerves. She hadn't even broken a sweat.

Test one was *done*? Seriously? I'd never failed that spectacularly before—not since my first week of training with Major Armund.

Embarrassment stained my cheeks red as the crowd's whispers increased. I hadn't even made it five minutes. If that had happened in real life, I would be dead.

Unable to meet Major Armund's gaze, I retreated to my side of the mat. My hands shook as clammy sweat lined my palms.

Eliza, Charlotte, and the rest of my squad watched on.

“Shake it off, Meyers!” Chris yelled.

“Yeah,” Nick echoed. “Shake it off!”

“You still have two more tests!” Charlotte encouraged. “You can do this!”

“Come on, Avery!” Eliza cupped her hands around her mouth. “Show them what you're made of!”

Despite their words of encouragement, I couldn't face them either. None of them had failed.

The judges' heads dipped as they wrote notes on their scoring sheets. Humiliation washed through me again.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Charlotte was right. I had two more tests. *Two* more.

I would do better on the next one.

Resolved, I stood up straighter and squared my shoulders. The tall supernatural I'd just battled inclined her head in respect before she stepped off the mat and my second opponent appeared.

He stood at around five-ten with thick arms. At first glance, I would have guessed he was a werewolf, but he was shorter than most wolves. That meant he could also be a sorcerer or half-demon. It was also possible he was a glamoured fairy.

Crap. Having my magic would have come in quite handy right about now.

I nervously waited for the second test to begin. After the judges finished their markings, the one on the end raised his hand. “Begin.” His arm lowered.

The meaty-looking man didn't move. I crouched, waiting anxiously for his attack. I had to get around him or to the side. It was against the rules for me to simply step off the mat behind me.

Since I didn't have any offensive moves or magic, I was in pure defense mode. In other words, I was a sitting duck.

I leapt to the right and began to run off the mat. I was three steps into my sprint when his binding spell hit me.

Agony ripped through me. It slammed into me so hard that I fell to the ground. My mouth opened and closed like a fish. I hadn't even felt or seen it coming.

Surprise flashed in the sorcerer's eyes.

That's right. I no longer have my shield spell to protect me.

My teeth chattered together as the force of his binding spell paralyzed me. He obviously hadn't anticipated it actually working. I gritted my teeth and tried desperately to fight his spell. I had to push through it. I had to move so I could get off the mat and the six feet to the finish line.

Fight it. Break out of it. Come on, other supernaturals can break through them! You can't lose this test too!

I heaved and strained.

Roll. Try rolling.

I moved an inch.

Hope blossomed in me. *Again!*

But just when lactic acid began to fill my muscles, his spell roped me tighter. My eyes flashed wide open.

I couldn't move. I was completely restrained.

A regretful frown covered the sorcerer's face, and I knew he hadn't tightened the spell on purpose. The spell had done it on its own as they were designed to do.

He kept his distance—waiting and watching, and I knew what he was doing.

He was giving me time to break through it. He *wanted* me to. He was trying to give me a chance at success.

Probably because he knew I was so weak. That I wasn't one of them.

Humiliation burned through me anew, and I willed myself to roll. I gasped, the effort tiring me more than any training session had.

A low growl came from off the mat. A few curious glances from the onlookers drifted to Wyatt. For the merest second, we made eye contact.

His eyes glowed liquid gold.

I tried to dip my chin, to avoid the sympathetic and pitying looks I saw in those around him, but I couldn't move. My chin didn't even tremble.

So I did the only thing I could. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Soft footsteps came from my right. I finally opened my eyes to see the sorcerer moving toward me. He moved slower than necessary, still trying to give me time to break out of his spell.

But I couldn't.

He paused and actually stopped a few feet away to give me even more time, but I was no stronger than a hare snagged within a trap. I was that weak, and he was the fox who'd come to claim his prey.

Another minute passed, and he sighed deeply. With a resigned snap of his jaw, he crossed the remaining distance between us and withdrew an SF weapon from his pocket. It was small, easy to hide, and hummed with magically infused particles.

With a regretful smile, he crouched down and lifted the gun to my head.

My eyes fluttered closed. I was dead.

He'd won.

His magic abruptly released as he called off the binding spell. I sagged in defeat. Like my first opponent, he also offered me a hand up.

Somehow, I managed to stand upright, but tears pricked the backs of my eyes. Test two had gone just as miserably as test one.

I hastily blinked so nobody would see my reaction, but it didn't stop the surprised murmurings in the crowd. It was pathetic how badly I was doing.

The judges again dipped their heads, and a moment of panic stole over me. That was two of my three tests. Two tests were gone, and I'd failed both miserably.

Only one to go, and I couldn't fail it. I *couldn't*. If I did . . .

No, I wouldn't think about that.

I'd worked too hard to get here. What was I doing in those first two tests anyway? *Idiot*. I needed to run and move faster, not wait for them to attack, not even a second of waiting. Without my spells, I was entirely vulnerable. I needed to act immediately and get off the mat.

I darted a look at Major Armund. Her jaw was set in a hard line, but she gave me a nod when our gazes connected.

Behind her, Reese and Wyatt watched, but I couldn't look at my commander. It was bad enough that all of my squad mates and the SF members around me had witnessed my utter failure. I couldn't take pity from Wyatt too.

The crowd parted, and my final opponent stepped onto the mat. It was another woman. She was small and demure looking, but pointed ears poked through her hair.

My shoulders sagged.

A full-blooded fairy for my final test.

Chapter 8

~ *WYATT* ~

Every muscle in my body was coiled and ready to fight. Avery's fearful scent permeated my senses. But there wasn't a damned thing I could do to save her.

My wolf lunged against his restraints so violently that I knew my eyes were glowing, but I couldn't stop it. I was as helpless to resist his rage as I was the pull of the moon.

Avery squared her shoulders, and I could tell she was trying valiantly to appear calm and composed, but the woman that had just stepped onto the mat was a full-blooded fairy.

Shit.

They'd saved the hardest opponent for last.

I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists. All I could do was watch.

The judges had probably thought that Avery would have passed tests one and two. They knew her magical ability was limited to a protective shield spell and a weak binding spell. And because she was an ambassador student, they would have picked opponents that she could have easily demonstrated her strengths on.

She should have been able to bind her first opponent—the female half-demon—then she could have run off the mat and won.

And with her second opponent—the sorcerer—her protective shield spell should have made her immune to his binding spell, allowing her a few precious seconds to race to victory.

And she had all of the training Major Armund had instilled into her. If it had come down to combat, she still could have held her own with a combination of spells, rolls, and maneuvers. I knew she could have. I'd seen her take on strong supernaturals in the last few weeks of her training. She'd beaten a few on occasion.

But surprisingly, that wasn't how her tests had gone. She'd either frozen from nerves and never attempted to activate her spells, or . . .

My heart stuttered at what the other explanation could be, that her magic was gone—totally and completely gone—which meant the Safrinite comet had fully eaten away her power.

That terrifying realization meant there was only one reservoir left for the comet to destroy—her life.

My pulse quickened.

Avery and the fairy waited for the judge to call the beginning of the match. All eyes were locked on him, but his head was still dipped as he conferred with the other judges.

The need to leap onto the mat and protect Avery fired through me again. I pinned myself against the wall in a rigid line. It was only through years of training that I kept my emotions in check, but that didn't stop the flare of my nostrils when the judge at last stood.

He raised his hand. "Begin."

Avery jumped to the side, a look of determination on her face as she raced for the edge of the mat.

But the fairy was faster. The small woman cut Avery off with a blurred move, her movements swift and precise.

Avery shifted to the side, narrowly missing the small hand that reached for her throat. My mate dipped and swiped out a leg, catching the fairy unaware in a move that was admirable even for the most skilled SF member.

The fairy fell.

My heart burst with pride when Avery leaped over her, that grim edge to her jaw still there.

Tension filled the crowd, everyone leaning forward when Avery landed on the fairy's other side. She bent her legs, ready to propel herself from the mat, when the fairy's arm shot out and her fingers curled around Avery's ankle.

Avery's eyes popped, and a collective gasp from the onlookers filled the room.

But just when I thought my mate would go down, she twisted and rolled. My breath sucked in when a flash of pain crossed her features. She broke the fairy's hold but at a price.

With a limping step, she threw herself toward the edge of the mat, to victory.

But the fairy jumped on her back after two steps.

Dammit!

The crowd howled at Avery's third missed attempt, but it didn't stop her grit and refusal to give up.

Avery fell and rolled again, except this time the move was calculated and precise. She took the fairy with her, the other supernatural's eyes widening.

Major Armund nodded, but Avery's move hadn't stopped the fairy. She clung on, her arm moving up to lock around Avery's throat in a chokehold.

I pushed away from the wall, my wolf urging me to leap over the crowd and intervene, but a hand on my arm stopped me.

"Don't," was all Reese said when I snarled in his direction. He kept his hand on me, urging me to stay put. "She may win this. Give her a chance."

Seeing his calm face and resolved demeanor cut through my instincts. I took a deep breath and doused the blazing need to protect my mate.

Avery was now on her hands and knees. Her face had paled, her eyes rolling back in her head from her oxygen being cut off, but still she fought.

The only advantage she had now was the fairy's small weight and stature. My mate wasn't tall, but she had a few inches on the fairy.

With a grim set of her jaw, Avery pushed onto her haunches and wrapped her hands around the fairy's arms. Launching from her crouched position, she jumped into the air but rolled at the last minute and fell backward.

The crowd gasped, and my jaw dropped when Avery landed flat on her back with the fairy beneath her.

A groan rose from the fairy, the maneuver obviously taking her by surprise. The fairy's grip loosened, and Avery snaked the arm over her head and released the chokehold.

A grin spread across my face.

Three months ago, my mate wouldn't have been able to pull that move off. She was neither strong enough nor confident enough to attempt anything like that, but today . . .

Today my mate was showing all of us how strong she'd become.

A swell of victory rose in Avery's eyes as she scrambled to her feet. The fairy still lay in a daze on the mat.

Avery dashed across the ring, the edge of it only feet away.

The crowd stood on their toes, everyone trying to see over those in front of them to find out if my

mate would make it.

Avery grinned and jumped off the mat, landing on the ground, victory in her grasp, when the fairy abruptly shot to her feet and blurred to the front of my mate.

She whizzed past Avery so suddenly that my mate didn't know she was there. Avery was still sprinting the remaining distance to the six feet off the mat when the fairy punched out and landed a firm blow to the center of Avery's chest. The pummel of fist on flesh made a sickening sound.

Avery went down, the blow knocking her off her feet and back onto the mat. For a moment, she lay there paralyzed—from shock or the wind being knocked out of her, I didn't know.

The crowd eased forward more, silently cheering her on.

But the fairy pounced.

She landed on Avery in another blurred move, straddling her before descending upon her like a locust. The fairy's small hands encircled Avery's throat, just as Avery blinked and awareness filtered through her expression.

No. I groaned in agony. The fairy effectively held Avery down by the neck. And we all knew what that meant.

With one twist from her deceptively small hands—hands that in reality could crush steel—Avery's neck would snap.

She'd lost.

Avery had *lost*.

A collective sigh of defeat ran through the crowd.

My mate closed her eyes, soft puffs of breath making her chest rise and fall. Her mouth twisted into a grimace. Three tests. Three fails.

The fairy rolled off my mate and offered Avery her hand. Avery opened her eyes and looked at it, not moving. The fairy shook it, her expression filled with sympathy.

My mate finally reached up and took the offered help.

The small fairy easily pulled Avery to her feet. She gave my mate a formal bow before departing from the mat.

But Avery just stood there.

Shock seemed to paralyze her as grief etched into her expression, a sorrowful frown turning her lips down.

My heart shattered. I was already heading toward her, pushing through the crowd, but Major Armund beat me to it.

She stepped forward and took Avery's hand, then whispered a few soft words to her before putting a comforting arm around her shoulders. Drawing her close, Avery's trainer led her from the ring.

In all the time I'd known Dee, I'd never seen her act gently. The woman was as tough as nails and as sharp as a razor, but she consoled my mate as if she were a fellow squad member.

"Dammit," Reese whispered. He pushed away from the wall and shook his head. "If only she'd had her spells. She could have passed this so easily." He shook his head again, disappointment written all over his face.

A defeated energy ran through the air. The judge at the end stood, the one who signaled the beginning of each test. "We'll break for lunch. The final tests will resume this afternoon at two. Scores for this morning will be posted by then."

Everyone shuffled their feet, the energy soon shifting as those who knew they had passed their final tests received further congratulations and pats on the backs from their squad mates.

My attention drifted to my other new recruits—Charlotte, Eliza, Chris, Zaden, Bo, and Nick. I knew all of them had passed. Every single one of them.

All except Avery.

There was no way the judges would rule in her favor. If she'd won one of the three tests, they would. She was an ambassador recruit after all. But to have lost all three? No way.

I headed in the direction Avery and Dee had gone, but the crowd swelled, pushing in front of me. Commanders and their recruits still lingered, while those who were being tested this afternoon were practicing various maneuvers and spells on the open mats, not bothering to break for lunch.

Over the tops of their heads, I scanned the huge room. Avery stood near the exit door, still talking to Dee. She said something to her trainer, shook her hand, then walked away.

I growled in irritation as Avery grew farther from me. It didn't help that there were too many voices to hear what she'd said to Major Armund.

I shouldered my way through Squad Eight. They were welcoming their newest recruit, a young Asian woman.

My tablet buzzed.

I considered ignoring it, but then it beeped in quick succession, indicating a high-priority message had just come through.

Damn it all to hell.

I whipped the device out, and with each sentence I read, my heart thundered harder.

Your expedited request was granted to the Bulgarian libraries. That half-demon you helped three years ago in Malaysia pulled a few strings. Prepare to leave this afternoon. I'll message you again when I have more info.

The breath shuddered out of me as fierce hope bloomed in my chest. *Thank the Gods.* Finally, a piece of good news.

I was about to pursue my mate again, when a hand tapped my shoulder.

"Major Jamison, you're back, sir!" Chris stepped around in front of me, his grin as wide as the Pacific.

I stopped, but my attention drifted over his shoulder. Avery was gone. She'd left the room, and I had no idea where she'd went.

"Did you see my test?" Chris asked eagerly, but his smile faltered, and I realized I was scowling. "Sir?" he finished feebly.

Guilt bit me. Hard. I'd essentially abandoned my new recruits. I'd left them in their final week of training, the most pivotal time for questions or last-minute drills in areas where they were weakest, yet . . .

I would do it all over again. I would do *anything* that was needed to find help for Avery.

I smoothed my expression. "I did see it, and you did well."

His chest puffed up.

"Hi, Major Jamison!" Bo said, appearing at Chris's side.

Charlotte and Eliza were just behind them, but like me, they kept darting glances to where Avery had gone, their expressions grim.

Nick and Zaden joined the group and, like Chris, wanted to know if I'd seen their tests. I was about to respond, when Charlotte said, "Does anyone know where Avery went?"

The guys frowned and murmured, "No," but it didn't stop their sudden chatter and questions

about how my assignment had been.

With a resigned sigh, I knew that going after my mate now wasn't the professional choice of action. My new recruits—six supernaturals who had worked their asses off over the last three months all wanted my time and attention.

Once again, duty called.

Ignoring their questions about my assignment, I forced a smile and began congratulating each and every one of them on their hard work, but once I finished the traditional gestures, only the wrath of the Gods could stop me from pursuing my mate.

Chapter 9

~ *EVERY* ~

The river bubbled and swirled in soft trickling sounds as a light breeze flowed through the forest. Most of the trees were bare, readying themselves for winter.

I sat on a log at the water's edge, my feet dangling beneath me as autumn leaves fluttered to the ground. I'd been out here for at least twenty minutes, hiding from everyone. I'd practically run from the training room to avoid my squad's sympathy and the crowd's pity.

Escaping to the woods was supposed to allow me a moment's reprieve. I'd hoped that maybe out here with nature at my back and the sun on my face that all wouldn't seem so lost and hopeless.

But it wasn't working.

Humiliation washed through me again and again. I'd failed. Failed *so* badly.

I didn't need to wait for the afternoon to know my score from the judges. In the history of the SF, no ambassador recruit who'd made it all the way through the grueling three months of training had ever failed all three tests. I knew. I'd looked it up.

Our tests were always easier. They were tailored to our strengths so we could pass. Passing my test was *supposed* to be a given.

I kicked at a rock, my mood souring even more. Several days ago, I would have passed it with flying colors. Because I'd still had my magic then. I'd still had my strength and self-confidence. I'd still had purpose, until the Safrinite comet took everything away from me.

I lay a palm on my chest where the encapsulated power from the comet had resided within me. I couldn't feel it anymore. Now that the itching had ceased, it was merely a vacant void.

It'd effectively killed my magic—as it apparently had set out to do. It was like a cancer, eating away at my insides and maliciously destroying everything in its path. I had no idea why or what purpose it served. It didn't seem to know or care either. All I knew was the comet's magic had changed me, and slowly, it was killing me.

I glanced at my phone again. Still no reply from my parents. I'd finally texted them, a simple and concise message.

Need to talk to you guys. There's something important I have to tell you. Please call me.

I couldn't put off telling them any longer. With my magic gone, there was no more hiding or denying what was occurring. It was only a matter of time before the rest of me faded too. And my parents deserved the truth because I needed to decide how I wanted to spend my remaining days.

I still yearned for the Institute. Some may say I was crazy to want to spend my last few weeks on earth working, but I'd dreamed for *so long* of following in my parents' footsteps. Even if I only worked for a week or two at the Institute, it would be enough. I just wanted a taste, a tiny bite of the life that I could have led.

Surely that wasn't asking too much?

A branch snapped behind me. I jerked my head around, and my lips parted in surprise.

Wyatt stood two yards away.

Shit.

His dark hair was disheveled, his eyes glowing. His rugged beauty stole my breath and created a longing in my heart.

For a second, I remembered the way I'd once felt for him—the longing, the wishing, and the all-consuming admiration and love—but that was before everything between us became ugly and jagged, before he'd used me and discarded me.

A bitter taste rose in my throat.

“Did you come to congratulate me on my stellar performance?” I asked sarcastically, trying for a fake chipper tone. I even managed a meager smile.

But his expression didn't change. He prowled steadily forward, his attention never leaving my face. I knew I wasn't fooling him.

My smile slipped, and I hastily turned around, blinking rapidly. I wouldn't cry. Not now. I would completely break down if I started crying, and I didn't want him to see me that way.

He'd taken enough from me. He wouldn't take the sliver of pride I had left. The *only* thing I had left.

Damn him. Why did he have to come out here? I was so fucking vulnerable right now.

The bastard probably knew it.

The log creaked when he sat beside me. He left a foot of distance between us, and I waited for him to say something, tension curling in my belly.

A minute passed.

Then another.

Silence reigned.

Okay . . . So, maybe he hadn't followed me out here to prey on me while I was down.

I didn't dare look at him. Instead, I nibbled my lip, remembering what I'd learned of him while he'd been gone. He'd used his money—whether that be his personal money or his SF budget, I didn't know—to have me trained to the best of the SF's ability. He'd *personally* asked Major Armund to train me because she was the most qualified. Something a commander had apparently never asked of a colleague before.

He'd also carried me from the fae lands to the healing center after the comet's magic rendered me unconscious.

He'd retrieved my car when I'd been too unwell to do it.

And he'd stopped to see me before he'd left for his assignment to tell me the truth of what the Safrinite comet had done to me.

So, what the hell did all of that mean?

I closed my eyes, needing a moment.

I thought of my mother, of the things she'd tried to teach me. She always said that actions spoke louder than words; that actions were what you could trust about a person's character.

A few months ago, I would have said that Wyatt's actions spoke more than clearly for him—he didn't want me, I was a burden to train, he regretted hooking up with me.

But in the last week, I'd seen a new side to it. I'd become aware of *actions* that spoke otherwise.

Or, maybe they didn't. Maybe it was all a part of his master plan to mess with me, which would make him a complete sociopathic monster, and I would have sworn on my life three months ago that Wyatt Jamison was the opposite of a sociopath, but . . .

Gak! I just didn't know what to think. It was all so fucking confusing.

I finally opened my eyes, but I didn't look at him.

I had too much to deal with right now to try and figure out Wyatt Jamison.

"Avery?" he said quietly. "I'm so—"

"So you're back from your assignment?" I cut him off, because his voice was filled with so much remorse, and I couldn't handle pity right now, even if it was fake pity. "Did it go okay . . . sir?"

The log creaked again when he shifted, and my eyes at last snagged in his direction.

That glow still filled his irises, and I wondered what I would feel if I still had my magic. Would I feel alpha energy radiating from him? Would I sense whatever emotion made his eyes glow so brightly?

He clasped his fingers together and looked down. "I'm back temporarily. I leave again this afternoon, and to be honest, no, it didn't go well. I failed miserably while I was away."

My heart sputtered. Hearing that he was leaving again, and today was likely the last time I would ever see him, made my heart squeeze and choke, like an engine struggling to turn over.

Stupid heart. Stupid, stupid heart. Why does he constantly affect me like this?

I forced a wan smile and tried desperately to sound disinterested. "Well, that makes two of us. I don't think I could have failed more miserably in there."

But my attempts at humor fell flat. That same naked pain rolled across his face again.

Gods, how can emotion that raw be fake?

"Is your magic gone?" he asked hoarsely, his voice barely above a whisper.

My lungs seized, my hand automatically going to my chest. "Yes. The last of it died this morning."

He abruptly looked down, his chest rising in unsteady breaths. "Have you considered going to the healing center again, so they can measure it?"

"What's the point?" I said bitterly. "I'll be there tomorrow morning, and regardless of whether I hear it today or tomorrow, I'll be hearing the same thing."

Despite trying valiantly to keep the pain away, tears welled in my eyes, and my vision blurred. *Oh Gods.*

But what was the purpose of trying to act so bravely in front of him? I was so sick of this. So *sick* of pretending that I wasn't hurt by him, because Wyatt Jamison's rejection had very nearly destroyed me, but I hadn't let it. I'd *refused* to let him destroy me. I'd fought his rejection tooth and nail. I'd been fighting it *every* moment of *every* day just so it wouldn't kill me.

The Safrinite comet, though? That bitch was proving to be a much trickier opponent. And quite frankly, I didn't have the energy to fight both of them.

So screw it. If Wyatt Jamison came out here to kick me while I was down, then he could kick away.

I would be dead soon anyway, so what did it matter?

I let my tears go. "I suppose it's the beginning of the end, huh? Cause if my magic's gone, then my life force must be next."

A low growl rumbled in his chest, and the log creaked again when he shifted closer. "That can't happen."

"But it will. Not even the SF can cure this, and I sure as hell haven't been able to stop it." I blinked, and more tears fell. "It's time I face the hard truth."

Wyatt swallowed, his eyes blazing. He'd moved so close that only an inch separated us, and even though I couldn't sense his power or magic, I did sense other things—the ragged sound of his uneven breaths, his oak and pine scent that swirled around him, the days' worth of stubble that coated

his cheeks.

Out here, in the woods with the autumn afternoon sun blazing above us like a meteor suspended in the sky, he looked so stark and haggard. I'd *never* seen such blatant emotion written across his face before.

Gods, what did that mean?

"Avery?" he said hoarsely. "I can't let that happen. You can't die. I will find answers. I'll find a way to stop this."

My stomach clenched. "But how?"

"My next stop is the Bulgarian libraries. The fae lands didn't have any answers despite my thorough search through their archives—"

"Wait. The fae lands' archives? What do you mean?" And then it dawned on me. It hit me like a million volts of lightning. "Your assignment." My jaw dropped. "The assignment that you left for last week was to the fae lands and was about *me*?"

He looked at me so intensely. "Yes. My assignment was about you. It's been entirely about you."

The breath rushed out of me. I turned back to the river, needing to concentrate on something other than him. My heart was pounding so hard, and my stomach twisted into knots.

Little white bubbles frothed near the river's edge. In the middle, a red maple leaf floated downstream. "Did Wes make you do that?"

"No, he didn't make me. He assigned me to it because he knew there was nobody better suited to the task."

"Is searching for elusive magic what you do for the SF?"

"No."

"Then why would he choose you? Why would you be the best man for the job?" I turned to face him, and my body jolted at the savage emotion in his gaze.

"Because when a werewolf's mate is threatened, he will do anything to save her."

My head snapped back. A werewolf's *mate*?

Surely, I'd heard him wrong, but then I remembered how he'd been that night under the stars—the possessive and territorial way he'd acted with me. And he'd pulled Major Armund in to privately train me, to give me the best chance at success.

I squeezed my eyes shut. *No, it can't be.* Because I also remembered his dismissive actions during the past few months, his moods, and his rejection.

I couldn't have heard him right. Because even if he'd pawned me off to Major Armund to improve my training, it didn't explain why he'd humiliated me or why he'd pushed me away. Why would he do that if he thought I was his mate? Werewolf males *couldn't* reject their mates. It went against everything in their DNA, yet that's what he'd done to me.

So why is he lying? What kind of sick reason is causing him to do this?

Fury fired through me. Screw getting kicked while I was down.

"Fuck this." I abruptly stood. But tears poured down my face.

"Avery!" Wyatt grasped me by the shoulders when I tried to disappear into the woods.

I whirled around, anger rising in me so swiftly that I *exploded*.

"You're fucking cruel! A real *monster!*" More tears rained down my face, trailing down my cheeks in raging rivers. "Why do you torture me like this?"

Wyatt's face fell. "Avery . . ."

But I took another step back. "You didn't want me. I'm not your mate, and you *know* it. You pushed me away, because I wasn't good enough for you. You made it abundantly clear that you wanted

nothing to do with me, so don't go throwing around words like *mate*, thinking it's going to make me feel better or it's going to make everything okay because it won't. Even though I know that you asked Major Armund to train me, it doesn't explain your behavior. Werewolves don't treat their mates the way you treated me. They don't! So *stop lying* to me!"

His chest heaved unsteadily. He took another step toward me, but I held my hands up, blocking him.

Anguish distorted his features. "Avery, that's not true. I *never* thought you weren't good enough for me, and I've always wanted you."

I wiped at my cheeks, *hating* him so deeply that I could have spat venom. I glared at him accusingly. "Do you know that night under the stars, I thought it was the beginning of something? I stupidly thought we were going to be together. I actually *thought* you wanted me too."

"Avery—"

"Why did you push me away? Huh? If you truly thought I was your mate, you wouldn't have—"

"I did it because I didn't have a choice!" His nostrils flared, and I felt certain that if I'd had my magic, his alpha power would have been slamming into me.

But I didn't have magic, so I didn't feel anything.

I was just like a human.

And realizing that made the last of my control snap. A sob racked my body, and then another.

I turned my back on him. The tears *poured* out of me.

In an instant, he was in front of me, pulling me into his arms. His scent washed over me, that oak and pine scent that always reminded me of a forest on a damp, misty morning.

My body went rigid. *Had no choice*. What *bullshit*. The thought made my agony turn to rage.

I kicked into action. I pushed him away and pummeled his chest with my fists.

But he held on, refusing to let me go.

"I'm not your mate!" I screamed at him. "You don't want me. You never did! And I was a fucking fool to think it could have been any other way." I hit him again and again, my fists connecting with his flesh, making horrifying thumps with every blow I landed.

But he didn't stop me even though he easily could have. Torment ripped through his features. "I'm sorry, Avery. I'm so sorry," he said again and again. "I'm so incredibly sorry. So goddamned sorry!"

I kept hitting him, refusing to be tricked by him again.

And he let me. He took all of my pain and all of my wrath, never once trying to stop me or defend himself.

And seeing that, knowing that he wouldn't stop me from abusing him, from taking everything out *on him*, as if he felt he deserved it . . . it took all the fight out of me.

I abruptly stopped, going completely still. Wetness coated my cheeks, and my chest heaved.

His arms remained around me. "I'm sorry, Avery. So sorry. I fucking hate myself for what I did to you."

His hands moved. They were everywhere. Up and down my back, through my hair, caressing my arms. He held me comfortingly as his whispered pleas didn't stop.

"I would take it all back. I would undo it all if I could. I never wanted to hurt you. I *hated* hurting you, but I couldn't be with you. Not for a couple of years, at least. I had to push you away."

The wind washed across my damp face. Dry, coarse dirt rubbed under my shoes. My mind buzzed with fatigue, yet his declaration still hit me like a punch.

I couldn't be with you. Not for a couple of years, at least.

None of what he was saying made sense.

I stayed still and rigid. I knew that I was a mess of tears and hair, of hate and love, of desperation and defiance.

But Wyatt kept holding me, and he told me again and again that he'd never stopped caring for me.

"Do you remember that day in the ice cream parlor? Back in Ridgeback?" he said softly. "It was the first day I saw you. I was there with three of my pack brothers to get their banana split deal—two for the price of one." He pulled me closer, his chin tickling the top of my head as he continued to stroke my back. "The first thing I noticed when I walked into that shop was the scent of lilacs. I'd never smelled anything like it. It was fragrant and beautiful, and so subtle that I wouldn't have detected it without my newly growing wolf senses. It smelled like a little flower was blooming in that shop."

Little Flower.

My lungs paralyzed. *Wyatt remembered that day? He remembered seeing me for the first time?*

He trailed his fingers down the outside of my hip, then back up again. "Across the room, I saw this girl. This young, beautiful girl with dark hair tumbling down her shoulders and braces covering her teeth. She looked so unsure of herself, but something in her eyes made me pause." He took another breath and shook his head slightly. "I didn't know what it was and neither did my wolf, but we knew that girl was special, that for some reason she meant something to us."

My lips parted. He remembered everything about that day? Just like I did?

But . . . that would mean . . .

"My pack brothers had no idea what hit me as we walked out of that shop. They didn't know that a part of my soul had just been cut from my body and given to that girl who sat at the booth, eating chocolate ice cream with caramel and hazelnuts as her parents flanked her sides. But *I* knew. I knew that I'd just met someone who I'd never forget."

Caramel and hazelnuts? He remembers that detail? Oh my Gods. He's telling the truth.

Tears threatened to fill my eyes again, so I squeezed them shut.

His hand trailed up again, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear. "But I was young then, still unsure about what being a werewolf fully meant. I'd only shifted for the first time a year before. I was still getting used to my new skin and the senses that were at times so strong they overwhelmed me, so I didn't act on my feelings. Instead, I watched and waited, and over the next two years that young girl grew and matured. Each day, she was more beautiful than the last, and she was so smart, and so determined to make something of herself. Her magic wasn't strong, but her soul was made of steel."

I opened my eyes to see his shining irises, like twin pools of gold.

His voice turned rough. "And when she left Ridgeback, I realized I'd wasted all of that time. I should have spoken to her more. I should have acted on how I felt. I should have told her that I loved her laugh, admired her strength, and envied her wit. But she was gone, leaving with her parents to travel to France, then Zimbabwe, and then Japan. She didn't know that I tracked where she moved and hoped that one day our paths would cross again."

My heart tripped. Those were the countries we'd moved to after Canada. *He tracked me? For that long?*

His gaze turned tender, his voice aching. "I wished for *so long* that I'd told you how I felt, but all that time I was just a stupid teenager who watched and wanted, so desperately wanted, because deep down, a part of me knew that you were meant for me. But I never acted on it."

My breath stopped.

Silence stretched between us as I tried to process all that he'd revealed. He'd felt the same way

about me as I'd felt about him in Ridgeback. All of those years when I thought he barely recognized me, he'd been watching me too.

"You really watched me during those two years?" I choked out.

"Every day."

"But you hardly ever spoke to me."

"How could I, when every time I saw you, my tongue twisted into knots?"

"But you never . . . I mean we never—" I ran a hand through my hair.

"I didn't have the courage, Avery. I never did, until you came here, but then duty got in the way, and I couldn't have what I've always wanted."

"Duty?"

"Yes. Duty. *That's* why I pushed you away. *That's* why I rejected you. It wasn't because I didn't want you. I want you, so *fucking much*." His grip tightened on my arms, and gold shone from his eyes so brightly they rivaled the sun. "Sometimes I want you so badly that I think I'm going insane. And my wolf has been insufferable. He hates what I've done, and he's so angry with me, but I can't leave the SF."

Agony poured through his words, and a part of me deep down knew that he spoke the truth. *Oh Gods.*

My heart stopped again.

Oh Gods. Oh Gods. Oh Gods. For months I'd hated him, and now he dropped this on me?

How could I go from hate to love in a split second?

I couldn't. My head was spinning. I could die any day and now this bombshell?

"I have a commitment to a fallen brother," he continued. "It's why I can't leave. Marcus died in battle to save *me*, and the only thing he asked of me as he passed away on the battlefield was to train his son when his son joined the SF. Elijah is seventeen now. He'll join the SF next year, and I have to be here to fulfill my promise. But you won't be. You'll be in Geneva, following your dream. The only way we could have been together was if you quit and never left Idaho. I couldn't ask that of you. I *wouldn't* do that to you."

My job? He turned my life entirely upside down and inside out for my *job*? "So you pushed me away and said it was a mistake? You lied?" Pain cut through me again. I'd believed him. I'd believed I'd meant *nothing* to him.

He hung his head. "I thought I was making the right choice, but I never intended for it to be permanent. As soon as I finished my commitment to Elijah here, I planned to quit the SF and follow you to wherever the Institute assigned you. You've always been the one for me, Avery, but the timing . . ." His lips pressed together, and he shook his head bitterly. "It just didn't work."

My gaze swept over his face, searching and hunting for any sign of deceit.

I found none. My heart stuttered.

"Why didn't you just tell me all of this?" Anger fired through me again. "Why weren't you honest? We still could have been together in secret, and then we could have done long distance even if you were here, and I was there. We—"

He brought a finger to my lips. "No, we couldn't. Wes found out about my interest in you. He pulled me into his office the morning after our night under the stars. He *knew* that I'd stalked you to the bar, that I'd spent eight hours alone with you. That in itself was enough reason to fire me because I'd broken policy, and if I'd been a newer SF member, he would have. But since I wasn't, he gave me a second chance, but he said that if I kept pursuing you during your time here, or if he saw any sign of me breaking protocol again, he would fire me without hesitating, and I *couldn't* risk that, not after

what Marcus did for me. I couldn't break my promise."

His eyebrows furrowed together. "Don't you see? I felt like I didn't have a choice. Because if I had a choice, if my actions didn't affect anyone else, I would have chosen *you*. It's always been you."

The breath rushed out of me as I tried to process that. "But you still could have told me. I would have waited for you."

He brought his hands up, cupping my cheeks. "For two years?"

My lips parted. *Two years*. That was a long time.

My gaze drifted down. Would I have done that? Could I have done it? Two years to wait for someone you'd never really been with in the first place . . .

It would have been hard.

I lifted my eyes back to his, trepidation filling me.

I couldn't answer that question, because I didn't know.

He must have sensed my hesitancy, because his gaze shuttered, a veil falling in place. He dropped his hands, the absence of the warmth from his palms leaving a chill on my skin. "So that's why I pushed you away. That's why I rejected you. But it was never because I didn't care for you or didn't believe that you were worthy of me. I'm the one who's not worthy of you."

His gaze stayed over my head. I could tell that my hesitation cut him to his soul, but *Gods*. He'd just dropped a bomb on me on, quite possibly, the most emotional day of my life.

My mind was still spinning.

"So, now you know the truth." He tugged a hand through his hair. "I should head back to headquarters. I have to ready a few things before I leave, and I need to meet with the SF library gargoyles to see if they've found anything new about why the Safrinite comet targeted you."

He stepped back, and I wanted to say something, to reach for him, or to acknowledge the depth of what he'd just revealed, but . . .

He'd seen that doubt in my eyes, and he'd *closed off*.

But I was still reeling from everything he'd said. Dammit, and I was still angry. Really fucking angry with him. *His* choice had cost *me* so much—even if he'd felt he'd done the right thing.

I brought a hand to my forehead.

My head was pounding. *Ugh*. This was possibly the shittiest day of my life.

Tightness tinged his jaw.

I sighed inwardly. I just needed a moment. But we didn't have a moment. He was leaving.

I followed him out of the woods as the birds sang above, and the bubbling creek disappeared behind us. The beauty of nature did little to stop the tumbling in my stomach, as if my nerves were doing somersaults.

I twisted my hands as brittle leaves fluttered to the forest's floor.

Wyatt stayed quiet, his broad shoulders rippling with tension as he moved as quietly as the wind.

I stared at his dark hair, wondering if he felt the weight of my gaze. So much had happened in the past week. So much had changed. I was on the brink of death. I'd failed my final test. I was supposed to go to Geneva, but since I'd failed my test, would the Institute even admit me? And Wyatt was leaving again, *today*.

After everything he'd revealed.

It was crazy that out of all of those momentous, life-altering events, the one that plagued me the most was the thought of never seeing my commander again.

And I had no idea what to do.

Chapter 10

~ WYATT ~

Avery's soft footsteps cracked twigs and swished through the brittle leaves behind me. Every sound she made had my senses jolting to attention. It was as if now that I'd voiced my desire to make her my mate, my senses grew hyperaware, every nerve in my body zinging with apprehension at what she'd say or do next.

My gut clenched as if I'd swallowed rocks. She hadn't accepted my apology. Not fully. She'd believed me. I'd scented that much, but even though her anger had lessened, she was still royally pissed off and for good reason.

But . . . she'd hesitated at the thought of waiting two years for me. *Hesitated.*

A sour taste filled my mouth.

And *that* was why I'd never forced a relationship on her. *That* was the reason I'd chosen to push her away instead of telling her the truth and asking her to wait for me.

I hadn't wanted to put her in that position.

Because the response I'd just gotten was exactly what I'd feared, and it made me want to howl in frustration.

But I kept my footsteps steady even though every muscle in my body coiled. I'd dropped enough on her today. She didn't need my emotional baggage on top of it.

Still, it was hard. Damn hard to act like I was fine. Magic simmered beneath the surface of my skin, heating my blood, as my wolf prowled and paced in my belly.

She didn't outright reject us, I reminded him. *She hesitated.*

He snarled. According to him, this mess was entirely my fault.

And he was completely right.

Slivers of trepidation swirled in my belly as we walked back to headquarters, because it was possible that Avery didn't feel the mate bond like my wolf and I did.

I took a deep breath and called upon my years of training to keep my focus clear. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about that. Because thinking about Avery, about what lay ahead for her and potentially *us*, was like tumbling down the rabbit hole. I knew that if I allowed it, I'd never claw my way out of that bottomless pit, and right now, I needed to stay focused and tuned into the task of ridding her of her mysterious illness.

Her life depended on it.

The Bulgarian libraries were our last chance to find a cure for whatever ailment plagued my mate. Their archives spanned millennia and contained more scrolls and ancient texts than any supernatural library in any realm.

Once there, I would hunt for answers relentlessly. I wouldn't rest. I wouldn't fail. I would do whatever it took to seek the cause of her failing magic and life force, and only then after I'd found a way to save her, would I face a future in which Avery may not choose me in return.

"What time do you leave today?"

Her quiet question snapped me from my brewing thoughts just as the edge of the woods appeared.

“As soon as my meeting with the gargoyle scholars finishes.”

“So the gargoyles were also working here while you were working in the fae lands?”

“That’s right. Masters Mallory and Alarus were assigned to your case.”

Her breath stuttered before she said haltingly, “I didn’t realize so much was going on behind the scenes, and to think when I’d been researching in the library last week, the gargoyles had been searching for the same information at the same time.”

I could only grunt in return. She had no idea that I’d also contacted every gargoyle who had ever worked in our library to see if they had any idle time to search for answers. I’d even been willing to sacrifice part of my life in return, as was the deal when one made a request of the gargoyles outside of the court’s ruling.

But no gargoyles had been available for me to make a bargain with. I hadn’t been surprised, since the four-foot-scholars were so coveted. Because a gargoyle’s knowledge superseded any supernatural’s, they were very sought after, and the legal delicacies didn’t help.

The courts were ultimately in charge of all library gargoyles, because gargoyles were naturally made of stone. They only came alive and stayed alive during daylight hours if they’d been given a human’s or supernatural’s life force to harvest from the courts—the typical punishment for convicted criminals. Like leeches, gargoyles fed off others’ energy forces. Without those sacrificed lives, they’d remain stone indefinitely.

So I’d had to go through the proper channels, through the supernatural courts—the law of our land.

Headquarters loomed around us when we stepped out of the forest onto one of the training fields. To the west, hidden under cloaking spells and iron wards, the SF library stood. Even though on the outside it looked like the other concrete buildings on site, inside was another story.

The library was ginormous and enchanted with magic. It contained thousands of documents on its soaring floating shelves. Mallory and Alarus’s latest report to me last night had revealed the same as my hunt in the fairy realm—nothing.

On the open field, Avery shifted closer to my side. Even with her magic gone, that soft lilac fragrance still clung to her like a delicate aura. My fingers shook at that realization. That scent solidified her witch heritage, yet her magic was gone. Logic deemed that her scent should be that of a human now, but it wasn’t.

So what the hell did that mean? Was she still magical because the comet’s magic was inside her? It was the only reasoning that made sense.

I threaded a hand through my hair. That had to be it, because if Avery’s magic was gone, she should carry the scent of a human, but she didn’t, which only proved how bizarre the Safrinite comet’s magic was.

My nostrils flared, and I tried to tamp down my anxiety. How the hell did we fight something we didn’t understand?

“Wyatt?” Avery said quietly, snapping my attention back to her. “About what you said in the woods . . .” She wrung her hands. “It just caught me by surprise. I didn’t know you felt that way, and for so many weeks, I’ve been thinking the worst of you, and I don’t know—” She shook her head. “I’m still angry. I know you probably don’t want to hear that, but it’s true. That, and it’s a lot to take in. A lot to process.”

A bone-deep weariness filled me. “I know. I don’t expect anything from you.”

“It’s not that. What you said about the ice cream shop—” Her voice caught. “I remember that day too.”

My gaze snagged to hers, surprise filling me.

“I felt something the first time I saw you too.”

My chest rose unsteadily, hope cutting through me like a knife.

“But right now, I need to focus on staying alive, but I wanted you to know that. I wanted you to know that . . . it wasn’t just you that day who felt something.”

I swallowed the thickness in my throat. Once again, she hadn’t rejected me, but she hadn’t thrown herself into my arms either.

Fuck.

I focused on the new recruit groups to the west working with their commanders. Their tests were this afternoon. All of them reeked of hope and determination—the pummeling scents carrying to me on the wind.

Avery’s attention shifted there too. Longing filled her scent. I imagined she wished she was progressing to the next level of her career.

I curled my hands into fists, fighting my instinct to comfort her.

It didn’t help that today should have been a day of celebration as we once again welcomed the newest generation into the SF, yet all I could think about was the woman walking at my side. The woman I desperately wanted a future with.

Avery cleared her throat, the sound as anxious as the emotional scent floating from her. “What time do they usually post the scores?” The door to the west entrance of the main building loomed ahead.

“They should be up by now.”

Her eyes widened.

“I’ll go with you when you check them.” I didn’t give her a chance to deny me. Once again, that innate need to protect her rose up like a tidal wave. I knew I couldn’t stop what was coming. I knew she hadn’t passed, but maybe, just maybe, the judges had taken pity on her.

We reached the door, and I opened it for her. She gave me a small smile, but her lips were tight with nerves.

“This way.” I led her down the familiar corridors and halls. Excited conversation drifted toward us when I rounded the corner in the wing containing the training rooms. A crowd had gathered around the posting boards, everyone clamoring to see their scores.

A young woman at the front of the group ran her finger up and down the sheets. She stopped when she reached her name. The tentative hope on her face abruptly vanished. She ran her hand along the line again, then pushed back from the wall. Others rushed forward to claim her spot.

The young woman ran past us with an anguished expression as two other recruits from her squad ran after her.

I inhaled her lingering scent of disappointment and regret in the ruffled air.

“Maybe I don’t need to look,” Avery said, jolting to a stop. Her face was pale as she twisted her hands.

A low growl rose up in my throat. My wolf wanted to hurt anyone who caused my mate to wring her hands and look so worried, but I pushed him down. “Would you like me to look for you?”

She bit her lip, and her beautiful golden-flecked eyes wrinkled at the corners. “Could you?”

“Of course.” *I would do anything for you.* But I didn’t say that out loud. She had enough to worry about without my overbearing instincts to deal with too.

I left her by the wall, hanging back from the boards, and moved closer to the crowd. I didn’t see Charlotte, Nick, Eliza, or anyone else from my new recruit squad in the mix. Usually, commanders

brought their new recruits here in a group so everyone could look together. Bavar had probably already done so, or they would be arriving shortly.

The commanders standing near the back wall nodded in acknowledgement to me. I gave a brisk nod in return but didn't slow my pace.

When the young recruits gathered around the boards saw me, several of them hustled out of the way, making room. The alpha in me was used to the reaction. Most in my pack acted similarly. Even though the human side of me didn't like using my position to push my way to the front, for Avery, I'd bowl over everybody if I had to.

I reached the board and began scanning the list. My finger stopped when I reached it.

Meyers, Avery — new recruit Jamison squad — FAIL

My gut tightened. I'd known that result was coming, had known all the way to my bones that they couldn't pass a new recruit that failed all three tests, even if she was an ambassador recruit. Even if she had suffered an otherworldly magical calamity that none of us had ever heard of.

Yet I'd been hoping, *wishing*, for them to show leniency. Everyone on the judges' panel had known what the Safrinite comet had done to my mate.

But they hadn't shown leniency. They'd shown brutal fairness.

I let my finger fall, my heavy sigh following.

Comet or not, rules were rules. We operated everything in the SF on rigid protocol. There was no gray, only black and white.

Which meant three fails couldn't be passed no matter the circumstance.

I turned toward where Avery waited, scanning over the heads of those around me to focus on my mate. She stood ten yards away, that last thread of hope lining her face.

Something in me cracked at her barely contained eager look.

And then she saw my expression.

Devastation ripped through the hope in her eyes.

My stomach dropped, and I was already pushing through the crowd to get back to her, but she gave me a tight smile and shook her head, her eyes pleading with me to stop.

I jerked to a halt. She didn't want my pity, even though what I felt *wasn't* pity. It was biting regret, soul-shattering rage, and the need to vengefully right how she'd been wronged. The storm of emotions nearly consumed me.

But she didn't want any of that.

I knew my eyes were glowing with the emotions that burned through me, yet just as I opened my mouth to call for her, she turned on her heel and ran.

Chapter 11

~ *EVERY* ~

Air flew past my face as I sprinted down the hall. Only one thought consumed me. I'd failed. Officially *failed*. And I needed to get the hell out of here before I lost it in front of everyone.

I didn't know why I'd been holding out hope. Why I thought that maybe, just *maybe*, the outcome would have been different than it was.

But it wasn't.

That one tiny sliver of hope inside me, that maybe fate would be on my side, that maybe I'd be given a second chance, withered into ash.

What I hadn't been expecting was the explosion of pain that followed.

I'd worked *so hard* to achieve my dream. I'd bled, sweated, cried, and yearned for a life in the supernatural community. All I wanted was to be an ambassador and contribute in the only way my meager magic allowed.

Yet all of my hard work had been for nothing.

Wind streamed through my hair when I flew through the exterior doors. I knocked into a group of new recruits congratulating each other and giving one another high fives on the sidewalk.

A startled shriek reached my ears followed by, "Watch it!" before I dashed down the path.

The autumn breeze bit my cheeks. I'd left Wyatt behind me. I shouldn't have done that. But I couldn't stand to see another ounce of pity on anyone's face—not even his.

When I reached my barracks, I placed my shaky hand against the scanner as panting breaths filled my chest. Magic enveloped my palm, and a brief moment of panic seized me. What if the door didn't open? What if the scanning security no longer recognized me? I wasn't magical anymore. Would it see me as a traitor?

But the familiar click sounded and the door unlocked, followed by the robotic voice welcoming me home.

I exhaled in relief before I raced up the stairs, taking two at a time. My ankle burned. I'd injured it in my last test, when I'd tried to escape the full-blooded fairy as I'd twisted and rolled my way out of her grip.

And that had all been for nothing too.

When I finally slipped inside my apartment, I braced myself for my roommates' squeals and exclamations of joy that they'd passed their tests.

But all was quiet. They weren't here.

I shut the door behind me, then leaned against it. I gulped in breaths, my lungs burning from my frantic run. Wyatt's agonized expression again flitted through my mind.

I'd left him back there without so much as a thank you for checking my score. And what he'd said in the woods . . .

My thoughts whirled. So much had happened today. Too much.

I slid to the floor, the worn mat in our small entryway scratching against my butt.

My phone buzzed, getting a jump out of me. Then buzzed again.

I wiped at my tears and pulled my mobile phone from my pocket to see a dozen missed text

messages—most from Charlotte and Eliza, but a few from the guys in my squad. Everyone was wondering where I was.

How long had they been trying to get ahold of me?

I forgot that I'd put my phone on silent, only letting it vibrate if a call came through, and one was.

From my parents.

With a shaky swipe of my finger, I answered the call. "Hi, Mom." My voice sounded as hollow and broken as my insides.

"Avery? Honey, what's wrong? We just got your text." My mom sounded so far away as if the thousands of miles that separated us were taking a physical toll on our connection.

"Oh, Mom . . ." I gripped my phone to my ear. "I failed. I didn't pass training."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry."

I brought a hand to my forehead, realizing that this wasn't even *why* I'd asked them to call me.

I'd texted to tell them about my magic being gone, about what the Safrinite comet was doing to me, but since the first thing out of my mouth had been about my test . . . she probably thought *that* was the reason for my urgency.

"Have you spoken with the Institute?" she asked gently. "Perhaps you could go through SF training again. I know that hasn't been done before, but they would probably allow it. You'll have to wait another year. I know that will be hard, but just because you failed this round doesn't mean that —"

"Mom, stop. There's more." I knew she was only trying to help and give me encouragement, but failing my final test was only the icing on the cake. A huge spongy dessert waited beneath that icing, filled with poisonous batter that promised death to all who ate it.

"What do you mean?"

"My magic's gone. The last of it died this morning."

A moment of silence followed before she replied, "Your magic's gone? From what happened the other weekend?"

"Yes." I closed my eyes and told her everything that I should have told her last week, that I *wished* I'd told her. At some point in our conversation, my father joined in. Both of my parents were on speaker as I said through hoarse words and a choked throat what I'd been hoping I'd never have to reveal—because last week I'd still held out hope that this could all be solved soon.

"And now my life force is down, too, and since my magic entirely disappeared this morning, I'm not sure if that means my life force will now disappear faster."

When I finished, they remained silent, only their haggard breathing letting me know they were still there.

My father finally swallowed, the sound like a rock dropping to the bottom of a pond, before he said in a shaky voice, "They said you're going to die from this? That there's truly nothing they can do?"

"Yeah. They're still trying to find a cure, but—" I pictured Wyatt again, his bottomless eyes, his fierce despair when he'd turned from the boards to tell me about my failure, and the pain and love in his features when he'd told me his true feelings in the woods. "But I think I need to prepare for the worst. That's why I'm calling you now."

"Oh, honey." My mom's voice broke.

My father was no different. He kept clearing his throat, and his voice sounded raspy. I knew the two of them were holding each other. They'd always been like that. So in love. So supportive of one another. It wasn't the first time I'd felt their great love even though an ocean separated us. If two

people were made for each other in this world, my parents were it.

“We’ll come to Idaho right away,” my mother said after softly blowing her nose. “We don’t have any portal keys, and I’m not sure if we’ll be able to secure any unless the Institute helps with that, but worse-case scenario is that we can portal hop to get to you tonight. It shouldn’t take us more than five or six hours with the transfers between portals to reach you if we can’t secure keys.”

“We’ll call the Institute now,” my father said. “Just sit tight, Avery. We’ll be there soon.”

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

For a moment, I just sat there, as if waiting for my parents to appear in my living room after using a portal key, but then I shook my head. They weren’t SF members. Even a portal key wouldn’t allow them to enter headquarters without clearance. The closest they could arrive was in the surrounding land outside the SF’s magical barrier. Or, if they weren’t able to secure keys, then they’d eventually make their way to the supernatural marketplace downtown, portal hopping until they reached it.

My head spun as I tried to process the logistics of it. Even with the magical advantages that supernaturals had, it still took time to reach destinations. If only I had time.

I took a deep breath and finally stood. My head felt foggy from the emotional toll of all that had happened today, but some of the heaviness that had been burdening me lessened. I knew that my parents couldn’t save my life but knowing that they would be arriving at some point today made the looming darkness over me lighten.

Another flash from my phone caught my attention. A fourth text message rolled in from Charlotte.

Just saw your score. We’re all down here with Major Fieldstone right now. Shit. I’m so sorry. Where are you? Eliza and I want to be with you.

My hand trembled. I grabbed a tissue to blot my eyes before replying:

I’m in our apartment, but don’t worry about coming here. I’ll come to you.

Her reply came immediately.

Ok. We’re supposed to go to some party in the main building, but we can skip it.

No. Go. You all passed, and that’s an amazing reason to celebrate. No way are we missing that.

Shit. You’re gonna make me cry, girl. This sucks so much. I wish we were all celebrating.

Yeah, but it’s okay. Tonight’s about the rest of you.

My roommates still didn’t know about the comet’s effects on me. Like my parents, I’d been hoping to never have that conversation, hoping it would all blow over, but now . . . *ugh*. I couldn’t handle another emotionally draining confession.

I’d tell them tomorrow.

With a sigh, I stuffed my phone into my pocket before heading to the bathroom to splash cold water on my face. Puffy, red-rimmed eyes stared back at me in the mirror while I patted my skin dry,

but the cold water had helped.

I brushed some concealing powder on my cheeks and around my eyes, then applied a thin layer of lip gloss. Once I no longer looked like a weepy corpse, I headed toward the door.

I swept it open and was about to rush down the hall when I jolted to a stop.

Wyatt stood in the hallway.

Chapter 12

~ *EVERY* ~

Wyatt was leaning against the wall, his hands stuffed into his pockets, but the second he saw me he straightened.

My breath caught. As always, his presence made my insides flutter. That flapping feeling only increased when I took in the width of his shoulders, the cut of his jaw, and the worry etched into his features.

“Hi,” I said, startled, my door still open behind me.

Hesitation hung around him, as if he wasn’t sure he should be here. “I just wanted to check on you.”

I eased the door closed, the soft click the only sound around us. “I’m okay.”

His brow furrowed, and I realized how ridiculous my response sounded.

“I’m sorry I left you back at the scoring boards. I shouldn’t have done that.”

He groaned. “You have nothing to apologize for. I’m the one who’s sorry. I’m so goddamned sorry about your test. I know you would have passed if it wasn’t for—” He sighed. “You know why.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. With my magic, that test would have been a piece of cake.”

A moment of silence fell. All of the things he’d revealed in the forest bubbled up inside me again. *Mate*. The air charged around us. I swore if anyone else had been there, they would have felt it crackle.

“I’d like you to get checked again at the healing center, before I leave,” he said hoarsely. “If you’re okay with that.”

The breath rushed out of me. Right. Wyatt was leaving. Pain cut through me, making my heart squeeze. Yet even though he probably had a hundred things to do before he left, he was here, patiently waiting for me, wanting to know if I was okay, and wanting to get me checked so he could know my status before he left again.

Even I wasn’t angry enough to deny him that.

“Yeah, of course. I can do that.” I texted Charlotte, telling her I’d be there soon, but I needed to do something else first.

She replied back immediately.

Don’t sweat it. We’re here. Just let us know if you change your mind and want us to come to you. xx

My lips lifted in a sad smile. If it weren’t for the comet, I would have been celebrating with them now.

“Avery?” Concern laced Wyatt’s question.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and braved a smile. “Sorry. I just had to tell Charlotte and Eliza that I was going to be late. I’m supposed to meet them.”

“If you’d rather not get tested now and do it later instead, that’s completely fine. It’s your choice.”

Even though he was once again putting my needs first, he still stood stiffly, shadows in his eyes. My insides turned over. He just wanted to know about my life force, if I was still hanging on before he left.

Mate.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, you’re probably right. I should get checked out, ’cause if my magic disappeared this morning, it’s probably best to know if my life force—” I clamped my lips shut.

A storm ripped across his features before he locked his jaw. “I’ll escort you.”

I stepped away from my door and began walking down the hall. He fell into step beside me, his hand coming to rest on my lower back.

I jumped. The feel of his warm palm seeped through my shirt. How long had it been since he last touched me?

He curled his fingers and jerked his hand away. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay. You just caught me by surprise.”

He gave me a tight smile, his expression veiled.

We took the stairs down and headed outside. SF members were doing afternoon drills and training in the surrounding fields. Despite it being test day, that didn’t stop what the numbered squads were doing. At any moment, they could be called away for an assignment. Life and death responsibilities still ruled this fortress. The Gods only knew that the law and order the SF was tasked with keeping didn’t stop just because a few new recruits hadn’t passed their final tests.

“Do you know how long you’ll be in Bulgaria?” I asked as we walked on the sidewalk toward the healing center.

“I don’t. It all depends on what we find and how quickly.” A deep crease appeared between his brows.

My stomach dipped again when I realized that I may never see Wyatt again if I died before he . . .

I twisted my hands as we approached the healing center.

A low growl came from Wyatt, then his hand was on my back again, his touch gentle and comforting.

The warmth from his hand eased me in more ways than even I understood. Some of the worry slipped out of me.

“This way,” he said gruffly. He opened the door, ushering me inside and toward the elevators.

The entire ride up to the second floor, his large frame felt so *big* in the small space. A presence hovered around him, a weight that had nothing to do with a scale but more to do with a *force*. Some women probably found an alpha wolf’s powerful build intimidating, even scary, but I’d always found Wyatt’s presence soothing. The only time that had changed had been the night after the stars. And now . . .

Now, I didn’t know what to think.

I nibbled my lip when the doors opened, as I once again remembered what he’d revealed in the forest. He believed I was his mate. Over the past weeks, he’d pushed me away so I could pursue my dream at the Institute and not be encumbered by a long-distance relationship, but he’d intended to find me again after he upheld the commitment that kept him here at the SF.

And even though he’d lied to me—which was a super shitty thing to do—I was kind of starting to understand his reasoning.

I sneaked a glance at him again when we stepped onto the healing center’s ward. He seemed to sense it, because his head dipped and his eyes locked onto mine. His expression was carefully

schooled, but a faint glow rimmed his irises, and his hand still pressed against the small of my back, the touch gentle yet surging with strength.

His touch held the promise of endless love and fierce devotion—if only I accepted him in return.

Gods, how could I have been so wrong about him? He was still the same boy I'd fallen in love with in high school. The last three months had just been one giant, colossal misunderstanding.

My stomach tightened. *Mate.*

But just as emotions threatened to overtake me, one of the witches hurried from around the main desk. It was Sally, the young red-headed healer, who blushed every time Wyatt stepped onto the ward.

“Major Jamison,” Sally said, nervously peeking up at him through her lashes.

But if Wyatt was aware of her giddy interest, he didn't show it. His warm hand stayed on my back, its reassuring weight causing goosebumps to pepper my skin when he began making slow movements up and down, just enough to let me know he was there while also tingling my nerves in a calming rhythm.

“Is Farrah here?” he asked, his gaze already sweeping the corridors over the young witch's head.

Sally's eager expression dimmed, even more so when her attention drifted to Wyatt's hand which had lowered to my waist. “She is. She's tending to a patient right now.”

“Tell her Avery Meyers and I need to see her when she finishes. We'll be waiting in the scanning room.”

He didn't wait for Sally's reply and instead propelled me down the hall, his normally long strides shortening to accommodate my gait.

My heart hammered at the feel of him, that familiar somersaulting in my belly growing again—the sensation I'd lived with daily when Wyatt and I were teenagers.

But when we entered the scanning room that I'd come to know so well, I stiffened. The magical device that I'd been laying on every morning for the past week waited—and this time, it promised a much different picture than the last one it painted.

The pressure of Wyatt's fingers on my back increased into a soft and calming massage until my tensed muscles loosened once more. With his free hand, he pulled a chair over. “Why don't you sit down?”

I nodded, thankful for the seat. Despite Wyatt's presence, it felt as if my legs could give out.

Once sitting, I folded my hands together and took deep, steadying breaths.

Wyatt prowled to the doorway, peering around it to where the witches were busy at work down the hall. When he caught me watching him, he gave a small smile.

“Have you been to the Bulgarian libraries before?” I asked, anything to distract myself from what was to come.

“No, it'll be my first time.”

I folded my fingers together, then unfolded them. “I've heard they're quite extraordinary. That they employ more gargoyles than any library in the world.”

“Four hundred and six last time I checked.”

My eyebrows shot up. “That many?”

“Yep. Wes is convinced that if answers lie anywhere, it's there. He's been trying since last week to secure a permit for me from the courts, but as you probably know, the courts can be damned annoying.” He growled, then huffed.

I laughed, the sound taking me by surprise, but he looked so cute and put out, like a teenager who hadn't gotten his way.

Some of the tense lines around his mouth softened, his lips tipping up. “It’s been too long since I’ve heard that sound.”

I sobered, my laugh tinkering out. His quiet declaration reminded me of what he’d said in the forest. Of everything he’d revealed.

Mate.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, as our eyes stayed locked together.

“Thank you,” I said softly, breaking the silence. “For working on my case and trying to help me, and thank you for my training. I know you called in a debt from Major Armund to do that. And I know nobody’s ever done that for an ambassador student before. So thank you for doing everything you could to help prepare me. And thank you for telling me the truth about my condition before you left, and getting my car when I forgot it downtown, and for checking my score for me, and—” My breath caught. “And for what you said in the woods, for coming clean about how you really feel for me, and being honest about what happened three months ago. Honestly, Wyatt, I can’t thank you enough. I had no idea you were doing all of that for me.”

My gratitude spilled out, my words growing faster and faster. My chest was heaving by the time I finished, my breaths shallow pants.

In a blink, he was at my side again, sitting in the chair beside me, but he was so damned big that his knee brushed mine. He began to move his leg, but my hand shot out and settled on his hard thigh.

The second I touched him, his entire body stilled.

I licked my lips and peered up at him. “And thank you for being with me here right now. It helps having you here.”

The glow around his eyes intensified as his jaw locked closed. I could have sworn the heat rising from his leg increased.

He nodded curtly, his chest filling with a shallow breath.

My palm warmed and tingled. He was so hard. All of him was like a rigid wall of stone and mortar, as if he would erect himself around me to stop anyone or anything from daring to touch or hurt me.

Something clenched deep inside me—something I hadn’t felt since that night under the stars.

He took a deep breath, then tentatively placed his hand over mine. His large palm felt rough and warm. His fingers curled, squeezing me gently.

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

My breath caught, my throat growing thick. I opened my mouth to tell him that I felt the same, but Farrah bustled into the room.

The second she appeared, my hand shot back to my side, slipping out from under his palm.

Farrah came to an abrupt stop, her attention sliding first to Wyatt, then me, then to Wyatt’s hand which still rested on his thigh.

Wyatt tensed, and I could have sworn the energy around him grew thicker, but if Farrah thought it was odd to have a commanding officer sitting so closely to his recruit—while practically holding hands—she didn’t comment.

Instead, she pulled out her tablet and tapped a few buttons on it. From the familiar routine, I knew she was pulling up my chart.

“Sally tells me you wanted to see me?” she said briskly.

Wyatt gave a curt nod. “I’d like Avery assessed again. Her magic disappeared entirely this morning.”

Farrah’s eyes flashed wide, but that tell of surprise disappeared when she smoothed her features

into calm professionalism. "Gone? She still had five percent this morning."

"I know." I ran my hands up and down my thighs, my palms suddenly feeling damp. "But I don't think it's there anymore. Right before my test this morning, I felt it go. It was like the last of it just slipped away."

Farrah frowned, then waved toward the pile of gowns on the counter. "I see. In that case, would you mind changing, Avery? I'll run the scans again."

I stood on shaky legs and grabbed one of the gowns before stepping behind the curtain. Once I had my SF T-shirt off and the gown on, I slid around the changing area and shimmied myself up on the scanner's bed.

Wyatt pushed to a stand, that same vibrating energy growing off him again. It was weird, even though my magic was gone and I couldn't register his supernatural strength or power, I still *felt* his presence. I wondered if that was what humans detected when standing near a powerful supernatural.

"Lie back, and I'll begin."

I did as Farrah said, and she set to work, attaching the stickers to my chest and limbs. The familiar hum of magic washed around me as the enchanted devices vibrated to life.

Wyatt stayed near the wall. He paced a few times, but then seemed to realize what he was doing, and ground to a halt before crossing his arms.

Once again, I swore the energy in our surroundings increased. Even though I didn't have my magic anymore, the sheer power of him filled the room.

"This won't take long." Farrah's fingers flew over her tablet as the scan began.

As before, the lasers swathed me, bathing me in their magical glow. A few minutes later, it was complete and I was getting dressed behind the curtain before joining Farrah and my commander on the other side.

"Well?" I asked, as I tucked in the last of my shirt. "What does it say?"

Farrah's frown deepened as she reviewed the information. She swiped to the next page on her tablet, then threw me a shaky smile.

"Sorry for the bother, Avery, but would you mind slipping back into that gown? I'd like to run the scan one more time, just to make sure it's accurate."

A stone formed in my stomach, and the luminescence around Wyatt's eyes increased. I didn't say a word, and instead whirled around to change again.

But on the second round, when I was lying flat on the scanner's bed, an aching sense of doom grew in me. Farrah had seen something on the first scan. Something she couldn't believe she'd seen.

By the time the second scan finished and I was dressed again, it felt as if ants had crawled under my skin and a ghost had grasped my lungs, seizing my inhalations. I couldn't sit still, and I couldn't breathe.

Wyatt sat at my side, following my every fidget and nervous movement. His jaw locked, yet he didn't say a word.

As Farrah reviewed my second scan, her face paled more and more with every page she flipped.

I began to tremble, and Wyatt reached behind me, his large hand settling between my shoulder blades.

I didn't realize how jumpy I was until he touched me, but with his warm, steady palm splayed across my back while his fingers lightly massaged my stiff muscles, I finally released the encased breath I'd been holding. I relaxed, if only a little, and I swore an approving growl rumbled in his chest.

"I'm sorry for taking so long," Farrah finally said. She pulled over a chair and joined us.

I tensed. Every time she'd sat down with me in the past after a scan, the news hadn't been good.

"Just say it," I said, my fingernails digging into my palms.

Her brow creased, concern lighting her eyes. "Your magic is indeed gone, but it's your life force that I find most concerning. It fell another thirty percent from this morning. It's now down to fifty percent."

My breath stopped, and Wyatt's fingers stilled.

"Thirty percent?" he said, his tone biting. "But the last test was only eight hours ago."

"I know." She scooted her chair closer and placed a hand on my arm. "That's why I wanted to test you again. I was hoping it was inaccurate."

"Gods." It was all I could manage, all I could utter. Fifty percent. I could be dead in *days*.

"So she has zero magic, and only fifty percent of her life remains? And you're sure that's correct?" Wyatt shifted to be closer to my side as the heat off him grew.

Before I realized what I was doing, I leaned into him. His arm wrapped around my shoulders, drawing me close. It was only when his scent flooded me that I grew aware of what I'd done.

Farrah averted her gaze, again studying the information on her tablet. "I'm sorry. I wish I had better news, but the second scan revealed the same information as the first." She pocketed her device, then regarded me with sympathetic eyes. "Have you told your family?"

I nodded. "They're on their way here. I told them this afternoon."

She placed her hand over mine and gave me a tight smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm glad to hear it." She squeezed my arm, then stood. "I'll see you tomorrow morning for your next check up if you wish to continue them."

She breezed out of the room, her long robe fluttering around her ankles.

My lips parted at her final words. *If you wish to continue*. As if she knew the check-ups would only further show my downward spiral and just become a formality. Her comment hinted at the fact that most likely I only had days left, a week if I was lucky. And was spending each morning here, hearing more bad news, really how I wanted to spend my remaining time?

The dam I'd carefully encased around my heart burst.

I lurched forward in my seat, my breath rushing out of me. In a heartbeat, Wyatt was kneeling in front of me, his large palms steadying my shoulders.

"Avery, look at me."

His urgent words had me raising my head as my entire body began to tremble.

The glow in his eyes intensified and every muscle in his body clenched. "I'm going to find a way to fix this."

The torment in his words and agony in his expression had tears filling my eyes. "But what if you can't?"

He snarled. "I *will*. I'll find a way. I won't let you die."

I squeezed my eyes shut as Farrah's departing words again filled my mind. *If you wish to continue*.

Wyatt ran his hands down my arms. "What can I do right now? What do you need? Tell me what you need."

You.

The thought stole over me before I could stop it, but it was true. What I needed right now was him, holding me and supporting me, essentially everything he'd been doing since the moment he came back into my life this morning. I scoffed. Was it really only this morning since he'd returned from the fae lands to watch me fail my final test?

So little time had passed, yet my life was careening in a downward spiral.

As if sensing the growing urgency in me, he pulled me to him. Before I could process what was happening, we were standing and I was in his arms, his entire body pressing against mine.

“I won’t let you die,” he whispered in my ear. “I won’t. I’ll find a way to stop it.”

My heart broke at the thick emotion in his voice. I wrapped my arms around him, savoring the feel of him and relishing his oak and pine scent. “Just hold me. Please.”

He swallowed but didn’t reply. Instead, his grip tightened, and I closed my eyes, sinking back in time to the night under the stars when he’d held me just as tenderly as he did now.

“We wasted so much time,” I whispered. “I wish—”

But I couldn’t continue. How could I wish for something that could never be? In another lifetime, another world, maybe we could have found a way to be together. But that wasn’t my reality. I was already saying my goodbyes. I was accepting a truth that I could neither control nor eradicate.

“No.” His arms turned into bands of steel. “Don’t talk like that. This isn’t the end.”

“But if it is—”

“It’s not!” he said fiercely.

I sank against him, letting him support my weight. It was crazy how easily he’d ripped through my barriers and shredded my walls. It had only taken him a few hours and a raw confession to break down the concrete blocks around my heart. Yet it’d taken me months to erect them. I’d done everything possible to pretend that I didn’t care and that his rejection hadn’t hurt me, but it had.

And now that I knew the truth of how he really felt, I didn’t want to pretend anymore. “Kiss me.”

His breath stopped, his body growing rigid. “You mean—”

His question hung between us, and I nodded. “If I’m going to be dead in a few days or a week, I want to spend the rest of my time with you.”

“Avery.” His hands tightened, gripping my waist and digging into my flesh. “Don’t say that. Please. I can’t . . . the thought of you not—”

I silenced him by pressing my lips to his.

He groaned, his eyes closing, and the feel of his mouth on mine again ignited a fire in my core and awakened my senses. I threaded my fingers through his hair, opening my lips under his.

He didn’t need further encouragement. His grip tightened, and he pulled me so savagely against him that I didn’t know where he ended and I began.

I moaned when his tongue dipped into my mouth, playing with mine, as the scent and taste of him flooded me, bringing me home.

“Avery,” he whispered. His kiss deepened as our lips throbbed and the urgency between us grew.

His hand locked around my neck, angling my head back farther so he could plunder my mouth. I moaned as the delicious taste of him overflowed my senses. Our tongues danced, dipped, and tasted one another in a fevered pitch. Need curled inside my belly, wrapping around my core, reminding me that it had been so long—*too* long—since he’d last given me release.

“Avery,” he growled. He tore his mouth from mine to kiss down my neck, then beneath my ear, before grasping the sides of my face desperately yet tenderly between his palms. “I would die for you,” he said hoarsely. “I would do anything for you. I need you to know that.”

I nodded quickly, hating that he’d stopped kissing me and needing to feel him, *all* of him.

He dipped his head again, his lips sealing over mine. And when I ran my hands up his sides, over the broad, muscled planes of his back, his entire body shuddered.

He gripped me harder, then growled, the low sound rumbling in his chest before his hands

moved down and curved around my ass.

He lifted me in an abrupt swoop.

I opened my thighs and wrapped my legs around his waist, letting him support my weight. He crushed my core against his hard length, already stiff and throbbing.

Moaning, I ground against him, wanting to feel him, *needing* to straddle his erection, and grip him so tightly until we—

Someone cleared their throat from behind us.

My head flew back, jerking toward whomever stood in the doorway just as Wyatt snarled his displeasure.

“I’m sorry,” Sally said, her eyes wide and her cheeks pink. “But Farrah asked me to come clean the room since your exam is over.”

Wyatt’s chest heaved. A feral expression covered his face, but he slowly lowered me until my feet were firmly back on the floor.

“Give us a minute,” he said curtly.

Sally bobbed her head, her lips puckering. She gave me an envious glance, her gaze drifting back to Wyatt before she hurried from the room.

I gulped in a breath, my body still on fire. Embarrassment crept up my cheeks that we’d just been caught like a couple of teenagers making out in the school’s broom closet.

When Wyatt caught my expression, he shook his head, then chuckled before pulling me close again and running his hands up and down my back. “That kiss doesn’t even come close to all of the things I want to do to you, Little Flower,” he whispered in my ear.

I shivered again, loving the feel of him against me, but just as quickly as the high of being with him came, so did the crashing wall of reality that it would all soon come tumbling down.

His grip on me tightened. “Avery,” he said, his fingers clasping my chin, then tilting my head up. His irises glowed. “I’ll find a way.”

Thick emotion clogged my throat. All I could manage was a nod, because as much as Wyatt was intent on finding a cure, deep down, both of us knew that may not be possible.

A buzzing sound came from his pocket. He rearranged his arms and pulled out his tablet. A fierce look of determination grew on his face as he read a message.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s from Wes. The final arrangements have been made. I’m going to Bulgaria, and I’m going to find you a cure.”

Chapter 13

~ WYATT ~

I strode down the hallway, heading toward the library. I knew I was scowling. I'd just left my mate at the healing center—after she'd heard devastating news about her dwindling life force—so I could attend my final meeting with the SF gargoyles before leaving her *again*.

Of course, Avery had nodded in understanding, telling me she should really go see Charlotte and Eliza, but it hadn't sat well with me.

She'd been distressed, and I hadn't been able to fix it, which automatically put me in a foul mood. Not to mention, for the first time in months, she'd softened toward me.

Blood rushed to my cock when I remembered our kiss and how she'd responded to me. The feel and taste of her had lit my blood on fire.

I ran my tongue over my lower lip. I could still taste her.

Seething quietly, I stalked through the library's huge doors, entering the massive room. The domed ceiling rose one hundred feet, and rows and rows of shelves, stacked higher than seemed humanly possible, made it one of the most impressive buildings in the SF headquarters. But I'd grown so used to the structure that I didn't give it a second glance.

I cruised to Mallory, one of the gargoyle scholars who frequented the SF, and I had to duck when one of the library's floating shelves shot past me.

Each shelf, around thirty feet tall, floated above the floor. There were hundreds of them, and they all swayed and moved in the air, as though they had life forces of their own.

I prowled to the quietly working gargoyle. "Master Mallory, have you found anything new?"

Mallory's large pointed ears twitched, and he gave me a sympathetic smile, revealing a mouth filled with sharp teeth. "I'm afraid not, Major Jamison, not since our last report to you."

Another shelf shot past us, skating five feet above the floor before it shot upward to suspend eighty feet in the air. Since Master Mallory only stood at around four-foot tall, wearing an earthy-brown-colored woolen robe, the floating shelves didn't bother him.

"Have you checked every single scroll in the library?"

"We have, sir. Alarus is double checking them now." He pointed a curved claw upward. On one of the shelves, Alarus dangled from a ladder as he plucked scrolls, tucking them under his stubby arm. "Neither of us were able to find what you seek. I'm afraid our library contains even less on the Safrinite comet than what you discovered in the fae lands." His large dark eyes blinked in a face that looked like stone. "We'll continue checking, just in case we missed anything in the first round."

I placed my hands on my hips, anger roiling inside me. I was running out of time. Avery was down to fifty percent life force. Not even two weeks had passed since the Safrinite comet, yet her magic was gone, and her life was hanging on by a thread.

It didn't help that come nightfall, the gargoyles' search would cease when they returned to stone.

I needed to get to Bulgaria.

"Report to me if you find anything, anything at all." As much as my irritation rode high, I knew that Alarus and Mallory were doing their best. "And thank you for your time and work."

Mallory bobbed his chin. "Of course, sir."

I did a one-eighty and hurried back toward the library's entrance doors. I whipped my tablet out, looking at the message Wes had sent me when I'd been with Avery in the healing center.

The courts sentencing just arrived. They've given us three gargoyles in Bulgaria. Nicholas Fitzpatrick is aware. He's organizing them now. You may leave when you're ready. A portal key is waiting in your apartment.

I glowered when I saw Nicholas's name again. That bastard could rot in hell for all I cared, but in the next breath, I quelled my anger. I needed Nicholas for this task. How I felt about him didn't matter. I'd have to play nice.

I typed in a message to Wes.

Heading to my apartment now, then will be leaving. No new findings in our library as of 1600.

I shoved my tablet back into my pocket. Since I'd been granted a portal key, once I grabbed my bags, I'd be in Bulgaria instantly. I clenched my hands into fists, but they still shook.

Fifty percent. Avery was down to fifty percent.

We were running out of time.

With a burst of speed, I shoved through the exterior doors and blurred toward my barracks. The afternoon sun was hidden behind clouds, a cool nip in the air. It did little to soothe the hot swirling magic beneath my skin. My wolf also wasn't helping. He'd been prowling and pacing ever since we'd received the message from Wes.

And on top of that, within the hour, I would be half a world away from my mate while Avery's life force continued to drain from her. My worst nightmare was that she'd die while I was gone, that I wouldn't be able to find a cure in time, and that I'd never see her again.

Swallowing the fear that crept up my throat, I rounded the corner on the sidewalk to my barracks, then drew up short when a familiar lilac scent hit me.

My nostrils flared, my entire body going rigid. I whipped my gaze around. I knew she was near, but I didn't see her.

Continuing on, I rushed the remaining distance to my barracks, and there she was.

It was like a blow to my chest when I spotted her standing near the entrance to my barracks'.

She stood in the corner, hidden from view unless one was walking directly toward the main door. A bag sat at her feet, and her face was a mask of uncertainty.

I growled, unable to help it. Anytime she looked worried, scared, unsure, or anything apart from happy and content, my wolf and I grew irritated.

"Avery," I said when I reached her. "What's wrong? I thought you were going to see Charlotte and Eliza?"

She jumped, obviously not detecting my silent approach. I placed a hand on her arm, needing to touch her and wanting to soothe her startled look.

The second I made contact, her bunched shoulders loosened. Unlike the previous weeks, she didn't flinch from my proximity. A surge of relief raced through me.

"I just came from the party Charlotte and Eliza are at. While I was there I got a call from the Institute." She twisted her hands, so I stepped closer.

"What happened?"

“They learned of my test score and what’s happened to me from my parents. Until today, they didn’t know about the Safrinite comet. I never told them during my weekly check-ins.” She shook her head. “I don’t know why I’m sad about it, I mean, I *knew* this was coming, but it’s official now. They said that with a failed test and this unusual ailment plaguing me, they can’t admit me.” She gave a brave smile, but it didn’t hide the devastation in her eyes.

“Avery.” My arms were around her and pulling her toward me before I could stop myself.

But she came readily. Her arms wrapped around my waist as she buried her head in my chest.

“It’s one piece of bad news after another. Sheesh, what did I do to piss karma off?” She laughed softly, but it rang hollow.

I pushed a lock of dark hair behind her ear, my heart thumping with an uncontrollable need to protect and cherish her. My wolf snarled. His agitation only made mine worse. We’d been failing all day at keeping our mate safe and happy.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said when she pulled back to look at me. “I know how much you wanted it. Fuck, Avery. I’m so sorry.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault. It’s nobody’s fault, besides that damned comet.” She shook her head, her eyes staying dry, and I realized at that moment that she was coming to terms with everything, that she wasn’t going to cry about it anymore. My heart swelled at her inner show of strength. She truly had a soul of steel.

But her next words made my blood run cold.

“Wyatt, I can’t keep doing this.”

“You can’t keep doing . . . what?” I asked slowly.

Her gaze lowered to the ground. “Stay here, waiting for the inevitable. I don’t want to sit in my apartment, or hang out idly with my parents, while hoping that you and other SF members can figure out what’s wrong with me and fix it.”

I released the breath I’d been holding. She wasn’t running from *me*. She wasn’t here to end things with me. The force of my relief made my hands shake.

But she was running from reality.

“Babe,” I said softly. “You have to give me time. I can’t fix this without more time.”

Her lips parted the second I uttered the soft plea, then they lifted in a small smile. “You’ve never called me that before.”

My chest rumbled when her scent took on a new hint of musk. I stepped closer to her, drawing her near again. Goosebumps sprouted on her skin when I dipped my head down.

“I’ll call you whatever you want as long as you’re mine.”

She shivered, and I knew I was getting off track. I needed to get moving. I had to get to Bulgaria. I had to find her a cure, but I couldn’t until I’d gotten her settled somewhere safe, until she felt okay.

“Do you want to stay at my place?” I asked quietly. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

She shook her head, and her finger trailed up my chest. Damn if that feeling wasn’t distracting.

“No, I don’t want to stay here.”

My brow creased as I racked my brain for a better solution. “A hotel then? Another commander’s residence? Where do you want to stay? Just tell me. I’ll make it happen.”

Her lips curved up more. “Wyatt, don’t you get it? I want to stay with *you*.” She waved toward her bag. “I’m not going to sit around while you all work to find answers. If I only have days, or a week, or however long fate has given me to live, I want to spend it with you while we both hunt for answers. I’m coming with you to Bulgaria.”

Chapter 14

~ *EVERY* ~

Wyatt grinned, and the excitement his expression held told me he would let me join him.

“I’ve got to get permission from Wes first. He’ll need to get clearance from the Bulgarian library. It may take an hour, but I’m confident he can do it. You’re the reason we’re going there, and you’re technically still an SF member so clearance shouldn’t be difficult.”

“Really? Then all I need to do is call my parents and tell them about the change of plan, and I should touch base with Charlotte and Eliza too.” I quickly explained that my parents were currently en route to Idaho. “They can probably change course and meet me in Bulgaria, so once I talk to them, I’m ready to go.”

He threaded his fingers through mine before sweeping me to him and devouring me in a plundering kiss.

I was breathless by the time he pulled back.

“You’ve just made me the happiest wolf on earth. The thought of leaving you again has been killing me.”

My toes curled, and a flush crept up my neck. For the first time since the Safrinite comet, a hopeful smile streaked across my face. “I want to be with you too.”

His grip tightened, his throat bobbing. For a moment, he just stared at me, his irises pools of liquid gold.

After another moment, he cleared his throat, his voice rough when he said, “Come on, let’s head upstairs so I can grab my bags and sort this all out.” He tugged me inside up to his apartment.

Once there, I called my roommates first. Not surprisingly, both were more than surprised when I explained what had been going on with me since the Safrinite comet.

They put me on speaker phone, and given the music that played in the background, I knew they were still at the party.

“Hang on,” Charlotte said. “I’m going to move us into the hall.”

A moment passed, and the music grew fainter.

“Okay, we’re somewhere private now. So you’re really going to the Bulgarian library because of what the comet did to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, goodness me, Avery,” Eliza said. “This is the most devastating news. I so wish you had confided in us earlier so we could have assisted you in whatever emotional or physical support you needed.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “I should have. I’m sorry that I didn’t, but I was hoping none of this would amount to anything.”

“So your magic is truly gone?” Charlotte sighed. “That would explain what happened in your final test. Shit, girl. That’s awful. I’m so sorry. What can we do?”

“Nothing, other than keeping your fingers crossed and hoping for the best. But thanks for listening.”

“We are most happy to listen at any time,” Eliza replied. “Please keep us up to date on any new

findings.”

“Ditto to what she said,” Charlotte added. “And seriously, girl, if you need anything, anything at all, just let us know.”

“I will. Love you guys.”

“Love you too,” Charlotte echoed, as Eliza said, “I carry the deepest affection for you also.”

I managed to keep the tears back when we promised to speak soon and then hung up. Behind me, Wyatt continued talking to Wes, so I rang my parents.

They answered readily, and I told them about my change of plan. They said they would change course and meet us in Bulgaria.

When that call ended, I stood in Wyatt’s kitchen and stuffed my phone into my pocket. *Gods. Talk about intense conversations.*

Wyatt at last finished his call with Wes and raised an eyebrow. “You okay?”

I managed a shaky nod. He drifted closer and pulled me into a hug.

I sank into him, relishing his feel. A hug was exactly what I needed.

“Do you need a minute, or do you prefer going?”

“Let’s go. Charlotte and Eliza now know what’s going on with me, and my parents said they’ll change course and portal hop to Bulgaria instead of coming here. There’s nothing left for me to do.” My hands were trembling so I gripped him harder. “So we’re really going to do this, huh? Search that massive library together?”

He pulled me tighter to him. “With the help from some gargoyles. But yes, we’ll figure this out *together.*”

I laughed at the low grumble of satisfaction that filled his chest. I would have sworn that if he could purr, he’d be purring right now. “So is everything ready to go on your end?”

He nodded and loosened his arm from around my waist. “Wes knows you’re joining me. He’s arranged to have the rest of your belongings packed and stored in my apartment for your return.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead, his scent lingering around me. “By the time we get back, you’ll be healthy again, and all of this will have felt like a bad dream.”

A glow lit the halo around his irises. One thing I was coming to learn about my commander—he didn’t accept defeat. Like, at all.

“Okay, should we go then?”

He held out his hand.

We picked up our bags in our free hands, then Wyatt slipped the portal key between our interlocked fingers. He whispered the spell to activate it, and the air spun around us, dipping and swaying, as if we’d been propelled by a rocket blast through a portal door.

I swallowed my yelp of surprise. It was only the second time I’d used a portal key to transfer, since I didn’t count that jump from the fae lands when I’d been unconscious following the comet.

Wind screeched through my ears, and my grip on Wyatt tightened. I was terrified of losing him in this void and ending up somewhere entirely displaced.

But just as quickly as the plummeting sensations and the screams of the portal winds had started—they stopped.

“Avery?” Wyatt said softly. “We’re here.”

I pried my eyes open, not realizing I’d squeezed them shut, then gasped.

We stood in a vast hallway in a large, dim, and ancient-looking building. Huge towering columns rose up around us as a marble floor sprawled beneath our toes. An endless hall stretched down either side of us, like a stone walkway in a tomb long forgotten.

“Is this the library?” I whispered.

It was dark and still. Heaviness blanketed the air, as if we’d crept into a giant’s cave as he slumbered in the back and disturbing him would create an unwelcome response.

“It’s one of the hallways between libraries,” Wyatt replied. “Nobody can portal transfer directly into the libraries. The closest you can arrive are the hallways if you have pre-approved clearance to breach the wards.”

“Wow.” I gaped, wide-eyed. Even though I’d traveled the world and had seen my fair share of wonders, the Bulgarian libraries were not something I’d been privy to—not even their hallways.

One required special admittance to be allowed here since these buildings weren’t tourist venues. They were heavily guarded fortresses cloaked in iron-fused wards and ancient spells. It was impossible to break into them. Nobody had managed that feat since the supernatural war of 1178 when the wards had been weakened by the death of the libraries’ head sorcerer.

I pivoted in a slow circle, taking in the faint scent of anise and thyme—herbs commonly used to magically preserve parchment. Even here, outside the actual libraries, I detected that magical scent. “Where is everyone?”

“Probably sleeping. They’re nine hours ahead of us in this part of Europe.”

I nodded, wondering where we were supposed to go. Strangely, I felt rather tired even though it was only late afternoon back in Idaho, but I’d had an emotionally draining day, so I wasn’t overly surprised.

I squinted into the darkness down the halls. “Is anyone expecting—”

“I see you survived the portal transfer in one piece,” a silky voice purred from behind us.

I whirled around just as Wyatt’s jaw clenched.

A vampire sauntered toward us. Wavy blond hair hung to his shoulders, smoldering blue eyes regarded me with delight, and a mischievous smile tilted his lips up.

“Nicholas?” I said. “Is that you?” I hadn’t seen the vampire since we’d first met three months ago in the SF’s cafeteria.

“It most certainly is, Ms. Meyers.” His tone dropped seductively.

Wyatt gritted his teeth as Nicholas Fitzpatrick glided our way.

The vampire looked as I remembered him, only today he was wearing slim-fitting tailored black pants, what looked like expensive Italian-leather loafers, and a crisp button-up shirt open at the throat. Everything about his attire reeked of money and was just foreign enough to let me know we weren’t in Idaho anymore.

“It’s been a while since I last saw you,” I remarked.

“Indeed, it has. Too long if you ask me.”

Wyatt’s jaw locked even tighter, and with a flush, I realized he knew how aroused I’d been that night Nicholas and I first met. Not because I’d *wanted* the vampire, but because that was how vampires affected most women.

I’d been in my first week of training then. Nicholas had been visiting the SF following a trial in the fae lands. We’d met in the SF’s cafeteria and dined together. It had been a memorable dinner, mostly because my response to him had been rather embarrassing.

My cheeks warmed when I recalled the vampire’s blatant sexual interest in me and my body’s intrinsic reaction to him. Vampires and sex went hand in hand. Everyone knew that, but it was still mortifying when one got caught up in their thrall.

But now, Wyatt felt that I was his mate . . .

Nicholas took my hand, as a warning growl rumbled in Wyatt’s chest. But Nicholas ignored him

and brought my hand to his lips. “I will say that this is a most pleasant surprise. I couldn’t believe it when I received the message that you’d be accompanying Major Jamison, but let me say that you look even more beautiful than I remember.”

My lady bits throbbed despite my effort to control the reflex.

Wyatt’s nostrils flared, and I shot him an apologetic look, but the air still crackled with energy as my commander looked ready to murder the vamp.

I clamped my thighs together as the feel of the vampire’s cool lips finally left my skin. A blush rose in my cheeks, heating my face. My body’s excitement made guilt flood me, but I could tell from Wyatt’s expression that he one hundred percent blamed my arousal on Nicholas.

Which was rightfully who it should fall on. I couldn’t stop my desire. If I could, I would, but I was as hopeless to resist a vampire’s charms as any human—probably even more so because I basically *was* human now.

I frowned when that thought struck me because I’d just portal transferred with Wyatt. Humans couldn’t portal transfer, not without strong magic from a talented sorcerer assisting them. Yet I’d managed to do it just fine even without my magic. And, come to think of it, I could also detect the magically enchanted scent of anise and thyme. A human wouldn’t be able to smell that either.

My brow furrowed more. So what did that mean? That I was still magical, somehow? Even if I didn’t have magic? Was it the comet’s power that allowed me to do those things?

I didn’t have a chance to ponder it further. Nicholas’s finger grazed the skin on my hand like a silky ribbon, my core throbbing again, before Wyatt snarled and his hand shot out, shoving the vampire away from me. “Enough already!”

Nicholas’s face became a mask of innocence. “Really, Major Jamison,” he said as he straightened his shirt. “I was just saying hello.”

“It was a rather long hello, even for you. And I suggest that you remember that Avery Meyers is *my* guest,” Wyatt bit out. “Which means you don’t touch her.”

My commander’s knuckles cracked as he stepped closer to the vamp. I could practically feel the rage simmering under his skin.

A nervous thrill spiraled down my spine, but then I shook my head. It was crazy that I was getting so wrapped up in Wyatt’s possessive behavior. He was a wolf, it was to be expected, but I’d be lying to myself if I said I didn’t enjoy the territorial gleam in his eye.

And seeing Wyatt like this made my core throb on an entirely new level, but this time it had nothing to do with the vampire and was entirely about my commander.

Wyatt’s nostrils flared, his gaze cutting to mine. But he must have sensed that my arousal was for him, because his jaw loosened, if only a little. Still, he placed an arm around my shoulders, drawing me close. He effectively stamped *mine* on me with that gesture.

“Now that we’ve all become reacquainted, shall we discuss our endeavors?” Nicholas clasped his hands behind his back and acted as if he didn’t have an alpha werewolf glaring down at him while possessively claiming his mate. “Unfortunately, since it’s the middle of the night, I’m afraid all of the gargoyles are sleeping.” He waved toward the ceiling of the long hallways.

My gaze drifted upward. Hundreds of stone gargoyles perched atop the mighty columns. I twirled around in a slow circle, peering into the darkness.

The hallways stretched forever, and gargoyles lined the top of *all* of the hundreds of columns.

“So many. Are there really four hundred and six gargoyles employed here?” My curious mind buzzed with all of the things I could learn. While I knew the basics of the Bulgarian libraries, so much of these gigantic monoliths were shrouded in secrecy.

Nicholas raised a finger. “Four hundred and seven actually. We just added one last week who showed advanced aptitude for hunting out myths and legends regarding the sea creatures of the fae realm. Now, I’m one of twenty representatives that work with the gargoyles. You’ll be working directly with me during your stay here. You may also see other staff in the halls, but if you have questions or concerns, I’ll be your contact.”

“Speaking of work, should we get to work?” Wyatt’s terse comment cut through Nicholas’s idle tone. “Time is of the essence, or did you not get that memo?”

I frowned at the growing tension.

“Of course.” Nicholas’s lips thinned. “But first, I shall show you to your rooms so that you may drop off your bags. Then we can venture to the libraries. You won’t have the gargoyles to assist you until the sun rises. However, I can show you a few of the scrolls that they found in anticipation of your visit.”

My heart thumped. They’d already found something?

Wyatt seemed of similar mind. He gave a curt nod, his feet already moving down the hall as he pulled me with him. “Fine. I want to get to work right away.”

Nicholas bowed mockingly. “Whatever you wish, commander.”

The vamp glided ahead of us, and we followed him down one of the long corridors. Near the end, two huge ancient-looking doors waited. They had to be around twenty feet tall, with arched tips, and door handles at least three feet long. I wondered how they were opened. They had to each weigh a ton.

“That’s the entrance to the Sacramentum Library,” Nicholas said with a wave. “It’s one of the five ancient libraries in this underground monolith.”

My jaw dropped. “We’re underground?”

Nicholas’s lips curved up like a cat ready to pounce. “Oh yes, my dear. You just stick by me and I’ll show you all of the secret delicacies that can only be found in this wonderfully historic city.”

I glanced at Wyatt to see if he was as enthralled as I was, but he was looking daggers at Nicholas again. The vampire had treaded closer to my side, only inches from touching me.

I cleared my throat and took a step back. Already that unbidden coiling tension was forming in my core as Nicholas did nothing to hide his sexual interest. A part of me wondered if he was doing it on purpose, to get a rise out of my commander.

Wyatt watched him like a hawk. I imagined that his reliance on Nicholas opening the libraries to us was the only thing saving the vampire from having his head ripped off.

Nicholas seemed to know that, too, because he winked slyly at me.

I gave him a meager smile in return, but it didn’t stop my interest in learning more about the libraries. Even though I’d grown up in various countries and had seen more venerable buildings than I could count, I never tired of their entrancing history. And I had a feeling none of my previous ventures would hold a candle to the secrets held here.

I slid closer to Wyatt, hoping my deliberate attempt to distance myself from the vampire would put Wyatt more at ease. But my commander kept scowling at the vamp, and I swear the energy was rising off him again.

A pang of longing filled me. If I had my magic, I would have been able to feel the energy emitting from my commander, but as things were, I couldn’t feel a thing, at least nothing more than a human could detect.

“Why the long face?” Nicholas asked me as he turned toward a massive spiraling stone staircase.

Wyatt placed his hand on my back, his touch eliciting a bolt of pleasure from me. I knew he'd sensed my melancholy, probably scenting it.

I forced a smile at Nicholas. "Nothing, I think I'm just tired."

Concern instantly lit Wyatt's eyes, and the heat from his palm grew. "Do we need a healing witch?"

"No, I'm just tired really, that's all. It's been a long day."

Wyatt kept his hand on my lower back as we ascended the stairs. The tall, winding staircase was filled with shadows as large candles flickered from sconces on the wall, as if a ghostly breeze disturbed them. It was only then that I realized there were no electric lights anywhere.

"Is it always this dark down here?"

Nicholas shook his head as we reached the next floor. "Not during daytime hours. Even though there are no windows here, there are enchanted fae lights that adorn the corridors, hallways, and libraries." With a smirk, he added, "I have to say, as a vampire, I much prefer them to natural daylight streaming in through windows."

I laughed, which got another glower from Wyatt directed entirely at the vampire.

"Visitor chambers are at the end of this hall," Nicholas stated as we traipsed down another stone walkway. "Meals will be brought to you three times a day. You're not allowed to venture between libraries unaccompanied, nor are you allowed to leave your rooms during nighttime hours. Such behavior is forbidden, and I'm afraid I cannot make any exceptions, not even for someone as lovely as you, Ms. Meyers." His gaze moved leisurely down my frame, fixing on my boobs as the heat burned in his eyes.

Another rush of lust shot through me, and damn if it didn't make me mortified. I had *no* defenses against this vamp and he knew it.

Wyatt's nostrils flared, and he grew so tense I feared his knuckles would cut through his skin from his clenched fists. "Just show us to our room, will you?" he barked.

Nicholas smiled before giving me another once-over. "Of course. This way." He continued on. "Your door is the second to last on the right. Now remember, if you're found wandering the halls or trying to gain access to the libraries without me, your representative, you will be instantly banned. Let that be fair warning." He slowed until he glided alongside me, then playfully nudged my arm. A snarl tore from Wyatt, but Nicholas ignored him when he said to me, "I would hate to have to escort you off the premises. It's such a tiresome climb to street level."

I flashed him a pacifying smile even though I was getting tired of his games, but just as my lips stretched, another wave of fatigue rolled through me. Damn. I really was tired. Something told me I was going to need coffee if I wanted to join Wyatt right away in the libraries.

"Here we are," Nicholas said when we reached the end of the hall. He pulled out a key from his pocket. It was four inches long, carved from smooth metal, and held an unfamiliar symbol—a human-headed lion—at the end of it.

"What's that symbol?" I asked pointing at it.

"It's a magical heraldry. This is an enchantment key from the twelfth century. And this symbol is spelled with *lysenteeth*. Whoever uses this key is automatically tracked throughout the libraries. It's similar to the SF in that regard. We monitor everybody's movements here, unless you're a working gargoyle or someone such as myself, a gargoyle representative. Only we can frequent these buildings unencumbered."

He handed the key to Wyatt, then frowned. "Oh dear. I'm afraid I only reserved one room and only have one key. I didn't realize you would be coming along until last minute, Ms. Meyers. No

matter. I can find a room for you. In fact, there's one free near my chambers. If you'll just follow me while Wyatt gets settled."

Wyatt's arm shot out, ensnaring me around the waist. He leveled Nicholas with a potent stare promising violence. "We only need one room. She stays with *me*."

Nicholas arched an eyebrow at the possessive growl from my commander. "I see," the vampire replied. "And this arrangement suits you, Ms. Meyers?"

I brought a hand to my forehead, a slight headache brewing behind my eyes. "Yes, it does. It was kind of a last-minute decision that I join Wyatt—I mean, Major Jamison. Sorry about that."

Nicholas pouted prettily. "No need for apologies, even if it would be delightful to have you near my chambers. But regardless, I'm most pleased that you could accompany him, even if you're sharing a room. Now, we'll just set your things inside, then we can venture to the libraries to begin combing through the records. If you would insert the key, Major Jamison."

Nicholas clasped his hands behind his back, and it felt as though the floor shifted. I swayed and brought a hand to the wall to steady myself.

Wyatt's arm tightened on my waist. "Avery?"

Another rush of dizziness swept over me. "I'm sorry. I'm just so tired—"

The key clanked to the floor just as Wyatt's other arm shot out. The next thing I knew, air was rushing around me as Wyatt's arms cushioned my fall.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 15

~ WYATT ~

“Avery?” I called frantically, shaking her slightly. Her face was pale, and she lay like death in my arms.

Nicholas stood at my side, gaping down at me like a useless fish.

“Dammit, get a healing witch!”

Nicholas kicked into action, disappearing in a blur of vampire speed as I held my mate in my arms. I felt for her pulse. A fluttery thread told me her heart still beat, but her respirations were shallow.

“Avery? Avery!” Blood pounded through my ears, and my wolf howled inside me. I shook her again, but her limbs were limp, her complexion pallid. “Fuck!”

I felt as inept as a child as I cradled her to me. Even though all SF commanders were trained in medical basics, what plagued Avery was beyond my skill set.

My heart thundered harder as the sickly realization of what was happening squeezed my insides. Fifty percent.

Avery’s life force had been at fifty percent at lunchtime, *after* it had dropped thirty percent from this morning.

“I’m so sorry, babe.” I rocked her against my chest. “I shouldn’t have let you come.”

Rage rippled through me at my carelessness. I’d been so desperate to find answers and have her beside me that I didn’t consider whether or not allowing her to travel was a wise move.

She should be back at the SF right now, with her parents and friends, with the healing center only minutes away. Not locked in an underground tomb as I frantically searched for a way to save her.

I blinked, and Nicholas was at my side again. An elderly-looking woman was cradled awkwardly in his arms before he set her down.

Milky irises stared at me as her hunched spine tilted her perpetually forward. With cracking joints, she kneeled to the ground, Nicholas assisting her.

“This is Hana. She’s a witch and seer,” Nicholas said. “She’s trained in the healing arts.”

Hana laid a palm across Avery’s forehead, her unseeing eyes staring down the distant dark hall. “A young witch who’s not well.” She frowned, her sagging skin hanging from her thin face. “Deep magic clouds her. It’s sucking the life from her.”

My blood turned cold, then I realized this witch had correctly diagnosed Avery without the advanced, enchanted machinery that was used at the SF’s healing center.

“Do you know what’s wrong with her? Do you know how to cure her?”

The witch removed her hand, her skin paper-thin and lined with wrinkles. “Not even I can save her. Only the Gods can.”

“No! I’ll find a way.”

Her withered face gave me a sad smile, then with popping joints she gripped Nicholas’s hand as he pulled her upright. “You must find a way soon. She doesn’t have much time left.”

My stomach bottomed out, as if someone had punched me in the gut. “What does she need right now? How do I keep her alive?”

The elderly witch's eyes continued staring vacantly over my head as she waved toward the door to our chamber. "Let her rest. Her energy is focused on sustaining her life right now. She shouldn't be taxed more than necessary."

I swallowed my snarl at how foolish I'd been, then snatched the key from the floor and was at the door inserting it before the blind witch could blink.

Magic shimmered over me when the enchanted key clicked in the lock. A tracking spell had just been placed on both me and Avery, since I cradled her in my arms.

The door swung open on creaky, ancient hinges. Candlelight flickered, illuminating the massive bedroom chambers.

"I'll help with your bags." With uncharacteristic sympathy, Nicholas grabbed our belongings.

I grunted a thanks as I strode into the room.

A huge canopied bed dominated the vast chambers. It was larger than my king-sized bed in my apartment, and was carved from thick mahogany wood. Intricate swirls and designs had been artfully etched into the headboard, and large pillars held a canopy of gauzy curtains aloft. A mountain of pillows and thick blankets covered the bed.

"Nighttime can be cool in these subterranean chambers." Nicholas pulled back the covers, and I laid Avery down. "I can request heated sheets. Our cleaning staff is used to enchanting our guests' beds when needed."

"Please," came my hoarse reply. I startled, realizing it was the first time I'd ever spoken politely to the vampire.

Nicholas dipped his head.

Shuffling sounded along the stone floor when Hana approached. Stringy gray hair hung from the healer's shoulders as she shifted closer to Avery. "I can make a brew for her. It should warm her and allow her to rest."

"Will she wake again? Ever?" I barely got the choked words out.

Hana laid a palm across Avery's forehead. My mate's face was still, her eyes unmoving beneath her lids. The only hint of life lay in her fluttering pulse and nearly silent breath.

"I believe so," Hana finally said, removing her hand.

My balled fists loosened, then my fingers began tapping on my thighs in a frantic beat. No time. I had *no* time. I knew I needed to get to work. My mate's life was literally being sucked away before my eyes.

But for the life of me, I couldn't leave her.

I sank onto my knees at her side and pulled her cool hand into mine. Tenderly, I lifted it to my lips and placed a soft kiss on the back of it. Her skin reeked of the vampire from where *he'd* kissed her earlier. My wolf snarled, and rage built up inside me anew.

As if sensing my rising wave of fury, the witch placed her hand upon my forearm. My muscles clenched, tension coiling inside me like a snake ready to strike.

"He is not your enemy, only death is." She dropped her hand, her gnarled knuckles cutting sharply through her skin. "I can stay with your mate, wolf. No harm will come to her."

Nicholas stiffened. "Mate?"

I growled in his direction. "Yes. She's my mate. *My* mate." I let my wolf shine in my eyes, letting Nicholas know I would challenge him or any other male who dared try to take Avery from me.

Nicholas swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. Surprise flashed in his eyes before his face was once again the portrait of bored disdain. "Well, that certainly makes things more interesting."

"You need to go." Hana took Avery's hand from mine and placed it under the sheet. "She doesn't

have much time left.”

In a blink, I was on my feet and at the door. I stuffed the enchanted key into my pocket and leveled Nicholas with a heavy stare. “Take me to the library. Show me what the gargoyles found.”



Despite the fifty-foot-tall ceiling, the air in the ancient library felt still and thick. Metallic-scented wards coated every surface, nook, and crevice. Not a breeze fluttered the pages in the massive leather-bound books on the table. None of the scrolls’ parchment crackled when I unrolled them across the scarred oak surface, and the air seemed to stand still, as if the gaseous atoms were suspended unmoving, causing one to wade through the air like swimming through water.

It was as though the library itself swallowed all sound and time, preserving everything it touched, like a caress from the fountain of youth.

The only noises in these immense rooms were the sounds of my breathing and the steady thump of my heart.

I hadn’t seen any other staff or patrons. Everyone was asleep.

Nicholas stayed perpetually silent. Since his heart no longer beat, and breathing was unnecessary for him, he sat in that frozenly-still way that only vampires could master, as if he personified death in his elegant clothes and casually crossed legs.

“This scroll speaks of the Safrinite comet as if it’s more than a celestial event.” I frowned and leaned forward in my seat more, my forearms resting on the table. “It says the comet first appeared two thousand years ago and caused more than just a rejuvenation of magic in the fae realm. It says it created life too.”

Nicholas thumbed the edge of the scroll, his lips downturned. “I found that surprising as well. Master Godric showed this to me shortly before you arrived. He only discovered it this evening. It’s one of our oldest texts. We’re lucky it’s stood the test of time.”

I growled, wishing it hadn’t taken the courts so long to grant us three of the Bulgarian gargoyles. If they hadn’t, we could have had this information a week ago.

“But what does that mean?” I ground my teeth together, trying to understand.

“That I can’t tell you.”

I picked up the crisp new sheet again that detailed the information about the comet. Nicholas had given it to me when we first arrived in the library. It contained a translation of what was found before the gargoyles returned to stone for the night.

On this one sheet, the Bulgarian gargoyles had already found more information about the comet in one hour of work than I’d been able to find in over a week earth time, or a month fae lands’ time, with the help of both fae lands *and* SF gargoyles.

No wonder these gargoyles were world renowned.

Thankfully, the gargoyles had also translated the findings since the contents in the books and scrolls were in languages from a time long ago and written in tongues that were no longer spoken.

Nicholas shifted slightly on the chair beside me, perusing through one of the tomes, searching for any further mention of the comet. The one advantage to having a vampire gargoyle representative was that he didn’t require sleep. Since Nicholas was already dead, sleep was merely a habit he had probably kept from his human lifetime, yet if he chose to, he didn’t need to sleep at all, which meant he could assist me twenty-four hours a day.

Nicholas stilled, then abruptly sat straight up in his chair. “Look at this here.” He pointed to a line on the page. Its swirly, faint words were illuminated in the dim candlelight. The script was in a

language I didn't recognize, containing symbols and letters lost to the ages.

Nicholas tapped the sentence. "This is from an ancient seer, renowned for predicting the future, and it sounds like a prophecy. Roughly translated, it says, *The Safrinite comet shall birth a new light, their fate shall reside in their starlight kissed plight, their heir shall be born in the moonlight aligned night, so that we may raise and attest our predestined might.*" Nicholas frowned, his blond eyebrows drawing together. "It even rhymes when translated. How ironic."

I shifted, the chair groaning under my weight. "Are you sure your translation's correct?"

He gave me a withered glance. "I've spent three hundred years working in these libraries. I can assure you, I've accurately learned an ancient language or two."

I sighed heavily, then realized he had no reason to lie to me. "So what the hell does that mean? Starlight? Moonlight born? And what does fate and predestined might have to do with anything?"

Nicholas sighed. "I don't know. However, I did see something interesting here that echoes these new findings." Nicholas retrieved a sheet from between one of the ancient tomes. "It talks about the comet being a giver of life, perhaps in reference to what the other one says, about it being moonlit born. Although what *that* means, I'm not entirely sure, since from what I've seen it does nothing but take life."

My breaths quickened when I pictured my mate back in our chamber. Hana had promised to contact me if Avery awoke or her condition changed. It'd been hours since I'd left her, and I hadn't heard anything.

I cradled my face in my hands, biting down my frustration. With a firm slap on my cheeks, I lowered my arms back to my sides. "You're right. It takes life. It doesn't give it, and we don't have much time left. You saw Avery. She's dying."

Nicholas's lips tightened. "The gargoyles shall awake soon. It's almost sunrise. When they do, they may be able to provide clarification. Speaking of sunrise, did you want to sleep before they begin working? You have around an hour."

My jaw loosened at his unassuming question. For a brief moment, I found myself feeling thankful toward him. Nicholas had been nothing but accommodating since we'd arrived, although I could do without his flirtation toward my mate. My wolf snarled in agreeance at that thought.

"No. I don't need to sleep."

"In that case, I shall ring for food."

Standing gracefully from his chair, Nicholas meandered to a bell hanging near the door. He rang it once, and a tray magically appeared on the table beside it.

He sauntered back to where I sat and set the tray beside me. A loaf of dense bread, a pound of hard cheese, and a bowl of pickled beetroot graced the platter. Next to it, a large mug of tea waited, already brewed. Given the glittering steam and aroma rising from the tea, I knew it was enchanted.

"What's in that?"

Nicholas shrugged and dipped back onto his seat. "Just something to help you stay awake, if you should need it."

I grunted, narrowing my gaze in suspicion.

He rolled his eyes. "Really, Major Jamison. Do you honestly think I'd poison you? It's truly just a brewed concoction from the kitchen that we give to most of our visitors since they are usually here for a short time."

While I still didn't trust the bastard, he had a point. If he did poison me, he would be staked by the supernatural courts within the week. And even though he was an arrogant prick, I didn't think he was suicidal. I grabbed the tea and gulped it down.

It burned my throat but quickly settled in my belly. Within seconds, the magic was swimming through my bloodstream, igniting my nerves, and sharpening my senses. “Thanks.”

He merely inclined his head.

I grabbed a slice of the bread and threw a thick wedge of cheese over it. I barely tasted the food as I wolfed it down. I didn’t even like beetroot, but I ate that too.

Within minutes, the food was gone. It had been enough to feed a small family, but if I wanted to stay awake and work through the coming days, I would need to eat often and regularly to fuel my high metabolism.

We hunched over the texts again as the candles flickered around us. Before the gargoyles had turned to stone for the night, they’d left several texts they hadn’t been able to peruse yet, but thought may contain information.

Nicholas helped me, and together we slowly combed through everything. He’d already told me what words to look for, even though I didn’t speak the language, but at least I could recognize the swirls and symbols that I’d committed to memory.

“Any luck?” I asked him. So far, we’d only found three additional references in the large tomes, but according to Nicholas when he translated them, they contained more cryptic references to starlight, moon born, and fate.

None of it made sense.

Nicholas pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, although I’m only a quarter of my way through this text. There may be something in the latter pages.”

His declaration cut through the thick enchanted air. As soon as he finished speaking, the air grew heavy again. It had been like that all night. Every time we spoke, the air moved sluggishly, as if parting reluctantly for our words. The magic was so strong here I could taste it, that overpowering anise and thyme flavor prickling my tongue.

But the potent magic that coated everything in this room like thick caramel kept these ancient texts preserved. I couldn’t help but wonder if it preserved people, too, but then I remembered how old Hana looked. Maybe not.

“How long has Hana been working here?” I asked as I flipped the page, my eyes like a hawk on each line.

Nicholas cocked his head. “Longer than me. I think around four hundred years.”

My search paused as I looked at Nicholas in surprise. “Is she a vampire?” She’d only smelled like a witch, a heavy scent of marigolds surrounding her.

“No, she’s not a vampire. She’s a mixed breed, both witch and seer, but she’s been blessed with a long life because she never leaves these walls.”

“So the magic *does* preserve everything here.” I abruptly straightened, an idea coming to me like lightning. “Avery needs to be here, inside this room. It could help her.”

Nicholas arched an eyebrow.

I pushed my chair back, already prowling to the main door. “If the magic in here can preserve life, maybe it will give her more time.”

Nicholas’s eyes widened, then sparkled, as he glided to my side. “Why, Major Jamison, I do believe you’re smarter than you look.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Is that the best insult you have for me? Do you really think you’re the first supernatural to believe werewolves are nothing more than mindless brutes?”

He shrugged delicately. “You can’t blame me for the jab when I’ve been waiting all night to strike.”

A low growl rumbled in my chest, reminding me why I detested this man, yet I couldn't stop my reluctant chuckle.

“But as you said, bringing Avery here may help her condition. I'll have to join you. As you know, you're not allowed in the halls unaccompanied.”

“Then lead the way.”

But just as Nicholas pulled the door open, a vibrating sensation shook the library's walls.

I tensed and slowly looked up. The vibrations were shaking everything in the library.

Nicholas only smiled, his lips parting just enough to reveal a sliver of fang. “Ah, they're beginning to awaken.”

Creaking stone and loud yawns filled the corridors outside of the library's ancient doors.

“Those are the gargoyles?” I'd never actually witnessed a gargoyle waking up in the morning or returning to stone at night. Most were reclusive when it came to their magical life forces, preferring to return to high perches atop stone buildings and away from prying eyes when they shifted between life and death.

“Indeed, they are.” Nicholas closed the door behind us, a giant groan coming from the hinges. “Would you like to meet the three that have been assigned to you? They sleep not far from your chambers. We can give them their orders, then retrieve your . . . retrieve Avery after they're sent off to work.”

A warning growl vibrated in my throat when he'd refused to call Avery my mate. I knew he was attracted to her, knew in a heartbeat that he'd charm her, seduce her, *ravish* her, if he thought he could get away with it.

But the vampire merely gave me a sly smile. “Come, Major Jamison. The day has just begun.”

Chapter 16

~ *EVERY* ~

I hovered above the blazing fire. Chanting from the robed figures hummed all around me, filling the air with vibrations that chimed with magic.

Pain coursed behind my eyes, and I winced. I tried to blink, to soothe the ache in my skull, but my lids wouldn't move. I was ensnared by some invisible force that held me above the flames, my spectral form a slave to an unseen entity.

With quickened breaths, I tried again to move, to soar away, but it was as though my body wasn't mine.

It was theirs.

The robed figures' chants grew stronger as they raised their arms above their heads, their magic fusing and growing as they worked in unison.

Panic hit my bloodstream. I needed to get away from here. Now!

But I couldn't.

The circled figures looked skyward, their faces shrouded in darkness, but I still saw their smiles. Their wretched coiling smiles tinged with a giddy awareness that finally it had begun.

"No!" I screamed and bolted upright in bed. Sweat dripped down my face, pooling around my collarbone and soaking through my shirt. I lay in a sea of sheets. Heat rose from them, making my skin hot and damp.

"Oh my." A withered-looking woman sat on a chair beside me, her eyes milky and unseeing.

I startled, turning left and right. I lay in a huge bed, a gauzy canopy above, a stone floor at its feet.

"Who are you? Where am I?" I shot off the bed, but my legs buckled beneath me. I fell to the stone floor, the cold rock slamming into my knees as the chilled surface felt like ice beneath my palms.

Panting, I remained there as dizziness swam through me.

Padding feet rounded the end of the bed, then the bent and old woman crouched down awkwardly onto all fours. She shuffled closer to me. Despite her blind eyes, she seemed to sense where I was. "Avery, don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

My chest heaved as I took in the unfamiliar surroundings. "Where am I? Where's Wyatt and Nicholas?"

"You're in your chambers in the Bulgarian libraries. Wyatt and Nicholas are searching the great tomes. You have nothing to fear. You only need to rest as they work." Her gentle words lilted with an accent, hinting at her origins being Slovakian or perhaps Hungarian.

I brought a hand to my forehead. Dizziness again swept through me. "But I didn't come here to rest. I came here to work, to search for a way to stop—" My words fizzled out. An aching sense of doom filled me. "Why can't I remember how I got in here?"

The old woman sat back on her haunches. "You fell unconscious several hours ago. I gave you a brew to help you rest while your wolf and Nicholas left to search for your cure."

My heart squeezed when I pictured Wyatt—my wolf, my *mate*.

And I knew then that I wasn't just Wyatt's mate. He was mine too. It explained everything, from the moment we'd spotted each other as teenagers and had been drawn to one another, to how we'd both been magnetically attracted to each other once again when I came to the SF.

Oh Gods, and we've only just made things right between us.

Blurry memories surfaced of Nicholas traipsing down the halls, guiding Wyatt and me to our chambers as I'd marveled at the monstrous columns and aged paintings adorning the walls.

I made a move to stand, then remembered Nicholas had specifically stated that we weren't allowed to travel outside of the chambers unaccompanied. So what did that mean? That I was stuck here? A prisoner?

"Can you take me to them?" I asked the woman. "To whatever library Wyatt and Nicholas are in?"

Her thin lips lifted in an apologetic smile, revealing several missing teeth. "I'm afraid not. You need to rest. And you should eat. I will ring for refreshments."

"But I don't want to rest. I don't have much time!"

Her demeanor softened, and she shuffled closer, her bony knees peeking out from her long woolen dress. She placed a dry, cool hand on my arm, and a rush of magic washed through me. Some of the dizziness abated.

After she let go, my head felt clearer, and the rising panic in me slowed. "You're a healer?"

"For many years. Now, let's get you something to eat—" She groaned when she tried to lift herself to a stand, using the bed post for leverage.

I hurried up to help her, and amazingly, I felt okay. The dizziness had completely vanished, and that numbing fatigue that had started after the portal transfer had dimmed.

"What's your name?" I asked, once the healer was fully standing. She still hunched over. Age hadn't been kind to her spine.

She gently patted my hand, then began shuffling toward the door. "I'm Hana. I work here in the libraries, assisting the other staff members with their ailments." She reached a bell by the door and rang it. A tray of food instantly appeared on the table beside it.

My eyes popped. To conjure food from thin air took immense magic.

As if sensing my surprise, Hana laughed softly. "The food is merely transferred from the kitchen. I'm not an alchemist."

"Still," I mumbled. To portal transfer food like that instantaneously took a *ton* of magic. I could only fathom the number of sorcerers and witches that were employed by the libraries to keep an institution like this running so seamlessly.

Hana hobbled toward the small table near the fireplace while carrying the tray. The dishes clattered when she set them down.

Two wingback chairs sat alongside the table, and she pulled one out, motioning for me to sit in the other. For being blind, she was remarkably adept at getting around.

"I can sense where things are," she said, as if reading my mind.

I frowned. "You're more than just a healing witch."

"A seer too."

Ah, that explained it. Since I knew I was stuck in this room for the time being, I joined her.

My mouth watered when I beheld the feast on the small tray.

Moist cuts of fileted beef—swimming in wine sauce—sat on a bed of julienne carrots, pearl onions, and baby potatoes. A separate bowl contained a fragrant creamed soup with bits of asparagus and herbs. Beside that was a basket of steaming rolls, as if they'd just been popped from the oven.

Under a domed tray was a miniature chocolate cake, just the right size for two people. Two glasses, filled with cool iced tea, sat near the edge of the tray.

“The tea will help with your fatigue and dizziness. We enchant all of our tea here.” Hana felt along the tray, her fingers stumbling over the utensils. “It’s best that we eat while it’s hot.”

“May I dish a plate for you?”

Her wrinkled cheeks brightened when she smiled. “Yes, thank you.”

I grabbed the plates and utensils, setting our places before I spooned portions from every dish. When done, I grabbed the basket of rolls, slathering each piece in a thick layer of butter.

My stomach growled with every second that passed, and I realized I was starving.

Once done, Hana felt around for her utensils. After she found them, she managed well enough.

I dug into the beef. “I can’t believe how hungry I am.”

She bit into a roll, her old teeth sawing through it. “It’s my magic that’s creating your hunger. Healing takes energy from the recipient.”

I chewed the mouthful of beef, then realized I didn’t have to. It melted like butter on my tongue, so tender it fell apart. I closed my eyes in bliss when the rich flavors burst through my senses.

Hana cackled when I moaned in delight. “The pixies that cook these meals are some of the best chefs in all of Europe. Some can’t believe that those of us employed by the library choose to spend our existence underground, but that’s because they haven’t tasted the food.”

I laughed and forked a potato. With each bite, I closed my eyes and savored the rich textures and tastes. Hana wasn’t kidding. This food was good enough to give up daylight for.

I was so caught up in the meal, that it was only as I licked my fork clean from the last bite of chocolate cake, that I remembered I hadn’t spoken to my parents in hours.

“Oh shit!” I exclaimed and dropped my fork.

Hana startled. “What is it?”

“My parents were coming to Bulgaria. They’re probably wondering where I am. I need to contact them. Do cell phones work down here?”

Hana swished her hand. “Of course, they do. We may be underground, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have magically enchanted cell phone towers.”

I cocked my head at how bizarre her statement sounded, then pushed back from the table and grabbed my bag. At least when I stood, while my legs didn’t feel strong, they felt steady. Hana was right. Her healing magic and the tea had helped immensely.

I fished out my phone, then groaned. Three missed calls and half a dozen missed text messages waited from my parents. “They got here three hours ago. How long was I asleep?” I asked as I sent them a quick message telling them I was fine and apologizing for not being in contact sooner.

Hana lifted a gnarled finger. “There’s a clock on that wall. What does it say?”

But I realized that I didn’t have to look at the wall since my phone held the time at the top. It was just past seven in the morning. *Gods, I slept for hours.*

Laughter bubbled up in me. I’d just had a dinner meal for breakfast, even though technically it could be counted as a late dinner in Idaho time. I opened my mouth to comment on that when a key sounded in the lock, and the door swung open.

The laughter on my lips died when Wyatt appeared in the doorway.

He came to an abrupt stop, his eyes widening when he beheld me standing by our bags. Disheveled hair stood up on his head, and another day’s worth of beard coated his cheeks. The fear that had been filling his eyes lessened, but before I could get a greeting out, he’d crossed the room and was lifting me in a crushing embrace.

“Thank the Gods,” he whispered, his entire body pressing into mine. “You’re awake.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, my breath stopping at the terror coating his words. “Hana said I passed out.”

His grip tightened, fear rising from him like a mist. “How do you feel?” He loosened me enough to scan my face.

I shrugged. “Okay. I was dizzy when I woke up, but Hana helped. She used her healing magic.”

Wyatt threw a thankful glance her way, then glowered. “You were supposed to notify me when she woke up.”

“And I was going to, just as soon as she had something to eat.” Hana pushed to a stand and picked up the empty tray of food. Stooped forward, she started shuffling toward the small table by the door, the dishes rattling. It looked as though she could topple over at any moment.

Wyatt hurried to take the tray from her, then helped her back to her seat. Once Hana no longer looked in danger of falling, Wyatt was in front of me again, brushing the hair from my face.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a figure standing in the doorway. I jolted. Nicholas watched us, completely still and utterly quiet, like a living statue. He dipped his head in greeting when he realized I’d spotted him, but his expression was impossible to read.

Wyatt tenderly traced his fingers across my cheek, pulling my attention back to him. The gentle touch elicited a tingle in my belly. I still couldn’t believe that only twenty-four hours had passed since he’d returned from the fae lands. Only two days ago, I’d been readying for my final test, convinced I’d never see him again. And now I was standing in the subterranean Bulgarian libraries, with my life slipping away from me, while my parents waited in a hotel on the earth’s surface.

Wyatt palmed my cheek, and I covered his hand with mine. “Hana said you were already searching in the library?”

He nodded, a deep glow haloing his irises. “We found a few things.”

My heart leaped. “You did? Already? What?”

He relayed the lines of text from some ancient scrolls the gargoyles had uncovered, something about starlight, fate, being born again by the moon, and how it all sounded like an ancient prophecy.

“What the hell does that mean?” I grumbled.

Wyatt let out an irritated sigh. “I don’t know, but the gargoyles are awake now. Three of them have been assigned to this case. With any luck, by nightfall, we’ll know how to cure you.”

Chapter 17

~ *EVERY* ~

Wyatt's hand drifted down to thread his fingers through mine. "The library is heavily enchanted. I want you to stay with me. When you are within those walls, the magic preserves everything. Maybe it will preserve you."

I cocked my head in confusion.

His gaze was a stormy torrent, a glow rimming his irises. "I'm hoping it will extend your life. That the magic will delay what's happening inside you and will give me more time."

I nodded in sympathy because I was unable to take that hope from him, even though I knew my life was fading despite being here in the magically preserving libraries. While Hana's magic had helped temporarily with the dizziness, I still felt weak and *off*. I'd had that strange off feeling ever since the comet's arrival, only now, it felt different. My muscles had weakened. My breaths felt shallow. Already, I felt tired even though I'd only been awake for an hour. I was tempted to close my eyes and sleep again.

But I would fight to stay alive. And if going to the library helped prolong that fight, then dammit, I would do it.

"I can spend the day there with you, but my parents are here. I want to see them."

Wyatt's eyes widened. "Shit. I completely forgot they were coming. Where are they?"

"They're staying at a hotel in the city." I pointed above us. "However many feet it is to street level." I peeked toward Nicholas.

The vampire still hid in the shadows, probably to give us privacy. At least his sex-mojo was under control this morning. I didn't know if I'd be able to fend him off at all right now. Not that I ever could before.

"Nicholas, would it be possible for me to visit my parents?" I asked.

"May I ask where they're staying?" Nicholas inclined his head, the perfect host.

I rattled off the name of the hotel.

His brow furrowed. "I could send a car for them. They are not allowed within these walls, but there is a neutral area where we conduct meetings on the surface. Would you like them brought there for a visit?"

A rush of gratitude filled me. "Yes, please. Thank you."

He dipped his head again, and for once that cocky arrogant tilt to his lips was gone.

For a brief moment, I was reminded of the man I'd seen in the cafeteria all of those weeks ago. The man behind the vampire, who had a decent soul, but had to live with the urges his nature forced upon him.

Wyatt's fingers tightened around my hand, the heat of his palm growing. I knew he didn't want me to leave him, and I knew he wanted me in the library to take advantage of its preservative effects, but I couldn't *not* see my parents. They'd traveled all this way after I'd called them for help. And if we couldn't find answers here, if my death was inevitable, then I needed to say goodbye to them.

A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it down.

Wyatt squeezed me again. I could only imagine the scent I was giving off—probably fear with a

touch of doom. How sexy.

“How long will that meeting take to arrange?” Wyatt asked.

Nicholas straightened. “I imagine I can have them here by this afternoon. Avery, would you like to join us in the library until then?”

I nodded vigorously even though my legs already felt limp from standing. “Yeah. I want to see what you’ve found and help in whatever way I can.”



The spells woven into the libraries carried a unique blend of heavy, aromatic magic that seemed to shimmer in the air.

I understood now what Wyatt was talking about. It felt as if a coating of energy hummed along my skin, and if I lifted my hand, it felt slightly weighted down, as if I were pushing through a thick pool of soup.

“So this is what the fountain of youth feels like,” I joked as Nicholas pulled out a chair for me.

The legs squeaked on the floor, yet the grating noise didn’t carry. It was as though the library swallowed its sound.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said with a wink. “I’ve been told by visitors that the enchantments and wards are unlike anything they’ve experienced elsewhere. It can take some adjusting to.”

I sagged onto the chair in relief, giving him a small smile of thanks. My chest rose unsteadily. Already I felt out of breath, and I’d only walked two hundred feet from our chambers down the hall.

Wyatt pulled out the chair beside me, his heavy stare grazing over my skin like a burn.

Even though I’d put on a brave face, I had a feeling I wasn’t fooling him. During the walk from our chambers, I’d kept my head high and my strides even, hoping to put his mind at ease so he could concentrate on the task ahead.

I knew he hadn’t slept. Hana told me that both he and Nicholas had worked through the night. And from the agitated energy rolling off my commander, I knew he hadn’t even rested.

Normally, Wyatt was composed, keeping his emotions in check, but given his dark expression and growing beard, I knew he was running himself into the ground. And who knew how many late nights he’d spent in the fae lands before returning to the SF to view my final test. He’d been working tirelessly for weeks given that time moved differently in the fae realm.

An ache swelled in my chest. We’d had such little time together. More than anything I wanted to be with him and explore what we could have had.

I shook myself, realizing where my thoughts were going. No. I wasn’t giving up yet. We would find a way to stop the Safrinite comet from killing me.

Wyatt’s oak and pine scent drifted toward me when he reached for a text spread out on the table. “I’ll show you what we’ve found.” He plucked several sheets of crisp new paper from one of the books. A dark scrawl flowed across each sheet, written in perfect English. “The gargoyles translated these texts last night before they returned to stone.”

He handed them over to me, and I read the sheets quickly, noting the references to celestial events that Wyatt had told me about in our chambers.

“They’ll undoubtedly find more information today,” Nicholas said, leaning closer as he read over my shoulder. “The gargoyles here almost have a sixth sense, able to sniff out the texts that contain the information they need. And the three that I’ve assigned to your case have worked as a team before. If any gargoyle partnership can deliver answers quickly, it will be them.”

Wyatt grunted in what I could only surmise was his thanks. While he and Nicholas weren’t

exactly friendly, they did seem more civil toward one another this morning.

I scanned the sheets again, the library as quiet as a tomb despite the fluttering paper. “How cryptic,” I murmured. “Do you think—” But I cut my question off when the sound of shuffling feet on stone came from behind us.

A four-foot-tall gargoyle, adorned in a thick woolen blue robe, bowed at Wyatt. “Major Jamison, I’ve found something new.” With fingers sporting long claws, he waved toward the large textbooks under his arm. “If I may.” He padded closer to the table.

Wyatt shot to standing, his chair nearly toppling over in his hurry to clear the table for the scholar.

With a loud thump and a plume of dust, the gargoyle deposited the texts between us. “You must be the young witch this mysterious illness is plaguing?” The gargoyle’s face twisted into a sympathetic smile. His parted lips revealed hideous-looking teeth that would make any child scream. Dark, solemn eyes regarded me, and his stone-colored skin looked ashen in the fairy lights.

Luckily, I’d met a few gargoyles in my travels so their appearance no longer shocked me. “Yes, I’m Avery Meyers, and you’re correct. Nearly two weeks ago, the comet caused some kind of magic to erupt inside me. Since then, it’s killed my witch magic and seems intent on killing me too. That’s why we’re here. We’re hoping these libraries will tell us how to rid me of whatever the Safrinite comet birthed inside me.”

The gargoyle held out his hand, the tip of his claw curling delicately around my palm before he kissed the back of my hand. Cool, rough lips grazed my skin. “I’m saddened to hear that. I’m Master Romanus, at your service. My fellow scholars, Masters Ambrose and Godric, and I will endeavor to find the answers you seek. Masters Ambrose and Godric are currently searching the archives in the Veritas Library. Godric is the one who found the texts you were just reading. Some say he’s a wizard at finding even the most elusive tomes.”

“Like I said, the dream team.” Nicholas winked at me, his blue eyes flashing as a lock of blond hair fell over his forehead.

“Well?” Wyatt loomed over the gargoyle, his hands on his hips. “What have you found?”

“Let me show you.” The gargoyle hefted one of the texts open and turned to a page he’d marked. His curled claw traveled over the paper until he reached a line near the bottom.

The writing was so faint, it was a miracle he could read it. A hum of magic washed over me when he began to recite the elegantly sprawling words.

My breath sucked in. It was written in ancient elvish—a dead language that was rumored to be the first among the fairies, although elves didn’t exist anymore. They were long extinct.

Once Master Romanus finished reading, the magic summoned from the book slowly faded, and he said in English, “Translated it reads, *For on the night of the heir’s conception, the great prophecy will begin. The stars will amass to twice their size, and the magic will be born in the fated starlight couple. And only when the Safrinite comet returns will the true prophecy occur. The magic will erupt in the heir destined to forge our path, creating the path for the gods to be born. Only then will we rise.*”

A blast of magic shot from the book when the gargoyle snapped it shut.

I gasped just as Nicholas said, “Apologies if that magical rush took you unaware. That happens from time to time with the documents in these rooms, especially when they’re written in elvish.”

Wyatt’s chest rose and fell. He’d tensed beside me, as if sensing an unseen threat.

I felt the same. The haunting words swirled around me, weaving me into their cryptic message. *Forging the path for the gods to be born.*

A bolt of awareness shot under my skin, as if the power that had killed my magic and was slowly killing my life had responded or awoken to the elvish language that had just been spoken.

“How strange,” I whispered. It was all I could manage. My blood felt as cold as the Arctic, and goosebumps had sprouted on my arms. “But what does all of that mean? Stars amassing? Planets aligning? A fated couple of starlight? And a prophecy?”

I shivered. I knew everything was linked, but it was a matter of figuring it out and hoping that we could find a way to save me in time.

Master Romanus pushed the heavy tome aside and dragged the second one closer. “I would surmise that it means the Safrinite comet’s magic was predicted long ago. You have to remember, it hasn’t returned to the fae lands in over two thousand years, and that tome from which I just read is almost two thousand years old. *And* that book is in elvish. It’s from the fae lands, as are many of the texts in this library. Now, listen to this clue. Another one lies in here, and we believe it’s also referencing the Safrinite comet.”

Nicholas, Wyatt, and I all leaned forward.

Master Romanus flipped to a page. Even though the giant book was written on paper that resembled cloth, it was beautifully preserved, the pages still supple and soft-looking.

And as Master Romanus began to read the elvish words, magic again tingled on my skin making me pimple as the ancient power washed over me.

When he finished reading, he translated it into English. “*For when the fated couple bears our heir, and the power is awoken through the ball of purple light, our reign shall spark the rising of her, the ancient one, and only then will the prophecy prevail.*”

When finished, the three of us assessed one another wide-eyed.

“The ball of purple light must be the Safrinite comet.” Wyatt tapped his finger on his hip.

I laced my hands together because they were shaking. “And more references to a fated couple, an heir, and a prophecy. Except this one also talks about an *ancient one*. But how do *I* tie into all of this? Am I somehow a part of this ancient magic? Or am I the heir? Or part of the fated couple?”

Wyatt inched closer to me, his arm drifting around my shoulders. His scent filled my senses, helping to slow the pounding of my heart. Gods, it was crazy how right it felt to be with him.

“Are we the fated couple?” I whispered, looking up at him.

He shrugged, his eyes glowing. “I don’t know. I know you’re my true mate, but fated mates are so rare. I’m not sure if that’s what we are.”

Nicholas’s elegant fingers stroked his chin. “Based on what you’ve found, Master Romanus, fated mates or not, I think it’s fair to say that whatever happened to Avery was predestined. It wasn’t an accident that it occurred. These texts speak of an ancient prophecy, and they read as if a recipient of this prophecy is the gateway.”

“But a gateway to what and at what price?” Wyatt seethed.

I shivered again, another rush of ice overtaking me. It was as if every time these ancient words were spoken in elvish tongue, a piece of my soul responded.

Wyatt pulled me closer, his warmth pressing into my side. I clung to him, soaking up every bit of spare heat he had.

Nicholas frowned. “Are you all right, Avery?”

My teeth chattered even though I tried to snap them shut. “I’m fine. Just cold.”

“Your lips look a bit blue.” His frown grew.

Wyatt tensed, his entire abdomen growing rigid before he tilted his head to better assess my features. His lips thinned. “He’s right. You’re paler, and there’s a blue tinge to your lips. Get Hana,”

he barked at Nicholas.

If the vampire had any qualms with Wyatt bossing him around, he hid them well. Nicholas rose to his feet in an elegant blend of speed and grace. “Normally, I wouldn’t leave a visitor unattended in this library, but as I can see Avery is in no place to venture anywhere, I will, yet I still ask that you give me your word that you won’t leave this table.”

Wyatt nodded curtly. “On my honor.”

As if knowing Wyatt’s honor was the equivalent of a sealed fairy bargain, Nicholas disappeared in a blur of vampire speed, the ancient door to the library squeaking shut behind him.

Master Romanus watched it all from across the table, his large dark eyes blinking in the bright fairy lights. “I shall return these texts to their proper shelves and confer with Masters Godric and Ambrose. I shall return when we have more information.” The gargoyle dipped his head before shuffling away.

Alone with Wyatt, I sank completely against him, letting him support my weight. I couldn’t get close enough to him. I was *freezing*. It felt as if ice slid through my veins and around my heart.

Wyatt wrapped his arms around me, hauling me closer to his chest. Coarse hairs from his chin tickled the top of my head. “Your skin is so cold.” He ran his hands up and down my arms, using friction to warm me.

I shivered even though his hands felt like fire. “I’m fine, really, just cold.”

His nostrils flared. “You’re not fine, Avery. You’re—”

A bang came from the doors, and in a blink, Nicholas was back at our side with Hana in his arms. The aged witch let out a gasp of surprise at their abrupt halt.

“Apologies,” Nicholas murmured before setting her carefully on her feet.

She reached out a hand until she connected with the table to steady herself. Then, on small feet, she scuffled toward us before laying a hand on my forehead.

Her brow puckered. “Your skin is like ice, and the magic—” She cocked her head. “It’s advancing.”

“What?” Wyatt barked. “I thought this room would help?”

Hana’s milky unseeing eyes stared over his head. “I’m afraid that even the power in these rooms isn’t enough to stop whatever magic has awoken in her. Its power is too great. It is not of this world.”

My lips parted, a line of the elvish text swirling through my mind. *Our reign shall spark the rising of her, the ancient one.*

Another shudder struck me.

“Is there something hot for her to drink? Or warm blankets?” Wyatt ran his hands along my body once more, but I shivered again.

With a discontented rumble, he ripped his long-sleeved shirt up and over his head. He had a T-shirt on underneath, but even though it was thin, I knew the coldness at these depths wouldn’t bother him.

Wyatt draped his heated shirt over my head, and I slipped my arms into it. I was momentarily distracted as I sighed in bliss at how hot it was.

“That may help temporarily,” Hana said. “But it won’t keep her warm.”

“Then dammit, where do I get—”

But before Wyatt could finish his sentence, Nicholas had blurred away and returned with a tray in his hands. A steaming cup of tea sat on it, a small teapot beside it. “It’s enchanted to stay hot no matter how long it’s left.” He deposited it on the table.

Hana sniffed. “Ah yes, that shall do the trick. Here, girl, drink.” She grasped the delicate cup and

saucer, and lifted them, the bone china rattling in her unsteady grip.

I took both from her but deposited the small saucer back on the tray, and wrapped both of my hands around the cup. I sighed. *So warm.*

Nicholas regarded me as I drank my fill, but he kept checking his watch.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes.” He gave me a placating smile. “I wanted to let you enjoy your drink, but it’s also important that you know your parents have arrived.”

I straightened. “They’re here? Now?”

“Indeed. Would you like to see them?”

“Is that wise?” Wyatt cut in. “If these libraries help preserve supernaturals, to have Avery leave them in her condition—”

“Wyatt.” I placed my hand on his arm, my eyes pleading. “These rooms aren’t going to stop the inevitable, and I need to see them.”

Chapter 18

~ WYATT ~

I insisted on carrying Avery from the library. She tried to protest. I knew her rumblings were in hopes of reassuring me that she was doing better, but I'd seen the tremor in her hands when she'd set her cup down and the deathly pallor of her skin when she'd forced a brave smile in my direction.

She was dying before my eyes. Literally. With each minute that passed, it was as though a little more life was sucked from her.

It was as though a dark cloud had descended over her, leeching the life from her eyes, and it was all happening so *fast*. Her dark hair, that was normally a beautiful mahogany shade, had grown duller. Her skin, which had once been warm and pink, was now pale. And her eyes. Her beautiful vibrant eyes held shadows of the inevitable.

Fifty percent.

Farrah's dire warning came back to bite me in the ass. Yesterday afternoon her life force had only been at fifty percent. It had dropped thirty percent since yesterday morning.

So what was it now?

My heart ripped at the thought. To know that nothing I'd done over the past two weeks had done anything to stop the Safrinite comet from killing my mate, ate at my soul.

I was failing.

Totally and completely failing.

Agony gripped my chest as Nicholas ushered us into a gated elevator. We'd traveled from the ancient library, slipping through the wards at the door like pushing through a thick curtain, until we were once again free of its magic and spells. From there, we'd followed the vampire to the end of a long columned hall to reach the elevator.

I watched Avery closely, searching for a sign that she was deteriorating more rapidly now that we'd left the library's interior.

Thankfully, she appeared the same.

Nicholas gave me a tight smile, his face a mask of concern. He slid the elevator doors closed behind us. Metal clanged on metal, the sound reverberating around us as a rush of magic shimmered over the contraption when the gate clicked closed.

Nicholas pressed a button. "Almost there." His gaze dipped to Avery whom I cradled in my arms.

She was still wearing my shirt. It encased her like a tent, hiding her full breasts and thin waist. It was so big it hung off her, but she'd snuggled into the warmth gratefully.

The elevator jolted, and we began to ascend.

Avery burrowed closer to my chest, her head tucked beneath my chin. Her soft breaths tickled my skin in cool puffs. She didn't feel quite as cold as she had only minutes ago, but she still wasn't warm.

My fingers curled around her legs, drawing her even closer. We had *no* time.

My mood darkened just as the elevator ground to a halt, and the door clanged open. The elevator had opened to another hallway, except this one was lined with windows. Daylight streamed onto the

black and white checkered tiles in the wide corridor.

Grinding my teeth together, I strode after the vampire.

Outside of the building, cars whizzed past on the street. Blaring horns penetrated the glass of the windows as pedestrians walked on the sidewalks. Now that we were on street level, the city of Sofia spread out around us.

A part of me gazed longingly at the oblivious humans who went about their day. They were completely unaware that only feet away, supernaturals owned a building shrouded in wards and magic. They had no idea that this building, which consisted of a book store and a coffee shop on street level, hid five ancient libraries beneath its surface. And they had no idea that another realm existed, and that magic from that realm was threatening my mate's life.

"They're in here," Nicholas said, skirting a bright beam of sunshine that streamed in through a particularly tall window. He stopped at a closed door.

My strides ate up the tiled floor as Avery stirred in my arms. "My love?" I murmured to her. "We're almost there. Your parents are waiting."

Her eyes opened, then widened. "We're here? Already?"

My face fell, as I once again saw how quickly she was fading. A glassy sheen coated her eyes, and fatigue pulled at her lips.

Nicholas waited for us to join him. Once we did, Avery wiggled in my arms. "I don't want my parents to see me like this."

I reluctantly released her, gently setting her down. Once she was standing, I ran my hand down her back, leaving my palm at her waist. She swayed slightly, like a leaf fluttering in a breeze.

I locked my jaw tighter. She was so weak that she could barely stand, yet she was determined to walk into this room and greet her parents as if everything were fine.

My throat tightened. Admiration and love for her flowed through my veins. My mate was a fighter. She always had been, and even now, as death threatened her, she refused to cow to it.

"After you." Nicholas dipped his head and opened the door.

Scents from inside filtered toward me. Old leather, cloves, and a hint of female wolf. Her parents smelled as I remembered them.

With a bright smile, Avery stepped into the room.

Danielle and Bryce Meyers pushed to a stand from the small table they'd been seated at in the windowless room.

"Avery!" Her mother rushed forward. Like her daughter, she had dark hair and eyes, although her build was taller and stronger, hinting at her werewolf background. She crushed Avery to her, holding her tight.

Avery hugged her back, but even from across the room I could see that her arms didn't tighten, and when her mom pulled back, my mate looked even paler.

"You look sick." Her dad frowned and laid a hand on her shoulder. He had a lean build and stood an inch shorter than his wife. He hugged Avery, too, but more gently.

Avery gave them both a brave smile. "I feel better than I look. How was your trip getting here?"

But her attempt at small talk didn't relieve the tears welling in her mother's eyes or the aggrieved expression on her father's face.

"Why don't we all sit down." I pulled out a chair for Avery.

She collapsed onto it.

It was only then her parents seemed to realize that Nicholas and I were also in the room.

"Wyatt Jamison?" Her father gave me a sad smile. "It's been a while. Avery tells us you're her

commander at the Supernatural Forces.”

“That’s right, sir.”

“Thank you for bringing her here,” her mother added, although her gaze didn’t leave her daughter.

Avery had closed her eyes and was leaning back in her chair, exhaustion evident on her face. She only opened her eyes when her mom pulled out the chair beside her.

Danielle Meyers took both of Avery’s hands in hers. She didn’t try to hide her tears. “Oh, honey. No. No. This can’t be happening.”

My gut tightened. “We’re doing everything we can to help her. The gargoyles have found more information and are working as we speak.”

“But what can we do? Surely we can do something?” Her father pulled out the chair at Avery’s other side and put an arm around her shoulders.

Crowded around her, Avery looked so small and delicate.

My heart squeezed. *My Little Flower*.

Nicholas glided around the table to the area near the far wall that held refreshments. “My apologies, but I’m afraid you’re not allowed in the library to help with our search, however, having you here is perhaps the greatest support you can provide.”

Avery nodded and sat up straighter, as if fighting the fatigue that pulled at her. “It’s really good to see you guys. I’m so glad you could come.”

Her parents tucked her under their arms, hugging her, and crying again.

My heart rate increased, my breathing growing rapid. Avery was acting as if this was it—her final goodbye.

No.

No!

I needed to do something. *Now*. I needed to fix this. I couldn’t let her say goodbye to her parents. She needed to live. She *couldn’t* die.

My wolf howled inside me.

I curled my fingers into my palms, letting my wolf’s claws out just enough to draw blood. The sharp piercing of my skin brought pain, grounding me back in the present.

Focus. Think. *How can I stop this?* I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth, using age-old breathing techniques we’d learned in the SF to stay sharp and in the present.

My heartbeat slowed, not pounding so hard that it drowned out other sounds.

“ . . . should go somewhere special. Take you to somewhere you’ve always wanted to go.”

Her mother’s words cut through my grief. I stiffened, and Nicholas’s hand stilled on the teapot he held. Five mugs of steaming tea sat on the refreshment table.

“I don’t think I can travel right now, Mom.”

“But is there something you want to do? Or see? What would make you happiest right now?” her father asked.

Pain cut through my chest. Gods. They were saying their final goodbyes, too, offering to do anything for her to ease the remaining days they thought she had.

“I don’t want to go anywhere. I want to stay here.” Avery’s gaze drifted to me.

For a moment, we just stared at each other, that gesture saying more than a thousand words could. My mate wanted to be with me. She didn’t want to be anywhere I wasn’t.

I cleared my throat just as Nicholas glided to the table and placed drinks in front of everyone.

“Remember that time when you were twelve and we lived in Scotland?” Her mom took her hand

again. “We were going to the governor’s ball, and you wore that pink dress I forced on you. You hated it, but you looked so lovely, and your hair had those glittery barrettes that you’d picked out from that little shop near our flat?”

Avery laughed. “I remember that dress. It was hideous, but I loved those barrettes. I still have them I think, somewhere in storage.”

“That was your first night out to an adult party,” her dad added with a smile. “You stayed up until two in the morning, dancing with the governor’s son.”

Avery laughed again. “He stepped all over my toes and kept apologizing, but I didn’t care. It was so fun to dance, to finally practice the waltz I’d been taught at school.”

“And do you remember what you said to us that night?” her mom asked. “After the ball?”

Avery cocked her head, her brow furrowing, but then her eyes lit up. “That was the night I said I wanted to be an ambassador like you and Dad. That if I got to attend parties and balls like that, then I couldn’t think of a better job.”

Her mom nodded. “And from that point on, everything you did was to further your studies and learning so you could one day walk in our footsteps.”

Avery smiled, her lips tilting up sadly. “And I was so close to getting that dream. So close.”

Her parents shared a pained look before hugging her again and launching into more stories and anecdotes from the past.

Nicholas and I stayed quiet. The tea went untouched, but its fragrant mint scent drifted around the room.

I knew I should leave, give Avery privacy with her family, but I was loathe to let her out of my sight. Every moment that passed was another moment I couldn’t get back. I couldn’t fathom the thought of this being the end, of never hearing her laugh again, or seeing the sparkle in her eyes, or scenting her mouth-watering lilac fragrance that ignited my blood and squeezed my heart.

I stood rigidly by the wall, my hands balled into fists as my wolf howled forlornly within.

“Did you know you were conceived right around this time?” Her mother dabbed at her eyes again just as they finished laughing about when Avery was a baby and had said her first real word—kitty. One-year-old Avery had apparently been obsessed with their neighbor’s cat.

“Mom!” she said indignantly. “TMI!”

But her mom just squeezed her hand, and her father nodded.

“Your mom’s right, though. It was a magical night. One we’ve never told you about, but we knew something special happened that night, and we were right. Look at you. So beautiful and smart.”

Her mom carried on. “We were in the fae lands, on a quick one-week assignment to discuss some changes to the realm transfer agreements between their world and ours. They had one of their rare celestial events that night. The stars were all twice their normal size, one of those events that only happens every millennium and infuses even more magic into their world. It was magical and so very beautiful. No wonder you turned out as perfect as you are.”

I stiffened as Avery shook her head and replied, “You never told me that, and I’m not perfect, but why didn’t you tell me that before?”

Her mom shrugged. “I don’t know. Like you said, TMI I guess.”

Her father scooted closer, holding Avery’s hand.

Nicholas’s gaze cut to mine, and I said in a low tone so only he could hear, “Avery was conceived during a celestial event?”

He easily heard me with his enhanced vampire senses. “I noticed that comment too. That seems like too big of a coincidence not to signify something.”

I thought back to what the scrolls had said. *For on the night of the heir's conception, the great prophecy will begin. The stars will amass to twice their size, and the magic will be born in the fated starlight couple.*

“Her *parents* are the fated starlight couple, and Avery is the heir,” I whispered in decibels too low for a non-vamp or male wolf to hear.

Nicholas's eyes widened. “Yes!”

Avery and her parents continued talking, oblivious to the conversation the vamp and I were having, and Avery seemed so happy to be with her mom and dad that I finally bowed out to give them space.

Nicholas watched my retreat, so I whispered under my breath that I was only going in the hall. Without him, I couldn't re-enter the library anyway, so it wasn't like I could do much else.

In the hall, I stabbed a hand through my hair, my senses still tuned toward the small meeting room in case Avery needed something, but I stepped closer to the window, pacing in front of the busy street as my stomach roiled and dipped.

Holy shit. It was all making sense now.

Avery was the heir.

Her parents were the fated starlight couple.

All of this was written in the stars thousands of years ago, which meant that fate was creating whatever magic had implanted itself in Avery.

And how the fuck did I fight fate?

I tore a hand through my hair again, not understanding the purpose of this prophecy or why Avery had been the chosen one. Because surely the comet's magic had a purpose, that it wasn't simply designed to torment innocent individuals, and then kill them.

But the question was, *what* was the point of all this? And could we discover it and save Avery before the comet killed her?

“We must be missing something,” I whispered under my breath. “There has to be more to this that we're not seeing.”

My pacing quickened as Avery and her parents continued saying their goodbyes to one another—sharing stories, professing love, holding each other in their last moments.

I'd seen it before, on the battlefield, and in my pack.

Dying wasn't coveted, but it could be beautiful when one was surrounded by friends and family.

I hung my head. My throat tightened so much that I couldn't swallow. A band squeezed around my chest, and a voice deep inside me told me that I may also have to say goodbye, because the reality was, my mate was dying.

Even if we now knew Avery's plight wasn't random. Even if we knew she was the heir. Even if we knew this was predestined. Even if the gargoyles were frantically searching for the missing puzzle piece at this very moment.

It didn't mean we'd find a way to save her, and if she died, I didn't know how I would ever be okay again.

Chapter 19

~ *EVERY* ~

Wyatt and Nicholas proved to be extremely patient and sympathetic while I remained with my parents. The afternoon ticked by as I sat with them in that room above the subterranean libraries.

It was only when the bell chimed four o'clock in the square outside, and I began nodding off in my seat even though it was only late afternoon, that they stood to leave.

"We'll let you rest," my mother said softly.

"I'm sorry. I'm just so tired." My chin dipped.

"Don't you dare apologize," my dad said. He helped me stand, and I hugged him as tightly as I could muster before doing the same to my mother.

Their eyes were red and puffy. In the past few hours, we'd cried as often as we'd laughed, but it felt so good to spend time with them, to connect again. It had literally been years since we'd enjoyed an afternoon of one another's company with no pressing commitments weighing us down.

Lately, I'd been so busy with school, then so busy with work. I'd visited them for the holidays but sometimes not. My studies had kept me occupied, and on more than one occasion I'd chosen to stay back at university with my friends.

Now I wished I hadn't passed up even a moment with my parents.

Wyatt appeared at my side when they gathered their things, his werewolf nature blurring his speed and keeping his footsteps silent.

My mom slipped her coat on while my dad donned his wool beret—the one that he'd had for as long as I could remember—over his thinning hair.

"We'll see you again tomorrow?" my mom asked as she kissed my cheek.

"I'd like that," I replied.

My dad gave me one last squeeze, then Nicholas showed them out. When it was just Wyatt and me in the room, he once again swept me up in his arms, cradling me against his chest.

"Hey," I said, swatting him half-heartedly. "I can walk. I'm not an invalid." Even though I basically was. I knew that I would probably collapse before I reached the elevator, but it felt good to say something normal—something I would have said before the comet sickened me.

But Wyatt didn't reply, my teasing doing little to alleviate the heaviness on his face. He pulled me closer, his throat working as his arms tightened more. "Have I ever told you that you're the most amazing woman I've ever met?"

I shivered, his tender words touching me in deeper ways than he could have known. "And you're the most honorable and kind man I've ever been with."

The glow around his eyes brightened as his jaw worked again. "Hardly. I—" He cleared his throat. "I'll never forgive myself for turning my back on you during these past few months. Never."

Something inside me shattered at the raw pain coating his words. "Wyatt. I don't blame you anymore for that. I didn't know your reasoning at the time, but now it makes sense, and I need you to know that I don't blame you."

"You forgive me so easily."

"Which is why you should forgive yourself."

He opened his mouth to say something further, but instead cleared his throat again and blinked rapidly.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw the moisture coating his eyes. “Wyatt,” I whispered again.

“I can’t lose you,” he said hoarsely. “I just can’t. I don’t know how to live without you.”

“You’ve done just fine up until now,” I said, trying to tease since the pain in his words tore me up.

“But that was before—” He ground his teeth together, his throat bobbing again when he swallowed, and it became apparent how hard he was fighting to control himself and not break down.

And that’s when I *knew* with every fiber of my being how real this bond was between us.

Mate.

I laid my palm on his cheek. “You need to learn to live without me. For me. Please learn, for *me*.”

His eyes blazed brighter, but he didn’t nod. Even now, when I felt death creeping toward me, Wyatt still wouldn’t accept that there wasn’t a way out of this.

“Will you take me back to our chambers? I think I’d like to lie down.” My body felt so heavy and tired. I’d never experienced fatigue like this. It was as if I’d hiked up the highest mountain, then run a marathon, then swum across the ocean, all after not sleeping for a month.

Yet I’d done nothing more than sit in chairs and sleep since we’d arrived.

“I should take you back to the library, to the preserving magic—”

“Wyatt,” I said softly. “That won’t stop it. Please, back to our chambers.”

He cradled me closer. “Of course. Whatever you wish.”

Nicholas appeared in the doorway again, and when we stepped back into the black and white checkered corridor, my parents were visible through the windows as they walked on the street toward their hotel.

My throat tightened. My dad had his arm around my mom. She leaned into his side as his head pressed against hers. They clung to each other with every step they took.

My heart lightened, if only a little. They would have each other after I was gone.

I took comfort in that as Wyatt carried me back to the elevator, Nicholas leading the way.

The vampire was strangely quiet, not once sending a heated glance or a titillating smile my way. It was as if he, too, felt my situation was so grave that he wouldn’t dare jeopardize what peace I had left.

Once back in the subterranean levels, Nicholas glided down the halls, his footsteps completely silent. Wyatt prowled behind him, each step a little bob that pressed me closer to his chest. His pine and oak scent floated around me. I inhaled, loving the smell of him. It quieted something in my chest, anchoring me. It felt so right to be with him.

Nicholas stopped at our door, and Wyatt extracted the enchanted key. When he inserted it in the lock, the door clicked several times as magic hummed along my skin.

“I’ll join you in the library again,” Wyatt said to Nicholas before he opened the door. “We need to keep searching.”

Nicholas dipped his head. “I shall be nearby for when you’re ready to depart.”

Wyatt closed the door behind us, then walked quietly toward the bed. I shivered, once again feeling the bone-deep cold that penetrated these ancient cavernous walls.

“I’ll light the fire,” he said and pulled back the sheets.

I slipped my shoes off, then sank onto the mattress while Wyatt hunkered down in front of the fire. I shimmied out of my pants and slid my bare legs under the covers.

The heated blankets immediately warmed my skin. I sighed as some of the icy coldness lifted from my limbs.

Once a fire was crackling, Wyatt returned to my side, the mattress dipping heavily under his weight. “Do you need anything?” he asked, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“No, just you.”

His eyes burned when they trailed over my face, my neck, my chest, before crawling back up again. “What can I do to help you before I return to the library?”

My heart sank when he mentioned leaving again. I couldn’t distinguish his hope, but I was beginning to realize that even here, in the most coveted library in the world, answers may not be waiting. It was most likely that nothing could save me from the Safrinite comet.

So far, the few findings the gargoyles had managed to muster together had all been riddles and prophecies. Nothing concrete had been discovered that said we needed to *do this* to save me from death.

And quite honestly, I didn’t want to die in these bed chambers alone.

“Join me?” I asked pulling the covers back.

His breath hitched when he saw my bare legs exposed beneath the sheets. My shirt had ridden up, revealing the juncture of my thighs. I still wore panties, but they left little to the imagination.

Wyatt growled, the rumble low and raw. “You need to sleep.”

“I need *you*. Sleep can wait.”

“Avery,” he said with a groan. “You’re so weak.”

I caught his hand when he was about to rake it through his hair. My grip wasn’t strong, but I wasn’t dead yet either. “I may be weaker than I normally am, but I’m not that weak. Please. Stay with me.”

Chapter 20

~ *EVERY* ~

I didn't need to ask again. Wyatt slipped his shoes off and lay by my side.

I looked at his pants and raised an eyebrow. "No pants allowed."

His lips lifted, then he laughed, the sound like music to my ears after so much pain had filled his expression since my parents departed.

He cocked an eyebrow. "What kind of nap is this?"

"The kind I wish we could have had a hundred times over."

He sobered at the quiet desperation in my voice. "Avery . . ."

But he did as I asked, and within seconds his bare legs stretched out next to mine, the dark hairs on his legs tickling my skin. He turned to face me until we both lay beside one another.

"Maybe we should say no shirts either."

His gaze darkened but he sat up and removed his shirt.

I couldn't help but stare at the ridges of muscles running up and down his spine, the beautiful planes that graced his back, his rippled abdomen, and the hard slabs of his pecs. His skin was perfectly golden—smooth and unblemished. He was beautiful. A masterpiece truly. And he was so hard and so *alive*. Every time I looked at him, an ache crawled up my throat for wishes that could never be and a life we couldn't share.

I attempted to sit up to remove my shirt, but my muscles quivered, weak and useless, unable to do even that simple task. I was fading that fast.

A band squeezed around my chest, robbing me of words.

"Let me," Wyatt whispered. His steady, sure fingers slipped around his too-big shirt that I still wore before he lifted it up my spine. When the material, along with my shirt underneath, slipped over the top of my head, I shivered again.

Goosebumps pimply my skin, and it felt as if a frosty breeze flowed over my limbs. Despite the heated sheets and stoked fire, that deep coldness penetrated my insides again.

Fear flared in Wyatt's eyes, but the last thing I wanted was him worrying about me again, so I lay back down, letting his attention slip to my breasts, still covered in my lacy bra.

The fear in his eyes was quickly replaced with desire, and it made a deep ache curl in my stomach.

His teeth ground together. Breathing heavily, his gaze drifted from my breasts, my nipples peaked from the cold, to the dip of my stomach and the low-cut panties that stopped just above my most sensitive parts.

"So beautiful," he whispered, an ache in his tone. He slammed a hand through his hair, his jaw locking. "And I'm such a cad for even looking. You're weak and dying, yet all I can do is stare at you and salivate."

And he was, too—well not salivating literally, but his erection pressed stiffly against his boxers. I itched to feel him again, to run my hand up the length of his velvety steel. It had been so long since I'd felt him. Too long.

"Come closer," I whispered.

He inched to my side until we faced each other, our lips almost touching. His erection brushed against my thigh, and my eyelids fluttered closed as a stifled groan filled his chest.

“I want you to touch me. I need you to.”

“But you’re—”

I brought my finger to his lips, silencing him. “Please.”

His breath shuddered, and a deep glow lit his eyes. Tentatively, he placed a hand on my outer thigh, his warm palm feeling like fire and heating my blood. My toes instantly curled.

“I dreamed for so many years of being in a bed with you like this,” I whispered and trailed a finger up his chest. “I wished for us to be together, for you to love me because I already knew I loved you.” His muscles jumped, and his breath stopped. “And right now, I’m certain of one thing. I don’t want to leave this world never knowing what this would have felt like. I want tonight to be like the nights we’ve never had.”

His chest rose again, his breaths quickening. “Gods, Avery. What if I break you?”

“You won’t break me.”

“What if it hastens the illness or makes it worse?”

“It won’t.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“The SF witches told me repeatedly that my actions would not affect it.”

“But what if you don’t have the strength? You could barely sit up.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to do all of the work.”

He groaned in pain, then sucked in a breath. “It would never be work.”

“Then I suppose there’s nothing further to worry about.”

Before he could voice more second thoughts, I slipped my hand around his neck. My fingers threaded through the silky soft hair at his nape, his skin so warm. I pulled him to my lips.

His warm mouth slanted over mine.

I kissed him, softly, encouragingly. He tasted like spice and tea, his lips firm, his touch achingly gentle despite the fire that was kindling inside me.

When I didn’t break beneath his hesitant first kiss, he shifted closer until I felt every hard inch of his body.

I moaned, and my tongue darted out, tasting him again.

He groaned as his hand curved around my waist, splaying across my back. He began to knead my lower back muscles, his fingers strong and sure.

Bolts of pleasure shot through me, and I sighed in bliss at the supple way his hands moved and roamed over my back, down my ass, and along my thighs. Such strength vibrated through him, yet he held himself back, only applying enough pressure to soothe and arouse, and then barely touching me every time I sighed or closed my eyes.

It was maddening, the gentleness of his touch. I may have been weak, but molten lava was already flowing through my veins. My need to be with him—the unquenched ache that flared low in my belly and spread throughout my limbs—trumped any perilous state of my health or concern for my well-being.

I wanted him. Wanted him so desperately.

For years I’d dreamed of this, of him taking me, making me his, and me carving out a little piece of his heart to keep snuggled up to my soul.

His head angled, kissing along my jaw before taking little nips of my neck. He moved down, slowly, so incredibly slowly that I thought for certain he was doing it on purpose. That he was intent

on taking his time, on driving me mad with lust and want.

But he never chuckled. Never gave me an amused smile. His mouth loved every inch of my skin while his hands continued to caress, roam, and fondle.

And when his mouth traveled to my chest, I was amazed that his gentleness continued. Energy pulsed from him, so heady and filled with desire that even I could feel it in my magicless, weak state.

His erection throbbed against my thigh, its stiff length like rigid steel.

He dipped his head again, kissing along my collarbone, as his hands disappeared behind my back. With a deft flick of his fingers, he released my bra's clasp, then tossed the flimsy material over his shoulder.

"So beautiful," Wyatt whispered when my breasts spilled out, aching and heavy, desperate for his touch.

I arched toward him, demanding that he pleasure me.

His hand automatically came up, cupping one of my breasts as his head swooped down. Dark hair that draped across his forehead tickled my chest just as his tongue flicked out to lick one peak.

I moaned so deeply that it vibrated my entire body.

Rumbling his pleasure, he sucked my nipple completely into his mouth, making me cry out. He did the same to the other, then played me like a symphony that he commanded—varying the speed of his kisses and licks, tweaking my nipples when my breaths quickened, then backing off when my body bucked desperately beneath his.

"So beautiful," he said hoarsely.

I sucked in a breath, then another when his mouth licked and sucked my breasts again, each movement growing more desperate. A deep growl came from him as he gentled, flicking my nipples lightly as if apologizing for his need becoming too great.

But I didn't want gentle.

As if sensing the effect he was having on me, he massaged and caressed me more, his hands shifting down until his fingers slipped between my legs. They swirled up my slit that was still covered by my damp panties, making me buck off the bed again, as his maddening mouth continued to ravish my breasts.

He hissed, then stilled when his finger dipped through the material, pushing it into my molten heat.

I clenched my core around him, crying out again, as his ragged breaths warmed my skin.

Jolting, his fingers pulled out to tease and rub lazy circles over the tight nub in my core, my panties still shielding me from the full onslaught of his assault.

Tension built inside me, coiling like a bomb that could detonate at any moment.

His fingers dipped again, as he moved up to nip at my neck and tease the sensitive spot behind my ear.

My breasts ached, my nipples taut pebbles, as he rubbed over my panties again before he pulled them to the side and then his thick fingers tapped me lightly, directly on that bundle of nerves.

A scream of pleasure rushed out of me, which he quickly swallowed in another kiss.

"Wyatt," I whispered into his mouth.

He didn't break the kiss even though his fingers . . . gods, his *fingers* were intent on driving me mad.

"I want you," I said simply. "So much."

His response was to growl fiercely, possessively. "I don't want this to end yet."

He thumbed my nipple then brushed his palm over it. Electric sparks shot along my nerves, and I

gripped his hard biceps, holding onto him as if I were drowning.

His other hand pressed between my thighs again, cupping my mound, then his fingers began another maddening onslaught—swirling and sliding along the taut nub that demanded release.

As if sensing the crazed state he was driving me toward, his light touches grew firmer—some of the maddening gentleness finally dissipating—as he stoked the flames hotter inside me.

Fiddling his fingers, he rubbed them in teasing movements along my slit, harder this time, but just when the wave of pressure began to build inside me, he pulled back and began kissing me softly, his hands trailing up and down my sides as the deep pulsing ache low in my belly threatened to combust.

“Wyatt,” I whispered. “*Please.*”

“Please, what?”

“Touch me. More. All of me. Please.”

“Like this?” he asked as he flicked my panties to the side again, exposing my sex to the cool night air.

I arched. “Yes. Yes, like that.”

With deft movements, he hooked his fingers around my panties and shimmied them down until nothing but cool air swirled around my swollen core.

Wyatt lifted his head, staring down at my naked frame. He prowled down my body again, kissing and sucking everything in his path until he kneeled between my thighs.

Any worries I had over my body’s weakening state vanished. My attention focused entirely on the man between my legs and his ragged breaths on my core.

He studied me, a reverent expression on his face.

And as I lay there completely naked before him, with the fire crackling in the hearth, and his eyes glowing like gold, I knew that I loved him. Loved him on such a deep level that I would die knowing I’d experienced one of the greatest gifts in life.

“Avery,” he rasped, pain and desperation in his tone, as if sensing that I knew the end was near.

“I’m still here.”

His breathing slowed, and with exquisite tenderness, he parted my thighs more.

Cradled between my legs, for a moment, he just stared, devouring me with his eyes as I lay molten and soaking beneath him. Ready for him. Wanting him. Desperately seeking a pleasure only he could give me.

“I want to remember you like this always.” And then he shifted, settling on the mattress as his hands cupped around my ass. I opened my mouth to respond, but his tongue darted out and licked my sex.

I came off the bed, arching and moaning, strength suddenly flowing through my veins at the taut nub he’d just inflamed.

“Avery?” he growled, concern in that singular word.

I panted, unable to speak for a moment. “I’m fine. Really, I am.”

“I take it you liked that?”

“Yes,” I breathed. “Oh, yes.”

He waited a heartbeat, then two, as if having to watch me breathe to ensure I was still alive and very much *there*. And when my rapid breaths continued to fill the room, his attention shifted back to my core, to my engorged sex just waiting for his kiss.

He licked me again, groaning, as that deep sound vibrated against my nub.

My entire body shook. My breathing turned ragged again as he devoured my sex, licking and lapping at me as if he wanted to eat me whole.

I bucked and arched, my fingers tangling in his hair as pleasure built inside me that was so intense, I could barely breathe.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “Your taste is addictive.”

I grasped the bedsheets, my hands balling into fists. Every moment of his mouth on me was the most exquisite torture, yet he seemed to sense every single time he brought me to the edge since he’d then pull back just before the waves crested, teasing me again, those *maddening* light swirls and touches returning that made me want to scream.

“For the love of the gods, don’t stop. Wyatt, *please*, don’t stop!”

I settled on my back, heart beating two hundred times a minute, but I forced myself to take a deep breath and loosen my fingers.

He chuckled deeply, the sound entirely too filled with male satisfaction. If I were stronger and not trying so desperately to stay present for all of this, I would have ripped at his hair and forced his mouth on my sex until I came on his face. But my arms felt weak again, that plaguing tiredness again threatening to consume me.

“So beautiful,” he murmured before he settled again between my legs, his eyes shining as he took his pleasure by giving me mine.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, letting myself feel all of the tantalizing sensations washing through me.

His tongue and mouth moved expertly, sucking, licking, and nipping until I returned to molten heat in his arms, every nerve in my body electrified as a deep throbbing need took root in my core.

But as before, he stopped just as I was about to reach that peak and crash all around.

I snarled, unable to help it. The need he was evoking in me was so strong. It was bordering on pain. I’d never wanted a man so desperately.

As though sensing that I could no longer think or recite my name, he finally shifted on the mattress to crawl back up my body to my lips.

“You’re incredible,” he whispered, then dipped his head to place a soft kiss on my mouth. “So responsive.” He nipped my ear. “I could do this to you all night.”

I moaned. “No, not all night. *Now*. I don’t think I can take any more.”

He chuckled, the sound so satisfied he practically purred.

Wanting to touch him more, *needing* him to fill my core or rub me to climax—or do something, *anything*—I spread my hands across his hard abs, reveling in his skin’s silky feel and the absolute steel that lay beneath my palms.

His breath sucked in.

I bit back a laugh. I was weak, yes, but I wasn’t paralyzed. I could still lift my hands, stroke his length, and kiss his neck.

“I thought I was doing all of the work,” he said hoarsely when I reached lower and slid my hand into his boxers to run my hand over his silken length.

“I’ve felt a sudden sense of rejuvenation.”

He hissed when I encircled him and squeezed before pumping him once, twice, then three times.

Every muscle in his body tightened, the veins in his neck standing out like thick ropes.

“Two can play at this game,” I whispered before biting his earlobe.

A shudder ran through him, followed by a deep groan.

I ran my tongue down his skin, then bit the sensitive area at the base of his neck. A low rumble vibrated his chest, but then he crushed me to him before his lips found mine.

I gasped in surprise at how quickly he’d unleashed his strength.

As if sensing the rough way he'd just gripped me, his hold suddenly loosened as worried eyes met mine. "Are you okay?"

I nodded quickly, too breathless to speak.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Gods no!"

His lips curved in a relieved, seductive smile before he leaned down again, our lips molding as one.

I sucked in a breath when he nestled deeper between my thighs as his calloused hands gripped my ass.

"You're so wet, you're dripping," he whispered. "I can smell the honey that's between your legs."

My muscles quivered, and I sank more into the pillow, then met his eyes. "It's all for you."

He growled low in his throat, his wolf shining through his eyes.

"No more games," I whispered. "I need you. Now."

His jaw locked, his chest rising, and with aching precision, he removed his boxers, his erection stiff, ready, and so large I couldn't look away.

Naked at last, he lowered himself down until his tip prodded my entrance.

I hissed in pleasure and curled my hips upward, begging him to sink into me.

But he brought his mouth down again, devouring me in a deep kiss that made my toes curl and my pulse feel as though it would leap through my skin.

He rubbed himself against me, groaning when my slippery heat opened, my swollen mound more than ready to accommodate his massive length.

"Avery, fuck, Avery," he whispered, his voice raw and thick. "I don't want to hurt you, but the need to *fuck* you—" His breath sucked in when I raised my hips more. His tip penetrated me a second time, just an inch, and I gasped when he pulled back, breaking that delicious contact. "I don't want to be gentle. I want to—"

"That's what I want too," I whispered. I wrapped my legs around his waist, his cock trapped between my thighs. "Take me hard. Make it rough. Make it whatever you need it to be. You won't hurt me. I promise."

"But this is about what *you* want, not what I want."

"Trust me, you couldn't do anything I don't want."

The light in his eyes grew as his erection again grazed my entrance.

I shuddered in pleasure, but the fatigue that had been weighing me down since yesterday made my body feel heavy.

Forcing it back, I gritted my teeth and made myself stay alert, not wanting to miss even a second of this. Because I knew *this* would be my last time with him. My only time with him.

And I wanted to cherish every second of it before I slipped away from this world.

"Avery," he whispered. He pressed another kiss to my neck. "Stay with me," he said urgently.

"Yes." I curved into him. "I'm here."

He kissed me, holding back once more, so tender despite the vibrating need that strummed from him like chords from a harp. I *knew* he was holding back. I knew that he wanted to tear into me, devour me, and violently plunge his entire length inside me.

But he was also scared. Despite what I claimed, I knew that fear of hurting me, making my

condition worse, ravaged his soul.

He stopped for a brief moment, pulling back and taking a deep breath. His hands trembled, his entire body shaking with desire. The evidence of it prodded my entrance, his shaft like steel and pulsing against my core.

But despite what he wanted, despite the need to ravage my sex in a powerful thrust, his wide hands stayed tame, his kisses soft.

And when his body, so heavy and strong, yet careful and loving, draped over me, I saw the depth of emotion that swam in his eyes.

His eyes glowed, his chest rising fast. Aching desire swirled in his irises, but so did something else, something deeper and more reverent—something that time and death couldn't destroy. The weight of it pulled at me, tugging at my heart, bathing my body in its warm light, until the love was so potent it consumed me and filled my pores.

"I love you, Avery," he said on a raspy breath. "Tonight. Tomorrow. Always. You're the only woman I'll ever love."

And then he sank into me, inch by inch, his hard length filling and stretching me as my body sheathed around him.

I gasped, unable to say or do more, because the feel of him—gods, the *feel* of him—nothing had ever felt so right.

And when he was finally fully settled inside me, stretching my inner walls so tightly that I'd never felt so achingly full, he began to move.

He stared down at me from above, entwining his fingers through mine. I held eye contact, unable to break from the emotional bond that was forming between us.

He groaned, his muscles straining, and I knew he was trying to go slow, to be gentle, yet the heat in me was growing fast, so fast, and so out of control.

"More," I whispered.

He picked up his pace, sliding in and out, tentatively at first, but then increasing his tempo until he was thrusting into me so deeply that each pump made me want to scream in ecstasy.

"More."

"Avery," he growled. His cock rubbed deep inside me, so incessantly, that the waves began to build.

"Yes. More."

He growled, his eyes shining bright, and my heart tripped when his canines lengthened, a wolfish gleam in his eyes.

With a suck of breath, he shut his eyes, his neck straining as he fought his nature.

"Wyatt, look at me."

But he kept his eyes closed and released one of my hands to grip my hip, to hold me beneath him as he rammed his length into me again and again.

A quiver shook his body. Then another as tension stretched across his face, an internal war battling within him that was evident for all to see.

With him still pumping relentlessly into me, my body trembled, on the verge of climaxing. "Wyatt, look at me!"

When he finally opened his eyes, those warring emotions hadn't lessened.

His irises flashed. His wolf was there.

"I'm trying not to," he said roughly, his voice so gravely, a mixture of man and wolf. "I'm fighting him."

“But you want to claim me.”

“More than you could know.” He bit on his lip, his canines still lengthened as his cock drove into me, pumping harder and faster with each thrust.

My tits bounced, and I cried out. I was so close to coming. So *close*.

“Claim me,” I whispered. “Please. I want you to, because I’ll always be yours, and you’ll always be mine. Forever.”

A snarl tore from his throat as his wolf brightened his eyes.

His hips slammed into me again, as he began fucking me in earnest.

I cried out, another wave building. I didn’t know how much more I could take. I thought for sure my orgasm would shatter at any moment, that the peak was there, so close that my body felt strung so tightly that I could uncoil at the slightest touch.

But just when I thought for certain the crash would come, the wave built higher. Then higher.

I arched my neck, giving him full access. He continued thrusting into me, so violently the headboard slapped against the wall, and when he descended toward my neck, his eyes glowed and his canines glistened.

“Avery!” he exclaimed in an agonized voice.

“Yes, claim me!” I grasped his head and wrenched him the rest of the way toward my throat.

A fierce growl tore from him before he bit into me. I moaned at the onslaught of pain and lust that shot through my core.

He released my hands and gripped both of my hips in a bruising embrace as he plundered into me with a frenzy while staying latched onto my neck.

He snarled again, the sound throaty, and that’s when I felt it—his magic seeping inside me, raging through my veins, heating my blood, as his claiming took root.

I closed my eyes, relishing the feel of his cock as his power slid through my veins, connecting with the vacant hole in my chest, where my magic had once resided, as his desperately tried to fill it.

But not even an alpha’s power could penetrate the encapsulated magic of the Safrinite comet.

But his love burned through me, infusing warmth and energy into my limbs that I hadn’t felt in days, and a momentary sense of power filled me.

I raked my hands down his back as he picked up a feverish tempo, slapping even harder and deeper, so savagely that I couldn’t breathe.

Another wave built inside me, the peak like a mountain that grew taller and steeper with every thrust he made.

And all the while, his claiming swam through me, marking me, owning me, sealing me forever as his.

When the final remnants of his magic soaked into my cells, permeating my senses, and altering my scent to always carry a hint of his, his thrusts slowed briefly as the tip of his engorged erection rubbed that spot deep inside me.

He unlatched from my neck, his eyes once again connecting with mine, and that time when he slammed his cock into me, the peak finally burst.

I screamed his name when an explosive orgasm rocked my soul and crashed through my core in waves so violent that my entire body bucked uncontrollably.

I screamed his name, again and again, as the unrelenting waves of ecstasy claimed my heart and possessed my mind.

Wyatt roared his release, his climax joining mine, and together we spiraled into another world, another dimension, as our love for one another transcended above this realm, through the stars, and

entwined our souls in the galaxies of time.

Chapter 21

~ *WYATT* ~

I panted heavily, unable to breathe. Avery still lay beneath me. I'd collapsed on top of her, barely catching myself in time so my full weight didn't crush her.

I still couldn't think. Could barely move. I'd never experienced anything like that. My orgasm had exploded through me, making me see stars, as my magic had entwined with Avery's soul, tethering her to me with a bonded thread.

It'd been perfect. Magical. Otherworldly.

I'd heard from other males what it was like to claim one's mate, but words didn't do it justice. The sensations and power that shook through me when the claiming had taken root . . .

Gods, I would never forget that cataclysmic feeling.

I tenderly brushed a lock of hair from her face, and she murmured softly, already surrendering to sleep. She cuddled into me, a sated glow filling her cheeks, as I felt inside myself for our bond, that luminescent silk ribbon which connected me to my mate.

I closed my eyes, concentrating on my core, and then . . .

There.

It floated inside me, a tiny glowing thread linking me and Avery forever. A growling surge of satisfaction coursed through me, a rumble vibrating my throat. I felt like puffing my chest. Beating drums. Roaring for the entire world to hear that Avery was *mine*.

I'd claimed her. Marked her. Had fiercely possessed her. And now she was mine to cherish and protect for always.

A tight band squeezed around my lungs. Gods, I loved her.

I gathered her to me, rolling gently to my side until her head was cradled in the crook of my arm.

She snuggled into me more, her breath creating soft puffs on my neck. I felt again for the bond. Avery's emotions strummed to me. They were dim and faint since she was sleeping, but I still felt them.

Contentment.

Absolute satiation. I puffed up with pride at that one.

And fierce . . . love.

My throat tightened when I felt her love for me. The warm, fragrant feel of it bathed me in lilacs, cushioned me in clouds, and swathed me in silk.

"I would die for you," I whispered to her softly before kissing her on the cheek. "And I will do anything to save you."

I lay with her for seconds that stretched into minutes. I spent the entire time watching her sleep while memorizing her features. She was mine. I had to protect her and keep her safe.

Which meant I needed to leave her.

I was loathe to let go of her but knew I must.

I slid out from under the covers and quickly threw on clothes while I watched my mate sleeping.

Fear quivered through me. She'd grown cooler and cooler as the evening had ticked by. Whatever strength my claiming had infused into her was slipping away.

Dark circles lined her lower eyelids. Those faint lines hadn't been there this morning. And her entire body was now so white it resembled snow. She'd still had some color a few hours ago. And even though her chest still rose, her breaths were shallow and infrequent.

My gaze snagged to the faint crescent moon that shadowed Avery's neck. My mark. It shimmered in the firelight. I traced my finger over it so softly that she didn't stir.

Mine.

My mate.

She'd wanted me to mark her. She'd *known* what that would mean, and she still chose it, which meant she wanted to be mine, and now she was.

But for how long?

That pragmatic realization nearly shattered me in its intensity, crashing down on me in a relentless avalanche of despair.

No.

I couldn't lose her.

A snarl threatened to rip from my throat. I choked it down and strode silently to the door. The lock clicked softly when I opened it, a shimmer of magic washing over my skin.

I closed it behind me, the door latching with a flare. Before I'd even turned around, a soft, seductive voice crooned from the hallway shadows.

"I wondered if you were ever going to emerge from there." Nicholas leaned against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other. His face was a mask of boredom, yet I caught the glint in his eye.

"How long have you been waiting there?"

"Long enough to know what was happening in your room." He shrugged. "I told you I would be nearby."

I locked my jaw. Knowing he'd heard me make love to Avery, that he'd heard her cries and passion, made me want to rip his head off.

He rolled his eyes. "Don't bother getting cross. It's nothing I haven't heard before." He pushed away from the wall and sauntered toward me. "Would you like to get back to work now?"

I gave a curt nod, not trusting myself to speak as fury simmered underneath my skin.

Wisely, instead of baiting me with more comments, the vampire glided back toward the Sacramentum Library.

Several staff members passed us in the hallway, keeping to the shadows with their heads dipped and their footsteps quiet.

I knew that hundreds of witches, sorcerers, and supernaturals worked within these cavernous walls, but I'd never heard idle conversation or soft laughter from them.

"Have they found anything new?" I growled, agitation making my hands flex and unflex.

Nicholas pursed his lips. "I do believe Master Ambrose recently found something. He sounded almost giddy when I spoke to him a few minutes ago, which says something. As you may know, gargoyles rarely get excited unless it's a novel finding."

I picked up my pace, my strides eating up the stone floor. When we reached the library's gigantic monolithic doors, Nicholas ushered me inside.

As before, entering into the room was like stepping into a void. Invisible forces pushed against me, slowing my movements and dulling sound.

Several gargoyles were perched upon ladders as they ascended the high shelves to retrieve books and scrolls. The shelves stretched for miles in the huge cavern, farther than I could see. Unlike at the SF, the shelves here didn't float but were firmly anchored to the earth.

In the corner, a group of supernaturals crowded around a table, their attention held by a large tome. They whispered quietly to one another, or at least, it sounded like whispering. They probably spoke at a normal decibel level but the wards and enchantments dulled their voices. A gargoyle sat at their side, pointing out various things in the large book with his curled claw.

“Ah, Major Jamison.” Another gargoyle hobbled toward us, wearing a similar-looking robe to Master Romanus. The cobalt-blue woolen robe hung low, hiding his clawed feet.

“Master Ambrose,” Nicholas said with a bow. “I trust you have the document you informed me of?”

“Indeed.” The gargoyle beckoned us with a bent claw and pointed at a table with a lone scroll sitting on its smooth wooden surface.

Even from the distance I could tell the scroll was old. Despite the anti-aging magic that throbbed heavily in the air, the scroll’s edges looked worn, its parchment yellow, and tiny cracks and crevices creased the rolled scroll at unnatural angles.

The group in the corner quieted when we approached, their eyes following us. They only resumed their hushed conversation after we passed.

I gritted my teeth together to keep my pulsing anger from overwhelming me. My mate was dying. I’d left her in our chambers alone. And everything was moving *too goddamned slowly*.

I was seconds away from picking the gargoyle up and carrying him to the table when he finally reached it.

“Here we are.” Master Ambrose stepped onto a stool. With careful precision, he unrolled the scroll.

My eyes widened. The scroll didn’t contain any text. Only a drawing of symbols, or perhaps they were shapes, and at the bottom a group of figures formed a circle. The figures were so tiny it was impossible to identify who they were, but they stood in a circle with joined hands.

I studied the rest of the drawing. Very faint colors splashed the circular shapes, as if vibrant colors had once graced this piece of work but time had faded it. There were ten circles in total, sitting on a straight line. All of them were of various colors—red, purple, yellow, green, blue—and were different sizes.

Nicholas arched an eyebrow. “Well, this is interesting. Can you tell us what it is and what it means?”

Master Ambrose clasped his claws. “We believe this a drawing of the fae lands’ solar system.” He tapped the circles drawn on the line one by one. “Daphnis, Jeulic, Merimum, Eucaladas, Titun . . .” He listed off the planets in order. “And *this*,” he added, tapping the circle at the end of the line that held faint hints of purple dye which now looked like watered-down orchid, “is the Safrinite comet.”

My brow furrowed as I studied the drawing more. I placed my hands on my hips. “What makes you think that’s the Safrinite comet?”

“Look at the date beneath it.” He pointed to a very tiny smudge of ink directly beneath the faint purple ball.

My lips parted, and I had to lean down to see that the smudge was actually two lines of text, so tiny that I could barely read them. My head jerked back. “Those are the dates when the Safrinite comet appeared in the fae lands—the first time two thousand years ago and the other week, but those lines are so small. It could’ve easily been mistaken for a blob of ink. How did you catch it?”

Master Ambrose grinned, revealing terrifyingly sharp teeth and thin gray lips. But instead of replying, he merely shrugged.

Nicholas chuckled. “There’s a reason the Bulgarian libraries are world renowned. Our gargoyles are highly esteemed for their clever findings. I can see why this made you excited, Master Ambrose. It is a rare find indeed.”

“How old is this document?” I peered closer at it.

Master Ambrose tilted his head. “We believe it’s around two thousand years old.”

My frown deepened. “Yet the date of the comet’s second coming is written on it. How was that known two thousand years ago?” Similar to earth, the fae lands hadn’t had advanced scientific technology back then.

“That I do not know,” the gargoyle replied. “But that’s not the interesting part.” He tapped his claw on the parchment, being careful not to tear or puncture it. “Do you see how they’re all aligned?” He once again ran his claw along the straight line that connected the circles. “Masters Romanus, Godric, and I believe this indicates the alignment of the planets, another rare celestial event that occurs in the fae lands.”

My breath hitched. “The alignment of the fae lands’ planets? But isn’t that happening—”

“Tonight.” Nicholas grew completely still.

My breathing quickened when I recalled the news stories I’d seen on TV during the past month. There had been coverage of the impending alignment happening in the fae lands, just as there’d been coverage of the Safrinite comet. The fae lands highly anticipated every celestial event since they each infused new magic into their world, and the biggest events even spilled over into earth’s supernatural news stories.

“So, according to this map, the Safrinite comet and the alignment are related,” I said, thinking out loud.

Master Ambrose shifted on his stool. “Yes, based on this document, they’re related, especially given this date here.” He pointed again at another faint smudge under the aligned planets.

My jaw dropped when I saw the date. “That’s the date in the fae lands *today*, which means that whoever drew this map, however many hundreds or thousands of years ago, also knew something significant would happen regarding the Safrinite comet and the alignment. But what does that have to do with Avery?” I studied the circle of figures again at the bottom. My jaw worked. Perhaps *they* would know. “Who are those people?” I asked the gargoyle.

He shook his head. “We haven’t identified them, but we shall continue trying to do so.”

Nicholas frowned, then leaned over the map. His shoulder-length blond hair brushed the worn document. “You said that Avery was in the fae lands when the Safrinite comet appeared and at its apex the magic took a hold of her, and tonight the alignment occurs, once again in the fae lands.” He looked at me expectantly.

My eyes widened. “Meaning something may happen again to her if she’s present in the fae lands when the alignment happens tonight.”

Nicholas nodded. “Yes.”

“How long do we have until the alignment?”

Nicholas checked his watch. “According to my calculation with the time difference—” His eyes widened. “Less than an hour.”

My heart skipped a beat. “We have to go. Now.”

I was already whizzing out of the library. A rush of air behind me told me the vampire was hot on my heels.

In a blur of speed, we arrived at my chambers. I inserted the enchanted key into the lock, twisting it in a flurry before barreling through the door.

Avery still slept. She didn't even stir, and she looked closer to death.

My heart squeezed, and my insides churned. I frantically felt for our bond.

The tiny thread still glowed inside me, her faint sleepy emotions strumming along it.

I carefully dipped down at her side. Her limp hand felt like ice.

Nicholas entered the room behind me but stopped when he saw her naked body barely covered by the sheets. The bastard didn't even bother trying to hide the waft of arousal that shot off him.

I lunged toward the vampire, a growl reverberating through me as my hand shot out to encircle his neck.

He sidestepped just in time, his eyes widening. They'd glued to the mark on her neck. The crescent moon that let all know that Avery was *mine*.

But even that didn't dampen his arousal. "You claimed her," he said in shock. "Tonight. That's what you were doing in here."

"Yes," I snarled. "I told you she was mine." Rage poured through me that his eyes dared fall on my mate as she slept unaware in his presence.

His heated gaze raked over her full breasts and lean legs that even under a sheet were still evident to see.

A roar burst from my chest, but when I advanced on the vampire again, he backed up with his hands raised. "Apologies. Old habits die hard. I'll leave you to wake her."

I waited until he reached the door, using my body to block Avery from view. "Do you have access to a portal key?" I barked at him.

"Yes."

"Good, then get the fuck out of here and retrieve it. As soon as she's dressed, we leave."

Chapter 22

~ WYATT ~

Avery felt as light as a feather in my arms, as if death was not only claiming her life but her very essence, as though stealing the matter that made her whole.

She didn't wake when I dressed her, and it wasn't until I was standing back in the hall, Nicholas ready with a portal key in hand, that her eyes drifted open.

"Wyatt?" she said sleepily, sluggishly. A dull glaze coated her eyes.

"Yes, my love. We're going to the fae lands. The alignment is tonight. We think it might save you." My throat tightened. I knew the alignment wasn't a guarantee. I knew it may not save her, but it was the only clue we had, and time was running out.

Her eyelids fluttered closed again, her long dark lashes creating shadows on her cheeks, and her body grew still.

So still.

"We must go now!" I yelled.

Nicholas blurred forward with the portal key. He placed one hand on me, the other on Avery.

I bit back a growl when he touched her, but at least he was only touching her hand.

"Should we tell her parents what we're doing?" the vampire asked.

"No time. We go *now*."

The vampire whispered the words to initiate the transfer, and a void closed around us. Portal winds rushed through my hair, creating a deafening roar in my ears. It felt as though the world dropped out from under us as we fell through time and space, twisting, bending, and crunching until we were neither here nor there.

I tightened my hold on Avery, trying to shield her from the worst of it, but she lay like death in my arms, not seeming cognizant of what was happening around her.

It was the same when I'd whisked her through the portal following her cataclysmic reaction to the Safrinite comet.

The portal transfer's jarring sensation came to an abrupt end, and we stood in a vast field in the fae lands, near the same spot where the comet had attacked Avery.

As before, a city of supernaturals had camped out on the field outside of the capital. Everyone was stretched out on blankets or hovering on enchanted carpets which floated inches from the grassy field that bloomed with an abundance of wildflowers.

Energy buzzed through the air. The crowd was ripe with anticipation for the impending alignment. Distant music rose from the capital, the parties already started as torches lit the city in a splendor of fire and light.

Overhead a firework burst, the number '10' appearing.

"Ten minutes until the alignment fully occurs. We didn't miss it," I breathed. "Thank the gods."

"Indeed," Nicholas agreed.

In the sky, the planets were already coming together, their circular forms moving toward one another in a slow progression until they would form a perfect alignment, at which point they would blaze brighter than the earth's moon.

I hugged Avery closer to me, trying to transfer my warmth to her, but she still felt so very cold. “Let’s find a quieter place.”

I turned into a blur, Nicholas following, as I sought a less crowded location in the field.

Avery didn’t make a sound, not even when I came to a sudden halt that would have stolen the breath from other supernaturals not used to werewolf speed.

I kissed my mate tenderly on her forehead and then her cheeks. “Avery? My love, we’re here. Just hold on.”

She didn’t respond.

I’d stopped us near the forest, yet still close enough to the capital that I could easily access medical help if she jolted back to life and needed more care, but we were far enough away that we’d avoid prying eyes and curious onlookers. The last thing I wanted was my mate being made a spectacle of morbid curiosity.

“She’s still breathing,” Nicholas said. “But barely.”

My heart stopped when I looked down. In the moonlight of the impending alignment, it was even more apparent how much Avery’s skin had changed in the time since I’d dressed her. An ashen hue coated her cheeks, her breaths now few and far between.

“Fuck,” I whispered. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Panic rose in my chest, threatening to cut off my thoughts and unleash my wolf. *No. Stay calm. Don’t lose it now.*

I took a deep breath and kneeled in the tall grass. Floral scents from the wildflowers filled the air, similar to how flowers smelled on earth, yet different—sharper and more pungent.

“She was lying on the ground when the comet affected her the first time. Maybe she needs to be lying on the ground now, too, when the alignment hits.”

“It’s possible,” Nicholas replied.

Another firework erupted in the sky. The number ‘5’ glowed in silvery sparks. In the distance, a boisterous cheer rose from the spectators.

I whipped my shirt off so Avery wouldn’t lay directly on the crunching stalks and dry dirt, and then gently laid her down.

She didn’t stir.

I kneeled at her side, my heart thundering in my ears. That panicked feeling again rose inside my chest. I could barely breathe. Barely think. My mate was still dying.

She was still *dying*.

I felt her pulse, my stomach bottoming out.

“Her pulse is only thirty-seven.”

Nicholas kneeled, too, but once on the ground, he didn’t move. He grew deathly still.

Another moment passed, and he said, “She’s barely breathing. I only saw her chest rise a few times in the past minute.”

“I know,” I whispered.

I took her hand in mine, my own trembling. That thick feeling closed my throat again. If it grew any tighter, I wouldn’t be able to breathe because my mate was dying.

Dying.

And even a trip here to the fae lands wasn’t stopping it.

“Why isn’t she getting better?”

Nicholas’s expression was still blank, still guarded. “Maybe she won’t until the alignment fully occurs.”

I rocked back and forth on my haunches as the simmering need to *do something* nearly tore me apart.

“We have another option,” Nicholas said softly. “I could turn her.”

My jaw dropped. “Make her a vamp?”

“It may save her. It may not, but I’m willing to try.”

“As her maker she would be forever tied to you.”

“Correct.”

“And we don’t even know if that would save her.”

“Also true.”

My mind buzzed, moving at a dizzying speed as I tried to fathom all of the consequences turning Avery would evoke. “No. I won’t let you. That’s not a decision I’ll make for her. The alignment will save her. It has to.”

My heart screamed inside me. I had no idea if I was making the right choice. My mate’s life rested on the gamble we’d taken that answers lay here in the fae lands and the impending alignment could somehow miraculously save her.

But what if I’d chosen wrong?

What if at this exact moment, the gargoyles had discovered something else in their searches that revealed what we should have done, and I’d just made the most consequential decision of my life?

“Dammit!” Blood pulsed through my ears, creating a deafening roar in my head.

What if . . .

What if . . .

What if . . .

Another firework exploded in the sky, ‘4’.

I rocked closer to Avery, placing soft kisses on her closed eyes, her forehead, her cheeks. “Please, Little Flower. Please stay with me. I’ve only just found you again. I can’t lose you, Avery. I *can’t* live without you.”

A blazing eruption shot overhead. ‘3’.

The hope flaring in Nicholas’s eyes dimmed as another minute ticked by without improvement in Avery’s state.

My heart cracked, and as I sat beside her, gently holding her while whispering all of the ways that I loved her, I felt her slipping further and further away.

I wrapped my fingers around her cool, limp hand. “Avery?” I said quietly. “Can you hear me? Do you remember when I first saw you? At the ice cream shop? And the moment we met again, in the SF garage, when I could barely breathe since you took my breath away? And do you remember tonight? When I made love to you and claimed you as mine. You wanted that, my love. You wanted me. You wanted us. Please don’t leave me. Please don’t leave us. *Please*. I can’t live without you.”

She didn’t stir, not even a whisper.

Her body lay alarmingly still, her chest not rising, her heart barely beating.

I closed my eyes and felt inside me for our bond. It hummed quietly, faintly, still there, our threaded connection as fragile as a wisp of silk.

I prodded along it, feeling for her life force, and tried to connect to her feelings and emotions.

But all that lay on the other side was nothing.

Not one single thread of life or existence.

Not one breath of emotion or love.

My breath hitched. *No, no, no.*

“Avery!” I said gruffly, aching. “Please, my love. Please stay with me.”

Another firework exploded. ‘2’.

Nicholas’s expression didn’t falter, but I felt his gaze skittering over us, and a sense of sadness emanated from the vampire.

He closed his eyes. “This may be the end,” he said quietly. “The alignment may not save her. You should say your goodbyes.”

“NO!” I yelled, but then immediately regretted my outburst even though it didn’t elicit a response from my mate. Not even a flutter of her eyelashes occurred at my vicious sound. “She can’t die. She can’t!” My voice broke, and I rocked forward, touching her hair, her lips, her eyes, her arms.

“Don’t leave me, don’t leave me,” I whispered over and over. An aching void opened up inside me. “Don’t leave me, Avery.”

A faint breath rattled her chest.

Hope flared inside me as brightly as the sun. I shot upright, my eyes wide as my gaze raked over her features. “Avery?”

But just as quickly as her breath occurred, it ended, and with an agonizing awareness, I realized it was the only time she’d breathed in the last minute.

Another firework exploded. A shining blue ‘1’ appeared above us.

I gripped her hand harder. Aching nausea roiled within me. We were close. *So close* to the impending alignment.

The planets were nearly a perfect circle now, so bright and huge they resembled the earth’s moon.

Only one more minute. *One* minute. “Please, my love. Please hold on! We’re almost there.”

But she didn’t respond.

I felt for her pulse again, searching in a panic for the beat of her heart. At least twenty seconds passed before I felt a very faint single beat lift her skin.

“Less than thirty seconds,” Nicholas whispered. “It’s not enough time to turn her now. Her fate is sealed.”

I felt for another beat, another thrum of life.

But it didn’t come.

Avery’s pulse stopped.

Her chest didn’t rise.

My eyes widened. “Avery!” I roared, my hands coming to her shoulders. I shook her, yelled at her, tried to infuse *life* into her. “AVERY!”

Her limp body stayed still. Deathly still.

I collapsed toward her chest, my ear going to her heart.

Silence.

Vast echoing silence.

And that’s when I felt it. The bond. Our connection.

It snapped like a tethered thread on the wind. As if silent shears had snipped her life away, cutting her from this realm as she floated into nothingness.

A cavern of pain cracked open inside me, and burning fire roared through my body, the flames eating me alive from within.

I roared over and over as agony ripped through me.

Our bond was gone.

The threaded connection had broken.

And that could only happen if my mate was dead.

Chapter 23

~ *EVERY* ~

An ear-splitting roar filled with pain, anguish, and gut-wrenching sorrow lashed through my senses.

That roar. That never-ending, aching *roar*. All I could hear was that agonizing sound.

Unparalleled pain ripped at my soul as that roar screamed at the world, striking through everyone's heart, as though the sound could tear off the flesh of anyone nearby.

I tried to open my eyes, to see what had happened, to run, or soothe, but the world was darkness. Nothing touched my skin or awakened my senses, only that desperate cry of never-ending *pain* that shattered my heart and squeezed the life from my breath.

And then . . .

Weightlessness.

An image appeared in front of me. A field. Wildflowers. Night-kissed wind. Me lying on my back surrounded by tall stalks of swaying grass and fragrant flowers.

Wyatt crouched at my side, kneeling over me, his body rocking as sobs heaved his chest and shattered his large frame.

Nicholas sat at my other side. The vampire's eyes were bright, his face haunted, his body absolutely still.

What's happening?

I floated above them, but I tried to reach for Wyatt. The urge to comfort and console him pulled at my soul like an anchor, demanding that I return to his side and trace my palms over his cheeks and wipe the tears from his eyes.

But I couldn't move.

I kept floating and floating, moving higher and higher.

Terror seized me. I *couldn't* return. I pushed and fought the tether that stuck to my back, yanking and maneuvering me in a dance of empty acrobatics as wind and air filled my being, ebbing and flowing, forcing me to rise higher and drift faster.

No!

Wyatt!

But he disappeared beneath me. Not seeing me. Not *seeking* me.

That's when it hit me.

I'm dead.

Oh gods! The Safrinite comet killed me!

I floated toward the stars, that tether robbing me of choice or rights. The ground disappeared beneath me. The sky was alive, *glowing*.

Millions of stars filled the vast galaxy, but I didn't want that.

I wanted to live.

To be with Wyatt. To *live*.

I lunged for the ground again, desperately trying to claw my way back to him, but a lone celestial event demanded my attention. The aligning planets shone brighter than the moon, forcing my eyes to

pry away from the meaning to my soul, to the man that cradled my body and mourned my loss to the depths of his being.

I gasped. The planets were inches away from a perfect sphere, their celestial bodies universally circular and filled with great power—immense *magic*.

Clouds drifted around me, wispy yet vacant. I saw them but didn't feel them as I rose higher and flew faster.

No! I have to get back!

A burst of shining light abruptly filled the sky. Blinding moonlight bathed the atmosphere. Power rippled through the heavens as magic burst forth from the celestial miracle.

The alignment had formed—a perfect body in the vast galaxy as magic erupted throughout the solar system, blazing through everything in its path, invigorating the stars, and drenching this realm in a cloak of new power.

Cheers and applause rose from the ground, the fae and supernaturals clapping in delight.

My spectral form *slammed* into a wall, jolting in space as the tether snapped.

I cried out in surprise, but no sound came from my lips, and then . . . a fracture. A crack. A fissure along the fabric of space and time continuum.

I screamed as the world plummeted past me. Fire coursed through my veins, heating my mind as the fae world pulled at me like a magnet, yanking, ripping, and *refusing* to let me go.

I was falling back to the ground.

Spiraling.

Descending at a speed greater than sound.

The clouds disappeared above me.

Air rushed past me.

My vision blurred in and out of focus.

A castle.

Fireworks.

The field.

A forest. I squinted. In the forest stood a circular group of robed men. Watching. Waiting.

But waiting for what?

What's happening?

Agony ripped through my limbs as the ground came at me faster and faster until the world became a kaleidoscope of blurred colors, vibrant scents, and fire licking the center of my being.

My body appeared in front of me a millisecond before I slammed into it.

The power of being jolted back into my corporeal self and made me scream.

Blackness.

I screamed again.

Fire.

I ripped and clawed, trying to get to the surface of the thick tide that pulled me under by an unseen force, a powerful current that robbed me of breath and sight. Fiery light suddenly burst along my limbs, and then finally I broke through. I surfaced to the feel and sight of my hands and legs radiating with liquid mercury.

I screamed again.

Power. *Ungodly* power blazed along my limbs and vibrated through my senses.

I shrieked from the unbearable pain.

Someone cried out.

Another yell.

Scorching heat.

I was dying again, being flayed *alive*.

Blazing light. So bright it felt as if my eyes were melting, and the sun had touched my soul.

Chaos. Death. *Life*.

What's happening? Dear gods, what's happening?

A nuclear reaction detonated. Atoms split. Elements formed. The universe tilted and expanded like a cosmic rubber band in reaction to the creature, the *being*, that was being born inside me.

I screamed again as ancient magic coursed through my body, twining around my nerves, consuming my cells, and devouring everything in its path.

Oh fuck, it burns!

I was dying.

Dying again.

A breath filled my lungs. So sweet, so pure. A waterfall of fragrances filled my senses—juniper, pine, jasmine, oak.

No. This wasn't death.

It was *life*. Soul-shattering *life*.

The essence of organic matter, the well of knowledge, the foundation that created and destroyed everything on this plane of existence.

The center of my soul fused with that great power.

Another yell came from someone beside me.

A rush of magic skittered over my skin like lightning on water. Electric currents jolted my limbs. My body spasmed, rising, hovering above the world as this *thing* I was becoming defied all odds.

And then . . .

Silence.

Chapter 24

~ WYATT ~

Blood pounded through my ears, and hope so sharp I could taste it on my tongue cut through the pain knifing at my heart.

Avery was screaming and screaming, her body convulsing, her nerves electrifying, but she was breathing. She was breathing after she'd *died*. "Avery! Gods, Avery!"

But she fought me. Her eyes had locked closed, her face screwed up in a mask of pain and anguish. I tried to hold on to her, tried to help her through whatever magic the alignment had birthed inside her, but her clawing hands kept fighting me.

"Avery, open your eyes. My love! Open your eyes!"

And then . . .

Silence.

Nicholas and I fell back as the world around my mate became as still as the emptiness between realms. A vacuum of sound and energy filled the field where my mate lay unresponsive.

A brief jolt of inexistence stopped *everything*.

Then . . . the world began turning again, that brief sense of everything being off ended.

Good gods, what was that? I dragged in a breath then lunged toward Avery.

I didn't breathe as my gaze glued to her chest, searching for a sign of life in my mate.

Her chest lifted and dipped.

Then it rose again.

But her face remained blank, her eyes closed as her dark lashes rested on her cheeks.

A sob of gratitude overwhelmed me. I cradled her to me, her body still limp and unconscious, but her skin was no longer ice. Fire licked her limbs, warming her body and heating my hands. Electric jolts followed, zapping and singeing the air around her, but she *breathed*.

"Avery?" I said softly, achingly.

Her body arched, bucking in my grip. She shrieked again, the sound sharp enough to slash through death, yet her eyes remained closed. Pain clouded her face. Her nose scrunched up, her mouth opening in a silent cry.

I snarled, my hands going to her shoulders, intent on stopping whatever consumed her, but her body convulsed again as Nicholas's eyes widened even more.

"What's happening to her?" I asked him desperately.

He shook his head, his face a mask of disbelief. "She's not dead. How is she not dead? We saw her *die*."

But as much as the realization that Avery now lived made my heart pound with hope, it was quickly doused in icy dread.

Something was happening to my mate. Something very, very wrong. "Avery—"

Her eyes flashed open.

Light the color of violets shone from her irises. Heat rippled from her, rising from her skin like a fever ravaging her body. And then the purple light in her eyes faded away, her irises once again brown flecked with gold.

“Avery?” I croaked.

She didn’t respond, but the heat rising from her continued even though her cheeks weren’t red, and sweat didn’t line her brow. Awareness flickered in her pupils, a rupture of something coming *alive*.

My lips parted, and I hesitantly reached for her again. “Little Flower?”

But the second my hand made contact with hers, she flinched away.

She blinked, and it felt as if an eon of time passed between us in a millisecond.

I shook my head as the strange sensation washed through me and then vanished. But when I faced her again, my muscles bunched.

Fear had sprouted in her eyes, and that turbulent, stormy swirling violet light, a visual cacophony of confusion and power, flashed in her eyes again.

“Avery?” I whispered.

“Who are you?” she snarled. “Don’t touch me!”

My head snapped back. “Avery? It’s me. My love, it’s *me*. Wyatt.”

But she retreated more, skittering back a few feet among the wildflowers like an animal cornered by a predator.

My brow furrowed, my chest heaving. It felt as though I was drowning. I could barely catch my breath, but I needed to go to her, soothe her, *comfort* her through whatever terrible magic had rendered her dead and then whole.

I reached for her again and placed my hand on her arm.

She bared her teeth, hissing.

My hand flew back, an electric shock zapping my palm as her eyes clouded with distrust. That violet light in her eyes darkened, swirling into a hurricane of power. “I said, *don’t touch me!*”

I inched back. My heart felt like a galloping beast in my chest. *For the love of all the Gods and realms, what in the universe is happening?*

Nicholas and I shared wild-eyed looks.

“Avery?” the vampire said soothingly. His pupils dilated, power strumming from his gaze as his compulsion flowed from him in silky threads. “We’re not going to hurt you. We’re just trying to help, but we need you to remain calm.”

My breath sucked in that he dared compel my mate, but Avery hissed at him, too, and a wave of power burst from her into the vampire.

Nicholas flew back, the force rendering him flat on the grass.

“Stay away from me!” she commanded.

Her words thundered across the field, carrying the strength of a thousand men, an army of power and magic, and that same sense of fractured time cut through me again, as if everything stopped and then joltingly restarted.

My heart skipped.

In the distance, the cheering crowd had abruptly become silent. Bewildered expressions flashed across their distant features.

I shook my head, trying to dispel the strange effects of whatever had just occurred.

When I finally felt like I could breathe, I raised my hands, trying to appear nonthreatening. “Avery, my love, please,” I begged. “Let me help you.”

But my quiet plea only made her hiss more. She backed up again as she abruptly created a magical dome around herself. It sprang from the earth, sprouting from nature as Avery wrapped her arms around her torso, that fearful look strumming through her eyes.

I rocked back on my haunches as the shimmering barrier formed a protective cocoon around my mate. My heart beat harder.

Something wasn't right. Avery looked at us like she didn't know us, like she'd never seen us before.

"Avery," I said softly, hoping my words would penetrate whatever magic she'd created around herself. "Do you know where you are? Do you know *who* you are?" I kept my distance, wariness filling me as the crackling magic hissed and smoked around her slim form. I'd never seen magic like that, had never *felt* anything like that.

If she'd heard me, she didn't let on.

Nicholas carefully inched closer to me, his eyes never leaving my mate. His expression darkened, his jaw clenching. "She doesn't remember us. She's probably confused. Maybe the alignment robbed her of her memories because of how traumatic it was."

I swallowed, my mouth going dry as I stared at my mate who assessed us with a distrustful look as she wrapped her limbs around herself, as though attempting to shield her person.

But she was my mate. *Mine* to protect.

Yet as my gaze drifted down her neck, down the smooth column of pale flesh and satin skin, my stomach dropped when I settled on the area near her collarbone.

Nothing marked her. The crescent moon shape was gone.

And that was when I realized what'd happened. Our bond had been cut when she died.

Death severed the mate bond among *all* mated couples.

Avery was no longer my bonded mate, not unless I claimed her again.

My shoulders collapsed under the weight of that knowledge.

Now my mate looked at me as though I were a stranger, yet her lilac scent still carried to me, penetrating the shield that surrounded her. It was stronger now, sweeter too—as ripe as a freshly picked lilac branch and as potent as a field of lilac trees—but it still smelled like *her*.

My mate was still there. She was still the Avery I knew and loved, yet now, she was *so* much stronger, and whatever had happened to her had destroyed her memories of who I was, but most importantly, of who *she* was.

A ragged breath shook my chest. I tilted my head, studying her as I sensed that something *else* had changed in her too. I could see it in the glint of her eye, the wary lilt of her stare.

She not only didn't know me—didn't know *us*—but whatever magic had been born inside her was too powerful for me to overcome. I couldn't rescue her through her protective shield, not unless she let me.

"Well, this is certainly unexpected," Nicholas stated. "How the hell do we get to her?"

My brow furrowed, my mouth tightening into a thin line. "I don't know, but I do know we can't unless she lets us."

"And if she doesn't?"

My nostrils flared. "She will, eventually she will. She's still my mate. She's still *mine* to cherish and protect. She just doesn't remember."



Avery and Wyatt's story continues in:

[*Hunted by Firelight*](#), book three in the *Supernatural Institute* series.

Download now on Amazon!

∞ ∞ ∞

Hi there! Krista Street here. Thank you so much for reading *Born by Moonlight*! I absolutely loved writing this book and hope you enjoyed it. There's so much to come for Avery and Wyatt, so I hope you enjoy the next installment!

∞ ∞ ∞

Also, do you have a minute to write a review on Amazon?
Book reviews really affect a book's success, so your review helps!
If you love this series, and don't mind showing your support, please take a moment to write a review. All it takes is one or two sentences. That's it!

∞ ∞ ∞

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Thank you again! ♥
Krista Street

Supernatural Institute
Don't miss out on this complete four-book series!

Book three, [*Hunted by Firelight*](#)



Book four, [*Kissed by Shadowlight*](#)



Magic in Light

Do you want to read more novels set in Krista Street's Supernatural world?

Check out, [*Magic in Light*](#), book one in a complete four-book series. You'll meet a few side characters from Supernatural Institute again, but don't worry, it's a completely separate storyline with different main characters, so you're not missing anything if you start it after Supernatural Institute.

Want a sneak peek? Read chapter one at the end of this book!



People on the brink of death come to me for life. I touch them, and my magic burns away their sickness. My gift is exhausting and painful, even dangerous. Which means I never intentionally touch anyone, and no one touches me.

So dating? Definitely not happening.

All of that changes when a cyber stalker threatens to burn me at the stake. I reluctantly hire a bodyguard, a six-foot-three mountain of temptation named Logan Smith, literally at my fingertips at all times.

Every fiber of my twenty-one-year-old virgin body vibrates for him. But when I accidentally touch him, my gift doesn't activate. Nothing happens except a zing of desire.

This is bad.

My mother told me about potential mates, but I'm Logan's employer. And come on, just *look* at him. Those broad shoulders and that firm backside...he's got to have a girlfriend back home.

But when the stalker crosses a line, Logan reveals a side of himself he kept hidden. He's not who he claimed to be, and his secret not only shatters my entire world but threatens everything I once believed.

[Download *Magic in Light* now!](#)

Beast of Shadows

Or try [Beast of Shadows](#), a enemies-to-lovers, fated mates standalone novel set in the Supernatural world.



Collin

I was warned not to leave my werewolf pack—that doing so would turn my wolf into a murderous rogue, but I didn't listen.

So now I live in the shadows, fighting to control my beast who's developed an insatiable thirst for human blood. I don't always succeed, which means the Supernatural Forces are out to euthanize me.

But then I see Brianna . . .

She calls to something deep inside me. Something I thought I'd lost.

Even though my beast craves her death, my heart aches for her to save my soul, so I take her for my own.

Brianna

For weeks, something's been . . . off. I can't explain it, but it's as if I'm being watched. Suddenly, I'm snatched off the street and thrown in a trunk by a terrifying man who shifts into a wolf.

Even though I fight Collin at every turn, something pulls me to his broken soul. We're drawn to each other, and my touch may be enough to heal his beast's psychotic mind, but the Supernatural Forces doesn't believe in second chances, and the SF *always* catches the rogue werewolves.

When they do, if I can't stop them . . . they'll kill him.

[Download *Beast of Shadows* now!](#)

Also by Krista Street

If you enjoy Krista Street's writing, make sure you check out her other complete series!

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Thank You

Thank you so much for reading *Born by Moonlight*, book two in the Supernatural Institute series. I'm so glad you enjoyed the first book enough to read the second. Thank you for reading my work! ♥

∞ ∞ ∞

Before you go, if you like my writing and want to stay in touch, [visit my website](#) to learn about **receiving new release texts** or signing up for my newsletter.

Or, you can follow me on Amazon by visiting my [Amazon Author Page](#) and clicking on the yellow button labeled "Follow." Amazon will *hopefully* email you when I release new books, although I can't guarantee that! ☺

Last, if you prefer social media, I'm on [Instagram](#) and post the occasional photo along with my new release stuff. I'm also on [Facebook](#) and am most active there. Feel free to join my FB reader group for sneak peeks, cover reveals, and updates: [Street's Peeps](#)

Thank you again for reading my work! I hope to meet you again in another novel soon! ♥

P.S. Turn the page for chapter one, in book one, of the Supernatural Community series, [Magic in Light!](#)

Chapter 1

The menacing words from the email stared back at me.

Dear Ms. Gresham,

Your time on this earth is ticking, witch. You'll be dead by the end of the month. Tick tock. Tick tock.

Your biggest fan.

“Daria?”

My head lifted from my laptop at the sound of my manager’s voice.

Cecile appeared behind me in the dressing room mirror. “Your new bodyguard is here.” Her gray hair swept back from her face in a matronly bun. Worry lines tightened her mouth, making her lips pucker.

Since this was the third death threat I’d received this week, I could understand her concern. I craned my neck to see around her. “Is he with you?”

“He’s waiting outside. I wanted to make sure you were ready to see him.”

“Yeah, I’m ready.” I pushed back my chair, the legs catching on the thin carpet.

“You can stay here, Dar. I’ll bring him in.”

Before I could protest, Cecile exited the tiny dressing room in our travel bus. The cheap brown paint covering the door peeled away from the surface, and the worn carpet had faded from years of too much sunlight. However, the bus ran and that was more important than any cosmetic appeal.

With trembling fingers, I closed my laptop, but when I tried to set it aside, it nearly fell from my shaky grip.

“Crap,” I whispered.

After muttering a spell under my breath, my laptop lifted in the air, my telekinetic magic holding it aloft. It glided to where I stored it by the desk and landed safely on the scarred wood shelf.

Forcing myself to take deep, steadying breaths, I peered out the window, hoping to catch a peek of my new bodyguard before he climbed aboard the bus.

But when I cracked the blinds, there was no sign of him. What I did see was a lone gas station across the road. Racks of junk food and miscellaneous paraphernalia filled the windows. Behind the gas station lay endless plains and a sky bathed in red.

We had pulled off some highway in rural southern Kansas, the scheduled pickup place to meet my bodyguard. I didn’t know the exact location. Tomorrow, we would be in western Nebraska after Mike drove us through the night.

I let the blinds fall back into place and plopped onto the chair. My bright turquoise eyes stared back at me in the dressing room mirror, reflecting my worried mood. *Just calm down, Dar.*

But that was easier said than done. Whoever my new guard was would be the first bodyguard I’d ever employed. Until recently, I’d never needed one.

I studied myself and smiled sadly. The image staring back at me looked like a younger version of my mother. For centuries, my mother’s people had birthed only daughters, and we all looked similar—golden hair, startling turquoise eyes, pale skin, and small frames.

If I ever had a daughter, she would be a near replica of me, and it wouldn't be just my looks she would inherit. She would also acquire my telekinetic magic and my healing light. My magic, I could hide and only use when needed, but my healing light was my purpose.

A purpose my mother and my nan had shared.

I hung my head. *I miss you both so much.*

The door to the dressing room squeaked open, startling me. Cecile appeared in the doorway, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. A few wispy strands of gray hair had escaped her normally tamed bun.

“Daria, this is Logan Smith.” Cecile sidestepped, revealing a tall, dark-haired man behind her.

My breath caught in my throat.

He had to be at least six-three, and his shoulders were so broad they brushed the doorway. Thick dark hair covered his head. His complexion was unblemished, his features chiseled, and a large duffel bag hung over his shoulder.

I swallowed my rush of awareness for how very ... *male* ... he was. *Wow.* I had no idea he would be so good looking.

Shaking myself, I stood to greet him.

According to Cecile, Logan Smith was twenty-five years old—four years older than I was—and had over six years of experience in security and came from a military background. He also came with a glowing resume and had passed his background check with flying colors. From here on, he would be traveling with us.

And hopefully keeping me safe so I can continue my supernatural-healing tour.

I held out my hand, knowing it would activate my gift but doing it anyway. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Daria Gresham.”

I tensed, waiting for his touch. Once our skin connected, my healing light would escape from the chest I buried it in deep within my belly. Unlike my telekinetic magic, my healing light had proved unruly. The only times I willingly let my light out was during my healing sessions, but touch triggered it despite my attempts to control it. A handshake with Logan guaranteed that unpleasant sparks would shoot up my arms once we made contact.

Still, social niceties required certain interactions, so I usually dealt with the unpleasant aftermath touch elicited. Besides, handshakes only lasted a second or two. Anyone could handle a second or two of pain.

Logan’s hand engulfed mine, his palm rough and warm. “Nice to meet you, too, although I wish the circumstances were different.”

My lungs seized, rendering speech impossible. I cringed. Waiting.

Logan pumped my hand once, twice, then ... he let go.

The sparks never came.

“Cecile’s told me you need protection.” Logan’s brown eyes grew alight with concern.

Frowning, I let my arm fall back to my side. “Um ... yeah, that’s right. I’ve been receiving death threats for the past few weeks.” I eyed his hand again. *Did I really not respond to him?* Shaking myself, I added, “And thanks for answering our ad and coming on such short notice. Cecile tells me you were formerly in the military but now do freelance work?”

“That’s right. I’ve been working personal security for a few years.”

My gaze unwillingly returned to his hand again. *How come I didn’t respond?*

Cecile gave me a curious look before waving toward the bunk beds in the back. “The plan is for you to stay with us on the bus.”

Logan hoisted his duffel bag higher. “That’s what I’m counting on. I can’t do my job if I’m not close.”

Cecile stepped forward. “If you’ll follow me, I can show you where to set your things.”

Logan gave me a small smile then trailed behind Cecile from the dressing room. I stepped to the doorway to watch, my frown deepening.

Logan showed no outward reaction to our bus’s grim interior on his way to the back. Even though our home on the road was clean, it was old. More than one visitor had wrinkled their noses at it.

I nibbled my lip and, against my better judgment, allowed myself a moment to study him. Faded, sturdy boots covered his feet. They were the kind of boots that would allow him to run at a moment’s notice but also plant a firm kick. Worn jeans hugged his lean waist and firm backside.

His fitted dark T-shirt awarded me a view of his strong back muscles bunching and tightening beneath the thin material when he moved. I bit my lip more, my stomach tightening. *Damn, he’s hot.*

But as soon as that thought came, I shook it off. He was also my employee, and I’d hired him for his competence, not his good looks.

What the heck’s the matter with you, Dar?

I returned to the desk to ponder my reaction, or rather non-reaction, to Logan’s touch. I figured it was a fluke, but the sight of my closed laptop on the scarred wooden shelf made any curiosity about my new bodyguard disappear.

My heart pounded, the staccato feeling growing more common every day. *“Your time on this earth is ticking, witch. You’ll be dead by the end of the month.”*

“Daria?” Cecile’s voice carried from the back of the bus. “Logan wants to speak to you.”

I shook off my thoughts and slipped my shoes on before retreating to where Cecile and Logan waited by the bunks. I passed the two couches at the front, along with the kitchen and the tiny table that could seat four since the bunks lay in the back. Our home was small, cramped at times, but it fulfilled our needs.

The carpet slid under my feet, and my stomach fluttered the closer I got to Logan. There was just something ... about him.

Logan stepped to the side to make room for me when I approached. I had to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. The top of my head barely reached his collarbone. The fluttering in my stomach increased just as the hiss of the door came from the front.

Mike jumped up the stairs. “Are we ready to hit the road?” His bushy black hair rested on his shoulders, hanging down from beneath his baseball cap. He’d worn the same New York Yankees cap for the past nineteen years.

“Excuse me.” Cecile bustled past Logan and me on her way to the front. “Yes, Mike. We’re ready to go. I just want to review our itinerary one more time.”

Mike rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Yes, yes ... I figured you would.” When he caught me watching him, he winked.

I smothered a smile and Logan cocked an eyebrow. I hurried to explain my amusement. “Cecile micromanages everything, and if she ever does it to you, don’t take it personally. She’s like that with everyone.”

“Good to know.” He scratched his jaw, and a moment of silence passed while Cecile and Mike’s soft conversation drifted to us. Logan dropped his hand and leaned against his bunk. “Do you employ both of them as well or are they related to you?”

“No, they’re not related, but I consider them family. Cecile was my mother’s best friend and is

like a second mom to me.”

When Logan’s gaze didn’t waver, I added, “She’s also very dedicated to her job and is fiercely protective of everything involved in my healing tour. She books the clients I see, keeps us on schedule, makes sure I eat, and all that stuff. She’s super organized, and honestly, I would be lost without her. Essentially, she’s the perfect manager.”

A lock of dark hair fell across Logan’s forehead. “Ah, your manager. That explains it, and I kind of suspected she was organized given my interview with her. If she ever decides to find a new career, she should consider joining the Marines.”

I laughed, the sound startling me. Given all that had transpired since the death threats began, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed.

Logan’s eyes twinkled. “And what about Mike? Is he the driver?”

“Yeah. Mike’s similar to Cecile. He’s not a relation, but he’s been in my life for as long as I can remember.”

Logan lifted an arm to prop against his bunk. His bicep bulged.

Damn. So. Hot.

For a moment, I stood there tongue-tied before mentally slapping myself and saying in a rush, “So yeah, a long time ago, my mom healed Mike’s mother in a session, but he didn’t have the money to pay her, so he offered to drive us for a few months, and a few months turned into nineteen years. He’s known me since I was a baby, and he’s kind of like a father to me—”

I clamped my mouth shut. *Why was I still talking?* I sounded like a blubbering moron, but Logan merely watched me with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

I gave him a weak smile. “So both Cecile and Mike are kind of like family to me—the only family I have now.”

“And your healing tours, what are those? I take it that’s where I’ll be guarding you?”

“Yep, exactly.” I twisted my hands.

Seriously, stand still!

Forcing my arms back to my sides, I added, “The tours are my job. My entire life’s work is dedicated to healing those who are chronically or terminally ill. I use my gift to cure them.”

I tensed, waiting for his reaction. Those who didn’t believe in my light assumed I was a fraud, taking advantage of the weak and depraved. And I never spoke of or demonstrated my telekinetic magic. That would garner too much attention, never mind that my spells were something I rarely used anyway. The Gresham women’s focus had always been on our healing light.

But the judgmental, scornful look that I’d grown accustomed to seeing in strangers’ eyes never materialized in Logan’s, but the twinkle in his gaze faded, his expression turning serious again. “I’ll do my best to keep you safe so you can continue working. Now, should we sit? I’d like to hear more about what’s happened and why you’ve hired me.”

I picked at my fingers again, despite telling myself not to, and nodded toward the dressing room. “You can have a look for yourself. According to the latest threat, I’ll be dead within the month.”

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Thank You