

WSJ AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
JAYMIN EVE





# **SUPERNATURAL ACADEMY: YEAR ONE**

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JAYMIN EVE



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**Supernatural Academy: Year One**

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Supernatural Academy: Year One

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## STAY IN TOUCH

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*For the lost, displaced, and alone.  
This one is for you.  
May you find your light in this world.*



## **SUPERNATURAL ACADEMY MAP**

\*Please note, the herbalism and water worlds are inside buildings, but this map gives you a better idea of what it looks like without the roof. :)



Somewhere close by, a loud, raucous countdown was on, cheers echoing as the New Year was rung in. There was no laughter or friendship in the dirty truck stop bathroom as I stared into the cracked and marked mirror, washing out the last of the hair color.

I had very few rituals in my life. I didn't have enough stability for ritual, but there was one thing I had been doing for the past five of my twenty-two years. Every New Year's Eve—my birthday—I changed my hair color. It was my way of saying “fuck you” to the last sucktastic 365 days. I would not be defined by my circumstances. Each new color was a new beginning, a new age ... a new chance at getting it right.

And this year, for the first time, I didn't stick with the darker tones.

This was going to be my year. The year of pink.

After I was done drying it under the shitty old hand dryer, I started sweeping all the boxes, peroxide, and color tubes, into a nearby trash can. My new color caught my eye under the low lights, and I had to smile. It'd turned out better than I'd expected, a shimmery pastel pink. Luckily, the one skill my mother had left me with was the ability to work magic in the art of hair transformations. She had been a beautician and hairdresser before she got sucked into the darkness of drugs, alcohol, and men who were no good for her.

The year she died was the first year I turned my silvery-blond locks into an orange mess of waves. Felt like something she would approve of. I'd been on my own since then, moving towns and changing hair every twelve months—was probably lucky I still had hair left, but somehow it continued to be long and thick and healthy. I was hair blessed.



Life blessed? Not so much.

It was time again to jump on the first bus out of here and start my new life. I probably could have stopped running by now—no one was looking for me anymore—but maybe part of me was still searching for the illusion of home that everyone else had.

This year it was going to be better. This year there would be light, because I'd had my damned share of darkness. I was so fucking done.

“Pink wouldn't have been my first choice, but I have to say you do wear it well.”

I spun around, searching for the person that voice belonged to.

I'd been alone in the bathroom. I had shut and locked the door, due to the shitty area of Detroit I was currently in. Whoever was there stood just outside of the small circle of light. I had pretty amazing night vision when I forced myself to focus, but sometimes tapping into my unexplained abilities caused me problems, so I just reached for my bag and the switchblade inside.

“What the hell do you want?” I bit out, making my voice as harsh as I could. I was no shrinking violet at five feet ten, but my voice was sweet, so far from matching my insides it wasn't even funny.

Maybe pink hair hadn't been such a good idea. I was really gonna give off the wrong vibe now.

There was no answer, but there was movement as a chick stepped into the light. I blinked a few times, swallowing down my next insult. She was nothing like I expected. Even taller than me, her skin was very dark, shining in the low lights. Her hair was a mass of curls, tighter to her head than mine—in a corkscrew fashion—and it was a vibrant red. She was stunningly beautiful, and not in a mere supermodel way. Nope. She was gorgeous in a dropped-from-the-heavens-by-the-gods way: full cherry lips, huge green eyes, high cheekbones, and aristocratic features. If I wasn't firmly on team into-dudes, I'd already be half in love with her.

She took another step closer and I pressed myself back against the dirty sink. Just because she was hot didn't mean she wasn't dangerous. “We've been looking for you for a long time,” she said as her long leather-clad legs halted in a strong stance. “You're very good at moving and covering your tracks, but ... your powers are growing stronger. You can't hide any longer.”

Panic bloomed within me. Strong waves that almost crushed me. Five years ago I had been wanted for questioning by many government agencies. Not only had I run away at seventeen, I'd fled a crime scene, leaving my



mother's body behind. But I was almost certain that they'd given up on me long ago.

Apparently not.

I immediately catalogued the room, trying to figure out an escape route.

"Are you not even going to ask my name before you disappear?" she asked, amusement in her tone. "Seems kinda rude, don't you think?"

I closed my hand around the blade, ready to flick it open at any sign of an attack.

"Should I care?" I shook my head at her. "I don't know you. I don't want to know you. I'm leaving now." It was worth a try, the false bravado. Maybe she would back off. But judging by her "we've been looking for you for a long time" comment, I doubted it.

"It's Ilia," she continued, like I hadn't just basically told her to go fuck herself. "My name. It's spelled I-L-I-A but you say it like eye—" She paused. "—Leah."

I was so astonished by her calm and conversational tone—like we'd known each other for twenty years and were old friends catching up.

"What do you want with me, Ilia?" I dragged her name out like she had. "What do you mean, 'My powers are growing stronger?' Like ... powers ... really? Are you insane?"

She laughed, throwing her head back as husky tones filled the air. It sent a tingle down my spine and I was pretty sure it wasn't just because her laugh was as sexy as she was. Energy drifted along with the sound.

"The insane thing is really going to depend on who you ask," she finally replied, once she got herself under control. "And on what day you catch me. But to answer your other question, you, my friend, are no ordinary supe."

I blinked at her, my hand sweaty on my blade handle. "Soup?" What in the hell did she mean by *soup*? Like the food? Or was that some sort of derogatory term I hadn't heard?

Or ... maybe a gang?

I hadn't been involved with any gangs lately. That was a life I'd quickly learned was not for me, but sometimes their members showed up in the oddest places. Like ... Detroit bathrooms.

"You're into the drug scene, right?" I burst out before she could reply. "Seeing the flying dragons and all that jazz. That's why you're all up in here talking about powers and soups. See, I don't do the drugs. They're not for me. My life is crazy enough as it is, so you can take your weird talk and fly



away now.” I shooed her with my free hand, making little whooshing sounds.

She laughed again. “Dragons. How do you know about dragons?” She winked, like this was the funniest joke she'd ever heard. “There’s actually quite a few in Faerie ... where all supes come from.” For the first time since stepping from the shadows, she moved closer to me, trapping me against the sink, blocking the only exit.

My blade flicked out before I even thought about it, but she never gave the sharp edge a second glance.

“See, I didn’t expect that you’d have zero idea of who you are,” Ilia continued, her face suddenly serious. “I should have guessed it, because we aren’t even quite sure what you are ... but you definitely have a lot of power hidden away. The few times you’ve touched your energy, you’ve sent ripples across the world. Right now, though, you have your power locked down. How?”

Touched my *what the fuck now?* “I... What?”

“Your power,” she continued, waving her hands at me in a “hurry up and get my point” gesture.

I shook my head. “You’re as crazy as my crackhead mother. Raving about ghosts and powers and gods.”

Ilia shook her head. “Wrong. There’s no way your mother was a crackhead. Crack doesn’t affect supes, and you, my dear, are one hundred percent supernatural.”

*Supernatural...* Oh, supe... Jesus.

I choked, coughing. “Did you just say supernatural?” It felt a little warm in the room all of a sudden, despite the chilly weather tonight.

“You’re not human,” Ilia said bluntly. “I’m not sure exactly what your race is though.” She regarded me carefully. “I thought I would know when I got closer to you, but ... it’s the weirdest thing.” She held a finger up. “Not a vampire, for sure, you couldn’t easily hide that part of your nature.” Second finger went up. “Could be a shifter, if you had your power locked down, but I ... doubt it.” Third finger. “Magic user is definitely a strong possibility, as is fey. But I don’t think we’re going to find out until I get you back to the Academy.” She dropped her hand then and smiled brightly. “I’m your supernatural collection agent, here to whisk you off to the Academy. Seems they’d like to have a word with you about ... whatever the heck you are. No one likes a mystery in our world. Mysteries usually end badly for everyone. So, you, my little supe, are going back to school.”



If I'd been the fainting type, this would be the point I swooned and cracked my head on the sink. But I was made of tougher stuff than that. Anyone who'd waited tables in some of the neighborhoods I had would agree with me. But ... had she really said *vampire* and *shifter*? Like ... legit?

My voice was flat. "I'm going to need you to step away from me, Ilia. Right. The fuck. Now!" She didn't move, just grinned as she watched me with those glittering eyes of hers.

"I like you," she said as her grin broadened. "I think we're going to be great friends."

Not likely. I didn't have friends; I'd been alone for years. At first, friends were liabilities I couldn't afford, and after that it became a bad habit to keep everyone at arm's length.

Ilia held a hand out to me. "Maddison James, you need to listen to me closely..."

The bitch knew my name. How did the bitch know my name?

"You're a supernatural. You're not human, and if you don't come with me and receive your training, you'll lose control one day. You'll hurt a human, and when that happens, it won't be the Academy coming for you. It'll be the supernatural enforcers, those who hunt down our criminals and lock them in the prisons. Trust me, you don't want to end up in the prison system."

I felt like my brain was going to explode, and I was already regretting the pink hair. This kinda felt a little bit like it was the pretty color's fault.

And how the hell in all hells did she know my name?

I decided to play along and run as soon as her guard was down. "I'm not saying I believe you...." I pretended to relax, closing my blade and slipping it back into my bag. "But I also don't want to hurt anyone. The strange shit in my life has been ramping up lately"—not even a lie—"so ... maybe I do need some help."

Ilia's full lips pursed as she examined me. I fought to keep my expression open and neutral, but something told me I was already too late. *Run.*

I moved, but I was too slow. She lunged for me, and before I could get out of the way, her hands wrapped around mine. She murmured a few words, words that were not English, and I felt a hot pulse against my skin. With a shriek, I tried to yank myself free from her, but she was surprisingly strong.

"Let me go, bitch!" I shouted, fighting to get loose. I was shocked when a moment later the pressure on my hands released and she moved back. That



was until I looked down to see crisscrossing beams of light wrapping all the way around my wrists and hands, binding them together.

Ilia dropped her head to stare me in the eye. “You were going to run, Maddison. Don’t play stupid with me. I can tell that for you to believe what I’m saying, you’re going to have to see it in person.”

Panic swirled inside of me, making my gut and chest ache as I struggled for each breath. I hated to be restrained; it had happened too many times when my mom’s “boyfriends” had decided an annoying as hell kid should not be seen or heard.

“Please release my hands,” I asked, trying to keep the tremble from the words.

Ilia shook her head. “I’m sorry. No one can remove these bindings except the Academy princeps. He gave me the spell and it’s specifically linked to him. Call it insurance that you have to follow me back.”

My heart was hammering in my chest; my blood roared in my ears as everything went a little pear-shaped. Ilia looked at me with concern for the first time, perfect eyebrows bunching as she leaned closer.

“I have a problem being restrained,” I admitted through gritted teeth. “It’s a trigger for me.” Before she could stop me, I spun around and smashed my hands against the edge of the sink, trying to loosen the binds. Nothing happened except sharp pains ricocheting up my arms. A few more taps and it was clear that this was no normal material. I could not break it, tear it, or wiggle my hands free from it.

Shaking, I faced her again and found sympathetic eyes on me. “Fuck. Sorry, girl,” she said gently. “I wish I could remove them, but all I can do is promise we’ll get you to the Academy as soon as possible.”

She reached down and grabbed the bag I’d dropped earlier and then wrapped an arm around me, hauling me closer as we walked out of the bathroom. Outside the temperatures seemed to have dropped even further. The wind was howling, bringing small particles of ice and snow. My jacket was in my bag, and I couldn’t reach it with my hands bound, but luckily I’d always had a pretty high tolerance for temperatures.

“How are we getting to the Academy?” I asked, somewhat resigning myself to the fact that I was not getting out of this. Not yet anyway. I couldn’t even move my hands. I would literally do anything to get these bindings removed—so I had to play along with her for a little while longer.

And ... speaking of these bindings, they were so bizarre that a part of me



was starting to believe what she was saying. The words kept running through my head: vampire, shifter, fey, and magic user ... supernaturals ... academies ... prisons...

What the fuck had my pink hair gotten me into?



*I*lia led me toward a nearby car. It was too dark for me to make out the model, but it was huge and looked expensive. She yanked the back door open and then turned to help me climb in—my bound hands made balancing quite the adventure.

I'd had my hands restrained exactly like this once before, and the memory of that was making it difficult for me not to panic. My head was pounding, terror scratching incessantly at my insides. It was only through pure force of will that I wasn't screaming hysterically.

I needed a distraction. Anything. "Are we driving all the way to the Academy?" I asked her again, breathless but coherent. Surely a school filled with *vampires* wouldn't just be on a normal Detroit street.

"Step-through," she replied quickly as she pushed me across and slid in next to me. *A what now?*

Wait ... if she was in the back with me...

I turned to the driver seat, and when huge brown eyes met mine, I let out a short, startled scream.

"Shut her up," it growled.

*What in the fuck...?*

It was too much for me, being tied like this while trapped in a vehicle with *some green freaking gremlin*. Darkness pressed in around the edges of my vision.

"She's going to pass out!" I heard Ilia yell. "Drive, Mossie. The step-through is not far away and we need to get there now."

*Mossie*. Even in my hysterical state I still had enough coherency to wonder if the name was a tribute to its green skin and high, pointed ears.

Tires screeched as the car took off, and I focused on breathing in and out,



filling my lungs over and over. As we skidded around a corner, I went sprawling across the wide back seat. Mossie was going too fast; if we stopped suddenly I was going to really regret not having a seat belt on.

Thankfully, when he slammed on the brakes, Ilia put a hand on my shoulder, stopping my face from smashing into the seat in front of me. I was then half lifted out of the car as freezing air howled around me again. I shook Ilia off, not wanting to be helped.

“Maddison, I’m not your enemy,” Ilia said as she shouldered my bag—it contained all of my worldly possessions.

“Bet you say that to all your kidnap victims,” I shot back.

Mossie jumped out of the car and joined us. I scooted around the other side of her, putting as much distance between the gremlin and me as I could.

“I’m not a gremlin,” he said in his raspy voice. “I’m a goblin. There’s a difference.”

I almost tripped over the flat ground. “You read my mind?” I whisper-yelled. “Do you know how fucking rude that is?”

Mossie grinned at Ilia, pointed teeth filling his mouth. “She seems to be adjusting to the supe world already. A human’s first question would be how did I read their mind, but not Maddison.”

“It’s Maddi,” I said stiffly. No one called me Maddison. “And I just assumed grem— goblins can read minds.”

He flashed me a look, one that I couldn’t decipher on the foreign features of his face. His skin looked leathery, tough with raised bumps across his cheeks and nose. The green was like a leaf from a rainforest tree, with lighter khakis across his ears. He was no taller than four feet, but he was nimble and looked strong.

I’d never seen anything like him outside of the movies, and staring at him was really helping to distract me from the fact that I was still bound.

“We can only read thoughts that are projected at us,” Mossie explained as we moved farther from the car. “If you’re thinking something *at* me, or sometimes even about me, then I might pick up on the thought.”

Good to know. “Is this something all supes”—the word felt foreign on my tongue—“can do?”

“No,” Ilia said, with a shake of her head. “Only a few of the demi-fey have that ability. And maybe some very powerful sorcerers, but you won’t have to worry about them. It’s rare.”

Right. Of course. Just demi-fey and powerful sorcerers.



*What in the actual fuck of all fucks was happening to me?*

“Just up ahead is the step-through sent by the Academy,” Ilia said. “Are you going to scream again?” She watched me closely.

I shrugged. “I don’t even have a clue what a step-through is, so, yeah, probably.”

Mossie grinned, and its distinct creepiness distracted me again. There was nothing calming about the goblin, that was for sure. We turned a corner and ducked under some dense bushes, and Ilia stopped before a ... swirling portal. There was no other way to describe it.

“Uh, I’m not touching that,” I said, shuffling back. Which was dangerous when your hands were bound. If I tripped, I couldn’t break my fall.

Ilia followed my movements, staying close to me. “You have no choice. It would take us days to get to the Academy otherwise, and we’d have to fly on a plane with humans because I don’t have the private one here. I’m sure you don’t want your hands bound for days.”

“I hate you,” I groused at her, injecting as much anger as I could into the words.

She almost looked hurt then. “I’m just doing my job! Everyone has a part to play in this world, and for me it’s making sure supes are not stuck in the human world without training.”

I almost felt bad, but the truth was she’d still bound my hands with her hocus-pocus bullshit and was now attempting to kidnap me. So she could just suck up my anger. Resigning myself to the fact that I was still at the stage of “do anything to get these stupid things off my wrists,” I reluctantly stepped closer to the swirling *step-through*.

Mossie was waiting patiently. “I’ll show you,” he said, and he took two steps forward, disappearing into the swirl. I looked around the back of the bushes, but he had not walked straight through.

It had taken him somewhere.

I gasped, choking on my own panic as I tried to backpedal again.

Ilia stepped in right behind me, stopping my backward trajectory. “It doesn’t hurt,” she groaned, sounding exasperated. “You’re going to be fine.”

Easy for her to say, she was clearly used to this world. A world I wasn’t sure I actually believed could be true. If I didn’t have a tiny green goblin as evidence and bound hands I needed freed, I’d be screaming and running.

But a part of me wanted to stay.

To find out answers to the many burning questions I had.



And the deepest, darkest truth of it all was ... what did I really have to lose? Another year of waitressing and hiding from the world? Fuck, maybe this was the change I'd been hoping for.

Or ... maybe I was about to be murdered and used in some sort of witchy cult ritual.

Either way, my life was definitely going in a different direction.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, closing my eyes as I crossed through the step-through.



I opened my eyes to find myself in a winter wonderland. It was white fields of snow, trees dusted with fresh powder, and not a sliver of civilization in sight.

“Nice school,” I said sarcastically when Ilia joined me. “Architecturally designed, I see.”

Mossie snorted from nearby and I spun to find the goblin leaning against a snow-covered tree. “You’ll need that humor to keep yourself afloat in this new world,” he told me, still chuckling.

“Where are we now?” I asked. “Still in America?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Europe. The Academy is hidden in Switzerland. Been here for a very long time.”

I coughed. *Whoa*. My first trip overseas, and I hadn’t even stepped foot on a plane. What in the...

Magic.

I swallowed hard, but before I could lose my mind, Ilia linked her arm through mine, dragging me along. I couldn’t do anything to dislodge her either, not with my hands bound. “Come on, the Academy is just over here,” she said, her voice lit with excitement. “You’ll see it soon enough.” She winked at me. “And it was sorcerer designed, if you really want to know.”

I snorted, and a small bud of anticipation pushed through my shock. It was clear Ilia was happy to be back here, and I wanted to see it for myself.

“How long have you been tracking me?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Five years, give or take.”

I swallowed, one date standing out for me. “Since the night my mom died?”

Ilia’s face fell. “That night your grief triggered some of your supernatural



powers. You sent a blast of energy into the world. It was from then we had you on our radar as an unknown, powerful supe. But you disappeared again so quickly. We remained on the case, tracking you whenever you sent out a flare. Recently, your energy has gotten stronger, which helped me narrow the search.”

I remembered the night my mother died so clearly. She’d been fighting with the current dirtbag pimp-slash-drug-dealer-slash-boyfriend. He’d hit her just a little too hard, smashing her head through the glass coffee table. I walked through the door thirty minutes later to find him wrapping her body in a sheet. My screams had drawn his attention, and he’d immediately come after me. Somehow, though, with strength I shouldn’t have possessed, I shoved him so hard he’d hit the side of our trailer and got knocked out cold.

Maybe that was the surge in power? There had been this *heat* burning in my stomach, but it had disappeared so quickly I’d written it off as mere adrenaline.

“Are there others like me out there?” I asked softly. “Supes living with humans?”

Part of me was screaming not to play her game, but it all felt real to me. It made sense. In whatever fucked-up way. Plus, she had a goblin and a magical portal to back her up.

She nodded. “Yes, there are a lot more than you’d probably think. But you were different ... to me, anyway. Even when my supervisor moved on, I couldn’t.”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

Ilia shrugged. “I couldn’t let you go that easily. For some reason, I was worried about you being in the world alone. I turned up at your mom’s just after she passed, and ... I felt a connection. I have no family left either. My mother died giving birth, and my father is dude unknown.”

I could see it cost her something to admit that, and it made me like her a little more. “You found a place at the Academy? A home?” I asked, trying not to let hope filter into my heart.

Hope was a killer. Any time I’d ever let myself hope for something more, the disappointment when it didn’t work out crushed me. Eventually you learned to stop hoping.

And accept your shitty reality.

“The best kind,” she said. “Follow the rules, stay out of trouble, and I think you’ll find your place there too. If you choose to stay.”



I didn't want to call her a liar, but somehow I doubted I'd have a choice. Not when the princeps had magically bound my hands just to get me here.

"Are you still in school?" I asked.

Ilia shook her head. "Technically, no. I'm twenty-seven, and I graduated from basic classes last year. I'm still in some specialised classes, even though I've been working in my field as a tracker for a few years."

"What classes?"

"Attack magic, weapons, advanced spell work." She shrugged, like that wasn't a huge fucking deal. *Attack magic!* "My training in these areas will continue for many more years. You start your basic Academy classes at twenty-one, so you're going to fit right in."

We were still plowing through the field of snow. Mossie was slightly in front, clearing a small path for us. I was just about to ask how far away the school was when a slight shimmer in the air caught my eye. "It's a protective shield," the goblin said, looking back. "It deters humans and protects those inside from exposure. Only supernaturals can enter."

He stepped through first, and I didn't hesitate to follow, wanting to see this world. I closed my eyes as I went to cross, and just as I stepped forward I wondered if I might get rejected. This was the first test of their belief that I was a supernatural.

There was a slight ripple of air around my body as I crossed the threshold, and I was stunned to actually make it through. No rejection...

Lifting my head, I let out a gasp. "Whoa..." I breathed.

Supernatural Academy spanned as far as I could see. Four huge towers, all slightly different in structure and design, were spaced around the edges of large buildings. The main Academy walls were made of brick and stone, and everything was ancient, in both look and design, like this school had been standing here for thousands of years.

As we stepped closer, I saw there was a wide body of water completely surrounding it like a moat. I also started to make out more details in the stonework. There was a crest with M V F S in it, iron twisting around the edges, pushing it out from the wall. As I stumbled forward, desperate to be closer to this new world I'd found myself in, I kept noticing new details.

More initials carved into stones near the front bridge; ivy and rose trellises along the outer walls; huge stained-glass windows scattered across the stonework.

The building had a presence, a history about it that transcended normal



buildings. It had experienced a lot of life. And it wasn't just the building; there was a feeling in the air here. That same *extra* that I'd noticed in Ilia when she spoke with passion. It was like static electricity shocking me, sending tingles down my spine.

Ilia placed a hand on my arm like she was sharing this moment with me. "This is the Supernatural Academy," she said proudly. "It was started in 1455 by a small community of supes in this area. They wanted a safe place for their children to learn about the world. It's designed so that you go to supe junior school first and learn the basics: reading, writing, math, and so on. They also learn how to fit into the human world. Then, when you're older, you advance your supernatural abilities at the Academy."

I shook my head. "Why would you start so late though? I mean, why waste all the years in human schools and not learn supernatural stuff until you're twenty-one?"

"Most of us don't have strong energy or abilities until puberty or older," Ilia explained. "I was seventeen, and most of the other supes I knew were even older. So there's really no reason for advanced classes younger than that."

"It's also important for you to fit in with humans," Mossie added, voice dry. "I mean, there's no point in goblins, or most demi-fey, trying." He waved a hand across his green, bumpy skin. "But the four other races, it's fundamental to ensure our worlds remain safely connected."

I guess that made sense.

"So no humans know about you ... I mean us?"

"There are some," Ilia said quickly. "We have Guilds that smooth our passage into the human world, and a few others are privy to the secret, but in general humans do not know."

Mossie snorted. "Human brains can't really process our truths without driving them crazy. Better this way."

Having spent the past forty minutes trying to process it myself, I kind of understood the reasoning.

I turned my focus back to the school. "I can't really believe this," I said. "The rational side of my brain keeps trying to discredit what I'm seeing ... create plausible excuses to explain away the weird."

Mossie laughed, an odd bark. "The barrier let you in. There's no doubt you're supernatural."

I still had doubts.



“I’m ready,” I lied, moving again. No one could be ready for this, but I was certainly ready to have my hands released. We crossed down a small incline, an expanse of thick green grass under our feet. “It’s not snowing or cold in here,” I noted.

It felt like a mild spring day, actually.

“Yeah, the weather changes daily in here,” Ilia said, her brows scrunching. “Which can be annoying if you’re trying to plan an outfit for an event.”

I coughed out a laugh before realizing she was serious. “Daily? Why the hell would anyone want weather that changes daily?”

She exchanged a glance with Mossie, shrugging. “There was a spell that went awry a long time ago, when they were trying to make it rain. And now all of us pay for it with the most erratic weather. In truth, there’s really no predicting anything within the school grounds.”

Good to know. Always comforting that I could be killed in my sleep by some random burst of magic. We crossed the wide bridge that led across to the front entrance, and I stared down into the sparkling blue waters. “Don’t ever go in there,” Ilia warned. I jerked my head up at her tone, curiosity holding me. I loved to swim. Loved it so much. But it had been a long time since I’d had the luxury.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

She shuddered. “Lots of things. Mermaids being one of the tamest creatures. Trust me, don’t go in there. It never ends well.”

Judging by her expression, the mermaids here were not like the ones depicted in the human world. I noted it on the list I was making in my head of things to explore further.

The double entrance to the first building we entered was huge. Twenty feet high, and almost that wide, it was both impressive and intimidating. Inside was an open circular room with light streaming in through the stone archways that crossed overhead. There were statues lining either side of us, each with a different creature carved into it. I didn’t recognize most of them, but there was a wolf, a bear, and a panther among them.

“Come on, we need to get to the princeps’s office,” Ilia said, linking our arms together again.

My stomach did a crazy swirl as I looked around. The entrance was deserted and I wondered where all the supernaturals were. Nerves almost locked my limbs in place at the thought that I’d soon see the different races



she had mentioned. Vampires, shifters, fey, and witches were the stuff of fantasy novels. And scary movies.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, forcing myself to stop being a scaredy-bitch.

Mossie grinned, and this time I didn’t even flinch at his pointed teeth. Progress. “It’s breakfast time. They’ll be in the common area.”

*Breakfast.* So weird, because back home it was probably around 1:00 A.M. Ilia shot me a disconcerting look. “Ah, shit. If it’s breakfast, we might have to go through the commons to get to Princeps Jones. He always has breakfast with his daughter.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but before I could protest she nudged me along a window-lined hallway, the arched and stained glass on my right side spanning almost to the very high ceilings, letting in colored beams of light.

Ilia moved faster and I hurried to keep up. Mossie continued at a more leisurely pace, but still stayed right with us. My eyes couldn’t move fast enough to take everything in. I wanted so badly to explore this ancient building; it was unlike anything I’d ever seen before. But Ilia was on a mission, and at least I’d be able to think clearer once I wasn’t bound.

My panic at being cuffed came and went in waves, and it was only because I could focus on all this other weird shit that I wasn’t rocking in a corner somewhere.

The noise hit me when we stepped into the common area. There were people—supernaturals—everywhere. I mean every-freaking-where. The commons was a large space, easily as big as a football stadium back home. From where we stood, I could see dozens of huge trees sprouting up across it, along with hundreds of tables. They were lined up like a cafeteria, only we were outside. “What happens when it rains?” I breathed, eyes locked on the scene. “You have no indoor cafeteria?”

Ilia shook her head before she pulled me further into the chaos. “Nope, this is where we all eat our food. The magic users take care of the rain if it comes across.”

We were starting to draw attention, and I wasn’t sure if it was the fact that I was restrained, that we had a goblin in our midst, or if Ilia was well known here, but many eyes landed on us and the noise died down.

“Why are they looking at us?” I whispered, trying not to meet any eyes while still taking in as much as I could from under my eyelashes. For the most part, all the supernaturals I could see looked like humans. Tall,



beautiful, scary-as-fuck humans. Mossie was still the weirdest thing I'd seen, and a small part of me relaxed.

Ilia pressed closer to me. "They know I bring in the unknown cases. They're just trying to figure you out, get a read on your energy."

The energy that only appeared on occasions and apparently was not easily read at all. *Great.*

Deciding that I was done staring at my feet, I jerked my head high and walked along with as much confidence as I could muster. When we were about halfway across the open cafeteria area, a table of girls caught my attention—they were beneath one of the largest trees, with huge pink flowers scattered amongst the green foliage. Their stares felt heavy, and I had to physically force myself not to glare back. Best not to create enemies on my first day in the supe world.

"The Clovers," Ilia whispered. "Stay away from Kate; she's their head bitch, from a line of very powerful magic users."

It didn't take a genius to figure out which one was Kate. She sat center stage, her minions around her. Her vibrant red hair curled atop her shoulders, her eyes dark as she scowled at me.

"Is she gonna turn me into a fucking toad or something?" I hissed, panicked.

"No magic," Mossie bit out, sending his own scowl in the direction of the queen bitch. "No magic allowed outside of classes. And definitely not against another student."

Yeah, I bet all of the rules were enforced all the time here too. Seriously. School was the place where all the rules were broken. Before I could freak myself out further, we were striding past the mean girls' table, and I turned my attention forward, to....

*Holy sweet mother.*

My brain felt like it was burning up as I met the gazes of the occupants at a table near the Clovers.

Five guys.

My mouth went dry as I tried to remember how to breathe and walk at the same time.

Each of them had me locked in their gaze, except one in the center who just gave a glimpse of black hair with silver-blond highlights shimmering in the sunlight. The nerves I'd felt facing Kate and her mean girls were nothing on how I felt in this moment.



The four faces I could see clearly were all cut from the same cloth. Powerful, dark, dangerous. I knew that look intimately. I'd been running from it my entire life, because girls who got involved with men like them usually didn't make it to their next birthday.

It was the fifth one though, who still hadn't bothered to even look my way, who sent a jolt of *something* through my body. That feeling was part fear and part ... intrigue. His shoulders were so broad that he was taking up a good third of the table himself, and I knew he was tall—his long legs were sprawled out to the side. But it was the powerful aura that I could sense around him that really ramped up my fear.

How the fuck I could tell he had “a powerful aura” was beyond me, but I felt very certain about it.

“Don't look at them,” Ilia said, sounding for the first time like she was nervous too. “Girl, you don't want the sort of trouble those five bring. Stay off their radar.”

“Who are they?” I had to ask.

When I finally pulled my gaze from the guys, it was to meet her wide-eyed stare. “They're all descended from the ancient—” She broke off and shook her head. “Never mind. Just take my word for it. They're scary and powerful, and not a good introduction to this world.”

I nodded, already understanding. I really didn't need her warning; I'd known it from the first moment I saw them.

They were trouble.



When we were out of the commons, my heartrate returned to normal. Ilia led us into a building close by, where my eyes took a moment to adjust as we pushed through a door and into a small room. It looked like an office, and a tall man was there chatting with a tiny blond-haired chick, both of them seated at a desk, plates and cutlery between them.

“Princeps Jones,” Ilia said, hurrying forward.

The princeps rose to his feet, and I was surprised by how young and good-looking he was: thick head of dark hair, dark brown skin that was without a single age line, and arresting blue eyes.

“Ilia, you found her!” While I was examining him, he’d examined me in return. “Pink hair,” he mused. “I like it.” He stepped closer. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Maddison James.”

I’d almost forgotten my new hair color; I self-consciously touched it. “Yeah ... it was time for a change. And it’s ... nice to meet you as well, Princeps Jones.” Despite the kidnapping, I actually meant that. For the first time, I didn’t have a listless sense of “this is just another shitty day” going on.

He gestured for me to move toward him, and it was only as I did that I noticed the slightest point to his canine teeth. “Vampire?” I blurted, before slamming my mouth shut.

Was that rude? I had no idea what was acceptable in this world.

Relief hit me when he smiled. “I see you’re adjusting well. Did you already know of our world?”

I shook my head, still staring at his teeth.

“Well, you’re correct. I’m a vampire, as is my daughter, Larissa.”

She got to her feet and stood beside her father. As I met her wide blue



eyes—just like her father’s—I fought the urge to tuck her under my arm and fight the world for her. She was delicate, nothing like I expected from a vampire. Standing just above five feet, she had creamy brown skin and white-blond hair, which could have clashed, but she pulled it off nicely. She looked ethereal and sweet.

My eyes darted to the table filled with their breakfast, and I wondered why she ate in here with her father and not out in the commons.

Was he really strict?

On first impression, he seemed laid-back, but first impressions were wrong a lot.

“Hey,” she said, her voice as delicate as her face. Her eyes lowered and I got a shy vibe from her. Either that, or she was beaten on a regular basis—a look I’d seen on plenty of girls before.

I glared at the princeps then, wondering if his joviality hid a monster underneath. He was a vampire. Maybe they abused their children as part of their culture or something.

He stared at me curiously, and I waved my bound hands in front of me. “Care to relieve me of my chains?”

My words came out more clipped than it would have before I saw his daughter. He bestowed what seemed like a genuine smile on me. “My apologies. I hate to force you like this, but those raised with humans take longer to ... accept their truth. I just wanted you to give it a chance.”

I didn’t disagree with his statement. I would have run if not for these magical restraints.

The moment my hands were free, the tension I’d had since they were first slapped on me eased, and I could finally breathe freely.

“So what now?” I said, rubbing my wrists even though they didn’t hurt.

“Now ... you have a choice to make, Maddison Marie James,” Princeps Jones said, using my full name. “Do you want to stay here at the Academy, where you will spend the next four years learning about your abilities and supernatural heritage? You’ll make lifelong friends and grow more than you could ever imagine.” He paused. “Or will you throw it all away out of fear?” He paused again. “Be warned though. If you don’t choose this Academy, you still need to remain in our world until we figure out your race and train you. The closest town that can handle this is in Germany. I’m afraid that living with humans is no longer a safe or viable option for you.”

Well, when you put it like that...



Warring emotions fought inside of me, because I felt manipulated. At the same time, I was here now, and staying at the Academy felt like a better decision than an unknown town in Germany.

“Exactly what does this school offer me?” I said cautiously, “and how much does it cost?”

Princeps Jones smiled; we all knew they’d hooked me, but my motto was never make it too easy for them.

“I’m glad you asked. I’ll give you a basic rundown now, and then we can meet tomorrow in my office, before class, and I’ll go into more detail.”

That sounded like a plan I could get behind.

“You’ll have your own room here, in the magic users’ tower,” Princeps Jones began. “All the races have separate towers, and since we don’t know what yours is, I’ll go with witch for now. I’m fairly confident in ruling out vampire and shifter. So you’re witch or fey ... or both if you’re mixed race. Either way, we’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

*Witch or fey.* I ran that through my mind, trying to connect with one of them.

“You will attend classes of your choosing,” he continued, “along with some basic ones that we assign—building blocks to your future in this world. Once we know your race, we can get more specific. As I said, you’ll make friends who are just like you, you’ll learn of your history, and you’ll find your place in a way that you never could in the human world.”

Because I was not human.

“Supernaturals have jobs? Like ... after they finish school?” I asked, wondering what the point of all of this was.

He nodded. “Yes. Some work in the supernatural prison system, but there are plenty of other roles scattered through our communities. Depending on your race.”

“What do you think?” Ilia pushed, stepping closer to me, wrapping her right arm around me. “Please say you’ll stay. I need a real friend; everyone from my year has graduated now, and I’m left with catty bitches like Kate.”

The princeps’s lips twitched but he refrained from smiling. And he never reprimanded her for language, which I liked. It would be a cold day in hell before I stopped cursing.

“I’m still not totally sure,” I admitted truthfully. “It’s a lot to take in. A large part of me still believes this is a dream and I’m going to wake up.” I got more than one sympathetic smile. “It scares me that you can’t easily read my



race, but I also ... don't want to walk away. You were right when you said I had no place in the human world. I'd like to find out if it's different here."

Ilia clapped her hands, jumping up and down a few times. Larissa offered me a shy smile.

"Fantastic. I'm very excited to have you joining our sacred school." He smiled broadly. "We can meet in my office tomorrow before school. It's the first day of classes here for the new school year." He glanced at his daughter. "I'll send Larissa to escort you."

She swallowed hard, her throat working, but she didn't argue with her father. "She's the same age as you," he continued, like she wasn't standing right there. "This is her second year, so you won't be in the same classes, but she'll still be a great help to you."

"Are you sure this really is basic stuff?" I asked, nerves getting to me. "I know Ilia told me you do junior schooling first, but ... I mean, if you all grew up knowing you were supes, and in the communities and such, surely I'm going to be really far behind. Even in the first year."

I couldn't figure out how I could take classes with adult supes who had known about this world their entire lives.

The princeps shook his head. "We spend our childhood learning the same sort of concepts as the humans. Reading, writing, science. We have to exist in the human world, so it's important that our children can integrate if needed. Our secondary schooling is where we focus more on the supernatural side of our world."

Pretty much exactly what Ilia said, which made me feel a little better. I'd been worried she was spinning her story to make me stay.

"You'll be fine," Larissa said softly. "You'll catch up quickly."

I doubted that. "I don't want to stand out in a really obvious way," I admitted.

Larissa chuckled sweetly, and I blinked at her. I wasn't the only one. Even her father was watching her with wide eyes. Our stares eventually got to her and the laughter died off.

"You'll never blend," she said softly. "I can already tell you're unique. Your power and race are not clear, but your blood smells strong and foreign." She gestured to my hair. "And you have freckles and the prettiest pink hair. We don't change our hair color much here, so your pastel pink is going to stand out."

Ilia nodded then. "Oh yeah, you're also hot as fuck. The freckles thing ...



I'm jealous. You have shit-all chance of blending. Even if you tried your best."

I snorted. "Dude, as far as I can see, all supes are hot as fuck, so I don't think my particular look is going to stand out." I wanted to chuckle over the freckle love too. They used to be the bane of my existence, but these days I'd learned to embrace them. Even when I wore makeup, I didn't cover them anymore.

I waited for everyone to agree and laugh with me, but no one did. "There's an appeal about you," Mossie said from nearby. "I don't usually feel a pull toward non demi-fey, but you, girly ... there is something about you."

Great, an appeal. That wasn't going to get me into trouble.

"How come I didn't see other demi-fey out there?" I asked. "Everyone looked ... just like me."

And Mossie definitely didn't look like me.

"We have our own school," he said shortly. "Across the other side of the water. Opposite to where we entered. Demi-fey prefer to ... do their own teaching."

I nodded, because I wasn't sure what to say.

A loud musical chime rang through the air, and Princeps Jones started moving. "I've got a meeting, but I'll see you tomorrow, Maddison. Look after her," he called to his daughter and Ilia.

Then he was gone through the door, leaving the four of us staring at one another. "I gotta get back to Demi-fey Academy too," Mossie said. He stopped at my side and nudged me. "Nice to meet you, Maddi."

"Uh, same," I said, surprised that I meant it. A lot had changed for me in the short time since I'd first seen his green, foreign features and screamed. I almost couldn't believe it had been only an hour or so.

Was it normal to adjust this quickly? Something to worry about later.

After he was gone, the three of us stood there somewhat awkwardly. Larissa had gone back to staring at the floor, and since I was naturally blunt, I stepped into her personal space. Her head jerked up.

"Does you dad beat you?" I asked, hoping like hell I was wrong. Mostly because I would hate to think Princeps Jones could pretend to be such a loving father, and also because I'd never go to a school with an abuser as a principal.

I waited for her to deny it—almost all victims of abuse denied it. They knew more abuse was coming their way if their abusers ever found out they



talked.

It was all about watching for the smaller reactions. Their “tells.” Which, granted, I didn’t know Larissa’s yet, but often the signs were still somewhat obvious.

She shook her head and blinked at me. There was no panic in her gaze; she looked shocked, like completely stunned that I’d asked her that. “Oh my gods! No! Never! He’d kill anyone that hurt me.”

My relief was huge. Unless she was very, very good at acting, she was telling the truth.

She rubbed a hand across her face, before letting out a sigh. “My father protects me. I’m a vampire, but I’m weak. My mother died when I was young, her carotid artery ripped out by a rival of my father. There was ... blood everywhere. When it was time for me to feed from the vein, I couldn’t do it. All I could remember was the scent of her blood everywhere.” She coughed, shaking her head. My heart beat faster as I felt her palpable pain. “So now I only feed on bottled blood,” she finished.

“So most vampires...?” I asked softly.

Larissa nodded. “Yep. Bite the vein and drink the blood.”

Right. I should have guessed that. I’d read one or two vampire stories before.

“I’m so sorry about your mother,” I told her. “I found my mother’s body as well. I know how that stays with you.”

Larissa shot me a sad smile, and something struck me then. The same way Ilia had predicted we would be friends, I somehow knew Larissa would be my friend as well.

“You’re going to sit with me from now on,” I declared. I hated that she was isolated in here, away from everyone else.

“And me,” Ilia added.

I smiled at her. “You’re sticking around?”

She nodded. “Yep. Princeps Jones promised that if I found you I could hang around for a while and make sure you were fitting into the world.” She shrugged. “It’s important to me. I’ve been relieved of all other duties.”

An unfamiliar emotion clutched at my chest, and for a brief moment I freaked out, until I realized that it was happiness. And excitement. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt anything except resignation.

I had to say, it was a nice change.

“I’d love to sit with you both,” Larissa said, more life in her voice. “Do



you want any help finding your room now?”

“Call me Maddi,” I told her, “and I’d love some help.”

Ilia swung my bag off her shoulder, and I reached for it, relieved to finally have it back in my possession. “Follow me,” she said, leading us back the way we’d come in.

I couldn’t help but look toward the two tables that had drawn my attention before. They were both empty now, but I could almost *feel* the energy left behind by those who had sat there.

“So you called them the Clovers,” I said. “Where did that name come from?”

Both of them looked at their empty table as well; Larissa’s expression was nervous, Ilia’s was disgusted.

“It’s an herb,” Ilia snarled. “Powerful and strong. It warps the mind of anyone who ingests it—makes them crazy. Those bitches were known for using it quite liberally in their younger years, when they were clawing their way to the top of the junior school, and their first year here.”

Larissa shuddered. “Yes, everyone had to be very careful about anything they ate and drank. My father eventually put an end to it. He had every clover plant destroyed or locked away.”

“But the nickname stuck,” Ilia said.

My face was screwed up as I stared between them both. “Are you telling me they were that level of evil bitch even when they were younger?”

I just couldn’t even imagine it, and I’d grown up in shithole drug-infested neighborhoods.

“You have no idea,” Ilia said, her lips forming a snarl. “Kate is evil. Straight-up evil. Best stay out of her way. She *should* ignore you if you don’t upset the status quo.”

I held both hands up. “Done. I don’t want to be anywhere near her business, let me tell you.”

We continued through the Academy, and I found myself once again trying to catch sight of everything. I asked more questions than either of them probably expected—even I was surprised. But this was fascinating. Stumbling into a fantasy world was not something one did every day of the week. I was going to suck up as much of this as I could.

As we started up the steps that spiraled inside of the magic users’ tower, I realized how huge these race towers actually were. The stairwell was the size of a small apartment in width. “So all magic user students sleep in this



tower?” I asked.

“Yep,” Larissa nodded, smiling freely. It was nice to see her coming out of her shell. “They’re coed, FYI. Supes are very free and easy with sexual relationships, so you’ll have to ... let go of some human concepts in that regard.”

I didn’t comment on this, but my gut twisted uneasily. “Kate lives in this section?” I asked as we reached the second level.

We stepped off the stairs to find a wide open room filled mainly with couches and shelves. It was like a very upmarket library-slash-games area. A few witches and wizards—I assumed—were sprawled about. Chatting. Laughing. And reading books. Taking advantage of the last day before classes started.

As we walked through, I even noticed a couple in the corner making out. Like, full-on mouth-fucking each other. Larissa’s warning felt *heavier* then. I’d spent most of my life watching my mother throw sex around like it were a necessity, and I doubted I’d ever be supe enough to go completely casual with sex, but only time would tell.

“Kate lives on the fifth floor. That’s where some of the best suites are. Her family is very important in our world.” Ilia’s dislike of her spilled out in her tone. “All of the Clovers are up there.”

“What floor am I on?”

She paused. “Uh, I know this.” She thought for a moment before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small cell phone. She flicked through some messages, and then met my gaze. “Second floor. Your room is already set up.”

At least I wasn’t close to Kate and her bitch-squad.

“The sixth floor is the best, but only the truly powerful are there,” Larissa said, her eyes lifting to the ceiling, as if she could see all the way to the top.

“Asher and the guys are there,” Ilia said wistfully. “I don’t live in the dorms anymore, but when I did, it was everyone’s dream to get to the sixth floor.”

I didn’t say anything, but I had a terrible feeling I knew who Asher was. One of the ones she’d warned me about.

Larissa lowered her voice. “Asher is part of the Atlantean-five,” she said, and I was immediately paying all the attention. “They’re kind of a big deal around here. Not brothers, but they all grew up together and are as close as family. They stick together. You mess with one, you’ve messed with the lot.



And they're powerful. Three mages, one vamp, and a lion shifter."

I blinked. "Atlantean-five?"

Ilia grimaced. "That's what I was trying to say before, but I cut it off because it's kind of a long story. But the main points are that the Atlanteans were an ancient race of magic-user-fey, and not a mixed race, but their own race, who were the first to cross from Faerie to Earth. They had a strong affinity for water magic, but most of them died when their land sank to the bottom of the ocean. We study them in the history of supernaturals, but they've mostly been forgotten."

My eyes went wide. *Atlantis*. I knew this tale; everyone knew this tale. I couldn't believe it was supernatural in nature.

"The ones who escaped, their descendants are always extra powerful," Larissa added. "Asher is the strongest, the purest of lines, but the other four all have Atlantean blood too."

She licked her lips, like she was trying to find moisture.

"Are there a lot of these Atlantean descendants around?"

Both girls shook their heads. "Nope, they're really rare. Last count was like five or six hundred total in the world. It's actually one of the reasons our Academy has had a huge influx of new students lately. Everyone wants to be close to them."

"If they're rare, how did the five of them meet?"

I mean, the odds of them finding each other would be almost impossible.

"I think ... I heard their parents were all friends or something," Ilia said with a shrug.

"Why are they so horrible?" I asked. The girls had both warned me, which I was taking seriously.

Ilia shook her head. "They're not horrible. Not at all. I've had a few interactions with them, and they're actually nice ... charming even. But I've always sensed that if you got on the wrong side of them, they could destroy you. I think it's better just to avoid them as much as possible." She raised an eyebrow at me. "Unless you can get one of them in bed for the night. I've heard Atlantean dick is a one-of-a-kind experience."

I blinked before a snort of laughter left me. "Did you just say *Atlantean dick*?"

She was without a filter, and while it had been annoying when she kidnapped me, I was already over that. I might have even been a little grateful that my hand had been forced, because now I was living the pink-haired life



like a boss.

Ilia shrugged. “Just calling it like it is.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about me going anywhere near them ... or their jewels,” I said.

I could already tell that this Academy was like high school on steroids, filled with magical creatures born of myth and legend. It was smart to stay off the radar of anyone popular or powerful.

It might be the only way to make it through alive.



My room turned out to be one of the nicest places I'd ever stayed. I had a queen bed with soft sheets and a thick blanket. Bathrooms were shared, but there were at least ten on this floor, so one was generally free—according to my very helpful tour guides. Both of them were now sprawled across my bed, and there was a sense of ease between the three of us that I wasn't sure I'd ever felt with any friend before.

“So ... what myths about supernaturals are true?” I asked, putting away my few sets of clothing. “Larissa went out into the sunlight, so I'm guessing vampires don't burn to ash?”

I found both of them grinning broadly at me. “What?” I snorted, hands on hips.

“Your human is showing, girl,” Ilia said, ruffling her gorgeous hair, before jumping to her feet. “I'm going to have to leave the explaining to Larissa; I've got a ton of paperwork to do before my date with a shifter tonight.” She paused. “Oh, and I programmed your door to recognize both Larissa's and my energy, so if you ever need us to grab anything from here, just press your hand to the panel and add us to the access screen.”

I nodded. She'd shown me how to unlock my room, which was keyed to my energy. No one could enter it without my permission, which was a huge relief.

Ilia left in a flurry of red hair and energy, and then it was just Larissa and me.

“To answer your question,” Larissa said, “some of the myths are true. Occasionally we've slipped up and exposed ourselves to a human. Stories get around after that, and a myth is born. For the most part, all supernaturals



share very similar traits. We're strong, fast, and heal quickly. We have an average life span of eight hundred years, and we're immune to most human diseases and worries."

I coughed. "Eight. Hundred. Years?"

All of my blinking was making my eyes itch, but I couldn't seem to stop doing it. She might have broken my head. "I'm going to live for eight hundred fucking years?"

Larissa actually chuckled at me. "I'm not sure they'll be fucking years, but yep, you should live that long. You know, if you don't piss anybody off."

We both laughed, and I dropped down next to her.

"So Atlanteans came first," I said, getting it all straight in my head, "and then that land sank, and the other supes crossed from Faerie after that? And there are four races, which are all kind of similar, just with a few unique powers to differentiate them?"

Larissa sat up straighter. "Wow, you've already deduced a lot about our world, considering you've only been in it for a few hours. That's pretty accurate, and the demi-fey of course, which is a whole other story."

Like I could ever forget Mossie.

"This is a huge logic puzzle. I enjoy putting all the pieces together."

Larissa dropped back again. "Here are some more pieces for you. Vampires need extra blood to fuel our cells. We can't regenerate them fast enough on our own. The added benefit of this is, the more blood we drink, and the fresher that blood is, the stronger we become. We're the fastest of all supes and can use compulsion to control those weaker than us." I gasped, and she shook her head quickly. "Don't worry about it, it's very rarely used, because if you lose control, you're going to have a pissed-off supe on your hands."

Un-fucking-believable.

"And shifters ... self-explanatory?"

She nodded. "Yep, there are multiple shifter animals, and they're usually part of a pack—named so because the wolf shifters are the strongest species within that race. They're powerful and loyal, very close to nature, and they're touchy-feely, so don't think twice when they hug you for no reason."

Her hand snaked over and she linked her arm through mine. "All supes like to touch, actually. It's for comfort, you know."

I'd spent most of my life trying not to get touched by fucked-up dudes, but I had to admit, this sort of friendly hand squeeze did feel nice.



Pulling back, I continued, "Fey?"

Larissa cleared her throat. "Last to cross from Faerie. They're elemental. They like to play with fire, wind, water, etcetera. They're close to nature as well, and they always look so put together. Something about them just seems ... unruffled."

With a snort, I dropped my head onto the soft bed. "Guess I know why witch was the logical choice for me."

There was absolutely nothing put together about me or my appearance.

Larissa chuckled. "Magic users are scary powerful because they can use supernatural energy and turn it into magic. There's almost no limit to what you guys can do, and that makes it a strong race to be part of."

It wouldn't matter to me. I was just excited not to be on a smelly bus right now trekking across some random state.

"Have you ever done any magic?" Larissa asked, rolling to her side so she was facing me.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. There have been a few unexplainable things. Like ... sometimes when I'm in danger, I'm suddenly extra strong and can throw a full-grown man across the room. And I've ... influenced people before. I didn't realize it at the time, but looking back, it was definitely beyond just a normal sweet-talking. It was more like having a power of persuasion." Like that vampire thing she'd spoke of. "One time I stopped a car from running over a little kid. I moved so fast, which I chalked up to adrenaline, but ... now... Lots of things like that have happened in my life ... but I've never actually said a magic spell or anything."

She nodded. "That all sounds like magic to me. They do use words to cast spells, but it's more about manipulating your energy inside. You should feel it swirling in there, especially when you're highly emotional."

Outside of that heat when I found my mother, I couldn't think of another time I'd felt a "swirl of power."

"The teachers will know how to bring your power to life," she promised me, pulling herself up from the bed. "And on that note, I'm going to find my dad and tell him you've settled in. Want to meet in the commons for dinner?"

Part of me wanted to stay hidden in my room, but that was not how this new life was going to work. If I was giving it a proper chance, I needed to get out there. I needed to learn everything I could about the world.

"I'll be there," I promised.

She grinned broadly. "Awesome. Around 7:00 P.M.?"



I nodded, and Larissa shot me one more smile before she left the room.

For a minute, the silence almost overwhelmed me, and I realized I hadn't been alone for hours. Not since Ilia busted her way into my truck stop bathroom. My head was plenty busy though, all of the new *crazy* information running around in there.

Overthinking wouldn't get me anywhere, so I decided to try and compartmentalize this day, put it all in a box I'd reexamine later, and get some sleep. The bed was really soft and I hadn't slept for over twenty-four hours, so ... perfect time for a nap.

When I woke hours later, I felt a lot better, right until I lifted my old watch and saw it was 12:00 P.M. *Fuck*. It was still set on US time, which sent a jolt of panic through me. I had no idea what the local time was.

Hopping off the bed, I eased my door open. Maybe someone would be in the hall and I could ask them for the time? It was empty though, not a single supernatural to be seen. Sucking up whatever dregs of bravery that were left inside of me, I let the door close behind me.

Back down the stairs, the comfy couch and bookshelf area was half filled with supernaturals. I was just about to venture over to the closest one to ask the time, when a low call sent trills down my spine.

"Hey! New girl."

His voice was a rich, deep rumble, tinged with humor tracing across each word.

Swallowing hard, I turned to find three dudes standing behind me. They looked somewhat familiar, and I really wished I'd taken a second to brush my hair that was no doubt tangled everywhere.

"Hey, new dudes," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. Everyone was new to me.

The middle one took a step closer. He was big, well over six feet, dressed in stylish and expensive clothing: faded and torn jeans—the designer type—a white long-sleeved, fitted shirt that molded to his muscular body, and dark gray boots. I noted his pretty-boy haircut, brown hair that was longer on top, and flashing eyes that were a shade of silvery brown.

"Can I help you with something?" I pushed before he could speak again. He continued to stare, and I tried not to run away.

*Never run from a predator.*

I'd had a bad feeling, from that first low rumble of his voice, about who was standing in front of me. The Atlantean-five. Or three of them, to be



accurate.

Three muthafucking Atlanteans. I mean, sure, supernaturals were a mythical world come to life, but Atlantis....

Silver eyes pushed even closer, his gaze dragging across my face and down my body. "I'll bet you can help me with a lot of things, little witch."

I scowled. Men, they were the same no matter where I went. Supe, Atlantean, human. All dicks.

"Look," I said, keeping my voice as brittle and cold as I could manage. "I'm not interested." I waved my hand at them. "In whatever it is you want to say."

I turned to flounce off, but he reached out and grabbed my arm. His smirk was gone now, and he had his eyes narrowed on me. "What are you?" he asked quietly, and I realized this conversation had taken a turn.

One of the other guys, who'd looked decidedly uninterested until this moment, turned to his friend. "Come on, Calen, leave the human alone. We have more important things to deal with."

I flinched at the *human* dig. I already suspected that was an insult in this world. Glaring, I took in the asshole. He was a blondie, a mixture of golden tones in his longer hair. His blue eyes were biting in a way that *Calen's* weren't, icy, with a silver ring right around the iris. And his scowl was impressive; I could feel his animosity from every part of his body. He was dressed similarly, but completely in black. The dark soul.

The third one was quieter, watching me with wide eyes that were silvery gray like Calen's but with slivers of gold bisecting them. There was no animosity in his gaze. If anything he looked intrigued, like he was dissecting me. He wore a plaid blue button-down shirt, dark chinos, and very expensive dress shoes. He smiled kindly, and I understood what Ilia was saying about them appearing nice but having a scary undercurrent.

All three were perfect specimens of the male species: tall, broad, beautiful. And clearly dangerous. They were the sort that mesmerized you until you couldn't see straight, turned your own body against you, and then when they had you right where they wanted you, they chewed you up and spat you out ... broken.

I was going to try really hard, right *after* this moment, to avoid them as much as possible.

After a few more seconds of the scary blond one glaring, Calen shrugged, and his intensity faded as he released me. "See you around, little witch."



The three of them melted into the crowd.

I realized that a lot of eyes were on me now and I fought against an urge to blush. What the hell? Why was my heart pounding in my chest so hard? That had been very ... something. It had been something insane, and I couldn't even remember what I had come down here for.

"You're in my fucking way," a chick said, who was clearly trying to get to the couch I was blocking. "Daydream somewhere else, human."

Apparently word had gotten around that I was "human."

Shooting her a scowl, I pushed past her, making sure to knock her shoulder as I did. Deciding I'd worry about the time later, I started to head back to my room. At least I was safe in there.

Just near the stairs, I paused and let out a low groan of exasperation. There was a huge clock on the wall that I'd apparently missed on my trip down. It was 6:00 P.M, and I quickly adjusted my watch to its new time zone.

I hurried back to my room, and when I stepped inside I took an extra-long moment to just breathe. That encounter had shaken me more than I'd like to admit. When I pulled myself together, I decided a shower might help to ease some of the tension inside. Water always made me feel better.

Grabbing clean clothes, I searched one of the drawers near the door, relieved to find towels and toiletries. So many toiletries, including makeup. Despite the fact that I'd always been poor, I usually managed to find money for a few pieces of makeup. I was no expert in applying it or anything, but I did okay. I couldn't wait to experiment with all of these new products, but for now I needed to get cleaned up.

The first bathroom was occupied, but the second was free. Stepping inside, I pressed my hand against the small panel like I'd been shown and it secured the door. After that, I took the longest, hottest shower I'd had in ages. By the time I stepped out, dried, and dressed myself, I almost felt like I had a new lease on life.

As I passed the mirror, my reflection startled me. I had to laugh at how odd it was to have such light hair. The shade of pink had turned out exactly the way I wanted it, and the year had already started out ... interestingly.

And it was only day one.



I had a great memory, and it was easy to retrace my steps back to the commons. Punctuality was something I appreciated, so I made sure to arrive five minutes early. It would have been even earlier, but I didn't want to risk being alone out here with supernaturals. There was too much I still didn't know. Rules about the races. Social etiquette. It was like going to a foreign country for the first time. You learned the rules to stay out of trouble. So I'd be cautious until I knew more.

The common area was clearly a popular place for supes to hang out. There looked to be hundreds of them there, eating and chatting and laughing.

The vibe was happy, with a calming energy in the air.

I lingered on the edge, not quite prepared to step out into their world. Not quite prepared to accept that this was my new life. *How was this my new life?*

At first I didn't notice the light thundering sound in the background, and it wasn't until I looked up that I realized it was pouring rain. *What the hell?* It was warm and dry here, and yet there was quite the storm raging outside. I marveled at the barrier above our heads, almost like a giant translucent umbrella, repelling the water.

Outside of the step-through, this was one of my first *magic in the wild* sightings. Like real, honest to fucking life *magic*!

What else had I missed out on knowing?

How did I end up in the human world in the first place?

Ilia said my mother couldn't have been my true parent, because she was definitely affected by drugs and alcohol and there was nothing magical about her. My father had apparently been the same—he'd died when I was five. Which meant I had another set of parents out there, ones who had either



given me away or had me taken from them.

*Maybe they were dead too...*

It was the most logical of explanations, but if we were using logic, why was I adopted into the human world? That didn't make any sense.

"Maddi!" Ilia's shout drew my attention, and I focused on her as she hurried over, dragging a tall blond guy behind her. He was impressive, with heavily roped muscles and a chiseled jaw, but it was his eyes I liked the best—happy and a deep, rich brown in color.

He smiled at me and I returned that smile, looking between both of them.

"Aren't you on a date right now?" I said.

Ilia winked at blondie, and I realized they were basically the same height. She wore boots with low heels, shooting her up over six feet. "Yep, we were just about to head out when I noticed you hovering here. Figured I better check you were alright."

"Where are you heading?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow at me, and I'm sure it didn't escape her notice that I hadn't actually said anything about being alright. "Queensborough ... it's a town nearby. It's supernatural occupied, and we're allowed to go back and forth between the Academy and the town as much as we want. There are a ton of awesome restaurants and shops there. I'll take you soon—I noticed you don't have a cell phone; we need to get you one of those ASAP."

The thought of exploring Queensborough gave me a jolt of excitement. It was another piece of this world, and I was desperate to uncover them all.

I shrugged. "My last one broke, and I never bothered to replace it." I nudged her shoulder. "Enough about me; go and enjoy your date with...?"

"Josh," he said, smiling at me again.

"Right." I nodded. "Go and enjoy. I'll be fine. Larissa is meeting me for dinner."

As if she'd heard her name, the tiny blonde vamp appeared on the edge of the commons. She caught sight of me and waved before she hurried along the path toward us.

Ilia waved as well before giving me a quick hug.

"You look gorgeous," I whispered in her ear. She wore a low-cut red dress and dark suede boots. Her hair was glossy and red, and her makeup was on point. She was truly stunning. "Make him work for all that," I said as she pulled back.

She smiled brightly. "You got it, babe. I always make them work."



“She does,” Josh added, clearly having heard our convo. “And Leah is well worth it.”

My heart went all mushy then, especially at his use of a shortened version of her name. I realized that this wasn’t a first date for them, as I’d thought initially. They were pretty comfortable with each other, and I wondered how long she’d been seeing the shifter. I also wondered what animal he was, but that was something to ask another time.

They were off then, waving at Larissa as they passed by. She stopped at my side, and I noticed how nice she looked. She’d changed into a dress and tights, short black boots finishing the look. I wore jeans and a plain white shirt, one of the seven sets of clothing I owned. I wasn’t here to impress anyone, thankfully, and I’d learned long ago not to sweat that sort of stuff.

“Are you ready to eat?” she asked, somewhat breathless.

Examining her closely, I thought she was looking a little pale, despite the creamy brown of her skin tone. “Is everything okay?” I asked, wondering if she’d been running from something.

Larissa nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just almost time for me to *feed* again. I can only go so long.”

It took me a second to realize what she meant by feed. Blood. Larissa needed blood.

That should have grossed me out, because, honestly, it was so far removed from the world I had existed in. But ... part of me had already started to accept this crazy new existence.

“As long as you’re not gonna munch on me,” I joked, because I already knew she didn’t drink from the vein, “then I can wait for you to get your blood.”

Larissa snort-laughed before reaching out and snagging my hand and dragging me through the tables. We were drawing attention again, and I was hoping that this “curiosity about the new chick” would end soon. It was already getting old.

When we finally reached an unoccupied seat, Larissa let me go and I sank onto the wooden bench. She sat across from me and leaned forward. “If you don’t mind, I’ll have some blood with dinner tonight.” She was watching me closely, waiting for my reaction. “It’s in a carton. You won’t even see anything.”

I waved my hand. “I don’t mind. I’m actually pretty curious about how all of it works.”



“Hold on to your panties, then,” she said, as she placed her hand on a small symbol carved into the center of the table. I hadn’t really noticed it at first, but looking closer I recognized it from the front entrance. It was the crest, with the M V F S on it. That had to be the school crest, and each letter represented one of the races.

A light burst up from the symbol, and Larissa reached out to stroke her hand along it. “Vampire,” she said.

Images appeared, and she brushed her hand across it again, rotating through them like she was scrolling through a menu selection. Paying closer attention to the light, I read the descriptions below each image. *B+ infused with apple ... AB- with a hint of spring.*

“Whoa,” I gasped, my hands pressing hard into the wood table. “This is how you order blood?”

Larissa grinned before a grimace took over. “Yes, unfortunately. I still eat food, it’s my main source of energy, but once every three or four weeks I have to feed as well. If I don’t, I get weak and angry, and my friends start to look really delicious.”

I snorted at that, and then realized I was one of those friends now. “I taste terrible,” I said, trying to keep my expression serious. “Really bad. Watery, weak blood.”

Larissa shook her head. “Lies. You should smell your blood.”

I narrowed my eyes on her, and she winked at me.

Her hand stopped moving then on one of the blood selections. “This one,” she said softly, and a moment later it appeared right in front of her. The blood was hidden inside of what looked like a large square juice box, so I couldn’t even tell.

“So this is how we order dinner as well?” I asked.

Larissa nodded, before she lifted her *beverage* and started to drink through a straw. “Yep, just tap the Academy crest and say dinner.”

I was a little excited that she was letting me try it. There was no hesitation as I reached out and slapped my hand on the symbol. Warmth immediately filled my palm. “Dinner,” I said.

The heat increased and I pulled my hand away, waiting for the images to appear. The first was spaghetti bolognese. Drool filled my mouth as I stared at the enticing food before me.

“Flick through,” Larissa suggested. “The menu changes daily, and there’s always so much to choose from. The food takes a little longer to arrive,



because it's actually prepared by hand—with a touch of magical help, of course. But it's worth the wait."

"Do we only get to pick one?" I asked, my eyes not moving an inch from the rich, red sauce of that spaghetti.

Larissa laughed, and my stomach rolled at a flash of red on her teeth. Maybe I wasn't as "cool" with it as I thought. Still, it didn't make me want to run screaming from the table, so I was doing okay. "Choose as many as you can eat," Larissa said, thankfully not noticing my reaction. "Some of the shifters eat like seven meals at every single sitting."

Yep. It was decided. I didn't give a fuck if the Clovers tortured me every day; I would put up with a lot for regular, delicious food.

After a few clumsy attempts, I got the hang of swishing my hand across the air and moving the images. It was some Matrix shit for sure, all advanced technology and out-of-this-world experiences. Only this was advanced magic, and I was starting to see just how much my life was about to change.

"This one," I said, pointing the same way Larissa had. The image kind of shimmered in the light, and my smile widened. This was going to be fun.

We ended up ordering about six different dishes, and I managed to eat more food than I probably did in a normal week. I was naturally curvy and loved to eat, even though I'd definitely had my share of starvation over the past ten years. Luckily I worked in restaurants and diners most of the time, which meant there were always leftovers and discount food for me to grab at the end of a shift.

Larissa watched me with humor. "I'm not sure I've ever seen someone enjoy the dinner menu quite like you are," she said with a chuckle.

Dragging some more pasta to my mouth, I let out a low, breathy sound. "This is ... amazing. I can't believe that I can just choose anything I want. That's a first for me."

Larissa's face creased in sympathy; her face was an open book. "Well, all of that is about to change—"

She was cut off by a bag slamming onto the table right between us, almost spilling my fruit salad everywhere. I jerked my head toward whoever was rude enough to do that and found myself face-to-face with the gorgeous redheaded witch I'd seen at the Clover table earlier.

Kate.

"New girl," she said, staring down at me.

Her eyes were hazel, with a dark green ring right around the pupil. She



had heavy makeup on—a winged eyeliner I was ultra-impressed with, and shimmery gold eye shadow. Her lips were full, but in a fake way, like she'd done something to enhance their plumpness.

“Head bitch,” I shot right back. I'd been on the streets for most of my life. I didn't take shit from anyone. Including the mean girl of the school.

Kate's eyes narrowed on me, and she leaned down in what she probably thought was an intimidating way. My hands itched for my switchblade, simply because it was a good backup. At least I knew they weren't allowed to use magic on other students, and surely out here in the open like this she'd obey that law.

“I'm here to lay the ground rules for you,” she breathed out in a hiss. “I wouldn't want you to make a *costly* mistake your first visit to the Academy.”

I exchanged a glance with Larissa, unhappy to see how pale and frightened she looked. I recognized the signs of someone who had suffered abuse at the hands of those stronger than her, and I resisted the urge to get into a fight right here.

Standing, I was taller than Kate, which allowed me to be the one looking down. “I don't need you to explain anything to me,” I said softly, my voice vibrating with annoyance. “In fact, I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak to me again. I don't like you. Or your magically botoxed face.”

The three chicks who stood just behind her gasped, and Kate's cheeks stained a dark red. “You just made a dangerous enemy,” she told me softly. “You're about to learn why I'm head bitch of this school.”

She swung around then, and her lesser bitches followed. Larissa's eyes were wide and shiny and she shook her head, breaths coming in and out in gasps. “You shouldn't have done that, Maddi. Seriously, she's not stable. I'm not sure she has a limit on what she might do.”

I waved her off, even though unease settled in my gut, leaving a heavy weight there. “It'll be fine. If I know anything about bullies, it's that you can't cave in to them. I mean ... why would she even approach us like that in the first place?”

Larissa sighed. “You're new. You're pretty. You're competition. And,” she cleared her throat, “I heard a rumor on the way over here that you had a little run-in with some of the Atlantean-five.”

I gaped at her, and she nodded. “Yeah, the rumor mill works fast around here. Kate no doubt wants to stop that before it starts. The Clovers think they own those guys.”



I shook my head. “Shit. It was like an eight-second conversation.”

“Eight seconds was more than enough time,” Larissa assured me. “And now you’re on both the Clovers’ and the Atlanteans’ radar. Nice work.”

I groaned and dropped my head in my hands. “Shit. This could only happen to me.”

Something told me I’d better figure out what my powers were and soon. I was going to need them.



When we finished our food, there were still hundreds of students sitting around. The sky above was awash with storm clouds that continued to rain down on the land. It remained warm and dry where we were though, and it was relaxing as some live music started up on the far side of the commons.

“Pixies,” Larissa said. “They come across from the demi-fey school. They’re nasty little assholes, but they have the sweetest voices.”

It was true, they sounded like a choir of angels. From this distance I couldn’t see more than a little flutter of glitter—they were tiny, but their voices easily projected across the area.

“You’ll learn a lot more about the supe races in your classes,” Larissa said. “Don’t try and learn everything at once. You’ll drive yourself crazy.”

“When do I find out what classes I’ll be in?” I asked. At some point I’d gone from “wait and see how I felt about this insane world tomorrow” to “I’m going to school and I need to choose classes.”

She opened her mouth to answer, then something behind me caught her attention. “Uh, tomorrow,” she said faintly, “when you meet with my dad.”

I turned to see what was causing her distraction. The first person I saw was Calen, moving through a small crowd near the entrance to the dorm rooms. Everyone shifted out of his way like he was royalty. Actually, on second glance, it wasn’t Calen; it was the guy in the middle of them.

And ... sweet mother of all that was holy.

“Do they have gods here?” I asked Larissa breathlessly. I couldn’t stop staring at him—looking away was a feat requiring more strength than I had.

“If there was any such thing as a god on Earth, Asher Locke is as close as you’ll get,” she replied, her voice as breathless as mine.



Asher Locke. Fuck. Me.

He was the one who'd had his head down when I first walked through. The one who'd captured my attention. Thoroughly.

Just like the other Atlantean-five, he was tall; his hair was black, but I could still see the shimmer of silver-blond dusted through it. It wasn't streaks ... more like an actual shimmer in the strands.

He wasn't looking my way, so I had no idea what his eye color was, but I could clearly see the dark masculine planes of his face, full lips, and defined cheekbones that could have made him look feminine, only there was literally not a single feminine thing about that guy. He was broad, and hard, and *deep breaths*. "Facial hair," I groaned, and Larissa made a noise of agreement. He wore a five o'clock shadow like nobody's business.

He was too much. Like ... everything about him was too much. There was something fantastical about Asher, even in a place like this Academy, which was already pure fantasy.

Finally, I couldn't look any longer, because I might have actually embarrassed myself by drooling. Pulling my gaze, I forced myself to turn to Larissa. Only she was staring at the five.

"Is he one of the magic users?" They'd said there were three magic users, one vamp, and one shifter. "Or ... the shifter, maybe?" There was something feral, almost animalistic about Asher.

She sighed, rubbing a hand over her eyes like she was trying to break a trance. "Magic user."

Refusing to turn back, I asked more questions with the hope of distracting myself. "What exactly happened to sink Atlantis? Does anyone know?"

If the history I knew was even remotely correct, it had happened thousands of years ago, but maybe they knew something.

"No one knows for sure," Larissa said. "Our history books detail a supernatural race that was beyond anything we have today. Stronger, smarter, more powerful and advanced, even though they lived over ten thousand years ago. It's believed that in their quest for power and knowledge, they pushed too far and angered the gods. One of them sunk the island and almost all of its inhabitants."

My chest ached unexpectedly as I thought about all of them being struck down by a god.

"That's why Asher feels so much ... more," I said. "Because he has a very pure Atlantean bloodline?"



Larissa nodded. “Yep, he’s unique, powerful, and ... so hot.”

He was definitely all three of those things.

There was something about Asher that didn’t feel the same as the other supernaturals I’d met. It made me curious and wary of him, because he was far too gorgeous not to be an asshole, and on top of that, he was descended from powerful super-mage-fey.

My head turned to where they stood, chatting with someone at a nearby table. I couldn’t help but stare. Calen’s eyes snapped in my direction and he shot me a smirk with a knowing expression. Apparently he hadn’t forgotten our little conversation before. I returned a scowl and resisted the urge to flip him off.

I really didn’t want to be on their radar; I already had to deal with a psycho redhead witch. That was more than enough drama for my supernatural school experience.

I’d just turned away when Larissa started choking and spluttering. “Uh, Maddi,” she finally got out. “I think they’re coming this way.”

“Who is?” I squeaked.

*Don’t look. Don’t look.*

“Calen, Jesse, Rone, Axl, and...,” she spluttered. “And Asher.”

Five names. Until then, I’d only known Calen’s and Asher’s, and now I wondered which one...

*Stop!* What the hell was I doing worrying about their names?

Standing, I reached out and grabbed her arm. “I’m sure you’re wrong, but just in case ... we should move,” I said with urgency. I didn’t need to rile Kate further, and I really didn’t need to drool all over the guys if they sat near us.

I needed more adjustment to this new life before I crossed that bridge.

Walking through the commons, I moved at a pace that got us back to the magic users’ wing and up the stairs in no time. When we were finally in my room, I slammed the door and leaned against it.

A burst of laughter drew my attention, and I turned to find Larissa doubled over, holding her stomach. There was something a little funny and pathetic about what we’d just done, but I wasn’t quite sure where her hysteria came from.

“That would be the first time,” she said, trying to breathe, talk, and laugh at the same time, “that any girl has run from them. You’re going to shake up this school, I can already tell.”



I snorted, crossing my arms over my chest before I relaxed and threw myself back on the bed. “I didn’t even finish high school. It’s insane to me that I’m back in this situation again, navigating cliques and ... supernaturals.”

“You’ll get the hang of it soon enough. I’ve never been to human school, but I watch television. I think we have the same basic fundamentals and setup. It’ll be fine.”

She patted my hand and turned to leave. “I’ll be at your door at around 7:00 A.M. That way you’ll have time to talk to Dad before class.”

“See you tomorrow,” I said, pulling myself up to a sitting position. She was almost out the door when she paused. “Oh, and your uniforms would have been delivered while you were gone. They’ll be in the wardrobe.” She pointed to the hanging space above a set of drawers and I felt shock creep over my face. I had not expected uniforms to be a requirement here. I mean, this was basically college, and they were supernaturals, but ... whatever.

“Wait,” I called, stopping her one last time. “Do those five all live here? In the magic users’ wing?”

She curved her lips into a smirky grin. “Still thinking about them, hey?”

I wanted to deny it, but that would be a massive fucking lie.

Her pretty face screwed up. “You know, I don’t actually know. I’ve definitely seen all five of them in this building before, but ... who knows.”

Knowing my luck, they definitely all lived here. And why couldn’t I get Asher’s perfect face out of my freakin’ mind ... his full lips, the five o’clock shadow...

*No! No more.*

“Asher is like the king of the Academy, so they probably do live here,” Larissa said. “My dad loves him and gives him anything he wants. Those five always stick together. Asher and Jesse especially seem really close.”

“Which one is Jesse?” I asked.

“The tallest one. He’s a lion shifter.”

“The one with the icy blue eyes?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s Rone.” She blushed a little. “He’s a vampire, and a moody asshole.”

Rone, the one who glared at me when Calen grabbed me earlier tonight. Moody was one way to describe him. “Isn’t dressing in black a bit of a vampire cliché?” I asked, feeling snarky toward the cranky bastard.

Larissa tried to hide her smile. “He’s always preferred black. For as long as he’s been at the school anyway.”



“What year are they in?”

“Second and third, but they went to the last few years of the junior school as well. It’s not on the same grounds as our Academy, but it’s in this area.”

“So which one is Jesse, then?”

“Jesse has green eyes and dark skin,” Larissa said.

I couldn’t remember if I’d seen him, but then again, Asher had been taking most of my focus.

Larissa left and I changed out of my clothes and into a tank top and panties, ready to crash into the soft bed. My mother always told me I was born at the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve. I’d never known if that was true or not; she was off her face and full of shit most of the time, but I still celebrated my birthday starting from midnight.

This birthday would definitely go down as the weirdest of my life.

And maybe the best.



I slept surprisingly badly considering how amazing the bed was. I couldn't settle. My mind was awash with information and my body was filled with nerves. Being on my own allowed all the doubts to creep in. All the thoughts of not being good enough, of trying to wrap my head around the new fantasy world I'd somehow found myself in.

If the barrier hadn't let me into the school, I'd have almost convinced myself by now that this was all a mistake.

At 5:00 A.M I gave up trying to sleep and dragged myself into the nearest bathroom. It was quiet in the hall, no one up and about yet, which allowed me to sneak in and out unnoticed.

Once I was back in my room, my long hair dry, I went in search of this uniform. It was exactly as Larissa had said, six sets, neatly hanging in my wardrobe. They were literally the only things hanging in there, because the rest of my clothes filled half a drawer.

Maybe I could find a part-time job here and earn some money to get new clothes in Queensborough, the nearby town. I'd ask Ilia when I saw her today. I also wanted to know how her date went. The thought of dating a supernatural sent a twirl of intensity through my stomach.

I mean, he was a shifter. What if he went furry while you were having sex or something? That felt really weird to me, but it might be normal in their world. I was definitely intrigued by the prospect of learning more about the four races. Hopefully I could "keep my human from showing" today.

I also really wanted to know more about the Atlanteans, and not just because of Asher. The myth of Atlantis was one that had long fascinated me; I'd always sort of believed it had been real. Even when it was just a Plato



fable. I really hoped I was in some sort of history class here.

Pulling one uniform out, I laid it across the bed before ditching the pj's I'd pulled back on after my shower. I'd have to ask about a washing machine soon, because I was down to my last clean set of underwear and clothing. I guess I could always wash them in the bathroom. Wouldn't be the first time.

The uniform was dark blue and white, with orange piping and crest embroidery on the jacket. It was a classic private school uniform, and I wondered why they made college supernaturals wear a uniform. It still felt weird to me.

The skirt fell to midhigh. Black tights underneath, which I struggled to get on. This might have been the first time in my life I had worn tights, but I eventually figured it out. The white shirt buttoned up snugly and was tucked into the skirt. The jacket went over the top, and it was comfortable. Which I hadn't expected.

It was almost as if these clothes had been tailor made for me. There was a full-length mirror in my room, so I checked myself out, and almost died at how different I looked. No one would be able to tell that I was Maddison James, street kid who basically raised herself.

I looked fancy.

I wasn't sure I liked it.

"Lucky the orange is understated, or it would clash horribly with the pink."

I let out a low shriek, jumping and spinning to find a stranger framed in my doorway. I was positive I closed that door after my shower—old habit from living in shitty neighborhoods—but it was clearly wide open.

"Uh, who are you?" I said, trying to catch my breath.

She strode forward, her long white-blond hair streaming out behind her. "My name is Deeann, but everyone calls me Dee. I'm a third-year magic user focusing on healing."

I shook the proffered hand quickly, feeling a slight tingle across my skin when she touched me.

"Maddison, everyone calls me Maddi. This is my first day."

Dee smiled, crossing her arms as she looked me over. She wore the same uniform as me, but she was short and curvy, filling it out in all the right places. She was pretty and cute at the same time.

"What sort of magic user are you?" she asked, her expression curious. "I can't really get a read on your energy."



I shrugged. "Would you believe that until yesterday I had no idea any of this even existed?"

She straightened, and her eyes got really wide. "A virgin."

A snort left me. "Yeah, not for years."

She shook her head, leaning into me. "No, a supernatural virgin. This is your first time interacting with our world?"

I nodded, wondering where this slightly odd chick was going with all of this. She let out a low whistle. "That's really awesome. Do you know much about humans? I've never met any myself, but I've always wanted to spend some time in their lives."

"How...?"

How could she have never met a human?

She must have figured out what I hadn't asked. "Our communities are self-sufficient. I'm from Stratford, a supernatural prison community in America. I've never had any reason to venture out of our world."

"So the supernatural towns around the world ... no humans live there?"

She nodded hard. "Nope. Only supes allowed. We live under the humans' noses, most of us never interacting. I mean, there are definitely supes that live out with the humans, but I'm not one of them."

She paused, and then with an expectant look on her face, leaned even closer. I had to laugh at the undisguised enthusiasm she was displaying.

"So..." she pushed.

"Yes, I know a lot about humans. I lived with them for twenty-two years, thinking I was human. What do you want to know?"

Dee let out a little shout. "I made the right decision to check out the new chick. You're already ten times more awesome than I thought and we've barely even talked."

I'd never met someone quite like Dee. She was oddly excitable and a little weird, but also nice.

"Maybe next time just knock first," I suggested.

Her cheeks went pink and she nodded. "Yeah, sorry about that. I just saw your door slightly ajar and decided to go for it." Her face brightened again. "Anyway, I'm meeting a friend this morning, so I'm going to take off. But hopefully I'll see you around soon. Otherwise, let's catch up at dinner."

I waved but she was already gone, rushing off as quickly as she had arrived.

Shaking my head, I was about to go in search of my shoes when there



was a knock on my still-open door. “Girl,” Ilia said, sashaying her way inside. “You’re just asking for trouble leaving your room open to the vultures in this school.”

I snorted, thinking that she’d probably have had fun meeting Dee and her eccentric ways. “I was kind of ambushed by another student,” I said, my words muffled as I stuck my head in the closet again. “She wanted to know about humans.”

When I emerged with a pair of shiny black flats, Ilia was sprawled on my bed. Luckily, I never made my bed—why bother when you were only getting back in there?—because she was flailing her arms around like she was making sheet-angels.

“What are you doing?” I said with a laugh, lifting one foot to slip a shoe on, followed by the other.

“I had the best night last night,” she said dreamily. This Ilia was very different to the one who’d collected me yesterday. Some of her professional façade had faded, and she felt more “real.” “Seriously. Josh is amazing. Too amazing. I’m no doubt going to screw this up soon, because I’m a mess.”

“You’re a gorgeous mess at least,” I supplied, quickly braiding my hair. I didn’t want it in my face today.

She pulled herself up to stick her tongue out at me before flopping down again.

“How do I look?” I asked, feeling those nerves kick in again. It was almost seven, which meant Larissa would be here any moment to take me to her father.

Ilia sat and checked me out with a slow, leisurely stare. I fanned my face. “You’re gonna make me blush.”

Her smile was huge, her eyes filled with mirth. “You look damn good. I’d kill for your curves.”

I sighed. “It feels weird, dressing this nicely for school. Usually I was lucky to have a clean shirt.”

She stood, placing both hands on my shoulders. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. This is the start of your new life. One where you can forget the scars from your old one.”

I smiled, but I wasn’t sure I agreed with her. That was the thing with scars ... you really couldn’t get rid of them. Even after they faded, the shadow of the injury remained. And it always would.

Maybe that was so you never forgot, hopefully learning from the past.



Changing the subject, I held up a pair of dirty jeans. “I need to wash clothes. Where do I do that? And is there any way for me to earn money so I can buy some new clothes in town?”

Ilia did a little dance. “Yes! I finally have a friend to shop with. You get an allowance here ... all the students do. It’s not much, but it’ll be enough to get you some basic clothing. Princeps Jones will explain all of that to you during this meeting this morning. I’ll check your schedule then too, and we can work out the best time to shop.”

“And washing?”

She strode over and pushed a small panel next to my wardrobe that I hadn’t even noticed. It popped open and Ilia nodded toward it. “Dirty clothes go in there. The building will return them clean and pressed in about twenty minutes.”

I stared wide-eyed at the panel for many long moments, and she laughed. “You’re going to love magic, trust me. It makes life so much easier.”

I imagined that it did, but there were no doubt instances when it also made life very complicated.

Before I could dwell too hard on that, Larissa arrived wearing the same uniform as me. Ilia was just in normal clothes, tight jeans and a black sweater, because she didn’t go to class anymore.

“How did you sleep?” Larissa asked.

I wrinkled my nose, lifting a hand to rub at my tired eyes. Ilia caught me before I could. “Panda eye is not a good look,” she said.

Oh, right. I’d put on makeup this morning. I could barely remember doing it.

“I think nerves got to me. I tossed and turned most of the night,” I admitted. “I’m pretty excited to see what today brings though.”

Understatement of the year. I was beyond excited.

And also freaking the fuck out.



We must have been early still, because I didn't see anyone about as we wandered through the lower levels of the magic users' tower. The couches were empty, books back on shelves, and it was silent in a comforting way. No noise meant no one was staring at the newbie.

"How often do you get new students here?" I asked as we walked.

Ilia shrugged, and Larissa pursed her lips like she was thinking.

"Almost never," Larissa said. "Most of the first years come from the junior school that's about fifty miles away. The last *new* new kid before you was Michael. He's a vamp in his third year now. But he showed up at twenty-two as well."

"So first years are normally twenty-one?"

"That's right." Ilia nodded. "We start junior school at ten, and that runs through until we're twenty or twenty-one, depending. After that, the Academy."

"We're not even recognized as adults until we're twenty-five," Larissa added.

Ilia snorted. "That's right, I'm the adult of this group and don't you all forget it."

We rolled our eyes at her, but conversation ended when Larissa paused outside a door in a building near the entrance to the school. She knocked once but didn't wait for permission before pushing it open. "Dad?" she called, stepping inside.

Ilia and I followed her into an open and warm room. It was lined in light cherry wood shelving that extended all the way to the ceiling. The shelves were filled with so many books that it was boggling to try and take them all



in. A large desk dominated the center of the room, made from the same cherry wood, and behind it writing on some papers was Princeps Jones.

He finished what he was doing, dropped the pen, and stood to welcome us. “Please take a seat,” he said, gesturing to the two chairs in front of his desk. Larissa and I sat while Ilia hovered behind us.

“No computer?” I asked, confused by the lack of technology in the room.

Princeps Jones shook his head. “No, computers tend to malfunction around the energy of the Academy. There are a few brands that work short-term, but nothing lasts. So it’s the old-fashioned way around here.”

It was interesting that cell phones worked when computers didn’t. Like she’d read my thoughts, Ilia leaned over. “You’ll have to buy a specific style of phone so that you don’t keep frying it as well.”

Princeps Jones nodded. “Yes, you can get one in Queensborough.” He leaned forward then and handed me a thick piece of paper. Actually, it was more like parchment, heavy and high quality. Written in beautiful script across the page was a timetable.

“First term this year starts on a Wednesday,” Princeps Jones said, leaning forward to point to that column. “You’ll just pick up from here.”

“Your school year runs January to December,” I confirmed.

All three of them nodded. “Yep, but we have plenty of time off throughout the year,” Larissa added. “Lots of supe holidays.”

Looking down, I found Wednesday. There were five classes listed: Basics of Magic, Pronunciation of the Fey Language, Demon Mythology 101, Sword and Sorcery, and Race Morphology.

It looked like I had two classes this morning, followed by a lunch break, and then three classes in the afternoon. I was going to be busier here than I had been in my years of high school.

“A lot of these are beginner classes,” Larissa said, “for first year students. You also need to choose three electives.” She pointed to a small section at the bottom of the page.

There was a list:

- Demon, Shifter, Vampire Wars.
- Water Magic—strengthening a specific elemental magic.
- Pack Laws and Hierarchy
- Structure of Supernatural Prisons
- Spells and Securities on Supernatural Prisons



- Ancient Spells
- History of the Supernatural World
- Herbalism—the study of plants for spells, attack, defense, and healing.
- Rune Magic—an archaic branch of magic.
- Bloodletting – finding your inner vampire.
- Facts on Faerie

I ran my eyes across them multiple times, trying to figure out what interested me the most. History of supernaturals was a given, I'd already decided that before even stepping foot in here. It was of utmost importance I started to learn about my new world.

As for the rest ... bloodletting was definitely out, but the others were harder to eliminate.

"I think Water Magic," since I was obsessed with water and swimming, "History of the Supernatural World," for obvious reasons, "and Herbalism." Plants were cool, even if I mostly managed to kill the few I'd ever had in my possession. For some reason, that one jumped out at me.

Larissa clapped her hands. "I'm in Herbalism. It's a newer class, so there aren't many in it yet. It's a mix of first years and more advanced students. It's a lot of fun, and it helps to know what plants can heal versus kill you."

That did sound helpful.

"I'm so excited that we have a class together," I told her.

The schedule heated under my palm and with a gasp I let it fall to the ground, expecting it to burst into flames. Instead, the writing started to twist and twirl across it as the electives I'd just chosen wove their way into my schedule.

Leaning down, I picked it up, noting I now had a class after dinner tonight. *Water Magic*.

"That paper is spelled," Princeps Jones explained. "It will update when there are schedule changes, say if the teacher needs to cancel the class."

"It's worth checking it every morning," Ilia said. "Even if you have it memorized."

Okay then. Who needed computers when you had magic?

The princeps lifted a shiny black card with the school shield embossed on it and handed it to me. "This is where your allowance is deposited," he said. "I took the liberty of giving you an extra six months' worth, because you've



not had the same advantage as the rest of the students in coming from a supernatural family. I want you to feel settled and be able to buy any supplies you need.” His eyes twinkled. “Unless of course you’ve decided you’re not going to stay on.”

My lips twitched and I recalled how I tried to play it cool yesterday. It felt like a lifetime had passed since then. “I think I’ll stick it out for a while,” I said nonchalantly. I held up the black card. “And thank you. You didn’t have to go above and beyond like that. I’m very grateful.”

He smiled kindly, and I wondered how I’d ever thought he could hurt his daughter. There didn’t seem to be a mean bone in either of their bodies, and considering they were vampires ... the myths messed up that one.

He spun then to pick up a stack of books from a shelf behind his desk, holding them out to me, and I lifted the heavy load. “The books are for your classes,” he said. “There’s notebooks for each class, along with pens and all that fun stationery stuff.”

I personally loved stationery. New pens were life.

Ilia leaned closer, her red springy curls bouncing around. “Additional textbooks and resources are given out in class. Plus there’s the library, of course.”

“So, all of my food and accommodation is provided?” I wanted to double-check I wasn’t accumulating a huge bill or anything.

“All included,” Princeps Jones assured me. “Food, lodging, uniforms, and any excursions you might have to undertake for the school. The allowance is just for extras: clothing, dinners in town, movies, and such. We want you to learn, but also to enjoy your life. You’re only young once, and this is not a prison. It’s a highly regarded, state-of-the-art learning facility.”

And I’d been chosen to be here—literally hunted down. I almost couldn’t believe it.

“Have you made any leeway into figuring out her race?” Larissa asked her father, and I was grateful she remembered to ask that.

His lips thinned. “Not really. Your power is too locked down. You definitely have some magic user in you,” he said, fingers forming a steeple in front of him. “You might be a pure mage, or ... there’s a possibility of a mixed race. If that’s the case, you could actually be any of the other three: shifter, vampire, or fey. Clearly your supernatural side has been suppressed for some reason. For now, let’s not rule any race out.”

“Half fey, half mage makes the most sense,” Ilia piped up from behind.



The princeps nodded. “That does make sense, but I’ve never sensed any affinity for elemental magic in Maddison’s energy, and it’s usually quite strong.”

“You sensed it when my magic flared occasionally?” I asked.

He nodded.

*Elemental.* Well, I definitely didn’t do anything cool with fire or water. Except swim like a fish, but I decided not to mention that, because it felt like misleading information. That was a skill, not magic.

“I’ve sent out a request for a very strong sorcerer to visit soon,” Princeps Jones said. “Hopefully he will be able to figure out why your energy is locked down.”

As scary as it was to think of a sorcerer messing with my *magic*, I was more than ready for answers.

“Until then, the teachers are aware of your unique situation,” Princeps Jones added. “They’ll give you leeway and then we can reassess everything once your magic is unlocked.”

Larissa and I stood, and I shook the princeps’s hand. “Thank you for this opportunity,” I told him seriously. “You’ve already changed my life.”

*Thank you, pink hair.*



We left the princeps's office early enough to grab a quick breakfast. The first meal of the day was my favorite, so there had to be a damn good reason to miss it. After we'd ordered from the magical hologram screen again—French toast with blackberry syrup for me—the three of us got down to some hardcore gossip.

“So I heard a rumor, Maddi,” Ilia said, leaning in close to me, “that you caught the attention of the Academy kings. What happened last night after I left?”

Larissa shot me a knowing smirk and I wrinkled my nose at her. “What exactly did you hear?”

Ilia's smile broad. “Well, apparently Calen was all over you on the main floor of the magic dorms, and I heard you rejected him. Straight-up badass style.”

God, supe-whispers was as bad as human-whispers.

“Then last night at dinner, you took off when they got close.” She lifted her eyebrows at me. “Everyone was losing their minds, because it's the Atlantean-five. No one runs from them.”

I groaned, resisting the urge to drop my head in my hands and hide. It was exactly what Larissa had laughed about last night. “I think the rumors are greatly exaggerated,” I said.

Her grin got wider, and I felt my own lips twitching in response. “It's not funny,” I snorted. “I barely know shit about this world. I really need to focus on catching up. The last thing I want is to deal with this drama on my second day.”

“There's something about you, Maddi,” Ilia said, leaning back in her chair, arms open on either side of her. “It's what we talked about yesterday,



and it was something I felt from the first time I started tracking you. Your energy, for lack of a better word, draws supernaturals to you.”

My face must have gone very pale, because she shook her head and chuckled. “Not in any crazy way, girl, don’t freak. But ... it might have been enough to grab their attention. Only time will tell.”

Our food appeared then, looking fresh and delicious. I tried not to think about what Ilia had said, focusing on shoveling the amazing food in my mouth. I didn’t really believe her, because this was no high school soap opera. I wasn’t an amazing, beautiful, funny girl who was going to snag all the guys.

I was a bit of a mess. A lot of a loner. And mostly ... invisible. I mean, dinner last night and now breakfast with Ilia and Larissa was the first time I hadn’t eaten alone in years.

She was wrong. There had to be another explanation.

After finishing our food, we started to walk. I hadn’t gone beyond the commons and my dorm yet, and I focused as the girls explained the layout of the Academy. “The school is set out in a circular pattern and there are four main sections or quadrants,” Larissa said. “There are also four dorms, which are scattered around the outside of these quadrants.”

She pointed toward one massive building. “This section is where all the sit-down classrooms are, any class that requires book work. Your history class will be there. Along with Pronunciation of the Fey Language, Demon Mythology, and a few others that you’ll have during the rest of the week.” She turned and pointed to another building, one that soared a lot higher in the sky than the classroom section. “This is the herbalism quadrant, where all the plants are. Best that you don’t venture into any unknown rooms there. It has a forest in the center, and around it are lots of specialized herbalism and healing rooms. It’s a really cool, Zen sort of place.”

“So classes run Monday to Friday, and we’re free on weekends?” I checked. They both nodded. “And vacation days?”

“You’ll have days off all the time,” Ilia told me. “Especially at each of our special dates. We don’t follow most of the human holidays, like Easter and Thanksgiving, but we do have Christmas—mostly because we love presents.”

That made sense. From the little I knew, supernaturals didn’t follow the same religion or history as humans, even though the two worlds had clearly been mingling for many thousands of years. They would celebrate vastly



different historical events.

“What are the other two quarters of the Academy?” I asked.

Larissa spun toward another building, next to the classrooms. “That’s the practical magic section. For hands-on learning outside of the textbook. Shifters learn to control their beasts there. Magic users practice spells. The fey burn trees down and then quench the fire with their water...”

“And it’s where vampires learn how to safely hunt their prey,” Ilia added. She chuckled as I shivered. “Animals, of course, even though that blood can’t really sustain them for long, but it helps to hone their instincts.”

Good to know the movies got something right.

“The last quarter, over there, is the water world,” Larissa supplied. This quadrant was huge as well, almost as tall as the forest quadrant. “This section we share with the demi-fey. There are all different specialized water zones, including pools, creeks, and even a magically created ocean. It’s kind of spectacular. That’s where you’ll go for Water Magic after dinner tonight.”

I couldn’t wait, my heart rate picking up at the thought of an entire area dedicated to my favorite element.

“First, though,” Ilia said, “there’s a start-of-year assembly.” Her eyes dropped to where I had my schedule clutched in one hand, books in the other. “And if you give me five minutes, I’m going to find you a bag.”

One of the downfalls in not being able to use computers ... there was a lot of paperwork. I took a moment to be grateful that I’d never been able to afford a laptop, because I would have legit cried if I’d fried it.

“Thank you,” I said, “I really appreciate that.”

Ilia winked and then dashed away.

“How are you feeling today?” Larissa asked in her quiet, observant way. “Yesterday was ... a lot. I mean, I can’t even imagine discovering that you’re not human and then being swept away to a supernatural school all in the same day. That’s, well, a lot.”

I leaned my shoulder against a nearby brick pillar, careful not to crush the trailing rose vine that was covering half of it. I gave her question some actual thought before I answered. “It’s like a dream, you know. I keep pinching myself to wake up. I’m not sure it’s actually hit me yet, but at the same time I feel excited and—” My voice broke and I cleared my throat. “Hopeful. For the first time since I was a young child.”

Larissa’s eyes were shiny. “I’m so glad that Ilia tracked you down. My dad said she never gave up.”



Something I was now beyond grateful for.

“Am I the only supe you’ve ever met that grew up outside of our world? That knew nothing?”

Larissa nodded. “Yes, it’s almost impossible not to know once your race energy kicks in. Your case is unique because of the block on your power.” She paused. “Actually, I did hear of one other like you.”

That piqued my interest. “Who?”

“A wolf shifter in America. She was spelled to hide her supernatural side and went through most of her life thinking she was human.”

“Wow, and she’s fitting in fine now?”

Larissa shrugged. “I’m not totally sure, but I believe so. She fell in with the leaders of the American supernaturals, so she must have something going on.”

Wow ... wow!

A kinship with this chick rose up inside of me. I wished there was a way I could talk to her. I’d love to know how she dealt with all the new emotions, if she was much happier now than she’d been before finding out.

Ilia dashed up then, barely out of breath. Her dark skin was rosy, her lips red, her hair healthy and bouncy. If I didn’t like her so much, I’d have to hate her on principle.

“Got one!” she all but shouted, holding it out to me.

My eyes widened at the satchel. It looked expensive and designer, made from dark brown leather, with two thick buckles on either side holding it together.

“Hope you don’t mind that it’s been lightly used,” she said. “This was mine for a few months in my last year of school.”

A short burst of laughter left me. “Are you actually kidding me right now? I’ve never owned anything this beautiful before. I can’t even tell you used it.” I slipped my books and pens inside, buckled it closed, and hooked the strap across my body. It was perfectly weighted, and I could barely even tell it was there.

Ilia shrugged. “I have a shopping problem. This is just one of many bags I own. I won’t even notice it’s gone.”

Our worlds could not be more different, but apparently it didn’t matter when it came to friendship. We’d found our common ground somewhere.

A tinkling sound drifted through the air, and I remembered it from yesterday.



“That’s the school bell around here,” Ilia said, as students got to their feet around us. “It still sounds even when we’re on vacation, just so we know roughly what time it is.”

My skin tingled as the tune finished its light melody, and I shivered.

“There’s magic in the music,” Larissa explained, noticing me rubbing at my arms. “Not that you have to be supe to know that. Music moves everyone in different ways, and it’s a magic even humans can access.”

Truth.

We fell in behind the largest group of students, and while we walked to the assembly room, I spent my time examining them closely, trying to guess which race they were.

Vampires—even Larissa—had this preternatural way of moving. Too quickly, too gracefully, very predatory. I picked a few out in the crowd and was excited when I spotted some pointed fangs on one. Evidence that I’d actually guessed right.

Fey, again, were reasonably obvious. They looked perfect. Like ... nothing had ever ruffled them and they didn’t wake up with bed hair and bad breath—supermodels with a full makeup and filter job on them.

Shifters and magic users were a little more difficult. I guessed at a few, because I felt like shifters would be more ... animalistic. But, after seeing Asher, that wasn’t necessarily correct. He’d had all that feral energy in his gaze.

I’d figure it out though.

I continued to follow my friends, not paying the slightest attention to where we were going. We ended up in a huge brick building—as big as any concert stadium. It had fancy padded chairs that went on for miles; students were filling them at a rapid rate.

“How many students go here?” I asked.

Ilia blinked, her face going blank. “Uh, I have no idea.” She shot Larissa a look. “Daddy princeps ever fill you in?”

Larissa shook her head, a small smile quirking her lips. “Dad, or one of the teachers, tell us at the assembly every year. You haven’t listened once, have you?”

Ilia didn’t even look remotely contrite. “Your dad is awesome and I consider him a friend as well as an employer, but ... yeah, I usually miss the first assembly.” She waved her hands around. “It’s such a clusterfuck of supes in here, and I need my space.”



Her independence was one of her coolest traits. Made her seem extra badass to me, because part of me had always been looking for my place in this world. Larissa led us down the middle aisle—there were at least four other aisles splitting the rows of chairs—and Ilia groaned when we ended up near the front. “Could you be any more of a princeps’s-daughter-cliché?”

Larissa stuck her tongue out but didn’t seem offended. “Best seats are up front, Ilia, you know that.”

Ilia shook her head like homegirl was crazy but didn’t argue again. We filed across the front and took three seats together.

The noise increased as more students arrived. “Is it normal for the races to mix together?” I whispered to Larissa, who was on my right.

She gave a little half shrug. “Yes and no. In the real world we’re pretty segregated, but Dad tries to change that up here. Yes, we are often with our own races for specialty classes, but for the most part we mix. This Academy is well known for fostering supernatural unity.”

Princeps Jones was fast becoming my favorite principal ever. The schools I’d gone to before had been a dreary existence for student and teacher. That was not the vibe here at all.

A few minutes later, the vampire himself walked out onto a raised platform in front of us. He wasn’t alone; a dozen or more other supernaturals followed him. Most of them looked a little older than the students, but also ... not. There was a sense of maturity about them, but their faces remained young and unlined.

“Good morning,” Princeps Jones started, his voice naturally projecting across the huge room. “Or, good evening for some of you night dwellers.”

There were chuckles across the crowd.

“I’m happy and excited to see so many familiar faces returning,” Jones continued, “and to have many new students gracing our fine establishment for their first year at the Academy.”

Someone started to clap, but unfortunately for them, that clap didn’t catch on, dying off in an awkward silence. I tried to hide my smile. Usually it was me being awkward as fuck the few times I’d found myself in social situations.

I should find that person and make a new friend.

“Before we get into the fun stuff, I’m going to go over the rules. I know a lot of you have heard this speech multiple times, but a refresher never hurts. Some of you have selective hearing.” Princeps Jones started to stroll across



the front of the stage.

“First, we have a zero tolerance policy to using our race gifts against another student. I do not care what they did to wrong you, do not retaliate. If you are suffering at the hands of a student, or struggling with something socially or academically, report it to a member of staff and it will be dealt with swiftly. Abusing race gifts to punish another often has dire results, including but not limited to dismemberment and death. It’s not worth risking. For any reason.”

His face was fierce, and those canines looked awfully sharp as he stopped center stage again.

“Zero tolerance. Don’t push me on this. You all have a lot of special gifts. This is what separates us from humans. We have to respect the gifts, or you’re not welcome here at the Supernatural Academy.”

Larissa shot me a wry smile. “He tries his best,” she whispered, leaning in close, “but there’s only so much he can do.”

Yeah, humans were hard to control. I imagined supes were near impossible.

“Rule number two: do not venture into the herbalism wing of the school unless you know what you’re doing. The same with the water world. Both of these quadrants are dangerous to the unsuspecting.”

Second time I’d gotten that warning, and I was definitely intrigued and slightly freaked out by what might be in those quadrants.

“Rule number three,” Princeps Jones continued, “respect your teachers. We are here to guide, not raise you. Having reached this age, we expect you to already know the basics of common decency. Of common sense.” He waved a hand toward the people standing behind him. “Each of these supernaturals has life and race experience that would take you decades to learn on your own. Use their wisdom to push yourself further than you’ve ever been before. Supernatural Academy is here to set you up for the rest of your life ... do not waste this opportunity.”

For some reason I was half on the edge of my seat. His speech was compelling...

“Is he using that compelling thing?” I whispered to Larissa.

She tried to cover her laugh. “Nope, that’s just how he gets.”

I shut up as he finished. “Finally, every year I get the same question about why we enforce uniforms, and it’s as simple as this: the supernatural world will try its best to divide us by race ... to keep magic users away from



vampires and so on. We even have to do it to some extent in classes, because there's no point focusing on race attributes you don't have. The uniform is one way to unify all of you. You're all Supernatural Academy students. Under one banner. One uniform. No segregation." He clapped his hands together and straightened his broad shoulders. "That's enough with the rules. If you have any questions about our expectations here at Supe Academy, just come and speak to me."

This time when the clapping started, it picked up in intensity.

And I knew I'd never forget this first day of my new school.



After Princeps Jones finished, some of the other teachers made short speeches, noting things like the term dates and holiday times. We learned that there were twenty-five hundred students enrolled this year, and that there was a waiting list of over double that who didn't make the cut.

This freaked me out, because I had no idea why I'd made it in. We didn't even know what my race was or if I'd be powerful yet.

"So," Larissa said as we stood, preparing to file out and head to our first classes, "you now know how many students are here." She fluttered her eyelashes at Ilia. "Or did you miss that again?"

Ilia waved a hand. "Caught it this time, thank you, smartass."

When we made it outside, there were students everywhere. We had to push our way through the crowds to make it into the rooms where my morning classes were held.

"Basics of Magic is a practical class," Ilia said, using her elbows to move students who were in her way. "So you're in this quadrant."

This was my first trip into the practical magic section, and I was surprised to see how open and airy it was inside. We walked past a ton of different environments. The first one was a desert, and I could feel heat wafting off it. "Some magic users like to work under intense conditions," Larissa explained. "There's a desert and ice land here."

The ice land sent literal chills across my body, and I shivered all the way past it. Ilia and Larissa stopped at the next part of this quadrant. "This is your room," Ilia said.

I peeked around the corner. The room was large and dimly lit; there were only a few soft lights glowing up high. The ground was covered in a dark



brown bark, and when I stepped onto it, it was spongier than I expected.

“The bark is from the *jujeniat* tree,” Larissa told me. “It originated in Faerie and has amazing magical properties. It protects the students from spells that go awry, which as you might guess, is important when you’re learning new things.”

In my head, Faerie was this weird mythical world that had been mentioned a lot of times, but I still couldn’t quite get a clear image of how it all worked. I sort of pictured it sitting side by side with Earth, but in an alternate dimension. I’d enjoyed one or two superhero movies in my life, so I was well aware of multiverses. I had thought they were fiction, of course.

Along with vampires and witches...

Students pushed us further into the room, and my nerves decided to start a dance party in my gut. “I’m not sure I can do this,” I said, swallowing hard. “I mean, yesterday morning I thought I was human, and that magic was when you managed to wash, dry, fold, and put your clothes away in the same day. This is insane!”

My panic kicked in hard as I met a pair of serious green eyes. “Maddison Marie James,” Ilia said with a scowl. “I’ve watched you, one way or another, for years, and I don’t think there’s anything you can’t do.”

“How do you all know my middle name?” I said stupidly. Of all the things to focus on.

She ignored me. “You fought against huge odds to survive. You practically raised yourself. This is no different. So get it together, get your ass out there, and learn some fucking magic.”

She gave me a little shove, and I sucked in a few deep breaths for courage before walking toward the gathering of students. I turned back once; Larissa waved, and Ilia fist pumped.

I felt a little better.

The teacher entered the room then. “Welcome,” he shouted across the large area, moving closer. “Welcome to your first day of basic magic.”

When he reached us, I was surprised by how young and handsome he was. Looking no older than late twenties, he had broad shoulders and a trim waist. His full head of thick auburn hair was neatly trimmed on the sides.

“I’m Abraham, a sorcerer and *Star Wars* fanatic,” he started conversationally. I was amused to hear such a human reference in a magic class, but it made me feel a little less like a weird outsider. “I’ll be teaching this class for your first year. We’re going to approach this with the idea that



none of you know a single thing about practical magic and that you only just came into your powers last week. That way, no base skill will be missed, and no one will go out into the world—or into year two—unprepared.”

The butterflies faded more as I hovered near the back of the students. There was about fifty from what I could see, which hopefully meant I could hang around the edges and not be noticed until I got my blocked energy figured out.

Abraham clapped his hands and I leaned forward to see him better. Lights started to swirl between his palms, the same sort of soft light from above. “This is energy,” he said, moving his hands back and forth. “Magic is just a manipulation of energy, directing it where you need, and making it work for you. When you’re first starting to harness your energy inside, it requires discipline and the use of words spoken out loud. But as your skills and confidence grow, you’ll be able to direct that energy with little more than a thought.”

The light exploded from between his palms, expanding across our heads like a curtain of fairy lights. My pulse picked up as I waited for his next move.

“All magic users have energy inside that can be used for spells,” Abraham continued. “Sometimes, though, the magic you want to achieve will take more energy than you have, and you’ll need to tap into a ley line—something you’ll cover much later in your training. For now, let’s start exploring the energy inside.”

He waved his hands. “Spread out. Give yourselves some room,” he shouted.

Once we were all situated, he started to walk between us. “The first thing is to recognize the magic. Find the foreign warmth swirling in your center. For some of you, it will already be as familiar as the beat of your heart, but for others this might be your first time truly exploring that part of yourself.”

Some of the students sat, and when Abraham didn’t reprimand them, I did the same. It felt like I could focus better down here. Closing my eyes, I breathed in and out deeply, trying to calm my mind and search inside. I wasn’t holding out much hope, considering my blocked energy situation, but the heat thing had happened once before. Maybe I could find it again.

“Feel anything?” a nearby voice whispered, and I popped one eye open to find a guy a few feet from me with a mop of black curls and dark blue eyes.

I shook my head. “Nope. So far I got nothing. You?”



He shrugged. "I'm not holding out any hope. I barely even register on the power scale. I'm pretty much the embarrassment of the family."

"Shit, sorry," I said, giving him a rueful smile. "I have no family if that makes you feel any better about your situation."

He winced. "Ah, yeah. I suppose it does." He laughed then. "Maybe we can just be powerless outcasts together."

I shrugged. "As long as they don't take away my bed and free food, I don't care about having no power."

Mostly the truth. It might have been nice to be good at something for a change.

He wiggled a little closer before holding a hand out to me. "Simon," he said.

I shook it quickly. "Maddi."

His eyes widened then. "Oh, you're the one who was raised human, right?"

I raised an eyebrow and his cheeks got a little red. "There have been some rumors floating around. Your situation is pretty unusual."

With a shake of my head, I laughed. "Yeah, I'm aware. So much for blending in."

We shut up then because Abraham was back in our section. I closed my eyes to search for my power again.

"Maddison James?" My eyes flew open to find Abraham standing at my right side. "How's your first day going so far?"

I blinked, forcing a smile. "Uh, good, I guess. I mean, I still don't have access to my power or anything, but for a first class this one isn't sucking."

His grin grew. "Would you mind if I tried a few things to see if I can sense or unlock some of your energy?"

I hesitated, wondering if I should mind. "That depends on what sort of things," I finally said, getting slowly to my feet; I would never give any person unhindered power over me.

"Nothing inappropriate, I assure you," Abraham said, his face softening. He wasn't classically handsome, not someone you would see in movies or as a model, but his features were kind. Comforting, almost. "I just need to touch you, on your shoulder or arm. Bare skin works best, but it would still work over your sleeve."

He was trying to reassure me ... and it worked. I took a step closer and held my hand out to him. He wrapped his warm palm over mine, and I jolted



at the buzz of static electricity between us. It zipped across my hand and up my arm.

Abraham chuckled. “Well, you definitely have energy inside of you somewhere. My power responded to yours without any help from me.”

I felt disconcerted and ... stunned, not quite sure how to deal with that feeling still tingling through my veins.

“Can you unlock my energy?” I asked him.

He shook his head, forehead crinkling. “It’s beyond my power.”

He released me, and I let my hand fall to my side. “Thanks for trying,” I said.

With a disappointed smile, he turned and resumed his walk through the students. As I took a seat again, the teacher’s voice rose up. “Now that you’ve spent some time exploring your energy, let us try one of the most basic spells in any magic user’s arsenal. A mage light.”

A ripple of excitement washed through the students—most of whom were sitting now. “Magic users have many words for light. The one I want you to note today, for future use, is *illumina*.”

Simon started to mutter it beside me, and he wasn’t the only one. I could hear whispers around the room. I quickly pulled out a notepad and jotted it down. Abraham had already spelled it out for us ... in lights above his head.

Show-off.

By the end of the class, a third of the students had managed to produce light. I produced sweet fuck all, which was annoying, but not surprising.

“I want you to continue to explore your energy,” Abraham yelled as the music bell rang out, indicating class was over. “The better you know it, the more you’ll control it. Push it outside of your center ... your comfort zone. And try not to set any buildings on fire. See you all next class.”

It got noisy as everyone started to file from the room. There was more than one disappointed face, and as bad as it sounded, it made me happy that I hadn’t been a failure alone.

“What class have you got next?” Simon asked, falling in beside me as we stepped out of the dimly lit room.

“Pronunciation of the Fey Language,” I told him, double-checking my schedule to make sure nothing had changed.

He nodded. “Me too.”

Pronunciation was in the quadrant with the classrooms, and since Simon seemed to know where he was going—we were both mostly following the



crowd—I let him take the lead.

The pronunciation room looked a lot like a normal classroom back home. Rows of desks, nice high-backed chairs, a whiteboard at the head of the room, and a teacher already waiting for us.

Simon and I ended up at desks in the center, and the teacher started out the same way as the last one had. “Welcome, first years, to Pronunciation of the Fey Language.”

I focused on her for the first time since entering the room and was surprised to see a very perfect, blond supernatural.

She was fey.

I had expected a magic user, which made no sense because the name of this class clearly had *fey* in it. She smiled around the room, and I could admit that she had the most perfect face I’d ever seen: heart-shaped and symmetrical in a way that was unnatural; high cheekbones, large blue eyes, and full pink lips. Simon let out a low sigh next to me and I shot him a smirk. Every dude in this class was a goner. Even in a world of hotties, and the supernatural world had a lot, this chick stood out.

“I’m Rowena. I was born in Faerie, which gives me a unique understanding of the fey language. As most of you know, this is where much of our magic originates from.”

Fey is Faerie ... good to know.

“The words you’ll learn are loose representations of the spells you’ll cast,” Rowena continued. “Even more important is the intention behind the spell, which will come later. First you must learn to speak the language like a native. Trust me, it will improve your spellcasting every time.”

By the end of the class, we’d written down twenty words that we were to memorize and practice saying. Rowena wrote the word on her board, and then followed it with how it was to be said, breaking each syllable down. It was hard to get my tongue around some of the sounds, and we were warned that if we didn’t master these basic fey words, we’d never be able to move on to the more advanced ones.

Definitely a future Maddison problem.

With two classes under my belt already and no drama to be seen, I was actually feeling pretty damn good about being back at school.

“Lunch now,” I said excitedly to Simon as we left the classroom.

He laughed and shook his head. “I feel your enthusiasm, but I actually have one of my electives now: Ancient Spells.”



“Oh, cool,” I said, almost meaning it. Without Simon I’d be braving the common area on my own. “What made you take that class?”

We stopped walking and he shrugged, stuffing some books into his satchel. “My parents are historians. Record keepers for a prison town near Munich. I’ve kind of developed a love for history from them. It runs in the family. Even my older sister, who graduated last year, is now a historian.” He shuffled his feet. “We all like to know how things originated, you know. Learn about the building blocks for what makes up our modern world.” He jerked his head toward the door behind us. “This is my room, so I guess I’ll see you in our next class together.”

“Have fun,” I said, waving as I walked away.

The history thing was cool. The events of the past explained so much of the present and future. And it always repeated itself.

If only we could start to learn from it, then the world would be a better place.



When I reached the commons, it was raining again, and the magical barrier was back in place, keeping us dry. The feeling of spring was gone from the air; it legit felt like late fall. It was messing with my mind—I was not used to living in a place where the weather changed every five or six hours. I mean, I knew there were states in America that often experienced four seasons in one day, but I’d never lived in one.

The other first years I’d been with dispersed, moving with their friends toward free tables. I searched for the closest table that was empty and settled in. Placing my hand on the shield, I said, “Lunch.”

The selections today were all different from last night’s dinners, and I ended up choosing a salad and tacos because they were favorites of mine. I also got some water and orange juice, which arrived immediately.

While I waited for my food, I cast a look around the school, searching for Ilia and Larissa. The commons was not as filled as it had been the last few times I passed through. Now that school was back on, it appeared everyone had different lunchtimes.

There was no sign of my friends, and I made a note to ask them about their schedules the next time I saw them. According to my parchment, I had two hours until my next class, which was a nice little break. Even though I was actually pretty excited to continue with this magic learning thing.

A tingle of energy rushed across my skin a moment before the food arrived, and even though I wasn’t starving, the smell of corn, salsa, and chili mince was enough to have my stomach growling. The Supernatural Academy cooks, whoever they were, made a mean taco.

“You’re at our table, new girl.” His voice was a low rumble and my eyes



flew open as I swallowed quickly. I had to tilt my head a long way back to find his face, and the moment I did, I swallowed again. I hadn't been able to place his face last night, but today I recognized him. The fifth Atlantean.

Jesse was green-eyed, dark-skinned, and a lion shifter. He was one of the biggest guys I'd ever seen in my life, well over six and a half feet and built like a linebacker. He was also really hot. Atlantean-level hot, because I was starting to think that they were definitely their own race of supes.

Before I could break down all of his pretty pieces, I finally registered his words. *Their table.*

Ah, fuck. Nerves skittered across my insides, making me squirm.

"I didn't know there were set tables for lunch," I said in a rush.

Jesse swung himself into a chair directly across from me, and I still had to look up at him.

"We claimed this table in our first year," he said, "but since you're new here, I won't give you too much shit about sitting your pretty ass in our space." He flashed me a half-smile, the white of his teeth extra bright against his dark skin.

"I'll move then," I said, already gathering my stuff together.

Just as I was about to stand, he waved a hand. "You can stay if you answer some questions. You've got some of my brothers curious, and this seems like the perfect opportunity to find out some fun facts about you."

I narrowed my eyes, hands clenching in front of me as I released my plate, letting it clatter to the table. My fear of these unknown Atlanteans faded as a sliver of anger swelled in my chest. "I'm not a sideshow amusement. I just want to eat my fucking lunch. Is that too much to ask?"

Jesse's smile grew, and then he threw his head back and laughed. "Are you sure you're not a shifter? Because that sort of fire is rarely seen in the other races."

*Charming and scary.* They were literally both.

"I have no idea," I said, before realizing I'd let a pretty important piece of information slip out.

Jesse didn't miss it either, his eyes narrowing on me. "Don't know, hey? Calen mentioned that he couldn't read your race, and that's actually a skill that cocky mage is quite good at."

"Calen spent four point two seconds with me. I doubt he got much of a chance to read anything."

I was hungry, so I picked up my taco and took another bite. Jesse's



expression shifted then to something darker, more primal, and I almost choked. “What?” I said as soon as I swallowed that mouthful. “Do I have something on my face?”

He shook his head, body unnaturally still. “You sure you’re not a shifter? Have you ever felt like ... something else was inside your mind? Taking over your body?”

I shook my head, reaching out to grab the icy glass of water. Swallowing a few mouthfuls, I watched him closely. “No, I’ve never felt that. Princeps Jones says my energy is blocked. They’re waiting for a powerful sorcerer to release it.”

I took another long gulp of water before going back to the taco. He kept watching me with that indecipherable expression, and it was making me nervous.

Thankfully, he turned his focus to food, and I was able to eat a few more bites in peace. He ordered at least six meals. Guess it took a lot of food to fill his height and muscle.

“What was it like being raised as a human?” he asked when he was done ordering.

“I didn’t know any different,” I said truthfully, wondering why the hell I was still sitting here. I should be running, like I had yesterday, but Jesse as an individual didn’t seem too bad. “Yesterday was my birthday. I changed my hair color like I do every year, and then boom, there’s a witch standing in front of me telling me that I need to accompany her to a supernatural school. I’m probably still in shock.”

Being human had never felt quite as shocking, that was for sure.

“How old did you turn?” he asked.

“Twenty-two,” I replied.

He nodded like he’d expected that answer. “As you age, your powers grow stronger, and it doesn’t surprise me they found you on your birthday. Do you know that each year at the time of your birth, you have a moment where your power connects to the gods? The very gods we are born from, gifted to our mothers.”

I blinked. “Seriously? How many gods do you all believe in?”

“A lot.”

His food started to arrive then, and he took a moment to maneuver the plates around before he was finally satisfied everything was in reach. The time and care he took to position everything amused me, and I bit back a



smile as I watched.

When he was finally satisfied, he said, “I have OCD when it comes to food. It all has to be in reach and positioned from most appealing to least in a half circle, starting on my left side.”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t bother me how you like to eat. As long as you don’t drop a half-chewed carcass on the table, then you do you.”

Jesse laughed again, and I was starting to like the warm rumbling sound. “I’ll keep my kills away from our table, then, shall I?”

He said *our* so casually that for a moment I was taken aback, until I realized he meant his and the other guys. Not his and mine. He started to eat, and since I’d finished my tacos, I picked at the salad, again wondering why I was still sitting here.

It should have felt weird, not getting up and moving the moment he opened his mouth and all but kicked me out, but for some reason, the draw to remain near him was stronger than my fear of what I was doing.

I didn’t understand it, but I was chalking it up to some weird supernatural thing. Maybe it was just the attraction of their Atlantean blood. It had seemed like everyone wanted to be close to them when they arrived last night.

Jesse started to eat, and I eyed each plate, already working out what I’d get next meal. He was very observant, noticing my examination of his food, and then he shocked the shit out of me when he nudged a few plates forward.

“I can share, if you’d like to try something.”

I stared at him, not quite sure if I’d heard that right. Did he just offer to share?

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. You’re a growing boy. Gotta keep your energy up.”

He watched me for a long moment, before he returned the plates to their original positions and continued to eat in his neat and methodical way.

“What did you mean that some of your brothers were curious about me?” I asked, searching through my salad for the cherry tomatoes. They were my favorite part.

Jesse shrugged. “A human-raised supe that Calen can’t get a read on ... they aren’t the only ones curious. Trust me.” He shrugged. “Rone seems to think you’re a spy or assassin, sent here to take us out. This has piqued Asher’s interest because he likes to know everything that’s going on, stay in control of situations. He wants to talk directly to you ... I just beat him to it.”

I snorted, before coughing on the tomato I’d just bitten into. “Spy or



assassin? Yeah, that'd be a cool story, but nope."

I was deliberately ignoring the Asher thing, because there was still something disconcerting about that guy. Something that both drew and repelled me. And I'd never even spoken to him, which should have been the biggest worry of all.

Jesse let out a low, growly laugh. "Yeah. Twenty minutes in your company and I can already tell there's nothing dangerous about you."

*Twenty minutes.* I checked my watch, and sure enough, it had been over twenty minutes since he'd sat down. Time was flying and my lunch break would be over before I knew it.

Another large body dropped into the chair next to Jesse and I found myself staring at a familiar supernatural, the one who had been with Calen and Rone yesterday, Mr. Plaid Shirt and silvery eyes.

"Hey," he said quietly, not questioning why I was at the table. "The others will be here in a minute." He was looking directly at me as he leaned over the table and held a hand out. "I'm Axl. It's nice to meet you, Maddison."

He wasn't as tall or built as Jesse. If anything, his muscles were long and wiry, like a runner or long-distance swimmer. He had messy auburn waves, and those eyes, which were a beautiful shade between gold and silver.

Grasping his hand, I shook it quickly. No energy hit me and I wondered if he was keeping it locked down. "Nice to meet you as well."

He sank back into his chair and immediately pulled out a textbook and some notepads.

"Axl is our resident genius," Jesse said with a smile. "He's studying the three hardest areas: healing magic, combat magic, and advanced spellcasting. And he's topping every single class."

There was a fondness in Jesse's voice that spoke of a clear and genuine friendship between Axl and him.

Axl shrugged. "What can I say, my brain craves knowledge. It's never satisfied. I need to know everything, break it down, and then build it up again perfectly. I wouldn't say I'm a genius though."

Jesse shot me a knowing look. *Genius*, he mouthed, and I covered my smile with my hand. Axl continued reading his book, so Jesse reached out and ordered a few more meals, which I assumed were for his friend, because if that boy ate one more thing himself, he'd probably explode.

Realizing that I was still just sitting there at this table with guys I didn't



know and that the rest of them would be there in a minute, I started to rise.

“Wait,” Axl said, and I almost jumped out of the chair because I hadn’t been expecting that. “I haven’t had a chance to ask you anything about your life and energy and future yet. I need to know all about it.”

“Uh,” I started slowly. “I mean, that might take a while, and really, I’m not that interesting.”

Jesse made a rumbling sound that I was certain no human could have done. It was very leonine, starting deep in his chest. “I have to disagree about the not-interesting thing.”

Whatever that meant, I was totally not analyzing it.

“And if you don’t sate his curiosity somewhat,” Jesse continued, “he’ll never stop asking you questions.”

“What about the others?” I asked, trying my best not to look around the table. “I mean, pretty sure after having met me just once, Rone already hates me. Might get a little awkward.”

Jesse and Axl both laughed. “Nah,” the book-smart wizard said, “Rone is just angry a lot. He doesn’t trust easily. He’s had a messed-up life and—”

Jesse cleared his throat, interrupting Axl, who trailed off. “Sorry,” he muttered, “I have a problem with keeping secrets. My natural curiosity means that I’m almost incapable of keeping anything I learn to myself.”

“Honesty is worth a lot to me,” I told him seriously.

Jesse looked wounded. “It’s not that I’m not honest, I am ... almost to a fault. It’s just that some secrets are not ours to tell. Rone’s and Asher’s especially. They have a lot of darkness in their past, and it shapes the supernaturals they are today. Something you’ll have to learn on your own.”

Uh, yeah. I doubted that would ever happen.

Axl nodded, and I could tell this was an old conversation they’d had to have a lot with him. Genius he might be, but he was sort of a clueless genius, if that was possible.

Since they thought they could ask me questions, I decided to throw some of my own back at them. “So, it’s just the five of you in this Atlantean club?”

It slipped out before I could think about it, and I wondered if maybe I’d offended them by bringing up their heritage so casually. A relieved sigh left me when neither of them reacted negatively.

“The five of us grew up together,” Jesse said. “Axl, Rone, Asher, Calen, and me. We met in Russia, when our parents were travelling between the prison communities. We’ve stuck together ever since.”



“You don’t sound Russian,” I said, looking between them both. If anything, Axl had almost no accent, and Jesse’s was slightly British.

Axl chuckled, his hands flat on his textbook even though he wasn’t reading it any longer. “We’re not Russian. You can think of us like human army brats. Our families were close because the ‘descendants of Atlantis club’ is small. They were mostly all friends, which turned into shared work traveling between the different supe communities. We were dragged along, and in that regard, we have no real home or identity.”

“Except here,” Jesse added. “This is the first home for all of us.”

“It’s my first real home too,” I admitted, before slamming my lips shut. That was such a personal thing to reveal, but then again, they were sharing with me and it felt right.

Silence fell between the three of us, and it was surprisingly comfortable. Which lasted exactly two point three seconds before an asshole destroyed it.

“What the fuck is she doing at our table?” Rone said, slamming a book down on the other side of Jesse. Now it was three of them facing me, and whatever comfort I’d been feeling completely disappeared.

Rone was even broader across the shoulders than Jesse, which was quite a feat. His features were beautiful. I mean, a fallen angel from the sky beautiful, with that golden-blond hair and icy blue eyes framed by long golden lashes, defined cheekbones, and a strong, angular jaw.

But I knew angry men, the kind that had a hatred festering deep inside of them, swirling violently until they could no longer control themselves. Rone was that sort of angry.

Lurching to my feet, I slipped around the chair and started to back up. “Wait,” Axl said, holding a hand out to me. “Ignore Rone.”

It was too late though. The moment I felt my safety was compromised I was out of there—an instinct that had saved my life more than once growing up. Spinning, I got no more than a single step in before I slammed into a hard wall. Strong hands wrapped around my biceps, stopping me from bouncing back into the table. I knew before I even lifted my head that it was going to be another one of the five. I hoped it was Calen, because the devil you know ... but my luck had officially run out.

Sea-green eyes streaked with silver met mine—it was almost as if silver had been melted through his irises, that’s how bright it was. Even through my jacket, I could feel the heat of his hands, and my heart started to race as I fought against myself. I needed to get away, but I couldn’t make my legs



move.

Asher continued to run that disconcerting gaze over me, and I wondered how the fuck he was real. Lashes that were dark and thick framed his eyes, topping a nose that was straight and proud, no sign of ever being broken, unlike most of the dudes I knew back home. His skin was golden ... bronze ... and his face was strong and perfect, like every piece of him had been hand selected and assembled by those *many* gods they worshipped.

He towered over me, almost as tall as Jesse. “Uh,” I stuttered, both of us doing the silent staring thing for an uncomfortably long time. “Sorry, didn’t see you there.”

He wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t scowling like Rone, so I took that as a positive sign. When his full lips finally curved, the slightest outline of dimples appeared, and I all but groaned. He probably had a huge...

My eyes trailed down him, and I jerked my gaze back up. Yep, not a single flaw I could see on him.

Was it fair that one person ... *supe* ... got to be so perfect? No, it wasn’t.



Before things could get embarrassing—and we might have already been past that point, I was too flustered to tell—Ilia and Larissa appeared like the guardian angel friends they were and all but hoisted me out of Asher’s hands and into a safe space away from the “kings of the Academy.”

Then we were walking, and I was still unsure about what the hell had just happened. The only thing I knew was I could still feel the burning imprints of his hands.

“What are you doing?” Larissa hissed as we hurried through the tables. “You were sitting with them?”

I choked out a strangled sound. “I—I didn’t realize it was their table. I—Fuck...”

When Ilia was satisfied that we were far enough away, hidden behind two ivy-covered pillars, she released my arm and got right in my face. “Holy shit, Maddi! We leave you alone for twenty minutes and you end up in the midst of *them*!” Her shock faded away to be replaced by a huge smile. “Tell me every. Goddamn. Thing.”

Larissa wasn’t quite as excited. “You ran from them last night, but today you sat with them... I don’t understand?”

“I don’t understand either,” I replied. “It was only Jesse at first and then Axl, and it didn’t even seem that weird.” My breathing was finally starting to calm. “Is it an Atlantean thing?” I asked. “Because I wasn’t afraid of them; I didn’t want to leave.”

“Like I told you, they’re nice and scary, and you never know what you’re going to get,” Ilia said, her eyes shifting back to the general direction of where they were, even though she couldn’t see them through the pillar.



I shook my head. “Jesse ate so much food ... and he even offered to share it with me—”

I was cut off by a huge gasp. This came from Ilia, and she was blinking at me like I’d just told her that the world was going to end tomorrow.

“He offered you food?” she asked, and I tilted my head as I squinted in her direction.

“Yeah, but I mean, he ordered like eight meals. I’m sure he wouldn’t have missed a few bites.”

Larissa cleared her throat. “Did you take the food?”

I looked between both of them. “Should I have taken it?” I asked hesitantly.

I was missing something here, one of those “rules” or “etiquettes” of this world.

Larissa and Ilia exchanged a quick look, and I was about to yell at them to just tell me already, when Ilia answered, “Shifters are very primal. A lot of their instincts go back to their animals within. And there are some things that are universal between them all. Food is a bonding experience. They love it. They revel in it. It’s an experience for them. If a shifter offers you some of their food, it’s about more than just sharing. It’s about pack. About even ... romance, sometimes.”

I swallowed hard. “So, Jesse was like ... shifter-style flirting with me?”

Ilia shrugged, and Larissa nodded.

“He was definitely doing something,” Ilia added. “Only time will tell what that something was.”

“Be wary,” Larissa said seriously. “Jesse has a long-term girl: Chellie. I mean, they’re off and on all the time, and I heard it’s definitely off right now, but she can be a real bitch when someone tries to touch her man.”

“Even when they don’t,” Ilia said with a snort of laughter. “She’s the *other* mean girl in the school and is best friends with Kate.”

Well, great. I now probably had two bitches gunning for me. I hadn’t seen the Clovers at lunch, thankfully, so maybe they wouldn’t find out.

“Well, I’m relieved to say that I didn’t take his food, so hopefully he’ll see that as a rejection.” And stop shifter flirting and creating a huge issue for me.

Ilia lifted her hands and pressed her palms to her chest, and then to either side of her forehead, leaving just the tips of her fingers sticking up above the side of her head. “From your mouth to the mother god’s ears.”



A prayer gesture.

I had so much to learn.

The music rang out across the air again, the magic tingled in my blood, and I realized that lunch was over. Wow, that two hours had felt like five minutes, and I'd barely even seen my friends.

"Sorry we were late for lunch," Ilia said, looking around as students started to move. "I got caught up with Princeps Jones. He needed some advice on another bounty they're searching for. A bear shifter who has been living in a forest in Germany... Anyway, it took longer than I expected."

"And I had a group project," Larissa added, "that ran way over in my last class. I mean, trying to get a vampire and fey to stop arguing with each other took half the lesson, and then there was no time for actual work."

I laughed and shook my head. "It's totally fine. I don't need to be babysat. You do your thing and I know we'll find each other at some point."

I'd been independent my entire life; it was enough to know they were there. That they had my back.

The girls dropped me off at my next class, which was back in the classroom section. I had no idea what to expect from Demon Mythology 101, because all I knew about demons was that they were soul-sucking entities from hell. I was interested to find out what was real and fake in the human lore on them.

Dropping my fancy bag beside my table, I waited for the class to begin. It was filling with a lot of students that I'd seen in my last classes, and a few I hadn't. Curious expressions met mine, and two hostile ones from pretty, dark-haired chicks. They looked so similar that I guessed they were twins.

I had no idea how they could have hated me already, since I hadn't ever seen either of them before. I must have stared a little too long, because one of them sneered at me. "Whore," she muttered. "Think you can stroll in and take the Atlantean-five?"

Ah, right. This was about me sitting with Jesse and Axl. No wonder everyone was staring at me. I'd definitely broken some kind of unspoken rule at lunch. I returned her glare with one of my own. "I didn't take anything," I said, not showing an ounce of weakness. "If they wanted you, then they would be with you. Don't blame me for your lack of—"

The teacher breezed into the room then and I cut myself off. Both brunette bitches shot me one last glare before they swung in unison to face the front of the room. Twins that spent a little too much time together.



No one sat at the desks on either side of me; I tried not to take offence to that. I was pretty used to making social fuckups. This was par for the course. Simon wasn't in this class with me, which was a disappointment. I'd have to ask him for his schedule next time I saw him.

Focusing on the teacher, I was surprised to see that she was barely five feet tall. Her hair was short and curled, strands of red and orange intertwining. Her skin was dark brown, with hints of red, and when she smiled a bright white smile, her teeth were slightly pointed. Overall, she was the most interesting-looking supe I'd seen so far.

Outside of Mossie, because there was nothing topping a goblin.

"Good afternoon," the teacher began. "Welcome to Demon Mythology. I'm Coco, and I'm half demi-fey, half magic user. Sorcerer level, of course."

Of course.

I wondered what sort of demi-fey she was. I hoped we'd get to explore their school as well at some point, because that's where the truly unusual supernaturals would be. I wanted to meet them all. Especially the mermaids.

"This class has two parts to it," Coco said. "First is history of demons and the world they now inhabit, and part two is *warning* and *reason*. Because I don't like to give you rules without making you understand why."

Whatever noise had been in the classroom faded away, and the focus was completely on Coco now. "Demons were once fey that lost their souls to the darkness. They became so tainted with the evil energy that upon death they could not move on to the world after. They became stuck in purgatory ... in the land with no energy and no life."

No one in the room moved, all of us entranced by the dark tale Coco was weaving.

"Demons are nothing to mess around with," she continued, "and as magic users you will be tempted through your journey to sorcerers. You'll be tempted with your own darkness. Tempted with the power of the demons. It's my job to prepare you to deal with that temptation."

The rest of the class was a history lesson on demons—bodyless entities that existed in a parallel world between ours and Faerie.

I added another planet to my mental image of Faerie and Earth, and I was pretty impressed that I'd nailed the parallel world thing. Even though it also made my head spin at all of the weird in my life now.

"Step-throughs are the fastest way for sorcerers and sorceresses to travel," Coco continued. "We use them to move between the worlds and within our



world. This is a fast, complex, and dangerous way to travel. You'll not do any classes on them until at minimum your fourth year. Do not ever attempt to open one yourself. You most likely will die."

Alrighty then. As warnings went, that one was pretty solid.

Someone raised their hand and the teacher nodded at them. "What do the demons want?"

Her expression turned fierce. "Mostly they want power. They wanted it when they were alive and they want it even more after death. They've drained their own world. There are no ley lines there."

No one else looked confused, and I quickly flicked through the textbook in front of me to find the section on ley lines.

*Ley lines are beams of energy that run in multiple axes around the world. Deep under the ground, invisible to the naked eye, they power the earth, magic users, fey, shifters, and a multitude of other supernatural creatures. Ley lines are used for particularly strong spells that an individual does not have enough power for.*

There was more under this, going into deeper details, but I stopped reading when another student asked, "Why don't they just come here? The demons. What's stopping them?"

Coco's smile was tormented. "The specters that are left are almost parasitic in nature. They can't come here without a host. Their essences cannot survive on Earth. Which is why this class exists. Demons are seductive ... they'll make you crave the power. But you must never give in to it. My entire family was killed by a demon-touched sorcerer in one of the last battles. It's why I've dedicated my life to teaching other supernaturals of this danger."

Her words were heavy, and sadness pressed to my chest. I didn't know Coco, but her pain was tangible. It made me want to really pay attention and learn the lessons she was about to teach.

We had seemed to only uncover the very basics of the origins of demons when the music chimed and class was over. After Demon Mythology, it was time for Sword and Sorcery. This was in the practical section of the school, and I followed the crowd because I figured some of them had to be in my class.

Sword and Sorcery ended up being in the same room as Basics of Magic. With bark underfoot, we all crossed to where a very tall, very handsome man stood waiting. He was the tallest person I'd ever seen. Like ... ever. I tilted



my head back to try to take him all in.

“Is he part giant?”

I swung my head to find Simon at my side and I shot him a broad smile. “He’s got to be seven feet tall,” I agreed.

Not only was he seven feet tall, but he had a fully shaved head, and since he was shirtless I could clearly see his multitude of tattoos, ranging from a panther along one arm to a dragon that spanned his entire back and side. The only thing he wore was black leather pants.

His feet were bare, and I wondered if the bark, despite its squishiness, still felt like walking on LEGO pieces.

“Hurry up,” he said brusquely, waving his hand toward the stragglers still making their way slowly into the class. “I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

His voice boomed, and the students started to run. No one spoke, all of us staring at the very intimidating and quite spectacularly Viking-hot teacher. “I’m Striker,” he said shortly. “I’ll be teaching you how to defend yourselves using weapons and magic. I’ve been in five wars and have killed hundreds. Or at least I stopped counting in the hundreds.”

He wasn’t bragging; he spoke factually, like he was reading from his fucked-up resume.

“Most of you are learning the basics of your magic, so for now we’ll be discovering our weapon of choice and training with it. It might take you some time to figure out which is the weapon that resonates with you, so try more than one.”

He waved his hand toward a wall that was somewhat hidden back in the shadows. I hadn’t noticed it until now, and as we moved closer I wondered how I’d missed it—it was huge and filled with shiny weapons. Countless different styles of swords, knives, chains, whips, maces, and a ton of shit I’d never seen before and had no name for. Most of them looked deadly, like the sort of object that I could easily kill myself with.

“Today just touch the weapons ... lift them if you feel the urge,” Striker shouted. “No one is to use any of them in attack or you will find yourselves out of my class.”

Simon stayed close to me as we moved toward the wall. I was nervous about touching the sharp and shiny swords, but I didn’t want to piss off the scary teacher, so I reached for what looked like a pair of nunchucks, twin silver handles with a spiked chain between them. The handles had spikes too, surrounding a small open space that was just large enough for me to wrap my



hand around.

I felt no spark or need to pick it up, so I moved on to the next one. This continued on and on, and by the end of class nothing had called to me, which was actually a relief.

Simon, on the other hand, had a pair of short blades that he was half in love with.

“I’m a warrior,” he said, eyes wide as he held his hands in front of him.

I laughed. “Yes, Simon. You’re a warrior. Now put them back before you cut your own arm off.”

I basically had to pry them from his hands so we wouldn’t be late for our next class. Race Morphology was back in the classroom side, and we had to run to make it before the music tolled again. Sliding into the last two free desks, I got fewer prying looks, but there were still some. At least the twins were not in this class. There were quite a few faces I hadn’t seen before though.

“My name is Sasha,” the teacher said, running her hands through her short brunette bob. It was bluntly cut, framing her cute heart-shaped face. “I’ll be your teacher for Race Morphology. This class is about learning the differences in the four main races. There will be a short section on the demi-fey also, but they are unique and diverse enough for their own entire class, so in this particular subject, they’ll only be briefly touched on. For now, we’re moving into part one, which is shifters.”

I understood then why there were so many new faces in this class—there were more than just magic users here; this was a class for any of the four races. I started to pick out the shifters and vamps and fey in the room. Identifying race was turning into a stupid, obsessive game for me.

Sasha wasted no time handing out a very thick textbook that had a variety of animals on the front of it. “Shifters are one of the strongest races in the supernatural world,” she started, jotting down notes on the board as she went. I followed suit, adding them in one of my notepads. “There are many different animals that shifters can change their form into, and the strongest is the wolf; the strongest and most prevalent.”

Someone interrupted her. “What about dragons?”

She paused and eyed the student who’d spoken out of turn. “Dragons are, of course, the absolute strongest, but they’re rare. So rare that we cannot count them.” She paused like she was waiting for another argument, but there was none.



“So, as I said, wolf is the strongest, and a lot of their pack mentality has been adopted by the other shifters, despite the fact that those animals wouldn’t normally have packs.”

She continued to explain about the shifters, how their need to shift would start around puberty, or even a little older, and that for a few years they would be subject to the whims of their animal. They had wildness in their souls, an animal instinct. They were strong, with exceptional eyesight, hearing, and sense of smell.

We learned that bear was the most common after wolf. Then there were the rarer lions, panthers, and leopards. She touched on some of the weaker animals, like rabbits and squirrels, which were not uncommon but hid themselves outside of the supe communities most of the time. She didn’t mention dragons again, but I couldn’t actually stop thinking about the fact that there were real freaking dragons in the world.

I really needed to ask about unicorns.

For the rest of class I took notes like my life depended on it, and was already planning on reading ahead in the text she’d given us. I needed to know everything about the races. I needed to catch up on the education I should have had from birth. “It’s not so bad,” Simon said as we left the class. “A lot of us learned from being around the races, but I really didn’t know that much about shifters. My parents are snobby and think that magic users are the only important race in our world.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks for making me feel better, but ... we both know I’m behind.”

He shook his head. “Nah, seriously, you’re thinking like an American. You start school so much earlier than us, and they try and shove you out in the world so young. We do things differently here. We also tend to stick very close to our own races. This sort of mixing you’re seeing here, this is not how supes like to exist in the real world.”

We wandered into the commons. There was a relaxed feel to the afternoon as students lazed about, their classes finished for the day. “You can change out of your uniform before dinner,” Simon told me.

“I still have another class,” I said.

“That’s fine. Any elective subjects outside of the main day allow casual dress.”

As much as I enjoyed the uniform aspect, having never been to a school that had one before, it was nice to think I could go back to my usual clothes.



“I’ll see you later,” I said to Simon, and he gave me a wave as I took off to the magic users’ wing.



In my old life, before the year of pink hair, I'd have lingered in my room, exhausted after a day of new experiences and cramming information in my brain. Such was the life of an introverted extrovert. I needed the downtime and then I could function again. But today I just wanted to get back out there. A small part of me could not shake the fear that if I stepped away from this fantasy world for too long, it would disappear on me and I'd never find it again.

So after a quick bathroom break, redoing my hair, and fixing the smudged makeup, I made my way through the magic users' wing. I wore torn-up whitewashed jeans, a black tank, and a denim jacket. My faithful Chucks were on my feet, and I wondered if I'd stand out even more now that I was mixing my old life and new together.

The sky was dark in the commons, not like nighttime dark but dark with a hint of green about it, like those clouds were about to sleet the world. Mage lights, which I now recognized from class—woot, go learning—were sprinkled above our heads, giving everything a romantic, if somewhat eerie feeling.

"Maddi!" Ilia shouted, standing to wave at me. I hurried closer and it looked like she was alone. Sliding into the chair next to her, I shot her a broad smile. "I'm starving, and considering I've already eaten two full meals today..."

Ilia shook her head. "Humans eat three meals a day, most supes eat four or more. We have faster metabolisms, and you'll never have to worry about getting fat. It's really difficult."

"I'm not worried about getting fat," I said with a snort. "I've spent too many years hungry to be afraid of gaining a bit of weight. I'd welcome it."



Could more curves ever be an issue?

“But I would like to start swimming again,” I said, reaching out to touch the crest. I was excited to see what new offerings there were for dinner. “It’s the best stress reliever I know.”

Ilia leaned in closer and we both stared, mesmerized by the meals sliding past our faces.

“You’ll have to chat with Princeps Jones,” she murmured, and I thought I saw a little drool escaping her mouth as chicken parmesan flashed up. “He gives permission for pool access and such. You should get a good view of the facilities during Water Magic tonight.”

I was strangely excited for water magic, and I really couldn’t figure out why; I’d shown no great skills in any of my classes today. Until my energy was unlocked, I was pretty much going to be useless. But I was loving the learning way more than I expected.

Deciding to go for a light meal so that I wasn’t sluggish and tired later, I chose a Caesar salad with chicken and garlic bread croutons. Ilia went for the parmesan. Surprise, surprise.

Larissa rushed up as soon as we’d finished ordering, dropping into the chair across from me. “I’m so freaking hungry I could die,” she moaned, holding her stomach. She’d changed out of her uniform too, wearing a lovely mauve knit dress with dark brown ankle boots.

“I love your outfit,” I told her. “You look so pretty.”

She grinned, her hands pressing against her cheeks. “Oh, thank you. I ... decided to branch out ... take some risks and dress the way I like. I spent so much of last year alone. This year will be different.”

I related. She had no idea how hard I related.

Another chick dropped into the chair across from Ilia, and the three of us stared for a beat at the newcomer.

I chuckled. “Dee,” I said, recognizing her mane of white-blond hair. “Nice to see you again.”

She waved both hands, her crazy enthusiasm not at all dimmed from when she’d entered my room this morning. “I said we’d have dinner together, and you seriously have to tell me everything about humans.”

Ilia and Larissa both shot me a look, silently asking who the heck she was. “Guys, meet Dee. She’s a third-year magic user who has a low-key obsession with humans.”

Larissa screwed her tiny nose up. “Why? I mean, humans are fine and all



that, but ... why?"

Dee shrugged. "No idea. It's been this way since I was young and managed to watch *One Tree Hill* secretly. My parents didn't like human television, it was banned in our house, but that was my guilty pleasure."

I shook my head. "Real life is not really like that. Like ... way less in the way of hot guys and bikinis and high school drama."

Dee pouted, and Ilia threw her head back to laugh. "Says the chick who somehow managed to end up at Asher Locke's table for lunch. In his hands."

I shot her a warning glare and she shut up, but the damage was already done. Dee had some sort of wide manic eye thing going on and she was frantically opening and closing her mouth. Spotting Simon, my perfect distraction, I jumped to my feet and called his name. His face lit up, curls bouncing as he hurried toward us. He dropped into the seat beside me, and I loved that I almost had enough friends to fill a six-seat table and chairs. That was a first.

"Hey, Maddi," Simon said, and I quickly introduced him to the rest of the table.

At this moment, Ilia's and my food arrived, and everyone else got to ordering. I ate slowly, not wanting to be finished long before everyone else was. Ilia had no such qualms, devouring her food with gusto. Just when she was almost done, our sixth and final seat was taken by Josh.

"Want to switch?" I asked him, because he was staring at Ilia like he wanted to eat her for dinner.

He shook his head. "Nah, it's okay. I'm not going to steal her away from her friends."

I shot Ilia a swoony face, which hopefully he didn't see. Dude had some charm. At least on the surface. Ilia certainly seemed to be firmly in lust with him.

Dinner passed by so fast that I was almost certain my watch was broken. We ate and laughed and I answered Dee's million and one questions about the human world. Unfortunately, my experiences were nothing to make a television show about, but I didn't seem to deter her enthusiasm.

By the time we were done, I had to hurry to Water Magic. It was not a class any of my new friends had taken, so they had no advice for me, and I had no idea what to expect. I didn't bring a notepad, figuring I'd be okay for the first class. Most of them so far had been fairly introductory, and if it involved water, paper seemed kind of useless.



Based off Ilia's directions, I left the commons and turned along a path I hadn't taken before, heading the opposite way to the classrooms. Before I even saw the water I could smell it—one of those weird oddities of mine. I could tell if water was salty, chlorine, poisoned, or stale. I knew water almost better than I knew anything, which had to be part of my supernatural side.

Maybe I was fey, but outside of the water thing, the rest of the elements meant nothing to me.

As I entered the first hall of the water world, a shiver of excitement trailed along my arms. A bunch of students, dressed casually like me, were on this same path, but I didn't recognize any of them. The further we walked, the darker and damper it grew. A briny scent filling my nose told me that there was water very close. I could almost feel it lapping against the walls either side of me.

Rounding the corner, I gasped. The hallway walls were no longer solid, transforming into glass or thick Perspex, and surrounding us completely, sides, bottom, and top, was water. It was as if they'd built an enclosed glass walkway right through the middle of the ocean or a large lake.

Some of the students faltered, and I could admit it was a little freaky stepping across the clear panels and not being able to see anything but water below. But it was also the coolest thing I'd ever experienced, and I had to stop for a moment just to take it all in.

Pressing my hands to the chilled walls, I stared out into the expanse of blues and greens. There was nothing else in sight, no creatures or sharks to freak me out. Above us there had to be magical sunlight or artificial light, because the sparkle of color in this water was like that of the Mediterranean on a perfect summer day. Nothing like the weather back in the commons.

When the last of the students ventured past me, I decided I'd better follow. Happiness added a bounce to my step, and I almost skipped to join the large group gathering at the end of the glass walkway.

The moment I caught sight of a familiar face at the head of the class, my smile immediately disappeared. "For fuck's sake," I swore under my breath.

Asher straightened from where he'd been leaning casually against one of the glass panels. "Welcome," he said, projecting his voice. Like Jesse, he had the faintest of accents, which I wanted to call British, but it wasn't quite right. "I'm Asher, and I'll be your teacher for Water Magic. If you're a first year, step to the right." He held an arm out to indicate where. "If you're in the advanced classes, head on through. Your teachers are already back there."



As I shuffled to the right, I barely noticed the students peeling off the main group and sliding past Asher to disappear into the darkness behind him. There was about two dozen first years left. And ninety percent of them were female.

Something told me that Asher being the teacher for Water Magic was not a secret. Personally, had I known, I probably would have avoided this class altogether. Why the heck was he a teacher as well as a student? Water Magic needed to come with a warning label.

“Before we start, I’ll give you a little background on this class,” Asher continued, and even though I was trying to edge behind one of the other students, it still felt like he was staring right at me. “Water magic is one of the lesser known branches of magic for all races except fey—they’re used to elemental classes. Here we’ll explore the power that lives within this element. An element that can shape worlds ... and destroy them. We’ll take the natural power of water and we will wield it with our own sorcery.” He turned and waved a hand. “First test to pass, though, is stepping through the barrier.”

I was confused about what that meant, because I’d just seen a ton of advanced students run through there with ease. Students pushed to the front, and I ended up near the back of the line waiting my turn.

The line started to move, but as more students fell in behind me I realized that no one was making it through. They had their turn, failed, and then rejoined the line.

When there were about five in front of me, a slender redheaded chick spun around, practically vibrating with excitement. “He’s insanely gorgeous. If I pass out when I get close to him, promise you’ll catch me.”

I laughed at her frantic expression.

“Promise,” I said, reaching out and shaking the hand she offered.

She shot me a grateful smile, and then it was her turn. Stumbling forward, she stopped near Asher. He leaned down, whispering softly to her, and her creamy skin went stark white. I already had my hands out ready to catch her, but she didn’t faint.

She stepped forward and closed her eyes, and where she should have crossed the threshold, her body bounced back, like she’d been rejected. Asher didn’t look surprised, he just gestured for her to head to the back of the line and then waved me forward. I was the last student to have a first attempt at crossing the barrier, and since I’d been relatively shit at everything I tried today, I wasn’t holding out much hope.



“Has anyone crossed?” I asked, when I reached his side.

He didn’t smile, but there was amusement on his face. “I’m still the only first year to ever make it through on a first attempt.”

I glared, because there was something endearingly arrogant about him.

“I could be tempted into giving you a hint at how to make it across,” he added, his lips tilting minutely so the dimples came into play. I wondered if I should have followed the redheaded chick’s advice and worked out a safety for if I fainted.

Asher was lethal to females everywhere. And probably half the males.

“No, thanks.” No one did favors without wanting something in return, and I also had too much pride to cheat when everyone else had to do this the hard way.

He shrugged, inclining his head toward the doorway. “Well, off you go, then. Be one with the water.”

I narrowed my eyes on the smug bastard, turning my focus to the doorway.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I stepped forward. Only half my attention was where it should be though, because Asher was standing infuriatingly close, and his scent ... goddamn. I’d noticed it when I crashed into him at lunch, a sunshine, salt water, endless summer days and cocktails on the beach sort of smell, and it was intoxicating and...

Shit.

Damn him and his sexy smell.

As I shuffled forward again, I tensed at the exact place the girl before me had bounced back, but I didn’t hit a hard wall like I’d expected; instead it was spongy as my body molded into it.

Panic overtook me when my breath was cut off; I felt like I’d just been dropped in a vat of jelly. Gasping, my mouth filled with a salty gelatin mess, I jerked myself backward, spitting and gagging as I went.

Asher was staring at me with the oddest expression as I leaned forward choking and coughing. “What the fuck?” I gasped again, my throat burning.

His lips twitched, and he no longer was casually leaning against the wall. Instead he was watching me like I was the most interesting thing he’d seen in a long time. “What the fuck indeed,” he murmured, before tilting his head and running that silvery gaze across me. “Looks like I might have some future competition for this job.”

I glared, my heart still pounding hard against my ribs.



Before he could tell me to move, I took myself to the back of the line, and tried to calm the hell down. “What happened?” the redhead asked. “You all but disappeared, and then suddenly you were back again, coughing and choking.” Her eyes got really wide. “What’s on the other side? Is it sharks? Octopuses?”

I snorted, my throat aching less, thankfully. “Octopuses and sharks? No sea creature between those two that scares you?”

She shrugged. “Sharks for obvious reasons, and octopuses have all of those legs. I mean, what the hell do they need so many legs for? It’s not natural.”

She made a fair point there. “It was soft, almost sponge like, and then jelly went in my mouth, and I freaked out because I couldn’t breathe. It was majorly uncomfortable, and I’m not sure I’m ready for a second attempt.”

Her head jerked back, and she narrowed rich, chocolate brown eyes on me. “It felt like I hit a brick wall. There was nothing soft or spongy about it, that was for sure.”

I shook my head, having no answers for either of us.

Our line started to move again as Asher gestured for everyone to step forward. “This doorway,” he said, “is protected by Sonaris, our god of the water. He lets only those worthy to wield the magic of water step through. If you can’t find a synchronicity with the water, you’ll never make it through the doorway. Don’t despair though ... the first task is almost impossible for newbies. You have a year to prove your worth. If you don’t figure out how to push through the water energy without assistance by the end of your first year, you’ll no longer be eligible to take this class.

*Sonaris*. I’d never heard his name before, but there was a familiarity in that unfamiliar word that I didn’t understand. Asher waved his hands across the barrier, murmuring something I couldn’t hear, before he nodded in the universal gesture for us to get our asses inside. Confusion filled me, and I still couldn’t figure out what had happened when I tried to cross the barrier. Clearly that was not the same thing everyone else had experienced, but ... why? I wanted to ask Asher, but I also didn’t want to. Because asking would require me to stand close to him and talk to him and breathe in that stupid, amazing scent of his.

I wasn’t strong enough to handle that right now.

Which was why I didn’t even look his way when I crossed the now barrierless entry, stepping into the dark world beyond.



I'd had no idea what to expect on the other side, but a circular room with three arched doorways was probably not it. Slightly anticlimactic.

"Through here," Asher said, pointing to the door on the right. "Don't take the other two paths without guidance. They're for advanced students, and there are creatures and environments back there that will kill you."

His warning did nothing except intrigue me, but I decided not to be stupid today and just followed him along the safe path. As we moved forward, there was a distinct sound of crashing waves. I'd never spent much time at the beach—only twice in my life—but I'd never forget that noise.

Crossing through the arched doorway was exactly like falling down the rabbit hole. We were in another world. Sun and sand, with aqua waves lapping against the shoreline.

My watch said it was 7:30 P.M., but here the sun was telling me it was midday in the Bahamas.

"It's perpetually summer here," Asher said, the bright sunlight highlighting the silver in his hair. "This is a vacation spot for students that win academic and practical magic awards, and it's where we will start our water magic lessons."

*Vacation spot?*

I looked around and my eyes bugged at the gorgeous little beach houses that were nestled back in a grassy, sandy area just behind the white sand. There were four of them, each a different color: aqua, purple, yellow, and pink.

This was a postcard magically brought to life, and I never wanted to leave.



Students started to move around me, and I realized I'd missed our instructions. Discreetly, I watched what they were doing, trying to follow along.

"I'm starting to get a complex." His low voice came from just behind me, causing me to jump and spin around.

"Uh, what?" I said, giving him my full attention. "A complex?"

He shook his head. "You keep running away from me, and I'm almost certain you haven't listened to a single word I've said since we stepped onto the sand."

Shit. He'd been talking the whole time? "I was listening," I lied, my voice stupidly breathless. "I heard everything. We're all ... swimming..."

I trailed off, squinting at the students who were wading out into the waves. They'd taken their shoes off and rolled up their pants. It wasn't exactly swimming.

Asher laughed, a low, husky rumble that made me feel stupid shit I didn't want to think about. "We're not swimming, Maddison. We're communing with Sonaris ... with the water itself. This is the most important part of this class, because if you can't connect with it, you'll never advance to the next level."

I cleared my throat, already reaching down to slip my shoes and socks off.

"You probably don't have anything to worry about though," he added, and my gaze snapped to his.

"What does that mean?" This was where the extroverted part of my personality came into play. I generally called people out on cryptic statements because they pissed me off.

"It means," Asher said slowly, "that you almost made it through the doorway. If you hadn't panicked..."

I swallowed. "My energy is locked down, so ... that doesn't make sense."

Asher watched me closely, his eyes burning with intensity. "Just because you can't actively access your power doesn't mean it's not there. It exists within you. The water is not confused by blocks on power. It knows all. It sees all. Sonaris, and his water, blessed my people long ago, and for that, all supernaturals owe him their loyalty."

"He blessed Atlantis?" I asked, my curiosity about Atlantis pushing through my unease.

"Blessed and cursed it," Asher said. "He gifted them with advanced



technology, but when they took it too far, growing bloated with greed and power, he sunk them to the bottom of his precious water to ensure they never abused his gifts. Some of my people believe he will return one day and offer us a second chance.”

“Are you one of the ones who believe this?”

Asher’s expression hardened; his voice became much less open. “I’m more of a live in the now. Searching for Atlantis and Sonaris destroyed my family, and I won’t waste my time on the same venture.”

I was dying to ask him what that meant, but I could tell by the set of his jaw that he’d given me all the information he was willing to reveal.

Thankfully, someone shouted then, drawing his attention, and when that student all but collapsed into the water, Asher turned and hurried away. He reached the student in seconds, hauling him up out of the water and dragging him onto the sand.

“You okay?” Asher asked.

The student was very pale. His thin ginger hair stuck up in wet strands as he breathed rapidly.

“I ... it ... there was something in the water,” he finally choked out.

More than one student gasped before hurrying from the water as well. Asher straightened to his full height, sending a dark glance around. “There’s nothing in this ocean that will hurt you. If you want to stay in this class, you’re going to have to learn to accept and love the water and all of its inhabitants.”

A few looked ashamed, but a lot still seemed terrified. This was a great way to weed out the students who were only in this class because Asher was the teacher. I moved closer to the water, wanting a glimpse of what was out there.

My gaze ran across the long expanse of ocean, and I realized that there was no end in sight. How big could it really be? Or was this some sort of Mary Poppins’s bag of a building, and it magically went on forever?

Rolling up my jeans, I strode forward. Being this close to the ocean—magical or not—and not going in was a crime. I wouldn’t waste my chance. The sunlight above was warm and soothing, and the water felt and smelled as real as the oceans back home. Cool water lapped at my feet and ankles, and I pushed through it until I was knee deep. A large wave washed the water up over my rolled-up jeans, and I froze as cold tingles started in my feet, moving up my body in a rapid rate.



At first I thought the tingles were just the contrast of warm skin to chilly water, but then they pushed further, up my legs and stomach, before enclosing me completely.

“What’s happening?” someone screamed from behind me

Fucked if I knew.

The water continued to swirl across my body, almost completely surrounding me.

“Maddison, step out of the water,” Asher said calmly.

Right. Water. I had to get out of the magically possessed water.

Focusing with everything I had, I managed to lift one leg, and then the other one, stepping back slowly. As if it was reluctant to let me go, water swirled around me for a few more seconds, even after I was back on dry sand. Eventually, though, it returned to the ocean, and I was left shaking, soaked, and confused.

“Class is dismissed,” Asher said softly. “Spend your time learning about Sonaris. There will be a quiz on him next lesson.”

He might have been speaking to the class, but he was staring at me. As everyone started to file out, I also moved, but when I got closer to Asher, he reached out and dropped his hand on my shoulder. A strong heat burst to life, licking across my skin, the same as the last time he’d touched me.

“Has that ever happened in the ocean before?” he asked softly.

I tried not to breathe too deeply, because inhaling that intoxicating scent of his was a surefire way to make a very bad decision. “No.” I shrugged lightly. “But then again, I’ve never really gone into the ocean before. I’ve walked across the sand, but there was no time to swim.”

“What about a pool?” he pressed.

There was something there in his gaze, like he knew more than he was letting on. “That’s never happened in the pool before. Or the shower.”

Luckily, because I’d probably have had myself committed if it had. Whatever weird events had happened to me had always been small enough for me to dismiss with some sort of excuse. But water defying gravity as it rose up to wrap around me ... yeah, not as easily excused.

“What are your other skills? You must have done something to bring your power to the attention of the school?”

I shrugged. “I really don’t know how they found me. Princeps Jones said that my power flared every now and then, and that was enough for them to keep tracking me. The only thing I can remember was shoving my mother’s



boyfriend into the wall of our trailer when he tried to hurt me, and he was a lot larger than me, so this was not a normal strength to display.”

Asher’s face darkened, the silvery threads in his eyes starting to slide further into the sea green. “Why do your eyes do that?” I asked, honestly curious. “The silver ... it moves.”

His words were harsher, as he spoke through a clenched jaw. “The element of silver—and gold to some extent—is linked to Atlantis. My ancestors were all silver-haired, silver-eyed, with dark golden skin.”

Now that he mentioned it, I’d noticed a silvery-gold sheen on all five Atlanteans.

“Can you swim faster than most humans?” Asher asked, returning the conversation to my water situation.

“Never actually raced anyone, so I have no idea. I’m a good swimmer, despite never having lessons or living near a pool.”

He shook his head. “I’m very interested to see what your energy feels like when this sorcerer unlocks your magic. When’s that supposed to happen?”

“No idea,” I told him truthfully.

Asher watched me for a few more long moments, expression unreadable.

“We should get going,” he said shortly, but it felt like some of the tension had faded.

He started to walk away from the water, and with one last look at the sparkling greens and blues, I followed. When we were through the doorway and back in the glass water walkway, he asked me, “What would you say to a few after-class sessions with me? Push that power of yours and see if we can unlock whatever secrets you’re hiding.”

I almost tripped over my own feet, managing to save myself at the last minute. All I could think about was being alone with him. I was attracted to Asher, had been before I even saw his face. Something about him—beyond the godlike looks—drew me in. But he also made me nervous, and I knew I was nothing more than a newbie human chick with weird powers to him. A mystery he wanted to unravel.

Nothing worse than being looked at like a sideshow in a circus. On the other hand, I was pretty keen to unravel the mystery myself.

“If you think it’s a good idea for me to come back here after class, then I’m ready to figure out my energy.”

Worst case, I spent a few hours in a gorgeous beach location with the hottest guy I’d ever seen by my side. Best case: I learned something new



about myself.

Asher lifted his arm and glanced at an expensive looking watch. “How about Friday at 6:00 P.M?”

I didn’t have my schedule on me, but I’d already memorized it somewhat. As long as no changes occurred, my last class on Friday was at two.

“Okay, sounds good.”

We were outside of the water world, and there was an awkward moment as I tried to figure out if I should just wave and leave, or if he was going to dismiss me.

I mean, why the fuck I was waiting to be dismissed was ridiculous, but he had me all flustered.

“Wear your swimsuit,” he told me. Then he gave me a nod and turned to leave. “See you on Friday,” he called over his shoulder.

All the breath rushed from my lungs as I sagged against a nearby pillar. “Holy shit.”

I had no idea how to process everything that had happened today, and it was only day one of my new life.

I wasn’t complaining though. This was the most excitement and fun I’d had in years.



That night I barely slept again, my dreams filled with water and magic and hot gods. I spent half of Thursday in a daze as I tried to process everything.

“Girl, you’re out of it,” Ilia said at lunch, and I jerked my head up, realizing I’d been daydreaming.

“Sorry, I’m just... Has Princeps Jones said when the sorcerer is coming to unlock my powers?”

Larissa leaned forward, chewing quickly so she could swallow her bite of sandwich. “Yes, shit! I forgot to tell you. He should be here Friday morning. What time does your first class start?”

“Ten,” I said, with more enthusiasm than was probably warranted. “I only have two classes on Friday, one before lunch and one after.”

And then my “off the books” lesson with Asher, which was part of the reason I’d barely slept last night.

Larissa smiled brightly. “Great! Well, Louis will be here then to help you out.”

I’d never heard of this Louis, but Ilia apparently had because she gasped loudly. “Louis?” she whisper-yelled. “As in *the* Louis?”

I looked between the two of them, waiting for someone to tell me what that meant. Larissa nodded, her lips curving into a sly smile. “Yes. I am so excited to meet him.”

“Who is *the* Louis?” I pressed.

They both spun toward me. “Holy shit, only the most powerful, hottest, scariest sorcerer in the world,” Ilia said in a rush, and it was clear that she was a fan.

I snorted. “Got his poster on your walls, I see...”



Ilia fanned her face. "When you see him, you'll understand. I promise you, this is going to be the best day of your life."

Right. I wasn't sure anyone could compare to Asher, so I doubted this Louis was all that, but the powerful thing did sound attractive. As someone who'd been powerless my entire life, there was something deliciously enticing about never being in that position again.

Hopefully he'd figure out what was locking my powers out.

When lunch was over, I ended up in my History of Supernaturals class. Of all the classes I'd been to so far, it was one I enjoyed the most. Not just because the teacher was a troll named Quark who stood about five feet tall, with skin that strongly resembled rough bark and a wickedly dry sense of humor, but because it gave me a deeper understanding of this new world.

Quark started by explaining the races, their connections, and how we had crossed from Faerie over different periods in history. He promised we would go into more details about that over the year, and I couldn't wait.

For now we knew that Faerie was a world that was dying, or at least not easily livable for supernaturals, which was why most of us made our life here on Earth, living with humans, managing our laws and people, monitoring supernatural criminals in the prisons that were scattered around the world.

Prisons that came about as a way to keep our secret amongst humans. Our biggest law, apparently, was do not reveal yourself to the humans. I was already reading ahead in the information packet I'd gotten, and that, along with my Race Morphology textbook, was going to be a future bedtime story.

My last class was Herbalism, in the forest section. After the water world, it was my favorite part of the Academy. It had such a mood about it. Magic gave this school an ocean and a rainforest. It was almost like I got to travel across the world without ever leaving the one spot.

"Okay, I need you to find and correctly identify the ten plants on your worksheet," said Fleecia, the fey who taught Herbalism. Like most of the fey, she was leggy, with golden-blond hair and very bright cerulean-colored eyes. "Once you've located and correctly identified them, then we can move on to their magical properties."

"Come on," Larissa said. "I know the best places to find these herbs."

We hurried away from the main group, venturing deeper into this dark forest. "So you took this class last year?" I asked as we pushed through the thick foliage. It was so nice to have her in a class with me.

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't offered to first years then. One of the



new changes this year. It's actually a relatively new class anyway, so this is the first year for a lot of these students."

I pointed out a herb on our list, and she made notes on the form.

"So how did Water Magic go last night?" she asked, while I sketched the herb—wolfsbane: a shifter attractant.

"Uh...." I hadn't told either of them what happened, but I was pretty sure I'd burst if I didn't share it. In hushed whispers, I detailed my little water incident and the future secret classes with Asher.

During my story we managed to find three more of the herbs, including cliffston, which when turned into an oil would put a supe into a deep sleep for a few hours. I could already tell that we were going to learn so much about herbal weapons and healing tinctures; supes were dumbasses for not taking this class.

Larissa shook her head, leaves tumbling from her blond locks. "So you're telling me that on your first day of school you managed to catch the attention of the most eligible bachelor of this entire Academy. I mean, girls would sell their family for some one-on-one time with him."

I snorted, still not sure how I felt about it. "Why is he even a teacher? He's a student, right?"

Larissa nodded. "There's no one better with water magic than him, so Dad pretty much had no choice but to beg him to teach the class. Our Water Magic students last year were outstanding, and that was all thanks to Asher."

No wonder he had everything he wanted in this school. Sounded like Princeps Jones needed Asher more than Asher needed him.



FRIDAY MORNING ARRIVED and Larissa got a message to me that Louis was delayed and wouldn't be by until after lunch tomorrow. I was disappointed, but shit happened, so I focused on the two classes I had. They passed quickly, and while my brain was tired from the information overload, I still loved this new life and everything I was learning. The expected freak out never came, because it was just all so fascinating. Not to mention I'd never been this happy and content before.

Later that afternoon, when I was changing out of my uniform, Ilia sighed. "Are you sure you should be alone with him?" She was sprawled back across my bed. "I mean, how could any sane woman not jump him?"

I'd confessed everything to her as well, and it was nice that Ilia and Larissa were aware of my weirdness and didn't care. No one thought I was a



secret mermaid or anything. Apparently they were ugly mean hags, and there was no way I could be descended from that.

“Blocked powers can manifest in weird ways,” Ilia told me. “Yours have always burst out strongly, only to disappear to almost nothing. The water thing could be fey energy, or a magic user skill. We still have no idea who your real parents are or your race mix.”

I paused, standing in just my bra and panties. “Yeah, what’s with that? I mean, shouldn’t they know about interspecies adoptions and shit?”

No one knew how my “mother” managed to get her cracked-out hands on me. There was so much they didn’t know, and it was fucking frustrating.

Ilia shrugged, her red curls bouncing around as she reached up to drag a pillow under her head. “There’s literally not a paper trail or fucking breadcrumb left behind in regard to your adoption. Whoever organized it did a very good job covering it up.”

Of course they did.

Crossing to my drawers, I dug around in my pathetic underwear section and pulled out my old bikini. Asher had said to wear a swimsuit and this was all I had, a ten-buck pair that I’d grabbed from a Walmart.

I wasn’t shy about my body, and Ilia wasn’t paying attention to me, so I shimmied out of my underwear and into the bikini. I threw on a pair of black leggings and a white shirt over the top and slipped my feet into my flip-flops. The weather outside was freezing, with snow forecast, but the beach area was perpetually summer.

“Are you going to put on makeup?” Ilia asked, sitting up. She looked tired, and I wondered if it was Josh or something else keeping her up. “I mean, it doesn’t hurt to look hot for Asher.”

I shook my head. “We’ll probably spend most of our time in the water, and panda eyes are not my best look.”

Ilia nodded, grimacing. “Good thinking. Besides, you really don’t need anything. You’re lucky to have such gorgeous lashes and eyes. And you know how I feel about the freckles...”

I pressed a hand to my chest. “Aw, you’re such a great friend. I mean, if we’re throwing compliments around, you look like you were hand carved by the gods themselves. As does Asher. Which is very disconcerting for someone who’s normal, like me.”

Ilia was up off the bed, her face fierce. “Girl. Friend. Don’t let me hear you say that again. There’s nothing normal about you, and even if there was,



you're not less than Asher. Not less than anyone."

I opened my mouth, but she cut me off. "I get it, I really do. It's not even that he's built like a god, which everyone can agree on, or that he rules the Academy. It's that he's an extra powerful supernatural, and you're still trying to find your way ... figure out your race and energy. I get the insecurities. But unless he's literally out there singlehandedly saving orphans or some shit, he's no better than the rest of us."

I shot her a grateful smile. "You're right. I'm not going to stress about him being out of my league. I mean, we're only meeting to see if we can explore my water magic affinity. So ... nothing to worry about."

Ilia didn't say anything, but I could tell from her smile she thought I was full of it.

Something we could both agree on.



The sky was a dark, stormy mess as I crossed through the commons and made my way toward the water world. The snow had arrived in the short time I'd been in my room.

As I got closer to the water world, I felt the pull in my blood.

It hadn't been like this in my old life; being around all of this magic was changing me.

Into what, only time would tell.

I was a little early and there was no sign of Asher when I arrived, so I decided to head inside. The moment I set foot in the glass walkway, I let out a low sigh. Strolling along casually, I didn't think, I just enjoyed the cool air and endless blue lights splashing across me. It was only when I reached the doorway, stopping just outside of it, that I admitted to myself that I wanted to try stepping through again.

Not being perfect used to bother me a lot. Like ... a lot. It was why I hadn't blinked an eye at Jesse and his eating preferences. I was that child who lined all my pencils in a perfect row and followed the same routine when stepping on the cracked tiles in our kitchen. A shrink would have probably commented on my need to control the few things I could in my life, because I lived in an out-of-control environment.

Either way, my OCD tendencies had been beaten out of me by the time I reached my teen years, and eventually my mind let it go and allowed me to flow with the never-ending chaos of life. But, occasionally, a little tic would return, and not making it through the doorway had been bothering me.

"Hey there, door of Sonaris," I said conversationally. I hadn't had a chance to do any research on the god yet—the schoolwork I had already was



keeping me busy. I'd have to wing it. "So ... about the other day. I'm not sure what I did wrong with your door, but I promise I mean no harm. From a water-loving chick to a water-loving god, I'd appreciate if you let me in."

And I was probably officially crazy. In my old life, I hadn't been religious; talking to God was not something I ever did. But three days into this new "supernatural" world and suddenly I was a believer.

There was no answer, which was a good thing—an answer would have actually caused a heart attack—so I pushed forward toward the dark, arched door. It was scary doing this on my own—if something went wrong there was no help. But this new life meant I had to try and be brave, at least some of the time. And it wasn't like darkness was new to me; magic was just a new version of it that I had to learn and understand.

When I hit the doorway the sensation was the same as before, a cloying jelly that choked off my senses and sent panic fluttering through my veins. I pushed myself for longer than I had yesterday. I mean, it felt like an eternity before I backed out, choking and coughing.

Shaking my head, I paused at the sight of Asher, one arm propped against the wall, doing that long lean that had my eyes travelling the length of him. He wore just a pair of board shorts and a fitted black shirt, the edges of some symbolic ink extending down his right biceps to his forearm. It was all black and geometric, and I tried not to drool over the way it bisected his muscled and tanned skin. He looked like a surfer, all sun-kissed and golden.

"Almost made it that time," he said, straightening and moving closer.

Wiping at my face to try and dispel the lingering feel of jelly, I coughed to clear my throat. "Almost?"

Asher nodded. "Yep, you basically disappeared from sight completely. You need to trust in yourself ... in the journey."

This time he didn't sound condescending, but I still got pissed off for no reason whatsoever. "Maybe I didn't want to be as awesome as Asher and achieve this in my first week!" I put my hands on my hips and glared. "Showing everyone else up."

His dimples appeared, and my heart started to pound hard enough that I could hear it in my ears. "Maddison James, you've got a lot to learn."

What the fuck did that mean?

He waved his hand and cleared the doorway.

"How do you do that?" I demanded.

His dimples disappeared along with his smile, but the twinkle remained in



his eyes. “When we’re friends, I’ll tell you.”

A laugh escaped me, and with it came the knowledge that my anger toward him was more about my frustration with my own limitations, and only a little bit because of this insane attraction I felt toward him.

“When we become friends? What? We’re not friends yet?” I slammed my hand dramatically against my chest. “You’ve wounded me. I drew our initials in my friendship tree. I’m going to have to cut that entire branch down now.”

I strode past him, entering the doorway without an issue. Stupid Asher and his stupid magic abilities. He caught up, and I was thankful he didn’t mention my “friendship tree.” Some days I needed to just keep my mouth shut.

When we stepped onto the beach, sunlight streaming across my skin, warming me, I kicked off my flip-flops and ran toward the water. Everything about this place felt so real. From the whooshing crash of waves, to the seagulls in the distance, and the scent of briny water...

“For someone raised as a human,” Asher said, when we were both facing the water, “you’ve adapted remarkably well to the supernatural world.”

I shrugged, and a chuckle escaped. “I keep waiting to freak out, like all the weird here will eventually overwhelm me and I’ll wonder if I’ve lost my mind. But it never comes. I just get up and go out into this new crazy world and love every second of it. Is there something wrong with me? Should I be reacting in a different way?”

Asher stared out across the water. “Maybe you’ve just finally found a place to belong.”

My throat got tight, because he’d nailed it. Growing up with my fucked-up life, I’d always counted my blessings: I managed to avoid rape, choosing who I gave my body to; I managed to avoid selling myself, choosing to wait tables for stupid hours while living in crappy shoebox apartments; I managed to avoid gangs and violence, having no interest in saving the bad boy. I’d had more than a few friends over the years who’d tried to save the bad boy. All of them got dead, because some people are beyond saving.

So, all in all, I considered my upbringing a sad but not totally horrific set of circumstances. My scars were so much lighter than most people in the same life as me. But, having experienced this new world for less than a week, I felt the absolute depth of everything I’d been missing out on. It gave me a new determination; I was going to fight for this new life. Fight and win.

“Want to try the water thing again?” Asher asked, startling me from the



darkness creeping through my head.

Swallowing roughly, I nodded. “Yes, let’s do it. My power was supposed to have been unlocked this morning, but Louis was delayed, so we’re still working with ... one arm tied behind my back.”

“That’s okay. It didn’t seem to matter on Wednesday.”

Asher took a step forward, and as visible energy rose around him, a chill ran down my arms. When his bare feet hit the water, that chill increased, spreading across my torso and down my legs. “I’m going to try and use my energy to release some of yours,” Asher said slowly, his voice deeper, a stronger accent creeping in. “Water magic is in my blood. I can control this element in almost all ways, including but not limited to drowning someone with the very water in their bodies.”

That should have scared the shit out of me, because I knew next to nothing about this scary, enigmatic supernatural. I didn’t know if he was a good guy or one of those bad boys in need of saving. But ... I wasn’t scared. I was enthralled and thrilled and trying my best not to step forward and drag my fingertips across his skin.

The draw ... it had to be his magic. That was the only thing that made sense.

Asher lifted his arms and water rose with him, streaming around in whirls and arcs, following his command. *Holymotherfuckingshit*. Like ... if I’d ever seen something sexier than that, I couldn’t recall it.

Asher started to talk, and it wasn’t in English.

“What—what does that mean?” I choked out as I stumbled closer, the water kissing the edge of my toes.

Asher grinned, those perfect white teeth almost predatory. “It means, get your ass in the water.”

A cool sensation licked across my feet and I almost sighed. The contrast from the heat of the sun to the icy water was delicious. The tingles were there again, but less forceful this time. Like they knew me now, and this was just a greeting. To get to Asher, I had to push through the whirls of water around him.

Now I understood why we needed a swimsuit. Stepping back to the sand, I shrugged out of the tights and shirt, checked my boobs were still behaving themselves in the top, and then strode forward. The bikini was not a skimpy one, no ass cheeks in sight, but still ... I was quite exposed. This didn’t freak me out, but I was slightly uncomfortable.



Asher's eyes locked on mine, and it might have been an illusion of the sun and water, but I thought the silver had almost completely melted through the green now. I was thankful that he didn't rake his gaze across me, while also immediately wondering if maybe he thought my body wasn't worth noticing. Yeah, I was a complicated mess.

*Fuck it.* I was here to learn about my magic, not worry about my figure. Stepping forward with more confidence, I focused on the ocean and those tingles in my blood. Water completely soaked me as I pushed closer to him, and sent my hair flying around in pink waves. Stopping a few inches away, I shivered, and not from the cold. There was so much energy around Asher right now—even as a clueless person, I could feel it.

"Is the heat rising in your body, the heat of power?" he asked. "I know you're learning about it in your beginner magic classes, that foreign heat that swirls and changes as you manipulate the energy."

I nodded, because I did feel it. It was much less than that night I'd shoved a full-grown man across the room, but it was definitely there. "I feel it," I said softly.

Asher held his hand out to me, and with only a brief hesitation I moved forward and took it. Almost immediately my body locked up and a cry burst from my lips before I could stop it. I tried to jerk my hand away, but we seem to have been fused together.

"What is happening?" I screamed.

Asher looked fierce, visible power flowing around him.

He didn't release me. "Your power is fighting mine," he bit out through gritted teeth. "The battle ... you're strong."

I tried to free myself again. "Let me go!" I demanded.

Asher shook his head and blinked, like he was breaking free from a trance, and then he severed our connection in one swift movement. This sent me flying back and I landed way out in the deep water. As I sank into the darkness, I struggled to get my brain back online; everything was out of order, and my thoughts were all confused.

A shadow zipped across the front of my vision, and for a moment I panicked. I was out in a magic ocean with magic creatures, and while Asher had said that nothing in here would hurt us, fear isn't always rational. The shadow zipped around me again, and the heat that was still in my center burned hotter. Then the world became crystal clear. Like I was wearing goggles ... only I wasn't.



*What in the...?*

That had never happened before.

The shadow, which was no longer a shadow in my new vision, came closer. It was a dolphin, only different to any that I'd seen in pictures—light pink in color, with a longer snout and large, intelligent eyes.

Kinda looked like a Pokemon character, but ... you know, not cartoon.

It pushed closer to me, and I found myself reaching out toward it. I had no fear now. That had faded the moment my power turned this dark and murky world into a bright and clear wonderland.

The dolphin was soft and hard at the same time ... rubbery. I stroked one finger along its side. Movement from nearby drew my attention, and I almost sucked in a lungful of water as Asher lazily drifted toward us. He arched a brow at the dolphin, and I noticed that it was now situated right by my side, almost under my arm. My lungs were starting to protest, so I leaned down and pressed my lips to its nose before kicking my legs to rise up through the crystal-clear waters. Light steadily grew around us until I broke the surface.

Asher joined me not even a split second later.

"So," I said, casually, both of us bobbing in the swell. "That got weird fast."

Asher let out a low laugh, and I tried not to watch the water sliding down his face. He looked good wet.

"It was interesting. But the most interesting part is how your power and mine appear to be enemies. I'd really like to know why."

"Maybe it's the lock on my power yours didn't like?" I said, thinking about it. "I'm feeling a little different now. You cracked the cage for sure ... I can finally feel that heat."

Asher regarded me for a beat. "I didn't crack it enough. Most of your power is still locked down. But one thing is clear: you're strong. Eventually your power would have shredded its prison."

That was basically what Ilia had told me, that each year my power surges increased and eventually I would explode and hurt humans.

"I think we've pushed you enough for tonight," Asher said.

Exhaustion hit me so hard that I almost went under the water. Asher reached for me, then hesitated, and a horrible thought occurred to me. "Will that happen every time we touch for an extended period of time?" I asked, trying to hide my disappointment.

Not being able to touch Asher shouldn't be a huge deal. I mean, he was



virtually a stranger to me, but I'd never liked restrictions. Or unfair rules.

"We've touched before," I reminded both of us. I'd literally crashed into his arms the first time I met him.

"I remember," he said, "and I felt a reaction both times, but it was mostly through clothing, or brief contact. This was different."

"Is that why you singled me out in class?" I asked. "Because there's some sort of power reaction between us? You're not the level of asshole I expected, which makes me think you're being nice for a reason...?"

The accusation spilled out, and I wanted to slowly sink under the water, because *what the hell was wrong with me?*

Asher threw his head back and laughed. "I think that's the first time someone has called me an asshole to my face. Surprisingly amusing."

Thank the supernatural gods he hadn't been offended. "Sorry, I sometimes talk before I think. It's a problem I'm not working on."

Mirth danced across his face. "I'm pretty sure I would have noticed you even if our powers weren't colliding," he said.

The heat in my body increased, and this time it had nothing to do with my energy. Then, with a hooded stare, his humor wiped clean, Asher nodded toward the sand. "We should get out of here," he said.

It took me a moment to pull myself together, and then I was following.



That night I couldn't sleep. Images ran through my mind: Asher's hand on mine, the energy between us, the clarity under the water. Confusion and lust and heat kept me tossing and turning until the early hours of the morning.

I finally drifted off around 3:00 A.M., only to wake five hours later to a heavy pounding on my door. "Girl, get your ass up. We're going shopping!"

I groaned and rolled over. "Go away," I shouted back, my voice muffled against the pillow.

A minute later, a heavy weight landed on me as Ilia flung herself onto the bed. "I'm awake, so you're awake."

A tired laugh escaped, taking with it the last of the air in my lungs—she was surprisingly heavy. I shoved her to the side. "I never should have allowed you access to my room," I groaned. "What if I slept naked?"

I felt her shrug. "Wouldn't bother me. I sleep naked."

Good to know.

I swung my legs off the bed and rubbed my face as I tried to get my brain online. "Okay, I'm up now. Give me time to shower and get dressed, and I'll meet you downstairs."

Ilia shot me a grin as she jumped to her feet, looking fine as fuck in a short denim skirt and tucked-in white tank. Her dark legs looked even longer than usual under the short hem, and I let out a low whistle.

"Damn, you look way too good to be just going shopping."

She posed, fluffing her hair up. "I might have convinced Josh to come along and carry our bags for us."

I high-fived her. "Good thinking!"

As I stood, Ilia eyed me closer. "You might as well sleep naked."



Looking down I shrugged. “Sometimes I do. Depends on how much I hate my boobs that day.”

I was wearing a tiny pair of white panties and a matching soft bra. Turning, I rifled through my drawers, managing to find a clean set of denim shorts and a plain black tank. I grabbed the rest of my stuff, and by the time I turned around Ilia was gone and I was able to shower and change in peace.

Once my hair was brushed, some makeup slapped on, I was ready to go.

Ilia was in the communal area of the magic users' tower, chatting with a few girls I hadn't met before. When I entered, she spotted me immediately and waved goodbye to her friends. She all but sprinted to my side.

“Someone likes shopping,” I observed when she almost knocked me over with her hug.

“Best part of being an adult,” she said. “Like Christmas every day of the year.”

That reminded me... “How do I find out how much money I have?”

The card from Princeps Jones was burning a hole in my pocket, and while I wasn't quite Ilia level of excited, I also wasn't dreading this trip. To think I could spend a little frivolously because my basic needs were being met here at the school was such a novelty.

She dragged me across to a small gray machine in the corner. I'd seen it before but hadn't really paid attention. “Scanner is here. You can either withdraw cash or check your balance.”

Oh, so pretty much an ATM, or the supernatural version of one. There was no slot to insert the card, I just had to place my hand against the screen and a beam crossed my palm.

“Your card is linked to your magical resonance,” Ilia explained. “The same sort of thing as the lock on your room. The card is just for in town.”

When the total popped up on the screen, I almost died. “What in the heck?” I whispered. “Five thousand dollars!” I'd never had that much money in my life.

“Euros,” Ilia corrected. “It's not much; the student allowance kind of sucks. I think they want us to be reliant on them. But the money will increase to a much nicer level once you get out in the world and start working.”

“It's a lot,” I said breathlessly.

She blinked at me, and then it was like she remembered where she'd found me. The life I'd lived. Her cheeks went a little pink. “Sorry, Mads. That was insensitive of me. It is a lot of money, and you deserve to have fun



with it. Let's go shopping!"

I wasn't upset at all. "I'm excited! What time do we have to be back for Louis, though?" I couldn't miss that; I needed to know what the hell was going on with my power.

"Just after lunch. Princeps Jones will text me if he arrives early."

Awesome, so we had the entire morning for retail therapy. As we walked toward the commons, Ilia asked me about Asher and our private lesson last night, and I told her a hurried, condensed version of what had happened.

"So you can't touch him anymore?" Her tone was incredulous. "You've just won the worst lottery ever."

I shoved her, grimacing. "Fuck. So true."

Josh was waiting for us on the other side of the commons, his tall frame leaning against a table. Ilia's face lit up as she waved, and he shot her a slow grin that almost had *my* stomach doing flip-flops. That was a nice look. If I ever got a boyfriend, he'd better look at me like that.

"Ugh," Ilia groaned softly. "I really like him." Her whisper was barely audible because shifters had great hearing.

"The feeling is clearly mutual," I assured her.

Excitement lit up her features before she smoothed it away. They were still in the early stages of their relationship and she was playing it cool.

"So back to this Asher thing," Ilia said. "Have you considered the fact that you might have Atlantean blood?"

I paused, because I hadn't. "I mean, I guess it's possible. It would explain my affinity for water magic, and the pull I feel toward the Atlanteans." It had been pretty obvious at lunch, and now with Asher. "You said there was at least five hundred or so out in the world—not the best odds, but not impossible. How would I find out?"

"When your energy is unlocked, we'll be able to tell," Ilia said.

Josh strode over to meet us, dropping a kiss on her cheek. He shot me a welcoming smile. "Hey, Maddi. Ready for some shopping?"

I laughed. "I don't have much experience in this whole shopping thing, but I'm guessing Ilia will keep us on track."

She straightened her shoulders like I'd given her an important task. "You have no idea."

I really had no idea.

Starting with her insane driving. She borrowed a car from the school, which were only given out to staff and certain students. It was a fancy



Mercedes sedan, which would have been lovely if I wasn't clinging to the door in panic. She was foot to the floor, sliding around corners, iced-out roads be damned.

When we entered Queensborough she finally slowed down and I unlatched my fingers, stretched them out from where they'd cramped in panic. "You okay?" Ilia asked, swinging into a parking lot, stopping less than an inch before hitting the curb.

I wrenched my door open and almost fell out in my haste to get out of the car. "You drive like a maniac," I choked out, sucking in air. "A. Maniac."

Ilia and Josh both laughed. "I'm magic, girl. I'd stop us before we hit anything."

My stomach rolled and I had to swallow more than once so I didn't vomit all over the pavement. Thankfully we hadn't had a chance to eat yet. When my body finally stopped freaking, I stood straighter and took my first real look at the charming town.

It was so pretty, with a variety of unique and cute shops decorating either side of the long street. It was cold though, and I shivered because I was not even remotely dressed appropriately.

"Here," Ilia said, and I turned in time to catch a thick ivory wool coat. "Figured you'd forget it wasn't climate controlled out here."

The Academy made me forget that the entire world existed, so that wasn't surprising.

Ilia was buttoning herself into a tan coat, so I slid my arms into mine and sighed at how warm it was. It fell to midthigh, and I quickly buttoned it.

"Let's shop!" Ilia all but shouted, and I sucked in a deep breath.

I was ready.



THREE HOURS LATER, I groaned. "Enough, please. I can't do any more shopping." Josh had already been back to the car six times, and Ilia appeared to have just hit her stride. "We've got all the clothes I need, and a cell phone. Now get me back to the Academy for my appointment with Louis."

Ilia shook her head like she was disappointed in me. "I guess you've got enough. For now. But I still think you should have looked for a formal dress. We have a school dance next month."

"Dances are not really my thing," I told her for the fifth time.

"Mandatory attendance," she told me, "which means you can't weasel your way out unless you're legitimately sick. It's a supe bonding exercise,



and it's usually—”

“Boring,” Josh added.

I hid a laugh, and Ilia shot him a dark look. “Yes, it can be somewhat boring, but it's also a great opportunity to wear a beautiful dress and eat awesome food and dance with anyone you want.”

“And the after-parties are always awesome,” Josh added, not exactly agreeing with Ilia, but smart enough not to openly disagree with her.

I sighed. “Maybe ... maybe it would be fun to let loose for a change. We can get a dress another time though.”

Ilia didn't argue, but her full lips were pressed thin as we strode from the last boutique. I had loved being in this little town. To see supes in the “real” world owning businesses and interacting with each other made all of it feel a little more real.

I hadn't seen much active magic about, but definitely noticed a few things that would've had humans scratching their heads if they stumbled on it.

“That'll never happen,” Ilia told me when I asked her about the possibility of humans finding Queensborough. “There are barriers and securities around the town, the same as around the Academy. If you're human, you'd never be able to enter.”

Another tick in the “I'm not human” checklist. I loved it every single time that happened.

Just as we were about to hop in the car—the back seats were almost full of bags, but there was just enough room for me to squish in—I caught sight of something that made me pause.

“Uh, is there a race of supernaturals who like to cosplay?” I asked, squinting to see them better.

Ilia and Josh both spun to stare down the street, scoping out the newcomers.

“That's not like any uniform I've seen,” Ilia said, and there was an undertone of worry in her voice.

I counted six of them approaching us, but I had a sense that there were more hidden in the background. They were dressed head-to-toe in black leather, with dark green and blue shimmery accents intersecting across their midsections and arms and legs. I only knew that because the shimmer reflected and was almost blinding at times. The strangest part was the headpieces. They wrapped right around to their eyes, looking a lot like scuba masks.



“Maybe we should go,” I said, an uneasy feeling settling into the pit of my stomach. “I ... I think we should go.”

Ilia nodded and slid into the driver seat. I was already in, seat belt clicking into place. As she spun out of the parking space and slammed the car into gear, a blast of energy zoomed past, narrowly skimming our car, crashing into a vehicle parked on the street.

“Holy fuck,” Ilia said, her eyes flicking between all of her mirrors. “They’re definitely not happy about us leaving.”

The Mercedes picked up speed, and I didn’t even bother to hold on for dear life. Instead I turned to stare out the back window, gasping at the sight of them running after us. They were almost keeping up with the speed of a car.

“They’re gaining on us,” I said softly, not wanting to startle her. “What the hell are they? Shifters? Vamps?”

No way for me to tell with their faces covered.

Josh’s chest rumbled as he spun in his chair, his eyes darkening. “Vamps could move that fast, but they are definitely not vamps. Some of the demi-fey as well, but they’re not humanoid in shape, which rules them out too.”

Well, great.

“Are you going to shift?” Ilia asked, shooting him a quick look. “If you don’t, I can try and use magic to buy us some time.”

Josh shook his head. “I can’t shift in the car; I’d rip it to pieces. My beast is larger than a normal lion.”

For a second that freaked me out, until I remembered that I had much bigger issues to worry about. Our pursuers had not shot at us again, which was good, but they were also still chasing us. Which was bad. Very fucking bad.

“If we make it back to the school, then we should be safe,” Ilia said, trying to sound calm and cheerful about the whole situation.

“We’re not going to make the school,” Josh said, and despite his previous assertion, he was starting to shift.

This was the first time I’d ever seen a shifter in action, and I was both fascinated and horrified as his bones cracked, his body transforming into a golden, furred beast that was as big as a damn horse. The seat collapsed under his weight while bits of clothing littered the car. His roar just about busted my eardrums, as he ripped off the door and leaped from the moving vehicle. Ilia spun the car in a one-eighty turn as I screamed.

“What are you doing?” I shouted.



She gritted her teeth, wrestling the wheel. “It’s not me. They hit us with a spell.”

The road between the school and the town was a single lane, ice and snow along the edges. The moment our tires slipped off the asphalt and clipped the slush, Ilia lost all control.

“Shit,” she spat, easing her foot off the accelerator. “Prepare for a fight, girl. Stay close to me.”

“I don’t know how to fight,” I gasped, clutching my seat belt, shopping bags pelting me as we finally came to a stop. “Especially not with magic.”

It was my first week; I was still learning how to create a mage light.

What was I going to do? Shine the way to make it easier for them?

When the car stopped moving, an echoing silence reverberated through my ears. I jumped when Ilia pushed her door open and sprang free. Shoving bags and boxes off me, I pushed at my door too. It didn’t move. It was jammed somehow, and I slammed it with my boot and then my shoulder, trying to get it unstuck.

Suddenly it was wrenched so hard that I almost tumbled out.

One of the leather-clad assholes was standing on the other side, and for a brief moment he examined me. I was assuming a male judging by the build, but it could have been a very muscled female as well.

“Are you Macilinta of the Sonaris people?” a heavily accented voice asked me. So heavy that I couldn’t even be sure I heard that correctly.

I gasped before shaking my head. “My name is Maddison.”

He reached in to yank me out and I threw myself back, out of his reach. I scrambled into the front and dove out the opening from the door Josh tore off. Hitting the cold ground was not the most fun I’d had today, but it was more fun than having some weird leather-wearing asshole rip my limbs from my body.

I was up and running, natural athleticism kicking in. On the other side of the road, a freaking lion was pouncing on a few of the leather-clad guys. The thought hit me hard: Josh turned into an animal. A lion.

*How is this my life?*

Ilia’s red curls caught my eye. She was fighting three ... no, four of our pursuers, and she was doing a wicked good job at it. Sparks flew from her hands as she spun and twirled in what looked like a complicated dance. She shouted words that I recognized as the fey language, and I could not imagine ever being that confident and skilled.



“Maddi!” she shouted. “Watch out!”

I heard his footsteps a moment before I was tackled to the ground. Bucking, I fought as hard as I could, managing to turn over. I took us both by surprise when my knee collided with his chin, knocking him back just enough that I could scramble to my feet.

My limbs ached as I started to hobble away. Who the hell were these *muthafucking rat bastards*? And why were they attacking us? None of this made sense. It was clearly a case of mistaken identity.

“We need you to help save the world, Macilinta,” he shouted in that same heavy accent.

Turning so I could see him better, I started to back up. “You’ve got the wrong person. My name is Maddison.”

Staring directly at him now, I noticed how full and pink his lips were, and the perfect white teeth he flashed when he spoke. Why I noticed that was a mystery, but apparently my brain acted even odder during crisis situations.

“You have blood of the royals,” he said slowly.

My foot scuffed a few rocks as I continued to back up, hoping that at least I could get closer to Ilia while I kept this crazy dude talking. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder, gasping as Ilia finally went down, a bunch of assholes pushing forward to finish her off.

I had to help her, but how? I looked around, and the guy who was pursuing me paused and tilted his head. “Your energy called to us, but ... your hair. It’s pink.”

Probably not a good time to tell him I dyed it.

“And right now I feel nothing from you.”

Also not a good time to tell him that my energy appeared and disappeared at will.

“So it stands to reason I might not be her, right?” I pointed out the obvious.

Before he could say anything more, a screech of tires drew our attention.



This car was big and black, with dark windows and shiny silver accents. I couldn't have told you the make and model to save my life; I'd never owned a car, and my mom only had shitty ones that barely started, but I knew expensive when I saw it.

Four doors opened almost simultaneously, and five huge dudes emerged. I choked out a relieved breath. It was the Atlantean-five.

Asher was here. He'd know what to do.

I had no idea where my faith in him came from, but as long as he—and his friends—saved my friends, then I was not going to question it.

"Maddi," Asher called to me, and I swallowed roughly.

"Help Ilia!" I said with force, still not taking my eyes off the guy.

From the corner of my eye I saw Jesse, Calen, and Rone peel off and head toward Ilia. Asher and Axl pressed toward me and the crazy guy.

"You would damn them all?" the leather-clad guy asked me. "All of our people?"

I shook my head. "Seriously, what the fuck are you doing coming up here with your cryptic bullshit? You have the wrong person! We don't have people. We have nothing."

Asher and Axl pushed forward on either side of us. "Move away from her," Asher told him, his words a snap of icy warning. "Arterians are not welcome here. You know that. If you don't want me to rip you all to pieces, you'll take your friends and leave. Now."

The leather guy turned his masked eyes in Asher's direction, a sneer pulling his full lips. "Ah, Asher, son of Cornipicus." He then turned to me, and then back to Asher. "Two royals in the same location..."

Asher made a low pissed-off sound as power started to rise from his



hands, his eyes locked with deadly intensity on the leather dude. The Arterian, as Asher had called him, leaned his head back and let out a high-pitched whistle. The sound started small but echoed louder and louder until the ground we were standing on rumbled.

It must have been some sort of distraction technique, because the Arterian disappeared in the middle of the magical shakedown. Asher jerked his head to Axl, and I was snatched up into the brainy wizard's arms. Before I could blink, we were at the black car and I was gently placed inside.

"Wait here," Axl said softly, his eyes silvery in the low, cloudy light. "The car is magically enhanced to withstand an attack, so you're safe inside."

I reached out and grabbed his arm, relieved that there was no explosion of energy when I did. "Who are they? Arterians?"

"They're Atlantean assassins," he said without hesitation. He hadn't been kidding about not being able to keep a secret.

I blanched. "Say what now?"

Axl shook his head. "It's a long story, and I have to get out there and help my brothers. All you need to know is they're hard-core. The only—and I say this as nice as possible—the only reason you three are not dead right now is because they want something from you."

I nodded, and then half in shock, shooed him away. He shut the door firmly and I sank back into the seat, trying to get my shit together. After a few minutes, I pressed my face to the window, a relieved breath escaping as Ilia and Josh came into sight. Josh was no longer furry, wearing a pair of pants that must have been magicked into existence. Both of them, thankfully, looked ruffled but not injured.

The Arterians were no longer in sight. Despite Axl's belief that they were scary, it seemed to have only taken Asher and his friends showing up to scare them off.

How scary did that make the Atlantean-five?

Allowing myself to relax, I closed my eyes and dropped my pounding head into my hands. Adrenaline crash was not a pretty sight. Normally I wasn't the type to bury my head in the sand; I preferred to know the truth and deal with the consequences. But right now I was tired. I didn't want to deal with assassins; I didn't want to deal with whatever the Atlanteans were doing or how they knew to come save us.

I just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep for fifty years.

Doors opened on either side of me and I jerked my head up, relaxing



again at the familiar faces. Jesse and Axl slid in on either side of me, Asher got into the driver side, Rone beside him, and Calen slid into the far back.

“Where’s Ilia and Josh?” I asked immediately.

“They’re taking the car back. Princeps Jones will want to examine it,” Calen said. “Ilia also insisted that your clothes and phone had to make it to your room.” He leaned forward, his breath brushing across the back of my neck.

I spun to glare at him. “Personal space, dude. Learn about it.”

He grinned. “We just saved your ass. Where’s the gratitude?”

Before I could call him out on that asshole question, Asher swung the car around and drove onto the main road. I settled for flipping Calen off. His low chuckle had my hands clenching, but I knew ignoring him was my best defense.

Asher drove fast too, but he felt more controlled than Ilia. Which gave me plenty of time to overthink everything that had just happened. After about five minutes, the silence was too much, and words spilled out. “Can someone please tell me what just happened? Why were we attacked by Atlantean assassins? And how did you know we were in trouble?”

Asher turned to look at me, which was kind of stressful considering he was the driver. “We felt them when they started using their power. Atlanteans are all connected. Our power calls to each other.”

“The Arterians are well known in our world,” Axl added. “We’ve crossed them a few times before and they usually know better than to play in our territory.”

Apparently their badass reputation was actually earned.

“We’re the ones who control the Academy and its territory,” Jesse said, shooting me a lazy grin. He definitely had that sleepy cat thing nailed. Right until he sprang into action. Jesse was even bigger and scarier than Josh, so it stood to reason his lion would be as well.

“Can you sense Atlantean blood in me?” I asked, deciding it was best to come right out with it. Ilia’s words had stuck with me, and after this little run in with the Arterians, it stood to reason that I might be connected in some way to Atlantis.

“No,” Asher said. “I have sensed no Atlantean blood. I have no idea why you were a target.”

Huh. What the fuck, then?

“He asked if I was Macilinta of the Sonaris people...” I let those words



trail off into a heavy silence.

“He said I was a royal,” I pressed further.

Rone shifted toward Asher, speaking for the first time. “Tell her *some* of our history. Also ... check her blood thoroughly.”

Short and not-very-sweet, was Rone. But, for the first time in my presence, there was no disdain in his voice. Asher eyed his best friend for a beat, and then nodded. “When we return to the Academy.”

We got back in record time, and Asher didn’t pull his car into the same garage that Ilia had taken the Mercedes from. He followed a dirt road around toward the back of the Academy. I’d never been in this section before. I blinked as a gorgeous weatherboard house came into view. It had a huge garage off to the side, with double automatic doors that opened as we neared. Asher parked his SUV inside, the space big enough for about ten vehicles. In fact, there was almost that many parked under here.

“Is this your personal parking space?” I asked incredulously as I climbed out and blinked at all the shiny and expensive cars filling the room.

The guys looked around like they were trying to figure out what had me so shocked. “It’s ours,” Axl said. “We like cars, and we had permission to build this plus the pool and house for our private use.”

I rushed across to the window and peeked out. The Academy was about a hundred yards away. “How special are you five? Truthfully ... has any other student been allowed to build their own freaking house on campus?” I paused. “Wait, don’t you all live on the sixth floor of the magic users’ wing?”

Rone glared. “Why don’t you mind your own business? What we do with our lives has nothing to do with you.” He waved toward a door on the far side. “Let’s get this over with. I have shit to do.”

Before I could think about it, I flipped him off. I’d done nothing to him. Nothing. He could take his scariness and bad attitude and shove it. Rone’s face darkened, and it looked like he was coming to throttle me—until Asher got in his way. The friends exchanged an extended look, and then Rone swung around and left the garage in a few long-legged strides.

“Come on,” Asher said, following Rone. We walked through a large doorway, Axl and Calen behind us, and up a set of stairs that led to the first floor of a loft-style house. It definitely had a vibe of the guys about it. Everything was simple but high quality, with large and cozy couches, huge windows that showcased a thick dark green forest beyond, and a roaring fireplace splashing heat and light across the dark wood floor.



“This is our home,” Axl said, stepping closer to me, his eyes doing that analyzing thing again as they ran across my face. “Seeing you here in my environment ... it’s very interesting.”

I laughed gently, because I was falling in love with his unique quirks. In a purely platonic way. “It’s exactly what I would have expected from you five. I mean, not that I know you well yet or anything ... but this place suits you.”

I didn’t want to dwell on the fact that they hadn’t brought anyone else here before, because I knew this was not a “you’re special” sort of situation. This was a “some crazy shit went down and we need to deal with it in private” situation.

Asher waved me toward the couch and I dropped—more like sank—onto a plush three seater. He stood before me, staring down with an unreadable expression. It should have felt uncomfortable, but ... it didn’t. We just stared at each other, whatever the connection was between us continuing to pulse slowly.

“There is a lot about us that you don’t know,” he said softly.

I nodded, needing to hear this story.

Asher sat beside me, and energy licked across my skin again. I had to hold back a groan because it felt so good, and so scary, to have him this close. We weren’t touching, he was very careful not to do that, but I could still *feel* him.

The others, minus Rone, sat in various chairs and couches around us, and Asher continued, “A lot of our history we’ve pieced together from books and legend. There are none left who remember the original days, and the stories have been passed down so many times that it’s almost impossible now to know what’s true. But we’ll tell you what we know ... or think we know.”

My breath caught in my chest, and I couldn’t quite figure out why this felt so important.

“Atlantis was thought to be the first instance of supernaturals crossing from Faerie to Earth,” Asher started. “Somewhere around 10,000 B.C., if you want to use the Christian way of measuring time.”

I appreciated human references. It gave me a better level of understanding.

“The original Atlantean supes were not like any of the races today,” Axl said. “If I had to classify them, it would be magic user crossed with fey, but not in a way of our mixed race. This was literally their own classification, and they were strong with an affinity for water magic.”



“They were very ambitious,” Asher added. “In a world that was still relatively primitive, they pushed themselves to be gods among humans.”

Calen snorted. “Arrogant bastard runs in our genes.”

Asher ignored him. “There were three royal families on Atlantis. Sons and daughters of Sonaris, blessed of god. Sons and daughters of Corpinicus, blessed of water. And the final royal family was Jervania, blessed of earth.”

Corpinicus ... that was Asher.

*Two royals.*

The Arterians had definitely believed me to be a descendent of Atlantis. From their royal bloodline.

“These royal families ruled peacefully together,” Jesse said, picking up the story, “and there was prosperity and power for hundreds of years. Until the Sonaris line, who always thought they were slightly superior because they were blessed by the gods, decided to take their power a step too far.”

Of course I’d be possibly descended from the very assholes who sank Atlantis.

Asher caught my eye and I braced myself for what was to come next. “They created something so powerful it caused wars. The three royal bloodlines turned on each other, each trying to possess and control the weapon.”

Rone’s deep voice came from the doorway. “Sonaris sank them into the ocean, and only a few hundred survived. It is those that we are descended from.”

“What was the weapon?” I asked.

There was the briefest of pauses, and I wondered if they were going to tell me. Maybe they didn’t know. “We think it was the elixir of life,” Rone added. “The secret to unlimited power and immortality.”

Well, fuck.



“S upernaturals live for hundreds of years anyway, right?” I asked, looking between them all. “Why was that such a big deal?”

“It wasn’t just about living forever, it was about power,” Axl said, back in scientist mode. “The energy in our center has limits, and unless a magic user can connect to a ley line, they will exhaust their own power quite quickly. The rumors—and I really hate relying on hearsay, but it’s the best we have—spoke of a weapon that might give the Atlanteans eternal life and limitless power. But there was a price to pay. What that price was, we haven’t found any details.”

I thought this over. “I’m not surprised Sonaris was upset,” I said with a shrug. “They were basically attempting to turn themselves into gods.”

“Exactly,” Asher said. “And whoever controlled the weapon would most likely rule the entire world.”

Definitely a weapon worth killing for.

I stretched my legs out in front of me. “I love learning of your history, I really do, but does anyone know why they’re after me? Why they would think, when none of you sense me as Atlantean, that I’m a royal descendent? I mean, even if I was, why do they care?”

“That’s a question we’d all like answered,” Jesse said, leaning closer. “The Arterians are a group, formed thousands of years ago, who continue to try and bring about the rise of Atlantis. They’re trained from birth to detect any that might be connected.”

I looked between all of them. “Can Atlantis rise again? Like ... is there a legend about what might bring that about?”

All eyes went to Asher again, and he shrugged. “Nothing concrete enough



to repeat. It's actually part of the reason we're all at this particular supernatural academy. It was founded by my family, and I believe they hid a secret Atlantis library here somewhere. It has unseen and priceless information about our history contained within it. We haven't found it yet, but we continue to search."

"If it's here," Rone said gruffly, still in the doorway, "we'll find it."

A wave of exhaustion pressed on me, and I rubbed tiredly at my temples. "So, what am I supposed to do now? How do I stay off their radar?"

"You should be safe in the Academy," Axl said, "the securities here are top notch. I've even checked them myself. But ... there's no guarantee. Every system has a flaw, and if they figure out this one, then they could infiltrate."

I rolled my eyes in his direction. "Very reassuring, thank you, Ax."

The slightest pink lit up the apple of his cheek at my use of a shortened version of his name. "We'll keep you safe," he added quickly. "You'll just have to stick close to us."

Without conscious thought, my gaze slammed into Asher's, and judging by his tight jaw, he didn't appear to be a fan of that plan. "I think step one is to unlock your powers," Axl hurried on to say. "It's the best way to determine once and for all if you're Atlantean."

"We should try it right now." Asher rose to his feet, broad frame crowding over me, while that fresh salt-air scent had my head spinning. Before I could protest, he reached out and grabbed my hand. His power wrapped around me, slamming down my arm and stopping in my gut. I cried out as the heat hit me and the ground started to vibrate.

"Asher!" I cried.

"Hold on, Maddi," he growled, his eyes flashing silver at me.

Doors all around us swung open, and it sounded like glass was shattering somewhere, but I couldn't turn to see it. The front door was in my line of sight, and I was the first to see the tall blond man that ran through.

"Stop!" the stranger yelled, power bursting from him, so strong that it threw everyone but Asher and me across the room. We were like a live wire at that moment, our power holding us in place, but I was starting to shake so badly I wasn't sure I would survive whatever was happening between us.

The stranger strode forward. "You need to release her, Asher," he said, his voice deep and rumbling.

Asher's jaw was locked, but he managed to mumble, "I can't."

Panic was building. The power was literally rattling my teeth; my entire



jaw ached. Light started to rise before my eyes; the heat inside of me felt like it was burning through my body, eating away at my insides.

The stranger pushed in closer, but he was moving slowly, like each step was hard for him to take. Another scream rose in my throat—it was hurting. Too bright. Too painful. Too much.

Light and energy exploded from us, and finally our hands were wrenched apart and I went flying back. As my head slammed into a nearby wall, everything went dark, and I lost hold of consciousness.



AWARENESS RETURNED, bringing with it a pounding head and dry mouth. I was scared to open my eyes in case the headache got worse—it was borderline a migraine right now. My memory was clear though, especially Asher's face when we'd been blasted apart. He'd tried to fight the energy, to reach me again, and there had been concern on his face.

Needing answers more than I needed to protect myself from the headache, I squinted one eye open, and then the other. Thankfully it was dark in the room. I was tucked into a large, soft bed.

The air was cool and calm; there was a scent of ocean around me. Either this was Asher's room or he'd sat with me for a few moments, because he was the only one of the Atlantean-five with this particularly unique smell. Dropping my bare feet off the bed, I walked to the door, opening it to find myself in a hallway. It led out into the guys' living area. Asher and Jesse were standing in the kitchen, and it looked like they were having a somewhat serious conversation. I padded closer, too tired and pained to give a shit about interrupting.

"Maddi," Jesse said, hurrying toward me. "How are you feeling?"

I shrugged. "Like my head went through a wall."

He shot me his slow grin. "That's pretty much what happened, so I'd say you're doing good."

My gaze settled on Asher and my chest squeezed tightly as the silence extended between us. "What was that?" I asked softly. He didn't pretend to misunderstand my question.

"I have no idea. Whatever was blocking your power, it was designed to fight Atlantean energy. Mine was strong enough to cause a reaction."

I swallowed roughly, needing to move closer to him. "Did you break the block?"

"According to Louis, I did."



I paused, tilting my head. “Louis was the good-looking dude that busted in?”

I mean, I hadn’t been so out of it that I didn’t notice he was hot as fuck.

Asher’s jaw ticked, and Jesse snorted from beside me, but neither of them disagreed with me. “Yes, Louis arrived in time to heal us both and reset the blocks on your energy.”

I gasped. “What?”

Why? Why would he do that? I thought the entire point was to free my energy.

“You’re too strong to be released just yet,” Asher explained as he stepped out from behind the kitchen island and joined Jesse. “But he’s pretty sure our powers won’t collide any further. The reason our powers fought was because of the block, not the power itself.”

Jesse cleared his throat. “He did advise that you should minimize physical contact until he can figure out exactly what Maddison is dealing with, though.”

“Where is he now?” I wondered, expecting him to have stuck around to explain some of this himself.

“He said he wanted to do some research and he would be in touch soon,” Asher told me.

*Research.* That sounded ominous.

I swallowed hard, looking down as I shook my throbbing head. “Did you learn anything in the short time my power was free?”

Jesse cleared his throat. “Well, it turns out that you have both fey and magic user power, but not like the mixed race...” He trailed off.

My lips trembled. “Like the original Atlanteans?” They both nodded. “And my blood?”

Asher stepped closer, and I struggled to keep my heart rate and pulse even. “Your blood still holds no trace of Atlantis.”

What. The. Fucking. Fuck?

I sucked in some deep breath, trying to stop the tears from escaping. “I was so close to answers, and now all I have is more questions.”

Asher’s chest rumbled. “We’re going to figure this out, Maddi. I promise. I’m almost certain that you have a connection to Atlantis, and understanding how that’s possible is a priority.”

The fact that I wasn’t dealing with this shit alone was enough to have more hot tears assaulting my eyeballs. It was a nice, foreign sort of feeling,



but I wouldn't rely on it.

"I'm going to head to my room," I said, pulling away in an attempt to compose myself. "Where are my shoes?"

There was the slightest hint of surprise on both of their faces. No doubt they'd expected a lot more questions and freaking out, but if there was anything I'd learned in my twenty-two years, it was that wasting time and energy on what you can't change will only drive you crazy. Right now there were no answers, only unknowns, and my brain was too tired to worry about those.

"We'll walk you back," Asher said.

I knew they were just doing this out of obligation, but I hadn't forgotten those assassins, and acting stupid just to prove my own independence wasn't my style, so I accepted their offer.

Jesse went off in search of my shoes while Asher and I remained near the door. We were close enough that I could see every silver fleck through his eyes, and my blood was heating again. The tension was about to kill me, so I tried to joke. "Wanna touch again and see if Louis was right?"

His grin was slow enough to rival Jesse's. He took a step closer, one arm lifting to press against the wall over my head as he leaned into me. I waited breathlessly. "I'm game if you are," he said in a rumble of husky words.

Gah! He was going to be the death of me. Maybe literally, if our powers kept exploding. He didn't move; that intense gaze remained on mine, and I realized that my joking had done nothing except send my lusty thoughts to an entirely new level. Backed against the wall, Asher felt like he completely surrounded me.

Jesse let out a shout from nearby, and I jumped a foot. Asher just smiled, stepped away, and gave me space again. I couldn't tell if I was relieved or disappointed.

Both. Definitely both.

"If anything happens," Asher said, serious now, "find me immediately. Okay?"

His intensity could turn a nun, I swear.

I nodded and swallowed roughly. My mouth was dry, my throat was dry, my panties were not.

Jesse returned, my Converse held triumphantly in his hands, and I had to pretend that I hadn't been eight seconds from jumping Asher.

"Sorry," Jesse said quickly. "Calen had them in his room. Bastard



probably thought you'd come looking for them yourself."

No doubt.

It was dark outside; I'd slept half the day away. Something occurred to me. "How did Louis even know what was happening?"

He'd arrived just in time.

Asher answered, "He felt our energy. Everyone in the Academy did. He said if he hadn't been there to contain it, things would have ended differently."

I let out a choked sound. "What would have happened if he wasn't there?"

Jesse rumbled out a laugh. "Apparently you two touching almost blew up the school." He waggled his eyebrows at me. "Imagine if it was more than a simple handshake."

Yeah, I was trying my best not to do that. I was already too hot and bothered.

"I better thank Louis the next time I see him," I said, shaking my head. "I never expected anything like that would happen."

"Me either," Asher said, turning his dark stare down on me. "Your power is beyond anything I've ever felt before. I'm very interested in what Louis says the next time he's here."

He wasn't the only one.

When we reached the commons, there were lots of students eating and relaxing. The moment we stepped out of the shadows and into the main area, it felt like hundreds of eyes were on us.

Two chicks made a beeline for the guys, skidding to a halt in front of Asher, and I almost shrank back at their venomous expressions. One I recognized: Kate. Head Clover. The other I didn't know. She was impressive to look at, with curves and a small waist, her long dark hair curled around her perfectly painted face. She had a whole Marilyn Monroe vibe going on.

She threw herself at Jesse, knocking me to the side. "Baby, where have you been?" she whined. Now I was almost certain this was Chellie, the on-again, off-again girlfriend.

"I don't owe you an explanation, Chell," he said. "We broke up two months ago. You've been fucking Shane ever since. Go and paw at him."

While Jesse was untangling himself from Chellie, Kate looked me over with her mean girl smirk.

"Look, it's the human trash. Hanging around the Atlanteans doesn't



change the fact that you're nothing more than a powerless, pathetic almost-human."

"Leave," Asher said with bite. Kate's head jerked back, shock coloring her face. When she blinked at Asher, seeing he was serious, all the color drained from her cheeks. She shot me the darkest look ever before swiveling on one heel and hurrying away. Chellie followed a moment later, fake tears filling her eyes.

She made it two steps before she turned back and lunged at me. The guys moved closer, but I shook my head at them. This was something I needed to handle on my own. I ducked Chellie's slap, stepping into her and slamming my elbow into her shoulder to knock her back. I could have easily hit her jaw, but I didn't want to get kicked out for fighting, so I went for the less obvious strike.

She stumbled, rubbing her shoulder, and lifted her lips in a snarl. "You're dead, new girl. You've just fucked yourself big time."

I laughed. "Bring it, bitch." After everything that had happened over the last twenty-four hours, I found myself surprisingly unworried about a couple of mean girls. Even if they could turn me into a toad.

She followed her friend, and I shot Jesse a pitying look. "Should have used your head brain for that decision, dude."

Asher laughed, and a moment later Jesse joined in, shaking his head as he ran a hand through his dark hair. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking. She's hot, and sometimes, I mean on rare occasions when everything was going well, she was a nice chick. But the drama just got to be too much."

"Is she a Clover too?" I asked, needing to know if that entire group would be gunning for me now.

Both guys nodded, and I let out a tired sigh. "Well, thanks for the escort, but I think I can make it to my room unscathed from here. I'll see you around."

I rushed off as fast as the Clovers had, heading to my room.

Holy shit, it had been a long day.



Despite my exhaustion, it was only early evening, and as I crossed through the magic users' wing, there was a ton of supes on the main floor. Someone had set up a projector, and there was a movie playing.

No one looked my way, and I was grateful to be invisible.

When my door came into sight, I let out a long breath. I was so ready to get out of these filthy clothes, shower, and relax.

"Maddi!" Ilia shouted as I opened the door.

I waited for the disappointment to hit, but I wasn't actually upset that she was in my space, Larissa was at her side, both of them wearing twin concerned expressions.

"Where the hell have you been?" Ilia asked. "I've been freaking the fuck out."

She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around me. I closed my eyes and let my body sink against hers for a moment. It was a really nice hug.

I was probably gonna cry again.

"Sorry," I mumbled, trying to keep it together. "The guys took me to their place and explained about the assassins, and then somehow Asher unlocked my energy, and ... yeah ... it's been a long day."

Ilia pointed to the bed, her expression stern, eyes bloodshot. "Sit. Talk. Do not leave anything out."

I marched because she meant business. Larissa settled in on one side of me, Ilia on the other, and then I took a deep breath and told them everything that had happened. Including the stories from Atlantis, what Louis had done, and how my powers were locked down again while *someone* tried to figure everything out.



When I was done, we sat there in silence. It wasn't uncomfortable, just absorbing the information ... processing it. "So, the Arterian called you another name and said you were a royal of Atlantis?" Larissa confirmed. "I mean ... how can you not have Atlantean blood?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea, but when my power was released, it was fey and magic user, in the way of the originals. Something's not adding up here. I'm more confused than ever."

Ilia waved her hand. "Forget that, let's worry about those assassins. I mean, I'm highly trained in defense and attack magic—it's actually the reason I got to be a tracker at such a young age—and I was like a first year against them."

I nodded. "Yeah, Axl made it very clear that if they wanted us dead, we would be. He said they must have needed me for something."

Larissa cleared her throat. "Dad wants to speak with you before class on Monday," she said softly. "I think you might be getting a security detail."

I coughed and choked. "What? Why?"

She shook her head and shrugged at the same time. "Something about your energy almost blowing up the school and sending out a beacon to the world advertising that you're here."

*Muthafucker.*

"I'm never gonna be cool with security following me around," I warned her, hoping she'd take that information back to her father. "My energy is locked down now, so no one will know it's me. He might as well just put more security around the school."

Larissa turned her head in a thoughtful gesture. "Yeah, that's not a bad idea. I guess he'll tell you more on Monday."

Monday. My second official week at the Academy.



I SPENT most of Sunday in my room, avoiding the world. My friends kept me company though, and I was starting to realize how damn lucky I was to have met them. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had true friends. Friends who would be there through the tough times as well as the good.

When Monday showed up, I was ready and dressed in my uniform. I wanted to see Princeps Jones and then get breakfast, because I was starving.

Today my classes were Race Morphology, Demon Mythology 101, History of the Supernaturals, Herbalism, and Sword and Sorcery. I also had Water Magic after dinner again. The swirls in my stomach at the thought of



that class were definitely because of the beautiful beach. Nothing to do with Asher.

*And the best liar in the world goes to...*

In truth, I was excited to get to all of my classes, even the ones without Asher. For the first time in my life I was actually into school. In my downtime yesterday, I'd read ahead on all texts and worksheets. I might be in my first year, but I was determined to learn as much as I could.

The school was quiet as I strolled through the commons. Today was sunny and bright and there was no barrier above us. I tilted my head back and allowed the sunshine to wash across my face. Cool breezes brushed over my skin, and a calm and contented feeling filled me. I'd read that magic users were very connected to nature, which explained why I'd often found solace in parks and creeks, especially if I was barefoot on the grass and dirt. They might have bound my powers, but they couldn't change my fundamental DNA.

I was a supernatural.

One day, admitting that wouldn't even feel weird.

Continuing on, I knocked on Princeps Jones's door, and he lifted his head to wave me in. "Maddison, please come in."

I closed the door behind me and dropped into the chair across from him. "How are you feeling today?" he asked, concern tilting his face and eyes down. "You gave us quite a scare on Saturday."

Subconsciously, I rubbed at my head, but there were no lingering effects. "I feel fine today," I said with a smile. "Confused by everything I learned, but physically fine."

He returned my smile. "I'll bet you're confused. We are as well, which is not something I like to admit to." His eyes twinkled. "So don't tell anyone."

I laughed. "Your secret is safe with me." I leaned in closer, some of my mirth drying up. "Do you know anything more about what's happening to me? About what I am?"

He grew more serious as well. "Louis and I spoke briefly about what he felt when your energy was unlocked. His main concerns center around the reason your powers were bound. And why there is no record of birth parents."

I swallowed hard. "I can't remember anything before I was five. I don't recall how I got to my adoptive mother's."

Princeps Jones nodded, unsurprised.



“Are you saying that I might have been with my real parents until I was five? Why did she never mention I was adopted?”

He lifted both hands in a “no idea” gesture. “I can only guess, but it wouldn’t surprise me if she wasn’t aware. Someone went to a lot of trouble to hide you, Maddi, putting you in the sort of situation where society would overlook you ... with a mother who wouldn’t pay much attention to you. It would have been simple for them to spell her into believing you were her biological child. Most of the details about you, like age and birthday, are probably correct. Provided in the same spell.”

I sank back in my chair, book bag hanging limply at my side. “This is almost unbelievable,” I said softly.

Princeps Jones leaned further forward, holding a hand out for me. I barely hesitated before placing mine into his. “I promise that we’ll figure it out,” he said softly. “You’re not alone any longer. I have watched your case for many years. Ilia has spoken often of your energy and how it is different. She cared about you long before she even knew who she was chasing. You’re not alone.”

My throat felt tight, and my chest ached. “Thank you,” I said hoarsely. “I’m very grateful to finally know some truths. Hopefully we figure the rest out soon.”

He nodded and released my hand. He shuffled a few papers around, clearing his throat. He was back to business. “Larissa informed me that you’re not interested in a security team, so I have arranged for more security around the border of the Academy, and the Atlanteans agreed to keep a closer eye on you on the school grounds.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but then decided not to bother. He was trying to work with me, and I wouldn’t be ungrateful about it. “That’s perfect, thank you for that.” There was something else I needed to tell him before I left. “Also, I don’t know if this is an issue or not, but my power is not as locked down.”

He didn’t seem surprised by my confession. “No, it won’t be. Your original block was placed before your energy was so strong. Now, though, you’re too powerful. Louis is regarded as one of the strongest sorcerers in the world, legendary, and he said that he’s never felt energy like yours. He did what he could, but at best, it’s a Band-Aid over a bullet hole. Your power is going to rub at his block until eventually it gets loose again. He’ll come back to repair the block, but eventually we’ll have to figure out what we’re dealing



with.”

“Has there ever been a magic user fey like me?” I asked, standing in preparation of leaving.

He shook his head. “Not to my knowledge. But Louis is looking into that as well.”

Poor Louis. His *research* was more than just a little thing. I’d dumped a lot of my shit on his shoulders, and no doubt the most powerful mage in the world was busy with other things as well.

But I wouldn’t turn down the help.

I waved goodbye to the princeps and left his office. The school was a lot busier now, and I hurried to the commons, needing food if I was going to function in my classes today. The tables looked pretty full, and I searched for a spot, wondering if I should just drop down under one of the large trees. They had these ropey intertwining roots going everywhere, and they were a popular spot for students to relax. There were ordering stations nearby as well, so you didn’t even have to starve.

“Hey, new girl!”

I spun to find Calen and Axl at their normal table, waving me over. I hesitated before deciding that it was worth hanging with them if I got food.

“Hey, guys,” I said, hovering, unsure if I should sit or not.

I was distracted by snickering at the next table, which was filled with Clovers.

“Sit,” Axl said happily. He was fast becoming one of my favorite supes. I’d always loved practical and clever people.

I was too hungry to stress about the implications of joining their table as I sank into a chair on the opposite side to them. “So, we’re on new girl babysitting duty,” Calen said, and he waggled an eyebrow at me. “I’m taking the night shift.”

I pointed a finger at him. “You step one foot into my room and you’re going to leave without your balls.” He opened his mouth, but I cut him off. “And it won’t be in any fun sort of way.”

“Spoilsport,” he muttered.

Axl watched the two of us, amusement dancing in his beautiful eyes. “I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a female reject Calen. I’m so happy you wandered into our lives, Maddi.”

I wasn’t surprised about the lack of rejection for Calen. He was hot. Atlantean-hot. Which was its own classification now. But I had zero interest



in him.

My stomach rumbled and I slapped a hand on my favorite part of the table: the bringer of food. “Have you ordered?” I asked them. They shook their heads, and then all three of us picked out our meals. French toast for me, and about six meals for them.

I fidgeted uncomfortably while we waited for our food. Mostly because I was getting very dark looks from the six chicks at the table next to us. One of them I hadn’t seen before—with waist-length, dead-straight, platinum blond hair—was trying desperately to attract Calen’s attention. She even called his name a few times, but he was flat-out ignoring her.

Never got the fun in chasing dudes who weren’t interested, but she seemed to want the challenge of it. She was damn persistent.

“I found something,” Axl said, distracting me. He pulled out some papers that had been stuck in the front of a thick blue text book with the title *Complex Algorithms of the Fey Language*.

“I did some research last night,” he said quickly, “and I found a few more readings from an Atlantean text of ours. Something I’d never much paid attention to, but it feels more relevant now.”

He handed me the top sheet with a complex design on it—it looked like a family tree.

“This is a translated copy of the royal lines of the three Atlantean houses,” he said, pointing out the familiar names of Sonaris, Corpinicus, and Jervania across the top. “Legend says those three were the first to find a way to open a step-through to travel between Faerie and Earth. The first supernaturals on this world.”

Goosebumps spread across my skin and I shivered. Our history was powerful stuff.

“They brought with them friends and family, probably a hundred supernaturals each, so three hundred in total. All with different ‘race’ strengths, even though at the time there was no such divide or distinction.”

I nodded, encouraging him to continue.

“The original Atlanteans settled on an island near Greece or Gibraltar, depending on what legend you believe.”

I already knew this from Atlantis History channel.

He placed his fingertip on the branch of Sonaris, and as it moved down I followed the names. Right to the very last one. I blinked twice at it. *Macilinta*.



“That’s what he called me,” I said softly.

Axl nodded. “I know, but this family tree cuts off almost nine thousand years ago.”

I looked between them. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Axl shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe nothing. Maybe it was just a common name. Or maybe there is something more to this that we need to uncover.”

Calen looked uncharacteristically serious. “The Sonaris royal line was supposed to have died with Atlantis. Some of the sons and daughters of Sonaris escaped, but the royal couple and their children did not.”

Axl nodded. “The queen from Asher’s line was the only royal that escaped, which is how he can be a descendent.”

None of this made sense. “I mean, facts are facts. I’m not ten thousand years old. I don’t have the blood of an Atlantean. We’re missing something big here, and I wish I knew what it was.”

Part of me wanted to track that Arterian down and make him tell me everything.

Our food arrived, and despite my roaring hunger I couldn’t enjoy it as much as I would normally. My mind was filled with Atlantis and royal lines and that damn family tree.

By the time I waved goodbye to Axl and Calen, I couldn’t tell if I was relieved or disappointed that Asher hadn’t made it to breakfast. He and his damn ancestors were occupying way too much of my headspace.



My classes for the day passed in a blur, I learned more about the supernatural world, and was the only one to find the teeny tiny purple herb, an alilia, in herbalism. This plant was the only known cure against the deadly bite of a golem, a creature created solely through the use of dark magic. I shuddered at the pictures of it in the text, because it had no eyes, nose, or ears, just a large slash of mouth filled with row after row of razor-sharp teeth. The creatures varied between one and ten feet tall and were built like a boulder with arms and legs.

Those teeth though. I shuddered.

I still carried my schedule with me, because if the teachers made any changes to our classes, that was where the information would appear. I noticed that Water Magic now had a “bring swimsuit” note next to it, and I decided I’d get changed before dinner so I’d be ready to head straight across.

All of my new clothes were neatly put away—Ilia had kept herself busy while she waited in my room on Saturday—and I was now overflowing with clothing choices for the first time in my life. The phone was still in its box, though, waiting for me to have a chance to set it up. I just hadn’t needed it yet; someone was always around the commons.

I put on a sleek black one-piece swimsuit with high-cut sides that made my legs look extra-long, a pair of cutoff shorts, and a “coffee then talk” shirt. Braiding my hair back, I thought about the way my hair color never faded. The pink would be this bright for the entire twelve months, with only the roots needing to be touched up. With the speed my hair grew, there was already a hint of silvery blond coming through. Luckily, I’d grabbed some supplies in town and could fix that next time I showered.

Pulling on my shoes, I left my room in a rush and headed to dinner. For



the next hour Ilia and Larissa entertained me with stories about their day while I absentmindedly picked at my food. My eyes kept darting to the table where the Atlantean-five sat, and it was stupid, but I kind of wished we were sitting there with them as well. Whatever had happened when Asher unlocked my power and almost destroyed the school had given me a ridiculous sense of being bonded to him. To all of them.

I needed therapy.

Forcing myself not to stare, I finished my chicken pesto pasta, which had just enough creaminess and spice for the flavors to dance across my tongue.

When the conversation turned to the dance, I joined in. "I need a new dress," Larissa said. "I've managed to actually put on some weight recently. Dad is making me feed more regularly, so I better get to the shops."

The dance was held next month, February 18, and it was the first big social event of the school year. Apparently supes came from outside the school for the occasion, including donors and parents.

"I need a dress too," I said, somewhat reluctantly. I'd never worn anything formal before, and a part of me was actually excited to be able to dress up. Another part of me was freaked out that I'd trip on heels and make a fool of myself. But this year, the year of pink hair, was all about firsts. First formal dress. First use of magic. First assassination attempt.

Look at me go.

"It's settled," Larissa said, sounding more decisive than usual. "We'll go shopping next weekend."

Oh shit. I'd forgotten one very important point in my sudden dance excitement.

"It might not be a good idea for me to leave the school," I said, sadly. Especially if leaving would put my friends in danger again.

"I'll clear it with Dad," Larissa said. "As long as we take security and your power is still locked down, it should be fine, right?"

I shrugged, having no idea, but if Princeps Jones agreed, then I'd go along with it.

It was time for Water Magic, so I hurried off to class and was one of the last to arrive. Asher was already waiting, and I joined the line as everyone had another shot at walking through the door. Which no one managed. When it came up to my turn, Asher reached out and stopped me before I could try. "I don't want to risk the block on your magic," he said, his features colder than usual. Which stupidly bothered me.



I didn't argue, deciding I could act as dismissively as him. Asher did his magic hand thing and opened the doorway. As I passed by, I didn't even give him a second glance.

When we stepped out into the beach, I resisted the urge to run straight for the water.

Everyone stopped right on the waterline, our shoes kicked off. A squeaking sound drew my attention and I smiled as a few of those pink dolphins made their presence known. Asher ignored them. "Everyone into the water again. If you can't find your connection to Sonaris, you'll never capture the essence of water magic. By the end of the lesson, I want to see you draw water up with your palm. I'll demonstrate how in a minute."

As we waded out, I noticed that there were a lot fewer students today. We'd lost maybe a quarter. The ones that remained, though, looked comfortable in the water. They were determined to find the connection, and so was I.

I spent the rest of the lesson finding my bond with the water. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel the push and pull of the currents; I knew when the waves were about to hit; I felt the animals. If Sonaris was part of the power of the water, then I felt like I was one step closer to connecting with him. I also had no problem following Asher's instructions, drawing up trickling streams of water with my palm, swishing them around the air in front of me.

Asher didn't speak to me for the rest of class. Or at the next class later that week. In fact, for the next month at school I barely saw Asher, even though I had two classes a week with him. At first it hurt me, and then it pissed me off.

"I just don't understand what the hell I did?" I complained to Ilia one afternoon when we were throwing bread into the water that surrounded the Academy. We sat on a small overlook, right beside the entrance bridge, in full sight of the security that lined either side of the main path now.

She shrugged. "They're always like that. It was surprising that they were so friendly with you in the first place."

It had been surprising, but it hadn't felt weird. At least not to me. "Even worse is that they're basically ignoring me, except for the one time they stepped in to stop me from going shopping. I mean ... that's bullshit and unfair."

There had been no dress buying for me, because they'd talked Princess



Jones out of letting me go. It hadn't bothered me that much, because I thought it meant they cared, but now I was thinking that was just an asshole power trip.

"Are you still determined not to go?" Ilia said, trying to hide her smile.

I crossed my arms, staring into the clear water. "Can't go if I don't have a dress. Even if it is mandatory." I was being a stubborn ass, but they had pissed me off.

Larissa leaned forward, swinging her legs over the side. "Do you think Asher is distant because he's worried that touching you might trigger some sort of power thing again? Like ... maybe he wants to touch you, so the only way to keep you safe is by keeping his distance."

I laughed, and then laughed some more, holding my stomach. "Girl," I said between chuckles, "you know I love romance novels as much as you do, but that's not what's happening here."

Neither Ilia nor Larissa joined me in laughing, and I just shook my head at them before changing the subject. "So, the dance. People are really excited. Like ... I didn't expect it to be such a big deal."

It was this weekend, and already the school was being transformed. Magic was in the air. Literally.

The commons now sported some gorgeous fairy lights above them, twinkling in the trees and across the sky. There were huge floral arrangements filling every archway, and long flowering vines wrapped around all the pillars. The Academy had already been pretty, but now it was magic.

"I'm almost sad I won't be going," I said with a sigh.

"Oh, you're definitely going." Ilia smiled charmingly. "Trust me."

I shook my head. "Nope. I don't have a dress. Or shoes. Or a date. It's not happening."

Both Ilia and Larissa had dates. Ilia was still hot and heavy with Josh, and Larissa had accepted an invite from another vamp in her bloodletting class. I hadn't had any invites, which I was trying not to take personally. The Clovers were doing their best to keep most students away from me, and I didn't care enough to take them on over it. I had Ilia, Larissa, Simon, and occasionally Dee. That was enough.

"We'll see," Ilia added with a smile.

I threw the last of my bread at her, and with a laugh she changed the subject.





WHEN SATURDAY ARRIVED, there was a sense of excitement in the air that had me wearing a stupid smile like the rest of the students.

“We’re getting ready at yours, right?” Ilia said, barging into my room that afternoon. “You never told me.”

I laughed and stepped back to let her—and all of her bags and cases—in. “Of course I’ll help you, but seriously, you’re ten times better with hair and makeup than me.”

She threw everything on my bed, and five minutes later Larissa appeared. She had less stuff than Ilia, but still plenty, and between them I couldn’t see an inch of bed.

“We have two hours to get ready,” Ilia said, glancing at her watch. “That should be just enough time.”

She pointed a finger at me. “Maddi first. Sit your ass in the chair.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “I’m not going.”

“You are,” she insisted. “I know you were really pissed about not being able to shop for a dress, but that doesn’t mean you should miss out. Don’t give those Atlantean assholes the satisfaction.”

She crossed to the bed and hauled up two dress bags. “We always got your back, girl. We’re your fairy godmothers, and we’re going to dress you for the ball.”

“What did you do?” I asked, as the slightest swirl of excitement sprang to life in my center. I couldn’t stop staring at the two black garment bags, wondering what might be inside.

“Sit,” Ilia said again, pointing me to a nearby chair. “Don’t ruin your surprise.”

I hesitated, because in general I hated surprises. The only ones I’d had in my life were of the bad variety. But ... I trusted these two, they already felt like sisters to me, so I would let them have their fun.

Two hours later I stood in front of the mirror, my best friends on either side of me, and we stared at our reflections. Ilia’s dress was a deep blood red. Of course. It was her color and I’d fight anyone who disagreed with me. It was a one-shoulder, slinky cocktail dress that draped across her lithe frame and fell in smooth waves to the floor. There was a slit all the way up one thigh, and every exposed part of her ebony skin was shimmery from where she’d dusted powder across it.

“I made a good choice with this dress,” she said confidentially.



“You definitely did,” I confirmed. Her makeup was also flawless: full red lips, and green eyes dressed in winged eyeliner.

On the other side of me, Larissa was just as gorgeous. Her blond hair was slicked back in a low bun that offset the simple white, floor-length, strapless dress she wore. The white made her brown skin look even creamier—she had the most perfect skin.

I was in the center, and I almost couldn’t believe it was me in the reflection. My long hair was curled, falling to midback, and Ilia had killed it with my makeup tonight; smoky dark eyes, a red lip, and shimmering cheekbone powder gave me a sultry, mysterious look.

“Thank you both so much,” I said, feeling a bit choked up about it again. I’d never had anyone care enough to try and give me a perfect dress.

They’d given me two.

The first dress was navy blue, with a halter neck and plunging neckline. It was gorgeous, and had I not seen the second one I would have worn and loved it. But it was the black one, with a fitted, ornately detailed bodice and off-the-shoulder straps that captured my heart.

I ran my hands down the corset front, amazed by all the perky boobs I had going on now. My girls were Ds tonight. “You look so beautiful,” Ilia said, her voice breaking a little. “My little supe is growing up.”

I laughed, resisting the urge to roll my eyes at her. “Seriously. I love you both so much. This is so much more than anyone has ever done for me. I won’t forget it.”

I held my arms out, pulling them in for a hug on either side of me.

“Stop,” Larissa said. “If you make me cry and ruin my makeup...”

We were all in danger of that, so we pulled away and finished getting ready. I slipped into black shiny heels. Larissa had on amazing silver heels, which brought her to my shoulder in height, and Ilia was a few inches taller than me in her red numbers.

“When are your dates getting here?” I asked, turning from the mirror.

“We told them we’d meet them there,” Larissa said.

I ground to a halt, halfway to the door. “What? Why would you do that?”

Ilia looked at me like I was stupid. “We wanted to arrive with you, of course. Hoes over bros.”

I was one lucky bitch.

“Let’s do this,” I said.

I was ready to see what this whole dance thing was about.



There had been a lot of talk about this dance, but since I hadn't expected to go, I'd deliberately *not* paid attention to it. I had no idea where it was being held, and when we ended up in the practical magic area, I was surprised. I'd say sixty percent of the school was familiar to me now; I had classes in all quadrants, and even if I hadn't been in every room, I had a good idea of what was around.

The dance was in a room I hadn't ventured into. The ice land.

I shivered as we stepped across the threshold onto a white carpet. "Uh, should we have brought coats?" I asked, rubbing my arms.

"No," Ilia said, shaking her curls. "The carpet walk is chilly, but the dance will be magically warmed. They really just want the winter wonderland theme. The first dance is always winter themed."

We slowly walked along the carpet that led across a land of white snow. Despite the chill, I didn't rush, enjoying the white rolling hills and snow-covered trees dotted about. Twinkling lights filled the sky as music drifted across to us from the band. One of the few whispers I had heard were over this band. Apparently they were a big deal in the supernatural communities.

"Packmates," Larissa said, her voice high and excited. "They're the hottest band in the world. I'm already dying."

"All shifters?" I guessed, based on the name.

She nodded. "Oh yeah. Two wolves, a bear, and a panther. Neil, the panther, is my favorite. He plays the drums."

More of the main dance floor was coming into sight now, and their music grew louder. It was a mix of rock and jazz, with lots of guitar and a strong drumbeat. When we reached the main platform of the dance floor, which was wood, circular in shape, and absolutely massive, I looked back along the



carpet to find hundreds of formally dressed supes trailing along.

This was going to be insane. Half the school was here already.

The moment my heels clicked onto the wood floor, warmth surrounded me, and I let out a low sigh. It was almost too hot after the icy walk, but soon my skin adjusted and the temperature felt perfect.

I had a pretty clear view at the setup—there was a raised platform across from us that held the band. They needed the height for security reasons—they were already surrounded by screaming chicks. I watched them for a moment; the lead singer was covered in tattoos, his hair falling just below his ears in scruffy curls, and his voice was damn sexy. Husky and deep, it sent tingles down my spine.

I could see—and hear—why they were so popular.

“Drinks first,” Ilia said, dancing her way across to the long bar that bisected one section of the round floor. “I need a cocktail.”

“They let you have alcohol?” I asked, astonished. We weren’t considered adults in the supernatural world, and back home, no school dance would serve alcohol to underage students.

They both laughed. “Of course,” Ilia said. “The only drink off-limits to under twenty-fives is faerie wine. I’ve been so messy on that stuff, so it’s probably for the best.”

And now I wanted to try faerie wine.

Our first drink was fruity and strong, and I took a long sip, enjoying the orange zestiness as it tingled on my lips. “Your metabolism will burn through these pretty fast,” Ilia said, smiling as she downed hers in one go. “If you want a decent buzz, trust the expert. You need to drink three fast, and then you can slow down with the rest.”

My grin grew. “Challenge accepted.”

Ten minutes later we were four drinks in and finally ready to leave the bar. The dance floor was packed now, and I waved at a few students I knew. I’d become a little friendlier in class, and while the Clovers kept some people from associating with the “human scum,” plenty ignored them.

The music grew louder as we walked toward the main section set up for dancing. Finishing my fourth drink, I dropped it on one of the tall tables that were scattered around. Magically, it disappeared, and I shook my head at the wonder of it all. Over a month here, and I still wasn’t used to this.

“Let’s dance,” Larissa said, seeming a tad more inebriated than us.

I hadn’t danced in years, but somehow my body knew what to do. The



beat was sexy, perfect for slow hip swings and bodies grinding together, and after some time, I noticed we were drawing attention.

I was just drunk enough not to care, when normally I might have stepped back.

Josh appeared, dressed in a black suit, the open collar showing a slice of tanned chest muscles. He swept his arms around Ilia, growls rumbling his chest as he nailed all the guys around her with a dark look.

Shifters were possessive bastards.

Ilia spun in his arms, wrapping herself around him as they moved together to the music. "Possessive lion," I heard her murmur. I hid my smile because I'd thought the exact same thing.

He leaned down and whispered something, and she shot him a slow smile, followed by a seductive nod. It had taken me a while to get used to the sexual nature of supernaturals. To ignore it when I found them frolicking half naked in the long fields out the back of the Academy. Or the passionate kisses which could happen anywhere, anytime. They were free in a way humans weren't, and the human-raised side of my brain had struggled with it, but now it felt much more normal.

I'd always had a high sex drive, and I finally understood why.

"Look at them," Larissa said wistfully, staring at Ilia and Josh. "There's too much pretty there for one couple. If they had kids ... they'd be perfect."

"I know," I said. "It's lucky Ilia is our friend or we'd have to hate her for being a goddess."

We laughed and fell about each other, the alcohol kicking in stronger.

"Shouldn't your date be here soon?" I asked, looking around.

Larissa shrugged, throwing her arms out to the sides. "I'm not sure. He didn't seem that happy when I changed our plans, so ... maybe he won't show at all."

I hugged her. "If he doesn't, then he's an idiot, and it's totally his loss." I pulled back. "You look smokin' hot."

She smiled and waved her hands wildly. "It's cool. I'm used to being alone. Vamps don't like to date the daughter of their princeps."

"Why don't you try another race?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Ilia and Josh, that's not really a normal situation. We mostly stick to our own races. Everyone is looking for their true mate."

We'd learned about true mates in class last week. Apparently it was a rare but very strong connection between two supes of the same race. It was a



magical bond. Like ... a soul mate or something. I had no idea if I believed in it, especially since it seemed that most supes did not have that sort of bond in their lives, but I understood why it kept them from straying outside of their race when dating. It was an elusive fantasy they were all chasing.

A new song started and the crowd around us screamed. I blinked before figuring out that this was a favorite Packmate song. Larissa grabbed my hand and we spun and swung our hips together. Ilia was still close by, but she was kissing Josh like he was the last supe on earth.

Just as I'd decided to get another drink, heavy hands landed on my waist and I was pulled back into a hard body. A gasp left me, and on instinct I jerked away. Spinning around, I faced a tall, blond shifter I didn't know.

I stared at him, noting that he was good-looking with a lazy grin and golden eyes.

"Lion?" I guessed. This academy had more than a few lion shifters at it, despite them being a somewhat rare animal.

"Tiger, actually," he all but purred. I snorted out a little laugh.

"Okay, then. How about don't touch without permission, tiger."

His face turned from smarmy to scowly in a heartbeat, and I dismissed him by turning my back and stepping toward Larissa, only to find she was now in the arms of a tall, dark-haired vamp. They were smiling and chatting together, and I figured this was the elusive date. He'd finally arrived.

Thankfully the tiger had taken my not-so-subtle hint and disappeared, so I decided to head to the bar again. I ordered two tequilas from the fey serving and downed both of them fast. The burn spread through my chest. In my old life, I didn't drink much. No time or money for that. But on the three occasions I'd managed to get drunk, it had taken a shit-lot of tequila to do it.

"Would you like to dance?" a low voice asked from behind me.

I wiped my mouth as I turned, just in case any tequila escaped. I smiled when a dark-haired supe came into sight; Damon, a magic user from my Sword and Sorcery class. I didn't know him well, having only exchanged a few words before, but I knew his weapon was a broadsword and he was insanely strong. I could barely even lift the sword, let alone swing it.

"Sure, I'd love to dance," I said.

He grabbed my hand, leading me through the crowds of supes. When we reached the edge of the dance floor, he pulled me a little closer, and we awkwardly swayed together.

"Come here often?" I said with a smile, hoping to ease the tension



between us.

He let out a low chuckle. "I like that you joke. It was the first thing I noticed about you."

I shrugged. "Humor is my shield, a deflection. It's also helpful when schooling idiots who need a quick lesson in life etiquette." Sarcasm and snark were considered humor too, right?

"I've noticed."

I could tell by those two words that he enjoyed my smart mouth, and that made me feel a little more comfortable with him. Not everyone got my sense of humor. Plenty of guys took it as an insult, their tiny *egos* unable to handle any sort of teasing.

"How are you doing with finding a weapon?" Damon asked, his arms tightening as he brought our bodies even closer.

I grimaced. "I don't know what's wrong with me. Nothing is calling to me. I'm only halfway along the wall, but still, almost everyone else is weaponed up."

Damon tilted his head, staring down at me with his intense gaze. "You should give the bow another go. I saw you with it last week, and I think there's a spark there."

I blinked at him. "You saw me?"

He nodded. "Yep, and to me it looked like you were displaying unnatural talent and skill with it. It might be your weapon."

"It felt *more* right than anything else I've touched," I admitted, thinking it over. I flashed him a wide smile. "Thanks for pointing it out."

"No problem," he said huskily before he leaned closer to me.

Maybe it was the alcohol, but in the low light his darkly handsome features looked extra striking, and I wondered if I would let him kiss me. I'd never been attracted to Damon before, but it was a dance, and there were pretty lights and snow fields, and maybe ... maybe I'd get kissed tonight.

Just before our lips touched, there was a gasp from the crowd around us and I jerked my head back. Girls surged forward, pushing past me, no longer interested in the band. I couldn't figure out what was happening until the Atlantean-five came into view.

Asher and his friends had arrived.



“*L*ooks like they’re coming this way,” Damon said.

I shook my head, because why would they be, but then I realized he was right. Asher didn’t talk to anyone, even though plenty of supes were trying to get his attention—male and female alike. He just strode across the floor, his eyes locked on me. I shivered, rubbing at my arms as I wondered if I should back up.

Deciding I wouldn’t be a coward, I remained where I was, holding my breath as they surrounded me. Damon didn’t back away, and I reassessed his bravery. If I were in his position, I would have run away.

“We need to talk,” Asher said, his expression dark, face shadowed despite the twinkling lights above.

I forced my expression to remain neutral. “No.”

His lips twitched minutely. “No?”

Something told me he hadn’t heard that word much before.

“That’s right ... no. It means I am denying your request to talk.” I waved rudely at him. “I’m busy dancing. You’ll just have to wait.”

Jesse was on his right side, and his grin was so fucking huge that it covered half his face. Rone was on the left, and he wore a neutral expression, which was almost friendly considering his usual scowl.

Turning my back on Asher, I paused at the sight of Axl and Calen on either side of Damon. I let out a sigh, recognizing that none of them were moving away, and we were starting to draw attention.

“Maddi, we’re sorry,” Axl said, and someone let out a groan from behind me. “We’ve been trying to figure out all of this Atlantean mystery, and we’ve neglected our friendship with you.”

“Way to play it cool,” Calen muttered.



Crossing my arms, I tried not to let his apology affect me. It had hurt when they all cut me out, and I'd guessed it was all to do with Asher. Asher the asshole. But now they were all back for some reason.

Supes pushed forward around us, everyone trying to hear our conversation. We were drawing way too much attention, and I was surrounded by Atlanteans, with no easy escape.

"Argh!" I snarled. "Five minutes. That's it."

I turned and shot Damon an apologetic smile. "Sorry, maybe I'll see you later...?"

He didn't seem too upset. Reaching up, he tucked a wayward curl behind my ear. "Definitely. Catch you later, Maddi." He pushed through the crowd.

Turning my pissed-off face to Asher, I said, "You better have a very good reason for deciding right now you need to talk to me after all but ignoring me for a month."

The crowds around us moved even closer, and I bit back a whole bunch of curse words when someone jostled me. The Atlantean-five closed in on me, protecting me from all sides.

"Move," I heard Rone snarl, and almost like magic, we had space around us.

When we were much more alone, I let out a relieved breath and the guys backed up a little. Asher's expression remained closed off as he stood staring down, making my breath catch in my chest. It wasn't fair that he could make me feel this way.

I tilted my chin up so I could look him directly in the eye. "You might be hot, Asher. You might have every single person in this school under your spell. But ... not me. Not anymore. Say what you've got to say, and then stay away from me."

I waited a moment, and when he didn't speak, I decided "fuck it" and went to make a dramatic exit. He reached out and caught my hand before I could take two steps. I gasped—this was our first contact since the whole "almost blowing up the school" incident. The six of us tensed, the silence heavy and filled with worry, but there was nothing except a low swirl of warmth in my center.

"Our energy isn't fighting anymore," I whispered, staring at our joined hands.

"Is the block still in place?" he asked, expression unreadable.

I nodded. "Yeah, but it's starting to wear; I'll need to see Louis soon." I



shook my head, lifting my eyes to meet his. "I can't believe we can touch now."

We were still holding hands; he could have let go, but he hadn't.

Asher's eyes flared, burning silver through the green, and I barely stopped from throwing myself at him. *Jesus*. Could I be any more pathetic?

Frustrated with myself, I tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let me. "There's so much you don't understand," he told me.

"I think I can keep up," I replied drily.

His laugh was raspy and dark. "I don't know what the fuck to do with you. You're everywhere. You call to the water ... and me." He leaned in closer, his lips brushing across my cheek. "I can't get you out of my head."

His words set something on fire inside of me, flames scorching my center.

His friends had faded into the crowd by now, reassured that we weren't about to blow up the school. "Where have you been for the last month?" I asked, our bodies still close.

His scent was all around me again, and I tried not to close my eyes and breathe it in. Why did he have to smell like my idea of home?

"I've been searching for the missing books of Atlantis," he said, distracting me from my messed-up needs. "I've half ripped this school to pieces and ... nothing."

"You're trying to figure out how I'm connected to Atlantis?" I wondered.

He pulled me a little closer. "Yes," he said huskily. "These books are our best chance of figuring out how you can have the energy of the originals but not the blood ... figuring out why our powers reacted that way. I'll be honest, despite Louis' reassurances, I wasn't sure we'd ever be able to touch again."

My heart clenched when he admitted to having the same worries that I'd had.

"Why did you stay away from me?" I asked again.

He took his time answering, his gaze never wavering. "It was the safest thing for you. The first time I touched you, Arterian assassins tracked you down. The second time, I almost killed you."

"But we're touching again," I murmured. "Do you think something bad is going to happen?"

I immediately wished I could take that back, worried he'd withdraw from me.

But he didn't. "I think the worst has passed. Both of those events



occurred because whatever lock was on your power was designed to react to Atlantean power. Maybe it was a safeguard. Maybe a warning system. Either way, it's been disabled now. I don't think we can trigger more bad luck."

I let out a shuddering breath. "What made you decide to risk it all tonight?"

His eyes shimmered in the twinkling lights, his hands strong and firm on mine still. "I couldn't stay away any longer," he said softly. "I tried my best. I focused on the library. But you look—"

He broke off, and I forced air into my lungs.

"Do you want to dance?" Asher asked, and I was sad that he didn't finish his sentence but also glad that something had broken the intensity. It was beyond...

"I'd love to dance," I told him.

We drifted onto the dance floor, and he wrapped his arms around me. Heat and ocean and power surrounded me, and I squeezed my thighs together to ease the ache there. My entire body felt like it had been touched by a live wire, and while it had definitely been too long since I'd had sex, this was all to do with Asher.

He moved gracefully for such a big guy, our bodies sliding together in perfect sync. "Damon is not the one for you," Asher said, and I narrowed my eyes on him. "Trust me. You deserve better."

I snorted. "Thank you for that unwanted advice."

He smiled, and I eyed him with suspicion. "What's got you smiling like that?" I asked.

His smile grew. "You're beautiful when you're mad." He brushed his thumb across my cheek before he leaned in closer. "You look gorgeous tonight, Maddi."

I swallowed hard. "Thank you. You look pretty nice yourself."

Vast. Understatement.

Asher was in a dark gray suit with an open-collared white dress shirt. It was custom made for sure, perfectly molded to his muscles. Asher in normal clothes was hot. Asher in a suit was devastating.

My eyes landed on his lips, and I'd never wanted to kiss anyone like I wanted to kiss Asher. To distract myself, I asked, "What makes you think that this Atlantean library is here in the Academy?"

He tightened his hold, and my chest was now flush against his. *Think unsexy thoughts. Think unsexy thoughts.*



“My family founded this school. If you want to get very technical, I own the Academy, which is why we’re allowed to have a private residence here. It also gives me some leeway when it comes to *bending* the rules.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Well, well, Mr. Fancy Pants. And that’s why you think the library is here?”

He nodded. “Yep, it was a personal family library, smuggled out of Atlantis before the collapse. It was then passed down through generations of my family, all of them working together to keep the last true history of Atlantis safe. Its location has been lost with my parents. They were killed when I was young.”

My heart ached for him. “I’m sorry to hear that, Asher. It must have been hard to lose them so young.”

Asher shrugged. “I barely knew them, and I wasn’t alone. I had Jesse and his family, and the other guys. We’re a family.”

I’d seen that between the five of them. There were some things about them that were a given: unnatural good looks, Calen’s flirting, Axl’s intelligence, Rone’s scowl and penchant for black clothing, Jesse’s lazy grin and OCD, Asher’s devastating power and presence; and the strongest given of all—they were a team.

I’d never doubted they were a family, not for a second.

The song changed to something fast paced, and Asher paused. “Do you want another drink?”

All I knew was that I didn’t want to step away from him. With the snow and the lights and the music, magic was in the air. Tomorrow he might go back to ignoring me, but tonight I wanted this magic.

“Sure,” I said. “I could use another drink.”

I fell in beside him as he started to walk. Supes called his name as we pushed through the crowd, and he was stuck talking to more than a few of them. The last ones who stopped him looked slightly older and a lot richer than most of the students. “Thank you for your donation,” Asher said to them, and I realized that these were the donors who were invited to the official school holidays. Asher couldn’t ignore them, and I waited near his side as he made polite small talk.

Eventually we made it to the bar, and Asher ran a hand through his hair. “What would you say to us having this drink somewhere a little quieter? I could use a swim...”

My heart rate picked up, and I wondered if he could hear it pounding in



my chest. "In the ocean?"

He shook his head. "I was thinking the pool in my house. It's perfect for laps. Calms the mind."

It didn't escape my notice that he'd invited me back to his place, which made me nervous, and when I got nervous, my stupid mouth went rogue. "No sex until the third date," I said, trying to sound funny, but it came out more like an order.

I bit back a groan at my own awkwardness.

His grin was more pronounced. "And does this count as a first date?"

I pretended to think about it. "I'm going to have to say no. We didn't arrive together, we argued, and then we only spent ten minutes dancing before deciding to bail."

I sucked in a deep breath as he yanked me closer, my body pressed to his long hard planes. "We're leaving together," he said softly. "That's date-like."

"Half a date," I said breathlessly. "At max, it's half a date."

He smiled, and all I got was dimple. *Fucked*. I was totally fucked.

He didn't argue though, just straightened and set me back on my feet. He'd been holding my weight, and now I was trying to find traction on the stupid heels. With a huff, I reached down and yanked the uncomfortable things off.

"I love heels," I said, "but after an hour or two they're nothing but spiked assholes."

He laughed, low and husky. "Axl tried a pair on to test a theory once. He has a very detailed thesis on the long-term effect of heels on your calves and feet, if you'd ever like to read it."

I blinked at him. "Are you serious?"

He slipped his hands into his pockets. "Very. Axl's brain won't let him rest until he answers whatever burning question he's pondering. He needs the answers."

"I love that about him," I admitted. "His curiosity. And his kindness."

Asher nodded. "He's very much both of those things." One of his hands extended toward me. "You ready to go?" he asked.

I nodded slowly, trying not to appear eager. "Sure. I just need to let my friends know I'm leaving so they don't worry."

Asher inclined his head and I spun to find Larissa and Ilia both waving at me from across the dance floor.

"I think they know," he said.



I waved back, and then Ilia's look got very pointed, and as her finger jabbed in my direction, I knew she was telling me get some Atlantean tonight.

*Take advantage of the magic.*

I might just do that.

Asher stayed close as we walked to the carpet, and there were eyes on us, but this time no one stopped us, at least not until we were about to step onto the white carpet. Three new arrivals blocked our path.

"Asher," Kate purred, her heavily made-up eyes locked on him as she stuck her chest out. "Where are you going?"

She stepped forward to rub a hand across his biceps, and I resisted the urge to punch her in the face. Asher was not mine, I knew that, but tonight ... tonight he was as close as I'd probably ever get.

She'd better not ruin this for me.

"Good evening, Kate," he said politely before he stepped closer to me, dislodging her groping fingers. "We're just on our way out. Have a great night."

Kate was dressed in a silver cocktail dress that was adorned with crystals from top to bottom. She literally shimmered as she moved. Her hair was dead straight, her makeup perfect, and judging by her expression, she was about to scratch my eyes out with her bloodred nails.

"You're leaving with the human trash?" she said, sounding hurt and incredulous. "I don't understand."

He shot her a bored stare. "I've told you more than once, I don't date. You're wasting your time on me, Kate."

*He doesn't date.*

That thought was more painful than watching Kate dig her claws into him. I shook it off, deciding it was better to know exactly what I was getting myself into. I would not look at this as anything more than one night.

Kate's eyes went wide as she stared between us. Chellie, who was dressed in a dark green mermaid dress, stepped up to her side, wrapping an arm around her. "I gave you a reprieve, trash," Chellie snapped at me, "because it looked like you were old news. But that reprieve has come to an \_\_\_"

"Don't push me," Asher said, bite in his voice. "Maddi falls under our protection and that of Princeps Jones. I promise you, you don't want to fuck with my business."



They wilted under his stare, but as they slipped around us, I saw the dark expressions on their faces. Asher scared them, but these chicks were used to acting without consequence. They weren't done with me yet; they'd just be sneakier about it next time.

Asher and I didn't talk as we started across the long carpet, and when we were halfway there, he shrugged off his jacket, draping it around my shivering shoulders.

"Thanks," I said. That encounter with Kate had pissed me off and ruined some of my mood.

Had Asher ever been with her? I mean, it was stupid of me to care, because I was hardly a virgin. Even working seven days a week, there was always opportunity for sex. Hell, I'd even had a six-month casual relationship with my boss at one diner. Nothing serious ever; I moved every twelve months to stay off the radar.

"If any of the Clovers bothers you," Asher said, startling me from my thoughts, "tell me immediately. I'd like to think they'll heed my warning, but knowing them like I do, there's little doubt they'll need a stronger warning at some point."

"I can take care of myself," I said, and that was the truth. I'd been doing it for twenty-two years.

He stopped walking, and I almost stumbled into him.

"I know you can," he said, no humor in his voice. "I've seen you navigate this new world and do it better than most of us that grew up here. But I want you to know that you're not alone. You don't have to do it all on your own."

I snorted. "You do realize that you've ignored me for over a month. Relying on you doesn't sound like the best idea." Alcohol made me honest, but I didn't regret saying that.

His jaw tightened, eyes dark and intense. "It might have appeared I was ignoring you, but you were never alone, Maddison. I promise you that."

What the hell did that mean?

"I did what I thought was the best thing for you. To keep you safe. But clearly it was a stupid decision."

"The stupidest," I agreed, still shaken by his previous statement.

Asher chuckled. "Come on, let's go. I'm in need of that swim more now than ever."

He wasn't the only one.



Despite his house—aka the mansion—being on the other side of the Academy, it didn't take us long to arrive. My shoes stayed in my hands, bare feet not bothering me. Asher left his jacket over my shoulders, and my favorite ocean scent kept me company.

It was only as he deactivated his locking system that I realized— “I have no swimsuit,” I said. I was wearing a strapless bra and thong, which I normally wouldn't swim in, but did it really matter?

Asher paused. “You want to go and get them?”

“I'll just swim in my underwear,” I decided. “Save us making another trip.”

For a brief second, his gaze dragged across the top of my cleavage, which was still plumped right up by my corset dress. He shook his head, like he was about to say something and then changed his mind. “Sounds good,” he finally said, turning to enter the house.

Trailing after him, I marveled at how pretty the front entrance was. It had a black-and-white patterned wallpaper on one side, and shoe-coat rack on the other. “Come on,” Asher said, “pool is through here.”

We crossed to the back of the house, stepping out onto a huge porch filled with plush outdoor lounges, the sort you could nap for hours on. Half a dozen stairs led down to an open, white pool house that sat beside a massive lap pool.

“How long is that?” I asked, my eyes running the full length.

“Just short of fifty meters,” he said, his eyes on the sparkling water. He shook his head and his mesmerized look disappeared. “I'll throw on some shorts and be right back.”

I nodded, and when he was gone I realized this was the perfect



opportunity for me to get undressed and into the pool before my bare ass flashed him. That brilliant plan went up in smoke, though, when I couldn't reach the top of my zip. After a few minutes of struggling, I gave up.

"Need a hand?" Asher's heat pressed into my back.

I nodded, crossing my arms to stop the dress from just falling off. Warm fingers gently dragged across my skin as he slowly slid the zip down, a trail of burning heat following his touch. We might not explode when we touched anymore, but the physical attraction and chemistry between us remained as strong as ever.

Just when I was about to lose my mind, he stepped back, moving around me to walk down the stairs. "See you in the water, Maddi."

I almost collapsed against the railing, my skin burning, and I knew I'd be covered in a flush to match my hair. All I could see was his broad back, those thick muscles shifting as he walked. The ink I'd caught glimpses of before was now clearly on display. Covering his entire right side, it wrapped over his shoulder and down his back, disappearing into the waistband of his green shorts.

Did those symbols mean something to him? The tattoos looked new, shiny and dark, but maybe it was like my hair. Supernatural ink didn't fade.

When he reached the edge of the pool, I let the gorgeous dress slip off, draping it carefully across a nearby chair. I was comfortable in my skin, so I didn't stress as I followed his path down the stairs. Asher's dark stare never left me; he waited in the pool, hair slicked back as water dripped across his flawless body. The water hid the silver in his hair, turning it pure black. He was rocking a very dark vibe, and I was into it.

When I reached the edge, I dived in smoothly. Most of my makeup was waterproof, but I'd still be a panda-eyed mess when I emerged. I really didn't care.

Water was life.

I didn't come up for a long time, swimming the entire length and then tumbling under water to come back again. When I surfaced, gasping in air, my gaze found him. He was in the deepest part of the pool, and he had to be treading water, but there was barely a ripple around him.

Water followed his command; his magic would help him stay afloat. Swimming closer to him, I kept a few feet between us.

"You can hold your breath for a long time," he observed.

I nodded. "Yeah, I've always been able to swim two lengths of a full-



sized pool.”

He reached forward and I waited to see what he was going to do. My breath was shallow as his long fingers cupped the back of my head, his thumb brushing gently under my eyes.

“Is it everywhere?” I said with a laugh.

Asher shook his head. “Just a bit under your eyes.”

He let me go.

“Are we going to swim?” I said, needing a distraction.

He drifted closer. “How about a race?”

My competitive streak sprang to life. “What does the winner get?”

His grin was slightly evil. “If I win, you’ll resume private water magic lessons with me. Now that we know your powers won’t be triggered by me, then we should be safe to explore your connection. I’m especially interested in honing your defensive skills using water.”

“And if I win...?” I said slowly.

He tried not to smile. Smug bastard didn’t think I had a chance. “What do you want?”

*Well ...* wasn’t that a loaded question.

“How about, if I win, I’ll let you know.”

Asher’s lips twitched, but he just nodded and waved me toward the end of the pool. I swam smoothly, he glided, and I had a feeling he was going to destroy me in this little competition. He moved almost as one with the water. I’d never seen anyone so comfortable in it ... like he was part of the water itself.

“You ready?” he said, and I nodded, pushing myself back against the wall.

“On the count of three,” he said. “One ... two...”

I braced myself, focusing the best I could through my alcohol-and-Asher impaired mind.

“Three!”

We both surged forward in the water. Focusing on my own race, I didn’t even glance to the side. Freestyle was my fastest stroke, and I powered along without breathing, determined to show him I was at least competitive. When the wall neared, I chanced a glance to the side, trying to determine where Asher was. I couldn’t see him, which probably meant he was already at the wall.

Slamming my hand on the end, I swiveled to find him. *No one was near*



me. Turning back to look along the pool, I blinked to see him still on the wall where we'd started.

"Uh ... what the hell, dude? You didn't swim," I shouted.

He pushed off, and before I could yell again, he was swimming. *Whoa*. He was fast. So fast that the race would have almost been embarrassing—for me—had he actually participated. When he reached my side, he smoothly popped up next to me, and I gaped at him.

"You swim faster than a dolphin," I said. "Why didn't you race me? You'd have won for sure?"

He moved closer, and I swallowed hard. With that slicked-back hair, water dripping across his skin, eyes shimmery silver, he looked like an amazing, mind blowing, *very* bad decision waiting to happen.

"Tell me what you picked," he said.

I didn't think, I just surged forward and kissed him. I wanted Asher. I wanted to taste him. I wanted to know what one night with him would be like. His hands gripped my hips and he immediately pulled me into his hard body. I wrapped my legs around him, and all thought faded away. He tasted as delicious as he smelled, fresh and sweet. His tongue stroked mine, confident, skilled, and a low moan escaped.

I pressed closer as our tongues slid together, his mouth dominating mine with slightly rough, tantalizing kisses. When I was dizzy and breathless, he slowed our kiss, sucking on my bottom lip.

"Holy fuck." I exhaled, both of us breathing heavily. "I knew we had chemistry, but that was..."

Asher made a low rumbling sound, his eyes blazing silver, and then his lips were on mine again. I barely noticed that he was moving us through the water, heading toward the wide steps that led into the pool. He sank back onto the middle step with me straddling him. I rocked my aching center against him.

His lips moved over mine and down my jaw, his hands sliding over my ass to control my hips. I could feel his hard length beneath me, and it was driving me insane. When his mouth reached the swell of my breast, he ran his tongue across the water beading there, and his hands slid up my back, releasing my bra. Breasts spilled out everywhere, and Asher lifted his head to meet my gaze.

"I'm starting to think your blood is lying," he murmured, hands cupping my boobs. I leaned back to give him better access, groaning as his thumbs



brushed my nipples. “You have to be Atlantean. The women were said to be the most beautiful of all the world. Curves, and silvery gold hair. Eyes somewhere between silver and the blue of the Atlantic Ocean.”

I moaned again. “Fuck. Asher. Seriously. You’re killing me.”

His fingers slid down and stroked across me, slipping under my thong just as his mouth closed around my nipple. My fingers glided into his hair and I clenched my fists, holding him to me. He slid a finger inside, followed by another, and usually I found it hard to have sex in the shower or bath, because the water washed away my natural lubrication. Not this time though.

I was as wet as this damn pool.

He moved to the other breast. “Can’t neglect this one,” he said with a low rumble. I was too far gone to reply as he continued to stroke my body, the pleasure almost overwhelming.

His thumb glided across my clit, and the low swirls in my body, the pleasure drugging my veins, exploded. I cried out as I rode his hands, his mouth on my nipple as he dragged out every last second of pleasure.

When I finally stopped rocking and moaning, he lifted his head and I froze at the deep rich silver that faced me. There was not an ounce of green left in his gaze.

“Asher?” I said somewhat breathlessly. “Are you okay?”

He nodded, his voice a deep, purring rumble. “That was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

Despite my recent orgasm, my body was already screaming for more, and I was reaching for him when he stood, gently setting me on my feet.

“What about you?” I said, sliding my gaze across his rock-hard body. The swim shorts did nothing to hide his erection, which was long and hard and completely unsatisfied.

He shook his head. “You said no sex until the third date. I’m an Atlantean of my word.”

I just stared at him, shaking my head. “I’ve changed my mind. That’s a stupid human rule anyway.”

Asher laughed. “Anticipation is half the fun, Maddi. Come on, let’s go and watch some movies while we wait for the guys to return. If we stay here, I’m definitely not going to be able to keep my hands off you.”

My legs wobbled as I started to follow him from the pool, the aftereffects of the orgasm still tingling through my body. Asher reached out and grabbed my hand as I stumbled, keeping me upright.



“What if one of them brings someone back here?” I said when we reached the stand. “I’m not really up to dealing with girl drama tonight. Maybe I should just head home.”

Asher shook his head. “Nah, we really don’t bring anyone back here. Especially not chicks. It’s our rule. We have a top-floor apartment in the magic users’ wing for that.”

I ground to a halt, taking him by surprise. “I’m a chick.”

Asher’s heated gaze ran across my bare breasts. My bra was lost somewhere in the pool, and I couldn’t be bothered searching for it. “I noticed.”

“I mean ... I’m here, so ... your rule?”

“You’re diff—”

“If you say different,” I interrupted, “I’m going to punch you. Don’t separate me out from other women. They’re my people.”

His laughter was starting to become my favorite sound; it was so deep and husky, and it sent shivers down my spine. “I meant different because we’re all pretty sure you’re Atlantean. We just have to figure out how. You’re one of us.”

My lips trembled, and I hoped he thought my eyes were watering because of the pool, and not because of those words. “Okay, then,” I managed to say. “Let’s go watch a movie.”

When we were back in the house, he pointed toward a nearby door. “Bathroom is there. Towels and everything will be inside. I’ll grab you some clothes.”

I didn’t bother to close the door. The shower in here was four times the size of the one I used in the magic users’ dorm. There was a ton of dials and switches, and I eventually figured out how to get the rainfall head working. Warm water washed over me, the wall showerheads massaging my muscles while I used bodywash to clean myself. When I got out, there was a towel and small pile of clothes waiting on the sink for me.

The mirror showed all the makeup caking my face. I used a hand towel to scrape most of the black off. Asher had left me a long-sleeved shirt that smelled like him; it was loose and hung to mid thigh. There was also a pair of boxer shorts that I slipped on underneath.

Padding silently out into the living area, I sank onto the couch and waited for Asher to finish his shower as well. My stomach growled; I hadn’t eaten since breakfast this morning, too depressed by the thought of missing the



dance.

“I ordered some food,” he said, appearing in his stealthy way.

I narrowed my eyes. “Two questions. One: did you just hear my stomach growl? And two: we can order food to our rooms?”

Asher dropped down next to me, dressed in a pair of sweats, no shirt on at all.

“You’re gonna need a shirt,” I said before he could answer my questions. “Seriously. If you want to keep your honor intact, then get a shirt on.”

He smiled, and my eyes were drawn to the five o’clock shadow.

“And no more dimples.”

His smile grew, and I dropped my head back on the couch with a groan.

The chair shifted as he got up, and then he was back, a fitted black shirt hiding all of his glorious muscles from me. It didn’t help though; my fingers still itched to touch him.

“To answer your questions,” Asher said, sitting even closer this time. “Supes all have great senses. Magic users are not on par with shifters, but those of us with Atlantean blood are stronger. I caught the faint sounds of a hungry stomach.” That was a tad embarrassing. “And the average student can’t order food to their rooms, but we can.”

Of course they could.

I was starting to think there was almost nothing inaccessible to the Atlantean-five.



Asher's house had a huge flat-screen. He let me choose the movie, and I had no idea what most of them were, so I just randomly selected something. It turned out to be pretty good. Lots of action and funny one-liners.

The pizza he ordered disappeared fast; I ate almost as much as Asher, much to his amusement. "I've always been partial to shifters," he told me. "They love their food. Witches, on the other hand, are all about starving themselves."

"Shifters, hey?" I said, trying not to let that bother me. He'd given me one orgasm. I didn't own him. There was no indication that we'd ever even get to the third date, but still ... it bothered me.

He shrugged. "Witches are growing on me. Especially when they have a perfect mix of fey about them."

I elbowed him. Jerk. "Growing on you. Imma grow my fist in your nose in a minute."

He smirked. "That made no sense at all, but to save my ass I'll just say that I'm suitably impressed by your threat."

I settled for flipping him off.

Asher chose the next movie, and as we relaxed, I yawned. It was getting pretty late now, and I was tired after a big day of dresses, makeup, and dancing. The alcohol had worn off, and I was ready for sleep. I must have drifted off at some point, because I woke sometime later to soft voices and a warm blanket draped over me.

"She okay?" I heard Jesse murmur, his low voice distinct.

"She's fine," Asher replied. "Just tired. I'll move her to the spare room in a minute."



Ouch. Spare room. Not his room. If that wasn't a huge reminder of our current relationship standing, then I don't know what would be. "No need," I said sleepily, pulling myself up. "I'm just going to head back to my dorm."

Asher and Jesse stood behind the couch, staring down at me. "It's late, and we'd prefer you stayed here," Jesse said softly. He was still wearing his suit, but had ditched the jacket. "It's safer than walking across campus at night when there are assassins out there."

I looked between the two of them and shook my head. "I've been wandering around the Academy for the last month on my own. I'm sure I'll be fine."

Their expressive faces went cagey all of a sudden, and a niggling thought drifted through my mind. It went back to what Asher had said to me at the dance. "You've been following me, haven't you?"

No confirmation, but also no denial.

I let out a huff. "Fine. I'll stay here tonight, but I'm leaving first thing in the morning."

And I wasn't sleeping in no stupid spare room. I'd just stay right here on the couch. It was comfier than my bed back in the Academy, and that was saying something. Plus, I was proving a point. What point, I hadn't decided, but it was a point.

"Sounds good. I'll put another movie on," Jesse said. He jumped over the back of the couch, landing beside me. Asher followed suit, on my other side. I tried to discourage the little swell of happiness that rose up as the three of us sat companionably together. *Only temporary.*

"Are you the only one back?" I asked Jesse.

He nodded, draping an arm around me. Asher shook his head, and then not-that-gently knocked off his friend's arm. Jesse laughed. "Well, well ... is the elusive Asher getting possessive over our Atlantean girl? Never thought I'd see the day."

Asher's reply was relaxed. "I was just doing her a favor. Your heavy ass tends to drape across whoever is next to you, using them as a pillow."

They continued to banter back and forth, and the easiness of their relationship was comforting to me.

The next time I opened my eyes, it was morning, and I was literally surrounded by male bodies. For a second I tried to process the absolute insanity of my situation. The insanity of me trusting any men enough to sleep in the same room as them. I never would have done such a thing in my old



life, but these guys ... they were different. I knew it on a fundamental level.

Wiggling around to see better, I could tell that the others had stumbled in, removed some clothing, and then fallen asleep wherever they landed. Calen was at my feet, almost curled around them, and I resisted the urge to nudge him in the ribs. His mouth was wide open, his breathing loud, and I could smell the alcohol on him.

He still managed to look attractive though. How, I had no idea. If I'd slept like that, I'd have looked and sounded like a swamp monster. I felt weird being in the center of them like this, so I tried to unobtrusively sneak out. Jesse and Asher, who each had an arm over me, tightened their hold, stopping me from moving.

"Ugh." I let out a huff. "You two muscle-bound dickheads are going to tear me in two."

Jesse popped one eye open and narrowed it on me. "Shh, this dickhead is trying to sleep, love."

I swung my elbow, hitting him in the ribs. "I'm not your love, and you're invading my personal space."

Asher let out a rumble in his sleep. My eyes locked on his broad chest, and I was hit with a memory of all those muscles under my hands last night, and that delicious V he had that led into his swim shorts...

Jesse's smirk caught my attention. "What?" I said.

He shrugged. "I see how it is. You're not shoving Asher away and demanding he get out of your personal space."

"Because you're an ugly fucker," Asher mumbled, his eyes opening as he uncurled like a sleeping jungle cat, all grace and long limbs, golden skin everywhere. My hands itched to trace the edges of his tattoos peeking out from under his shirt, and I reminded myself to ask him what they meant.

I really wanted to know if it was Atlantean.

The intensity in his eyes this morning was equal to the look he'd leveled on me last night when he destroyed my sanity by giving me the best orgasm of my life.

I wanted another one. Stat.

"I gotta go," I said in a rush, not trusting myself around him. "My friends will freak out if I'm not in my room."

Calen laughed, and I realized he'd been awake for a while. "The way those two were going at it with their guys on the dance floor, I doubt either of them ended up in their rooms either."



There was the slightest slur to his words, like he was still kind of drunk, or maybe half asleep.

I paused. "Even Larissa?"

He nodded. "Oh yeah. He had his fangs in her and everything."

I blinked. "Is that ... is that something vampires do?"

We hadn't covered the sex part in Race Morphology yet. Calen pulled himself up, his wrinkled dress shirt completely unbuttoned, and ... so were his pants. I didn't even want to ask why that was.

"Yeah, it's part of our foreplay," Rone said.

I turned toward him, trying not to act too excited that he was talking to me. Not just talking, but sharing personal vamp business with me. "So ... you guys bite and drink each other's blood while having sex?" I asked hesitantly, not sure if I was overstepping.

"Yep," Rone said as he stood from where he'd been asleep in an armchair. He stretched his massive frame out, arms above his head. He was much more put-together than Calen, no buttons open, but he had ditched his jacket. "We do a lot of blood play ... mostly with vamps, because we get the whole blood thing, but it happens with other races too."

I should have been disgusted by the thought of them biting and drinking blood while fucking, but it didn't seem weird to me. I thought it was kind of hot. Maybe I was part vampire too.

That'd be hilarious. Maybe I was all four races. *Yeah, right.* Like that would ever happen.

"You should stick around," Axl said, walking in from a nearby bathroom. He was showered, dressed in neat chinos and a polo shirt, and had a thick, ancient book in his hands. "We can have breakfast around the pool."

I didn't look at Asher, even though I wanted to see his expression. What did he think of me sticking around a little longer? Mr. "I don't date" was probably freaking out about me getting attached or something.

"That's a good plan," he said, surprising me. "You can join us for our swim after breakfast. It's a daily ritual."

Jesse nudged me. "Come on, swim with us. You know you want to."

My lips twitched. "You made that sound dirtier than it should have, but yes, I would love to stay and swim with you. Can someone get a message to Ilia and Larissa, let them know I'm here?"

"I'll let them know," Axl said. "I've got to head into the Academy and speak with my professor. I'll talk to your friends and order us breakfast while



I'm there."

I looked down at my borrowed shirt and shorts. "Can you ask Ilia to pack a bag for me. She has access to my room."

I should have just gone with Axl, but I didn't really feel like doing the walk of shame in Asher's clothes across the Academy. I had enough problems with the Clovers as it was. Imagine if they caught wind of that.

"I'll take care of you," he said, shooting me a sweet smile.

Asher just shook his head. "If you all could stop hitting on Maddi, that'd be great. She's here as our friend. Okay? She's one of us. An Atlantean. That's a bond deeper than you all trying to plant your dick in her."

Laughter rang out, and there was good-natured ribbing going around while I raised an eyebrow in Asher's direction. That hadn't been his story last night. And sure, it wasn't his dick, but...

He leaned in closer. "Different rules for me," he murmured, and my blood boiled again, my body aching.

Whatever Asher and I were doing, be it just exploring the chemistry in a short-term thing or otherwise, I was so fucking into him. I just had to hope that I didn't lose my heart somewhere along the way. Something told me if that happened, I'd never get it back.

Axl left, and the others drifted off to their rooms for showers and to change. I decided to wait until I had new clothes before showering, but I still needed to pee, so I hurried into the same bathroom I'd used last night. When I was done, I washed my hands.

I scrounged around for some toothpaste, resorting to the old "finger brush." It was like being a teenager again and sneaking around with a boyfriend. Or in my case, sneaking around so my mother's boyfriend didn't "accidentally" climb into bed with me. I'd taken to carrying toiletries with me on a daily basis, because I had to escape so frequently.

Until the Academy, the best day of my life was when I got my first job and crappy apartment.

I shook off the darker emotions that were creeping through my mind ... the sorrow that pressed down on my chest. It was so easy to allow it to suck my happiness away and take me back to the tired, scared, emotionally broken girl I was before. I'd come a long way since my mother's death, and I refused to go back.

A polite sort of knock sounded on the door and I walked across to open it. Axl was framed in the doorway. "You can't be back already?" I said,



astonished.

He shrugged. “I’m fast, and I might have cheated a few times. Technically magic shouldn’t be used outside of classes, but if you don’t get caught...”

I laughed and pulled the door open wider. “Did Ilia have anything to say?”

A pained expression pulled at his face, creasing the corners of his eyes. “She was pretty adamant that she wanted to see you. I’m afraid she wasn’t happy about the ‘no outsiders’ rule for our house, but in the end she relented and gave me your bag.” He held it out to me. “She also said that if you didn’t have—” He cleared his throat. “—a six-way with all of us, then she was greatly disappointed in you.”

It looked like it physically pained him to repeat her message. I threw my head back and laughed out loud. “You’ll learn to ignore Ilia and her *big* ideas.”

He nodded. “Yes, I can see that she likes to push the boundaries. My brain also pushes me toward new discoveries, but I’m afraid I’m not quite as adventurous as Ilia.”

I patted his arm, taking the heavy bag. “No one is, don’t feel bad.”

He backed out then, and I shut the door firmly before I rifled through the bag. She’d packed a lot of clothing, including five sets of skimpy underwear and two bikinis. Of course she wouldn’t throw in my one-piece swimsuit; nope, she went for the sexiest things she could find.

I held up a red lace bikini, which literally just had a small square over the nipple. Hello, side boob. The rest was a web of lace that covered nothing. Narrowing my eyes, I shook my head. I definitely did not buy this. Considering it was red, which was Ilia’s signature color, I was going to guess this was hers. She had a hell of a lot less boob than me; I’d be almost naked in this.

Throwing it back in the bag, I pulled out the other suit. The black top had lots of crisscrossing straps, and while it wasn’t one I’d purchased either, it looked a little more solid than the red one. It would have to work.

I showered quickly and jumped out to slip on my bikini. It took me five minutes to figure out where all the straps went, and another five minutes to curse Ilia, because there was so much ass and side-boob in this getup.

After I pulled on a short white summer dress, I stashed the rest of my stuff on a shelf near the sink. My hair was long, the curls crazy, but I didn’t



care. I was going to get it wet soon anyway.

When I emerged, the guys were all standing in the living room. All dressed in board shorts.

I faltered. *Atlantean muscle*. This was ... I mean ... all that...

“You ready, Maddi?” Axl asked, and I blinked. Even he was well built; not as bulky as his friends, but his shoulders were just as broad.

And all of them were inked across their right sides.

“Are these marks Atlantean?” I asked, needing a distraction. If I could stare at the designs versus the bodies underneath them, I might just make it through this swim.

“Yes, they’re marks from our royal lines,” Asher said.

“That’s why Asher’s is the crown,” Axl added. “Because he’s almost directly descended from the last ruler of his house.”

An abstract monochromatic crown filled the right side of his pecs completely. “Maybe I should get some ink too,” I joked.

Five sets of eyes ran across my body, and I swallowed roughly.

“Asher did our ink,” Rone said, breaking the tension. “He’s an expert in the language and the ancient symbols.”

I tilted my head, taking a closer look at the designs. They were breathtaking. Art in its finest form. I was beyond impressed that Asher was the artist, and now I had a very good idea of what I would ask for when we next bet.

I wanted Atlantean ink from Asher.



The food arrived soon after that, and we sat around a large table in the pool house. It had thick aqua cushions offsetting the dark wood frame. Breakfast consisted of fruit, pastries, and bacon and egg rolls. At first it seemed like a ton of food, but it disappeared so fast that I counted myself lucky to have snagged one small plate. Jesse, on my left side, had his plates arranged around him in the order that suited his mood, eating them in a neat, precise manner.

While we ate, I asked them all questions about their lives and families. I wanted to know everything. The guys gave Axl permission to reveal their backstory, and he was more than happy to oblige.

“Asher’s parents died when he was young ... three or four,” Axl told me. “They were on an expedition in the Greek Islands, trying to find more Atlantean artifacts. Something went wrong. His father’s body washed up and they never found his mother.”

“They were murdered,” Asher added, his voice dark and gravelly. “I’ve spent a lot of years trying to unravel their last few days.”

Sympathy for Asher rose inside of me. He’d been so young when he lost both parents. It was devastating. And completely unfair.

“I understand wanting closure,” I said softly. “I hunted down information on my father, my adoptive father as it turns out, because I didn’t just accept my mother’s vague ‘he died from drug use’ answer.”

Turned out he’d died because he stole drugs. Something that his dealer was not too happy about.

“It’s fine,” Asher said, even though his face was telling another story. “Like I said, I barely knew them. And while closure would be nice, I doubt it’ll ever happen at this stage.”



There was a beat of silence, everyone caught up in the darkness, and then Axl continued, "Jesse's parents are still alive and well, living in Germany. They work for one of the prisons as corrections officers, and they're big-time into wine."

I choked out a laugh, and Jesse shrugged. "He's not even kidding. They own three wineries, and drink at least one bottle every night. They like to 'sample' the new season's haul."

I already liked them.

"Calen's parents live in France," Axl continued. "They own a little bakery there, and I can tell you, to my knowledge no one makes a better dessert than his mom or fluffier bread than his dad. I tried to calculate their recipes to the exact formula one day, but they use no strict measurements. It's not calculable."

Calen sighed, leaning forward to rest his chin on his hands. "I miss them. Mostly their food, but also just seeing them in person. I need to get back to visit soon."

"Are they coming for Parents' Day?" Asher asked.

Calen sat straighter. "Yes. Fuck. I completely forgot about that. The school is opening step-throughs from a few main ferry points, and I'm pretty sure the parents are catching one from Paris."

"Parents' Day? I asked.

"On May 10," Calen said, "they open the school for parents to visit. They generally stay until after dinner, and then take the step-throughs back home."

I forced a smile. Parents. Whatever would one do with those?

"I'm the product of two scientist parents," Axl said quickly. "They're pretty uninterested in me or anything to do with my life, but I understand it. Their minds are on the bigger picture. I don't even know where they are; we don't really keep in touch. But if I ever needed them, they'd be here."

Sure, if he could track them down, since they apparently just fucked off and didn't even bother to tell him. I got that Axl was practical and understood their reasons on a mental level, but emotionally it had to hurt.

It hadn't escaped my notice that he'd left Rone for last, still hesitating as he started the vampire's story. "I said it was okay," Rone grumbled, waving his hand. "You've all accepted her as one of us, and I won't bother to fight it until I know for sure she's here to hurt us. For now, I'm reserving judgement."

Axl eyed his friend, and then nodded slowly. "Rone has a similar



backstory to you,” he said softly. “Adopted as a young child. His family were ... not good supes. They were part of an evil clan that liked to prey on humans, feeding and killing at will. Rone refused, even when he was young and vulnerable, and they almost killed him.”

Rone shifted forward in his chair. “I escaped.” His voice could have frozen the pool it was that cold. “I was six years old, and I survived until the guys found me two years later. They were camping near Russia, in this huge forest, and they stumbled on my cave. My Atlantean blood called to them, and they came to find me.”

I could only imagine the things he had to do to survive at such a young age.

“They saved me,” he finished gruffly. “And I’m loyal to them, and only them.”

“I get that,” I told him, not even caring if he bit my head off for it. “My mother was an ice addict. She sold herself to the highest bidder just to get her next hit. She tried to sell me as well, but I was able to escape each time. Pretty sure it was my supe side influencing the human men. That was the only thing that saved me. She died when I was seventeen, and I’ve been on my own since then. Working dead-end jobs, because they don’t ask questions. Ilia finding me changed my life in ways I can’t even express.”

The air was heavy, charged with strong emotions, and I hated the mix of sympathy and anger across the faces around me. “How about that swim?” I said, changing the conversation. “I’ve reached my emotional limit.”

“Thank fuck.” Rone jumped to his feet. He moved so fast, diving into the water before I could blink.

Pushing my chair back, I ditched my sundress and was heading toward the pool when Calen sprinted around the table and yanked me up into his arms. “Put me down,” I shouted, smacking his shoulder.

He just grinned. “Gladly.”

He threw me so far into the pool that I almost landed in the middle. As the water closed around me, I opened my eyes and let my sight adjust. I hadn’t done that yesterday with Asher because it was dark and I was somewhat drunk. But today, today I was back to my normal self, and I wanted to really *feel* the water.

Not only was it crystal clear under here, but I could sense various elements of the water itself. Like, it was salty, and not in the normal way of chlorine salt, but something that was much closer to the ocean. It was the



cleanest pool I'd ever been in, with almost no chemical residue.

It felt like silk on my skin. How could I not have noticed this last night?

Asher, Jesse, and Axl appeared in the water around me. All of them circling closer. They were probably wondering what I was doing under here, just floating in the middle of the pool like a weirdo. But ... then again, maybe they understood. If I was Atlantean, then these five were literally the only supes in this school who would understand.

Kicking gently, it took me a second to reach the surface and pop my head out. I wasn't short of breath as I treaded water. "You have to be Atlantean," Axl said the moment his head popped up next to me; his hair looked darker as it slicked back off his face. "I've never seen anyone just hover in the water like that except those descended from our people."

"What line are you from?" I asked him.

"Jervania," he said without hesitation. "Most of us are Jervania, except Jesse and Asher who are Corpinicus. You're the only one we've ever met who might be Sonaris."

"Yeah, most of Sonaris went down with the ship," Jesse added, swimming closer. "They tried to save the land but perished before they could."

I pressed my lips tightly together, working through my emotions. "I might not be Atlantean. I mean, my blood is saying no, so the magic user and fey thing ... maybe it means something else. I mean, the magic fey mix that the Atlanteans were, that had to have died out many centuries ago. So how? I'm twenty-two. I'm definitely not from original Atlantis."

The Atlanteans that existed now were diluted bloodlines, with different races mixed in. Only Asher showed signs of magic user and fey skills, and still not like what they'd seen in me.

Asher's expression was closed off. "We can't discount anything yet. You have the same affinity for water that we do. An affinity that drew the five of us together and has drawn me to you as well. We'll figure it out, Maddi. There's an answer close by, I can feel it."

Part of me hoped he was right, because I was big enough to admit it...

I wanted to be Atlantean.



THE MORE TIME I spent immersed in this world, the faster time passed. After my weekend hanging with the guys, I was a regular visitor to their house, and it was starting to feel like a second home to me. Nothing sexual



happened between Asher and me again, with alone time rare, and somehow we fell into a friendship that was both fraught with sexual tension and teetering on the edge of inappropriate.

It was driving me crazy, but I hardly had any time to think about it.

There was always something happening in this school.

March 3, we had the vampire holiday, Fang Day. They hunted in the forests around the school, and I was warned not to leave the main part of the Academy in case one of them mistook me for food. Larissa was so excited that I almost wished I could go with her.

“You hate to hunt though,” I said when she expressed her glee. “You barely drink blood from a glass.”

She laughed. “Oh, I don’t hunt, but it’s just nice to have a day with my dad where he’s not working. Running this school is like three full-time jobs, and I love that he does it so well, but Fang Day is our daddy-daughter date.”

I sighed. “That’s maybe the cutest, creepiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She winked at me, and I shook my head at the insanity of this life.

After that it was the Full Moon Party on April 14. Again, I was not allowed to leave the grounds, but the shifters held their party out in the back field, on the edge of the Academy grounds. Half of them were naked, the other half in nothing more than underwear as they danced and shifted and had all the sex they wanted under the full moon. The fact that a school would ever allow their students to do such a thing was fucking amazing.

All of us watched from Asher’s house, except Jesse—who was in the midst of the party. When he finally stumbled home in the early hours of the morning, he was covered in glow paint, glitter, and lipstick.

“Best. Fucking. Night. Ever,” he mumbled, and then he passed out at our feet.

“Holy shit,” I laughed. “I love this school. I hope I can stay here for at least the next fifty years.”

Calen laughed and draped an arm around me. I let him pull me closer, because we’d reached an understanding. He could be his normal jokey, sleazy self, as long as he never stepped over the line. The moment he did, I was going to remove his nuts and bronze them into a trophy for my shelf.

“If you want to drag your four years here out, stop studying for the exams.”

“Not a bad idea,” I said, only half-joking.

Asher stepped closer, wedging himself between Calen and me. My heart



flip-flopped as our bodies pressed close.

“I have another lead on the library,” he said, his heat and energy burning along my skin.

Excitement flared inside. “Seriously? A solid lead?”

He nodded. “Yep. Found some paperwork in my parents’ stuff detailing a shifter demolition and construction team that was building something near the demi-fey Academy. Princeps Jones is going to smooth it over with their princeps and get us permission to explore there.”


“Okay, awesome!” I said. “That would explain why you haven’t been able to find anything here. It might have been in their territory the entire time.”

He nodded, his head moving closer to mine. My lips parted as I breathed in his scent, my body aching in ways that only Asher could create. But he never made another move. “You’re one of us,” he said softly, as if he’d read my thoughts. “I won’t fuck it up. You’re too important.”

I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to grab his shirt in both hands and pull him to me. I loved that they treated me like one of them, but at the same time, with Asher, it wasn’t enough.

This couldn’t last much longer.



 n the first day of May, I had an appointment with Louis to reinforce my shield. I was nervous as I knocked on the princeps's door.

"Maddison," Princeps Jones said, turning away from where he was talking to a tall, blonde, stunningly handsome supe. "Please come in."

I stepped inside and smiled, trying not to fidget. The other supe, who I vaguely recognised as Louis, strode over to me. "Maddison, it's nice to finally meet you. How are you feeling?"

I smiled and swallowed roughly, forcing myself to act like a normal person. "Nice to meet you too. I'm good. The power is starting to destroy the block, I think. I can feel more heat in my center."

He nodded. "Yes, I will reinforce that for you today, and then we can discuss the future."

He'd been gone a long time, and while I knew he wasn't spending all of it researching my situation, I hoped he'd learned something. "Did you find out anything about me? About my power?"

Louis's eyes flared, and I realized they were almost a blue-purple. "I have no explanation for your power," he said softly, his words leaving tingles of energy across my skin. It was no surprise that he was the most powerful sorcerer in the world; it vibrated with every word he spoke. "But it does rival my own," he warned me, "and it was locked down for a reason. Until I figure out what that reason is, I'm worried about freeing it completely."

I was disappointed. "Asher said he has a lead on the Atlantean library," I offered. "We're hoping there will be answers in there."

Princeps Jones already knew this, and I wanted to keep Louis informed. I felt like at some point we might need either his help or expertise. Fangirl Ilia



had told me he was over a hundred years old.

Louis's eyebrows drew together. "Call me as soon as you find it. Information on Atlantis is very scarce. That's actually what I've been trying to track down ... in-between other jobs for the American council."

I nodded, understanding that he was a busy, important supernatural.

Louis continued, looking between Princeps Jones and me. "I'm worried about the recent surge in Atlantean activity. The Arterians appearing, Maddison's unusual powers, and the whispers on the wind about gods stirring. My gut is saying that we're running out of time. News has even reached Stratford, and since most American supes don't remember the original Atlantis that's telling me something."

"I promise to contact you as soon as we find anything," I said, worry taking hold of me. I hated that those Arterians were still out there. "Do you think we could try and lure the assassins out? I could leave the grounds again, with backup of course..."

Louis and Princeps Jones exchanged a glance, not at all surprised by my "genius" suggestion. "I don't think it's a good idea to risk you unnecessarily," Louis finally said. "I can't stay right now to help, and these Atlanteans are powerful and well trained. Find the library first, and then we'll talk about the Arterians."

I nodded, and Louis got to business, stepping forward, both hands held out. He paused just above my breastbone. "I'm going to need to touch you," he said softly, his face kind.

I nodded. "Go ahead."

His palms pressed to my chest, on the bare skin above my uniform, and the heat of his power surged into me, taking me by surprise. "It was very worn down," Louis said when he was done. "You're getting stronger. I'm worried that soon I will not be able to keep it at bay. When that time comes, you'll have to leave with me. We'll go somewhere far away, where you can't hurt anyone, and I'll train you to control the energy. I won't let the power destroy you or anyone else, Maddison. I promise."

Louis was so swoon worthy. There was an old-school gallantry about him on top of the powerful and sexy thing he had going on. If I wasn't completely obsessed with an Atlantean god already, I'd probably have a semiserious crush on Louis.

After I left the office, I turned my thoughts to the rest of this week. It was exam week, and there were no normal classes on. Today I had my Sword and



Sorcery exam at 11:00 A.M—each student had their own fifteen-minute exam timeslot.

Which gave me plenty of time for breakfast and last-minute studying.

“Axl,” I shouted, waving as I hurried to his table.

I’d almost reached him when a tingle of energy rushed along my body and I went flying in the most overdramatic trip anyone had probably ever seen. I would have landed face-first into a nearby table if Rone, who must have been nearby, hadn’t used his vampire speed to catch me midflight.

“Holy shit,” I gasped, pressing a hand to my chest as I stared up with wide eyes. “What the fuck just happened?”

His lips twitched as I dramatically continued to curse—the twitch was as close as Rone got to a smile. “You tripped over your own feet.”

The fuck? I had not tripped.

I glared, struggling to get down. He dropped me to my feet, and I searched the crowd, finding the Clovers exactly where I’d expected them.

“It was Kate?” Rone growled.

I nodded, not taking my eyes from them. “Yeah, those bitches have been stepping it up lately.”

This was not the first incident, but it was the first one that someone else witnessed. I hadn’t told anyone about the bleach in my shampoo—which I luckily scented before it destroyed my pink hair. Or the clothing that I’d sent to be washed last week that had been returned in shreds.

Or the cliffston in my water bottle yesterday.

I’d been saved by my ability to scent water elements, helped along by the fact we’d been studying the herb closely in Herbalism. What they’d wanted to put me to sleep for, I would rather not think about.

“I’m going to have to confront them soon,” I said with a sigh. “Not this week though. This week I’ve got to pass my classes.”

Rone had his eyes locked on them, the icy energy of vampires ramping up as he glared. “Don’t worry about it,” I told him. “They’re just annoying, and it’s my problem to deal with.”

His eyes met mine, and I thought he muttered “We’ll see about that,” but he was gone before I could ask him to repeat himself.

I continued toward Axl, sinking into the chair beside him. “You okay” he asked, worried eyes running across me.

I nodded. “Yep, all good. Rone saved me.”

It seemed Axl wanted to say more, but he didn’t. “Sword and Sorcery this



morning?” He patted the textbook on the table. “You’re more than ready. Use your magic to direct the arrows cleanly into the targets. There will be multiple different obstacles to make it harder though.”

I nodded. “I’ve been practicing my magic words and controlling the arrows, but I’m still nervous. The teacher said that they randomly select the obstacles, so there’s no way for us to know until we’re in there.”

Axl nodded. “Let’s work on the words. It’ll help, I promise.”

For the next thirty minutes he quizzed me, and I practiced pronunciation while calling energy. Louis’s reinforced block had it back to being harder to gather but easier to control. I hoped it didn’t let me down during the exam.

“You’re going to do great,” Ilia said. She’d arrived ten minutes ago and was eating her way through three plates of pancakes.

Since I was done with my exam prep, I turned all of my attention to her, finally taking in her drawn face and red, glassy eyes. “Everything okay?” I asked, reaching out to wrap an arm around her. “You look upset.”

Jesse and Axl were at the table with us, but they were deep in conversation about Parents’ Day, which was next week.

Ilia sniffled. “Josh and I broke up last night,” she said.

I gasped. “What? Why?” I pulled her even closer, one-arm hugging her the best I could. “What happened?”

She shrugged. “I found out that he fucked someone else at the Full Moon Party. He didn’t even remember it. They were drinking wolfsbane moonshine, and yeah, apparently she’s pregnant. Dumb bitch knew it was her fertile time and didn’t bother to take any precautions.”

Supes have very specific fertile times, even the magic users. The shifter would have known it was hers long before she frolicked naked at the Full Moon Party.

“Is Josh sure it’s his?”

I mean, if he apparently couldn’t even remember her...

Ilia shrugged. “He doesn’t know for sure. He won’t know until it’s born. But ... I mean, he put himself in that position after asking me to be exclusive. His friends confirmed he was with her.” She shrugged again, her bottom lip quivering. “It’s for the best, really. A magic user and shifter were never going to work out in the end.”

I sniffled with her, my heart hurting for my friend. “Stay in my room tonight,” I said when we pulled apart. “We can hang out and eat junk food, take your mind off it.”



I had exams to study for, but she was my first priority.

She shot me a sad smile. “Love you, girl. Thanks for the offer, but I’m actually heading out soon for a new hunt. We’ve got a wolf shifter in Japan causing some issue. He’s sixteen and pretty powerful already. I’ll probably be gone a month or more, which right now is the best news I could have gotten. If I stayed near Josh, I’d probably curse his dick to fall off or something.”

I laughed, even though she was definitely not kidding. “I’m going to miss you.” It would be weird not seeing her every day. “I suppose it has been a long time since you did any work.” I joked to cover my sadness.

She snorted. “Yep, it’s time for me to earn my keep again. But I’ll be back before you know it.” She nudged me. “And if you ever set your damn phone up, we could text.”

I snorted, not even sure I knew where it was at this point. “Be careful,” I said to her. It bothered me that she was about to traipse halfway across the world; I would miss her so much. But this was her job, and maybe getting away from Josh was the best thing for her.

With one last hug, she took off, and I tried to ignore the sad ache in my chest.

I got up to leave just as Asher arrived. He stopped me with a hand on my arm, a hand that felt like it was scorching my skin. “You’re going to kill it on your test,” he said, flashing those fucking dimples at me.

Asshole.

Sometimes I wondered if he did it deliberately.

“I’m nervous,” I admitted. “This is my first supernatural test, and I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“You are.” He was always confident. I tried to absorb some of it.

“Thanks. I’ll find you guys later.”

He nodded. Then he did something that completely took me by surprise. Leaning in, he kissed my cheek gently before he released me and turned to slide into his table for breakfast.

I stared after him in shock as my pulse spiked and breathing turned ragged. That was the first “non-friend” thing he’d done in ages, and it affected me far more than it should have.

Shaking my head, I stumbled away, stopping short at the death glares from the Clovers at their nearby table. In fact ... it looked like half of the school was staring at me. My relationship with the Atlanteans was the subject of much gossip, which we fueled by never admitting or denying anything.



The guys didn't want people to know I might be one of them, and despite my few weird episodes in Water Magic, nothing had gotten around about it yet. Instead, the students all thought I'd found my own harem and was fucking the five guys on a rotating schedule.

If only it was that simple. Truth of the matter, Asher was too much for me to handle, let alone five Atlantean supes. But sometimes I enjoyed the drama of our entire situation.

Masochist.

Pushing that kiss to the back of my mind because I had an exam to get through, I rushed across the commons and into the practical magic area. Simon was already outside the test room—his timeslot was just after mine—pacing frantically, rubbing his hands together.

He rushed at me when I reached him, grabbing my hands. "I can't do this," he said, sounding half-hysterical. "I'm not cut out for this magic thing."

I shook my head. "You're amazing," I said fiercely. "You found your weapon straight away. You're one of the smartest supes I've ever met, and you aren't as weak in magic as your family has made you believe. You've got this, Simon. If you can remember four hundred years of supernatural history, you can do anything."

His family had done a real number on him, making him feel like he was barely magic in nature, and therefore not worthy of being here. They were smart and powerful, apparently, but in my head they were idiots for not loving their son unconditionally.

Simon tried to smile, but he was clearly too nervous to achieve anything other than a grimace. "I might vomit," he said, breathing deeply. "I don't understand how you're so calm. Your magic malfunctions all the time because of the block, and yet you still make it work."

It was true, but the teachers were aware of my "special circumstances" and they allowed for this. Plus, I'd worked my ass off to be as good as I could be. "We've studied hard. You're awesome with your short blades. You'll be fine."

By the time it was my exam slot, I'd talked Simon off the ledge and felt confident enough to leave him alone. His nerves had at least taken my mind off my own worries. I passed Damon, who had the time before me. We hadn't talked much since the school dance; he'd backed right off when I left with Asher that night. Hanging with the Atlanteans made it kind of hard for me to get a legitimate date.



“How did you do?” I asked as he paused.

Damon shrugged. “It was easy. It’s really just an evaluation of progress. End of year is the hectic exam.”

I knew that, but I was still determined to do well.

“See you on the other side,” I told him, hurrying down the short path and into the Sword and Sorcery room. It looked huge and intimidating; I was used to being in here with dozens of other students. The long wall of weapons gleamed in the low light, and Striker, our teacher, was waiting for me. I picked up the pace, stopping right before him.

“Maddison,” he said abruptly, still a man of very few words. “Pick your weapon and prepare.”

Nerves returned full force, and I tried to focus. I knew the words I would need, it just depended on what obstacles appeared. Lifting the bow from the wall, I held it parallel to the ground and nocked the arrow into it. This single arrow would be what I directed through a series of obstacles using magic words.

“Prepare yourself,” Striker said, and then the lights dimmed.

I took some deep breaths and lifted the bow. A familiar thrum of energy unfurled in my center, dull because of the block, but it was there. It liked the bow. It wasn’t the same intense connection that other students had with their weapons, but it was the closest I could find. Whatever weapon was my “one,” it wasn’t here.

Red and white targets popped up across the huge room in different sizes and heights. They were randomly scattered, with no direct path, and I almost freaked out again.

*Fuck it*, I decided.

I’d worked too damned hard to give up now.

“Begin,” Striker said from wherever he was; I could no longer see him.

I eyed the closest target and mapped a path. “Work with me, *arendo*,” I whispered, using the closest faerie word equivalent for arrow. It was a loose interpretation, but I felt like the arrow related to it. Lifting the bow to the right position, my *arendo* rested beside my cheek. I took a deep breath, relaxed, and then let it go. The string made a distinct twang that I was actually growing to enjoy, because the louder that sound, the better my arrow flew.

Today, it was loud.

The arrow flew straight and true toward the first target; a fire sprung up



before the thin paper circle, and I whispered "*Loest*," Faerie for "cool." Ice licked across the arrow, allowing it to pass through the fire unharmed.

The next target I directed it to was nearby, and it was a gateway to three others. "*Sunde*," I said, sending the arrow left, and then "*disense*," to lower it slightly. I released the power when it was low enough, and the second target was destroyed. This continued on and on. Over and over, new obstacles sprang up. One target was iced over, and I needed to send flames along the arrow to burn through the icy shell.

When there were two targets left, I whispered, "*Sunde*," to send it left, but I was tired by now, and I overestimated how much energy I needed to release. The shield over my power wavered, sending forth a huge surge. The arrow completely missed the target, shooting off to the side and smashing into a pillar.

"Fuck," I breathed, pissed off that I'd been so close to hitting every target.

The lights flickered before flaring to life, and Striker stepped forward from wherever he'd been standing. "Sorry," I started, but he held a hand out to stop me.

"You did an excellent job," he told me. "Especially with your power suppressed."

I blinked. "Oh, thank you. I've been working hard on my use of power and the pronunciation of the fey language."

I loved that so many of my classes tied in with each other to strengthen me as a magic user. Some days it even felt like it was working.

"You should be proud," Striker said, surprising me with the somewhat personal touch.

I basically floated out of the room.





The rest of my exam week passed in a similar manner. I studied hard, Axl quizzed me even when I was half asleep, and I surprised myself with how far I'd come over my four months at the school. For the first time in my life I was pretty sure I was acing my classes.

"How did you do?" Larissa asked when I stepped out of the written portion of the Herbalism exam.

"I think I got them all right. Chesna and cholia trip me up every time, because they look and sound the friggin' same."

Larissa laughed. "Oh gods, I know. Trolls probably love that, because one kills them, while the other just cures their allergies. Anything to make it harder to find the one plant that can take them down."

Cholia killed a troll. The tiniest drop on their skin would petrify their wood-like exterior. I really hoped I got that one right.

We celebrated the end of exams by ordering three meals for dinner and five desserts and sharing them between us. "I wish Ilia was here," I said sadly, scooping more of the beef stroganoff into my mouth and moaning at the creamy sauce that dripped from the succulent meat. "I miss her."

"Me too," Larissa said, dropping her eyes to the table. "But at least she texted to say she arrived safely and would be chasing her supe for a few weeks."

I nodded, making a mental note to try to find the phone again. I hadn't seen the box in months, but I must have shoved it somewhere. Thankfully Larissa had one that got Ilia updates.

Larissa reached out and grabbed my hand. "I think I'm addicted to having friends now. I never realized how lonely I was before you showed up. You



and Ilia. I love you both.”

Aw, my little vamp and her emotions always hit me in the feels.

“I also never knew what I was missing out on,” I agreed, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “Knowing I have you guys in my corner ... it means everything. I would cut a bitch for you. Girl power, my friend. This is girl power.”

She laughed, her eyes watering. “Girl power.”

“What about me?” Calen said, dropping into the seat beside me and reaching out to snag some of my food.

“You can’t be part of girl power,” I told him, not so politely snatching my stroganoff back.

“Why not?” he said, sounding completely affronted.

I raised my eyebrows. “Uh, let me think of the reasons. One: too much dick. Two: Too many balls. Three: Not enough awesome.”

“So much dick,” he agreed. “You have no idea how much dick. Wanna find out?”

I punched him in the shoulder, and then resumed my celebration dinner. Calen ordered for himself and leaned back to look between Larissa and me. “You know there’s a big party on tonight, right? I expect you both to be there, dressed in your finest, skimpiest clothing.”

“A school-based party?” I wondered, because I hadn’t heard anything.

Calen threw his head back and laughed. “Gods no. This one is underground, of course. That’s where all the good stuff happens.”

I turned to Larissa. “What do you think? Will there be any weird shit there?”

She laughed, flashing all of those perfect white teeth and just the hint of fang. “Like what?”

I shrugged. “Sacrifices to the gods. Double, double, toil and trouble spells?”

She screwed her face up, having no idea what I was talking about.

“You’ll be fine,” Calen interrupted. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“Very reassuring,” I told him drily. “You’re usually ass-up drunk before I’ve even had my first drink.”

He opened his mouth, but then shut it again, because I was right. “You’re still coming,” he finally said.

I just shrugged. “We might make an appearance.”





LATER THAT NIGHT, when we were back in my room, Larissa was hyped. “Oh my gods, Maddi! This is insane! I’ve never been to one of the underground parties here. It’s usually reserved for the popular.” Her eyes went really wide. “Holy shit. I’m popular now. I mean, I’m not really popular, more like popular by association because you’re hooked up with the five hottest dudes at school.” She sucked in a few deep breaths, resting her hands on her knees.

I shook my head as laughter burst from me. “It’s going to be fine. They’re just supes like you and me, all of us living this same life.”

She shook her head. “Not even remotely the same life. They live like gods, and the rest of us are the peasants scurrying around in the mud. But ... I see your point.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes at her. “So, what does one wear to these secret supe shindigs?” I asked, impressed with my alliteration.

Larissa bounced toward my wardrobe, rifling through the dresses. She pulled out a deep rich purple one, which was actually one of my favorite pieces I’d bought. I’d never expected to wear it though, because it was basically backless.

“This!” Larissa said, examining it as she held it out in front of her. “This one for sure.”

I searched through my underwear to find something that would work. I had nothing—the only way to wear this dress was braless. I pulled on a thong and slipped the dress over my head before spending a few minutes situating my boobs.

“Holy fuck,” Larissa breathed, looking me over. “You look amazing. Maybe too amazing. You’re going to get in trouble in that outfit.”

I crossed to the mirror and stared at my reflection. The dress fit me perfectly, skimming across my upper thighs; my boobs were more supported than I’d expected, with a small gold chain underneath them, and my entire back, almost to my ass, was on display.

“Ahh, I really want to wear it,” I said, turning again, “but I also don’t want to get in trouble.”

Larissa’s expression grew determined. “You know what, screw ’em. That’s what Ilia would say. I’m always more cautious, but she would love that you’re wearing that number. Don’t change.”

Even though I wasn’t sure, I decided to channel Ilia as well. I felt sexy, and occasionally it was nice for a girl to rock her curves out in the world.



Larissa found a skimpy white bandage dress in my stuff that showcased her flawless skin and perfect figure—she was much slimmer than me. “That looks way better on you than me,” I said. “Keep it.”

She hugged me. “Thanks, Mads.”

We finished our hair and makeup, ready to head out at about 10:00 P.M. I’d left my hair down in wide curls, the pink looking darker against my dress. My eye makeup was lighter than for the last dance, but I still went with the dark eyes again; I wanted the sexy vibe to go with my dress.

“How do we find out where this party is?” I asked her, wondering if she knew.

I should have asked Calen, but it hadn’t occurred to me at the time. I figured everyone would be heading there and we’d just follow along.

“If you’re invited, you’ll get directions soon.”

We fussed with our makeup for another ten minutes, stopping when a quiver of magic licked across my skin. An envelope appeared on my bed, and I shook my head. “For a school where you’re not really supposed to use magic outside of class, there sure is a lot of magic going on.”

Larissa nodded. “That’s a loosely followed rule. It’s mainly because we’re all volatile, and magic users have the advantage over other races. Dad is all about keeping things on equal footing here, even if it’s not like that in the real world.”

I hated the thought that in the real world, the four races were divided. Princeps Jones had done an excellent job in making sure this school did not feel like that.

I kinda never wanted to leave.

Larissa grabbed the envelope; her fingers were trembling when she ripped it open. A single off-white card was inside, with fancy gold calligraphy writing on it. I peered over her shoulder to read it.

*Maddison James and Larissa Jones are invited to the first PARTY OF THE YEAR!*

*Your escort will arrive in two minutes. Be ready.*

We exchanged an excited glance, and she dropped the card and envelope on the bed. “Do they always escort you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Last year I overheard someone talking about a party and how they all got a treasure map on how to get there.”

I already preferred this way.



In the supe world there was no need for identification or money, so I just powdered the shine on my nose, touched up my lip gloss, and pulled on some heels. The knock on my door was firm, and when I opened it, Deeann was on the other side. I hadn't seen much of her lately. We hung in different circles, and she was a few years ahead of me in classes but was still a welcomed friendly face.

"Hey, bitches," she said, shimmying in her dress. I felt better about mine the moment I saw her teeny, tiny, almost translucent number.

"Ready to go?" she said, waving us out of the room. I shut my door, excited and nervous about what this party might entail.

Deeann stopped at a few more doors on the way, collecting some other students. I didn't recognize most of them; they weren't first years.

"You're one of the only first years coming," she said. "Usually newbies aren't allowed."

I could tell she thought I should be grateful, but I wasn't a huge fan of excluding people from anything. It had happened too much to me during my life. It almost made me not want to go. *Almost*. Pure curiosity pushed me forward.

Our small group followed Deeann through the commons and into the forest quadrant. It wasn't the easiest place to walk in heels, but Larissa and I managed to keep each other up as we stumbled along. The forest was, in general, off-limits and filled with dangerous plants and animals, which of course made it the perfect place for an "underground" party. We ended up much deeper into the dense flora than I'd ever been. When Deeann sent up some mage lights, I was fascinated by the different trees here. They were huge and gnarled, seeming much older than any of the trees I'd worked with in Herbalism.

"This is the oldest part of the forest," Larissa confirmed. "We're definitely not supposed to be back here."

I was already crossing my fingers that I didn't stumble across anything that might kill me.

The faint sound of music registered about twenty seconds before the party came into sight. They must have had some sort of noise-dampening spell on the area, because when we stepped between two massive trees, the music all but crashed into us. Not just music, but lights and laughter and the scent of beer.

Deeann chuckled as she spread her arms and spun in a circle. "Welcome



to the best party of the year,” she shouted.

Larissa leaned into me. “They’re all called that,” she whisper-shouted. “They have at least four a year, and it’s always the ‘party of the year.’” She finger quoted and rolled her eyes, but it was clear she was still excited to be here.

“Is this clearing a natural part of the forest?” I asked.

It was a huge cleared space.

“Magic,” Larissa said, eyeing the setup. “Lucky they can do that without hurting the forest. Otherwise Dad would kill them.”

“He knows about the parties?”

She nodded. “Oh yeah. He definitely knows. But as long as no one gets hurt, he lets them go. He’s pretty cool for a dad.”

He was very cool.

We both grabbed some drinks, poured straight from a huge silver keg.

“This beer is laced with magic,” Larissa warned as soon as she took a sip. “It’ll get you drunk faster.”

I shrugged, chugging another mouthful. It had been a hectic week, and I was ready to let loose. And maybe a small part of me hoped to find a guy to at least dance with; I had to stop mooning over Asher. We were friends, and don’t get me wrong, I loved our friendship, but I wanted more. Something held him back, and I had a feeling it had everything to do with my unknown power and possible connection to Atlantis. Until he found that damn library and we figured out what I was and how to safely release my power, he would continue to fight whatever was—or could be—between us.

“You looking for Asher?” Larissa said, her eyes locked on me as I people-watched the room.

I gave her all of my focus. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “Come on, you’re talking to me. I know how you feel about him.”

I swallowed another sip of my drink, letting the icy liquid cool me down. “I have to let go of my obsession,” I said, sadly. “He’s driving me fucking crazy. Always everywhere. So insanely sexy. And ... I mean, we had that one thing together and then nothing. I don’t get it.”

Larissa’s gaze was intense, her drink dangling in her right hand. “He watches you, you know, when you’re not paying attention. And the look on his face ... not friends. Very much *not* friends. It’s intense and hot. If he holds back, it’s because he thinks he has a good reason to do so.”



“He said he doesn’t date. Maybe it’s just that. We’re friends now and he probably doesn’t want to make it awkward.”

Larissa didn’t look convinced. “I don’t think it’s that. Asher has changed since he met you. I don’t think he feels the same way about dating anymore.”

I shrugged, chugging more of my beer. “I have no idea. All I know is he’s driving me crazy.”

She nudged me. “If you want to change the status quo, then you should make the first move. Maybe you’ll have sex and get it out of your system, or you’ll figure out that there’s something deeper there. Whatever you both are doing now is not healthy.”

Truer words had never been spoken.

There was a loud shout, and as if I’d summoned him with my words, Asher and his friends made their appearance at the party. I watched Asher, my alcohol-fuzzed mind drinking in every fucking beautiful inch of him. He was dressed in a black fitted T-shirt, dark jeans, and fancy white kicks. His hair was shorter on the sides, with that messy length falling about on top, and his eyes were locked on me, darkness already creeping into them.

He was watching me as closely as I watched him, his eyes dragging across the bare skin my skimpy dress left on display. “Exactly what I was saying,” Larissa murmured close to my ear. “I’m halfway to an orgasm just from the sexual tension in the air.” She discreetly fanned her face. “I haven’t been laid since the last dance, so have some pity on this poor vampire.”

I snorted at her and grabbed her hand. “Come on, let’s dance.”

She laughed. “Good plan. You can lure him out with your sexy moves.”

If only it was as easy as that.



The beat on the dance floor was deep, the sort that settled into your blood and made you feel as one with the music. As I swayed with Larissa, eyes closed and arms above my head, I wasn't Maddison James, orphan and human-turned-supe, I was a forest nymph, powerful, strong, and sexy.

We were joined on the dance floor by almost all the other supes here, everyone drinking and dancing, letting whatever magic was in the air—and beer—capture them. I was swirled from one group to another, dancing with everyone, not caring whose skin I touched.

I think for a short time there I lost my mind. And I was well aware that a pair of green and silver eyes burned into me the entire time. Asher stood off to the side, Jesse and Rone with him, and even when I tried not to look at them, he kept capturing my attention. Asher stole my breath in the sort of clichéd way I previously thought only happened in books. My limbs felt heavy, my body achy as lust pulled at my core. But I was also stubborn and had way too much pride to throw myself at him.

Maybe with a few more drinks under my belt though...

Larissa wrapped her arms around me, and I was distracted as she swung me around. When she let me go, she moved into her unique and somewhat complicated dance steps of the sprinkler-slash-lawnmower.

Just as I threw my head back, laughing until I almost cried, a warm hand landed on the bare skin in the center of my back. My laughter turned into a gasp at the heat and spark under that touch. It almost felt like the palm was branding me.

Slowly I turned, and I wasn't at all surprised to find Asher behind me. He towered over me, gaze hooded, the silver defined in his eyes. Before I could



say a word, he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me fully into his body. His head tilted down, close to mine, and energy danced between our eyes as the moment extended. This second, where our lips hovered together but we didn't kiss, was beyond intense. I couldn't breathe.

"This doesn't feel very friend-like," I finally said, sounding as breathless as I felt.

Asher's chest rumbled, his lips brushing across my jawline while his hands traced over my back, bringing every nerve ending there to life. He didn't speak, but whenever I caught sight of his face, there was a lot going on. The beat took hold, and our bodies started to move together, the magic in the air driving us. I'd only had one drink, but it was enough.

Asher moved his leg between mine, I could feel every inch of his muscled thigh along my skin. I pressed my aching center against him, finally understanding the supes *need* sex thing. I was dying. There was only so much I could take care of on my own, and right now I wanted Asher more than I wanted anything else in the world.

"You tempt me like no other," he said, so softly that I almost missed it. I tilted my head back, needing to see his expression. His eyes told me so much more than his words. "I've tried to embrace the friendship, because everything between us is complicated. Your power. Our Atlantean heritage. I've never dated, because my world can be dangerous. I lost my parents at a young age because of their obsession. Dragging you into it just seemed selfish."

We stopped dancing, but we didn't move apart. If anything, we were pressed even closer.

"But I'm already in it," I reminded him.

He shook his head. "We don't know anything yet. You might even be more important than any other Atlantean ... beyond me." His nose brushed across mine as he brought his face closer. I breathed him in, the scent, remembering his taste from last time. His next words jolted me. "I can't resist you any longer."

My tongue darted out to try and moisten my lips. "Then don't."

Asher's mouth crashed into mine and I moaned against his lips, our tongues moving together. He tasted like ... everything. Life and air and water.

Elemental.

Primal.



He pulled me into him, lifting me up. I wanted to wrap my legs around him, but I wasn't high enough to easily do that—he was just holding my weight, a few inches off the ground.

“Higher,” I moaned.

He tightened his hold, and I almost sighed as my legs finally settled around him. Our mouths never parted. I wanted to kiss him forever. It started to rain at some point, but I barely even noticed the cold droplets scattering across my heated skin. We were technically inside a magical building, but it rained all the time in here. The water was clean and almost identical to normal rain.

Asher kept one hand under my ass while the other tangled in the hair at the back of my neck. His hold was firm, and I wanted him so badly that my head was spinning. As more rain fell, I tilted my head back to stare up into the darkness above, letting the water soak my face. Asher's lips landed on my throat and my eyes fluttered shut at the sensation of him pressing kisses along my jawline, the scruff of his five o'clock shadow scraping across sensitive skin.

I knew we were drawing attention. I could feel the eyes on us.

But I didn't care.

He pulled my lips back to his, and I groaned, needing more. “Let's go,” I said softly.

One last kiss and I was back on my feet. Asher kept a hand on me until I was steady on my heels. “You want to leave?” he murmured huskily. “But this is only our second date...?”

I glared, or tried to; I was too aroused for angry emotions. “If we count all of our movie nights and shared meals, we've had fifty dates.”

His grin was fierce, his eyes predatory as he threaded our fingers together and started to lead me through the crowd. Mostly everyone parted for him, which was finally coming in handy, but someone stepped into his path just before we left the dance.

“Asher,” the guy said. I was pretty sure he was a vampire, but maybe also a shifter. He was huge. “We need your help with something.”

Asher shook his head. “Find someone else,” he rumbled. Now, if he'd spoken to me in that “don't fuck with me” tone, I would have found someone else. But the vamp was either brave or stupid, because he pushed. “Come on, man. This requires the use of water magic. It's a bit of a situation, and ... there's an animal involved.”



That made me feel bad. I popped my head around Asher—who was shielding me with his body. “Go and help,” I said. “You can’t let an animal suffer. I’m not going anywhere.” The night was still young. As was the weekend, if everything went according to plan.

Asher held my gaze, then let out a long breath. “I’ll be right back,” he said. As I started to nod, he moved fast, pressing his lips to mine, and then another kiss to the corner of my mouth.

It took me like five minutes to even realize he was gone, because my head was all fucked-up with lusty thoughts. I lost track of everything and everyone when Asher was around.

Just as I was about to shuffle off the main path to stop blocking everyone, two familiar bitches stepped in front of me.

“Hello, Maddison,” Kate said, almost conversationally. “I think it’s time we addressed this issue between us.”

I crossed my arms, sending mental SOSes to Asher. “I don’t have an issue with you, Kate. I really don’t care about you at all. I just want to live my life. Run along and live yours too. There’s no reason we have to hate each other.”

Her face creased as she blinked confusedly. She appeared to be more than a little shocked by my current “let it go” attitude. Chellie, who had been watching her friend with concern, shook that off and turned anger on me.

“You pushed us too far.” Face-to-face, I was concerned by the state of her pupils. I knew drugs when I saw them, and this chick was on something heavy. She reached out and shoved me ... or attempted to. I saw it coming and sidestepped, and she let out a frustrated scream. Her next screech was loud and out of control: “I’m about to show you what happens to chicks who touch things that don’t belong to them!”

Kate, recovered from her shock, stepped into me. “Asher is mine,” she hissed. “He’s always been mine, and when he’s finally ready to settle down, he will choose me. Not a magicless human bitch.”

Kate had let her feelings for Asher turn into something dark and obsessive. I mean, I got obsession when it came to the Atlantean, but she could clearly no longer differentiate reality from fantasy.

Without warning, she swung out at me, and again, it was only my reflexes and relative sobriety that gave me a chance to dodge her palm. But it turned out she hadn’t been aiming to slap me. Her hand skimmed across my face, droplets flinging with it. The rain had stopped, so I knew it had to have come from Kate, and then a strong bitter taste hit my lips.



I shook my head as it went immediately cloudy.

“Cliffston,” Kate whispered.

I stumbled, shaking my head again. Did she just say *cliffston*? The herb that put supes to sleep?

I tried to back up from her and call for help, but nothing in my body was working. As I slumped forward, someone caught me in strong arms, and then I was lifted and we were moving quickly. I remained conscious as they ran, my nerves screaming at the way I was wrapped in my kidnappers’ arms. I was bound, unable to move, and it was triggering my old PTSD again.

I hated this out-of-control feeling; if I could have moved, my limbs would have been shaking like crazy. These bitches had better plan on killing me, because if they didn’t, and I got out of here alive, I was going to torture them. Then kill them.

With my last conscious moments, I attempted to free my power. I needed it now more than ever, but between Louis’s block and the herb, I was useless.

My kidnappers moved fast, and then I ... I was in a car.

I lost time after that; everything was disjointed, even when I was lifted again and dropped onto a hard surface. How long I lay there on the stone ground, I had no idea, but eventually the cliffston wore off. Pushing myself up, I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut to relieve the tension headache. When I found the equilibrium to get to my feet, I looked around, trying to figure out where I was.

The room was small, with cobbled ground and a single bench along one wall. It looked like a courtyard that someone had decided to close in after the house was built. I kicked off my heels, wanting to be able to run with ease—if I got the chance. My beautiful dress was torn and dirty, and I could already see bruises forming across my thighs and down my shins. Considering supes didn’t bruise easily, it told me they’d been rough.

My gait was uneven, but I made it to the solid wood door. Rattling the handle—it was locked—I attempted to shoulder my way out. All that got me was additional bruises and anger issues. Turning, I slumped back against it. There was nothing else in the room that I could try and escape from. No windows. No fireplace. No air vents.

I started to shout as loud as I could, hoping it would annoy them into letting me go. “Let me out! Open the fucking door!”

Over and over, until I was hoarse and half slumped against the door. Either no one was here and I’d just wasted precious energy, or they were very



good at ignoring their victims.

Sliding further down the door, I coughed a few times, my chest and throat aching. The door abruptly opened behind me and I almost tumbled out backward. Scrambling to my feet, I backed up, giving myself some distance.

A man stood in the threshold. He was taller than me by a few inches, and there was something vaguely familiar about him, even though I was almost certain I'd never seen him before.

"There you are," he said, his lips quirking up in the corners. I stared harder at those lips, my sense of *déjà vu* increasing.

He stepped further into the room, closing the door behind him, and I backed up as far as I could go.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "We gave you something to counter the cliffston's effects, but you'll probably still be drowsy for a few hours."

"Who—?" My voice cracked, and I swallowed hard. "Who are you?"

His eyes were so dark that there was only a sliver of color difference between his pupil and iris. His face was angular, handsome, but in a scary way, all shadowy planes and high cheekbones. Even if he hadn't kidnapped me, I would have been wary of him.

"My name is Connor. I'm the head of this division of the Arterians."

Everything became frighteningly clear: this wasn't anything to do with Kate or Chellie and their hatred for me. This was about the Arterians. I stared harder at Connor, and there was that familiarity around his mouth and white teeth.

"You're the one who tried to take me outside the Academy?"

I was sixty percent sure.

He nodded. "Yes, I needed you to come with me. Accept who you are."

"And who am I?" I asked, in no mood to fuck around.

He casually crossed his arms over his chest. "We believe you're the one we need to return our world to its former glory."

I coughed out a derisive laugh. "Seriously?"

Connor lost some of his relaxed attitude. "Why do you fight the inevitable? Your fate? You belong with us, as part of the fold."

Ignoring the fate thing, because *what the fuck?* I focused on the second part of his crazy. "What fold?"

"We're the people of Sonaris. You're the daughter of Queen Helene, the last living ruler of Atlantis. A daughter she bore from Sonaris himself. Only our god's blood could return our world, since god's blood stole it away. You



were saved to bring about the rise of Atlantis.”

I stared at him for many long moments, and then I laughed for so long that my sides ached and my chest hurt. Connor moved in that superspeed way that I’d seen Asher use, and then he was right before me.

“Laugh all you want, but you are the daughter of Sonaris, and you are our only hope.”

In that instance, I realized he was serious. He believed this crazy.

Holy shit.



He truly believed that I was somehow ten thousand years old, and the daughter of a queen and god. “How is it that I’m alive?” I said, keeping my voice even so as not to antagonize the crazy assassin. “I mean, if this Queen Helene was the last queen of Atlantis, and it sank ... what, like ten thousand years ago, then ... I mean, I’ve aged really well...”

He stood straighter, like his time had finally come. This was a story he’d clearly been sitting on for years. “You were in a magical stasis where you did not age or change. We expect the rest of the Atlanteans are in this same condition. Together we can bring about the rebirth of our civilization.”

Loud shouts outside of the room cut off further conversation. Connor spun to face the door, his arms spread out on either side of him. I felt the pull of magic and watched half in fascination and half in fear as blue orbs of light appeared in each hand.

“Stay behind me,” he said softly, “I will protect you.”

I snorted. “And who will protect me from you, you crazy asshole?”

He shot me a confused look. “I will protect you from everyone.”

I lifted one eyebrow, but before I could point out the complete lack of logic in that statement, the door burst open. Literally. It smashed into countless pieces, scattering across the room. I ducked my head, but still got some scrapes from the debris.

A furious Asher stood in the doorway. His broad shoulders heaved as he looked around the room. When his gaze landed on me, I choked back a sob, and fought my desperation to run to him. I didn’t want to distract him from the very dangerous man still standing between us.

“You need to move away from her, Con,” Asher said slowly, his voice



low and gravelly. "This is not like when we were kids. I will end you."

*Con?* Like ... they were old friends or something.

Connor shook his head, his lips pulling down. "I'm sorry, Asher. I really am. But you know why I need this to happen. You know why I need Atlantis to rise again. I've spent years tracking down every possible lead, and she is it. She's the one."

He released both orbs, and I screamed, but Asher dodged them with ease, releasing his own powerful spell in almost the same instant. They both spoke fey words, attack words that were far beyond anything I'd learned, sending energy and light back and forth across the room.

It appeared they were almost equally matched, until Asher broke from the magic fight, taking two steps forward to slam his fist into Connor's face.

Connor flew back across the room.

I rushed toward Asher, only to be hauled back by an invisible force. My back hit the wall behind us and I groaned. Asher's gaze locked on me, and there was lethality in that one look. I barely recognized him as the same supe who had been sexily flirting with me at the party. This Asher was scary.

"I've got you, Maddi," he rumbled. "I won't let him touch you again."

Asher's scent, sun and light and fresh air, increased as his power started to fill the courtyard room. It was both palpable and visible. Blue and white wisps sent my hair flying as wind whipped around us. Connor was back on his feet, standing in front of me, his power still holding me to the wall. The immobility wasn't freaking me out like it should have been though, because I was focused on Asher.

"Enough!"

The voice was female and unfamiliar. Straining to see who it was, I could barely move an inch, which had my fear finally kicking in. The heat in the center of my body expanded in response, and for once I pushed harder at it, needing to be at full strength.

"How is this possible?" Asher said, his voice dead of emotion. Which made me look closer at the woman. No emotion was usually when Asher was feeling things the strongest.

She stepped out of the shadows. The first thing I noticed was her black hair with a silvery sheen, and then when she turned her green eyes on me, I gasped.

The woman looked just like Asher. Did he have a sister?

"Nice to see you again, son," she said, as emotionless as him.



Son? What in...? How in the fuck?

"There's a lot you don't understand," she said. "I promise to tell you everything soon. But first we need to take Maddison to the Greek Islands. We need her help to bring our Atlantis back."

Asher's power increased, and the woman looked pained as she tried to push forward. "Son, you know this is the right thing," she shouted. "We have no other option."

"You're not my mother." Asher snarled, his voice lashing out like lightning, striking each of us in the room. "She died a long time ago. I don't know how you're mimicking her face, but you do not have me fooled." His chest rumbled. "If you don't want me to destroy this building and everyone in it, then Maddison will be returned, unharmed, to the Academy, and you will never involve her in any of your or the Arterians' schemes again."

His fake mother gasped, long and dramatic, and I could tell by her expression that she really was shocked. "How ... how can you say that? You would damn us all to save her?"

I wanted to sob as Asher's eyes caught mine. "I would," he said. "You and everyone else."

Connor, who was fighting his way through Asher's power, reached the woman's side. "Is there another way?" he asked.

She paused, a thoughtful look crossing her cold features. She was as beautiful as Asher, there was no denying it, but the fire that lived inside of him was missing from her.

She was cold and broken.

Could it be an imposter wearing her skin? That was kind of horrific to consider.

"There's one other way, which Asher knows about." She waved a hand at him. "I left him the letter, which he chose to ignore. He has ignored his destiny."

Asher scoffed. "Most people would ignore a letter from their dead mother."

She smirked; she knew she had him.

"Asher..." I managed to choke out. The hold was making it hard to speak. "Don't. Please."

His dark eyes met mine, and what I saw there scared me: resignation.

Pushing at my power, I struggled to get free, because I couldn't let him do this. Whatever his evil fake mother wanted, I had to stop him.



But I couldn't break the shield over my powers; it was too strong, and again, I was not enough.

A sob escaped me as Asher and I exchanged another long look. "I agree to your terms," he said, never turning from me. Some of his power faded from the room.

"No!" I cried, my chest aching. I didn't know what he'd agreed to, but I knew it was bad and he'd done it to save me.

"It's agreed," the woman said. "You will follow me to the islands of your birth and help us to bring about the rise of Atlantis."

Asher nodded. "I will, but what I said stands as well. You must allow Maddi to return safely to the Academy, and you will never go near her again."

The woman's eyes met mine, and she waved her hand, releasing the magical hold binding me. *Bitch*. It had been her holding me all along.

As I tumbled to the floor, Asher crossed to me, leaving Connor and the woman near the door. Reaching down, he gently lifted me, careful of my ribs and other injuries. He seemed to know exactly where I was hurt as he held me close. "Go with the guys," he said softly, leaning forward. "Don't leave the Academy until I return. Promise me. Whoever is impersonating my mother, they're strong. I don't trust them to keep their word." His voice went even lower. "I have a plan to eliminate the threat, but I need to know you're safe first. Work with me on this."

Tears were already filling my eyes. "No, Asher. Please, don't do this. We can deal with it together."

His lips pressed to mine and I cried hot silent tears as our bittersweet kiss lasted for many long moments. "Find the library," he whispered as he pulled back. "Find it, and then figure out what your part is in all of this. Figure out how to channel your power. I think it'll come in handy soon."

A hand landed on his shoulder. "Your time is up," the woman said. "Let your little friend go home and we will take our first and most important step forward as a family."

Her eyes locked with mine and I could see the promise there. She was not done with me. But whatever she wanted from Asher was worth postponing my part of her big plan.

Asher shrugged her off. He stroked his thumb across my cheek one last time, his expression heavy and filled with regret.

"Ash," I cried as she pulled him away.



His face once again emotionless, he turned to leave with her.

Connor joined them, looking unhappy. His eyes kept darting back to me, and I knew it was bothering him to leave me behind. He truly believed I was the daughter of a god.

My heart broke when they were almost out of the room. Sobs burst free. Asher paused, his shoulders tense as he turned back. I took a step closer.

“Don’t do this,” I begged. “I’m not worth it.” I couldn’t live if he sacrificed himself to save me.

He shook his head, a sad smile tilting his lips. “You’re worth so much more than this,” he said.

I took another step forward, but they had disappeared. I crossed my arms over my chest as more sobs ripped from me. So much of what just happened I didn’t understand. All I knew for certain was that Asher was gone.

Asher had been my friend for months. My lover for a night. And in my heart for a long time.

Now he was gone.

“Maddi!” Rone’s rumbling roar broke through my grief. I lifted my head to see the giant vampire rushing through the doorway.

He moved in a flash, his body blurring with speed as he dashed toward me. I was crying too hard to say anything. All I could do was choke out indecipherable words.

He reached out, wrapping his huge hands around my biceps, pulling me closer. The icy vampire energy hit me, and strangely enough, it made me feel the tiniest bit better.

“What happened?” he pressed, staring down at me. “I was held by some sort of spell, and it only just released me.”

I tried again. “Asher,” I managed to get out.

Rone shook his head, and then he shocked the shit out of me when he yanked me right into his body and ... hugged me. Held me close to his chest.

“Holy fuck,” he growled in my ear. “You scared the ever-living gods out of me.”

More tears fell, because this was the first time I’d ever heard or seen Rone express any sort of softer emotion toward me, and I couldn’t even enjoy it because of Asher.

He set me gently on my feet, icy blue eyes looking me over. “Are you hurt?” he asked. Then he looked around. “Where is Ash?”

I shook my head, throat tight. Rone’s expression turned into a grim



specter of death. Not mine this time, thankfully; his rage was for another. “That stupid bastard sacrificed himself to save you, didn’t he?”

I nodded, anger crushing the pain, giving me a surge of energy. “Yes.” I cleared my throat. “Some woman that looked exactly like his mother was here, but Ash said she was a fake. She said she had left him a letter about his destiny, which he said he had ignored. It was Asher or me, and he took the bullet for us both.”

My ramblings barely made sense, but Rone seemed to understand. “We’ll get him back, don’t you worry. And rest assured that Asher can look after himself.”

He was so much calmer than I expected; it seemed he had a lot of faith in Asher and his powers. But he hadn’t seen that woman ... hadn’t felt her slimy, evil presence. She’d known that wearing Asher’s mom’s face was a surefire way to throw the Atlantean off-balance. She was devious and sneaky, and I was more than a little worried.

Rone led me toward the door. “The others are securing the perimeter. It was lucky that Axl put a tracker on you, because we wouldn’t have easily found you this fast otherwise.”

In normal circumstances I’d have been ultra pissed that someone put a tracker on me without my permission, but in this situation I really didn’t have a place to be angry. I should have expected it. Axl had trackers on all of his friends because he couldn’t sleep at night unless he knew they were safe. I’d clearly made the cut there, which was sweet. In a creepy stalker way.

“What do we do about Asher?” I asked, continuing to pick at the patch on my energy. The moment my power was released, I was following that bitch and ripping her to pieces.

Rone’s face was once again awash in hard, angry lines. “Did he say anything to you?”

I looked around to make sure we were alone and leaned in close. “He said he had a plan to eliminate the threat, and that he wanted us to find the library. We need to figure out how I fit into all of this. He thinks we’ll need my powers soon.”

He’d also told me not to leave the Academy until he returned, but I wasn’t sharing that, because if they went after Asher, I was going as well. End of story.

“For now we follow his advice,” Rone said seriously. “Asher does not make any decision lightly, and he will have a plan. If we don’t stick to it, we



might fuck it up for him.”

*No! No! NO!* my body and mind screamed. I wanted them to go after Asher right now. Every second he spent with those people were seconds he was in trouble and out of my life.

Tonight I’d felt a much deeper emotion from Asher. The way he’d touched me at the dance. His face when he sacrificed himself for me. I was finally realizing that he felt the same way I did. Both of us had just been too stubborn and stupid to explore it. There was no way I was letting him disappear now.

But there was nothing I could do on my own. I needed all of their help to stand a chance.

“I’ll agree to the plan for now,” I said slowly. “We go back to the school and find the library.” My powers being freed was a new top priority for me. “Have we heard about the possible location in the demi-fey school?”

Rone shook his head. “We haven’t received permission yet. The demi-fey princeps is making it difficult. I think it’s time for us to put a little pressure on him.”

Yes. It was fucking time.



Rone remained protective as we entered a small living area. I'd been right about the courtyard; the rest of the house was very different to where I'd been held. It was painted in warm colors, and there was a large fireplace and wood floors.

There were bodies everywhere, some dressed in the full Arterian assassin outfit, others in normal street clothing, but I counted at least twenty bodies. "Are they all dead?" I asked, not sure I cared if they were. These assholes were part of some stupid fucking conspiracy that got me kidnapped and Asher taken from us.

"Some are dead," Rone said, sounding as uncaring as I felt. "Some are just knocked out or badly injured. Asher kind of lost his shit when they wouldn't return you."

My eyes burned but I didn't cry again. There would be time for that later. Time when I dealt with the torrent of raging emotions inside of me. For now, I was moving forward, following Asher's plan.

Movement near the door had me on alert, but it was only Calen and Jesse. "Maddi babe!" Calen said, hurrying forward. He swept me up in his arms and I allowed him to hug me.

"I'm okay," I said softly. "You arrived in time."

When he set me down, Jesse moved forward, his eyes darker than normal. His expression was...

I choked back a sob.

"Mads, sweetheart," he growled. "Don't fucking do that to us again."

I laugh-sobbed this time, and then he was hugging me. He held on longer than usual, and I tried to find comfort in this hug. It didn't work. The arms I really wanted around me were not here, and I had no idea when I'd see him



again.

Axl rushed in the door then, and I pulled back from Jesse just in time to get the strongest hug of all. “It worked!” He sounded breathless. “I knew if I pinpointed this location via satellite and worked out the exact numbers of hostiles inside, we could take them down.”

“It almost worked,” I said, chest aching.

Rone wasted no time telling them exactly what had happened with me and Asher. I filled in any details he had missed, and then Axl started calculating shit on his notepad that he always carried. “The magical tracker on Asher tells me that he’s still in the country,” he said. “We can catch him. If we leave now.”

My eyes locked on Axl’s face like it was a water mirage in the desert.

“No,” Rone said, dashing my hope. “Asher asked Maddison to give him time. And to find the library. He must know that simply rescuing him won’t put an end to whatever is going on. We have to do what he’s asked.”

“Well,” I finally said, unable to stand there a moment longer. “Let’s do exactly what Asher asked. Let’s find this fucking library.”

The car ride back to the Academy passed in a blur. I spent most of it dozing on Jesse’s shoulder, listening to them discuss how they were going to tackle the demi-fey problem. It was early morning, the sun rising steadily as we traveled. It felt like years since I was kidnapped, but it had only been about eight hours.

As the first impressive view of the Academy came into sight, I sat a little straighter. I loved that we were back home, but coming *home* without Asher was a punch in the gut. “What are we going to do about Kate and Chellie?”

I hadn’t forgotten those two bitches. Just thinking about them made me furious on a level that I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt before. The only other person to come close was Asher’s fake mother. She had made it to the top of my list.

“Asher already took care of them,” Calen said with a snort from the front seat. “They’re not going to be bothering you.”

“He killed them?” I asked, not sure if that should surprise me or not. I’d seen the carnage back at the hunting lodge.

“Worse,” Jesse said, his chest shaking as he laughed. “Death would have ended their suffering immediately. Instead, with the help of Princeps Jones, who he contacted as we were racing after you, he’s set everything in motion to ruin them. Their social status in our world is gone, their money, their



families high paying job, and as an extra fun punishment, they might both face charges in the supernatural prison system.”

I gaped at him, and he smiled. “Yep. Asher has a lot of power and influence. His family was rich and connected, and they left him everything. He controls their corporation.”

“Locke Industries employs thousands of supes,” Axl added. “Including Kate and Chellie’s families.”

I hadn’t known that. I mean, sure, I knew they were rich—the cars and house and clothes and all the rest told me that, but that was next-level money.

“Why did they do it?” I asked, realizing I’d never stopped to wonder why.

Jesse tensed at my side. “They’ve been looking for a way to get rid of you. The Arterians approached them with the opportunity—rumors of your enemies reached far and wide.”

“They didn’t know what the Arterians wanted with you or where they took you,” Axl added. “All they cared about was getting rid of you.”

“You better be done with that bitch now, Jess,” Rone growled from the front. “No fucking more.”

“Or *no more fucking*, to be more accurate,” Calen joked, then shut up when multiple glares turned his way.

Jesse’s rumbling chest was so very leonine that I half expected to find a furry beast next to me. “As far as I’m concerned, Chellie no longer exists in my world. She’s changed so much since falling in with the Clovers. I don’t even recognize her these days.”

I reached out and took his hand, because I sensed that at one point or another he’d cared for that psycho. Maybe she really hadn’t always been insane. I’d known a lot of people who had turned unrecognizable, either from drugs, alcohol, or the people they brought into their life.

I wasn’t going to forgive her anytime soon, but I could extend sympathy to Jesse. He deserved it. The car circled around the Academy, crossing over a bridge. There were more guards than ever stationed there, and we had to undergo a car search, and then a magical scan, to ensure we were not concealing anyone or any weapons.

“Princeps Jones tripled security the moment you were taken,” Axl told me, spinning in his seat. “Too little, too late...”

Rone shook his head. “The Arterians can get to anyone. We have to be vigilant. Our priorities are keeping an eye on Maddison and finding the library. Asher is relying on us, so while he’s keeping those bastards busy, we



will do our part.”

I was beyond determined to find the library.

When we pulled into their garage and got out of the car, two familiar figures were standing just outside.

“Larissa,” I cried, running to her. Her face was puffy, eyes red as tears streaked from them.

“Holy shit, Maddi,” she whispered against my shoulder. “I’ve never been so scared in my entire life.”

I hadn’t either. Being drugged and kidnapped was the basis for ninety percent of women’s nightmares. I was no exception.

“I’m okay, though,” I said, pulling back. “The guys found me in time.”

“Where’s Asher?” Princeps Jones asked, his sharp eyes noticing the missing member of our group.

Rone told him the story, and when he was finished I spoke up. “The library ... we can’t wait on that any longer. We need permission to access the demi-fey lands or we will go without permission.”

Princeps Jones pursed his lips. “Princeps Linstar keeps pushing me along the chain of command, all of the protocol bullshit. If you have a liaison there who would speak for you, I might be able to make something happen faster.”

“What about Mossie?” I said in a rush.

I hadn’t forgotten that little green goblin. He was my first “real” view of the supernatural world. It had been hard to ignore something so fantastical, even when my mind refused to accept what Ilia was saying.

Princeps Jones paused to consider. “Mossie is actually friends with their princeps. They’re old family friends. He might be exactly who you need.” He straightened, nodding. “I’ll make it happen. Stand by for more information.”

He focused on me, tilting his head to the side in a confused manner. “Your energy feels different,” he finally said. “Your scent has changed as well.”

Uh, awkward.

Larissa nodded. “Yes. I noticed it when I hugged you. I think the block on your power is shifting.”

Princeps Jones nodded as well. “Yes. I will contact Louis.”

I didn’t bother to tell them that I had been picking at the block since I got kidnapped. I mean, at the time it had seemed like a “what do I have to lose?” sort of situation, but now maybe it was better that my crazy power didn’t explode all over the place. I was playing the long game to save Asher.



Princeps Jones turned to leave; Larissa lingered for a few more minutes. "Will you be in your room later?" she asked.

I was about to nod when Jesse said, "No."

"Maddison stays here with us now," Rone added. "For her safety."

I crossed my arms. "If you guys insist on that, then I insist on Larissa and Ilia being able to visit whenever they want."

The four exchanged a glance, their expressions hard to read.

Rone turned back, his eyes lingering on my tiny friend for a beat longer than was necessary. "We agree."

Larissa sagged forward. "Okay, great. I'm going to go and get some sleep now. I've been up all night. But I'll be back later to see how you are."

She hugged me tightly, before following the same path as her father.

I was exhausted too, but I was also angry, half-naked in my torn-up purple dress, and covered in all sorts of crap. I needed a shower, sleep, and then information. In that order.

"Someone better show me to my room," I said softly.

We walked back into the garage, using that entrance to get inside the house, which was already as familiar to me as my room back in the magic wing. "The spare room isn't actually set up for long-term sleeping," Axl said when we were all inside, the doors magically sealed shut. He had some wicked security system set up on the entire place. "But ... I think Asher would want you to take his room."

My immediate reaction was to shake my head. I wasn't okay staying there without checking with him.

"He would definitely want you in there," Jesse pushed. "And for now, it's the most comfortable place we can put you."

"You were going to move me to the spare room last time," I pointed out, feeling like they were trying to manipulate me somehow. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Nope," Calen said, sliding in next to me. "It's just got a lounge-bed thing in there, and you'll definitely hate it after a few nights. Let me show you to Asher's room."

I wanted to protest. I really wanted to, but I was just too exhausted for another fight, so I let him lead me. "I'll grab your clothes and personal belongings from the dorm," Axl shouted after me. "Just get some rest."

I waved a hand and followed Calen. Asher's room was in the back part of the house, and it was just as huge as I remembered. I hadn't paid much



attention last time, but now I really noticed the soft ocean colors of the décor. The greens and blues soothed my soul.

“Asher has a private bathroom, so double bonus of not having to share with us,” Calen told me. His normally smartass grin was nowhere to be seen. “We’re going to get him back, Maddi. You haven’t known us that long, but you’ll come to see, we never leave a brother behind.”

I nodded, my throat so tight I almost couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to cry in front of them though; I needed to be alone.

Calen left me, the door closing softly after him.

And I broke.

I broke into a million pieces, dropping to my knees, my hands fisting in the carpet as I silently sobbed my heart out, letting myself grieve. For that moment, I felt all the fear and anger and pain. I let myself worry and cry and miss Asher.

His scent was everywhere around me, but he was not here.

Eventually I pulled myself together and dragged my tired ass into his bathroom. Like the other bathroom I’d used here, Asher had a huge shower, with five showerheads and a ton of other cool gadgets that I didn’t bother to figure out. I just stripped off my clothes, washed myself with his bodywash, and climbed out some time later, cleaner but still emotionally wrecked. Naked, I entered his wardrobe and grabbed a soft shirt from his drawers. It was large enough to cover me while I slept. Hopefully my clothes would be here by the time I woke.

Crawling into Asher’s bed, I snuggled under his impossibly soft sheets. They were silky and warm, contrasting to the cool air. My eyes fluttered shut, and I forced all the dark thoughts into a box. A box I would examine tomorrow. For now, I needed sleep.

I drifted off to the scent of Asher surrounding me.



The next two months passed by in slow agonizing increments. Parents' Day came and went, and I met Calen's and Jesse's parents, and they were both wonderful. Jesse's left us with a ton of wine, and Calen's parents proved Axl right with their baking skills. They'd brought us French apple-almond cake, Le Fraisier French strawberry cake, and a bunch of profiteroles. By the time they left, I considered asking them if they were open to adopting any new children.

The rest of my days were spent trying to unravel the mystery of the missing library, going over the notes Asher had on his desk, reading Atlantean texts in the hopes of finding something that the guys had missed, and generally not sleeping, eating, or functioning because I was angry and sad and pissed and furious and devastated all at once.

The excavated spot in the demi-fey territory was behind their school, and even with all of the pushing and Mossie coming in to bat for us, we only just got permission today to finally check it out. The one thing that stopped me from just taking the permission myself was apparently they had some sort of scary-ass creatures patrolling their grounds at night, and they were the eat first, ask questions later kinda scary.

"It's been over two months," I complained to Jesse as both of us finished another lap of the pool. I'd taken to daily swims, going for hours in an attempt to quieten my mind. "Asher has been with them for two fucking months and we're no closer to finding him or the library."

I slammed my palms into the water, sending an arc over the edge. "I mean, how do I even know he's still alive?"

"He is," Jesse reminded me. "Axl is tracking his movements, and they're still consistent. Whatever they're doing, it's deep in the ocean, and it's a daily



back and forth.”

Small comfort.

“Guys, come on,” Rone shouted from the back porch. “The official form with the final permission just came through.”

I was out of the pool so fast that Jesse got a decent splash of water in the face from my wake. Rushing into my—Asher’s—room, I changed into my clothes—which now hung next to his in the wardrobe—and was out with the guys in a minute. “Let’s do this,” I said, my voice higher than usual.

Mossie met us on the path between the academies. Demi-fey Academy was smaller than ours, housing about a thousand students. Mossie was a proud tour guide, pointing out their different facilities.

“This is the main arena,” he said, his green skin shimmering lightly, “where we have our weekly fight tournaments.”

It was a large stone stadium; through the open entrances, I could see an arena and lots of chairs for spectators.

“So the area this library is supposedly in...” I said, because right now that was literally the only area of this Academy I was interested in. “Is it clear? Or is there a building on it now?”

I was clutching a map in my hands. It was a rough sketch of both academies and was somewhat correct, but there were a few things out of place from my Academy, which made me worry that things had changed since Asher’s family had hidden their library.

“It’s clear,” Mossie confirmed. “I scouted it this morning but couldn’t see anything. I know that Princeps Linstar has also been looking, which is why it took him so long to grant permission.”

“He was hoping to find it first,” Axl said, nodding like he understood. “Priceless information would be held in those walls.”

Fucking asshole had delayed us for months. It was not good enough, and he better hope he wasn’t here today or he would hear all about it. I had a lot of pissed-off to get out of my system. My power surged, even though Louis had only repatched it yesterday. He’d told me that we were running out of time, and that the next patch would probably be my last. Which meant I would have to stop school and searching for the library to learn how to control my power.

*When it rains, it pours.* That saying was much more real to me these days. I mean, I wanted my powers free; I needed them for Asher. But I also didn’t have time to stop for months and train to control them. Always with the catch



twenty-twos.

We reached the spot unscathed, passing a lot of interesting students along the way. I wanted to ask questions, I wanted to know what the different demi-fey were, but they were questions for later. We had started to learn about some of them in class. Race Morphology had briefly covered mermaids, trolls, and gargoyles so far, and we had a lot more still to come. Seeing them firsthand though, that was definitely better than learning about them from a textbook.

“This is where the perimeter starts,” Mossie said, waving his hand around. In front of us was a forest, behind us an outdoor workout arena with gym-like machines scattered about, but nothing I recognized. We only had general coordinates on the map, about a half-mile radius.

“Do we dig?” I asked. There was no building to search, and if they were trying to keep something secret, building an underground facility made the most sense.

“I’ll see if I can feel it first,” Rone said, striding forward. “My senses are strong, and I might be able to scent the Atlantean magic.”

I crossed fingers on both hands, because I wasn’t sure how much longer I could wait to get Asher back. I was unraveling. Not sleeping, barely eating, and only just managing to get my ass to class. I felt like I was failing him, and he would never have failed me.

Rone took his time, pressing his hands and then nose to the ground in different parts, but found nothing. Jesse shifted into his lion and sniffed around as well, but he didn’t scent anything either. Axl took the map and all of Asher’s notes off me again and started to calculate things.

I strolled off on my own, using the small flickers of magic I had access to, hoping to sense something. But I didn’t get even a single buzz of magic in the area. It was almost like we were in a magic dead zone.

We explored for a few more hours before deciding we’d come back tomorrow. With shovels. When we got back to the house, Larissa and Ilia were waiting out front for me. I hugged them both before opening the front door to wave them in.

“You guys want a drink?” I said, feeling a little down. “I could use a drink.”

Three hours and ten bottles of wine later, we were swimming naked in the pool. I couldn’t even remember whose idea it was, but it was the best fucking idea ever.



“I’ve missed you,” Ilia said, her voice dreamy. “Ever since the whole kidnap thing, you’ve been distant. Which I totally get,” she rushed to say, “totally totally ... totally. It’s just ... nice to have your fun ass back for a night.”

I shook my head, floating on my back, boobs and vag flashing the entire world because I just didn’t give a fuck anymore. “I’m a fucking mess,” I said, eyes locked on the stars above. The summer weather was perfect here, and I couldn’t remember the last time the barrier was used above the commons, even with its random weather changes. It was definitely more volatile in winter. “We’re no closer to finding Asher, and every single day he’s gone it’s like acid eating away at my soul. I’m not sure how much longer I can be patient.”

How did I help him on my own though? If anything, me tracking him down might cause him more issues. I’d been powerless when the Arterians took me. And no library meant no idea who I was or how to control my stupid powers.

Maybe I should demand my powers be released. Deal with the fallout, whatever happened.

“Maddi, seriously,” Calen shouted, his voice muffled like he was holding his head in his hands. “Can you put some damn clothes on. You’re giving the rest of us blue balls.”

I flipped him off, but he kind of had a point, so I at least stopped floating, submerging my body under the water. Larissa looked nervous as the guys appeared, all of them entering the pool area to check on me, as they did every night when they came back from working out or classes.

“Are you all naked?” Rone asked, his voice a mixture of anger and resignation.

“Naked as the day we were born,” Ilia said, shimmying in the water. Her nipples were barely covered, and with the advanced sight of most supes, the dark and water didn’t really hide anything.

“Fantastic,” Calen groaned again. “They’re naked and drunk.”

He started muttering, and it sounded a lot like *Asher is going to kill me*, but I couldn’t really be sure. Just the thought of Asher was enough to sober me up, and I reached for the towel on the side, lifting it as I stepped up out of the water, wrapping it around me as I went.

“I don’t want to get out yet,” Ilia complained, lazily gliding across the pool. “You guys have the best water in the entire Academy. The entire



world!”

I shot her a wonky smile. “Stay,” I said. “Enjoy yourself. I’m going to do some more research.”

I could see the indecision on their faces, and it wasn’t until Calen, thankfully dressed in shorts, dive-bombed in and splashed water all over them that they got caught up in a water fight. I hurried away, sad and sober once more.

The next morning when I stumbled out of bed, I was surprised to see Ilia and Calen wrapped around each other on the couch. My friend was thankfully clothed now. I went in search of Larissa, only to run into Rone as he opened his bedroom door. On the other side was a familiar head of blond hair, and I raised an eyebrow at him.

He shook his head before gently shutting the door. “It’s not what you think. I just made sure she was safe because she was very drunk by the end of the night.”

Rone had a caring side, one he hid behind his gruffness. The angry, untrusting side of him was not an act—he was a product of his upbringing—but this was not the first time I’d seen him act in a protective manner toward Larissa. I was starting to think he had a little bit of a thing for her.

I didn’t push him on it, because he wasn’t the type to deal well with that, but Larissa was definitely going to spill the next time we were alone.

Jesse cooked us breakfast, which was a nice surprise—we usually had food delivered from the Academy. His pancakes were probably the best I’d ever had, so I wasn’t complaining.

“So, back to the Demi-fey Academy today?” I asked, shoveling in one bite after another, craving the food after all the wine and swimming.

Jesse, Axl, and Rone shook their heads. “Today is Supernatural Day,” Axl said, and I leaned forward because I loved it when he got that teacher tone in his voice. “This date is the first official record of supernaturals crossing from Faerie—outside of the Atlanteans—and is our celebration of that.”

I smiled. “That’s cool. I remember someone mentioning it in history class the other day. What happens?”

“Celebrations all day,” Rone said. “Starting with a race competition event in some of the practical magic buildings.”

Despite my annoyance over missing another day to search for the library, Supernatural Day turned out to be a hell of a lot of fun. Magic users



dominated in the first three events, but vampires kicked our ass in the scavenger hunt and race through the forest. At the end of the day, there was a huge magical light display, which was akin to fireworks but much more creative. I saw dragons and unicorns and waterfalls explode across the sky, and I could feel the energy on my skin, raising goosebumps.

All day though, there had been a dark cloud hanging over our heads, and I was looking forward to July 21 next year.

That Supernatural Day, Asher would be back with us.

I was determined.



“*T*his patch won’t hold much longer,” Louis said as the heat under his hands increased. “You’re wearing yourself thin, not just with school, but with everything else you’re taking on.”

I barely answered him, my mood alternating between “angry” and “emotional wreck.” Another two months had passed since Supernatural Day, and we had dug out half of the demi-fey school, to no avail. I was starting to think the library was a figment of their imaginations and we had been wasting time.

“What if I don’t want it to hold?” I said. This wasn’t the first time I asked, but it was the first time I was going to really push. “I need my powers now. I need to be able to use them.”

Louis tilted back so he could see my face clearly. “Are you having trouble in class?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said, my tone monotonous. “Classes are pretty easy. I’ve had a lot of time to study.”

I was actually topping two classes, Sword and Sorcery and Race Morphology, which was a first for me, but I couldn’t even be excited about it.

“I need to go after Asher. I can’t live like this any longer.”

Louis knew bits and pieces, and he had promised me that he would check out the situation, but there was stuff going on back in America that was taking up a lot of his time, events that could affect all supes on a global scale, and I understood why that had to take precedence.

“I understand your need, Maddi, I really do. But we know Asher is still relatively unharmed and moving around. So I would ask for you to hold out a little longer.” My heart sank. “I will make the time for you, I promise. But



your powers ... this is not going to be a quick twenty-minute lesson. It could take months to teach you how to contain that energy.”

I swallowed roughly. *Months*. “We need to find the library. Asher was so sure that the answers to my power would be there.”

Louis pushed a hand through his blond hair. “I traced Asher’s power and I found their home base, but there was no one there. They’re always under the water.”

I nodded. “It’s Atlantis,” I said softly. “They’re trying to bring it back, help it rise, but ... Asher must not be able to give them what they want.”

Or he was deliberately not giving it to them. But how long could he stall them for? Time had to be running out for him.

“What happens if Atlantis rises?” I asked softly, one of the many questions keeping me awake at night.

Louis took his time to answer. “No one knows for sure,” he said. “Those that believe Sonaris, in a fit of anger, sank Atlantis as a way to punish his people also believe he used so much of his power to topple the great nation that he also trapped himself. Those supes believe that if they rise again, so will Sonaris.”

“And he will destroy us all?”

Louis shrugged. “Powerful gods are unpredictable. We have no idea what he will do, but for now it’s best we don’t find out.”

“Am I his daughter?” That question wouldn’t leave me, no matter how much I laughed about it in my head.

Louis’s lips pressed into a firm line, his eyes soft. “I don’t know,” he admitted, sounding like that bothered him. “Your blood ... your energy, it’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen or felt in this world. But I don’t know any gods and can’t give you a definite answer. Maybe when your power is fully released I will know more.”

“Is that part of the real reason you’re holding back on releasing it? Because of these unknowns?”

He nodded. “Ever since you told me what the Arterian said, I’ve been worried that maybe even I won’t be able to contain your power. Not once it’s fully released. When it burst with Asher, that was just a small hole that grew larger as more power poured from it, but I got there before it was completely free.”

If Louis couldn’t control it, then no one could. He was the strongest of all magic users in the world.



“I will figure out the best location to take you when I release it. I will help you, even if I have to bring in a few of my friends. Or Tee, my mate. She’s very powerful as well, and she really wants to meet you.”

I smiled, having heard a lot about his true mate. She sounded amazing. “I’d love to meet her.”

Louis nodded. “I’ll make it happen. For now, I have to go back and deal with America’s dramas. You keep an eye on Asher’s energy, search for the library, and if either of those things change, contact me.”

I nodded, accepting that was my only option.

The rest of the week, exams took my focus; I studied every night with Axl. When it was over, I felt relieved and excited ... and broken.

“Are you sleeping?” Jesse asked me as I flopped onto the couch with him. “Because—and please don’t take this the wrong way—you look like crap.”

“Smokin’ hot crap,” Calen said, entering the room, bottles of beer and wine in his hands. “You’re always hot, Maddi, it’s just that the circles under your eyes have circles now.”

I chuckled, dropping my head back with a groan. “I’m not sleeping well, that’s for sure. This new nightmare has decided to appear...” My nightmares before had mostly been about the kidnapping. But the last few nights... “It’s Asher, and he’s trapped under the water, strung up between these massive stone pillars. They bleed him, trying to activate a stone that’s above his head. It feels so real.”

Jesse and Calen went motionless, which was a tell for these guys.

“It’s really happening, isn’t it?” I whispered. Part of me knew or sensed it was, because it was so vivid.

“It might be,” Jesse said grimly. “Like Axl said, the reason they’ve been moving so much is because they can’t find the secret slipstream entrances that lead to the underground pocket that holds Atlantis. They move all the time.”

“Atlantis moves?” I asked, trying to figure out how that was possible.

Jesse shook his head. “No, the entrances move. They’re magically designed to do so, or so the legend says. But ... your dream. It sounds like they’ve locked on to it and Asher is fulfilling his promise.”

I was on my feet, my head shaking. “No,” I said, looking between them. “No. NO! I refuse to accept this. If you saw the dream—” I broke off as panic overwhelmed me.

It was one thing when Asher was fine and active, moving with them, his



energy strong. But this... I choked on a sob, my clenched fists pressing to my chest as I fought to breathe.

"We can't keep delaying. We're never going to find that library. We just have to go and get Asher back. We can take them on, I know we can."

Calen was nodding with me, Jesse looked less sure. "We should talk to the others tonight," he finally said. "It makes me uneasy to go against Ash's orders, because we could easily screw up whatever he has going on. But ... I'm about fucking done with him being gone like this, and now that they've found the entrance. We might have no other choice."

Bottom line for all of us: we'd rather die in hell with Asher than be safe while he suffered.

By the time Axl and Rone arrived back at the house, I was dressed and ready to leave. That's how sure I was we would leave this very night to track Asher down.

"We have to go," Rone said as I stalked into the kitchen, anger driving my steps to be loud stomps. "Fuck waiting for the library. Asher needs us."

Yes. Fuck yes and all that jazz.

"I'm already calculating, and it will take us about twenty hours to drive, five hours if we can use the school jet." Axl was noting everything in his book. "That's to get us to the island where their base camp is. We'll have to go by boat after that."

"Princips Jones won't lend us the jet," Jesse said with an irate shake of his head. "I've already run the plan past him, and he wants us to wait. He said that we have no idea what we're walking into and dragging Maddi into a situation like that is irresponsible."

Four sets of eyes turned to find me. "Don't even think about leaving me behind," I said. "I won't stay here. I don't care what I have to do to get loose."

"It is a big risk for you," Rone said, his voice softer. "They wanted you first, and if whatever they're trying is not working with Asher, then you'll be their next target."

I didn't even bother to reply. They knew my stubborn ass by now. They knew that when I set my mind to something, I never wavered on it. Just like Jesse with his order of food placement, I was set in my personality quirks.

"We'll take Asher's jet," Jesse decided, and there was no more arguing after that. "I'll contact the pilots and see when they can head out."

Something inside my chest relaxed; I was able to breathe again. Even



though this would be dangerous, I didn't care. We were finally doing something, and that was the only thing that mattered.

A knock at the door startled me, and I was closest, so I got there first to open it. Ilia and Larissa were on the other side, and I remembered we were supposed to go to another school dance tonight. One to celebrate the end of exams.

They both looked over my all-black outfit: skinny jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and black boots. "Are we in stealth mode?" Ilia asked, chuckling.

She looked like a million bucks, dressed in a tight black dress that made the red of her lips and hair pop nicely. Her five-inch heels lengthened her legs, so she was basically as tall as Calen. Speaking of, Calen was on his feet in a heartbeat, stalking toward Ilia.

Those two had had a bit of a thing going on since the night in the pool. Ilia insisted it was just fucking, both of them scratching an itch. It was easy because we all spent so much time together, but ... I wasn't sure that was strictly true. There was a spark there, something that spoke of more than just animal attraction. Maybe not the same as what she'd had with Josh, but ... it was definitely not nothing.

He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, and I heard whispers as Ilia draped herself across him. She was so sexy that he looked dumbstruck every time.

Larissa was extra gorgeous tonight too, her blond hair back in a braid, showcasing the delicate beauty of her face. "What's going on?" she asked. She'd probably scented the nerves and determination in the room.

I tried to smile. "We're going after Asher."

She swallowed hard, her throat working. "But ... Dad ... he said that you..."

He'd clearly told her we'd asked to use the jet.

Rone was at my back. I knew his scent and energy really well now. I could tell all the guys apart without even having to look at them. "We have no choice," he said to Larissa, the two of them close friends without all the sex of Ilia and Calen.

Larissa shook her head. "It's too dangerous." She rubbed at her eyes, smudging the makeup. "I can't lose any of you."

She whispered the last part, but we all heard. Rone tried to reassure her: "We'll be careful, but we can't leave him there any longer. His circumstances have changed, and we've let him handle this on his own for too long



already.”

She took a long moment to answer. “I understand,” she finally said. “Asher would do the same for any of you. You should save him. I just... Let me come.”

That was immediately shot down by everyone. “It’s too dangerous,” Rone told her, a bite in his voice. He rarely used that tone with Larissa; he was gentle with her in ways he wasn’t with anyone else, but this got him fired up.

“If Maddi is going, we’re going,” Ilia said stubbornly, finally coming up for air from Calen.

Axl, who was still calculating something on his paper, lifted his head then. “Maddi is one of us. Part of this world. She’s also connected to Asher somehow. This is her fight, but you two, you would be liabilities.”

Ilia took offense, even though Axl was merely stating the facts as he saw them. “I’ve never been a fucking liability to anyone, Axl,” she snapped; her anger brought a shocked look to his face. “Not one person or supe. So you better switch your argument up right now.”

Axl might be a buff, over-six-feet-tall Atlantean genius, but under Ilia’s ire he looked like a child chastised by his mother. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just, you’re not Atlantean. We might have to swim deep, and our bodies can adjust, but yours cannot, among other things. I know you’re a very strong and well-trained fighter. And your attack magic is second to none. But this is a different set of circumstances.”

Ilia *was* very good at what she did. That was the reason she had the job of tracking and returning lost supes. She was almost always an asset. Except under the water, she would be exactly as Axl had said: a liability.

Red flared across her high cheekbones, and Calen must have seen the signs of her impending explosion, because he started gently rubbing his hand over her back—one of the very things that told me this was more than just sex between them. He cared.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked, her voice controlled.

“The jet leaves in two hours,” Jesse said, walking back in the room. “I sent a message through to them. But I have no idea how long we’ll be gone.”

There was literally no way for us to know. We might find Asher in five hours, or it might be five days.

She looked at me for a long time, then shook her head. “I don’t like this at all. But I do understand that this is Atlantean business and I’m not going to be that useful.”



Larissa sniffled at her side, shoulders curving forward. I wrapped my arms around them both. “I love you guys,” I said.

Ilia growled as she squeezed me tighter. “Don’t start that bullshit. You’re coming back okay. You’re more powerful than you believe. You can do this.”

Larissa sniffled louder. “I’m so scared for you all. You’re walking into a danger you know nothing about, and I’m afraid I’ll lose someone. You’re family to me now.”

Vampires could be very cold with anyone outside of their immediate family, especially when they’d suffered the sort of trauma Larissa had in losing her mother. She’d closed herself off for years—until this year, when everything had changed. And now we were heading straight into the sort of danger that supes didn’t return from.

I understood her tears.

We hugged for a long time, and then Ilia and Larissa pulled themselves together and took off to distract Princeps Jones so that he wouldn’t delay us.



Asher's plane was nothing like I expected. It was fancy: thick plush carpet; gold inlaid fittings; Locke Industries insignias across the wall panels; and huge captain's chairs made from leather so soft and buttery I was almost certain it was magic. And the best part: it had a specially designed engine and electronic panel that was protected from our energy, so hopefully it wouldn't fall out of the sky.

When we were all buckled in and ready to go, the pilot announced that we were about to taxi down the runway. Nerves took hold of me. Flying had always felt foreign, like we were never meant to soar in the clouds. Discovering I was supernatural didn't change that feeling. If anything, I was more certain that Atlanteans should not fly. We were built to swim.

Jesse, who was the closest to me, reached out to take my hand. I clung to him with almost embarrassing strength, but it didn't seem to bother him. The initial takeoff threw me back in my chair a little, and my ears felt funny as we rose in the air, but after another five or so minutes, my fear faded, and I was more fascinated with the clouds out the window.

"Incredible," I breathed, my hand pressing against the glass, like I could reach out and run my hands through the fluffiness.

"I love all your firsts," Axl said, shooting me an odd look. "You're the best thing that happened to the five of us. We needed..." I waited with bated breath for what he was going to say. "You," he finished. "We needed you in our lives."

"It's true," Calen added from the chair behind Jesse.

"Yep," Jesse chimed in.

Rone didn't say anything, but he shot me his version of a smile, and my heart fluttered at this sweet moment. No one had ever said anything like that



to me before. I'd never been needed or wanted. I'd never been anything.

"Thank you," I whispered, reaching out to squeeze Axl's hand, and then Jesse's. Jesse had been my rock these last few months as we searched for the library and I dealt with my powers and school, both of us missing Asher with a desperation that was borderline obsessive. I wasn't sure I would have made it through without him.

Without them all.

I must have dozed off at some point, waking up as we came in to land. Axl was still doing his tracking thing, making sure we were on the right path. "How does it work?" I asked, watching as he filled the page with symbols and numbers and small graphs.

"I tag your energy with mine," he said softly, his forehead creased in concentration. He was only giving me half his attention. "Then I receive coordinates when I tap into the spell."

Wonder filled me at the possibilities magic could bring. "Can everyone do that?" I asked.

Calen snorted. "Nope. It's advanced magic that Axl shouldn't be playing with. But he's never been great at waiting for his age to catch up with his magical abilities."

Axl finally lifted his head, dark smudges under his eyes. The tracking was tiring on his energy, that much I already knew. "Tyson Compass managed to become a sorcerer last year, and he's pretty much the same age as us. Sure, the quads are famous, and he has no peer, but still ... it's doable. You just have to exercise your magical muscles."

I had no idea who Tyson Compass was, or the quads, but I believed that Axl could do anything he set his mind to. I'd already seen him do amazing stuff.

The plane really started to descend now, and I spun in my chair, tightening my belt and checking the small tray table again, making sure it was locked in place. "You okay, sweetheart?" Jesse said, looking relaxed across from me.

I sent him a tense smile. "Yes. I'm good."

We were that much closer to Asher. I was fucking amazing.

The plane landed smoothly, and when we exited via a set of stairs, I stared around, trying to take it all in. It was late, but I could see bits and pieces of the sparse landscape. It was warm as well, the breezes carrying a hint of salt in them. We couldn't be more than a few miles from the ocean,



the body of water calling to me.

“We will find a room for the night,” Rone said, “and then come morning we will track Asher.”

I didn’t argue, though the thought of waiting one more night almost drove me crazy. I understood, though. We had to take a boat to wherever they were, and heading out in the dark wasn’t smart or safe.

A large black car was waiting for us, a driver ready to take us into the small village nearby. There were not a lot of accommodations available, but Axl had managed to secure us two rooms in a three-level, white-walled, grecian villa. There were two double beds in each room—we were going to have to share.

“It’s just one night,” Axl said pragmatically. “Let’s get some sleep and head out at first light. There is a speedboat with our names on it waiting at a nearby dock.”

I sank down onto one of the beds. “I’m going to share with Maddi,” Jesse said. “And I think Rone should take the other bed. We need to keep her safe now that we’re out of the Academy.”

No one disagreed. “We’ll be next door,” Calen said.

I tried not to worry about sharing a bed with Jesse, and it would be nice to sleep soundly because I wasn’t worried about being kidnapped.

We’d all brought a small bag with us, and I used the bathroom first, changing into a tank and soft pj pants. I brushed out my hair, braiding it to keep it out of my face. Jesse went in right after me, and I was already in the bed, squished to one side when he returned. I was across from Rone, his bed two feet away. Having these two on either side of me was about as safe as a girl could be.

We were quiet for an extended time, but I sensed none of us were asleep. I was actually afraid to fall into a deep sleep, because then the dreams would come.

“Why do you think I’m having the dreams?” I asked. “I mean, if they’re real ... that’s got to be odd, right? Me seeing Asher’s situation...”

“We don’t know,” Rone said gruffly. “Asher mentioned ... from the first time he caught you in his arms ... that there was a connection between you. We thought at first that it was because of your strong Atlantean blood and the shield over your power.”

“But then you broke that,” Jesse added, “and the connection never went away.”



“It didn’t,” I admitted. “I mean, at first I thought it was just because Asher is insanely hot.”

There was a moment of silence and then both guys laughed. I had to laugh too. “But it’s not,” I said, sobering. “It’s something more. Deeper. A connection that extends beyond the normal sexual attraction and chemistry.”

“You guys definitely have that,” Rone said with a low groan. “Trust those of us who had to be around while you two tried to avoid it.”

It was true. That night of the party we’d finally woken up to ourselves, only to have everything go to fucking shit around us.

Eventually exhaustion caught up to me, and I let my eyes drift closed.



“MADDI!” Gentle hands wrapped across my shoulder and I choked out a sob, stuck half in the dreamscape and half in reality. “Sweetheart, come on, wake up.”

I finally managed to pry my eyes open, seeing the stark white hotel walls. Jesse had his arms around me. Rone was somewhere close by too, the icy bite of his energy hitting my skin. “The dream?” he asked, deep voice close to my shoulder.

I nodded, trying to clear my throat and wipe the tears from my cheeks. “It’s getting worse. That bitch pretending to be his mother is unhinged. If what I’m seeing is true, we have to find him today or we might be too late.”

“I don’t understand why he’s even indulging this,” Jesse bit out, anger tightening his hands on me. “He’s the strongest of any Atlantean, even those recruited into the Arterians. That’s why they’ve been trying for years to get him.”

“He’s stronger than his parents?”

Jesse nodded, early morning light washing across his dark features. “Asher’s a lot stronger. We don’t know why, but somehow his genetics threw back to purer lines. He’s the first to be able to control water the way he does. He is virtually unstoppable in the water.”

“And out of it,” Rone said drily.

I remembered all of the bodies he’d dropped at the cabin.

“Maybe he was stalling them and now he’s too weak to fight back,” I guessed. Because the Asher I saw in my dreams was suffering.

Jesse growled, the lion taking over. “Either way, we’re going to find him today and end this.”

My breathing and heart rate eventually slowed to a normal level, and



since I needed to pee, and the sunlight was starting to make itself known, I climbed out from between the two guys and made my way to the bathroom.

“Was there anything new in the dream?” Rone asked, just before I shut the door.

I paused, my hand tightening on the frame as images flashed my way. “Yeah. There was a woman, one I hadn’t seen before. She was touching him, whispering in his ear while he was ... was restrained and bleeding.”

I wanted to kill her and his fake mother, who had stood by watching.

“Asher didn’t look conscious,” I choked out. Spinning around, I slammed the door shut, sinking back against it, covering my mouth to silence the sobs.



We were a somber but determined group as we made our way along cobbled paths to a small harbor. There was a multitude of fancy boats docked there, and I guessed this little town was popular as a vacation spot. I didn't blame them. The weather was gorgeous, perfect blue skies, with just a few fat, white fluffy clouds in the distance. Crystal-clear waters. Islands dotted about in the distance.

The man we got our boat from spoke only Greek. Which wasn't an issue, because Axl fluently conversed like he'd been raised right here in this village.

"How many languages do you all speak?" I asked, standing back with the other three.

"Axl speaks ... shit, like ten at least," Calen said. "Asher the same. The rest of us lesser supes ... about six."

And I spoke one. Story of my underachieving life.

The sun was high and hot when we hit the water; I had to shade my eyes against the glare.

Calen, who was apparently a bit of a boat enthusiast in his spare time, took the control, or whatever it was called. It looked a little like a steering wheel. Axl sat beside him, still navigating.

I alternated my time in staring out across the perfect view around me and wringing my fingers in my lap. The dream still had me shaken, and the thought that we were heading into a dangerous, unknown situation was not at all reassuring. But I was more than willing to risk my life for Asher. He'd already proven he would do the same for me.

As the mainland disappeared from sight, my stomach rolled, and I felt slightly disoriented. Which lasted all of five minutes before the soothing lull



of the water snapped me out of it. This was my happy place, the salty water, and the swell as it rocked our boat. Unlike the plane, I didn't fear anything out here.

Anything except the bastards who had taken Asher.

When I couldn't stand the silence any longer, I leaned toward Axl. "How's the tracking going?"

He nodded a few times, still staring at his numbers. "Good. They've stopped moving, and we're getting closer, so we have to move with caution."

Calen immediately cut the powerful engines, and I was wondering if we'd have to row ... or maybe swim to the location. Then I felt a whisper of magic and we started to move again.

*Right.* One day magic would be my first thought.

"Slow," Axl said, his voice low.

The magic across my skin lessened and we glided until we almost came to a halt.

Axl stood, and leaning over the side of the boat stared down in the water. It was still clear, but at this depth the visibility wasn't as good as in the shallows. "He was here," Axl murmured, his eyes still darting about the water like he could find what he was looking for that way. "I think the entrance is somewhere close by. We're going to have to go below."

My first thought was to freak out, because holding my breath for five, even ten minutes, was great, but it wasn't enough to get us into the deep.

My worry must have been written across my face, because Jesse let out a low laugh. "I guess Ash never got to this part of your water magic. All Atlanteans, no matter race, can manipulate water. We bring the oxygen to surround our mouths, almost like scuba gear. It takes practice though, which you don't have, so you'll have to stay close to one of us."

Water Magic classes had been canceled when Asher disappeared. We had barely gotten to anything there.

"Calen is the best after Asher," Axl said, still half distracted. "He has the strength to bring oxygen to both of them."

I raised an eyebrow at Calen. "Look at you, being the overachiever."

Calen shrugged, but his grin held pride. "I'll keep you safe."

"I know."

I had no doubt.

Calen dropped the anchor, and we ditched all unnecessary clothing. I was in a black bikini with a tank over the top. "Are we sure this isn't stupid?" I



said, hanging on the edge of the boat. Jesse was already in the water, his dark hair slicked back. Calen was beside me, Axl doing one last calculation. “I mean, we have no idea what waits for us down there, and Asher might not even be there, since the entrance moves, and—” I cut myself off, the sound of my high-pitched voice irritating me.

“Asher is here,” Rone said, sounding sure. “And we have let this go on too long. It’s been months. I’m ready for some action.”

*Asher.* I just had to think about him. About his dark hair and beautiful eyes that could be green one minute and then filled with blazing silver in the next instant. His perfect face. If anyone was born of a god, it was Asher, not me.

“I’m ready,” I said, determination filling me. It washed away the fear, allowed me to straighten my spine and push myself off the edge of the boat, sinking under the cool water.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, allowing the stress to fade as the world above disappeared. I’d been swimming a lot lately, and my body had adjusted in more ways than one. My eyesight could switch to underwater vision almost instantly, allowing the world to come into clear focus. My skin adjusted to the cooler temperatures with ease, and I found it comfortable and easy to move about. I couldn’t breathe underwater, of course, but I wasn’t panicked when holding my breath. I could hold it for a long time.

Calen came into sight, his right hand extended to me, and I drifted closer to take it. Even under the water I felt his magic swirling around us, and I pushed at the heat in my center, bringing my own limited magic out to play. I didn’t know how to create an oxygen bubble around my mouth, but I liked having my magic close by just in case.

Calen’s power licked up my arm, and a small space formed around my mouth. I gulped in some oxygen, and then some more, testing it out. It continued to fill with new air, even as we started to swim deeper.

Calen’s hold on my hand remained strong, his magic running up my arm. We swam in slow, unhurried movements, keeping an eye on our surroundings. I really hoped one of the guys knew how to find the boat ... or even the surface again, because once we reached a certain depth, it would be very hard to tell top from bottom.

My eyes continued to adjust, and my nerves faded further as more of the silence enveloped me. There was something soothing about being under here, in a way I’d never felt before. Like ... as the pressure increased, it decreased



my worries. The five of us stayed close, and I felt another level of comfort to have my friends with me.

Movement to our right had Calen slowing, and I tightened my grip on his hand, waiting for it to appear again. It was a turtle, large and majestic, slowly gliding through the water, and I watched with fascination as it drifted past. There was a ton of fish around as well, but our magic was keeping them out of our personal space.

It was while we watched that turtle that the Arterians appeared. Silently surrounding us, wearing their leather outfits again, goggles firmly in place along with a breathing device that attached to the back of their suits.

The guys reacted, and for once so did I. I'd had nine months of training at the Academy now; I knew a thing or two about directing energy. Heating the water around my free hand with the simple *firenze* command, I shot it at the closest assassin, aiming not for their face but for the tube that connected the breathing device. My aim was good, and since they'd been more worried about Calen—dismissing me as powerless—I severed the cord and pelted him with boiling water.

The Arterian's mouth formed a screaming shape, and he sent out spirals of magic in an attempt to counter my boiling water. Calen tugged me away; we needed to help the others. They were evenly matched at the moment, and when we joined the fight, coming up behind them, it turned the tables to our advantage.

But then more Arterians arrived. A dozen. Then three dozen. They surrounded us five deep, and their magic circled us like a whirlpool, whipping sea creatures and seaweed around.

One moved to the front, entering the circle where we were all waiting, back to back, prepared to fight for our lives. With a wave of his hand, the mask faded off his face and I was looking at Connor. He waved for me to follow him.

I hesitated. On one hand, they were trained assassins who probably wanted to kill us. On the other hand, we wanted to go to Asher, so following him might be our best option.

Otherwise, we could be swimming around here for fucking days looking for him.

I moved forward, but Calen gripped me harder and jerked me back. I shook my head at them, the five of us doing the sort of eye exchange they usually did without me.



I had a very good idea what each of them was saying though.

*We have to find Asher*, I silently reminded them.

*It's too dangerous*, Jesse's eyes were definitely saying.

*We're already surrounded, there's really no other option.* Axl was practical, and he agreed with me.

*I'll follow the majority* was for sure Calen's thought. *But if you want to fight, I'm down for a fight.*

Rone was giving me nothing, his expression shuttered, as it often was.

This time when I moved toward Connor, all of the guys followed, staying in our small group, watching each other's backs. The Arterians around Connor came to attention as we got closer. They'd taken us with sheer numbers, but in an even fight we might have had a chance.

Connor turned, waving an arm to show us the way, and then he started to swim. He moved much faster than we had been, and I struggled to keep up, definitely not at the level of the Arterians.

I made a vow that if we made it through all of this alive, got Asher back, and returned to the school, I was going to swim every damn day and strengthen my underwater skills. Along with my magical ones.

Connor took us deeper and deeper, and every time I thought I'd finally reached the edge of my ability to withstand the cold and pressure and the limit of my underwater sight, my body would adjust. I was starting to wonder if I had a limit, if any of us with Atlantean blood did.

Connor's rapid swimming finally started to slow. The floor came into view—well, not so much the floor as a huge shelf of rocks and caves that spanned for miles. He slowly drifted closer, his hands skimming across the top of one rock face. When we were almost on top of him, he paused, his hands digging into a small crack in the stone. It was so small I probably wouldn't have noticed it under normal circumstances.

Intense heat, filled with energy and magic, burst up from the crevice, and I jerked back. Connor swam back in a rush, and after a minute the heat faded, but the energy did not. The rocks started to move, and I blinked a few times to make sure I was seeing correctly. Maybe I was starting to run out of oxygen or something, because it looked a lot like a hole was opening in the middle of a solid rock face.

I turned to Calen, and he tugged me closer, wrapping his free arm around me to keep me away from Connor. We were all on high alert. When the split in the rocks was large enough to fit one or two full-grown men—even supe-



sized men—Connor swam right into the opening, and like he'd been sucked through, disappeared in an instant.

*The slipstream.*

The Arterians pushed forward, forcing us to follow the same path as Connor. Jesse moved past us and swam in first. The moment his arms, head, and shoulders entered, the rest of him disappeared as quickly as Connor had. Calen pulled me forward next, spinning me in his arms and indicating that I should hold on around his neck. In no position to argue, I plastered myself to him, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. There was a split second where our hands parted and his energy faltered—water crashed into my lips and I managed to shut them just in time—but as soon as we were touching again, his power returned to me. I closed my eyes as he swam us forward, and then we were off.

Something grabbed hold of us, like the strongest current in the world; it zipped us down so fast that I let out a little shriek. Needing to see the dangers before they hit me, I opened my eyes and watched as we zoomed along a tunnel, almost like a slide in a water park. Whatever held us was beyond our power to control, and I hoped there wasn't a rock wall at the end, because if there was we would definitely go splat.

The downward trajectory leveled out, and I closed my eyes again and buried my face in Calen's chest. He held me even tighter, one of his hands rubbing soothingly along my back. The moment the force released us, I opened my eyes again and gasped. It would have sounded loud and shocked if anyone could hear it, because *What the fuck am I seeing?*

We were in a circular room, one with a table and chairs in the center, chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and two huge bronze statues standing on either end towering over the entire thing.

I spun toward Calen, who was staring around, his brow creased. *Atlantis?* I mouthed. He shook his head, but the crease didn't fade from his forehead. He held my hand again, and we swam away from the tunnel entrance, searching for Jesse.

As we passed the long table, I noticed that it appeared to be made of wood, but there was not a mark or crustacean on it. It was in perfect condition, as were all of the velvet padded chairs, which made no fucking sense because this shit had to have been under the water for thousands of years.

It took us about five minutes to find the exit from this room—on the



ceiling, just behind the chandelier. Our heads broke the surface of that opening, and suddenly we had air. I sucked in a deep breath, finally able to breathe on my own. Calen's power left my body, and he released my hand.

"What the hell is this place?" I whispered.

Calen's voice was filled with awe. "The underground caves of Atlantis," he whispered.

Where we had popped up, somehow there was no water, even though we were still deep under the ocean. There was a long series of caves that extended far back into the distance. Water-filled crevices were dotted about, like the one we'd just popped up from, but for the most part it was dry and filled with oxygen.

Calen and I swam to the closest ledge, pulling ourselves out. "Stay close," he said softly, taking his first step into the cave system.

I stayed as close as I could without actually climbing onto his back, my eyes darting around as I tried to take it all in. The cave was long and without adornment. There was very little light in here, so Calen sent up a mage light to help.

He was shirtless, I was pantsless, it was freezing under here, and for once I was feeling the cold. I wrapped my arms around myself. When we stepped out of the first cave tunnel, we found Jesse standing there wearing just his shorts as well, along with a pissed-off expression. I rushed forward, wrapping my arms around him.

"Thank God you're okay," I murmured as he squeezed me tightly, lifting my feet off the ground before he set me down again. "Where's Connor?" I asked, looking around.

Connor stepped into view; he'd been hiding behind some huge pillars that I hadn't even noticed until now. *Whoa*. Those two pillars were the first of many. There were long rows of them, all hand carved into the stone, each etched with glittering rocks and gold veins.

"This way," Connor said, turning to walk between the pillars. It was almost like they lined the path. The path ... to Atlantis?

"What about the others?" Calen said shortly. "We're not leaving until our brothers arrive."

Connor made a low rumbling noise. "They'll be right behind you. The Arterians have strict instructions not to hurt you."

I snorted. "Yep, that was very obvious when they immediately started to fight us."



Connor shook his head. “You attacked them. They were just defending themselves. We do not kill our blood brothers without reason. There are too few of us left.”

I guess that was a possibility, but still. My experience with this group didn’t inspire any sort of trust in them.

He must have known we were serious, because Connor didn’t argue, he just leaned back on a pillar to wait. A minute later, Rone walked into view, followed by Axl. Not caring to wait for the Arterians, I stomped toward Connor. “Let’s go,” I said shortly. “Take us to Asher.”

He grimaced. “Gladly. The madness has to end now. I’ve been waiting for you to come here so you’d set the right tides in motion.”

I glared at his back, those broad shoulders defined in the leather outfit. “What does that mean?” I asked. “Is Asher okay?”

Connor stiffened, and I tried not to panic, but it was insanely difficult. All the worst-case scenarios were running through my head. “He’s alive” was all he said, which was not at all reassuring.

The pillars led us to a doorway in the rocks, and when we stepped through I choked back a gasp. There was a waterfall ... under the damn ocean.

I had so many questions.

We stood on a precipice, the water below rough and tumultuous. A narrow bridge spanned out across it, leading to the waterfall. As we walked closer, I tried to find the top of the waterfall, but it was too huge. I also couldn’t see either end of it—it spanned out for miles across the caves. Following Connor along the narrow walkway, more pillars came into sight, and it was here that the landscape of my dream finally came to light.

Then I saw Asher. It took all of my control not to shove Connor into the raging waters below, because I almost couldn’t stop myself from running to him. In the dreams it had appeared that Asher was being held under the water, but it was the cascading waterfall behind him that made it appear so, drenching his body, which was secured between two of the pillars right at the base of the torrent.

Six supes were standing around him, and they turned toward us, almost in sync. My entire focus was on Asher, though, who had his arms and legs tied to all four corners of the pillars. His chest was bare, a pair of black shorts his only covering. His hair was longer than the last time I saw him, hanging across his forehead as his head drooped forward. His chest was moving, that



much I could see, but I hardly felt a sliver of his energy.

*No!* Were we too late?



Asher's fake mother stormed toward us. I'd never bothered to ask for her name, because we all knew that this was not Ash's real mom. "About damn time you got here," she snapped. "I couldn't break the promise, but breaking Asher seems to have done the trick anyway."

It was very difficult not to punch her in the face.

I swallowed hard, my breath coming out in gasps as I fought to control my anger. "I'm going to kill you," I said, meaning those words more than I'd meant anything else in my life. "What have you done to Asher?"

She smiled at me, a genuine smile, completely unconcerned that I'd threatened to kill her. "Turns out he doesn't have enough power to open the gates. I gave him his chance, but maybe the famous Asher is not quite as strong as we believed. Which is why I need you."

"Who the fuck are you? Why are you wearing his mother's body?"

She threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, I love your assertiveness. I guess there's no point in lying any longer. You are correct, I'm not the original owner of this body. I chose this form because I believed it would entice Asher to join my cause. I didn't anticipate that he would spend his life figuring out how to stay under the radar, or that he would team up with powerful friends who have helped him evade me. I eventually contacted him, sent my note, and he ignored me. His own damn mother." She laughed again, running a hand along her lacy blue dress. It barely concealed anything, and I could clearly see her nipples through it.

"Why didn't you just take him?" They'd already proven they didn't have an issue with kidnapping.

She shrugged. "His mother only agreed to me utilizing her DNA if I



promised to not force Asher's hand. It was her one stipulation before I killed her. She probably hoped she was buying him time. I agreed, and therefore had to wait for him to choose to come of his own free will. And there was nothing that could make him ... until you, my dear."

"Who are you, then?" I pushed.

She smiled even brighter. "I'm Shera, goddess of the seas, bonded soul to Sonaris."

I gasped, which was covered when Jesse let out a rumbling, humorless laugh. "Now it all makes sense. Gods have to honor their promises. One of your many rules. You've broken a lot of other rules though, Shera. You're lucky the hell lands are not calling for your soul."

She tsked. "I bend the rules, not break them. It's the reason I had to ask permission for Asher's mother's DNA, and yes, you are right ... when I promised to not take Asher against his will, I had to stick with it."

Gods had rules? Why the hell did I not know this? It suddenly seemed very important to find out what all of those rules were now that we were playing in their world.

"Shera?" Axl said suddenly, like he'd finally figured out a puzzle. "I remember your name now. It took me a while because you were such a minor deity that to call yourself a goddess of the sea is pretty insulting to all the *real* gods out there."

Her eyes flashed, and the smile faded from her face as she bitch-stared him. "Watch your mouth. You contain such a small trace of power from Atlantis that you're almost useless to me."

Jesse rumbled, the lion inside making itself known as he defended his brother.

Shera shocked me then as she stepped aside, gesturing for the others to do so as well. "Let them go to Asher. They have a chance to save his life, but the only way they can do that is if they fill the life stone in his center."

"A life stone," Axl said, his eyes darting between her and Asher. "What did you tie his life to?"

She stepped closer, her gait smooth and sensual. "You tell me, genius know-it-all."

"The gate of Atlantis," he said immediately, not even having to think about it.

She nodded. "Yes. I even had another descendant from the royal line here to add her power and blood to Asher's, but it didn't budge the spell holding



the gate.”

Axl crossed his arms, his face showing the least amount of animation that I’d ever seen. “That spell was cast by a god. There’s none with the power to counter that.”

“That’s not true,” Connor said. “I’ve been telling you all since the start. Maddison is born of Sonaris.”

Shera’s laugh sounded desperate and maniacal. “There is no way Sonaris fathered a child with a mortal. I refuse to believe it. I was willing to indulge you because I agree that she’s a powerful Atlantean descendent, but she’s not his.” Her expression hardened. “Never mention that lie to me again.”

Connor didn’t flinch under her unwavering stare, but he also didn’t push the agenda any further. Shera focused on us again. “Go to him. It’s your last chance. If you want to save Asher, you’ll have to risk opening the gate.”

I didn’t care. I was done waiting.

Running as fast as my rubbery legs would carry me, I slipped past Shera and her minions and beelined straight for Asher. My brain and body were screaming, panic flooding me. He wasn’t moving. I couldn’t see his chest rising and falling.

Water smashed against me as I got closer, the force of the waterfall devastating even at a distance, which had to mean it was almost crushing Asher. He was right under it.

I whispered the word to activate a basic shield, something we’d recently learned, which gave me a little protection against the water. When I was a few feet from Asher, I drank in every hard line of him. How could he still look so perfect? His skin a healthy-looking bronze, his muscles strong. If it wasn’t for the fact that he was hanging lifelessly, and I could barely feel his energy, I wouldn’t have known anything was wrong with him. My hands trembled as I pressed them against his chest. He was suspended off the ground and already so tall—this was the highest I could reach.

His body was cold to the touch, directly contrasting to the hot tears streaking my face. “Asher, can you hear me?” I asked, trying to figure out how they kept him contained.

“They’re magical manacles,” Jesse said at my side; all of the guys had arrived by now. “We can’t break them without breaking Asher.”

“Where’s the stone?” Axl cut in. I’d forgotten about the soul stone. “If we can bring Asher back to full strength, he’ll be able to break free.”

Rone sounded pissed. “He’s only like this because he allowed them to



access his energy.”

They pushed forward, all of them protected by the same sort of magical shield as mine while they searched for the stone. “Call me if you find it,” I shouted to them, the roar of water loud. “I’ll search further back here.”

I didn’t want to let Asher out of my sight, but there was something calling me back in the waterfall, a sensation tugging at the energy inside of me, urging me toward it.

*Is that the stone?*

The water as it crashed around me was almost deafening. I had to use more of my limited magic, funnelling it into the shield. The water fell in a thick, heavy sheet, and as I pushed my way through, visibility was limited.

When I was completely immersed, and there was no sound but crashing water, I finally reached the *other side*, where the call was the strongest.

It was a wall, as long and tall as the waterfall, and carved into the smooth marble were elaborate symbols and images. I recognized them from Asher’s notes. It was definitely Atlantean writing. Was this the wall around the city?

Whatever wanted me, it was inside this wall.

I pressed my hand to it, and that feeling of being called increased.

Something heavy slammed into me from behind, breaking through my shield and cracking my head against the wall. I got the shield back up straight away, because the water could crush me here, but I couldn’t see who had hit me.

“You’re my last chance,” Shera whispered, coming at my left side and forcing me back into the wall. “You must be the key. While your idiot friends are distracted with Asher, I will bleed you to release your power.”

“No,” I cried, right before she broke my fragile shield again and stabbed me.

I hadn’t seen the blade, or her hand, as it moved super-fast. She plunged it right into my gut and I screamed; the pain almost had me blacking out. My shield fell completely as she twisted the blade, whispering something dark. Words slithered across her tongue. Words I did not understand, but they cracked my body wide open.

The heat in my center exploded, close to what had happened the day with Asher, but with five times the force. The only way to describe it was like those images of atomic bombs exploding and the shockwave force that followed. Shera held her ground for twenty seconds, maybe longer, before she was whipped away from me, her screams echoing in my ears with the



roar of the thunder.

I collapsed, both hands wrapped around the blade in my belly as energy continued to expel from my body. It was too much for me to handle; she had released it too fast, and the vessel could not handle the onslaught. I dragged myself forward, not knowing where I was heading but knowing I needed something, the water still beating across me, though not crushing me like I'd expected. If anything, it felt like the only thing keeping me alive.

"Help me," I whispered, half dragging myself on the side without a blade in it.

The water started to rush around me in unusual swivels and swirls until it formed a barrier under me and pushed me along the rocks. When I was probably about halfway through the waterfall, a shadow fell over me, and I flinched.

"Maddi!" I hadn't heard his voice in so long. For a second I thought I was dying and this was my last nirvana moment before darkness. Asher's arms wrapped around me; he lifted me with ease. "Hang on, baby, I've got you."

"My power," I mumbled. "It will kill you."

He shook his head. "Your power saved me. It broke my chains and restored my energy. And now I need to get you into the water; it will help."

I had no idea what he was talking about. All I could do was continue to ride out my energy release, hoping like hell I wasn't about to be exploded into a million pieces. Asher ran, ignoring the waterfall that still surrounded us. He might have had a shield, I had no idea, but whatever he was doing, he was not slow or weak any longer.

He pulled me closer, and the moment we burst from the falls he threw us into the rough ocean that surrounded the bridge. Water closed over our heads, tossing us around for a moment until Asher sank deeper. When we were completely engulfed, some of the echoing screams in my head faded. The pain was less intense, and my power release slowed. The water seemed to absorb my energy, lessening the fissuring of energy in my center.

Asher's face came into view; he was watching me intently, like he was afraid to look away.

I felt the same way.

It was fucking insane, considering I was stabbed and bleeding power and fluids everywhere, but I moved to be closer to him. I pressed my lips to his. It was a need that went beyond normal hormones. I was driven by something I couldn't explain. A primal force.



Fire erupted between us, not literally, but it felt like it could be. The energy exploded, crashing out in a visible wave, and then the world started to rumble around us. This time for real.

I pulled back from Asher, my eyes wide as I looked around. *What the...?*

This was either an underground earthquake or we'd done exactly what Shera wanted.

*Atlantis was rising.*

My power had finally stopped its insane eruption and was now swirling strongly inside of me, and as I registered this, I noticed something else: *I was breathing underwater.* No bubble over my mouth. No shield around my head. I was just breathing as if I was above the water, and it didn't even seem weird to me.

Asher was doing the same thing, and I stopped to think if I'd noticed him do that before. Was it something all strong Atlantean bloodlines could do once they tapped into their powers?

The blade in my gut distracted me when it started to glow. The Atlantean symbols etched across it turned a shimmering aqua color, mixing with my blood.

Asher tugged on my hand, and I rose to the surface with him, both of us popping our heads up to see rocks sliding from the caves into the water. I coughed up water, my lungs expelling the liquid so I could breathe oxygen again.

Asher did the same.

"How?" I said when I could finally speak. "We can breathe water?"

Asher nodded. "Yes. It's something I've kept secret for many years, because it's not a power any Atlantean descendant has these days."

Holy fuck.

"And that explosion when we kissed? The ground is still shaking?"

He tugged me so that we were moving through the choppy water toward the lowest cliff.

"I don't know what that was," he said, voice deep. "But we need to get out of here."

He launched himself out of the water with ease, leaning over to pull me up, careful not to dislodge the blade.

"You're going to have to pull it free," I said when my feet hit the shaking ground.

Asher shook his head. "No, it's Atlantean steel. The wound will bleed



you out. I need to get you back to the Academy right now. The herbalism department has a special tincture that will remove the blade and clot the blood.”

“We’re hours away from the Academy,” I whispered. “I can’t have a blade sticking out my stomach until then.”

It was still hurting me, but it wasn’t as painful as it had been initially. My newly released power was acting like a balm, soothing some of the hurt away. Our attention was forced to the water then as Shera rose from it, and I wondered if she’d been down there searching for us. Or was she doing some other asshole thing under the water? Torturing sea creatures or something.

“It worked,” she shrieked, her body hovering just above the water.

Asher pulled me closer, and I finally noticed that he was bleeding too. His wrists looked like they’d been rubbed raw from those manacles. I gently brushed my fingertips over them, and he tightened his hold on me.

Shera glided closer, her eyes darting between Asher and me. “It was both of you,” she whispered, looking freaky with her hair flying about her face. Her voice had that very deep tone to it again. “The blood of the god children.” She clucked her tongue. “Connor was right.”

Asher pushed me behind him, stepping toward her. “You’re not going to get a chance to find out.” His eyes flashed. “All this time you’ve been trying to break me, I learned of your weakness, Shera. It’s time for my mother’s body to rest with her ancestors.”

I stumbled as the ground rocked again and water started to pour into this area. Asher murmured two words. They sounded short and simple, but they were not familiar to me. Shera screamed the moment he spoke and tried to lower herself into the water again, but Asher held her immobile with his power. A red spot appeared in her chest, spreading across her skin, and she screamed as it consumed her.

I felt Jesse and Rone’s energy a moment before they reached us. They pressed close to my back. Rone’s eyes were black as he took in the blade still hilt-deep in my heaving stomach.

“Mads...” he said softly.

I wanted to reassure him I was okay, but I couldn’t look away from Asher and whatever he was doing to Shera. “Stop!” she screamed. “You need me. I’m the only one who can control hi—”

She was cut off, Asher’s power burning right through her. It was only when Asher stumbled forward that I realized he’d weakened himself greatly



to take her out.

Shera exploded then in a puff of smoke and ash that drifted into the water below. “Is she gone?” I asked, watching the black mist.

Asher nodded. “Yes. The gods who take a vessel have one weakness. Atlantean fire. Funnily enough, it’s a spell that was lost to history long ago, no doubt a deliberate move on the part of Sonaris and the others, but it was here, etched on the wall. It’s taken me months to find the entrance and weeks to translate the words, but I finally figured it out last week.”

I could have cried with relief. We’d all made it just in time.

Asher watched me closely. “I was so weak by the time I did though, I didn’t think I’d get the chance to use it,” he murmured. “I’m glad you ignored my orders and came for me.”

“Yo,” Axl shouted from where he stood on the end of the barely visible bridge. “We got to get out of here. This entire place is about to be crushed under the water.”

Asher scooped me into his arms, somehow not jostling the dagger. The three of them sprinted, and over his shoulder, I watched as large chunks of rock fell, crashing into the rising water. I didn’t want to think about the consequences of what we’d done here—we’d initiated something to do with Atlantis. Maybe it was its rise, I didn’t know for sure, but it was definitely something.

Axl and Calen were waiting for us at the entrance, and Asher took the lead, leading us back along the pillared path. I tried not to think about the heat of his body pressing along mine. I focused on the fact I had a knife in my stomach. Nothing like a mortal wound to cool the hormones. I was also pretty sure it was the only thing keeping my power at bay, because the heat blazing in my center was starting to scare me, but it hadn’t done anything yet.

Asher moved down another cavern we hadn’t been in; it ended in a small circle of deep, dark water. “This is the way out,” Asher said. “It moves fast, and it’s best not to fight the currents. They’re magical portals that allow only Atlanteans to travel to the lost city.”

“What happens if you’re not Atlantean?” Calen asked.

Asher turned to him, and I could have cried as his lips quirked and those dimples came out to play. I’d missed them. “Exactly what you’re imagining.”

Calen flinched, and Axl let out a low whistle. “At least I can confirm that we all have Atlantean blood now.”

I groaned as Asher shifted, the burn of the blade increasing. Asher looked



down with concern. “We need to move fast. The longer the steel absorbs her blood and power, the harder it will be to remove.”

He then stepped into the water hole, holding me close, and we were whooshed along the waterslide, taking us away from the secret caverns of Atlantis and back to the surface.



Because those slipstream entrances changed all the time, we ended up nowhere near our boat, which meant we could literally be miles from our vessel.

“There’s an island this way,” Asher said, pointing into the horizon. “I know there’s equipment there for us to get in touch with the Academy. They’ll open a step-through.”

My energy pulsed inside of me. I was so desperate to get back to my home that I imagined the building in my head. The stone and brick. The ivy-woven pillars and irregular weather patterns. I let myself go there for a moment, because I needed the comfort of home.

The heat spread, and I closed my eyes, too tired and sore to keep fighting.

“Uh, Mads...?” Jesse said, using a tone I hadn’t heard before.

I squinted one eye, not sure what I’d done.

A shimmery step-through was swirling just above the water’s surface. “Did you open that?” I asked, looking at Asher.

He shook his head. “Nope. That was all you.”

I had no idea how I did it, and I wasn’t sure it was safe, but before I could voice that worry, Calen shot himself out of the water and straight into the shimmer.

“Shit,” I cursed. “What if I fucked up and that leads to like ... the moon or some crap?”

Axl shrugged. “The likelihood of the step-through leading somewhere you haven’t been before is very slim. What were you just thinking of?”

“The Academy,” I said. “Wanting to go home.”

Everyone looked relieved. Axl shot me a confident smile. “If you take into account our current circumstances and your thoughts at the time, I’ve



now weighed both sides, and I think the step-through is the safest.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. Having made his mind up, he followed Calen, and then Jesse did as well. Rone hesitated, gesturing for Asher and me to go first.

“What if it closes after I go through?” I asked.

*I mean, how do these things work?*

Rone let out a breath, a low pissed-off sound, but he didn’t argue, sending his huge body into the shimmer. “I’m sorry if I hurt you,” Asher said, dark green eyes destroying me with their glittering intensity.

“It’s okay,” I told him truthfully. “Please just get me home.”

His gaze dropped to the blade and the slow pulse of blood still lighting those Atlantean symbols. “Hold on to me,” he said softly.

I wasn’t quite at the place where I was ready to tell him that there was no way I’d ever let him go again.



THE NEXT MONTH at the Academy was rough. My step-through took us exactly where I’d intended, inside the grounds and everything, which was supposed to be impossible. I was immediately separated from Asher and the guys and sent into a reinforced medical wing in the herbalism rooms. Asher’s tincture was applied to my wound, and over several days the blade slowly slipped out of my skin, until finally I was free.

It took another week of the tincture for the wound to heal, and I was not allowed any direct contact with anyone, even when I could hear Ilia shouting in the hallway outside of my room.

It wasn’t just because of the blade though. It was because of my power. Once the blade was free from my skin, my power grew uncontrollable. I’d already destroyed everything in the room but me.

Asher came every single day—the first day he wasn’t allowed to enter, and he demolished the three rooms around me. Luckily, Jesse and Rone were with him and managed to calm him down before he leveled the entire building. Between the two of us, we were quite the destructive pair.

After that day, Asher still came, but he just sat on the floor outside my door. We couldn’t talk to each other—the magical seal was strong—but I could see him through the glass, and the simple fact of knowing he was there, that we were close, was enough to stop me from losing my mind.

Princeps Jones did his best to keep me abreast of the school’s happenings while providing me with as many books as I could read through a small



enchanted entrance that allowed things in but not out.

Louis made his appearance twenty days after I returned from Atlantis, having been stuck in some sort of scuffle with the American army that had almost exposed all supernaturals to the world.

"I'm so sorry," he said, stopping by my bed. He was the first person I'd been near in almost three weeks, and I found myself a little teary as he sat down beside me.

Isolation was not something I would wish on anyone.

"How are you feeling?" Louis asked. "Your injuries took a long time to heal."

I nodded. "Yes, the blade was Atlantean steel, engraved with powerful symbols. My blood activated it, but I'm good now. Free of pain and fully functional. It's my power that has everyone scared. It's a bit of a volatile, violent mess." I didn't blame the princeps for keeping everyone away from me. I would not survive if I hurt one of my friends. "Please tell me you can block my power again."

Lights exploded around me, shattering glass across the room. That was the fifth time this week. I was now an expert at replacing light bulbs and also at giving myself magical baths.

He wrapped one arm around me in a strong hug. "I'm so glad you're okay. And I'm sorry, Maddi, but I can't block your powers again. They're too strong. That's why I was a little late getting here; I've been trying to figure out a way to help you ease into this level of power. I spoke with a few of the top magical users, and we think we have a short-term solution."

I sniffled. A short-term solution was better than nothing.

Pulling back, I wiped at my eyes. "What's your solution?"

He smiled. "I'll give it to you in a moment, but first ... let's talk. Have they told you anything about Atlantis yet?"

I shook my head. "No one has really been able to communicate with me." Just a few letters and notes sent in by the princeps.

"It's rising," he confirmed. "The process is slow—it has miles of water and tunnels and magical blocks to push through, but there's no doubt that the lock is broken."

"What does that mean?" I asked quietly.

He shrugged. "I have no idea. All we can do is wait and see what this brings about. That land has not stood for thousands of years. There's no way to tell how this will change supes or magic."



“What about humans?” I said drily. “Going to be kind of hard to hide an island rising from the sea.”

Louis chuckled. “We’re setting up shields and diversions around the area. No human should discover the secret, even if they’re flying above.”

He straightened and clapped his hands together. “Before we worry about that, let’s deal with your power.”

He asked me a bunch of questions, noting the ways my energy had changed now that it was released. “It used to feel like a warm spot in my center,” I told him, pressing my hands to my stomach, right over the scar that I’d always carry from the Atlantean blade. “But now it’s an inferno. I have to actively concentrate on not spilling power everywhere, and if my emotions are riled at all, it...” *I lose all control*. “If your solution doesn’t work, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to leave this room.”

Louis wrapped an arm around me again. “The thing with your power is that it’s very elemental in nature. I spoke with Asher, and we both agree that you are built for water. In water your power would be easily controllable. Here on land, not so much.”

“You said you could teach me,” I reminded him, trying not to sound as desperate as I felt.

He nodded. “And I will. But neither of us have months right now to disappear. The world is changing at a rapid rate, and we’re going to be needed. Soon. My solution should allow you to finish your school year and give me time to deal with what’s happening back home. Otherwise, we’ll all have much bigger problems than a powerful Atlantean.”

Louis lifted his hand. Dangling in it was a blue swirly pendant shaped like a wave, with jagged edges. “It took six sorcerers to forge this pendant,” he said slowly. “It’s the strongest magical amulet that I’ve ever seen in my years. It’s infused with water and designed to absorb and disperse your energy.”

Reaching out, I slowly took the long silver chain attached to it. “This is my short-term solution,” Louis said as I lifted it over my head, letting it fall down to rest against my chest. “Believe it or not, your powers are still growing, unfurling their wings, which were clipped long ago.”

I shuddered at the thought, not happy to be this powerful. It was too much. The pendant worked immediately; the heat lessened inside of me. A feeling of control came over my energy. I understood what Louis was saying: I’d still have to be careful, but this would help me control the power.



Louis was watching me closely, assessing my energy with whatever magical sight he possessed. “It’s working,” he said, looking pleased.

Turning myself fully in his direction, I decided to be blunt. “Do you know if I’m Atlantean now? Am I the daughter of a god?”

Louis stood, his beautiful face creasing into a smile. “You’re definitely Atlantean. Your power flows like the tides of the sea. And ... the god thing ... does it matter? Would it change who you are and how you feel? You might very well be the last daughter of the queen and a god, I can’t tell, but you’re still the same Maddison you’ve always been. Your parentage does not define you.”

I had one answer, the other still unknown, but I found myself somewhat satisfied anyway. Louis reached the exit and turned back to smile at me. “Ready to return to the world, Maddison James?”

I pretty much flew out the door.



I found Asher in the pool, his muscled frame cutting through the water with angry slices. My heart was fluttering like crazy as I stood on the edge and watched him power along—his head remained down, not a single breath taken.

“He’s been swimming for days,” a low voice said from behind me. I turned to find Axl there, his expression shuttered, his eyes wide and shiny as he stared at me. “Whenever he’s not sitting with you, he’s swimming. All of us have been.”

“I’m sorry, Ax,” I said softly, knowing that our separation had been hard on all of us.

He wrapped his arms around me and I sank against my friend. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” Axl said. “The last three weeks have been hell.”

I thought that I’d cried myself out during my isolation, and still my eyes burned. A splash behind us had me spinning around, Axl all but forgotten as a naked Asher stalked toward me.

It was the first time I’d gotten a chance to see all of him, and the sight had my mouth dry and knees weak in the same instance.

“Ash,” I breathed, my heart thundering in my chest.

He hunted me across the wooden deck of the pool and scooped me into his arms. I wrapped my legs around him and oddly enough, it almost felt like more of my energy settled inside. Between Asher and the pendant Louis gave me, I might just figure out how to keep this power at bay.

Our lips crashed together in a kiss that almost stopped my heart. It was desperate and filled with lust and need and ... something deeper. We’d been through a lot now, the past year defining me in ways that the previous twenty-two did not. Kissing Asher now, in this second that both of us were



safe and free, made it really hard not to cry at how perfect this moment was.

When we finally pulled away, Asher ran his fingers through my hair, gently caressing the long strands, his thumb brushing across my cheek.

“When did you get out?” he asked, the silver back in his eyes. There was a small tic high in his jaw as he worked to keep his shit together.

“Just now,” I told him. “I came straight here.”

*To you.*

He was the only thing I could think of.

His breaths were ragged as he dropped his head into my neck, breathing me in. I thanked everyone I could think of for magical baths, because I hadn’t actually had a shower for almost a month.

“I lost my fucking mind every single day,” he whispered, his breath hot against my skin. “I bargained and bribed and destroyed, but they would not let me see you.”

“I lost my mind too,” I admitted.

Asher strode across to one of the loungers, sinking down, pulling me on top of him. “Tell me everything that happened from when you were taken,” he said, holding me closer. Neither one of us wanted to let go.

Trying to think around the hard, delicious, naked body pressed to me was not easy, but I managed to tell him about the healing, and how my energy was insanely strong. When I got to Louis’s temporary solution, Asher touched the pendant on my chest, letting the cold stone slide across his fingers.

“I need to know what happened to you as well,” I said softly. “When Shera took you.”

Asher stiffened, but he didn’t hold back. He told me about the weeks of endless searching and how he started to hone his skills under the water. He told me about finally finding the entrance and the connection he felt to Atlantis—or the walls at least—when they first found it.

“It calls to me,” he said.

I nodded. “Yes. It was the same for me. Something inside those walls was calling me, and I’m scared to find out what it is.”

He cupped my face, kissing me softly again. “You won’t be alone. No matter what happens, we’ll face it together.”

I lay against him for a few moments, listening to the thrum of his heartbeat under my ear.

“The chick I saw in my dreams, the one pawing all over you ... she’s



another Atlantean?”

Shera had said something like that, but it still bothered me to remember her touching him.

Asher's chest rumbled. “She's Shera's daughter. Born from my mother's body.”

I jerked my head up. “What? And she was trying to get you two to hook up?”

They were basically related, and she had to be pretty young. Funny, she hadn't looked that young in the dream. There was something predatory about her.

Asher let out a dark laugh. “Shera was desperate; she would have tried anything. When I finally figured out the fire spell, I was glad to be rid of her. Only I left it too late to try the spell. She'd drained so much of my energy that I couldn't power it.”

“Don't ever do that again,” I whispered to him, my lips close to his. “I don't care how high the stakes are, don't run off to play the hero. I can't go through that again.”

“I've had a lot of time to think things over while I was gone,” he said, eyes silver, “and I'm sorry it took me so long to get my shit together. To figure out that fighting my feelings was stupid and redundant. I won't waste any more time.”

His mouth landed on mine, soft and gentle, caressing as our tongues danced together. At least it started that way, but the moment his hands gripped my hips, pulling me closer, I lost control.

The kiss was so hot that I couldn't breathe or think or do anything other than react. I just kissed him like my life depended on it, and he was doing the same. He sucked in my bottom lip and I groaned—I'd never been this turned on in my life.

I rocked against him again, my panties soaked and my body more than ready. I brushed my hands down his chest, feeling the perfect ridges of his body before I caressed his abs. My fingers wrapped around the tip of his dick, which was huge and thick.

“Please,” I moaned.

Asher lifted his head from where he was kissing me. “What, baby girl? Tell me what you want?”

I moaned again, almost beyond words. “I need—Asher, fuck.”

His fingers had slipped under my sweats, caressing along my swollen,



throbbing flesh.

“Say it, Maddi,” he said with more command, and I obeyed without thought.

“I need you. Please. Don’t hold back with me. Not today.”

He lifted me, and we made it to his room in about twenty seconds. He didn’t drop me on the bed like I expected. He placed me on his table, pushing me back so he could bury his face in my pussy.

I almost came right then, thrashing and moving against his hot damp mouth. He moved back long enough to rip my sweats free, but he didn’t remove my panties, choosing to lick my clit through the soft material, using it to rub against me as his fingers danced inside of me.

“Asher,” I cried, teetering on the edge.

He slowed his assault, pulling back. I sat up, reaching out to wrap my hand around his rock-hard length. I leaned down to suck him deep into my greedy mouth. He tasted salty and sweet at the same time, and I groaned as my tongue swirled across him.

His hands fisted in my hair, just shy of painful, and when a deep rumble left his mouth, I groaned as well, loving that I was making this good for him.

Asher tightened his hold, pulling my face up to his, our lips meeting in another frantic, punishing kiss. He wasted no time removing every last piece of my clothing, before he moved us to the bed. I couldn’t stop touching his body, marveling at the strength and beauty before me. There was nothing and no one comparable to Asher, and the fact that he was mine, in even this sort of small capacity, blew my mind.

We hadn’t had the “are you my girlfriend or boyfriend” talk yet, and I wasn’t even sure that was something supes did, but we’d already proven that we cared beyond most normal relationships, and that was enough.

“You’re not fertile,” he said, pressing hard kisses along my chest, his lips and tongue caressing my nipples.

“No,” I moaned, moving against him. “Not fertile.”

I’d learned about being fertile and if there were any supe STIs—there weren’t—early in the year. It was good to be responsible and prepared. It was also a relief to find out why I’d never had a period, something human-raised Maddison had worried about but never had the money to get checked.

Asher slid inside me in one smooth movement, and it was only because I’d been prepped well and was more turned on than I’d ever been in my life that his size didn’t hurt me.



He moved slowly at first, sliding in and out, teasing nerve endings and getting me wetter than I'd ever been. After some time, he lost that controlled speed, lifting me with one hand to give himself better leverage before slamming into me. After months of torture, months of separation, months of denying our true selves, this was exactly what we needed.

Reaching up, I threaded my fingers through his hair and pulled his mouth down to mine. We both released a breathy groan as our tongues met, and I hoped that I would never get sick of tasting him like this. It was fucking heaven.

Asher pulled back so that our eyes could meet. "I'm addicted," he said softly, those dimples assaulting me with their beauty. He slid deeper, the pace slowing again.

I gasped, arching into him. "Asher..."

His hand tightened on my ass, lifting me while he used his other hand to stroke my clit. The hot, drugging swirls in my center expanded, filling my body with the sort of pleasure that could possibly kill a person. Groans escaped, and my body tightened and exploded.

He drew my orgasm out for a long time, the slow, deep strokes dragging every ounce of pleasure from me. The moment I relaxed, he leaned down and kissed me gently, his thumb caressing my cheek before running across my lips.

I sighed, another moan escaping as he continued those slow, deep thrusts. It was almost too much with the aftershocks of my orgasm still racing through me.

Sweet Jesus.

Something was very clear to me now. There was normal sex, and then there was sex with Asher.

My buildup started again, faster than before and with strong intensity. One fist gripped the sheets at my side, and I arched my back, giving him deeper access.

"You are so fucking perfect," he said, a rumble in his tone.

"Ash," I cried, about two more strokes from losing it.

This time when my body shattered, black and white dots flashed across my eyes. I forced myself to breathe, because I was pretty sure I was going to pass out if I didn't. Asher's body tensed above me, and he groaned my name as he joined me, both of us riding the pleasure for many, many long minutes.

Asher twisted to the side, our bodies still together as he dropped to the



bed. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing emerged. I just couldn't coherently string words together. Asher's strong arms banded around me, his lips pressing over and over into my lips and jawline and cheeks. It was a surprisingly sweet moment after the hottest sex of my life.

"You're under my skin, Maddison," he said softly, his breath and scent teasing my senses. "I've been sleeping in a bed that smells like you. Sitting in a medical wing that smells like you. Dealing with four best friends who love you and consider you family."

"I stayed in your room while you were gone," I said softly. "It was the closest I could get to you, and it killed me every single fucking day to know you were at the mercy of those assholes." I sucked in a deep breath, refusing to be lost in those green eyes until I got all the words out. "I dreamed of you, watching you be tortured. Of that woman touching you. I can't do that again."

His lips were a butterfly kiss across mine. "You won't," he promised, his face hard as the scary, powerful Asher came out to play. "I chose to try and destroy them from the inside, and it worked, but only because you all showed up at the right time. I won't be so lenient next time. If they come at us again, any of the remaining Arterians, I will show them exactly why Atlantean royalty was feared."

"You think they'll try again? To take you or ... me?"

He broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Atlantis is rising. That was the first part of their plan. But I don't think it's everything they want, and only time will tell what the rest of their plan is."

Not a comforting thought, but knowing that we were all together, I wasn't too worried. We'd deal with whatever came at us.



I'd missed quite a lot of school and classes with everything that had happened, so my days after this were filled with study and catching up. My reunion with Ilia and Larissa involved tears and ice cream and another wine-fueled naked dip in the pool. Asher kept the guys away, and I was grateful.

With the end of my first school year at the Academy approaching, I found myself sitting down for breakfast with everyone. We were in the commons, surrounded by students. Some of them were studying—it was the start of our last exam week—but most were watching us closely. That appeared to be a new activity in the school, watching our table to see what crazy might happen. Word had gotten around about our trip out to the Greek Islands, and while most people didn't know the true story—the rumors were pretty insane—it still created a ton of interest around us.

Asher and I hadn't come out as a couple or anything yet, but we did touch an awful lot, and everyone was trying to figure out what was going on with that.

"Are you ready?" Rone asked Larissa, sitting close to her. "What exam do you have first?"

Larissa, who was in her second year, had been telling me a few days ago how much harder it was than first year. Normally that would have freaked me out, but mostly it made me excited. I couldn't wait to see how we would advance, the new things I still had to learn.

"I've got Herbalism with Maddi," she said, shooting me a small grin. "And then I have Demonology."

Rone leaned down and murmured something low. I couldn't quite figure it out, but it sounded a lot like *You got this, love*.



*Love?* Well, that was interesting.

Larissa certainly thought so; her cheeks went pinker, her eyes soft and dreamy.

Rone had so many hidden layers, and at first sight the two of them made no sense, but when you dug deeper, there was a symbiosis there. A gentle truth. A yin and yang.

Asher wrapped his arm around me, pulling me into his side, and my tummy did the butterfly thing, my pulse raced, and my power started losing its shit. Because apparently it loved Asher and kept trying to smash through my chest to get to him.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to the top of my head, and I sighed.

“So, my parents sent me a letter,” Calen said, leaning forward. His thing with Ilia had apparently died a natural death, but I could have sworn that I’d seen them naked together in the pool the other night. And they were sitting very close at the moment. “They heard there’s an entire task force heading out to the location where Atlantis is rising. They predict the rise will be complete by the end of the year. Literally.”

That would be my birthday. Weird coincidence ... or just another fucked-up connection between me and that lost land?

“We should be on that task force,” Jesse added, leaning back in his chair. He’d finished his food, the plates still lined up in their perfect order. “There is no one more qualified to deal with whatever Atlantis throws at us.”

“Louis has already said he’d be there,” I told them. The sorcerer had stopped by to check on me and the amulet. “He’s hoping to fit some training of my power in at the same time, since he’ll be there for a while”

Not that it really mattered. A step-through could take him from one side of the world to the other without issue, but I still got what he was saying. He would focus on Atlantis and me, in that order.

“Are you all worried about what changes this might bring?” Ilia asked. She didn’t look as put-together as usual—her last job had taken a real toll on her; the supe was still missing and it bothered her.

“No,” the guys said.

“Yes,” I replied at the same time.

Five sets of eyes met mine. “I’m really worried, but I know we’ll handle it. Whatever it is.”

“No more dreams?” Axl asked, lifting his head from the textbook in front of him.



I shook my head. “Nope. Sleeping like a log.”

Well, outside of all those nights I ended up in Asher’s bed with him loving my body until I couldn’t breathe or think. Come to think about it, maybe that was the reason I slept so well. Asher kept the nightmares at bay.

For the first time in my life, I wasn’t alone.



MY EXAMS WERE OVER FAST, and even though I wasn’t as confident as I had been in previous exams, I still felt good about it. I’d worked hard. I’d learned so much. And I would continue to do so, for however long Supernatural Academy allowed me.

“Party time!” Calen shouted, hooking an arm around my waist and twirling me across the commons. “Get your sexiest clothes on and meet us back here at 10:00 P.M.”

Ilia and Larissa shooed him away, and then the three of us crowded into Ilia’s little apartment. It was in the magic users’ wing, but on a floor lower than the shared area with the couches. I hadn’t even realized this section existed until she brought me here the first time.

It was bigger than our dorms, with a small sitting area and her own private bathroom.

Larissa threw herself back on the bed. “Guys, I need help,” she said.

We both crowded closer; she flung a hand dramatically across her face. “I think I love him.”

Ilia and I exchanged a grin. “Rone?” we both said.

Larissa groaned again. “Fuck. Yes. I can’t stop thinking about him, imagining him naked. I ... I either need to get laid immediately, or—”

“You need to get laid by Rone immediately,” Ilia confirmed. “That vamp is fine, and you’re going to explode if you don’t take advantage of all that.”

I held both hands up. “Back up for a moment. Did you say love? Like ... real deep feelings?”

She pulled herself up, her smile fading. “I-I think so. My feelings are definitely deep. He makes me feel things I never expected. I’ve never had a relationship before, just sex. An itch that you scratch. This thing with Rone, it’s so much more than that. We’re friends, really great friends, and I thought that would be enough. But...”

“It’s not,” I confirmed, knowing exactly how she felt. That’s how it was with Asher and me.

Ilia ruffled her hair, sending the red curls tumbling everywhere. “Take the



chance. Make him realize what he's missing."

Her face brightened and she spun, rifling through her wardrobe, which was about ten times more impressive than Larissa's and mine combined. "I have the perfect dresses for both of you in here," she said. "Aha!"

She pulled out a short, tight, red number and threw it at Larissa. "That one is way too short for me, so it should be perfect for you. And red is a great color on you, girl."

Larissa normally didn't go for the revealing clothes like Ilia, but this time she just held the dress up, stared for a few minutes, and then nodded. "Yep. I'm going to go for it."

She disappeared into the bathroom, and I turned my attention to Ilia. "Okay, give me your best," I said. Asher was going tonight. I wanted to create new, better memories than the ones we had from the last party we'd attended.

Ilia flicked through more clothes, her forehead wrinkled as she shook her head over and over. "It's here," she muttered. "I know it."

Finally her expression brightened. "Yes!"

She pulled it out and I blinked at the deep pink. She spun and held it out to me. "These are your last days of pink hair," she told me, her eyes wide and excited. "You said it was the year of pink hair. You've rocked it better than anyone I know. But I also think it's time to move forward. To let pink go and..." She lifted one eyebrow. "Have you decided on your next color?"

I nodded, but I didn't tell her yet. Half the fun was seeing the transformation in person. My birthday was fast approaching, and with it my ritual would kick into effect again.

Ilia huffed. "Fine, don't tell me. My point is, let go of pink in a big way."

She waved the dress at me, and I got up to take it from her.

It was not my normal style: a strapless number with a mermaid skirt that stopped just above my knees. It would hug my curves, and hopefully I had long enough legs to pull it off. "You're thinner than me," I said, stretching the bodice across my chest. "You're going to have to lube me into this."

Ilia snorted. "The visual of that..."

We both laughed just as Larissa stepped out of the bathroom, a red sheath draping across her body, falling to midthigh. "Yes!" I shouted, jumping up and down. "That's it. You look so gorgeous."

She covered her breasts, which were much more exposed than I'd ever seen on her before.



“You have great boobs,” Ilia exclaimed, and Larissa shot her a dark look.

“I’m changing,” she said, spinning around. We both dove forward to grab her, yanking her back before she could.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Ilia said. “You’re going to show Rone exactly what he’s missing. There’s a sex goddess hidden under all of the plaid, I know it.”

Larissa stuck her tongue out at her. “I don’t wear plaid, asshole.”

She didn’t try to escape to the bathroom again; instead she moved to the mirror and started to work her hair into a braid. “I’ll wear it,” she finally said when she finished dealing with her hair.

I slipped on the pink dress, which was the same shade as my hair, only a little darker. It actually went really nicely with my complexion, making my skin look even more sun-kissed than normal. I decided to pile my hair up in loose curls, leaving just a few tendrils falling down to showcase the strapless neckline. The dress was cut low, just across the top of my boobs, and it was formfitting all the way down until the mermaid tail.

I kind of loved it. And once my makeup was done, hair up, and heels on, I was more than happy with Ilia’s choice.

“We’re so fucking hot,” she said, twirling in the mirror.

She was hot. White minidress, stilettos, legs that went on for a few hundred miles, red hair, lips, and eye makeup.

Perfection.

When we made it to the commons, there were students everywhere in various states of dress. And undress. Depending on how you looked at it. A real trend existed in this school of wearing shirts the size of bras and skirts the size of stamps.

“I’m glad to see the Clovers’ punishment stuck,” Ilia said, her eyes locked on their empty table. Last dance they’d been there, holding court with all of their followers. This week they were gone. They’d been exiled out of the main courtyard, forced to sit on the sidelines. All thanks to Kate and Chellie. Those two were awaiting trial in Germany right now, and could soon be sharing a cell with a bunch of other criminals.

I couldn’t even find it in myself to care. They’d almost cost me everything.

They’d almost cost me Asher.

Speaking of. There was a hush when Asher and the other guys entered the commons. All eyes turned to them, students hurrying forward, calling his



name and saying hello. He acknowledged a few of them with a nod, but his eyes never wavered. They were locked on me as he stalked forward. The crowds parted for him even while trying to grab his attention.

Unable to wait, I moved toward him, a little unsteady on my heels, but determination kept me walking. Asher's pace picked up, and we all but crashed together as his arms wrapped around my back. Asher leaned down so that our lips could meet, and gasps rang out around us.

Guess the secret was out now.

The kiss ended up somewhere between casual and ready to rip each other's clothes off. My breathing was fast when he pulled back, his arms holding me close.

"Pink is a gorgeous color on you," he said, resting his forehead against mine. "You look so beautiful."

"You don't look so bad yourself," I told him, trying to keep the awe out of my voice.

He was wearing a dark gray shirt that hugged his biceps and chest muscles. It was just tight enough that I could make out the faint outline of his abs, which kind of made me want to drag him back to his room and strip that shirt right off him. He had on jeans, the sort of well-worn, faded denim that was both sexy and casual. His boots added height, his hair was roughly styled, and his dimples were already killing me.

"I'm really glad you didn't die," I said softly.

His smile grew until a low, husky laugh escaped. "I'm really glad too, and if you keep looking at me like that, we're definitely not making it to the dance."

I had to really think for a second if that was a bad idea or not. A classmate from my demonology class dashed past then, and seeing me did a huge backtrack.

"Maddi!" Trent shouted, somehow the only student here who wasn't fixated on Asher. Instead, he was staring at me. Or my boobs, to be more accurate. "How did your last exam go?"

Crossing my arms over my chest, I shot him a "seriously" look. "It went fine. It was easier than I expected. Yours?"

He groaned, finally looking at my face. "I thought it was so hard. They had like twenty different timelines we had to remember. I mean, how many demon wars has this world had? I couldn't keep up."

Trent wasn't the sharpest tool, so this didn't really surprise me. But



apparently he had some powerful, rich parents, and his connections would keep him in school and moving through the grades.

“Save me a dance,” Trent said, his eyes back on my boobs.

“Yeah, that’s probably not going to happen,” I said seriously.

Trent pushed closer to me.

Asher moved, inserting himself between us. “Go away,” he growled. “She’s not interested.”

Trent blinked, his gaze tipping up to meet the icy eyes of the Atlantean standing there. Panic dropped across his features, and he started to back up. “Sorry,” he stuttered, the smooth smarminess disappearing. “I didn’t realize.”

Asher’s rigid features didn’t relax. “Now you do.”

Trent ran, and I smacked Asher on the arm. “I had it handled,” I told him.

Finally some of the pissed-off anger faded from his face, and he winked at me. “I know that, but it’s in my nature to protect what’s mine. I’m just one of those guys.”

He was; he protected the people he cared about with a ferocity that would scare most supes. I could never be mad about being one of those people. Plus...

“I feel the same way about you,” I admitted. “Whenever those chicks drape themselves over you, I kind of want to rip their faces off.”

It was my first experience with being possessive, and it certainly took controlling myself to a new level.

Asher’s gaze went all dark and sexy. “I fucking love that about you.”

There was this weird pause, because he’d used the love word, but then Ilia and Calen were calling us, and the moment passed. This party was in a different location to the forest one, out the back of the main classrooms, in a huge room I hadn’t seen before. It was almost set up like a ball, with polished marble floors and stadium seats right around the outside.

“This is the music and concert room,” Ilia said, leaning around Calen to speak to me. “They have huge performances in here, and it has the best acoustics.”

This was proven by the music pumping in the place, filling my blood with energy. Asher dragged me right out onto the dance floor. “We got interrupted last time,” he murmured near my ear, and I pressed myself as close as I could get.

“This time I’m dancing the night away,” I replied, wrapping my arms around his neck.



I'd clearly jinxed us though, because not two minutes later a loud siren blared through the room. It was so piercing it even cut through the loud music.

"What is that?" I asked Asher, swiveling my head to see what was happening.

"It's the alarm on the perimeter of the Academy," he said, going into protective mode. He kept one hand on me while he angled his body between me and the door.

The other guys found us almost immediately, surrounding me as well. "Where are Ilia and Larissa?" I asked, trying not to panic. My hands clutched at my necklace, relieved that my power was still strong and present inside of me.

"Right here," Ilia said, dragging Larissa and depositing her into the middle of the Atlanteans, next to me. She then pulled twin daggers from thigh sheaths—because she was literally that badass—and stood next to Asher. I was distracted watching her twirl those babies in her hands, before remembering that the alarm had gone off for a reason.

Someone had breached the perimeter.

Princeps Jones dashed through the entrance. He had some of his staff with him, and they didn't look shocked or angry by the obvious signs of a party happening. Larissa was right, he definitely already knew and just turned a blind eye. He searched around, and when he spotted us he surged forward. I was starting to get a bad feeling about this, a sense that this was something to do with either Atlantis or me.

Or both.

"Asher," Jones said, not at all breathless. "Arterians are at the front of the school. They're demanding that you and Maddison speak with them."

"No!" Asher's voice was snap of fury. "She will go nowhere near them."

Ilia twirled her daggers again, eyes narrowed. "Let me speak with them," she suggested, and I had to shake my head at how brave and scary she could be, if not a little reckless and stupid.

I dropped my hand on Asher's arm and immediately got his attention.

"We should go," I said softly. "They wouldn't be here if they didn't have something important to say."

Asher growled, a feral light entering his eyes. "Last time, they kidnapped you. This time, I will just kill them all before they get a chance."

I chuckled, wrapping my arms around him. "Easy, tiger. Let's just hear



them out first, and if we don't like it, we can discuss killing them."

Asher's chest rumbled under my hands, and I knew he wasn't happy about it. I gave him another minute to think about it, not pushing when he was so close to the edge of his control.

"Okay, fine," he snapped. "But you'll go nowhere alone."

I nodded, not wanting to talk to them alone. "They asked for you as well," Princeps Jones reminded him.

Asher let out a derisive laugh, dark and without humor. "They know it's the only way to get to Maddison."

No one argued, but in my head I was almost certain that whatever schemes they had cooked up, Asher was just as important as I was. It had taken the two of us to bust the lock, both of our blood.

We left the dance in a large group, the alarm still blaring through the school. It would ensure that most students were safely back in their rooms while we dealt with the threat.

"They remain outside," Princeps Jones said as we walked. "They tripped the alarm solely to gain my attention."

We ended up at the front entrance, the one I'd crossed almost a year ago with Ilia. There were dozens of the leather-clad Arterians spread out, but only one stood on the bridge. The only one without a helmet. Connor.

His focus was on me, intense and unnerving.

Everyone else stayed near the large front entrance on Asher's command, while the two of us moved forward. He stopped me before I could step onto the bridge, leaving a ten-foot gap between us and Connor. "What do you want?" Asher said, his icy words whipping out with force.

Connor didn't look away from me. He was staring at me like I was something special, and I really wished he would stop.

"Why are you here, Connor?" I asked him.

"You need to come to Atlantis," he told me. "If you don't return, they're all going to die."

I shook my head. "What do you mean? Who will die?"

Close up, I noticed that Connor's hands were shaking. It was the first time I'd ever seen him rattled.

"You are the key, Maddison," he said, his voice low and strained. "Asher's parents searched for you for hundreds of years. The god-child held in stasis, the key to Atlantis rising. Only, you weren't the only one in stasis. The rest of them are too, and now they're all going to die. You're the only



one that can save them. You're the only one who can stop Sonaris."

I still didn't understand. It didn't make sense.

Connor took a deep breath. "Atlantis will rise, and if you're not there to free your people, Sonaris will destroy them all."

He took another step closer, and Asher held up a warning hand. "Don't," he said softly. The sort of softness that meant he was furious and already considering the murder plan.

Connor finally turned his gaze away from me to Asher. "I'm not joking around," he said, and I remembered that these two had a history. I hadn't asked Asher about it, because it had slipped my mind, but now I was curious. "Ash, it's happening now. Sonaris could damn the entire world."

"This was foreseen," Asher said softly, and I realized he was trying to explain it to me. "A thousand years ago a prophet predicted it. My parents tried to force it into fruition. They lost their lives in the process. I have been trying to stop it from happening by refusing to step one foot into the waters of Atlantis."

"Until me," I added. "My kidnapping forced your hand."

He nodded. "Yes, and I have no regrets. If anything, the last few months, and most of my life, has taught me that you can't fight fate."

"What do I have to do with it?"

Asher's jaw was rigid, the muscles in his arms vibrating. "The daughter of the gods was the key to Atlantis's demise, and she will be the one to return it. Her sacrifice returns the people, and in return, is the only thing to stop Sonaris."

Connor was nodding. I could see him from the corner of my eye.

"So ... you do believe I'm Sonaris's daughter?" I asked, part of me hurt that he hadn't confided this in me before.

Asher didn't answer immediately. "I ... I don't know," he finally said. "In some ways, it makes sense."

For the first time I started to consider that I might actually be a ten-thousand-year-old half supe, half god. I must have been frozen in time, as a small child at least, because the earliest memories I had were being five and thinking I was human.

Someone had freed me from Atlantis, dropped me in the human world with a block over my power, and set this entire thing in motion.

"It wasn't just your power that brought about the rise," Connor said. I'd almost forgotten he was there. "It was the combination of almost direct



descendants from the three royal lines.”

“Who is the third?” I asked. Asher was Cornipicus, I was Sonaris, but who was Jervania?

“Connor,” Asher said. “He’s almost as pure of blood as me. His parents were best friends with mine, and I was raised for some time with his family. I went between them and Jesse’s, until....”

“Until you left us,” Connor said bitterly. “We had a fundamental disagreement on the prophecy, and Asher has spent his time since avoiding anything to do with Atlantis.”

That wasn’t strictly true, since his four best friends all had Atlantean blood in them. He just avoided the prophecy and anyone connected to it.

“So your blood was in the water with ours?” I asked, and Connor nodded. “How am I the key, then?”

“Sonaris sank Atlantis,” Connor said. “His blood is the only thing that would have broken the spell. You have his blood. If your power was at full strength, you could have broken the lock without us.”

*Fuck.*

Connor held a hand out to me. “Are you ready to return, to save the very people you cursed ten thousand years ago?”

Asher’s power blasted him back across the bridge, and I had to grab his arm to stop him following after Connor.

“No, please,” I said. “Fighting him is not going to stop what’s happening. I think ... I think I need to at least return to Atlantis and see what he’s talking about.”

Asher’s arms wrapped around me as he pulled me into his chest. “I can’t let you do this,” he said, his voice filled with worry. “We have no idea what awaits us there.”

A few strands of pink hair that had escaped my updo fell across my face, and I thought about how the year of pink hair had brought me more joy than I ever thought was possible, but also a shit-ton of fear and stress and crazy.

I made up my mind right then, pulling back from Asher to see Connor. “I’ll meet you at the Atlantis location in one week. You can prove your story to me, explain everything that would be required to fix the situation, and then we will go from there.”

In one week it was my birthday. Before I met with anyone and changed the fate of the world, I was going to change my hair.

New color had always been synonymous with new fate for me.



Let those fate-bitches do their best to take me down. The year of pink was over.

It was time for something different.

The year of purple.



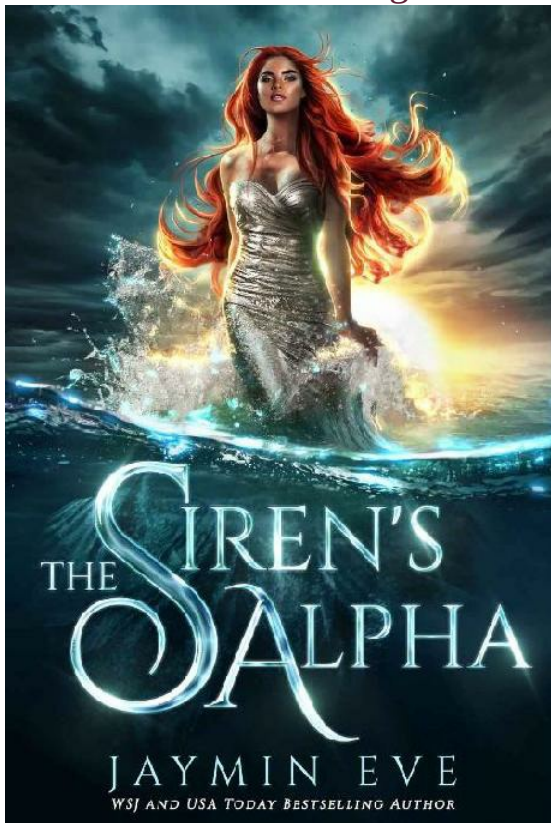




## STAY UPDATED

For a free copy of The Siren's Alpha and to be signed up for exclusive content from my newsletter (including another serial free story), click here:

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Blurb: Every year Lettie makes the trip back to Hotel Paranormal - a hotel which is used exclusively by a multitude of supernatural beings. This is her one chance to release her glamour and spend time with her siren sisters.

This year the wolves are there too. Including Axel, an alpha wolf, who leads his people with a iron fist and a darkly captivating presence.

The last time they were at the hotel, Lettie and Axel spent one night together, and this year he plans on tracking her down again -the siren who sung a song around his soul.

Only sirens don't settle and alphas don't mate outside their pack. There is

no white picket fence in their future.

It's a battle of the wills, with explosive chemistry, and two alpha supernaturals who will learn that above all else, love is worth fighting for.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've always loved school based books. Something about the new beginnings and the firsts we experience during our schooling years. I really wanted this story to feel like you were taking a stroll through magic classes, and feeling the vibe of being in a school for supernaturals. It was so much fun for me to explore that exciting new beginning for Maddi.

And I hope you all loved it too!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jaymin Eve is the Wall Street Journal and USA Today Bestselling author of paranormal romance, urban fantasy, and sci-fi novels filled with epic love stories, great adventure, and plenty of laughs. She lives in Australia with her husband, two beautiful daughters, and a couple of crazy pets.

<https://www.amazon.com/Jaymin-Eve/e/B00E1URI2I>





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